

Russian helicopter shot down in Syria as battle rages over Aleppo

By Alex Lantier
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Five Russian servicemen were killed Monday when US-backed Islamist opposition militias shot down a helicopter in northwestern Syria's Idlib province. The downing of the helicopter took place as fighting raged in Aleppo between US-backed opposition militias and Russian and Syrian government forces.

The helicopter was shot down near Saraqeb, halfway between Aleppo and Khmeimim air base, where many Russian aircraft operating in Syria are housed. It was the single biggest Russian loss of life in Syria since Moscow launched a military intervention to back the Syrian regime in September of last year.

Russian Defense Ministry official Sergey Rudskoi said, "Today there has been a terrorist attack that resulted in the loss of a Russian military transport helicopter Mi-8, which was returning to base after completing a humanitarian mission to deliver food and medical supplies to Aleppo residents. It carried a crew of three and two officers from the Russian center for the reconciliation of warring factions in Syria. The helicopter was gunned down over territory controlled by the al-Nusra Front terrorist group and related groups of the so-called 'moderate opposition.'"

The French daily *Le Monde* confirmed that "the wreck's identification number indeed corresponds to that of a helicopter that is armed but used for research and medical evacuation purposes." The pro-opposition Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said the helicopter had indeed delivered humanitarian aid to Shia villages near Aleppo surrounded by Sunni Islamist opposition forces.

While it remains unclear how the helicopter was shot down, there is a very real danger that this event could escalate into an all-out diplomatic or even military confrontation between Russia and the United States. There are multiple reports that the embattled Islamist

forces in the area, which are linked to Al Qaeda, might have shot down the Russian helicopter with a missile provided by the US government.

"I've heard some local sources where the helicopter was downed speaking of the possibility of MANPADs—shoulder-mounted surface-to-air missiles—being used in that context," freelance journalist Alaa Ibrahim told Russian state-owned *Russia Today*.

The Reuters news agency wrote that there was a "prospect—which could cause a major diplomatic incident—of the helicopter having been brought down by a US-supplied weapon." It continued: "The United States has equipped some rebel groups with TOW anti-tank missiles, which can also be used against helicopters."

It is quite possible that Washington provided such weapons to the Islamist opposition for use against Russian and Syrian government forces. The US is growing increasingly desperate as the situation facing its Islamist proxies, whom it has supported for five years in a bloody war for regime-change against Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, grows darker by the day.

The military situation appears to be turning decisively against the Islamist opposition militias. The noose around east Aleppo has been tightening ever since July 7, when Syrian regime forces cut the Castello road going north from Aleppo to Turkey.

Decimated by Russian air power, the anti-Assad forces were stunned by Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's announcement earlier this month that he would seek better relations with the Syrian regime. They now fear that Turkey may permanently cut off their supply lines.

The opposition faces being crushed across the entire north of Syria and is mounting a desperate last-ditch

offensive to try to break the encirclement of its forces in Aleppo.

US-backed forces are attacking Aleppo from the southwest of the city, trying to rescue opposition forces who find themselves encircled by Syrian government forces in the east of Aleppo. That city, which has been devastated by four years of fighting and looting by Islamist militias, is now being plunged into some of the most violent fighting it has seen.

The Islamist counterattack is being mounted by two militias, the al-Nusra Front, until last week Al Qaeda's affiliate in Syria, which has renamed itself Jabhat Fateh al-Sham (Front for the Conquest of Syria), and Ahrar al-Sham. The areas of Aleppo held by the US-backed forces have long been critical to the Islamist opposition, giving it a foothold in what was once Syria's economic capital, near key supply bases in Turkey from which the NATO powers have supported it.

Russian sources said 42 civilians had been killed and 98 wounded as opposition militias shelled areas of Aleppo held by Syrian government forces.

They claimed that the opposition forces had suffered a major defeat after they launched an offensive with four suicide attacks by al-Nusra fighters in armored vehicles rigged with explosives. Syrian regime forces counterattacked, with air support from Russian strategic bombers. Rudskoi stated, "More than 800 militants were killed during the fighting; 14 tanks, 10 infantry fighting vehicles, more than 60 vehicles with mounted guns were destroyed."

A humanitarian catastrophe is unfolding in Aleppo. Areas of the city controlled by the opposition are home to an estimated 200,000 to 300,000 people. There are mounting reports of shortages of food and other basic supplies. Russian officials claim they have gathered 14 tons of humanitarian supplies, of which 2.5 tons have been delivered by helicopter or other means of transport, and they are appealing to residents to leave via "humanitarian corridors" set up around the city.

Virtually the entire population remains trapped in horrific conditions, however. Russian military sources themselves claim that only 169 people managed to flee through the "humanitarian corridors" this weekend. They also reported that opposition militias had executed four people whom they caught trying to flee through the corridors.

US, European and United Nations sources are charging Russian and Syrian government forces with carrying out war crimes in Aleppo. UNICEF claimed that four hospitals and a blood bank had been hit by air strikes, and US Secretary of State John Kerry attacked the Russian "humanitarian corridor" strategy for potentially being a "ruse."

However, the attempts of Washington and its NATO allies to posture as humanitarians, shocked by the violence of the forces led by Moscow and Damascus, are shot through with hypocrisy. It was they who launched the proxy war that has now cost an estimated 400,000 lives. Airstrikes by US war planes in northern Syria have killed more than 200 civilians in just the last two weeks.

Washington and its allies have worked closely and openly with "rebel" forces such as al-Nusra that are linked to the Al Qaeda terrorist group that carried out the September 11 attacks in the US. They continue to shield them as part of their drive to topple Assad and deprive Russia of a key ally.

Whatever embarrassment al-Nusra's ties to Al Qaeda may cause in Washington, powerful sections of the US ruling elite are signaling that they will continue backing the opposition. There is a grave danger that, in order to rescue its Islamist proxies from defeat, the US government will launch a broader intervention in Syria and the Middle East that could provoke an all-out military collision with Russia.

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