US sends more ground troops to support Kurdish militias in Syria

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The Obama administration, just weeks before handing power to a Trump presidency, has ordered an additional 200 American special forces troops to Syria, to operate alongside the predominantly Kurdish militia who comprise the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). Defense Secretary Ashton Carter made the announcement on the weekend.

The SDF is one of the US-funded and armed groupings being used as Washington's proxies in the now five-year civil war aimed at overthrowing the Russian and Iranian-backed regime of Bashar al-Assad. The additional US troops will join some 300 who are already on the ground in Syria. They will participate in an SDF offensive to seek to recapture the city of Raqqa from the extremist Islamic State (ISIS), whose victories in both Syria and Iraq were seized upon in 2014 as the pretext for direct US and European military intervention.

The offensive on Raqqa coincides with the massive Iraqi government and Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) assault on the ISIS-held city of Mosul in northern Iraq. The capture of the cities would give US-backed Kurdish forces control over not only the provinces and territory in Iraq that are part of, or are claimed by, the KRG, but a large swathe of northern and eastern Syria. Both the Iraqi and Syrian Kurdish nationalist leaderships have made clear they do not intend to return areas they hold to the jurisdiction of the Iraqi and Syrian governments.

The increased involvement of American forces in the Kurdish offensive will heighten already tense relations between the US and Turkey, ostensible NATO allies. The Turkish government of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan labels the Kurdish YPG, or Popular Protection Forces, that make up the bulk of the SDF as a terrorist group and a front for the Turkish-based PKK (Kurdish Workers Party). Since 1984, the PKK has waged an off-and-on civil war for a separate or autonomous state in the predominantly Kurdish-populated provinces of southeastern Turkey. The most ambitious Kurdish nationalists have historically advocated the formation of a Kurdish state encompassing the Kurdish regions of Turkey, Syria, Iraq and Iran.

The growing rift between the US and Turkey was palpably displayed late last month, when the American military announced it was "not involved" and would not conduct air strikes in support of a Turkish-backed assault on the Syrian town of al-Bab, north-east of Aleppo, which is targeting both ISIS and the Kurdish SDF. US advisors in the area were also withdrawn, most likely to avoid being caught up in operations against Kurdish forces that are also being accompanied by American personnel.

The Turkish government was one of the key US allies which, from 2011, directly assisted the anti-Assad rebellion. It turned a blind eye to thousands of Sunni Muslim extremists from around the world entering Syria across its border and enlisting with Al Qaeda-linked and other Islamist organisations that were fighting the Syrian government.

The sordid intrigues against the Assad regime in Syria by US imperialism, the European powers and regional states, such as Turkey, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf state monarchies, have led to a disaster for the Syrian people. Out of a pre-2011 population of just 18 million, over 400,000 have lost their lives, close to 5 million have fled the country as refugees and another 7.6 million are considered "internally displaced."

Five years since the outbreak of fighting, the policy of both the Obama administration and Turkey faces a debacle.

The turn by ISIS to attack the pro-US government in

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Iraq in 2014 compelled Washington to order operations against it by American and allied air power, involving the militaries of the US, Britain, Australia, Canada, the Netherlands, France, Bahrain, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. ISIS has lost thousands of fighters and much of the territory it held. Kurdish forces in both Syria and Iraq have been one of the main beneficiaries.

Direct Russian military support for the Assad regime since 2015 has enabled the Syrian military, assisted by Iranian, Iraqi and Lebanese Shiite militias, to gain the upper hand in the civil war. The US and Turkish-backed rebel forces in the major city of Aleppo, where some of the most savage fighting has taken place, are on the verge of total defeat.

Reports in the past three days have suggested that the US had negotiated an "honourable withdrawal" for the remaining rebel fighters, in which Russia and the Syrian government would allow them to leave Aleppo. Under the purported agreement, the former Al Qaeda affiliate, the al-Nusra Front, would have to evacuate to Idlib, the last significant city in northwestern Syria held by the non-ISIS rebels. Other rebel groupings have reportedly been offered safe haven in areas along the Turkish border not under Kurdish control.

Russia, which has repeatedly vetoed US-driven attempts to pass a UN Security Council resolution demanding an immediate ceasefire in Aleppo, responded to the reports by denying that any agreement had been reached. Talks are said to be ongoing.

The fall of Aleppo will usher in a new stage in the five-year carnage. It will leave the Assad regime—primarily as a result of the Russian intervention—in control of the key population centres of the country. It will enable Syrian Army forces and supporting militias to redeploy, backed by Russian air power, toward Raqqa. The possibility of direct clashes with US forces will significantly increase.

The remnants of ISIS and other Islamist forces will continue to fight. In an unexpected development, an estimated 4,000 ISIS fighters launched an assault over the weekend and seized back control of much of the city of Palmyra, a historic site in central Syria. The fighting to recapture Raqqa is expected to be bloody and protracted and is unlikely to be concluded before Donald Trump assumes the US presidency. Likewise, in Iraq, the siege of Mosul may well continue for months.

The fall of both Raqqa and Mosul, however, would leave KRG and Syrian Kurdish forces, backed by Washington, in control of most of the border region between Turkey, Syria and Iraq. Their refusal to return territory poses the prospect of clashes with the Turkey military or the forces of the Shiite-dominated and Iranian-backed Iraqi government in Baghdad.

Throughout the US election, Donald Trump criticised US involvement in Syria and its support for the Islamist-based rebels fighting the Assad regime. When his administration is inaugurated on January 20, 2017, it will preside over a highly volatile geopolitical state of affairs, fraught with the potential for escalation into a wider war.

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