

Is the Battle for Aleppo Now a Turning Point In the Syria War?

by Carl Osgood

July 31—On July 27, the Syrian military command announced that it had completed the encirclement of the rebel-held portion of Aleppo, the largest city in Syria and once its commercial capital, by completely cutting the Castello Road, the last route into that part of the city to the northwest for the armed opposition groups. By doing so, the Syrian army, with backing from the Russian Aerospace Forces contingent deployed in Latakia, has made the positions of the terrorist groups untenable.

At the same time, the Syrian government, in concert with the Russian military, is moving to rapidly conclude the situation rather than digging in for a lengthy siege. The July 27 military announcement triggered an uproar from international humanitarian aid NGOs, which warned that starvation for the 250,000 civilians estimated to still be in that part of the city would soon follow.

Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu and the Syrian government, in a move that was likely pre-planned for some time, announced on July 28 the commencement of a large scale humanitarian relief operation. “We have been continuously appealing to the opposing sides for reconciliation, but every time insurgents broke the ‘silence regime,’ shelled inhabited areas, and attacked positions of the government troops. All this caused a bad humanitarian situation in Aleppo city and its suburbs,” Shoigu said at the Russian Defense Ministry on July 28. “Therefore, in



Footage released July 30, 2016, of Syrian refugees who left the parts of Aleppo occupied by ISIS, via humanitarian corridors.

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accord with the decree of the President of the Russian Federation, the Minister of Defense gave orders to start a large-scale humanitarian operation aimed at providing assistance to the civilian population of Aleppo city in cooperation with the Syrian government.”

International humanitarian organizations operating in Syria have been invited to join the operation. Three humanitarian corridors were opened for civilians and for fighters who decide to lay down their weapons, while a fourth corridor was opened on the Castello Road for armed militants to withdraw. On July 31, Lieutenant-General Sergey Chvarkov, the head of the Russian reconciliation center at the Latakia airbase, announced that four more corridors would be opened.

Shoigu also announced that under orders from Russian President Vladimir Putin, in response to a personal request from U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry, Deputy



cc/Mohammad Reza Jofar

Some of the Syrian Army troops who were involved in breaking the several-year-long siege of the pro-government Shi'ite villages of Nubl and Al-Zahra (combined population 35,000) in Aleppo province on Feb. 4, 2016.

Chief of the Main Operational Directorate General Stanislav Gadjimagomedov was going to Geneva with a group of experts, in order to develop joint measures with the United States aimed at the stabilization of situation near Aleppo.

A Work-in-Progress

At the same time, Syrian President Bashar al Assad has signed a decree granting amnesty for members of armed groups who turn themselves in to the competent authorities and lay down their weapons, and those who set free, in a safe manner, persons they have kidnapped. According to Sputnik, the decree says that “Armed fugitives hiding from justice shall be exempt from liability if they surrender and hand over their weapons to the competent judicial authorities or the police within three months from the date of this decree’s publication.”

The next step will be restarting the Syrian peace negotiations. Russia’s ambassador to the UN in Geneva, Alexey Borodavkin, reported on July 28 that President Assad has sent an invitation to UN Envoy Staffan De Mistura’s deputy, Ramzy Ezzeldin Ramzy, to discuss ways for possible political settlement of the crisis in the country. “Only a political transition process, with participation of the moderate opposition in

reforming state institutions, will allow achievement of a ceasefire and settlement of the inter-Syrian conflict,” Borodavkin said.

In remarks on July 29 reported by the Russian Defense Ministry, Deputy Defense Minister Anatoly Antonov expressed cautious optimism that the humanitarian initiative might work. He emphasized that the Russian military is doing everything possible to relieve the humanitarian situation in Aleppo. Indeed, this is the sole focus of the operation, and the Russian foreign and defense ministries have already sent out appeals to foreign counterparts and organizations to

join the effort. “The first response is quite positive,” Antonov said.

“The organizations ‘Doctors Without Borders’ and ICRC, as well as the office of the Special Envoy of the UN Secretary-General for Syria Staffan de Mistura have shown interest in the operation.” At the same time, he noted that “the reaction of some media agencies and political figures, who have seen a disguised plan in the Russian actions, is surprising.” This is exclusively humanitarian, but the Russian military, he said, “will not admit the flow of arms, under any circumstances, to the regions controlled by the militants.”

While it’s not clear what’s happening on the ground with the corridors, what is clear is that the operation remains a work in progress. Military experts consulted by Sputnik “are warning against too much optimism. Encirclement, they note, does not mean victory.” The kind of urban warfare that an assault on the remaining rebel-held portions of Aleppo would imply, is difficult, dangerous, and absorbs a great deal of military effort and resources. This is why, one expert surmised, Damascus and Moscow are instead trying to convince the militants to leave. “If this occurs, organized resistance will not be possible, and the city can be taken.” It remains to be seen, however, whether or not this will happen.