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Russia, Syria Launch Large-Scale Humanitarian Operation in Aleppo

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Russia and the Syrian government launched a large-scale humanitarian operation in Aleppo on July 28. According to the UN, the situation is critical for about 300,000 people remaining there with food supplies expected to run out in mid-August and medical facilities suffering damage as the fighting goes on.

The militants keep on violating ceasefire regime, shelling settlements and attacking positions of government troops.

The Russia-supported Syrian government forces have already established control over the major part of the city, including Bani Zeid neighborhood, cutting off rebel-held areas and severing all supply routes. The humanitarian operation comes a day after the Syrian army cut off all supply routes through the Castello road used by militants. Neither al-Nusra nor any other jihadist unit is able to break out of the trap. Russian Air Forces keep on striking the targets north of Aleppo in support of the offensive of Syrian army units advancing towards Shakif, Dahrat Abd Roubaud and the district of Beni Zaid.

Syria's President Bashar Assad offered an amnesty for rebels laying down arms and surrendering within three months. The government air-dropped leaflets, asking Aleppo residents to cooperate with the army and calling on militants to surrender.

Russian Defence Minister Sergey Shoigu said in televised comments that corridors will be opened to allow civilians and unarmed rebels to leave the besieged city.

He described the corridors as a «large-scale humanitarian operation». Three corridors for civilians and unarmed fighters would have medical posts and food handouts. The fourth would be for armed militants ready to surrender, though the US had not supplied information about how the rebel Free Syrian Army units it supports had separated from jihadist al-Nusra fighters. According to the Defense Minister, Russia would welcome cooperation of international aid organizations.

The Defense Minister said, Moscow is sending a top general and experts to Geneva at request of US Secretary of State John Kerry to discuss the situation in Aleppo.

According to Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov the recent US-Russia discussions should encourage moderate Syrian opposition groups to leave areas occupied by al-Qaida's branch in Syria, thus helping to implement a truce there. Lavrov discussed Syria with US State Secretary John Kerry on the sidelines of the ASEAN ministerial conference held in Vientiane, the capital of Laos. Kerry said, he hoped to announce in early August details of a plan for closer military cooperation and intelligence sharing with Russia on Syria. The parties are in talks on coordination of air strikes against the al-Qaeda-affiliated al-Nusra Front.

Speaking after a meeting with US Syria envoy Michael Ratney and Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Gennady Gatilov, UN Syria envoy Staffan de Mistura said, he aimed to convene a new round of Syria peace talks towards the end of August, putting down a new deadline for a US-Russia deal to support the talks.

The idea of joining forces with Russia appears to be gaining traction in the United States. For instance, it is openly backed by Republican US presidential candidate Donald Trump. *«When you think about it, wouldn't it be nice if we got along with Russia?»* Trump said at campaign rally in North Carolina. *«Wouldn't it be nice if we got together with Russia and knocked the hell out of Islamic State?»* he asked.

The recent events in Aleppo bring this issue to the fore. President Barack Obama's administration has only recently begun to see Jabhat al-Nusra, al-Qaida's affiliate in Syria, as a global threat that could eventually rival the Islamic State, echoing a Russian argument that it has long resisted. The failure to see the evident fact does not speak in favor of US intelligence agencies and presidential advisers. Stopping al-Nusra, which has been one of the main beneficiaries of the ongoing Syrian civil conflict, is a prerequisite for crisis management. The gist of the problem is that the al-Qaida fighters are interwoven with the rebels. The United States has not lived up to its agreement to separate the opposition forces it backs from the militants.

Actually, by designating militants who share the same areas and positions as terrorists «moderate opposition», the US is providing extremists with a safe haven. The jihadist groups benefit from such neighborly relations in the same way they make use of civilians. The lack of a clear signal from Washington to the rebel groups makes the conflict drag on. Done deliberately or as a result of US failure to keep its word, this is the main obstacle on the way of finding a solution to the problem. With or without the US, al-Nusra must be defeated. The experience of Afghanistan and Libya shows that getting involved with extremist forces brings nothing but chaos.

The recent events prove Russia can do without the United States. The Russia-backed Syrian forces have achieved a major success in Aleppo to drastically change the situation into their favor. Nobody else, but Russia and Syria tackle the humanitarian problem and lend a helping hand to civilians. And nobody else, but Russia and Syria create conditions to make the UN-sponsored peace talks renew in Geneva.

The encirclement of the city comes at a precarious moment for the rebels, who are also facing Syrian government forces advancing around Damascus. They are closing on the rebel-held town of Darayya, outside of the capital. The extremist groups in Syria are facing an existential threat.

The tide of Syrian war is definitely changing in favor of Russia-supported Syrian forces. The time is propitious for the US to live up to its obligations and join Russia in the fight against the common enemy. This is the way to rectify, at least to some extent, the terrible mistakes of the past.