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Washington escalates covert backing for Al Qaeda militias in Aleppo

By Thomas Gaist

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US-backed militias fighting against the Syrian government of Bashar al Assad have broken through the Russian and Syrian government encirclement of their positions inside the war-ravaged northern Syrian city of Aleppo, according to Western media.

During fierce battles over the weekend, the US-backed, Islamist-led militia coalition known as Jaysh al Fateh overran military bases in southwest Aleppo and secured an access road connecting the city to the rest of the country. Russian war planes and Syrian and Iranian ground forces counterattacked Sunday, targeting the anti-Assad forces with aerial bombardments and artillery.

According to Syrian opposition leader Anas al-Abdah, the Islamist offensive has achieved “almost a miracle,” leaving the anti-Assad forces poised to “break the siege and move into a stage where we are talking seriously about liberating the city.” The offensive has carved out a slim corridor linking Aleppo to rebel-held areas, raising the possibility of resupply operations for the desperately besieged Western-backed forces.

The encirclement of Washington’s extremist groups inside Aleppo, who have been reduced to a diminishing pocket in the city’s north and western sectors in the face of a redoubled Syrian offensive backed by Russian air power and Iranian ground forces, came as a humiliating reversal for US imperialism. Washington has orchestrated a relentless civil war in Syria since 2011,

killing hundreds of thousands of Syrians, without achieving its aim of toppling the Damascus regime and installing a neocolonial puppet government.

During the opening phases of the US-NATO orchestrated war, the anti-Assad militias seized control of large areas of the city, which they sought to utilize as a base of operations and object of plunder. Prior to the outbreak of the war, Aleppo's population numbered between 1 and 2.5 million, according to varying estimates. Today, some 50,000 civilians are estimated to eke out an existence amid the rubble. The city as a whole has been without electricity and running water for more than a year, and entire neighborhoods are completely razed to the ground.

In recent weeks, with the Turkish government of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan withdrawing support for the rebels in retaliation for Washington's involvement in the failed July military coup attempt, the American-backed militias have faced the imminent possibility of defeat.

It is not coincidental that the ferocious US-backed assault is unfolding on the eve of Turkish President Erdogan's trip to St. Petersburg for talks with Russian President Vladimir Putin, on Tuesday. There are well-grounded fears in American ruling circles that Erdogan will reach a broad-based agreement with Putin, one that would close-off all remaining supply routes necessary for sustaining the war against Damascus.

The cause of the sudden reversal in the fortunes of the anti-government forces, who, if US media reports can be believed, have seized the initiative from the jaws of total defeat, was quietly acknowledged in reports published by the *New York Times* on Saturday and Monday, titled "Military Success in Syria Gives Putin Upper Hand in US Proxy War" and "Rebel Offensive in Syria Challenges Government Siege of Aleppo."

As Saturday's *Times* piece noted, the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) has been supplying the Al Qaeda-linked militias with virtually unlimited supplies of sophisticated antitank missiles and other weaponry.

The US-backed rebel coalition, which has been dominated by the Al Nusra Front, "would receive new shipments of the antitank weapons as soon as the missiles were used," according to comments from a rebel commander made in 2015, and quoted by the *Times* Saturday.

"We ask for ammunition and missiles, and we get more than we ask for," the anti-Assad commander said.

The shipments of advanced Stinger missile systems, which are capable of destroying, among other things, commercial jetliners during takeoff and landing, as well as military-grade helicopters, have continued up to the present.

In contrast to the Obama administration's assertions that the shipments were being curtailed and funneled exclusively to "moderate forces," in reality the CIA has been surging support for the encircled anti-Assad militias in Aleppo, foremost among which are the Al Nusra fighters.

As the *Times* update on Monday forthrightly acknowledged: “A vital factor in the rebel advance over the weekend was cooperation between mainstream rebel groups, some of which have received covert arms support from the United States, and the jihadist organization formerly known as the Nusra Front, which was affiliated with Al Qaeda.”

The infinite mendacity and hypocrisy of both the *Times* and the American imperial policy it defends could hardly find sharper expression.

The newspaper presents the change in name and formal disaffiliation of Al Nusra from Al Qaeda as some distant memory, when it, in fact, was announced barely a week and a half earlier. It, like most of the Western media, now cheers on the supposed battlefield successes of the so-called “rebels,” who, until the end of July, swore allegiance to Al Qaeda, supposedly the main target of Washington’s 15-year-long “war on terrorism.”

Moreover, in recent weeks, as US intelligence outfitted the surrounded Al Qaeda “rebels” in preparation for a new bloody offensive, America’s top diplomat, Secretary of State John Kerry, has touted steps toward a US-Russian military cooperation pact in Syria, the centerpiece of which would supposedly have been joint strikes against Al Nusra. While Kerry was pledging military cooperation with Moscow, along with joint “counterterrorism” operations, the CIA was giving weapons hand over fist to the Al Qaeda-affiliated forces, dumping fuel on a simmering US-Russian proxy conflict with the potential to engulf broad areas of the Middle East and Europe in all-out war.

The downing of a Russian Mi-8 transport helicopter over Syria’s Idlib province Monday, which produced the largest single death toll for Russian forces operating in Syria since Moscow launched its intervention last year, grimly illustrated the lethal dynamics being unleashed by American imperialism’s ever more reckless pursuit of unchallenged hegemony over the strategic Levantine nation.

The US media celebrations of the “rebel” victory cannot be taken at face value, and must be weighed against reports from the Syrian government side, which have presented the scope of the rebel counteroffensive in more modest terms. Whatever the true extent of the rebel advances on the ground, it is already clear that the intensified fighting will serve as the political basis for a major military escalation by Washington.

In an interview with Fox News this weekend, Democratic presidential frontrunner, Hillary Clinton, issued bellicose threats against Russia, stating that “the facts raise serious issues about Russian interference in our elections, in our democracy.” Clinton has made clear her intention to pursue a massive escalation of the Syrian war and the broader US war drive against Russia if she wins the White House, saying during last year’s Democratic Party debate, “We have to stand up to his [Putin] bullying and specifically, in Syria.”

While the Obama White House prefers to delay a major escalation until after the elections, the weakness of the American position on the ground is forcing the administration to consider direct strikes against Damascus. Former Obama administration adviser, Dennis Ross, suggested last week that the White House should “begin speaking in a language that Mr. Assad and Mr. Putin

can understand,” and employ direct cruise missile and drone strikes against Assad’s military infrastructure.

In the event that the government crushes the rebel attack, powerful factions within the US establishment can be counted on to press for the most aggressive measures against Assad, to be launched in the name of salvaging the American proxy forces, which have been built up at a cost of billions in CIA-supplied cash and weapons.

Even should the Al Qaeda-linked forces complete the breakout, and reassert control over Aleppo and the surrounding region, this will only set the stage for a massive government counterattack, and thus provide a suitable political pretext for further escalation by Washington. Beneath the fog of war in Syria, the only certainty is the constantly growing tendency toward a US-Russian clash that poses the gravest dangers for humanity.