

Defeat of ISIS in last stronghold signals new stage of US war in Syria

By Bill Van Auken
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Syrian government troops, supported by Iranian-backed Iraqi and Lebanese Shia militia forces, have routed ISIS from its last stronghold in Syria, the Euphrates River town of Abu Kamal just across the border from Iraq.

Far from signaling an end to the US intervention in Syria, launched in the name of fighting ISIS in that country and in Iraq, the collapse of the Islamist militia has only set the stage for a further escalation in Washington's drive to assert its hegemony in the Middle East by military means.

Remaining ISIS fighters withdrew from Abu Kamal in the face of the government offensive. The group is now believed to control only a few small villages along the Euphrates and small nearby desert areas.

The taking of Abu Kamal follows the driving out of ISIS from the Iraqi city of Qaim, where Iranian-backed militias also took the lead. The linking up of these forces effectively secured the much vaunted "land bridge" linking Tehran to a northern tier of Arab states—Iraq, Syria and Lebanon—which have all established close ties to Iran.

Washington's main aim now is to blow up these ties. To that end, the Trump administration has sought to sabotage the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), the nuclear accord struck between Tehran and the major world powers, while seeking to forge an anti-Iranian axis linking the US, Israel and the reactionary Sunni Persian Gulf oil monarchies led by Saudi Arabia.

This anti-Iranian alliance has found its most destructive expression in Washington's backing for Saudi Arabia's two-and-a-half-year-old war against Yemen, where an unrelenting bombing campaign combined with a blockade of the country's airports, sea ports and borders is unleashing a famine that could

claim the lives of millions.

The Saudi regime orchestrated the convening of a meeting of the Arab League in Cairo on Sunday for the purpose of condemning Iran and the Lebanese Shia movement, Hezbollah. Saudi Foreign Minister Adel Jubeir told the assembly that the monarchy "will not stand by and will not hesitate to defend its security" from Iranian "aggression."

This supposed "aggression" consists of a missile fired from Yemen on November 4 which was brought down near Riyadh's international airport without causing any casualties or significant damage. This, after Saudi warplanes have bombed Yemeni schools, hospitals, residential areas and essential infrastructure into rubble. Both Iran and Hezbollah have denied Saudi claims that they supplied the missile, while a UN monitoring agency has stated that there are no indications of missiles being brought into the impoverished war-ravaged country.

Lebanese Foreign Minister Gebran Bassil and Iraqi Foreign Minister Ibrahim al-Jaafari boycotted the meeting in Cairo, while Syria has been expelled from the Arab League. While hosting the meeting and heavily dependent on Saudi aid, the Egyptian regime of Gen. Abdel Fattah el-Sisi appeared to distance itself from the aggressive anti-Iranian line from Riyadh, with Egypt's Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry calling for the defusing of tensions in the region. Sisi himself called for the return of Prime Minister Saad Hariri to Lebanon in the interest of "stability." Hariri was apparently kidnapped by the Saudi regime and forced to resign his position in an attempt to blow up the Lebanese government, which includes Hezbollah.

Within Syria itself, US military operations have already shifted from combating ISIS to countering Iranian influence and Syrian government consolidation

of control over the areas previously held by the Islamist militia and other Al Qaeda-linked forces.

This has been made explicit in the form of the direct US role in evacuating ISIS fighters and commanders from areas under siege by the Pentagon and its proxy ground troops organized in the Kurdish-dominated Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). Repeated charges by both Iran and Russia of such complicity have been confirmed by the BBC, which documented the US military and the Kurdish YPG militia organizing a convoy that rescued some 4,000 ISIS fighters and family members together with tons of arms, ammunition and explosives from Raqqa last month.

The purpose of this operation was to redirect the ISIS forces against the offensive by Syrian government troops, while freeing up the US proxies in the SDF to make a dash for strategically vital oilfields north of the Euphrates.

Both Iran and Russia have charged that the US also intervened in an attempt to prevent the fall of Albu Kamal to the Syrian government troops and their Shia militia allies. The Russian Defense Ministry charged that US warplanes were deployed to effectively provide air cover for ISIS by preventing Russian planes from bombing the Islamist militia's positions.

Last week, US Defense Secretary Gen. James "Mad Dog" Mattis made clear that Washington has no intention of ending its illegal military intervention in Syria, ostensibly launched for the purpose of defeating ISIS. "We're not just going to walk away right now before the Geneva process has traction," he said.

Mattis was referring to the long-stalled UN-brokered talks between the government of President Bashar al-Assad and the so-called rebels backed by the CIA, Saudi Arabia and the other Sunni Gulf monarchies.

Washington is attempting to uphold this process—and the demand for the ouster of Assad—in opposition to attempts by Russia, Iran and Turkey, the three largest regional powers, to broker their own political solution to the Syrian crisis, the product of the US-backed war for regime change.

Russian President Vladimir Putin is hosting his Iranian and Turkish counterparts, Hassan Rouhani and Recep Tayyip Erdogan, at a summit in Sochi Wednesday to discuss a joint position on Syria. Washington's reliance on the Syrian Kurdish forces has served to further solidify relations between Ankara

and Moscow.

While there are tactical difference within the US establishment and its military and intelligence apparatus over how to proceed in the Middle East, there is general consensus on an escalation toward military confrontation with Iran.

In a piece published by the *Wall Street Journal* titled "Iran Strategy Needs Much Improvement," Kenneth Pollack of the Brookings Institution argues that the nuclear deal, Yemen and Lebanon are distractions from the main arena for such a confrontation: Iraq and Syria.

Pollack, a former CIA agent and National Security Council official, who was one of the leading advocates of the US invasion of Iraq, argues that Tehran is "badly overexposed" by its intervention on the side of both the Iraqi and Syrian governments against ISIS.

"Washington could take advantage of this by ramping up covert assistance to Syrian rebels to try to bleed Damascus and its Iranian backer over time," he writes, "the way the US supported the Afghan mujahedeen against the Soviets in the 1980s."

That the US support for the Afghan mujahedeen produced Al Qaeda, US imperialism's supposed arch enemy in an unending global war on terror, does not give this imperialist strategist the slightest pause. He like others in US intelligence circles know that such movements have a dual use, serving at one point as proxy forces in wars for regime change, only to be transformed at another into a pretext for US interventions in the name of fighting terror.

At the same time, Pollack calls for the US to maintain "a large residual military force" in Iraq to counter Iranian influence.

What is involved in this proposal is a continuation and escalation of the campaigns of US military aggression that have already claimed the lives of over a million Iraqis and hundreds of thousands of Syrians. To thwart Iran's influence, Washington is prepared to blow up the entire region.

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