

Bolton walks back Trump's Syria troop withdrawal

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US National Security Adviser John Bolton and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo have embarked on what could be described as a “walk back” tour of the Middle East. Its purpose is to assure US regional allies that Washington is not about to implement the decision announced by President Donald Trump last month to carry out a speedy and total withdrawal of US troops from Syria.

When Trump made his surprise announcement on December 19, administration officials indicated that the president had ordered a complete withdrawal within 30 days. He posted a video on Twitter declaring: “Our boys, our young women, our men, they’re all coming back and they’re coming back now. We won.”

The announcement unleashed a political firestorm in Washington, leading to the resignation of both US Defense Secretary James Mattis and the American envoy to the so-called anti-ISIS coalition, Brett McGurk.

Leading Democrats as well as the editorial boards of the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* reacted as if the sky had fallen. The thought that the illegal US troop deployment in Syria would be abruptly ended was treated as a veritable act of treason, while Gen. “Mad Dog” Mattis’ quitting the administration was mourned as a tragedy for the nation. The general line was that the US had lost an irreplaceable statesman, his responsibility for war crimes in Iraq and Afghanistan and his boasting that “it’s a hell of a lot of fun to shoot” Muslims notwithstanding.

The promise to bring an end to the US wars in the Middle East and Afghanistan was an integral part of Trump’s “America First” 2016 election campaign platform, which he was able to use to considerable effect against his rival, Hillary Clinton, who was identified with endless US wars and plans for a major escalation of the US intervention in Syria.

There was nothing pacifistic about Trump’s agenda. On the contrary, his aim was to end military campaigns he saw as pointless and wasteful in order to redirect the US war machine toward the naked pursuit of US imperialism’s economic interests, principally through the preparation for war against its chief global rival, China.

The timing of Trump’s announcement last month was doubtless driven by his administration’s intensifying political crisis as it confronts multiple investigations, which are

themselves driven by bitter differences within the ruling establishment over foreign policy. The charges of Russian “meddling” and “collusion” have their source in the Democratic Party’s alignment with sections of the ruling class and military-intelligence apparatus that oppose any tactical shift away from a direct confrontation with Russia, including on the Syrian battlefield.

Trump knows that the “bring the troops home” slogan resonates within the American population, which is sick and tired of a quarter century of wars in the Middle East that have produced nothing but millions of dead, the destruction of entire societies and the squandering of trillions of dollars.

But under mounting pressure from the Pentagon, the intelligence agencies and predominant layers within the US ruling class, represented by top congressional Democrats and Republicans alike, Trump has been compelled to steadily dilute his call for an end to the US Syrian intervention.

With the military high command insisting there is no way within 30 days to withdraw US troops—officially numbered at 2,000, but in all likelihood closer to twice that number—much less the mountains of arms and munitions poured into Syria, it was put out that the deadline would be four months.

Trump then disassociated himself from that timeframe as well, insisting, “I never said we’re doing it that quickly.”

On Monday, Trump tweeted, “We will be leaving at a proper pace while at the same time continuing to fight ISIS and doing all else that is prudent and necessary!”

This about-face comes as no surprise. The *World Socialist Web Site* warned on December 22: “Anyone who believes that Trump’s decisions regarding Syria and Afghanistan signal a new era of peace in the Middle East or anywhere else on the planet is in for rude shocks.

“First of all, the depth of US imperialism’s commitment to its control of the Middle East and Eurasia—a policy which it has pursued relentlessly for decades—is far too great to be reversed by presidential fiat.

“Senator Mark Warner, the ranking Democrat on the Senate Intelligence Committee, tweeted, ‘as we’ve seen with the President’s haphazard approach to Syria, our national defense is too important to be subjected to the President’s erratic whims.’

“Moreover, Trump—reacting to the multiple pressures acting

upon him—shifts policies and tactics from day to day. What he declares today can be repudiated tomorrow.”

Bolton, the right-wing war-monger, was dispatched to Israel and Turkey to spell out Washington’s commitment to do all that is “prudent and necessary” in Syria. He is being followed by Pompeo, who is to deliver a similar message to the collection of monarchical dictatorships and reactionary regimes that make up Washington’s anti-Iranian axis in the Arab world.

The national security adviser spelled out during his trip to Israel that there is no deadline for US troops to withdraw from Syria, and that the illegal intervention remains open-ended. “The timetable flows from the policy decisions that we need to implement,” he said.

These “policy decisions” appear to include not only the slaughter of the last remnants of ISIS, but also the protection of the Kurdish YPG militia, which has served as the Pentagon’s main proxy ground force, but is seen by Turkey’s right-wing government as an existential threat. Also included in these “decisions” are the rolling back of Iranian influence in Syria and the wider region and the completion of the regime-change operation launched in 2011 to topple the Damascus government of Bashar al-Assad.

During his meetings with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, whose government has proclaimed the right to wage unlimited air strikes against targets in Syria, Bolton held out the prospect that, even if the US were to pull its troops out of northeastern Syria—with many of them being redeployed across the border to the al-Asad airbase in Iraq—a permanent presence could still be maintained at the US base at al-Tanf, which sits astride a strategic route linking Tehran to Damascus.

Even more ominously, Bolton issued a warning against the Assad government launching a chemical weapons attack anywhere in Syria during or after a US troop withdrawal. The Trump administration has twice—in April 2017 and April 2018—used fabricated chemical weapons incidents as the pretext for launching missile strikes on Syria.

Bolton threatened that, should Washington claim that a new chemical weapons attack had taken place, “a lot of options would be on the table ... if they don’t heed the lessons of those two strikes, the next one will be more telling.”

The significance of Bolton’s threat was spelled out in a Washington Post column by Hugh Hewitt, a right-wing radio talk show host and former Reagan administration official who backs Trump and has even more vocally supported his national security adviser.

“We know that Bob Woodward reported that when Trump ordered a second strike against Assad, then-Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis withheld some of those options, including targeting Assad, which the president had ordered. ‘We’re not going to do any of that,’ Mattis is reported by Woodward to have said.

“The message seems clear to both Iran and Syria: The United States is reconfiguring; it isn’t leaving. In fact, it may be

getting even more lethal.”

Thus, Trump’s demagogic promise to “bring the troops home” has only set the stage for a new escalation of violence in the Middle East and beyond.

Underlying this entire reactionary episode is the absence of a mass anti-war movement in the United States. This in turn is bound up with the role played by a coterie of pseudo-left organizations, fraudulently claiming to be “left” and “socialist,” that have not only failed to oppose the US intervention in Syria, but have justified it in the name of “human rights” and by portraying the CIA-backed, Al Qaeda-linked militias unleashed upon the country as a “democratic revolution.”

Representative of these tendencies is the International Socialist Organization (ISO), which maintained a discreet two-week silence on the bitter debate in Washington on Trump’s troop withdrawal call, apparently waiting to see which way the wind would blow in State Department circles. Finally, it posted a January 3 article titled “None of them care about Syrian lives,” once again invoking all of the “human rights” pretexts for US intervention, while bemoaning Washington’s failure to provide sufficient support to the CIA’s “democratic uprising” and denouncing those who oppose imperialist intervention as “defending Assad’s terrorism.”

The operations of such organizations, working in tandem with the Democratic Party, have served to disorient and demobilize the mass opposition to war that exists within the working class.

The growth of the class struggle in the US and internationally creates the conditions for reversing this situation through the development of a mass political movement of the working class, in opposition to imperialist war and its ultimate cause, the capitalist system.

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