

US ratchets up threats against Iran, Turkey amid Syria withdrawal plans

By Bill Van Auken
15 January 2019

In the midst of a tour by Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, ostensibly aimed at reassuring Washington's Middle East allies in the wake of President Donald Trump's announced decision to withdraw US troops from Syria, a series of US actions have escalated tensions, posing the threat of a far wider war in the region.

Pompeo has used his trip to eight countries—seven monarchies and the police-state dictatorship of Gen. Sisi in Egypt—to make clear, as he put it over the weekend, that the Syria withdrawal is merely a change in tactics, while US strategy for asserting imperialist domination over the Middle East remains unchanged.

“The fact that a couple thousand uniformed personnel in Syria will be withdrawing is a tactical change. It doesn't materially alter our capacity to perform military actions we need to perform,” Pompeo told reporters traveling with him during a stop in the United Arab Emirates on Sunday.

In an interview with CBS's “Face the Nation,” Pompeo insisted that the absence of US troops in Syria would halt neither the US attacks on ISIS nor its military pressure on Iran.

“Those are the real missions,” he said. “The tactical changes we've made and the withdrawal of those 2,000 troops is just that—a tactical change. Mission remains the same.”

It is apparent that the strategic focus remains US imperialism's drive to curtail Iranian and Russian influence in the region, including by means of military force.

The US government has developed plans for military strikes against Iran, according to media reports. Monday, *The Wall Street Journal* cited current and former US official who said that the National Security Council, headed by National Security Adviser John Bolton, had asked the Pentagon last fall for military options for attacking Iran.

The pretext for the attack plans was an incident last September in Iraq in which a Shia militia had fired mortar rounds into an open lot near the US embassy, harming no one and inflicting zero damage. There is no evidence whatsoever that the shelling was carried out on instructions

from Tehran.

Nonetheless, Bolton led a series of meetings aimed at preparing plans for a military attack on Iran.

“People were shocked,” a former senior administration official told the *Journal*. “It was mind-boggling how cavalier they were about hitting Iran.”

Bolton has been a longtime and fervent advocate of regime change in Iran, writing a column for the *New York Times* in 2015 titled, “To stop Iran's bomb, bomb Iran,” and becoming the most aggressive proponent within the US administration of Trump's decision to abrogate the Iran nuclear deal last May and impose a series of escalating economic sanctions that are tantamount to an act of war.

Bolton has repeatedly indicated that US policy in Syria is still aimed at driving out Iranian advisers, who are present in the country at the invitation of the government in Damascus. This posture was echoed by Pompeo in his jingoistic speech in Cairo on Thursday, in which he vowed that the US would continue its intervention in Syria “to expel every last Iranian boot” from the country.

Meanwhile, *Axios* reported on Monday that Trump had repeatedly asked then-Defense Secretary James Mattis and other aides why the US Navy could not simply blow up Iranian boats in the Persian Gulf.

In response to Pompeo's statement and the reports of US military threats, Iran's Foreign Ministry issued a statement Monday insisting that, “The US must learn lessons from the defeat of its numerous warmongering policies in the region over the past decades and know that the Islamic Republic of Iran does not value such US threats and will not be swayed by them.”

Even as it escalated its confrontation with Iran, Washington also heightened tensions with its ostensible NATO ally, Turkey.

Trump tweeted on Sunday that the United States was starting the military pull-out he announced on December 19, while the Pentagon clarified that it had only begun withdrawing some equipment—no troops—and that their pullout would “not be subject to an arbitrary timeline.”

“Will attack again from existing nearby base if it [ISIS] reforms,” Trump tweeted. “Will devastate Turkey economically if they hit Kurds. Create 20-mile safe zone ... Likewise, do not want the Kurds to provoke Turkey.”

Asked in Saudi Arabia what Trump meant by devastating Turkey, Secretary of State Pompeo replied, “You’ll have to ask the president.”

The semi-incoherence of the US president’s tweet—not to mention the threatened eruption of a wider war—is driven in large measure by the centrifugal forces unleashed by the US regime change operation in Syria, which relied initially on Al Qaeda-linked militias—funneling in billions of dollars’ worth of arms and money as well as Islamist “foreign fighters” that ultimately strengthened the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), allowing it to overrun much of Iraq.

Having failed in the protracted and bloody campaign to oust the government of President Bashar al-Assad, Washington shifted to a military campaign to defeat ISIS—all under the Obama administration—utilizing the Syrian Kurdish YPG militia as its principal proxy ground force, backed by devastating US airstrikes.

Turkey, which Trump had indicated will replace the US as the main anti-ISIS force in northeastern Syria, regards the YPG as a branch of the Turkish Kurdish PKK (Kurdistan Workers Party), which Ankara defines as a “terrorist” group and has combatted militarily for decades. The right-wing government of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan sees rolling back the YPG from its border as its first priority, and the campaign against ISIS as a distant second.

US attempts to square the circle between its NATO ally Turkey and its Kurdish proxies in Syria have thus far proven unsuccessful. Bolton, on a mission to walk back Trump’s announcement that US troops were going to quickly abandon Syria in 30 days, was snubbed in Ankara last week, relegated to meeting with a government spokesman and deputy ministers, after he demanded that Turkey lay off “the Kurds.”

Trump and Erdogan held a telephone conversation on Monday in an apparent bid to smooth over the friction caused by the US president’s tweet.

White House Press Secretary Sarah Sanders said Trump “expressed the desire to work together to address Turkey’s security concerns in northeast Syria while stressing the importance to the United States that Turkey does not mistreat the Kurds and other Syrian Democratic Forces with whom we have fought to defeat ISIS.”

Turkish officials said that Erdogan had reiterated his support for the US withdrawal and that he had discussed with Trump the potential creation of a “safe zone” carved out of a 20-mile-wide swath of Syrian territory. The two also reportedly spoke of the situation in Manbij, a Syrian

town on the western side of the Euphrates River that had previously been held by the YPG together with US “advisers.”

Turkey has threatened to send its forces into Manbij and has continued to build up troops and armor on its border with Syria. Meanwhile, an Islamist militia backed by Turkey has said that its forces are prepared to attack the area. For its part, the YPG appealed to the Syrian government, which has sent troops into the area around Manbij as the Kurdish militia has withdrawn. The threat of the town turning into a flashpoint involving a clash between the major powers involved in the Syrian conflict remains acute.

Trump’s political opponents within the Democratic Party and the military-intelligence apparatus continue to attack the Syria withdrawal proposal from the right, accusing the administration of bowing to Moscow and Tehran.

The *New York Times* published an editorial statement along these lines Saturday titled, “John Bolton’s Wars,” expressing sympathy for “bomb Iran” Bolton for his mission of trying “to explain, or even undo, the president’s more impulsive and erratic foreign policy decisions.” The piece praised Bolton and Pompeo—the two leading advocates of an escalation of US militarism in the Middle East—for “trying to at least mitigate the damage caused by some of Mr. Trump’s surprise pronouncements.”

Under conditions in which the Trump White House may well be tempted to provoke a major military conflict with Iran or Russia in order to divert public attention from the crisis conditions created by the government shutdown, the multiple investigations surrounding so-called “Russian meddling” and “collusion,” and the growth of the class struggle in the US itself, the supposed Democratic opposition is only pressing for an escalation of American militarism.

To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>