

US troops withdraw across Syrian border into Iraq

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Hundreds of US troops crossed the Syrian border into Iraq Monday, the first large-scale sign of the pullout ordered by President Donald Trump that has provoked a political firestorm in Washington. The troops traveled in armored cars and other military vehicles, which came under occasional “fire” from Kurdish youth armed with stones, potatoes and tomatoes.

At one point, according to a video circulated by the Kurdish ruling party in northeast Syria, a group of demonstrators stopped a US convoy briefly, while displaying hand-made signs, in English, including one which read: “To the US Army who are leaving northeast Syria now tell your children that the children of the Kurds were killed by the Turks and we did nothing to protect them.”

There is intense hostility to the US withdrawal in Kurdish towns and villages, where the population now fears occupation by the Turkish army, or even worse, by Turkey’s allies in the “Syrian National Army,” a criminal militia consisting largely of former members of al Qaeda and other Islamist groups recruited by the CIA and Saudi Arabia to fight in Syria against the government of President Bashar al-Assad. These forces have been linked to atrocities, particularly against the many non-Sunni minorities in Syria: Alawites (a variant of Shiism), Kurds, and Christians.

After being abandoned by their American patrons, the Syrian Kurdish YPG militia has sought aid from the Assad regime, Russia and Iran against the invasion by Turkish armed forces, which began two weeks ago. Direct fighting between Turkish and Kurdish forces was halted Friday under a 120-hour “pause” agreed between Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and US Vice President Mike Pence on October 17. The “pause” ends this morning and a resumption of violence is widely expected.

While Trump has sought to strike a phony antiwar posture with his pullout order, the US troops leaving Syria will not actually return to the United States. The Pentagon confirmed over the weekend that all 1,000 US troops ordered to leave northeast Syria would move into western Iraq, mainly in Anbar province.

It is not clear whether the Iraqi government has yet given approval to this deployment, since the 5,000 American troops now in that country is the maximum level under the current agreement between Baghdad and Washington.

Since May, Trump has sent 14,000 more American troops to the Middle East, mainly as part of his campaign of threats against Iran. Earlier this month, he ordered another 3,000 US troops deployed to Saudi Arabia to protect Saudi oil fields from an alleged Iranian threat.

Monday saw the latest twist in White House policy, with reports that 200 US Special Forces operatives will remain in Syria, mainly to protect the country’s oil fields, which are in territory the Kurdish forces seized from ISIS during the bloody struggle of 2014-2018. Trump hinted at the decision in a tweet in which he boasted, “We have secured the Oil.”

This action will likely intensify the factional warfare in Washington, where Trump’s opponents, both Democratic and Republican, will point out—correctly enough—that he cares more for the oil of Syria than the people. Their main concern, however, is that Trump too openly reveals the real motivation of the entire US intervention in the region going back to 2003: to secure control of some of the most important oil resources on the planet, regardless of the millions who have been killed, wounded or driven from their homes by US invasion and occupation.

While American military forces are carrying out

Trump's withdrawal order, albeit with widely reported grumbling among both officers and rank-and-file soldiers, a bipartisan congressional delegation traveled to Jordan as part of what amounts to a parallel foreign policy initiative.

The delegation was headed by House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, accompanied by Eliot Engel, chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, Adam Schiff, chairman of the House Intelligence Committee, Bennie Thompson, chairman of the House Homeland Security Committee, and Mac Thornberry, ranking Republican on the House Armed Service Committee, and four other Democrats.

They met on Saturday with Jordan's King Abdullah, after which Pelosi issued a brief statement referring only obliquely to Trump's pullout order: "With the deepening crisis in Syria after Turkey's incursion, our delegation has engaged in vital discussions about the impact to regional stability, increased flow of refugees, and the dangerous opening that has been provided to ISIS, Iran and Russia."

The trip to Jordan was widely seen throughout the region, and in Washington, as a direct slap at Trump's Syria policy. Last week the House of Representatives voted by 354-60 to condemn the pullout, with two-thirds of Republicans joining all Democrats in the vote. Pelosi herself raised the issue directly with Trump October 16 at the White House, reiterating suggestions that Trump is acting to benefit Russia, telling him "all roads lead to Putin" in his Mideast policy, and then walking out of the meeting.

The Pelosi delegation left Jordan for a secret visit to Afghanistan, made public only after they had returned home to the United States. In the course of their stopover in Kabul, on Sunday, October 20, they met with President Ashraf Ghani and his main political rival, Chief Executive Abdullah Abdullah, with US Ambassador John Bass and other US civilian and military officials, as well as US troops at Camp Morehead.

The Afghanistan trip raises a number of significant issues. In January, Trump deliberately canceled a Pelosi trip to that country in the midst of the partial federal shutdown over the refusal of Congress to provide funds for his wall along the US-Mexico border. Trump denied the usual permission for a congressional delegation to use military transport into the war zone. It is not clear

for the current trip whether Trump gave his permission, or whether the military did not notify him or simply ignored his wishes.

While in Kabul, the congressional delegation had a closed-door briefing from Secretary of Defense Mark Esper, who was also engaged in an unannounced visit to the Afghan capital. Pelosi and Esper crossing paths in Kabul cannot be considered a mere coincidence, and the topics of discussion likely covered more than Afghanistan.

A closed-door Pelosi-Esper meeting in Washington would immediately trigger speculation about the Pentagon's role in the impending impeachment crisis. One important aspect of the Watergate crisis of 1973-1974 is that then-Defense Secretary James Schlesinger instructed military commanders not to obey any orders from the White House that were not routed through him—an effort to forestall any attempt by President Richard Nixon to use the military to block the impeachment proceedings that eventually led to his resignation.

The congressional Democrats have confined the impeachment drive against Trump to issues raised by the national-security apparatus over Trump's conduct of foreign policy to serve his personal political purposes—raking up dirt on the Democrats and former Vice President Joe Biden, a potential rival in 2020—rather than US imperialist aims in Ukraine, which center on the wider conflict with Russia.

Pelosi has adamantly opposed including Trump's real crimes, such as persecution of immigrants, attacks on democratic rights, or assertion of unlimited executive power in defiance of the Constitution in the impeachment inquiry, which is being closely coordinated with the CIA and other military-intelligence agencies. In turn, the Pentagon has noticeably distanced itself from Trump's hardline refusal to cooperate with the probe.



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