

US suspends talks with Russia as danger mounts of escalation in Syrian war

By Jordan Shilton
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In a highly provocative move, the United States announced yesterday it was breaking off bilateral talks with Russia on halting fighting in Syria's civil war. The decision is only the latest indication that the US is preparing the ground for a major escalation of military operations in its war for regime-change in Syria.

With boundless hypocrisy, US State Department spokesman John Kirby said in a statement that Russia had failed to maintain its end of the bargain. "This is not a decision that was taken lightly," Kirby said. "Unfortunately, Russia failed to live up to its own commitments, and was also either unwilling or unable to ensure Syrian regime adherence to the arrangements to which Moscow agreed."

US officials added that contact between the two countries would continue to reduce the risk of clashes between US and Russian aircraft operating in Syrian air space. But this pledge cannot conceal the fact that both powers have mutually incompatible agendas in Syria and are perilously close to a direct military clash that could spiral out of control and trigger a wider war. As White House spokesman Josh Earnest bluntly put it, on Syria, there was "nothing more for the US and Russia to talk about."

Washington's attempt to pin the blame on Russia for the breakdown of diplomacy in Syria is thoroughly dishonest. The United States never had any intention of abiding by the ceasefire agreement struck between Secretary of State John Kerry and Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov last month. It exploited the week-long pause in fighting to enable its proxy Islamist "rebels" to regroup in the face of a Russian- and Iranian-backed offensive by Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's troops in Aleppo, while continuing to provide its Al Qaeda-linked allies with arms. The US-backed anti-Assad forces never accepted the ceasefire.

Open differences emerged within the US political and military establishment over the ceasefire terms, with the Pentagon publicly rejecting military and intelligence cooperation with Moscow in the name of fighting terrorism. It is likely that a September 17 US air strike on a Syrian army outpost near the town of Deir ez-Zor, which helped

ISIS fighters capture positions in the area, was deliberately launched by a faction of the US military opposed to intelligence-sharing with Russia, for the purpose of blowing up the ceasefire agreement.

The incident had the desired effect. The ceasefire collapsed several days later when a UN aid convoy came under attack. Washington and its European allies blamed the attack on Moscow and used it to demand that Russia and Syria ground their aircraft. Russia denied any involvement in the bombing of the aid convoy.

The US government and media have seized on the bombardment of "rebel"-held eastern Aleppo, controlled by the al-Nusra front, which Washington lists as a terrorist organization, to accuse Russia of war crimes and prepare the ground for an escalation of the war. Since intervening on the side of the Syrian government last September, Moscow has sought to advance its own interests by propping up its ally Assad. Syria is the site of Russia's sole naval base outside of the former Soviet Union.

According to UN figures, at least 320 civilians have been killed in Aleppo since the end of the ceasefire. Civilians have been targeted by both sides, although the Western media has generally buried reports of the shelling of government-controlled areas by Islamist "rebels." Up to 270,000 civilians, including 100,000 children, are trapped in the city.

The crocodile tears shed by US and Western politicians over the fate of Aleppo's inhabitants are a transparent fraud, aimed at concealing the fact that primary responsibility for the catastrophe in Syria, where more than half a million people have lost their lives and over 50 percent of the population have fled their homes, lies with the US and its allies. Washington deliberately fomented the civil war with the aim of removing Assad, installing a puppet government, and asserting its hegemony in the energy-rich Middle East against its main rivals, Russia and China.

The Western powers' humanitarian pretenses were further exposed by a leaked UN report which placed chief responsibility for the disastrous conditions in Syria on the

US and European Union's sanctions regime. The report, which was published in May but only released Sunday by the *Intercept* after it obtained a leaked copy, accuses Washington and Brussels of imposing since 2011 "some of the most complicated and far-reaching sanctions regimes ever imposed."

US prohibition on money transfers has made it almost impossible for aid groups to pay salaries and buy supplies, leaving the way open for ISIS and the al-Nusra Front to open unofficial avenues for the transfer of financial assistance. A separate letter from "a key UN official" in August described the sanctions as a "principal factor" in the collapse of the healthcare system.

The Obama administration never had any intention of reaching a deal with Russia to curb the violence in Syria unless it fully capitulated to US demands for the installation of a pro-Western puppet regime.

Moscow has instead made increasingly clear that it is unwilling to back down in the face of US threats to encourage Islamist terrorists to direct their attacks against Russia. After Kirby menacingly declared last week that extremists could attack "Russian interests" and even Russian cities, an ominous pronouncement given Washington's long-standing collaboration with Jihadi terrorists, Russia shot back that any US escalation in Syria would lead to "total war" and cause "tectonic shifts" throughout the Middle East.

Earlier on Monday, President Vladimir Putin announced the suspension of the United States from an agreement regulating the disposal of plutonium from decommissioned nuclear weapons. Putin cited as reasons "the radical change in the environment, a threat to strategic stability posed by the hostile actions of the US against Russia, and the inability of the US to deliver on the obligation to dispose of excessive weapons plutonium under international treaties."

On Syria, Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said Washington had failed to separate US-backed "moderate rebels" from the al-Nusra Front, which was to have been a first step under the ceasefire deal to the establishment of a joint implementation center from which Moscow and Washington would coordinate attacks on terrorists.

"We are becoming more convinced that in a pursuit of a much desired regime-change in Damascus, Washington is ready to 'make a deal with the devil,'" Russia's Foreign Ministry said in a statement Monday. For the sake of ousting Syrian President Assad, the US appears to be ready to "forge an alliance with hardened terrorists."

In truth, such an alliance has long been cemented. In 2011, the Obama administration exploited similar "humanitarian" concerns as those now being whipped up over Syria to

justify the bombardment and destruction of Libya so as to overthrow the Gaddafi regime. This was combined with support to Islamist extremist forces, leading to the deaths of tens of thousands and plunging the North African country into a brutal civil war. Many of these same Islamists were then relocated to Syria, supplied with arms funneled through the CIA, the Gulf states and Turkey, and encouraged to wage war on the Assad regime. It was out of this environment that ISIS emerged and began to gain ground.

The US political and military establishment is fully prepared to risk an all-out conflict with nuclear-armed Russia to secure its geo-strategic ambitions in the Middle East and beyond. Less than two weeks ago, General Joseph Dunford, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, told Congress that extending US control over Syrian air space would mean war with Syria and Russia. He emphasized that the US military had no intention in establishing any kind of intelligence-sharing arrangement with Russia.

Last week, in another calculated provocation, Defense Secretary Ashton Carter delivered remarks at a nuclear base in North Dakota threatening nuclear conflict with Russia.

The escalation of tensions with Russia has the support of Washington's Western allies, including Britain and France. The suspension of talks coincided Monday with reports that Paris is circulating a draft UN Security Council resolution demanding that the Assad regime halt its bombardment of Aleppo and warning that those responsible for war crimes will be held accountable.

The text also refers to the need to immediately halt all military flights over Aleppo, which in effect restricts only Syrian and Russian planes and could serve as the initial step to a "no-fly" zone enforced by US and allied aircraft. Diplomats expect Russia will veto the resolution if it comes to a vote, a move that French Foreign Minister Jean-Marc Ayrault has vowed would result in Moscow being labeled as complicit in war crimes.

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