

US-Russian tensions flare in Syria

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The death of a senior Russian general advising Syrian government forces and claims by the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) militia that it has been bombed by Russian warplanes have escalated tensions between Washington and Moscow, as the two sides wage rival offensives to seize control of the oil-rich Deir Ezzor province from the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS).

Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov charged Monday that the death of Lt. Gen. Valery Asapov in a mortar attack near the city of Deir Ezzor the day before was “the price, the bloody price, for the two-faced American policy in Syria.”

Deir Ezzor province is in eastern Syria, bordering Iraq, and is the center of the country’s oil and gas industry, which provided much of the power for the country’s cities before it was seized by Islamist militias as part of the US-backed war for regime-change against the government of President Bashar al-Assad.

Both because of its strategic energy resources and its geographical position, the province has become the focus of a scramble for control, with the US-backed SDF, a Kurdish-dominated militia supported by American Special Forces troops and air power, rushing from the north to counter the advances made by Syrian government forces.

Early this month, the Syrian army succeeded in breaking a two-year siege by ISIS against the government-held city of Deir Ezzor and its 200,000 residents. The Syrian government victory was answered by the US proxy forces of the SDF being diverted from the siege of Raqqa, the so-called ISIS capital to the north, and sent down the eastern side of the Euphrates River to contest control of the city and the province’s oil and gas fields.

US military spokesmen have issued repeated statements claiming that Washington is interested only in defeating ISIS and is not, as one put it, “in the land-

grabbing business.” Facts on the ground, however, strongly indicate that this is precisely the “business” being pursued by the Pentagon.

The charge by the Russian Foreign Ministry official that Washington is engaged in a “two-faced policy” in Syria was preceded by the Russian Defense Ministry’s release of aerial photographs showing large numbers of US Humvees used by American Special Forces troops occupying what had been ISIS strongholds north of the city of Deir Ezzor.

The ministry noted that there was no sign of any battle having been waged in the area, which was free of craters from shelling and bombing, and that the American forces had not even bothered to set up a defensive perimeter in the ISIS-held area. “This shows that all the US servicemen who are currently there feel completely safe in the areas under the terrorists’ control,” the ministry said. A ministry spokesman said that Russian surveillance of the area had turned up no sign of combat between the SDF and ISIS.

The clear implication is that Washington and its proxy militia struck a deal in which ISIS ceded the territory without a struggle and directed its forces against the Syrian Army instead. Given the intimate ties between the CIA and the Islamist forces that created ISIS, there are no doubt lines of communication between US forces and the purported target of their intervention in Iraq and Syria.

The SDF militia and its US Special Forces “advisors,” on the one hand, and the Russian and Iranian-backed Syrian army, on the other, are pressing forward around Deir Ezzor, advancing, according to an SDF spokesman, to within barely two miles of each other. The SDF claims that its forces have seized control of a major gas field named Conoco, while Syrian troops and tanks have crossed the Euphrates River and taken towns on its eastern bank.

The US proxy forces and the Syrian government

troops are effectively in a race to establish control over the oil and gas fields that are crucial to the economic recovery of Syria after nearly six years of devastation wrought by the CIA-orchestrated war for regime-change.

Each side has accused the other of carrying out attacks on their positions. On Thursday, a Russian Defense Ministry spokesman said that, after Russian-backed Syrian government troops had twice come under fire from SDF positions, Moscow had warned Washington that continued shelling would provoke a Russian response against the US proxy forces and American Special Forces troops operating with them.

“A representative of the US military command in Al Udeid (the US command center in Qatar) was told in no uncertain terms that any attempts to open fire from areas where Syrian Democratic Forces are located would be quickly shut down,” Major-General Igor Konashenkov said in a statement.

For its part, the SDF claimed Monday that its forces in the Conoco gas field had been bombed by Russian aircraft, resulting in the wounding of six of its fighters. It marked the second time that the SDF has leveled such a charge in as many weeks, and the US proxy force declared in a statement: “We will not stand by with our arms crossed and we will use our legitimate right to self-defense.”

Russia has denied responsibility for attacking the SDF. A Pentagon spokesman confirmed Monday that shells had fallen near the militia’s position, but said he could not confirm that they were fired by Russia. For its part, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, a monitoring group opposed to the Assad government, said that no Russian rounds had hit SDF positions.

The increasing dangers of an open military confrontation in eastern Syria between the US and Russia, the world’s two major nuclear powers, is driven by Washington’s determination to seize control of the area, both to deny resources to the government in Damascus and to further the carve-up of Syria. Washington is also seeking to secure Syria’s eastern border in order to counter Iranian influence in the region and prevent the consolidation of a land route linking Iran through Iraq to Syria as well as Lebanon, where Iranian forces could link up with Hezbollah, the powerful Shia-based political movement and militia.

The threat of this scramble for eastern Syria erupting

into a wider regional war is further fueled by the aggressively anti-Iranian stance of the Trump administration, which appears determined to blow up the 2015 nuclear accord reached between Tehran and the major powers and has embarked on an increasingly aggressive military and diplomatic posture toward Iran across the Middle East.



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