

Russian Troops take up Positions in Aleppo, Jihadis given Ultimatum

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Global Research, September 13, 2016

[The Duran](#)

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Russia's official news agency TASS has confirmed that Russian troops are taking positions along the Aleppo road - the main road leading into Aleppo from the north, which was captured by the Syrian army in July.

At the news conference in Geneva on Sunday US Secretary of State Kerry confirmed that part of the agreement between the US and Russia for a ceasefire in Syria involved the 'demilitarisation' of the Castello road, to allow for humanitarian access into Aleppo. [This is what Kerry said](#)

".....this arrangement (the US-Russian agreement - AM) also requires forces from both sides to pull back from Castello Road - and we have agreed on that pullback. Castello Road is a major artery into Aleppo, and what this pullback will do is create a demilitarised zone around it, permitting as quickly as possible the resumption of humanitarian and civilian traffic along that road. And that will be achieved over a period of time by some monitoring, which is essential to the compliance."

Since the terms of the agreement are not being published, the precise nature of what was agreed was not clear from Kerry's remarks. It is now becoming clearer.

It appears from the TASS report that whilst Syrian troops are being withdrawn from the immediate area of the Castello road, their place is being taken by Russian troops - apparently naval infantry troops sent there from the Russian base at Khmeimim.

The TASS report also makes it clear that the Jihadi fighters in eastern Aleppo are supposed to hand over their weapons and to evacuate eastern Aleppo by way of the Castello road. Here is how TASS reports Sergey Kapitsyn, the senior Russian official on the spot, [explained it](#)

"This road is now the corridor for the exit of gunmen from the eastern part of Aleppo who decided to stop fighting and surrender their weapons. As part of the September 9 agreements between Russia and the US on reinstating the ceasefire a special focus will be on the Castello road. It will become a key route for delivering humanitarian cargos in Aleppo. Now works are underway here to equip the checkpoint of the Syrian Red Crescent Society through which the humanitarian cargos will travel to the eastern and western parts of the city,"

(bold italics added)

This explains why, [as reported previously](#), the Syrian air force dropped leaflets over Aleppo a few days ago giving the Jihadi fighters in eastern Aleppo two days to lay down their arms or evacuate. The Syrians were pre-empting the announcement of the US-Russian agreement, which it is now becoming clear requires the Jihadi fighters to evacuate eastern Aleppo, and which came into force on Monday i.e. two days after the leaflets were dropped.

In passing, the incident with the leaflets confirms that the Russians were keeping the Syrians informed of the progress of the negotiations with Kerry, just as they say.

Earlier reports which circulated a few weeks ago claimed that the Russians told Kerry that they wanted all Jihadi fighters out of eastern Aleppo by mid September. It is increasingly looking as if the US-Russian agreement does indeed contain such a provision, though possibly with a more relaxed deadline.

The original US ceasefire proposal which the Russians rejected at the G20 summit in Hangzhou required the Syrian military to pull back from the Castello road at a time when the Jihadis led by Jabhat Al-Nusra were in control of the Ramousseh district and had therefore closed the Ramousseh road into Aleppo from the south.

Though there are obviously more than 2 roads into Aleppo, the Castello road from the north and the Ramousseh road from the south are the two main roads into the city.

Had the US ceasefire plan as originally conceived come into effect the Syrian army would have given up control of both of the two main roads into Aleppo: the Castello road from the north and the Ramousseh road from the south. That would have made the government's position in Aleppo extremely precarious and vulnerable to any collapse of the ceasefire.

The recent government victories in south west Aleppo have radically changed the picture. With the Syrian army back in control of the Ramousseh district its communications from the south are secure.

If there ever was a plan by the hardliners in Washington to impose a ceasefire in Aleppo that would have made the city vulnerable to takeover by the Jihadis, then it has failed. Instead it appears that the existing plan is for the Jihadi fighters to be evacuated from eastern Aleppo instead, securing the government's control over the city.

Words of caution are in order. The mere fact that the Russians are taking control of the Castello road in place of the Syrian army and that the US - Russian agreement apparently requires the Jihadi fighters in eastern Aleppo to evacuate the city does not mean that the latter will happen.

Already there are reports that various Jihadi groups are rejecting the agreement Kerry and Lavrov agreed in Geneva on Sunday. It seems far more likely and far more in character that the Jihadi fighters in eastern Aleppo will dig in rather than evacuate.

The US - Russian agreement does not therefore mean that the battle of Aleppo is over. What it means is that a faction in Washington - which however does not mean the entire bureaucracy in Washington - has now rather grudgingly coming round to accepting the fact that the battle is lost.

In order to save something from the wreckage it is therefore trying to save the lives of the Jihadi fighters in eastern Aleppo and to preserve them as a coherent force by agreeing face-saving terms for their withdrawal. The fact the Jihadi fighters will not appreciate the effort and will almost certainly refuse to do what the US has agreed for them is another matter.

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