

ISIS Last Stand; End Times for the Caliphate

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*“There can be no doubt about it, the ISIS of just two years ago was the most powerful, well-led, generously-armed and resource-efficient paramilitary force in modern history, having carved out for itself an empire between two sovereign states and devastating their armies in the process. However, this is no longer so. The days of the Islamic State consuming Syria like a cancer are over.” The Defeat of ISIS, **Andrew Illingworth**, Almasdar News*

Russia and its allies have expelled ISIS from its last urban stronghold in Syria. Now the Syrian coalition will turn its attention to the numerous hotspots around the country where al Qaida-linked groups have dug in waiting for the Syrian Army to make its final push.

On Monday, Lebanese media reported that the Syrian Arab Army (SAA), joined by combat troops from the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and Hezbollah, recaptured the city of Abu Kamal in Deir Ezzor province. The city was the last bastion for the terrorist group, ISIS, which, at one time, controlled a vast swathe of land stretching from northern Iraq to central Syria. Now the group has been chased from its last urban hideaway and scattered across the arid wastelands like a nomadic tribe wandering the desert. Abu Kamal was ISIS’s “last stand”, the final chance to fend off the advancing loyalist forces and reverse the course of the war. But the three-pronged attack proved to be too much for the demoralized jihadists who fled the city northward or surrendered to Syrian troops on the perimeter. Thus, ISIS no longer occupies any of the major towns or cities that once comprised the emerging Wahhabi proto-state. The group has been soundly defeated, its leadership is in tatters and the star-crossed Caliphate has met its end.

What happens next in Syria is of critical importance. Although large parts of the country remain under the control of al-Qaida-linked groups and the other Sunni militias, Russian **President Vladimir Putin** believes the combat part of the war is nearing its end and wants to begin preparations for a political settlement. This view is shared by the entire Putin administration including **Deputy Defense Minister Valery Gerasimov**. On Monday, Gerasimov said:

“The active phase of the military operation in Syria is nearly over. Thanks to our joint efforts, terrorists are being wiped out in the Al-Bukamal area in eastern Syria and along the Syrian-Iraqi border. It will only be a matter of time before the other militant groups are completely eradicated which will allow us to move on to a post-conflict settlement.”

It’s worth noting, that the western media has entirely ignored the defeat of ISIS at Abu Kamal mainly because it was the Russian-led coalition that delivered the final blow. In the

current climate in the US, any facts that fail to support the anti-Russia hysteria that has swept the country, are scrubbed from publication. So while the headlines at the New York Times should have read: "Russia Crushes ISIS in Syria", they instead focused on the trivial details of the latest sex scandal.

Post-ISIS Meetings Begin

On Monday, Putin met with **Bashar al Assad** in the Russian resort city of Sochi to discuss the winding down of military operations and the next phase of the 7 year-long war. The Syrian President expressed his heartfelt gratitude to the man who, by any measure, saved Syria from a fate similar to that of Libya or Iraq.

"I have conveyed to Mr. Putin and to the Russian people, our gratitude for their efforts to save our country. In the name of the Syrian people, I greet you and thank you all, every Russian officer, fighter and pilot that took part in this war."

Putin thinks the defeat of ISIS at Abu Kamal creates an opportunity for the warring parties to hash out their differences and reach an agreement that will put an end to the fighting. There's no doubt that Assad will be asked to make concessions he wouldn't otherwise make to satisfy the objectives of his Russian allies. But Putin does not want Syria to become his Vietnam, he has no intention of using the Russian airforce to recapture every square inch of sovereign Syrian territory. As he's said from the very beginning, his plans involve the annihilation of the terrorist forces operating in the country; nothing more and nothing less. This is why the outcome at Abu Kamal is so important in shaping the agenda. ISIS has been vanquished and the enclaves where the other insurgent groups are currently located, will be part of a wide-ranging mop-up operation that will end the terrorist threat in Syria for good. Security will eventually be reestablished and the government will move on to the arduous task of rebuilding its decimated cities and infrastructure. But first a settlement must be reached.

Later in the week, Putin will meet with leaders from Iran, Turkey and (maybe) Saudi Arabia. The geopolitical interests of all the parties are vastly different but not necessarily irreconcilable. Turkey, for example, might agree to withdraw its troops from Northern Syria if they are given assurances by Putin that the Kurds will not be allowed to set up an independent state on Turkey's southern border. The Kurds might also be willing to settle for something less than "full statehood" if they are allowed sufficient autonomy to operate as a culturally independent entity. The main problem is the United States and its Israeli-Saudi allies who still want to topple Assad, partition the country, and transform Syria into another US garrison state at the heart of the world's largest energy reserves. The defeat of ISIS has not changed Washington's strategic ambitions or its determination to occupy Syria even after the hostilities have ended.

Defense Secretary James "Mad Dog" Mattis has already stated that the US will not leave Syria after ISIS is crushed. Here's what Mattis said at a recent press briefing on November 13:

"We're not just going to walk away right now before the Geneva process has cracked...We're going to make sure we set the conditions for a diplomatic solution...We have to get the UN-brokered effort in Geneva to take this thing forward."

When Mattis was asked to provide the legal justification for the ongoing US occupation of east Syria, he said:

“You know, the UN said that ISIS — basically we can go after ISIS. And we’re there to take them out.”

The United Nations never approved US intervention in Syria, but that’s probably a moot point given Washington’s abysmal record of shrugging off international law. From the look of things, the US is planning to stay in Syria for a long time, and that’s going to dampen the prospects for peace. Check this out from NPR:

“A rising number of Syrians who fled are returning to their homes, with more than 600,000 going back in the first seven months of this year, according to the International Organization for Migration. The U.N. migration agency says that number is comparable to the number of returns spanning the entire year in 2016.

The Syrian government has been stressing that people are coming home, NPR’s Ruth Sherlock reports, and state media have been posting photos and accounts of such returns...

Most of those going home – 84 percent — were displaced within Syria. “The next highest number of people ... returned from Turkey, followed by Lebanon, Jordan and Iraq,” the IOM adds.” (U.N.: More Than 600,000 Syrians Have Returned Home In 2017”, NPR)

The fact that Syrian refugees are returning home in droves further underscores the positive impact Russia’s intervention has had on restoring security across the country. The Russian president and his generals have prevented another country in the Middle East from being senselessly ravaged and plunged into fratricidal warfare. But while Putin has achieved much of what he set out to do when he launched his campaign in September 2015, US proxies in the mostly-Kurdish SDF have seized nearly all the territory east of the Euphrates creating the de facto partition that Putin hoped to avoid. How can this situation be resolved without a clash between Washington and Moscow?

It can’t be. There can be no political settlement unless the US relinquishes control over Syrian territory and abandons its misguided project to redraw the map of the Middle East. But is that really going to happen?

It all depends on **Donald Trump**. If Trump really wants to end the conflict, then the Saudis and Israelis will probably comply. But if Trump is convinced that Syria is merely a skirmish in a much broader war with Iran, then he might opt to double-down by establishing bases east of the Euphrates while escalating tensions in other parts of the region. Is this what the recent flare-up in Saudi Arabia was all about? Did the Crown Prince collude with Trump’s people in detaining **Saad Hariri**? Is the administration trying to throw more gas on the ME fire hoping to shift the attention to Tehran?

It’s possible. Trump has never tried to conceal his hatred for Iran, but how far is he willing to take it? Is he willing to take the country to war? Here’s a clip from an article by Josh Rogin at the Washington Post which helps to illustrate how members of the media (and their think tank colleagues?) are using events in Syria to make their case against Iran. He says:

“...the Assad regime and Iran are preparing for the next phase of the long-running war, in which they will attempt to conquer the rest of the country. Whether Iran succeeds depends largely on whether the United States acknowledges and then counters that strategy.

Tehran is pouring thousands of fighters into newly acquired territories and building military bases. Although U.S.-supported forces hold territories east of the Euphrates River in Syria’s southeast, as well as along the borders of Israel and Jordan in the southwest, Iran has stated its intention to help Bashar al-Assad retake all of Syria....” (“The U.S. must prepare for Iran’s next move in Syria”, Washington Post)

Does Trump believe this nonsense? Iran has not “conquered Syria”. It was invited to help support the sovereign government in its fight against jihadist outsiders who destroyed the country and killed tens of thousands of its people. Rogin’s analysis is completely divorced from reality.

Here’s more from the same article:

“[A] task force of senior former U.S. diplomatic and military officials has come up with suggestions for how Trump could prevent Iran from taking over what’s left of liberated Syria and fulfill his own promise to contain Iranian influence in the region.”

By “liberated Syria”, Rogin is presumably referring to the territory in east Syria that is currently occupied by US Special Forces and their Kurdish proxies. Here’s more:

“Most urgently . . . the United States must impose real obstacles to Tehran’s pursuit of total victory by the Assad regime in Syria,”.... the Trump administration must increase its assistance to Sunni communities lucky enough to live outside Assad’s rule and help U.S.-supported local groups hold valuable territory in Syria’s southeast...” (WA Post)

Escalate the conflict? Is that what Rogin wants: More war? And, on what grounds?

On the basis that the enemies of the Syrian government must be given carte blanche in their battle for regime change. Isn’t that the gist of what he’s saying?

Rogin again;

“... the United States should work with regional allies to stop Iran from moving weapons and troops into Syria. That would require interdicting shipments by sea and ensuring that U.S.-supported forces control key border towns in Syria and Iraq. Such moves could check Iranian aggression without triggering armed conflict with Tehran.” (“The U.S. must prepare for Iran’s next move in Syria”, Washington Post)

Rogin’s analysis reads like a science fiction novel. He wants the United States to engage in clearly illegal acts of piracy to prevent a sovereign government from assisting a neighbor in its fight against foreign terrorists. He also wants Trump to block critical land-routes that connect Beirut, Damascus, Baghdad and Tehran, effectively imposing a military cordon

around the country. Rogin thinks the US has the right to arbitrarily decide these matters without United Nations approval.

This is lunacy, and yet, this is the neocon rationale for expanding the war beyond Syria's borders. More than anything, the neocons want to drag the United States into a war with Iran. That is their Number 1 priority.

But what about Trump? What does Trump want? Does he want to be the "exalted" leader who plunges the country into another bloody world war or does he want to implement the non-interventionist policies he supported during his campaign?

Which is it?

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