

Sergey Lavrov: “Terrorists Should Be Fought Until Their Full Elimination” in Syria

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Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov complains about misrepresentation of his words of the previous day; confirms that there is no ceasefire in Aleppo and that objective remains total elimination of Jihadi controlled pocket in the city.

Thursday 9th December 2016 saw the Jihadi fighters driven out of Sheikh Saeed, another key district in eastern Aleppo formerly under their control.

Loss of Sheikh Saeed – sometimes referred to as the ‘eastern gateway of Aleppo’ – not only confines the Jihadis in Aleppo to an ever smaller area (around 6 square kilometres), but tightens even further the noose around them, and distances them further from escape into the Aleppo countryside.

The other major event of 9th December 2016 was the mass evacuation, which has been arranged by the Russian Reconciliation Centre in Khmeimim air base, of thousands of civilians from eastern Aleppo.

This operation has been widely misunderstood or misrepresented as some sort of ‘ceasefire’, when on the contrary it is a further sign that the Jihadi pocket in eastern Aleppo is in its final hours.

The origins of this misunderstanding are certain words spoken off the cuff by Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov following meetings he is having with Western officials – including US Secretary of State Kerry – in Hamburg. In order to clear up this misunderstanding I will first set out [Lavrov’s exact words](#)

Combat actions of the Syrian Army in eastern Aleppo are suspended today, as a yet another and the biggest one so far operation to evacuate the civilians willing to leave the place is underway there. There are some 8,000 people in the column. That’s a huge operation and the withdrawal route is five kilometres long.

These words imply no sort of ceasefire, unilateral or otherwise. What Lavrov was saying was that the Syrian army had temporarily scaled down its operations in order to allow the long column of 8,000 civilians who are being evacuated from eastern Aleppo to leave unhindered.

Lavrov’s irritation at the way his words yesterday were misunderstood or misrepresented

has been made clear today in [a clarification he has provided](#) of what he said yesterday

I never said that military activities have been stopped completely. I just said that they were halted yesterday for a specific period of time in order to provide civilians with an opportunity to leave. After these humanitarian pauses, military operations will go on until eastern Aleppo is liberated from militants.

The background to all this is that the Russians and the Syrians have been trying to evacuate the civilians from eastern Aleppo to get them out of harm's way for weeks. All their attempts to do so have up to now failed because Al-Qaeda has prevented the civilians from leaving. Indeed there are credible reports that on occasion Al-Qaeda has executed civilians who have tried to leave, and has violently broken up protests by civilians demonstrating against Al-Qaeda's refusal to let them leave.

The reason Al-Qaeda has been preventing civilians from leaving eastern Aleppo is because it has wanted them there as human shields. Indeed the whole propaganda campaign Al-Qaeda has organised over the last few months – which has been enthusiastically supported by Western governments and by the Western media – has depended on keeping the civilians there so that they can act as human shields.

Moreover in preventing the civilians from leaving eastern Aleppo, Al-Qaeda has had the active help of the UN Secretariat and its humanitarian agencies, who have never made any issue of the fact that Al-Qaeda has been forcibly preventing the civilians from leaving eastern Aleppo, but who have on the contrary been colluding with Al-Qaeda's propaganda campaign by repeatedly demanding 'ceasefires' and 'humanitarian access' to the civilians in eastern Aleppo.

Lavrov's anger at the conduct of the UN Secretariat finally boiled over yesterday, when [he unequivocally condemned the behaviour of its Staffan de Mistura](#), the UN's chief representative in Syria, whom he accused of practising "sabotage"

The third direction is political process. It seems to me I've already strained my voice, calling on Staffan de Mistura to stop sabotaging political negotiations.

(bold italics added)

These are exceptionally strong words coming from a diplomat of Lavrov's experience. They show how strong Russian anger at the conduct of the UN Secretariat in Syria has become. Whilst Lavrov's words are concerned primarily with de Mistura's mismanagement of the political negotiations, there is no doubt they also partly reflect Russian anger at the way the UN Secretariat has acted as Al-Qaeda's propaganda ally during the siege of eastern Aleppo.

The fact that it has now become finally possible to evacuate the civilians from eastern Aleppo is a further sign that the Jihadis' grip on eastern Aleppo and on the civilians there has finally been broken, and that is how yesterday's events should be understood.

Once the civilians are evacuated – in the absence of any agreement for the Jihadis to withdraw from the city – the Syrian army will be in a better position to round up the remaining Jihadis since they will no longer have civilians behind whom they can hide. That

is what Lavrov implied yesterday, and what he has confirmed today.

That the total destruction of the Jihadi presence in eastern Aleppo is the Russian objective was [again made clear by Lavrov yesterday](#)

Our strategy is very simple as it is based on a UNSC resolution which states that terrorists should be relentlessly fought until their full elimination.

(bold italics added)

The Russian Reconciliation Centre in Khmeimin air base has just issued a [statement](#) saying that 8,500 civilians have been evacuated from eastern Aleppo over the last 24 hours

Only in the past 24 hours, a total of 8,461 residents, including 2,934 children, left the areas that remain under the militant control, with the assistance of the Russian Center for reconciliation of the warring parties.

This suggests that the operation to evacuate the civilians from eastern Aleppo is now all but over. Barring an agreement to withdraw the Jihadis from Aleppo within the next few hours, fighting in the city will resume in full force shortly.

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