

Washington threatens to fight Syria and Russia for oil

By Bill Van Auken
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The Pentagon has explicitly stated that US troops being redeployed to occupy Syria's oil fields are prepared to unleash "overwhelming force," including against troops loyal to Syria's own government and the Russian and Iranian forces that support it.

The ominous US threat came as clashes between Turkish and Syrian government forces along the tense border between the two countries underscored the extreme instability in the region following President Donald Trump's order earlier this month to re-position US troops as part of the green-lighting of a Turkish invasion.

The Turkish incursion, which has killed hundreds and driven an estimated 200,000 from their homes, was launched with the purpose of driving from the border the Kurdish YPG militia, the main element in the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which served as the proxy ground troops for Washington's so-called war against ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria). Ankara considers the YPG a "terrorist" organization and an extension of the Kurdish separatist PKK in Turkey, against which it has waged a bloody counterinsurgency campaign for more than three decades.

In response to what it regards as Washington's betrayal, the Kurdish leadership in Syria appealed to both Syria and Russia to take control of the border area.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan struck separate deals with the United States—buffoonishly touted by Trump as a "great day for civilization" that had "saved millions of lives"—and with Moscow. The two agreements involved successive cease-fires in the invasion launched by Ankara on October 9 in return for a commitment to move Kurdish forces 30 km (approximately 18 miles) south of the Turkish-Syrian border.

While there has been much talk of the 30 km strip being turned into a "safe zone," with Erdogan proposing to send

millions of Syrian refugees there from Turkey, one of Ankara's principal goals is to gain control of the M4 highway that runs parallel to the border, 30 km inside Syria, and allows for the movement of troops between eastern and western Syrian territories with Kurdish majorities.

The latest cease-fire, brokered by Moscow following a meeting between Erdogan and Russian President Vladimir Putin in the Black Sea resort city of Sochi on October 22, expired on Tuesday. Moscow claimed that it had overseen the withdrawal of 34,000 YPG fighters 30 km south of the Turkish border.

Erdogan on Wednesday told members of his Justice and Development Party (AKP) in the Turkish Parliament that his government had concluded fulfillment of the agreement was not complete. "We will retaliate in kind against any assault from outside of the safe zone and will widen the area of the safe zone if necessary," he said.

Such "retaliation" erupted into violent attacks by the Turkish military, and the Islamist militias it backs, against Syrian government troops near the strategic Syrian border town of Ras al-Ayr on Tuesday and Wednesday. According to reports, the battles claimed the lives of seven Syrian soldiers while leaving several others wounded. The Islamist "rebels" reportedly advanced under the cover of heavy Turkish supporting fire and protection by armed drones.

The so-called "rebels" have also launched attacks on predominantly Kurdish villages, with the aim of driving out their residents.

The Turkish-backed Islamists posted videos on Telegram showing their fighters kicking and abusing captured Syrian troops, as well the body of one soldier who appeared to have been executed.

Meanwhile, *Time* magazine cited US intelligence sources as stating that the Turkish-backed militias were using US-supplied weapons to carry out war crimes

against the Kurdish civilian population in the border areas, and that Ankara has deployed far more troops than are needed to secure the so-called “safe zone,” raising the threat of an intensified “ethnic-cleansing” operation.

Under these conditions of escalating tensions on the border, where Turkey and Russia are supposed to carry out joint patrols beginning in early November, the Pentagon has spelled out that US forces being sent into Syria’s oil fields under the pretext of guarding them against ISIS are prepared to attack Syrian government and Russian forces if they enter the area.

“The United States will retain control of oil fields in northeastern Syria,” US Defense Secretary Mark Esper told a Pentagon press conference Monday. He claimed that the deployment of American troops there was aimed at denying oil resources to ISIS—which has already been defeated—and assuring that they remain a source of funding for Washington’s erstwhile Kurdish allies in the SDF. He added that US forces will “respond with overwhelming military force against any group that threatens the safety of our forces there.”

Esper was asked by CNN, “What do you want to do with in the oil fields, does that include denying access, preventing Russian or Syrian forces, which now have changed the battle space?”

The defense secretary responded, “So the short answer is yes, it presently does,” going on to claim that the objective was to assure a funding stream for the SDF so that it could continue to guard the prisons where alleged ISIS fighters numbering in the thousands are being held under appalling conditions, many of them wounded, starving and on the brink of death. These prisoners, including children, have been packed like sardines into makeshift jails.

Esper and the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Gen. Mark Milley, cut off further questions about a potential clash between US and Russian forces in Syria, attempting to steer the press conference back to the extra-judicial execution of ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.

The shift of US forces to the oilfields of Syria’s northeastern Deir al-Zour province signals continuity with the regime change war launched under the Obama administration nearly eight years ago, based on the CIA’s funneling of arms, money and fighters to the Al Qaeda-linked militias that were unleashed against the government of President Bashar al-Assad.

Trump’s demagogic claim earlier this month that he was putting an end to Washington’s “forever wars” in the

Middle East and withdrawing US troops from Syria touched off a political firestorm. The Democratic leadership in Congress was joined by the majority of Republicans, as well as recently retired senior US commanders, expressing the view of the current top brass, in denouncing the move as a “betrayal of the Kurds” and, above all, an impermissible ceding of ground to Russia and Iran in the oil-rich region.

The re-deployment of US troops to the Syrian oil fields and the killing of al-Baghdadi were both aimed at quelling this criticism. While al-Baghdadi’s slaying appears to have missed its mark in terms of generating any increase in popular support for the decades-long US military intervention in the Middle East, the sending of soldiers and tanks into the oil fields represents a commitment to continue the war for regime change.

It is meant to deny the Syrian government access to energy resources needed to reconstruct a country that has seen half a million people killed, half of its population displaced and the bulk of its infrastructure destroyed. More broadly, it is aimed at continuing the protracted military campaign to assert US hegemony over the region in order to deny its energy resources to US imperialism’s principal global rivals, in particular China.

This act of international piracy—Moscow has released videos of US forces providing security for the smuggling of Syrian oil—places US troops on a front line facing both Syrian government and Russian forces. With other state and non-state actors, including Turkey, Iran, the Kurdish militias and the Turkish-backed Islamist militias, all operating in the same small region, the threat of a localized clash sparking a region-wide or even global conflict is greater than ever.

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