



The battle for Aleppo and the imperialist-brokered ceasefire

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Once again, a wave of tens of thousands of refugees is trying to cross the Syrian-Turkish border, seeking asylum from the horrors of Syria's civil war, with 35,000 at the Bab al-Salama border crossing. This time it is not (primarily) from ISIS that they are fleeing, but repeated bombing raids by Russian aircraft backing the army of Bashar al-Assad's regime and his Iranian and Lebanese allies.

The pro-Assad forces' aim is first to encircle, and then to subjugate, the rebel-held parts of Aleppo, Syria's largest city. It is reported that the rebels have indeed been cut off from supplies coming in from the Turkish border to the north. The principal forces resisting in the Aleppo region are reported to be the Free Syrian Army (FSA), the Islamic Front (led primarily by Ahrar ash-Sham) and Jabhat al-Nusra.

A statement on 11 February from the International Syria Support Group (ISSG), made by US Secretary of State John Kerry and Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov, promised that humanitarian access to the besieged areas will commence this week, and that an ISSG task force will, within one week, 'elaborate modalities for a nationwide cessation of hostilities'. This, they claim, will enable the resumption of the stalled peace negotiations between the Syrian parties.

This timescale, however, will also allow Assad and his close ally Russian President Vladimir Putin to complete and tighten their siege of the city, even if they cannot yet storm it. Certainly, it will give them a powerful bargaining chip in any future negotiations.

If the ceasefire does not materialise, Kerry has stated, 'then there has to be consideration of a Plan B? You can't just sit there?'. What might this 'Plan B' involve? The signs are ominous; both Saudi Arabia and Qatar have discussed providing 'boots on the ground?', Saudi has been given permission to base aircraft at Turkey's Incirlik airbase, there are plans for US aircraft to provide cover for the 'moderate rebels?.

However, given Turkish hostility to the USA's alliance with the Kurds in Rojava, and the USA's alarm at the risk of a Saudi-Iranian escalation, it is not at all clear what action the US would immediately be willing to endorse. Moreover, the battle-worthiness of Saudi's military is often questioned. Meanwhile, Assad, intoxicated by his recent successes, told AFP news agency on 12 February that his forces will take back the whole of Syria from the rebels, though how welcome such a boast is to his Russian allies is also questionable.

Nevertheless, the possibility of a clash between the rival regional powers and their imperialist backers is a real one, with incalculable consequences for the region and the world. It demonstrates the urgency of the need for working class organisations to mobilise internationally against all these fire-raisers masquerading as peacekeepers, humanitarians, or defenders of national sovereignty.

Causes of Syria's suffering

The scale of the misery that Assad's determination to crush the Syrian revolution has led to is staggering. Estimates of those killed vary between 250,000 and 400,000, with as many as 1.9 million wounded and 60,000 'disappeared?. Some

7.6 million people are internally displaced. To these horrors must be added the suffering of the 4 million Syrians who have fled the country, creating a diaspora on a scale matched only by the Palestinians in the decades following the 1948 and 1967 wars.

While a cessation of the bombing of Syria's besieged cities and the arrival of aid for refugees trapped on the Turkish border would certainly be welcome, the fact that the sponsors of this proposed armistice are the USA and its allies on one side, and Russia and its allies on the other, must cast the greatest doubts that it will last, let alone lead to peace and freedom in this unhappy country. These two blocs of 'great powers' bear a heavy responsibility for the suffering of the Syrian people.

To their intervention must be added the actions of their regional allies, Turkey and Saudi Arabia on one side, and Iran, the Iraqi government and the Lebanese Hezbollah on the other, that have prolonged and intensified the war. These powers also have their own agendas, although they do not exactly coincide with, and often even conflict with, those of their Russian or Western imperialist allies.

Turkey, in particular, is pursuing its own war against its Kurdish minority, and wants to weaken the Syrian Kurds in Rojava. That is why Ankara was willing, at the very least by deliberate neglect, to enable the ISIS attack on Kobane. Today, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan fiercely denounces the USA for its alliance with Rojava's People's Protection Units (YPG) against ISIS. If Turkey sends troops across the border, then it will be to combat them rather than ISIS or even the Assad regime.

Over the past five years, the major regional powers have all objectively, and often quite consciously, strengthened the forces of reaction in Syria and in the region. The chief beneficiaries of this have been the Assad regime and ISIS, as well as various other formations within a broad spectrum of reactionary Islamist and Salafist militias.

The combination of imperialist and regional interventions has boosted a counterrevolution against (and also within) the movement for democracy that began so courageously five years ago in Syria's popular uprising of March 2011. Until its crushing victories over the Iraqi army in 2014, ISIS was able to grow rapidly because it was not the principal enemy of any of the global or regional powers. For all the demonisation of ISIS in the Western and Russian media (and the brutality of its methods is genuine enough), it has not really been the main enemy of any of the major powers involved in Syria.

The Saudi state, now waging its own bloody sectarian war in Yemen, initially backed those parts of the FSA that were controlled by lower and middle-ranking Sunni officers who defected from Assad's army. Its aim was to preserve, or reconstruct, a functioning pro-Saudi state apparatus that could maintain capitalist order following Assad's removal. Though it continues to support the secular-nationalist FSA components like the Southern Front and the Syrian Revolutionaries Front, as well as the bourgeois liberal exiles grouped around the Syrian National Coalition, it also supports Islamist factions in order to gain influence through the formation of the Islamic Front.

Meanwhile, Turkey, Qatar and elements of Saudi Arabia's own ruling class have promoted the more radical Islamist and Salafist formations like Ahrar ash-Sham and Jaysh al-Islam, thereby helping these reactionary forces to gain hegemony within the Syrian armed opposition.

On the other side, Iran and Hezbollah have not only supported Assad but in doing so have also fomented a Shia versus Sunni conflict that has helped to frustrate the yearning for democracy of all of their peoples. In the process, they have also undermined the prestige which Hezbollah gained in the Arab world and amongst many in the western antiwar movements by its resistance to Israel in 2006.

A crisis of leadership

Today, the international working-class and progressive movements of all types should rally to defend the Syrian opposition's struggle for human rights and democracy, no matter what temporary military alliances they have been obliged to make. This should even include a defence of the FSA, whose major components have repeatedly called for a

US or NATO intervention, which, if it had occurred, would have been a deathblow to the Syrian revolution.

The fact is that, contrary to the propaganda of the 'pro-Russian and pro-Iranian' elements in the Western antiwar movements, the USA and NATO do not want to see the downfall of Assad at the hands of his own people. Nor, after their experience with dismantling the Ba'athist state machine in Iraq, do they want to see the precipitous collapse of Assad's repressive apparatus.

Instead, they are seeking a deal with Russia over the heads of the Syrian people, despite having launched a new cold war against Russia in Ukraine, where their own interference has blown up in their faces.

Rojava

The Rojava Kurds, uncritically lionised by some Western socialists after their courageous (and progressive) resistance to ISIS, have sought (and obtained) alliances with the USA and Russia. In return, they have refrained from providing any support to the anti-Assad forces within Syria's Arab majority population. Fresh from cooperating with US airstrikes against ISIS, the YPG seized Menagh airbase from anti-Assad rebels on 11 February, supported by Russian bombing. This has effectively sealed the siege around the rebel-held Aleppo region, leaving it surrounded by the YPG to the north and west, by ISIS to the north and east, and by pro-Assad forces to the south.

Having vied with success for the favours of both major imperialist power blocs in Syria, the YPG under the leadership of the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) appears to calculate that this will ensure Rojava's complete autonomy in any future political settlement. That is to say, Kurdish autonomy is to be bought at the cost of the Syrian revolution, rather than the Assad regime.

This narrow nationalism has led them to a disastrous miscalculation. They will not only lose the sympathy of democratic forces amongst Arab Syrians but, if the Assad regime is victorious, or is replaced by an anti-democratic coalition supported by Saudi Arabia, Turkey etc, then the fate of Rojava will be a cruel one indeed.

The clouds of global war

Two things explain the enormous confusion surrounding the international crisis focused on Syria. The first is mounting inter-imperialist rivalry. This has led the conflicting powers to support various Syrian factions in order to frustrate their rivals' manoeuvres. The second is the nature of the leaderships within the forces that rose up against dictatorial regimes of all types in 2011.

Most of the FSA leadership are pro-Western, albeit infuriated by Obama's refusal to intervene on their behalf, or even to provide them with the weapons that could have halted Assad's barrel bombing of Syrian cities.

The PYD leadership in Rojava, for all its socialistic pretensions, is a supremely pragmatic, nationalist force, willing to swap sides at a moment's notice.

The Islamist and Salafist militias, whether 'moderate' or, like the Nusra Front, with the same programme (if not the same practice) as ISIS, are equally likely pass from being temporary military allies to being deadly enemies of democratic, let alone socialist, forces in Syria.

The threat of clashes between NATO and Russia in Syria, as in the previous events in Ukraine, threatens far more serious confrontations, as does the growth of Chinese-US tensions in East Asia. The darkening clouds of a new world recession make this no empty threat, as governments, 'democratic' as well as 'authoritarian', seek to deflect their populations' attention away from their own sufferings.

Faced with this, we need an international movement against war that is opposed to all the imperialist camps, and which in every country acts on the basis that 'the main enemy is at home'. The drive to war must be opposed in the first instance by the mass action of the working-class movement in each country against its own government.

Socialists should continue to support the Syrian rebel forces fighting Assad and his Russian allies, while opposing the threatened entry of Turkish or Saudi forces, even if these arrive in the guise of international 'peacekeepers'. There needs to be an urgent discussion with socialists and working class militants in Syria and the Syrian diaspora to determine a political strategy and, with it, the organisational forms needed to renew the Syrian revolution.

In the here and now we should mobilise on the following basis:

Support the resistance in Aleppo to the Assad-Putin onslaught

Massive aid to the refugees who have fled and are still fleeing Syria, and food and medical aid for all those displaced and besieged within the country

Open the borders of the European Union and all of its member states to Syrian refugees, providing them with education and jobs, housing, health and welfare services

All imperialist powers' armies and their air forces, navies etc. out of Syria and the entire Middle East

Support for the right of self-determination of the Kurdish people

Opposition to any partition of Syria into spheres of influence (and exploitation) by the imperialist and regional powers, and also to any Lebanese-style sectarian model of communal 'power-sharing'

Down with the Ba'athist dictatorship, release its imprisoned and tortured victims from the régime's jails, expose its crimes

No to its replacement by any type of sectarian supremacist regime, no to ethnic cleansing or communal persecution, freedom for all the religious, ethnic and national communities

For a democratic, anti-sexist, secular and socialist Syria as part of a United Socialist States of the Middle East

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