

Peace Talks “Paused” after Putin’s Triumph in Aleppo

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Global Research, February 05, 2016

[CounterPunch](#)

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“This is the beginning of the end of jihadi presence in Aleppo. After 4 years of war and terror, people can finally see the end in sight.”

— Edward Dark, Twitter, Moon of Alabama

A last ditch effort to stop a Russian-led military offensive in northern Syria ended in failure on Wednesday when the Syrian Arab Army (SAA) backed by the National Defense Forces (NDF) and heavy Russian air cover broke a 40-month siege on the villages of Nubl and al-Zahra in northwestern Aleppo province. The Obama administration had hoped that it could forestall the onslaught by cobbling together an eleventh-hour ceasefire agreement at the Geneva peace talks. But when the news that Syrian armored units had crashed through al Nusra’s defenses and forced the jihadists to retreat, UN envoy Staffan de Mistura suspended the negotiations tacitly acknowledging that the mission had failed.

“I have indicated from the first day that I won’t talk for the sake of talking,” the envoy told reporters, saying he needed immediate help from international backers led by the United States and Russia, which are supporting opposite sides of a war that has also drawn in regional powers.” (Reuters) De Mistura then announced a “temporary pause” in the stillborn negotiations which had only formally begun just hours earlier. Developments on the battlefield had convinced the Italian-Swedish diplomat that it was pointless to continue while government forces were effecting a solution through military means.

After months of grinding away at enemy positions across the country, the Russian strategy has begun to bear fruit. Loyalist ground forces have made great strides on the battlefield rolling back the war-weary insurgents on virtually all fronts. A broad swathe of the Turkish border is now under SAA control while the ubiquitous Russian bombers continue to inflict heavy losses on demoralized anti-regime militants. Wednesday’s lightning attack on the strategic towns of Nubl and Zahraa was just the icing on the cake. The bold maneuver severed critical supply-lines to Turkey while tightening the military noose around the country’s largest city leaving hundreds of terrorists stranded in a battered cauldron with no way out.

For the last two weeks, the Obama team has been following developments on the ground with growing concern. This is why Secretary of State John Kerry hurriedly assembled a diplomatic mission to convene emergency peace talks in Geneva despite the fact that the various participants had not even agreed to attend. A sense of urgency bordering on panic was palpable from the onset. The goal was never to achieve a negotiated settlement or an honorable peace, but (as Foreign Policy magazine noted) to implement “a broad ‘freeze’

over the whole province of Aleppo, which would then be replicated in other regions later.” This was the real objective, to stop the bleeding any way possible and prevent the inevitable encirclement of Aleppo.

The recapturing of Nubl and Zahraa leaves the jihadists with just one route for transporting weapons, food and fuel to their urban stronghold. When loyalist forces break the blockade at Bab al Hawa to the northeast, the loop will be closed, the perimeter will tighten, the cauldron will be split into smaller enclaves within the city, and the terrorists will either surrender or face certain annihilation. Wednesday’s triumph by the Russian-led coalition is a sign that that day may be approaching sooner than anyone had anticipated.

It’s worth noting, that a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, Michael O’Hanlon- whose plan to “deconstruct Syria” by using “moderate elements” to “produce autonomous zones”-advised Obama and Kerry “not to pursue the failed logic of the current Syria peace talks but to explore a confederal model and seek buy-in from as many key players and allies as possible.” In other words, the main architect of the US plan to break up Syria into smaller areas, (controlled by local militias, warlords and jihadists) thought the peace talks were “doomed” from the very beginning.

According to O’Hanlon the US needs to commit “20,000 combat troops” with “the right political model for maintaining occupation”. The Brookings analyst says that “Any ceasefire that Kerry could negotiate...would be built on a foundation of sand” for the mere fact that the “moderate” forces it would support would be much weaker than either the SAA or ISIS. That means there would be no way to enforce the final settlement and no army strong enough to establish the authority of the new “unity” government.

O’Hanlon’s comments suggest western elites are deeply divided over Syria. The hawks are still pushing for more intervention, greater US, EU, and NATO involvement, and American and allied “boots on the ground” to occupy the country for an undetermined amount of time. In contrast, the Obama administration wants to minimize its commitment while trying desperately to placate its critics.

That means Syria’s troubles could resurface again in the future when Obama steps down and a new president pursues a more muscular strategy. A number of powerful people in the ruling establishment are as determined-as-ever to partition Syria and install a US puppet in Damascus. That’s not going to change. The Russian-led coalition has a small window for concluding its operations, eliminating the terrorists, and reestablishing security across the country. Ending the war as soon as possible, while creating a safe environment for Syrian refugees to return home, is the best way to reduce the threat of escalation and discourage future US adventurism. But Putin will have to move fast for the plan to work.

Excerpts from: “[Deconstructing Syria: A new strategy for America’s most hopeless war](#)”, Michael O’ Hanlon, Brookings Institute.

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