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Putin's Aleppo Gamble Pays Off

By Mike Whitney
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Last week's game-changing triumph in northern Syria has moved the Russian-led coalition to within striking distance of a decisive victory in Aleppo. After breaking a 40 month-long siege on the cities of Nubl and Zahra, the Syrian Arab Army (SAA) has encircled the country's industrial hub and is gradually tightening the noose. Crucial supply-lines to the north have been cut leaving the Sunni extremists and anti-government militias stranded inside a vast, urban cauldron. It's only a matter of time before these disparate renegades are either killed or forced to surrender. A victory in Aleppo will change the course of the war by restoring government control over the densely-populated western corridor. This is why the Obama administration is frantically searching for ways to either delay or derail the Russian-led juggernaut and avoid the impending collapse of US policy in Syria.

Recent peace talks in Geneva were convened with one goal in mind, to prevent Syrian President Bashar al Assad and loyalist forces from retaking Aleppo. The negotiations failed, however, when Washington's mercurial allies, the so called "moderate" rebels, refused to participate.

According to the Wall Street Journal, the Syrian opposition withdrew “under pressure from Saudi Arabia and Turkey, two of the main backers of the rebels.” The WSJ’s admission was later confirmed by Secretary of State John Kerry who according to a report in the Middle East Eye “blamed the Syrian opposition for leaving the talks and paving the way for a joint offensive by the Syrian government and Russia on Aleppo.”

“Don’t blame me,” Kerry said, “Blame the opposition. It was the opposition that didn’t want to negotiate and didn’t want a ceasefire, and they walked away.”

None of this will surprise readers who followed the talks closely. The meetings were surrounded by confusion from the very onset. The US delegation headed by Kerry was focused entirely on reaching an agreement that would involve a ceasefire and stop the government-led onslaught. The Saudis, Turks and opposition leaders, however, were on a different page altogether. They seemed oblivious to the dire situation on the ground where their jihadist foot soldiers were taking heavier losses by the day. Kerry, the realist, was looking for a way to stand-down and save US-backed militants from certain annihilation. But the Saudis and Turks felt they had a strong-enough hand to make demands. The clash in viewpoints was bound to produce disappointing results, which it did. The meetings were cancelled before they even began. Nothing was settled. Here’s more from the *WSJ*:

“About a half-dozen cities and towns targeted in the new regime offensives have one thing in common: All were held by a mix of Islamist and moderate rebel groups funded and armed by Saudi Arabia and Turkey. Complicating the picture is that some, but not all, of these groups collaborate with the al Qaeda-linked Nusra Front. That gives the regime and its allies fodder for their claim that they are fighting terrorism.”

(“Saudi Arabia, Turkey Pushed Syrian Opposition to Leave Talks“, *Wall Street Journal*)

This should dispel any illusion that that the fighters that are trying to topple the government are merely disgruntled nationalists determined to remove an “evil dictator”. That is not the case at all. While there are a fair amount of indigenous insurgents, the bulk of fighters are Sunni extremists bent on removing Assad and creating an Islamic Caliphate. This is why Moscow refused to implement a ceasefire during the talks in Geneva. Russia adamantly opposes any remedy that allows internationally-recognized terrorists from escaping their eternal reward.

Kerry has deliberately misled the public on this matter. Just last week, he said, “Russia has indicated to me very directly they are prepared to do a ceasefire... The Iranians confirmed in London just a day and a half ago they will support a ceasefire now.”

This is false and Kerry knows it. Moscow has tried to be flexible about other so called “moderate” opposition forces, but when it comes to ISIS, Jabhat Al-Nusra (Syrian Al-Qaeda group), Jaysh Al-Mujahiddeen, Harakat Nouriddeen Al-Zinki, and Harakat Ahrar Al-Sham, Russian leaders have repeatedly said that that they will not relent until the jihadists are either killed or captured. This is why Russia’s airstrikes continued during Geneva, because most of the fighters in Aleppo are dyed-in-the-wool terrorists.

It's worth noting that the Russian-led military offensive clearly hews to UN resolution 2254 which states:

... for Member States to prevent and suppress terrorist acts committed **specifically by Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant, Al-Nusra Front (ANF), and all other individuals, groups, undertakings, and entities associated with Al Qaeda or ISIL, and other terrorist groups**, [...] and to eradicate the safe haven they have established over significant parts of Syria, **and notes that the aforementioned ceasefire will not apply to offensive or defensive actions against these individuals, groups, undertakings and entities**, as set forth in the 14 November 2015 ISSG Statement.” (Thanks to Moon of Alabama)

In other words, Moscow is not going to comply with any ceasefire that spares homicidal jihadists or undermines UN resolution 2254. Russian military operations are going to continue until ISIS, al Nusra and the other terrorist militias are defeated.

Even so, Kerry has not abandoned the diplomatic track. In fact, Kerry plans to meet Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov in Munich on February 11 for a meeting of the International Syria Support Group (ISSG) to discuss “all the aspects of the Syrian settlement in line with the UN Security Council resolution 2254.”

The emergency meeting underscores the Obama's administration's utter desperation in the face of the inexorable Russian-led military offensive. It's clear now that Obama and his lieutenants see the handwriting on the wall and realize that their sinister plan to use proxy armies to remove Assad and splinter the country into three powerless regions is doomed to fail. Here's how the ISW summed it up on the *Sic Semper Tyrannis* website:

“Battlefield realities rather than great power politics will determine the ultimate terms of a settlement to end the Syrian Civil War. Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and his allies in Russia and Iran have internalized this basic principle even as Washington and other Western capitals pinned their hopes upon UN-sponsored Geneva Talks, which faltered only two days after they began on February 1, 2016. Russian airpower and Iranian manpower have brought President Assad within five miles of completing the encirclement of Aleppo City, the largest urban center in Syria and an opposition stronghold since 2012. ...The full encirclement of Aleppo City would fuel a humanitarian catastrophe, shatter opposition morale, fundamentally challenge Turkish strategic ambitions, and deny the opposition its most valuable bargaining chip before the international community.”

Last week's fighting in northern Aleppo has transformed the battlespace and shifted the momentum in favor of the government, but it has not yet dampened support for the jihadists in places like Ankara or Riyadh. In fact, the Saudis have offered to deploy ground troops to Syria provided they are put under US command. As for Turkey, according to The Hill: “Moscow's Defense Ministry (has) accused Turkey of planning a military invasion of Syria.” Here's more from the same article:

“The Russian Defence Ministry registers a growing number of signs of hidden preparation of the Turkish Armed Forces for active actions on the territory of Syria,” ministry spokesman Igor

Konashenkov said in a statement....Russia claimed (to) have “reasonable grounds to suspect intensive preparation of Turkey for a military invasion” of Syria.” (The Hill)

Turkish officials have denied that they are preparing for an invasion, but at the same time, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has admitted that Turkey will not stay on the sidelines if it is asked to participate in a future campaign. This is from *Bloomberg News*:

“President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said his country should not repeat in Syria the same mistake it made in Iraq when it turned down a U.S. request to be part of the coalition that toppled Saddam Hussein.

“We don’t want to fall into the same mistake in Syria as in Iraq,” the president said, recounting how Turkey’s parliament denied a U.S. request to use its territories for the invasion of Iraq in 2003. “It’s important to see the horizon. What’s going on in Syria can only go on for so long. At some point it has to change,” he told journalists on the return flight from a tour of Latin America, according to *Hurriyet newspaper*.” (“Erdogan Signals Turkey Won’t Stay Out of Syria If Asked to Join“, Bloomberg)

While it’s impossible to know whether Turkey, Saudi Arabia or the US will actually invade Syria, it’s clear by the panicky reaction to the encirclement of Aleppo, that all three countries feel their regional ambitions are more closely aligned with those of the jihadists than with the elected government in Damascus. This tacit alliance between the militants and their sponsors speaks volumes about the credibility of Washington’s fake war on terror.

Finally, in less than five months, loyalist forces aided by heavy Russian air cover, have shifted the balance of power in Syria, forced thousands of terrorist insurgents to flee their strongholds in the west, cleared the way for the return of millions of refugees and displaced civilians, and sabotaged the malign plan to reshape the country so it better serves Washington’s geopolitical interests.

The war is far from over, but it’s beginning to look like Putin’s gamble is going to pay off after all.