



Syria: End the Siege of Aleppo ? Russian and Nato forces out of Syria and the Middle East

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Since July 7, Syria's largest city, Aleppo, has witnessed intense fighting after Assad regime forces and their Lebanese and Russian allies cut off the eastern part of the city, with a population of 250,000, from food and military logistical supplies.

According to the Institute for the Study of War, "Russian and regime airstrikes from April to July targeted critical civilian infrastructure in opposition-held neighbourhoods, including maternity hospitals?. Physicians for Human Rights said bombs hit six hospitals in the final week of July alone. Once again, there are credible reports of chlorine gas barrel bombs being used. The airstrikes were clearly designed to prepare the civilian population for eventual surrender.

Indeed, many predicted that the fall of the city was imminent at that point. A defeat for the 'rebels' would probably have signalled the approaching end of the civil war with a triumph for the Assad dictatorship. Besides the town of Idlib, eastern Aleppo is the last major urban area controlled by anti-Assad forces. Yet, despite merciless attacks from the air, with helicopters dropping barrel bombs and Russian Sukhoi aircraft more conventional munitions, those forces made a dramatic counterattack and breakthrough in the first week of August, relieving the siege and potentially putting regime-held western Aleppo under siege in turn.

The counter-offensive was led by Jabhat Fateh al Sham, the rebranded al Nusra Front. Al Nusra declared in June that it was breaking its ties with al-Qaeda and building alliances with other jihadist and secular groups in Syria against which it had previously been fighting. It announced, "Unifying our efforts and ranks is imperative to meet the goals of the Syrian revolution", and anticipated, "a complete merger between all sincere groups".

The formation of a broad united front, which also involves Jaish al-Fatah (Army of Conquest, itself an alliance of several groups) and the Free Syrian Army (FSA) has clearly brought rapid military gains but, even if victory is gained in Aleppo, it is doubtful that it can hold together for long. The prestige of the Islamists has risen as a result of the breakthrough and is increased by the fact that they are not openly beholden to the US, indeed, Washington regards them as its bitter enemies.

According to various reports, it was Jabhat Fateh al Sham 'martyrs', in other words, suicide bombers, who were decisive in breaking through the Syrian Army lines and seizing an important government military base in the Ramouseh district. This seems also to have allowed the seizure of important stocks of weaponry, including heavy artillery. The Aleppo counter-offensive also included several other groups, including Harakat Nour al-Din al-Zenki, which has access to US logistical support, including BG71-TOW anti-tank missiles.

Whilst these forces are particularly strong in Aleppo and better centralised than others, one must reject the lies of the Assad-supporters that they constitute the majority of the 'rebels'. Indeed, the rather fragmented FSA includes a much larger number, up to 100,000. In addition to these armed forces, there is also still mass popular support in the rebel held areas. This was evidenced during the short period of a relative truce by political demonstrations in support of democracy and against the sectarianism of Islamist forces.

Clearly, the majority of the Syrian masses do not want their revolution to be turned into a religious war. While forces

like Daesh/ISIS openly do, and other Islamists choose to conceal their reactionary aims in the short term, it should not be forgotten that it is the Syrian regime and its Iranian allies who are the key forces who want to turn the revolution into a 'religious war'.

Talks

The United States and Russia are due to resume talks to revive Geneva III, which broke down in the Spring, but Islamist groups they define as terrorist will not be allowed to attend. At the moment, the US regards Jabhat Fateh al Sham as terrorists. Therefore, they cannot condemn Russian-regime bombing attacks on them, even though they are a major force in the relief of Aleppo. However, al Nusra long received support from Qatar and its successor probably still does. Since they are a major force in the resistance to Assad, a negotiation without them will be a farce. In addition, the Kurdish YPG is also not allowed to attend. Indeed, the whole 'peace process' is little more than smoke and mirrors aimed at disguising the imperialist powers' actions and intentions.

What should be the attitude of revolutionaries around the world to the Syrian war and its present stage? Obviously, Jabhat Fateh al Sham is a politically and socially reactionary force that we cannot wish to see come to power in Syria. However, just as obviously, their numbers, weaponry and effectiveness as fighters, make it necessary to enter military alliances with them against Assad and Putin who remain, right now, the main enemies of those fighting for democratic rights and social justice in Syria.

However, on the morrow of military victory and quite possibly even before that, Jabhat Fateh al Sham, will prove a most dangerous enemy. Whilst the League for the Fifth International fully supports victory for all the defenders of Aleppo, it emphasises how important it is for secular and democratic forces to be strengthened, to have no illusions in their temporary allies, to reject any political confusion of banners and to prepare for the unavoidable future conflict.

The resistance fighters have the absolute right to demand and take weapons from whoever could or might supply them, although most will in fact come from the arsenals captured from the regime. The Nato powers could, of course, easily give surface-to-air missiles to the resistance, thereby dramatically altering the balance of forces on the ground, but their support and protest are so much hot air. They will not provide such weapons because they might, at the next turn of the wheel of fate, fall into the hands of those who will joyfully bring down US warplanes. This is especially true because the US relies almost entirely on its air superiority to avoid putting 'boots on the ground' again and wishes to avoid a direct clash with the Russian air force.

The negotiations between the two major imperialist powers, the US and Russia, are little more than a hypocritical farce. The proxy conflict between them in Syria is only one part of a geo-strategic conflict that has been developing for several years now. It has included the right-wing putsch in Ukraine, engineered by the Neocons in the Obama Administration. This provoked Russia's takeover in Crimea and the uprisings in the Donetsk and Lugansk 'republics'.

Nato and the EU rapidly imposed severe sanctions on Russia. In those conditions, Russia stepped up its support for Assad, including direct intervention in Syria. Doubtless, Putin would be prepared to reduce support for Assad if the US were to trade off its New Cold War and sanctions against Russia, but 'Putinophobia' is too valuable an asset for the US, since it stymies the plans of sections of German and EU ruling classes and bourgeois strategists for a rapprochement with Russia.

The global struggle between the imperialist powers, together with the relative weakening of US hegemony, has opened a space for the reactionary regional powers not only to intervene as allies and proxies, but to pursue their own national interests in Syria. Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and even Qatar play their dirty games. Iran has become a major supporter of the Assad regime, including direct supply of fighting units from pro-fascist militias.

Turkey and the Gulf Monarchies have presented themselves as supporters of democracy, while they strangle it in their own countries. Turkey has made the struggle against the Kurdish people its major aim in the war although it might be prepared to trade off its allies in Syria for a deal with Russia, difficult as this would be.

It is these cynical games between the great powers that have kept the Syrian people on the rack of a terrible and prolonged civil war; one which some estimates say has killed as many as 470,000 and created 3.8 million refugees. In addition, its varied religious and ethnic communities have been ripped apart and the cultural treasures of the country reduced to rubble.

In Syria, Russia and Putin are undoubtedly the main villains because they intervened to help Assad crush a democratic revolution. Any painting of Putin as an anti-imperialist because of his opposition to the US and Nato, as has been done by some from the Stalinist tradition, is a reactionary delusion. At the same time, however, in Ukraine it was the US that was responsible for the fake Maidan revolution that turned into a fascist spearheaded coup which then went on to launch a brutal civil war to conquer the Russian speaking areas in Eastern Ukraine and was responsible for the massacre in Odessa.

As the League has repeatedly stated, we have entered a new period of inter-imperialist rivalry in which the New Cold War could suddenly and catastrophically hot up. Within this, we have to maintain our support for justified, progressive struggles, even if their leaders turn to the imperialist rival of their enemy or their leadership falls into the hands of politically and socially arch-reactionary forces. Evidence of how this can happen can be seen in the way that the spontaneous revolutionary upheavals across the Arab world either suffered counterrevolution by the regimes or came to be led by reactionary Islamist forces. Indeed, since revolutionary leaderships do not evolve spontaneously, such developments are very likely in our present conditions.

The Syrian democratic opposition and resistance, as well as the Kurdish forces in Rojava, have demonstrated an enormous heroism in their struggles for democracy and freedom from Assad and against Daesh/ISIS. But they have failed to give political direction and leadership to the Syrian revolution, they have failed to combine its democratic and social aims, making the revolution permanent and linking it to the revolution in the whole Middle East. Indeed, they have hoped for the support of different imperialist and regional powers, in particular the US. This applies to large parts of the FSA and to the Kurdish YPG.

Whilst even a genuine revolutionary leadership might be forced to trade with the devil in order to receive weapons and supplies for defence against immediate enemies, the leaderships of the different opposition forces were more than willing to go beyond that by calling for an overt intervention by imperialist forces like the imposition of no-fly zones or by being willing to negotiate the future social and political order in Geneva or elsewhere.

This dangerous preparedness to tie the fate of mass struggles to the reactionary aims of imperialist and/or regional powers must not blind the working class and the left globally to the fact that the Syrian revolution is still a legitimate mass struggle, and one that needs support from the oppressed globally, but it does demonstrate the depth of the crisis of leadership.

Solving this crisis of leadership is an international task; fighting for the creation of revolutionary parties and fighting forces independent of any of the imperialist powers, parties that defend democratic rights and working class interests against all forms of religious bigotry, ?secular? military dictatorship or capitalist politicians.

Thus, we say;

- ? Break the siege of Aleppo completely; massive supplies of food and medical aid to the population
- ? Stop the bombing, Down with the Assad regime.
- ? All Russian and US/Nato forces out of Syria and the Middle East.
- ? Self-determination for the Kurds in Syria, Turkey and Iraq
- ? For revolutionary workers' parties in all the countries of the region.
- ? For a Socialist Federation of the Middle East.

