

# Killing of US troops in Syria feeds furor over withdrawal

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A devastating suicide bomb attack on a popular restaurant in the northern Syrian city of Manbij Wednesday killed at least 20 people, including four US personnel.

Responsibility for the attack was claimed by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS).

The Pentagon confirmed the attack and US casualties, reporting that the dead included two US soldiers, a civilian Defense Department employee and a military contractor. Three other US personnel were wounded, one of them critically.

While initial reports suggested that the US personnel were conducting a “routine patrol” at the time of the bombing, apparently, they had routinely stopped to eat at the same restaurant, making them vulnerable to attack.

The bombing inflicted the worst losses suffered by US forces since they began their illegal intervention in Syria four years ago. Until now, just two American soldiers had been killed in combat and two others lost their lives in non-combat incidents.

The dead and wounded included civilians as well as members of the Syrian Democratic Forces, the US proxy ground force that is comprised predominantly of the Syrian Kurdish YPG militia.

The deaths of the US troops immediately became fodder for the bitter internecine conflict within Washington and the US military and intelligence apparatus over US President Donald Trump’s announcement last month of his decision to withdraw all US troops—officially numbering 2,200, but according to some reports, 4,000—from Syria.

Both the US media—which led the nightly news with worried accounts highlighting the supposed dangers of a US withdrawal—and leading political figures from both major parties rushed to exploit the bombing to oppose any end to the US intervention in Syria.

A clueless speech delivered Wednesday by Vice

President Mike Pence before an audience of State Department personnel hailing the “leadership of the commander in chief” in defeating ISIS, while saying not a word about the casualties in Syria, only served to stoke the anti-withdrawal furor.

Republican Senator Lindsey Graham, who had initially voiced strong opposition to Trump’s Syria withdrawal plan and then claimed to have reached an understanding with the US president—apparently reassured that it would not impinge upon US imperialism’s predatory aims in the region—responded to the casualties in Manbij by voicing new denunciations of the pullout.

“My concern, by the statements made by President Trump, is that you set in motion enthusiasm by the enemy we’re fighting,” Graham said Wednesday. “You make people we’re trying to help wonder about us. And as they get bolder, the people we’re trying to help are going to get more uncertain. I saw this in Iraq. And I’m now seeing it in Syria.”

Similarly, Senator Robert Menendez, the ranking Democrat on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, stated: “Today’s bombing, which took place in a Syrian city patrolled by U.S.-backed forces, is a stark reminder that the Trump Administration needs a clearly developed and articulated strategy to secure the gains we have made in the fight against terror that includes those on the frontlines of this ongoing fight ... The United States must do more to work with our allies to develop a comprehensive approach that secures our long-term interests in the region.”

These “long-term interests” have been pursued under successive administrations, Republican and Democratic alike, for decades. They are bound up with the assertion of US hegemony over the oil-rich Middle East and the rolling back of influence in the region by Iran, Russia and China. This, not ISIS, is the principal aim of Washington’s intervention in Syria.

The troop withdrawal announcement triggered the resignation of US Secretary of Defense Gen. James Mattis as well as Washington's envoy to the anti-ISIS "coalition" Brett McGurk, precisely because of concerns over these strategic interests.

Over the past week, top administration officials, including Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and National Security Adviser John Bolton have made it clear that Washington is by no means abandoning these interests and will not cease its intervention in Syria, no matter the troop withdrawal announcement.

In his speech in Cairo a week ago, Pompeo declared that the US would continue its intervention in Syria "to expel every last Iranian boot." He insisted that the troop withdrawal was merely a "tactical change" and that the US would pursue its militarist campaign by other means. Bolton has voiced similar aims, as news reports have revealed his request from the Pentagon for plans for military strikes against Iran.

As for the troop withdrawal, no US soldiers have been pulled out of Syria and there is no timetable for their departure, with the Pentagon insisting that it will be based on conditions on the ground. At most, some of the vast amounts of military hardware brought into Syria has been shipped out, and a few of the dozens of bases established by the US military on Syrian territory have been evacuated.

Manbij, the site of the blast that killed the American soldiers, is becoming an increasingly volatile flashpoint in the protracted conflict resulting from the regime change operation launched by Washington and its regional allies in 2011 with the aim of using CIA-funded and armed Al Qaeda-connected militias to topple the Syrian government of President Bashar al-Assad.

While this effort failed, with Syrian government forces backed by Iran and Russia retaking 60 percent of the country and the vast majority of its major population centers, Washington has continued its intervention with the deployment of thousands of US special forces troops in northeastern Syria, ostensibly to combat ISIS, and the recruitment of the Syrian Kurdish YPG militia as its proxy ground force.

With Trump's announcement of the US withdrawal, Turkey has threatened to intervene to drive out the Kurdish militia from Manbij, which is on the west bank of the Euphrates, as well as the rest of the Syrian-Turkish border area to the east. Ankara regards the YPG as a branch of the Turkish Kurdish separatist movement, the PKK, which it brands as "terrorist" and against which it

has fought a bloody counterinsurgency campaign for the last 35 years.

Turkish troops and armor have been mobilized on the border, 20 miles north of Manbij, and fighters of a Turkish Islamist militia have been deployed near the city for a possible assault.

Trump issued a statement over the weekend warning that Turkey would face "economic devastation" if it were to attack the Pentagon's Kurdish proxies.

While the Erdogan government condemned the statement, the Turkish president followed it up with a phone conversation with Trump on Monday, which apparently centered upon Trump's off-hand suggestion that a "security zone" could be set up, carving out a 20-mile swath of Syrian territory along the border with Turkey. Erdogan jumped on the proposal, insisting that Turkey could set up the zone.

The Syrian government denounced Turkey's proposal as the "language of occupation and aggression."

The Kurdish YPG, meanwhile, has asked the Syrian government to intervene with its forces to protect against the threat of a Turkish invasion, and has initiated talks with Moscow on a proposal to reach an accommodation with Damascus.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov declared on Wednesday that the territories on Syria's northern border must be placed under control of the Syrian government. "We are convinced that the best and only solution is the transfer of these territories under the control of the Syrian government, and of Syrian security forces and administrative structures," Lavrov said.

The Manbij bombing and the conflicting interests of the US, Turkey and Russia expose the mounting dangers that Trump's proposed troop withdrawal has only laid the basis for the explosion of a wider and far more dangerous war in the region.



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