

Trump defends US pullback in Syria

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As Turkey's offensive against the Kurdish YPG militia in northern Syria entered its second week, US President Donald Trump delivered a belligerent defense of his decision to pull back US military forces from the Turkish-Syrian border.

Speaking at a press conference together with visiting Italian President Sergio Mattarella, Trump insisted that Turkey's invasion of Syria had "nothing to do with us," while referring dismissively to the YPG, which served as the Pentagon's proxy ground troops during the so-called war on the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), suffering an estimated 11,000 casualties.

"If Turkey goes into Syria it is between Turkey and Syria. It's not our problem," Trump said, adding, "There's a lot of sand that they can play with."

The Kurds are "no angels," Trump stated repeatedly, adding that they were "paid a lot of money" to fight for the US. Meanwhile, he denounced the PKK, the Kurdish separatist organization in Turkey against which Ankara has waged a bloody decades-long counterinsurgency campaign, as "worse at terror and more of a terrorist threat in many ways than ISIS."

The statements echoed the justifications given by the Turkish government of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan for its invasion of Syria. It has described it as an anti-terrorist campaign, classifying the Syrian Kurdish YPG as a branch of the Turkish Kurdish PKK.

Trump brushed aside a question about his having given Erdogan a "green light" for the invasion during a phone conversation last week, taunting ABC's White House correspondent over the network's mistaken airing of a video taken at a Kentucky gun range, claiming that it showed Turkish assault on a Syrian Kurdish village.

The US president delivered his populist and nationalist defense of his actions, which he insisted were in keeping with his campaign pledge to end Washington's "forever wars" in the Middle East and Central Asia, even as Vice President Mike Pence and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo were set to arrive in Ankara today for talks aimed at securing a cease-fire agreement.

Erdogan initially said he wouldn't meet with anyone but Trump and rejected any cease-fire or mediated settlement, declaring that Turkey would never negotiate with "terrorists." Later the Turkish government announced that he would meet with Pence.

Relations between Ankara and Washington, which have deteriorated even since an abortive 2016 military coup that enjoyed covert US backing, followed by Turkey's decision to purchase a Russian S-400 missile defense system, have been further soured as the US has imposed sanctions on Turkish officials and entities, re-imposed tariffs on Turkish steel and halted talks on a trade agreement in response to the fighting in northern Syria.

The Trump administration took the limited actions in response to a bipartisan furor over the pullback of US troops. Much of the protests by Democrats and Republicans alike have been couched in terms of the US "betrayal" of the Kurds and humanitarian concerns over the killing of civilians and the displacement of some 160,000 people forced to flee the fighting.

These humanitarian arguments for a continued US military presence reek of cynicism and hypocrisy. The present bloodshed on the Turkish-Syrian border is a byproduct of decades of US wars in the region that have claimed the lives of millions and laid waste to entire societies. Those making these arguments support a continuation and escalation of the CIA-instigated war for regime change that has killed roughly half a million Syrians, while turning millions more into refugees.

A White House meeting with Congressional leaders Wednesday afternoon broke up in acrimony after Trump reportedly called House Speaker Nancy Pelosi a "third-grade politician," while telling Democrats the "there are communists involved [in Syria] and you guys might like that." The meeting was convened shortly after the House voted 354-to-60 (with two-to-one support from Republicans) in favor of a resolution condemning the troop pullback as "beneficial to adversaries of the United States government, including Syria, Iran, and Russia."

Criticism of Trump's actions has also come from within

the military, including the usually secretive special forces. Speaking at a conference of the Association of the US Army, Secretary of the Army Ryan McCarthy acknowledged the criticism stating, “You obviously don’t want to have disobedience, but they have to have opinions.

The political firestorm over Syria is rooted in the bitter internecine struggle within the US ruling establishment over the strategic orientation of US foreign policy.

Trump’s critics within the political establishment oppose what they see as his insufficiently belligerent attitude toward Russia, expressed particularly in his administration’s failure to adopt a more aggressive posture in Syria. Trump and his allies—while making demagogic appeals to broad popular antiwar sentiments—see the conflict in Syria as a distraction from their main strategic aim, which is preparations for war with China.

Recriminations in Washington have escalated with Russia and the Syrian Arab Army (SAA) loyal to President Bashar al-Assad moving swiftly to take over positions abandoned by US Special Forces troops in the strategically important city of Manbij, west of the Euphrates River and near the Turkish border.

The deployment follows the announcement of an agreement between the Syrian Kurdish leadership and the Assad government to join forces against the Turkish incursion. SAA troops have also entered the city of Kobane, just south of the Turkish border, and Raqqa, the former “capital” of ISIS, which was reduced to rubble by US air strikes that killed thousands of civilians. Government troops had not been able to enter these areas for more than four years.

While Trump had repeatedly called for the complete withdrawal of US forces from Syria, a policy that prompted the resignation of his former Defense Secretary James Mattis, the Pentagon succeeded in deflecting a pullout. It sought to establish a permanent presence in northern Syria with the aim of countering both Russian and Iranian influence, denying the Syrian government access to oil and gas fields in the region and continuing a war for regime change.

While US troops have drawn back from the Turkish-Syrian border, it is by no means clear that they are being withdrawn from Syria as a whole. Administration officials have indicated that a US force will remain deployed at a base in al-Tanf, where US troops are illegally occupying a strategic border crossing linking southern Syria with both Iraq and Jordan. US special forces have also used the base to train so-called “rebels” seeking the ouster of the Assad

government.

Moscow, much like Washington, has adopted an ambiguous attitude toward the Turkish invasion, with Foreign Secretary Sergei Lavrov voicing support for Turkey’s “right to secure its borders,” while calling for close collaboration between the Turkish and Syrian governments. Russian President Vladimir Putin, meanwhile, has called for the withdrawal of all foreign forces from Syrian territory.

Even as the US has called for a cease-fire, Washington joined Moscow in killing a resolution presented by the European Union members of the UN Security Council—including Germany, France and the UK—demanding that Ankara halt its military operation.

Russia’s special envoy on Syria, Alexander Lavrentyev, reported that Turkish and Syrian officials are in regular contact to avoid clashes that “would simply be unacceptable.”

Nonetheless, it was reported that artillery fire from the Turkish-backed Syrian Islamist militia that is being used as shock troops in Ankara’s intervention killed two Syrian government soldiers near the town of Ain Issa.

With the armies of Turkey, Russia, Syria and the United States, along with Kurdish and Islamist militias, all operating within the border region, the danger of a military confrontation spinning out of control and igniting a region-wide and even global conflict is ever present.



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