US-Turkish tensions rise over Syria withdrawal plan

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The crisis over US President Donald Trump's plan for the withdrawal of US troops from Syria escalated Tuesday after Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan refused to meet with a visiting US security and military delegation and then publicly denounced statements by Trump's national security adviser, John Bolton, as he was preparing to fly out of Ankara.

"No one should expect us to accept or swallow national security adviser Bolton's comments," Erdogan told members of his Justice and Development Party (AKP) in parliament—and an audience on live television—referring to demands that Turkey guarantee the security of the YPG Syrian Kurdish militia, which has served as the main proxy ground force for the US intervention in Syria.

Insisting that his government saw no difference between ISIS and the YPG, Erdogan declared, "If they are terrorists, we will do what is necessary no matter where they come from."

He added that he had no need to meet with Bolton, when he could speak to Trump anytime on the telephone.

"Although we made a clear agreement with US President Trump, different voices are emerging from different parts of the administration," Erdogan said. "Trump's remarks continue to be the main point of reference for us."

Bolton's delegation—which included the chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, Gen. Joseph Dunford—was relegated to meeting with Erdogan's spokesman and a group of deputy ministers. A scheduled joint press conference was abruptly canceled.

After Bolton had left Turkey, Fahrettin Altun, Erdogan's head of communications, tweeted: "I hope that he got a taste of the world-famous Turkish hospitality during his visit. Turkey's national security is nonnegotiable."

Trump announced his planned withdrawal on December 19 following a telephone conversation with Erdogan. He advanced the premise that the defeat of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), the ostensible mission of US troops in Syria—some 2,000 according to the Pentagon, but reported by at least one general to be twice that number—had been completed, and that Turkey would "take out any remnants of ISIS."

The announcement triggered an eruption of furor within the US military and intelligence apparatus and its representatives in both the Democratic and Republican parties, who saw it as an intolerable concession to Russia and Iran. It triggered the resignation of Defense Secretary Gen. James Mattis as well as Washington's envoy to the so-called anti-ISIS coalition, Brett McGurk.

Since then, the Trump administration has steadily walked back Trump's initial pledge to pull US troops out of Syria within 30 days. A subsequent report indicated that logistical concerns of the US military mandated at least a 120-day period to execute the pullout. Since then, statements from Trump and top administration officials, including Bolton, have made it clear that the illegal US military presence in Syria, at least in some form, is to continue indefinitely.

Bolton's overseas mission, beginning in Israel and continuing on to Turkey, was to spell out conditions for the troop withdrawal. These include not only the wiping out of the last remnants of ISIS in northeastern Syria, but also a guarantee of the security of the Pentagon's proxies in the Syrian Kurdish YPG militia, which is viewed by the Turkish government as a branch of the PKK, the Turkish Kurdish separatist movement against which it has waged a bloody counterinsurgency campaign for more than 30 years.

Bolton has also indicated that US aims of rolling back Iran's influence in Syria and the wider region and regime change in Damascus—pursued unsuccessfully and at a terrible human costs through a CIA-orchestrated insurgency by Al Qaeda-linked militias—remain on the

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table.

Bolton's rhetoric—coming on top of the walking back of Trump's pledge of a rapid troop withdrawal—appears to have blown up the scheduled meeting with Erdogan and called into question an apparent rapprochement between Washington and its NATO ally in the region.

In Israel, Bolton indicated that he was going to read the riot act to the Turkish president over any move against the Pentagon's Syrian Kurdish proxies.

Erdogan and other Turkish officials expressed outrage over Bolton's equation of the YPG with all Syrian Kurds, insisting that their hostility was only to the YPG, which it regards as an extension of the PKK—which both Washington and Ankara have branded as a "terrorist" organization—and not to the Kurdish people.

Erdogan's spokesman Ibrahim Kalm, the main official with whom Bolton and his delegation met, denounced the idea that "Turkey will slaughter Kurds if it enters Syria" as PKK propaganda that Washington should not be repeating.

Such claims are belied by the Turkish operation in the Syrian district of Afrin in March of last year, which resulted in the expulsion of some 300,000 Kurds and the unleashing of Turkish-backed Islamist gangs against the population.

Turkey's aims were indicated in an op-ed piece penned by Erdogan and published in the *New York Times* in which he spelled out plans for the carving out of a buffer region on Syria's northern border in which Ankara would "create a stabilization force" after an "intensive vetting process" of Syrian Kurdish forces.

Syria has rejected Turkish military operations on its territory as an illegal violation of the country's sovereignty.

According to a US official quoted by Reuters, Bolton told Turkish officials that Erdogan's article was "wrong and offensive." Part of the article favorably compared Turkish anti-ISIS operations, which left villages taken from the Islamist militias largely intact, to the savage air war waged by the US military that reduced the city of Raqqa and other towns to rubble.

While Turkish officials reportedly told the American delegation that Ankara would not launch military intervention in Syria as long as US troops remained in the northeast of the country, the Turkish media has reported that the Turkish military has continued a buildup of its forces on the border between the two countries.

Turkish officials also reportedly demanded that the Pentagon hand over all of some 22 separate bases that the US military has established in northern Syria, as well as any armaments left behind by departing US troops. They insisted that none of these weapons remain with the YPG militia.

Amid the rising tensions on the Turkish-Syrian border, a contingent of Russian troops in armored vehicles deployed to the city of Manbij, located about 10 miles from the border, conducting security patrols. The city, retaken from ISIS, had formally been occupied by the YPG along with US special forces troops.

Syrian Kurdish forces invited the government of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, which is backed by Moscow, to send its troops into the city as they withdrew in the face of a threatened Turkish offensive.

Meanwhile, military representatives of Egypt and the UAE, which oppose any expansion of Turkish influence in the region, have also visited Manbij and are promoting the growth of a Sunni Muslim militia in opposition to both Turkey and the YPG.

In tandem with Bolton's abortive mission to Ankara, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo began an eight-nation tour of the so-called anti-Iranian axis, which includes seven Arab monarchical dictatorships and the police state regime of Gen. Abdel Fattah al-Sisi in Egypt.

On the first leg of this tour in Jordan, Pompeo declared that Washington was "redoubling" its offensive against the "malign influence" of Iran in the Middle East. This effort has included the indispensable US support for the near-genocidal war being waged by Saudi Arabia against the starving people of Yemen.

Pompeo tweeted on Tuesday that Washington's "tactics have changed, not the mission."

The message is clear enough. Whatever happens with Trump's Syria troop withdrawal, US imperialism is continuing the quarter century of uninterrupted wars for hegemony over the oil rich Middle East that have killed and maimed millions. And the crisis created by Washington's protracted regime-change operation in Syria still threatens to erupt in a wider war of regional and even global dimensions.

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