

US Marines deploy to Syria for live fire exercise

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In a sign of the imminent escalation of the Syrian war, over 100 US Marines flew into the country late Friday to participate in live fire exercises. The drill, which included air strikes and artillery fire, was intended as a warning shot at Russia as Moscow prepares to back a government offensive against Islamist militias in the province of Idlib.

According to two Pentagon officials, the Marines flew by assault helicopter to the al-Tanf military base in southeastern Syria near the Iraq border. The area, which the US military has illegally occupied, has been used by the American forces to train anti-Assad Islamist militias and commands a strategically important position due to the substantial oil reserves located in eastern Syria.

The officials said that the military exercise was launched after Russia made contact with US forces twice over the past week via a deconfliction hotline to request authorization to attack ISIS terrorists operating within a unilaterally imposed 35-mile exclusion zone around the US base. Both requests were rejected.

General Joseph Dunford, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said the provocative move was designed to send a message “to anyone who’s looking.” “There’s a significant amount of reinforcement capability, both the forces that went in there for exercises as well as air support, should our forces at al Tanf need it,” he added.

Dunford also warned that top US commanders are in regular contact with President Donald Trump to provide him with updates on American preparations for a military strike in the event Syrian government forces launch a chemical weapons attack in Idlib province. In what amounted to an open invitation to the Islamists in Idlib, at least 10,000 of whom are aligned with al-Qaida, to stage a chemical weapons attack so as to

trigger an American intervention, Dunford declared, “The president expects us to have military options in the event that chemical weapons are used.”

Accusations of chemical weapons use have invariably been employed to legitimize US imperialist-led aggression in Syria over recent years. In April 2017 and April 2018, Trump launched cruise missiles and air strikes following fabricated instances of chemical weapons use blamed on government forces.

Allegations of chemical weapons use are also designed to provide Washington’s geostrategic ambitions with a “humanitarian” cover. On Thursday, the *Washington Post* reported that Trump has agreed to a new military strategy in Syria that will see US troops deployed there “indefinitely.” Underscoring that the fight against ISIS was nothing more than a pretext for US involvement, the Trump administration’s new goals include “the exit of all Iranian military and proxy forces from Syria, and establishment of a stable, nonthreatening government acceptable to all Syrians and the international community.”

In other words, US troops will continue their operations in Syria, which are illegal under international law, until its geostrategic rivals have been pushed back and a more pliable regime is installed in Damascus.

The US political and military establishment is fully committed to remaining indefinitely in Syria and Iraq as part of its reckless agenda to consolidate its dominance over the energy-rich and strategically significant Middle East. To this end, the Trump administration has intensified its cooperation with the Saudi regime and its Gulf allies in their near-genocidal war in Yemen so as to push back Iranian influence. In addition, Trump scrapped the nuclear accord with Tehran earlier this year and reimposed brutal economic

sanctions in what amounted to a step in the direction of military conflict with Iran.

Washington's predatory imperialist goals in Syria were enthusiastically endorsed in an editorial in yesterday's edition of the *New York Times*. The *Times* wrote that while stopping "an all-out assault on Idlib is the immediate goal...helping to ensure Syria has a more stable future is also in America's interest." To achieve this "stable future," the *Times* declared that the Trump administration's "leverage includes keeping in place 2,200 American troops, who have been mostly fighting the Islamic State, in eastern Syria; making clear Mr. Assad will have to change his behavior to get control of that area's oil and gas resources; and becoming more engaged diplomatically."

The *Times* and other media outlets have seized on the looming Syrian government offensive in Idlib as the latest pretext for implementing American imperialism's war aims in Syria.

Russian aircraft began bombing Islamist positions in Idlib on Thursday after a three-week pause in attacks. Air strikes launched mainly on rural targets on Saturday and Sunday reportedly killed six civilians and destroyed a hospital in southern Idlib.

At least 10 civilians were also killed in government-controlled areas by shells fired by rebel groups.

United Nations officials and representatives of relief organizations have warned that, with a civilian population of 3 million, Idlib could be the scene of substantial civilian casualties if a sustained campaign of Russian air strikes, combined with a Syrian government ground offensive, is launched to drive out the Islamists. Around half of Idlib's population is made up of internally displaced people and 1.7 million rely on food aid.

However, attempts by the political establishment and corporate-controlled media in the United States and other Western powers to exploit such dire conditions to justify an even greater bloodbath are deeply cynical. Of all of the parties in the Syrian war, it is US imperialism and its European allies who bear chief responsibility for the death and destruction suffered across the country and in the Middle East more broadly. Washington has the blood of hundreds of thousands, if not millions, on its hands as a result of the wars of aggression in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya. Over the past two years, the vicious onslaughts on the cities of Mosul in Iraq

and Raqqa in Syria claimed the lives of tens of thousands of innocent civilians.

It remains unclear when the Assad government's offensive will be launched. At a summit in Tehran Friday, Russian President Vladimir Putin, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani, and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan failed to agree on a joint position on Idlib. While Erdogan, fearing the destabilisation of an area on the Turkish border and the influx of hundreds of thousands of refugees into Turkey, appealed for a ceasefire, Putin and Rouhani rebuffed him. If and when the assault on Idlib is launched, it could produce an end to the rapprochement among the three countries, which have largely excluded the United States from a series of summits on Syria's future.

While Russia intervened in Syria in 2015 with the aim of propping up its sole Middle Eastern ally, which also plays host to Russia's only military base in the region, Iran intervened in the conflict with the aim of opening up a land bridge between Tehran and Damascus, and strengthening its position vis-à-vis Israel. Unlike Moscow and Tehran, Turkey sought Assad's removal but found itself increasingly at odds with Washington over the US reliance on Kurdish militias associated with the banned PKK, against which Turkey has waged a counterinsurgency war for the past four decades.

Erdogan responded to Putin and Rouhani's rejection of his ceasefire appeal on Twitter late Friday, writing, "If the world turns a blind eye to the killing of tens of thousands of innocent people to further the regime's interests, we will neither watch from the sidelines nor participate in such a game."



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