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## Aleppo and the new world order

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The brutal battle for Aleppo in Syria has claimed hundreds of innocent lives, many of them children. It ended with the defeat of the Syrian militant rebel groups – primarily the Jabhat Fateh Al-Sham (formerly the Al-Qaeda-affiliated Al-Nusra Front), the Ahrar Al-Sham and the Jabha Al-Shamiya – and the victory of forces loyal to Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad.

The tragedy is yet another reminder that the era of a unipolar world characterised by the United States as the unchallenged superpower since the collapse of the Communist bloc in 1990 has come to an end. The US was not a party to the final deal to evacuate the rebel-held zones in Aleppo, and it could not play any role to prevent the bloodbath in the ravaged city.

However, a portion of the American political elite is still living in a state of denial and finds it difficult to digest the painful fact of the decline of American power seen in the fate of Aleppo. Alternatively, this portion believes that the current international political landscape can be reversed by intensifying interventionist policies.

In a 14 December editorial, the Washington Post newspaper wrote that “by refusing to intervene against the Al-Assad regime’s atrocities... President Obama created a vacuum that was filled by Vladimir Putin and Iran’s Revolutionary Guard.” It apparently does not realise that the US is no

longer powerful enough to project its hegemony around the world at will. In fact, the US did all it could to bring Al-Assad down, but to no avail.

In a 16 December press conference regarding the Syrian crisis, US President Barack Obama said that “I understand the impulse to want to do something. But ultimately what I’ve had to do is to think about what we can sustain, what is realistic.” In response to the Washington Post editorial, US political commentator Patrick Buchanan argued that “the blunder was not in staying out of Syria’s civil war, but in going in. Aleppo is a bloodbath born of interventionism.”

The Aleppo tragedy is a result of the US and its Western allies’ fixation on the “Al-Assad must go” mantra and the policies adopted in support of that doctrine without having the power to make it materialise. Meanwhile, they have not had the slightest vision of the domestic forces inside Syria and thus have only been able to guess at who might replace the Syrian dictator.

During the conflict in Syria the US funded, trained and armed the Syrian “moderate rebels” only to discover later that this force was largely non-existent. Instead, the US had inadvertently supported terrorists, and Pentagon-trained rebels betrayed the US and handed their weapons over to Jabhat Al-Nusra immediately after entering Syria.

According to a New York Times report, in 2013 Obama secretly authorised the US Central Intelligence Agency to begin arming Syrian rebels under an operation code-named Timber Sycamore. The CIA knew “it would have a willing partner to help pay for the covert operation... the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia,” the paper said.

The US did what it could to succeed in Syria, but today’s multi-polar world, crowded with state and non-state actors, has not let it reshape the Syrian political system to conform to its desires.

Another significant sign of the decline of American power that stood out in Syria is the fact that the US’s close and strategic allies in the region have adopted policies with no regard for US government demands. This became apparent when the US realised that terrorist groups dominated the anti-Al-Assad forces in Syria and demanded that their allies cut their support of them. The US still thought that it could organise its own rebel groups to fight Al-Assad and the Islamic State (IS) group simultaneously.

A leaked email from former US secretary of state Hillary Clinton from January 2016 includes an excerpt from a private October 2013 speech in which she noted that she wanted to pursue “a more robust, covert action trying to vet, identify, train and arm cadres of rebels” in Syria. These rebels would have fought both the government of Al-Assad and “the Al-Qaeda-related jihadist groups that have, unfortunately, been attracted to Syria.”

Clinton added, however, that this “has been complicated by the fact that the Saudis and others are shipping large amounts of weapons – and pretty indiscriminately – not at all targeted towards the people that we think would be the more moderate, least likely, to cause problems in the future.”

In a 2014 e-mail purportedly written by Clinton to John Podesta, her campaign manager in the 2016 US presidential elections, and published by WikiLeaks, she says that “we need to use our diplomatic and more traditional intelligence assets to bring pressure on the governments of Qatar and Saudi Arabia, which are providing clandestine financial and logistic support to ISIS [IS] and other radical Sunni groups in the region.”

**INABILITY:** However, this has not been possible. Two years ago, outgoing US Vice-President Joe Biden talking at the Institute of Politics at Harvard University confessed to the inability of the US to force its regional allies to change course in Syria.

“Our allies in the region [Turkey, Saudi Arabia and the UAE] were our largest problem in Syria,” he said. They poured “hundreds of millions of dollars and tens of thousands of tons of weapons” towards anyone who would fight against Al-Assad. “And we could not convince our colleagues to stop supplying them.”

Turkey has been no less effective than Saudi Arabia in the rise of IS, if only to fulfil its neo-Ottomanist dreams, by disregarding US demands to stop this course of action. Footage surfaced in 2015 published by the Turkish daily Cumhuriyet that showed that the Turkish intelligence agency (MIT) had ensured IS terrorists safe passage into Syria.

Given the above, it is interesting that Obama in his 16 December speech said that the blame for the brutality in Aleppo rested “in one place alone – with the Al-Assad regime and its allies Russia and Iran. And this blood and these atrocities are on their hands.”

In order to cover up its defeat in Syria and in the US presidential elections, the present US administration seems to be seeking to bring about a second Cold War against Russia by simplistically blaming its losses on the personal ambitions of Russian President Vladimir Putin.

Thomas Graham, a leading US expert on Russia, rejects this anti-Putin hysteria, holding that Russia “cannot survive other than as a great power,” however. Putin’s “authority,” he says, “is reinforced by an elite that, save for a small minority, shares this view, which also resonates with the broader population. Putin’s departure will not likely change the essence of the Russian challenge to the US, no matter how different his successor’s style and tactics might be.”

According to Kremlin Spokesman Dmitry Peskov, “almost every level of dialogue with the United States is frozen. We don’t communicate with one another, or (if we do) we do so minimally.”

This is a frightening situation. A lack of cooperation between the US and Russia can only end in more chaos, more bloodshed in the Middle East, and more opportunities for militants to unleash terror both in the region and in the West. US President-elect Donald Trump has shown a glimpse of hope in this regard, however, perhaps because he better understands the new world order.

According to a 20 December report carried by the US news agency Bloomberg, “Trump has already showed his hand by planning to stack his administration with officials supportive of

closer cooperation with the Kremlin, from Michael Flynn, the president-elect's national security adviser, to Exxon Mobil Chief Rex Tillerson, a candidate for secretary of state.”

On 23 December, in response to a Christmas letter from Putin, Trump also issued the following statement on Twitter. “A very nice letter from Vladimir Putin; his thoughts are so correct. I hope both sides are able to live up these thoughts, and we do not have to travel an alternate path,” he said.