

Pentagon prepares to send a thousand more troops into Syria

By Bill Van Auken
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The Pentagon is preparing to submit a request that would send 1,000 more US soldiers and Marines into Syria, doubling the number of ground troops now deployed in the war-torn country.

The proposed escalation, following close upon the sixth anniversary of the US-orchestrated war for regime change that has killed close to half a million Syrians and turned millions more into refugees, signals a turn toward a qualitative escalation of the US intervention in that country and in the broader Middle East.

The request for the troop buildup comes in the wake of the a report submitted by the Pentagon at the end of last month outlining proposals requested by the Trump administration for an escalation of the US intervention being waged in Iraq and Syria in the name of combating the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS).

Gen. Joseph Votel, the head of the US Central Command (CENTCOM), which oversees US military operations in the region, “is set to forward his recommendations to [Defense Secretary James] Mattis by the end of this month, and the Pentagon secretary is likely to sign off on them,” the *Washington Post* reported Thursday, citing an unnamed Department of Defense official.

The troops would likely come from the 24th Marine Expeditionary Unit and the US Army’s 82nd Airborne Division. The Marines would be drawn from a force of 2,200 which is aboard ships now headed toward the Syrian coast, while the Army paratroopers would come from a force of some 1,000 troops that have been pre-positioned in Kuwait. The initial escalation of troop levels could be quickly increased further from these additional forces being deployed to the region.

Such an increase would formally abrogate caps

imposed on US deployments in Iraq and Syria by the Obama administration, 5,000 in the first country and 500 in the second. These limits have already been breached with “temporary” deployments continuously rotating more US troops in and out of the region. Meanwhile, earlier this month the Pentagon dispatched 250 US Army Rangers and 200 Marines into Syria.

The proposed changes in US deployments would not only increase the number of troops on the ground, but also “increase the potential for direct US combat involvement in a conflict that has been characterized by confusion and competing priorities among disparate forces,” according to the *Post*.

This “confusion” and multi-sided character of the ongoing fighting in Syria is the direct product of Washington’s abortive attempt to topple the government of President Bashar al-Assad through arming, funding and support for Islamist, Al Qaeda-linked militias in collaboration with Turkey, Saudi Arabia and other Sunni gulf oil sheikdoms.

The further buildup of US forces, carried out against the opposition of the Syrian government and in violation of international law, is ostensibly aimed at combating ISIS, itself the product of the protracted US intervention in the region.

In combating ISIS, the US has relied on a militia force dominated by the YPG, a Syrian Kurdish militia. At the same time, Washington’s NATO ally in the region, Turkey, has intervened in Syria in the name of combating ISIS, but directing much of its military power at preventing the YPG from consolidating a Kurdish autonomous zone on Turkey’s southern border.

The US Ranger unit, equipped with heavily armored Stryker combat vehicles, was deployed to the northern Syrian city of Manbij as part of what the Pentagon

described as a “reassurance and deterrence” mission, i.e., an attempt to prevent Turkish and Kurdish forces from engaging in all out clashes.

Meanwhile, however, there is also the possibility of a far more dangerous military clash erupting in Syria between the US and Russia.

Russian forces, supporting the Assad government, are also operating inside Manbij. At a press briefing Wednesday, a spokesman for US operations in the region spoke from Baghdad to Pentagon reporters, acknowledging that US and Russian troops were close enough to “observe each other’s movements.”

“They can see each other,” said Col. John Dorrian. “They are not talking to each other, and they are not hanging out together.”

All of these disparate and mutually hostile forces are massing in the area for an attack on Raqqa, a city of 300,000 controlled by ISIS. The US is backing the Kurdish-dominated militia, which has said it will resist any Turkish role in retaking the city. Turkey, meanwhile, is supporting Turkish Islamist forces that are opposed both to the Kurds and to the Syrian government, whose own forces are moving against Raqqa with the backing of Russia.

As the Pentagon prepares its escalation in Syria, an influential Washington think tank has called for an even greater expansion of US operations aimed at furthering US strategic interests throughout the oil-rich region.

The Institute for the Study of War, which is funded by major military contractors, including Raytheon, GeneralDynamics and DynCorp, issued a report entitled “America’s Way Ahead in Syria.” Its principal authors are Kimberly and Frederick Kagan, a husband-and-wife team of neo-conservative advocates of global US military escalation who acted as advisors to US commanders in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The report criticizes the current plans for escalation as an attempt to “supersize the Obama administration’s strategy by lifting constraints on US forces and adding a few additional resources.”

Instead, they advocate, “President Trump and his team must change the strategy fundamentally. They should orient their new plan on American interests rather starting from what the US had been doing.”

The strategy advocated by the Kagans points toward a US confrontation with both Iran and Russia for

hegemony over the Middle East.

“The Russo-Iranian military buildup and attempt to dominate the regional system and resources constrain and weaken the United States,” the report states. “Russia and Iran are building a regional order based on their shared near-term interests, which will not diverge any time soon. This developing system denies America the freedom to protect its own interests. The Russo-Iranian coalition will make it more difficult for the US to respond to terror threats against it, defend key allies such as Israel, and ensure unfettered access to trade routes the US economy depends on.”

The report states that “the US must maintain and likely increase its military presence in Iraq even after Mosul’s recapture.” It calls for the building up of forces in Iraq to confront and defeat Iranian influence.

“We must show once again that we are willing to fight and die with Sunni Arabs against their enemies and ours--Al Qaeda, ISIS, and Iran,” it insists.

In Syria, the report adds, the US should “seize and secure a base in southern Syria ... and create a de facto safe zone” where US forces can “recruit, train, equip, and partner with” local Sunni militias.

It also states that Washington must prepare for direct military confrontation with Russia over control of Syria. “The US must be prepared to conduct a full suppression of enemy air defense if necessary and to use alternative sources of leverage over Putin to deter him from attacking US forces. The US must position a joint package of strike and air defense assets in theater before beginning this course of action to strengthen this deterrence. The package must be obviously able to attain air supremacy throughout the theater and maritime supremacy in the Mediterranean if required.”

Behind the initial plans for escalating US troop deployments in Iraq and Syria, what is being discussed in the White House, Pentagon and CIA, as well as the think tanks connected to the US military and intelligence apparatus, are proposals that pave the way to a third world war.

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