

Fighting continues in wake of US-Turkish agreement on northern Syria

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Fighting continued in northeastern Turkey in the wake of an agreement struck Thursday between US Vice President Mike Pence and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. At least 14 civilians were reported killed Friday in air strikes and shelling near the bitterly contested Syrian border town of Ras Al-Ain.

The deal, described by Washington as a “ceasefire,” has been characterized by Ankara as merely a 120-hour “pause” in its offensive against the Syrian Kurdish YPG militia, which served as the US military’s proxy ground troops in what was ostensibly a war against the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS).

Under the terms of the deal, the YPG forces—regarded by the Turkish government as “terrorists” and an extension of the PKK Kurdish separatist movement in Turkey—are supposed to be withdrawn from a so-called “safe zone” extending 20 miles south of the Turkish-Syrian border.

At a press conference in Istanbul Friday, Erdogan stressed that it was Washington’s responsibility to assure the withdrawal of its erstwhile Kurdish allies from the border region. “If the promises are kept until Tuesday evening, the safe zone issue will be resolved,” he said. “If it fails, the operation ... will start the minute 120 hours are over.”

It has become clear, however, that there exists no agreement as to what territory the “safe zone” covers. While Pence announced on Thursday that this zone would extend 20 miles south into Syrian territory, he gave no indication as to what length of the Syrian-Turkish border would be involved.

Both US officials and spokesmen for the Kurdish forces have since indicated that the deal applies only to the roughly 80-mile stretch of the border area between the towns of Ras Al-Ain and Tal Abyad that Turkish forces have occupied. The Erdogan government, meanwhile, has stated that the “safe zone” will extend 275 miles from the

city of Manbij, about 25 miles west of the Euphrates River, all the way east to the Iraqi border.

The realization of such a venture, however, would require either the collaboration of—or a direct military confrontation with—Syrian government troops backed by Russian military units, who have moved into the area, taking over bases abandoned by the US military in Manbij and establishing their presence in the cities of Kobani and Raqqa, as well as elsewhere on the Turkish-Syrian border.

Moscow’s position is that all of Syrian territory, including the territory marked out for a so-called safe zone, must be placed under the control of the Damascus government of President Bashar al-Assad. With the announced withdrawal of the 1,000 US troops deployed in northern Syria, Russia has emerged as the principal mediator between Turkey, the Syrian government and the Kurdish militia. It is unlikely a coincidence that the 120-hour deadline for the US-Turkish deal falls on Tuesday, when Erdogan is scheduled to fly to the Black Sea resort city of Sochi for a meeting with President Vladimir Putin. According to some reports, representatives of the Assad government are also to be present.

While US President Donald Trump has made ludicrously grandiose statements about the ramshackle deal struck in Ankara, claiming that it had “saved millions of lives” and represented “a great day for civilization,” it has only intensified opposition within US ruling circles, where the withdrawal of US troops from Syria is seen as strengthening Russia’s hand in the Middle East.

This was apparent in a lengthy analysis published Friday by the *Wall Street Journal*, whose right-wing editorial board is generally a reliable supporter of Trump. It stated: “The decision by President Trump to leave Syria set in motion events that upended U.S. policy in the Middle East, cast doubt on America’s reliability as an ally and allowed Washington’s adversaries to fill the

void: The Assad regime strengthens its hold. Russia expands its influence. And Iran sees greater freedom to ferry weapons to allies in the region, posing new threats to neighboring Israel.”

Similarly, the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), a Washington-based think tank with close ties to the US military and intelligence apparatus, commented: “The precipitous withdrawal of U.S. forces from Syria now tilts the balance further in Russia’s favor. The PYD [Democratic Union Party, the political arm of the YPG militia], which Turkey regards as a terrorist group, is likely to fall further under Moscow’s sway, allowing Russia to play Turkey and the Kurds off one another. Already, the PYD has accepted the restoration of Assad’s control over northeastern Syria. Turkish-backed militias are racing to secure as much of the region as possible, but Russian forces have positioned themselves between the Kurds, Syrian forces, and the pro-Turkish militias, casting Moscow as the main powerbroker. The U.S. withdrawal also makes Russia’s ambition of reuniting Syria under Assad more achievable.”

Behind all of the denunciations of Trump for betraying the Kurdish nationalists—who offered their forces up as cannon fodder for the US imperialist intervention in Syria in the vain hope of securing autonomy—these are the real concerns that have generated a political firestorm over the US withdrawal.

Trump has sought to cast the withdrawal as a fulfillment of his campaign pledge to end Washington’s “forever wars” in the Middle East and Afghanistan, making a populist and nationalist appeal to broad antiwar sentiment. At the same time, however, he has increased the Pentagon’s budget to \$750 billion, while seeking to focus US military might against American imperialism’s principal global rival, China.

From the beginning, the Democrats have focused their opposition to Trump on foreign policy questions of concern to the US military command and the intelligence agencies, particularly centering on what they view as an insufficiently aggressive posture in relation to Russia and Syria.

With Trump’s precipitous troop withdrawal in Syria and the subsequent signing of the agreement in Ankara conceding to all of Erdogan’s demands, this opposition has found growing support within the Republican Party as well, reflected in last Wednesday’s 354-60 vote in the House of Representatives condemning Trump’s actions in Syria, with Republicans joining Democrats by a margin of 2-to-1.

Republican Senator Lindsey Graham, one of Trump’s staunchest supporters, joined with Democratic Senator Chris Van Hollen in announcing that, despite the so-called cease-fire deal, they were moving “full steam ahead” with legislation calling for sweeping sanctions against Ankara. These include not only a halt to all US military collaboration with Turkey and a ban on arms sales, but also an investigation into Erdogan’s personal finances, fines against Halkbank, a large Turkish state-owned bank, and a ban on US investors buying Turkish sovereign debt. Similar legislation is also moving through the House.

Part of the deal struck in Ankara was a pledge that Washington would impose no further sanctions on Turkey and would withdraw those already imposed following a conclusive halt to the Turkish offensive in Syria. The imposition of congressional sanctions will have the likely effect of shifting Ankara into even closer alignment with Moscow.

In the midst of the political controversies over the Turkish incursion into Syria, Amnesty International issued a report charging the Turkish military with “serious violations and war crimes, summary killings and unlawful attacks.” It said that both Ankara and the Syrian Islamist militias that it supports—formerly armed and funded by the CIA to overthrow Assad—had shown “a shameful disregard for civilian life.”

Meanwhile, the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) said Friday that it is conducting an investigation into verified reports that Turkish forces have used chemical weapons, white phosphorus shells, against civilian populations on the border, leaving Kurdish civilians, including young children, with horrific chemical burns.

While the US government and the corporate media repeatedly promoted unsubstantiated claims of the use of chemical weapons by Syrian government forces to justify US military intervention, there has been no such outcry over the crimes of the Turkish regime.



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