

ANALYSIS

# **Syria: The counterrevolution crushes Aleppo - The last barbaric stages of an onslaught**

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**The Syrian regime and its Russian ally are in the last barbaric stages of an onslaught against Aleppo. Ashley Smith analyzes the consequences of the rebel stronghold's fall.**

THE COMBINED forces of Bashar al-Assad's regime, Russian air power and Iranian-backed Shia death squads are reconquering Eastern Aleppo, according to reports—and with it, the last of the major cities liberated by the Syrian Revolution since 2011.

"Aleppo is being destroyed and burned completely," Mohammad Abu Rajab, a doctor in Aleppo, said in a voice message quoted by the *Guardian*. "This is a final distress call to the world. Save the lives of these children and women and old men. Save them. Nobody is left. You might not hear our voice after this. It is the last call, the last call to every free person in this world. Save the city of Aleppo." [1]

After it was freed from regime control in 2012, Aleppo was "a symbol of the democratic alternative that could be Syria," as Syrian revolutionary Joseph Daher put it [2].

That's why Assad and his Russian and Iranian allies declared unremitting war against it. They subjected Eastern Aleppo to a siege to starve its people and force them to flee. Aleppo's population, once greater than the Cleveland metropolitan area, collapsed to an estimated 250,000 earlier this year.

In the past month, Assad's forces moved in for the kill. Everything from schools to hospitals to homes and more have been bombed, reducing a whole section of Syria's once-largest city to a pile of rubble [3]. Ground operations have retaken one section of the city after another.

While Assad claims to be liberating Aleppo from terrorists [4], he is, in fact, slaughtering not only armed rebels fighting government forces, but untold numbers of civilians.

Stephen O'Brien, the United Nations' humanitarian chief, said Aleppo was becoming "one giant graveyard." [5] Abdul Kafi Alhamado, an English teacher in Aleppo, gave the same assessment to the BBC: "The situation inside the eastern part of Aleppo is literally doomsday. Bombs are everywhere, people are running, people are injured in the streets, no one can dare go to help them, some people are under the rubble."

The regime reportedly considers civilians who escaped the siege as suspected supporters of the anti-Assad revolution. Hundreds of men and boys have been rounded up and thrown into Assad's jails to suffer torture and death [6].

**WITH THIS** victory, Assad has restored his rule over the major cities of Syria—but at an enormous

humanitarian cost.

His regime is responsible for the vast majority of the 400,000 lives lost in five years of warfare. Countless cities and villages have been destroyed. Fully half of the country's pre-war population—11 million people—have fled their homes. There are 5 million Syrian refugees scattered throughout the region nearby, and 1 million have made treacherous sea and land crossings to Europe.

Assad had to turn to this kind of barbarism to crush the revolution that began in 2011 [7]. It was a popular, pro-democracy uprising, just as legitimate as the other rebellions against the autocracies throughout the rest of the Middle East and North Africa collectively known as the Arab Spring.

Syrians rose up against Assad's neoliberal dictatorship, organizing a tide of non-sectarian, multiethnic demonstrations throughout the country [8]. They were confronted by three forces of counterrevolution.

First and foremost was the regime itself. Assad responded to the uprising by sending his police and military to fire on peaceful protests and search out activists to arrest, jail and torture in Syria's vast gulag of prisons. Their slogan was "Either Assad or we burn the country."

Instead of deterring the revolt, Assad's brutality led opponents to take up arms in self-defense. Whole sections of the Syrian military defected to form the Free Syrian Army. The popular revolt and the armed resistance liberated large areas of the country, where Local Coordination Committees and regional Local Councils were set up to begin to remake Syrian society democratically from below [9].

**FACED WITH** the real possibility of defeat, Assad turned to the classic strategy of all tyrants: divide and conquer.

His regime, while nominally secular, is well versed in manipulating religious and ethnic divisions. Its chief base is among the minority population of Arab Alawites, who practice a version of Shia Islam. Assad has always postured as a defender of the Alawites and other religious minorities against the threat of the country's Sunni majority.

But Assad established a relationship with reactionary Sunni fundamentalists in the early 2000s. He allowed them to use Syria as a base to conduct attacks against the U.S. occupation of Iraq [10]. When the occupation ended and some of the jihadists turned on Assad, he jailed them.

After the revolution broke out in early 2011, Assad released thousands of these prisoners in the hopes that they would coalesce as a rival to the mainly secular, pro-democratic uprising [11]. These included Abu Muhammad al-Jolani, leader of Jabhat al-Nusra (now called Jabhat Fateh al-Sham); Zahran Alloush, founder of Jaysh al-Islam; and Hassan Aboud, founder of Ahrar al-Sham.

Assad hoped the reactionary fundamentalists would target more secular revolutionaries and turn the revolt into a sectarian one, while he postured as a defender of Alawites, Christians and other religious minorities against terrorism. But all of this was a cover to attack revolutionaries, their Local Committees and the Free Syrian Army.

The Assad regime also maneuvered to prevent Syria's oppressed Kurdish minority from uniting with the predominantly Arab revolt. Though it has repeatedly betrayed and oppressed the Kurds over many years, a whole section of northern Syria was effectively ceded to the Syrian wing of Turkey's Kurdish Workers Party (PKK), called the Democratic Union Party (PYD).

The regime's divide-and-conquer strategy aided and abetted the second counterrevolutionary force: the various Islamic fundamentalist forces. The jihadists released from jail near the beginning of the

uprising helped form both the al-Qaeda affiliate in Syria, the Nusra Front (now rebranded as the independent organization Jabhat Fateh al-Sham) as well as the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS).

For its part, Nusra did fight the regime, and while imposing its reactionary rule in areas it dominated. ISIS, which established its base in Raqqa, didn't even fight the regime, but actually established a de facto non-aggression pact that included oil sales [12].

**THESE TWO** forces of counterrevolution—the Assad regime and the Islamic fundamentalist semi-opposition—were bolstered by a third: the imperialist and regional powers. Both Iran and Russia intervened in Syria to save Assad from what appeared to be certain downfall.

Iran, which views Assad as a regional ally, sent military advisers, its own Shiite militias and those of its Lebanese ally Hezbollah to bolster the Syrian government's depleted ground forces [13].

Russia, with the aim of projecting itself as an imperial power in the region, deployed its air force, targeting not ISIS, as it claimed, but Syrian revolutionaries. Indeed, 90 percent of Russian bombing runs were carried out against targets other than ISIS [14].

Other regional powers, including Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey intervened against the Assad regime, but not in support of the revolution. Instead, they backed various Islamic fundamentalist forces.

Finally, the world's biggest imperialist power, the U.S., also intervened as a counterrevolutionary force.

Contrary to the claims of some on the left, the U.S. did not want regime change in Syria [15]. At best, it aimed for an orderly transition that would get rid of Assad, but preserve his state, while adding some elite elements of the opposition—a similar outcome to elsewhere in the Middle East, which the U.S. turned to more explicitly after the disastrous intervention in Libya.

The U.S. did fund some handpicked rebel groups. But it denied them crucial anti-aircraft weaponry [16] that would have enabled the rebels to overcome the Assad regime's sole military advantage: airpower.

The last thing the U.S. wanted was a successful revolution from below. Instead, it used the rebels as a bargaining chip in fruitless negotiations to achieve an orderly transition to pacify the country. And since the rise of ISIS in Iraq and Syria, the U.S. has abandoned most of its support for the rebels and focused on defeating the so-called caliphate [17]. To do so, it was more than willing to engage in de facto collaboration with Russia and the Syrian regime.

**AS A** direct result of U.S. policy, the popular revolution and its military wing dwindled while the counterrevolutionary Islamic fundamentalists funded by Turkey and the Gulf States grew in force.

Nevertheless, as recently as last March, Syrian revolutionaries were still able to mount demonstrations against both the regime and the Nusra Front during a brief ceasefire [18]. Since then, however, the revolutionary forces have lost further ground to Islamic fundamentalist forces as the Assad regime's sieges and the relentless bombing of Russian warplanes took their toll.

Assad thus got the scenario he always wanted; he and his Russian and Iranian backers can now claim they are fighting a "war on terror" against Sunni jihadists.

This result has exposed the U.S. as a weakened power in the Middle East. To be sure, it is still the region's dominant power, but it is no longer able to dictate the region's politics. Meanwhile, Russia's

position has gained in strength, while U.S. officials have been able to do little other than propose resolutions for cease-fires in the UN Security Council, which Moscow has vetoed [19].

Russia has managed to outfox the U.S. and ensure the survival of its ally Assad against any orderly transition sought by Washington. And now, with the surprise election of Donald Trump, U.S. policy in the Middle East is about to change.

Trump advocates an explicit alliance with Russia and Assad against ISIS and al-Qaeda. But in a sign of the total incoherence of his ideas, he also proposes scrapping the nuclear treaty that the Obama administration negotiated with Russia's ally Iran—a move that could disrupt any U.S. and Russian collaboration in Syria.

With U.S. policy in tatters, various parties involved in the conflict—including long-standing American allies—have struck deals with Russia.

For example, Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who used a recent botched coup attempt as a pretext to curtail democracy and re-launch the government's war on the Kurdish minority, has worked out a pact with Russia. The strategic aim is to use the cover of their common war against ISIS in Syria to prevent the Kurdish PYD from consolidating territory.

**THE SYRIAN** government, Russia and Iran will likely agree to a negotiated settlement brokered with the U.S. and other powers at some point. But it will be an unstable deal.

Even after the victory in Aleppo, Assad's regime will still only control only about a third of the country. The Kurds control a large part of the northern region; ISIS still retains power in Raqqa and its surroundings; and Islamic fundamentalist militias like Jabhat Fateh al-Sham retain power in Idlib.

Turkey will fight to stop the consolidation of any Kurdish autonomous zone. The U.S., Russia and Assad will continue their war on ISIS, and Saudi Arabia and Qatar will continue to back their fundamentalist allies to conduct a guerilla resistance against the regime.

Apart from the interests of imperial and regional powers, any kind of settlement will ultimately be based on the betrayal of the Syrian people's hopes for democracy and equality—thought it will at least provide Syrian revolutionaries at home and abroad space to rebuild their forces for a struggle in the future.

Such struggles will no doubt come. The Syrian regime, like those in the rest of the region, has little to offer but repression and austerity. Amid the counterrevolutionary settlement, Syrian revolutionaries will have to build a new left based on the multiethnic and non-sectarian solidarity of the early stages of the revolution.

Internationally, the left must reckon with its failure to unanimously support the Syrian Revolution, and it needs to re-learn how to combine opposition to all forms of imperialism with solidarity with revolution from below [20].

As part of that effort, we must oppose the tide of xenophobia and Islamophobia, and demand that our own governments admit any and all Syrian refugees who want to come to the U.S., and provide them with sanctuary and assistance to rebuild their lives.

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**P.S.**

\* <https://socialistworker.org/2016/12/13/the-counterrevolution-crushes-aleppo>

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## Footnotes

[1] ESSF (article 39742), [Syria - Children trapped in building under attack in Aleppo, doctor tells UN](#).

[2] ESSF (article 39639), [Pro-Assad Regime Forces in Syria Respond to Trump's Election by Escalating Military Offensive](#).

[3] [http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/gareth-bayley/aleppo-assad\\_b\\_13424390.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/gareth-bayley/aleppo-assad_b_13424390.html)

[4] <http://www.usnews.com/news/world/articles/2016-10-13/assad-says-aleppo-to-serve-as-springboard-for-liberation>

[5] <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-38155936>

[6] <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/news/2016/12/9/syrian-men-and-boys-missing-after-entering-regime-held-aleppo>

[7] ESSF (article 38032), [Why are Syria's refugees going through hell? - "Some 300,000 people are trapped in Aleppo"](#).

[8] ESSF (article 39743), [2011-2016 - How did Syria become a burning country?](#).

[9] <http://www.socialistproject.org/issues/august-2016/self-organisation-syrian-revolution/>

[10] <http://www.businessinsider.com/assad-used-to-let-jihadists-move-from-syria-to-iraq-to-kill-americans-heres-how-us-special-ops-spies-went-after-them-2015-8?IR=T>

[11] <https://qunfuz.com/2016/12/03/addressing-the-oireachtas-me-and-hassoun/>

[12] <http://europe.newsweek.com/isis-oil-deals-assad-regime-revealed-us-special-forces-raid-452426?rx=eu>

[13] <http://www.chron.com/news/world/article/Assad-relies-on-foreign-fighters-in-push-to-10787485.php>

[14] <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/oct/07/russia-airstrikes-syria-not-targetting-isis>

[15] <http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424127887324345804578427190797966234>

[16] <http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10000872396390443684104578062842929673074>

[17] ESSF (article 39744), [Geopolitics: Obama's new war in Iraq and the region](#).

[18] ESSF (article 38828), [Syria's revolutionaries return to the streets - The left must stand in solidarity](#).

[19] [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle\\_east/russia-and-china-block-syria-truce-in-un-vote/2016/12/05/beat48ff8-bb2a-11e6-ae79-bec72d34f8c9\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/russia-and-china-block-syria-truce-in-un-vote/2016/12/05/beat48ff8-bb2a-11e6-ae79-bec72d34f8c9_story.html)

[20] ESSF (article 38818), [A critical test - Anti-imperialism and the Syrian Revolution](#).