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Syria

Pro-Regime Forces in Syria Respond to Trump's Election by Escalating Military Offensive

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JAISAL NOOR: Welcome to The Real News Network. I'm Jaisal Noor in Baltimore. Almost 30,000 people have fled the besieged rebel-held part of Aleppo in the past few days, the UN said on Thursday, December 1st. Taking the total number of displaced people in the Western part of the City to more than 400,000 where they face a coming bitter winter.

According to UN official Jan Egeland, Russia and the Syrian government for now refuse to make a pause in the bombing to let medical and food assistance in the eastern part of Aleppo. But Russia has proposed to set up four humanitarian corridors to evacuate the wounded – 400 injured people still need immediate evacuation from East Aleppo and to get aid in. Well, now joining us to discuss this and much more is Joseph Daher. He's a Swiss Syrian socialist activist, academic, founder of the blog Syria Freedom Forever. And his recent book is titled Hezbollah: Political Economy of Lebanon's Party of God which came out in October of this year. Thanks so much for joining us.

JOSEPH DAHER: Thank you for the invitation.

JN: So, I wanted to start off by having you address the humanitarian situation in Aleppo. The Syrian army and its allies continue to push to retake the Eastern part of the city which until very recently been a stronghold of the so-called rebel alliance. Can you talk about the latest news?

JD: Obviously, the pro-regime forces, which is not composed mainly of the regime's army, is mostly composed of Iranian-sponsored militias, Iraqi fighters, Lebanese Hezbollah, Iran fighters and other pro-regime militias, have been trying to take over the complete territories of Eastern Aleppo. In regards to the humanitarian situation, it's catastrophic.

It's been catastrophic for the past three years when the bombing and the shelling has started against the three neighborhoods of Aleppo and Eastern areas of the city. But for the past four months, Eastern Aleppo has been under siege, and today, you only have 10 ambulances working and you have a shortage of fuel. So, they might not work in the following days. You don't have any more hospitals because they've been destroyed by regime's airplanes and Russian airplanes and shellings, etcetera.

Doctors are working in very difficult conditions. You have a shortage of fuel, of food, no electricity, etcetera. So, it's catastrophic conditions. People have spoken of an Armageddon occurring in Eastern Aleppo, whereas, one of the UN officials said it was one of the worst places, or the worse place on Earth for civilians today.

JN: And so, there are some reports suggesting that these recent events, the advancement of regime, pro-regime forces, could signal a shift, maybe a dramatic shift in the conflict. What are your thoughts on that?

JD: Obviously, there's a process of incubating the revolutionary process and this has been accelerated by the last events within Syria, but also internationally-speaking and we'll speak about it I think later, the election of Trump who wants to have closer relationship with Russia and wants to put an en to the Syrian revolutionary processes in the region, while having a closer relationship with authoritarian regime, including the Assad regime.

When it comes to Syria, Eastern Aleppo has been a symbol of the democratic alternative that could be Syria. Whereas, you don't have any kind of control, or of the Islamic State, the so-called Islamic State, where it has been

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kicked out from Eastern Aleppo in the beginning of 2014, following an uprising of the democratic forces of Syria, both civilian and the armed forces.

And Jabhat al-Nusra, which is al-Qaeda, only has a couple of hundred forces, where you have around 8,000 soldiers of the various Free Syrian Army and other Islamic forces. And you had hundreds of popular organizations, obviously that had their role completely diminished following the sieges, the shelling, the bombing for the past few years on these areas.

I would just remind people that in 2013 summer, you had 1.3 million people living in Eastern Aleppo. Today, you only have 250,000 persons because this has been a strategy of the regime to prevent any kind of democratic alternative within Syria. Whereas, you can see, for example, areas controlled by the Islamic State not being bombed by the regime, or by Russian bombing, since the direct intervention of Russian airplanes. In Syria, from the end of September, 2015, 90% of the Russian bombing has not been in the area controlled by the Islamic States. So, the fall of Aleppo would definitely be a turning point and a very bad turning point for the Syrian revolutionary process.

JN: Some would say that many of the opposition groups that are fighting Assad are funded and backed by Gulf dictatorships, for example, Saudi Arabia, and if they have their way, Assad would be replaced by something more resembling the Taliban. And, you know, perhaps something more repressive and worse than what Assad represents. What are your thoughts on that?

JD: First of all, I think what has characterized the groups affiliated or have considered themselves as the Free Syrian Army, is the lack of any kind of assistance, whether political, financial, or military to these kind of groups.

When it comes to ... Islamic fundamental forces, yes, they have received funding from various ... league of countries or networks, private networks within Gulf monarchies. For example, Jaysh al-Islam, which is present in the Damascus Province, has been the biggest receiver of Saudi funding and it has attacked revolutionaries. So, the objective of the various Gulf monarchies has not been to assist the democratic armed forces of Syria — especially the various groups that were affiliated with the Free Syrian Army at the beginning of the uprising and even later — but to transform this popular revolution into a sectarian civil war because they are also afraid of a democratic Syria, because this could serve as an example for expanding any kind of democratic experience throughout Syria and to Saudi citizens, etcetera or the Gulf citizens.

Today, you cannot say that the biggest threat for the Syrian people and the main actor that has killed for the past five years Syrian civilians, or displaced people, or created millions of refugees, is the Assad regime and its allies. This is a thing. This is not in any way to undermine the threat of the various Islamic fundamentalist forces. But you cannot fight one monster by helping another. Let things be very clear, we have to fight both monsters, because they nurture each other.

JN: And so, some, like Larry Wilkerson, he's the former Chief of Staff of the Former Secretary of State Colin Powell, have said Obama made a grave error by demanding Assad must go. That Assad has too strong a base of support and too much power for that to be a realistic demand and by hanging on that demand, we're extending the conflict. We're continuing the flow of weapons and arms to both sides. How do you respond to that?

JD: On the opposite, the US has not extended its help to the various Free Syrian Army forces. I just remind that the program that was voted into the US parliament, I think it was in 2014, to fund various groups was completely been cancelled in 2015 and has no result on the ground. Because one of the demands in this program to fund various Free Syrian Army-affiliated groups is that they don't fight the Assad regime and that they concentrate their offensives

against the Islamic State. This shows once again that the US, for the past few years, has never had the objective to overthrow the same regime, or the Assad regime. John Kerry declared in the end of 2015, in Moscow in front of Putin, Russian President, that the US are not seeking any kind of regime change.

So, I would say, it's the lack of any kind of assistance to Free Syrian Army groups that allow the development and the expansion, in addition to the repression of the Assad regime, and its ally against the popular forces of Syria to have enabled the expansion of various Islamic fundamentalist forces within Syria, as well. In addition to this, it's important to remember that the Islamic State is the reaction... it's a form of counter-revolution as a reaction to the various repression of authoritarian regimes in the region and, particularly, the Assad regime.

So, you cannot put an end to that without putting an end to the condition that enabled expansion of groups such as the Islamic State. And one of these reasons are authoritarian regimes in the region supported directly and indirectly by various imperialist, sub-imperialist forces, as well, that we have to denounce, as well, all the interventions that occurred in the past few years in Syria in the region from regional and international states that only brought problems, definitely.

JN: So, I wanted to ask a question about the role of the Kurdish forces, and we know the US has been backing some Kurdish forces with air strikes since 2014, and there was some reports that the Kurdish YPG forces were cooperating with the regime in fighting with Aleppo and now, apparently, they are denying having cooperated with Assad in Aleppo. Talk about what's going on with the Kurds.

JD: So, when we speak about the Kurds, it's a variety of political forces. The group you're mentioning is the YPG which is the armed branch of the PYD which is the sister organization of the PKK. The PYD in Syria has since the beginning of the uprising, tried to advance its own interests. This meant making deals on some occasions with regime forces. And when regime forces withdrew from Kurdish majority-inhabited regions, it gave them to the PYD forces. And until today you have in cities controlled by the PYD, Qamishli or Hasakah, areas that are still controlled or areas that are still under the control of the regime.

This does not mean that PYD is an ally of the Assad Regime. The Assad regime has refused any kind of self-determination of the Kurdish people; the Baathist regime has a history of repressing Kurdish forces and of colonization of Kurdish-inhabited regions, etcetera. But the opportunist interests of the PYD has pushed it to work with various forces – for example, working sometimes with Assad forces – and what might happen, most probably in the case of Aleppo, is that they took advantage of the bombing of Russian airplanes and regime airplanes and the ground offensive of poor regime forces to advance their own interests, taking control of various areas that were under the domination of armed opposition forces. But at the same time the YPG had worked in the past with groups of the Free Syrian Army, like when Kobani was under siege by the Islamic State, the forces with various Free Syrian Army forces.

And one of the examples you had also in Aleppo, people fleeing regions from opposition forces, to Sheik Maqsood which is a Kurdish-inhabited area, controlled by the PYD. So, it's been, PYD has done what's in its best interests and we should criticize some of its positions – for example, supporting the Russian intervention in Syria that has killed for the past, more than a year now, more than 3,000 civilians. At the same time, we have to take into consideration the chauvinist policies and position of the exiled opposition that have refused to acknowledge the Kurdish people as a nation and refuse any kind of demands of the Kurdish people like federalism project or changing the name of the country into a Syrian Republic instead of Syrian Arab Republic. So, it's nuanced analysis that we should have on the policies of the PYD.

JN: And finally, I wanted to end the interview with a question about Donald Trump. One of his leading campaign pledges would be to tear up the Iran nuclear deal. You know, talk about what – and for the

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region and specifically for Syria –” what a Trump presidency could mean for the conflict.

JD: Trump's election meant an acceleration, and we're seeing on the ground an acceleration of the liquidation(?) of the Syrian revolution. And most of various analysts have commented how Russian forces, as well as Iranian forces and pro-regime forces, are accelerating their offensive in various areas of Syria, not only in Aleppo because today or yesterday Russia bombed a market in a village of Idlib Province called Ariha, killing 40 people. But you also have offensive of regime forces in the Damascus Province and pushing people to leave these areas, so to accelerate the various offensives to reach a point of fait accompli when Trump would be in power officially, beginning of January.

Because the plan of Trump is, as he said, a form of isolationism, which is usually inherited or affiliated with extreme right-wing connotation in the US, and seeking more collaboration with the Russian State and, therefore, including in the case of Syria, he has repeatedly said that his main objective is to put an end to Daesh and that he's ready to work even with, for example, the Assad regime because it's not his direct enemy.

He said, as well, in the election campaign that it was a mistake to help get rid of Saddam Hussein and Gaddafi because although they were not nice guys, at least, we didn't have terrorists. So, he has this plan of seeking increased relationship with authoritarian regimes. For example, just as he wants to upgrade relationship with Egypt, that is lead by the dictator Sisi, that he wants to call the Egyptian regime a friend, I think we'll see more generally-speaking in the region bad days for the self-determination of the people. Just as in the case of Palestine, as well, he has supported the various policies of Netanyahu and wants to declare Jerusalem as a capital.

So, for the Syrian, Egyptian, Palestinian and, more generally, the people of the region, it's not good days in perspective. So, and obviously for the Syrian people, it's the worst in absolute manner because it means an acceleration of pro-regime, destruction of opposition-held areas and increased suffering for the people in these areas.

JN: All right, Joseph Daher, thank you so much for joining us. He's a Swiss-Syrian socialist activist, founder of the blog Syria Freedom Forever. His recent book, titled Hezbollah: Political Economy of Lebanon's Party of God is joining us from Geneva, Switzerland.

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