Washington escalates threats over Syria as Russia bombs Al Qaeda positions

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5 September 2018

With forces loyal to the Syrian government of President Bashar al-Assad apparently preparing for a ground offensive to reassert control over the northwestern province of Idlib, the Trump White House, the State Department and the Pentagon have all issued warnings of a "humanitarian" catastrophe and threats of US retaliation over the use of chemical weapons.

The latest threats came Tuesday, with the White House issuing a statement declaring that Washington was "closely monitoring the situation in Idlib" and the "threat of an imminent Assad regime attack, backed by Russia and Iran."

Such an attack, the statement continued "would be a reckless escalation of an already tragic conflict and would risk the lives of hundreds of thousands of people." It added that, in the event of a chemical weapons attack, "the United States and its Allies will respond swiftly and appropriately."

The statement reiterates earlier declarations by Trump and top administration officials. The US president had tweeted on Monday, "The Russians and Iranians would be making a grave humanitarian mistake to take part in this potential human tragedy." Secretary of State Mike Pompeo warned last Friday that the US would view an offensive in Idlib as "an escalation of an already dangerous conflict," and National Security Advisor John Bolton warned that the US "will respond very strongly" to any use of chemical weapons.

Russia and the Assad government have rejected the warnings. After a three-week lull, Russian warplanes carried out at least 20 airstrikes on targets near the Idlib's western border, reportedly targeting positions held by Chinese Uighur Islamist extremists who are affiliated with the Syrian branch of Al Qaeda. The action involved Russian Sukhoi Su-24Ms and Su-34s jets and was supported by Russian ships in the eastern Mediterranean.

Syrian Foreign minister Walid Muallem said that the US threats would not stop the "determination of the Syrian people and Syrian army's plans to clear Idlib and finally put an end to terrorism in Syria." Syrian troops and armor have reportedly been massed at the province's border.

Speaking at a Moscow press conference Tuesday, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov described Idlib as a "terrorists' nest" that threatened Russian bases in Syria. "Just to speak out with some warnings—without taking into account the very dangerous, negative potential for the whole situation in Syria—is probably not a full comprehensive approach," he said, in obvious reference to the threats from Washington.

Absent from the US statements is any recognition that Idlib is effectively run by the Syrian Al Qaeda affiliate, which leads the dominant "rebel" faction, Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (IHT), and includes large numbers of so-called foreign fighters. The IHT has reportedly set up gallows and employed firing squads to eliminate opponents seeking accommodation with the Syrian government.

The UN's special envoy to Syria, Staffan de Mistura, has acknowledged that there are at least 10,000 Al Qaeda-affiliated fighters in Idlib. The front that the group leads is said to control 60 percent of the province's territory along with its capital, and effectively governs the region. Others have put the number of Al Qaeda-linked fighters at between 20,000 and 30,000.

Washington is threatening to intervene not out of any humanitarian concerns. Successive US administration have carried out bloody interventions in the region—from the war of aggression in Iraq, to the regime change operations in Libya and Syria and the near genocidal US-Saudi war against Yemen—that have claimed the lives of millions and decimated entire societies.

If it launches a new act of aggression in Syria, it will be to rescue the Al Qaeda-led "rebels," which Washington and its Western and regional allies have supported since the onset of the proxy war for regime change in 2011,

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pouring billions of dollars' worth of money and weapons to support these forces. And it will be to further US geo-strategic interests in dominating the Middle East and rolling back the influence of Iran and Russia in both Syria and the wider region.

With the open defense of Al Qaeda in Syria, Washington is unceremoniously ditching the 17-year-old "global war on terror" in favor of preparations for military confrontation with what US national security documents describe as "revisionist states" challenging US hegemony—i.e., Russia and China.

As for the warnings over a chemical weapons attack, these amount to an invitation to the Al Qaeda forces to stage an incident in order to secure air support from the US and its allies. Damascus flatly denied responsibility for earlier incidents—in Douma last April and in Khan Shaykhun a year before. Both were used as the pretext for missile and air strikes by Washington and its allies.

The *Washington Post* Tuesday published excerpts from a new book on the Trump White House by Bob Woodward, *Fear*, which included an account that after the supposed April 2017 chemical weapons incident, Trump proposed to his defense secretary that the US military assassinate Syrian President Assad.

"Let's fucking kill him!" Trump is quoted as saying "Let's go in. Let's kill the fucking lot of them."

While Mattis is reported to have told Trump he would develop such plans, the book says that he immediately told a senior aide: "We're not going to do any of that. We're going to be much more measured."

Gripped by extreme political crisis over the internecine war within the US political establishment, particularly over US policy toward Russia, and confronting mounting social tensions and rising working class militancy at home, the impetus for the Trump administration seizing on another phony chemical weapons incident to launch a major US escalation in Syria is greater than ever.

The UN's Syria envoy, De Mistura, told reporters this week that the Syrian Al Qaeda affiliate had "the capability to produce weaponized chlorine," meaning that it is entirely capable of staging a chemical weapons attack and blaming it on the government.

The moves toward a Russian-backed Syrian government offensive to retake Idlib are unfolding in the midst of intense rounds of diplomatic discussions between Moscow, Ankara and Tehran. The leaders of the three powers—Vladimir Putin, Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Hassan Rouhani—are set to meet in Tehran on September 7 for discussions that will center on the question of Idlib.

Turkey's defense minister and intelligence chief were in Moscow, while Iran's foreign minister has held meetings in both Ankara and Damascus in recent days.

Turkey, which has backed a section of the Islamist militias in Syria and is anxious to avoid another flood of refugees across its border, has sought to forestall the offensive, insisting that the "moderate" rebels can be separated from their Al Qaeda core. It has also sent troops and tanks to positions inside Idlib near the Turkish border with the aim of blocking any further movement of Syrians into Turkey.

Moscow is clearly hopeful that Turkey can provide a means of delivering Idlib to the government in Damascus without a protracted and bloody campaign.

The Erdogan government has come into increasing confrontation with Washington, over both the US military's use of the YPG Syrian Kurdish militia as its principal proxy ground force in Syria and the Trump administration's imposition of sanctions that have exacerbated Turkey's economic crisis.

The Turkish government reported on Tuesday that the country's defense minister, Hulusi Akar, had told the visiting US special representative for Syria, James Jeffrey, that Turkey wanted all Kurdish militants out of the Syrian-Turkish border region.

The threat of the developments in Syria turning into a wider and far more dangerous confrontation are clear. Russia has reportedly moved 26 warships and 36 planes, including strategic bombers, into the Mediterranean. The US, meanwhile, has also positioned substantial forces in the region.

Moscow reported last week that the Pentagon had redeployed the USS Sullivan to the Persian Gulf, with 56 cruise missiles on board, and that B-1B strategic bombers had been redeployed to the Al-Udeid Air Base in Qatar.

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