

US threat to escalate Syria war over alleged gas attacks

By Bill Van Auken
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Washington has reiterated unsubstantiated allegations that the Syrian government carried out multiple gas attacks against a “rebel” stronghold in the Damascus suburb of Eastern Ghouta, raising the prospect of a new US attack on forces loyal to President Bashar al-Assad.

The US State Department claimed Monday that it recorded six “suspected” chemical attacks in Syria over the past month, while the US ambassador to the United Nations, Nikki Haley, launched a provocative campaign in the Security Council, demanding passage of a resolution condemning Damascus “in the strongest terms” for alleged acts about which no substantive evidence has been produced.

Russia opposed the statement, insisting that “no perpetrators have been identified” and accusing Washington of mounting a “propaganda campaign” against the Syrian government.

Senior US officials, speaking on condition of anonymity, told the AFP news service that a US military attack against the Syrian government was “on the table” and “always feasible.” President Donald Trump “hasn’t excluded anything,” said one official, adding, “Using military force is something that is still considered.”

A second senior US official claimed that the Assad government was seeking new ways to deploy banned chemical weapons. “It looks like they are trying to evolve for either military reasons or to escape accountability. It is incredibly important to stop that before it gets off the ground.” The official added the absurd warning that the use of such weapons “will spread to US shores, if we cannot stop it.”

The Syrian government has denied any responsibility for chemical weapons attacks in Eastern Ghouta or elsewhere, pointing out that it eliminated its entire chemical weapons program under an agreement

brokered by Washington and Moscow and confirmed by the United Nations and the international chemical weapons control agency in 2014.

It further charged that US-backed “rebels” linked to Al Qaeda and other Islamist groups supported by the West and its regional allies had repeatedly used such weapons. “Syria confirms that the US, Britain and France bear full responsibility for obstructing the international investigation of the use of toxic chemical materials by covering the crimes of terrorist groups in Syria,” the acting chargé d’affaires of Syria’s permanent delegation to the UN, Munzer Munzer, told the Security Council Monday.

In April 2016, the Trump administration seized upon unverified reports of an alleged chemical attack by a government warplane on the village of Khan Sheikhoun in Idlib province to launch 59 cruise missiles against Syria’s Shayrat Airbase.

The threat that the US will launch an even more devastating attack is fueled by the increasing crisis confronting Washington’s intervention in Syria as well as the global strategy enunciated by both the White House and the Pentagon, shifting from the two-decades-old “war on terrorism” to the preparation for “great power” conflicts.

This shift finds its most immediate expression in Syria, where the US had justified its deployment of some 2,000 troops in the name of combating the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). With the routing of ISIS in both Iraq and Syria, however, US officials have made it clear that Washington intends to maintain a permanent occupation of Syria through the formation of a 30,000-strong “border protection force” and the carving out of a US zone of influence comprising roughly a third of Syrian territory along the country’s northern and eastern borders with Turkey and Iraq. The

principal aim of this strategy is to counter Russian and Iranian influence in the region and lay the groundwork for a broader war for US hegemony over the oil-rich Middle East.

Washington's reliance upon the Syrian Kurdish YPG militia as the mainstay of its so-called border force, however, has provoked the increasingly bloody intervention of Turkey against the Kurdish enclave of Afrin in Syria's northwest and the threat to extend it eastward to the city of Manbij, which is a base for US special operations troops operating together with the YPG.

The Syrian government reported Tuesday that the Turkish invasion had thus far claimed the lives of nearly 150 civilians, while leaving roughly 350 more wounded.

Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan on Tuesday issued a statement defying US warnings against any Turkish advance on Manbij. In an address to the country's ruling Justice and Development Party's (AKP) parliamentary group, Erdogan dismissed US claims that it was in Syria to combat ISIS. "We don't believe this," he said. "It means you have calculations against Turkey and Iran, and maybe Russia."

Erdogan charged that both the Obama and Trump administrations had assured Ankara that the US would withdraw from Manbij and restrict the presence of the YPG, which the Turkish government considers a branch of the outlawed Turkish Kurdish separatist group, the PKK, to the eastern shore of the Euphrates River.

"You allow them to settle and tell us 'Don't come to Manbij.' We will come to Manbij to hand it over to its real owners," the Turkish president said, reiterating a policy of driving the Syrian Kurdish population from Turkey's border and replacing them with displaced Syrian Arab refugees.

Employing the right-wing nationalist demagoguery that has characterized AKP rule, Erdogan told his audience that Turkey was confronting the same enemies that stripped the Ottoman Empire of "five million square kilometers" of territory.

"They have forced us so much that in the end they have awakened a sleeping giant. They should know this. The Turkish people are advancing to a new era. No state or international organization can question the

power of Turkey any more," he said.

The invasion of Syria has been accompanied by a repressive crackdown within Turkey itself. By its own admission, the government has detained at least 600 people, some of them for posting antiwar sentiments on social media. Meanwhile, Turkish media figures and entertainers are being subjected to a virulent campaign to force them to make statements in solidarity with Turkish troops in Syria.

Both US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson and National Security Advisor Gen. H.R. McMaster are slated to arrive in Turkey early next week for urgent talks with the Erdogan government aimed at forestalling an armed confrontation between the two ostensible NATO allies.

Even as the tensions continue to escalate between Washington and Ankara, the threat of a confrontation between the US and Russia in Syria is also mounting in the wake of last Saturday's shootdown of a Russian fighter jet over Idlib province.

Russian officials reported that they have recovered both the wreckage of the downed Su-25 jet and the remains of its pilot, Maj. Roman Filippov, who managed to eject but was killed fighting elements of the Al Nusra Front, the Syrian Al Qaeda affiliate, after he reached the ground. The Russian Defense Ministry indicated that it intended to carry out an investigation to determine what kind of missile struck the plane. The most likely source of the attack was a shoulder-fired anti-aircraft missile, or MANPAD, supplied by the CIA to the so-called rebels dominated by Al Qaeda.

In the wake of the shootdown, Russia has stepped up its airstrikes against positions held by the Islamist militias in Idlib province.

Under these conditions, Washington's firing of another barrage of cruise missiles—or worse—over unsubstantiated claims of Syrian government chemical weapons attacks carries with it the real prospect of igniting a military clash between the US and Russia, the world's two major nuclear powers.

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