US escalates military intervention in Syria

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The US has significantly escalated its military presence in northeastern Syria in response to growing friction with Russian forces deployed in the same area and in apparent preparation for carving out a US-backed "autonomous" zone controlling Syria's major oil fields.

On Friday, the US Central Command (Centcom), which oversees American military operations throughout the Middle East, announced the deployment of half a dozen Bradley fighting vehicles along with roughly 100 troops to operate them. The Pentagon is also beefing up radar installations in the area and increasing patrols by fighter jets and attack helicopters in a bid for control of the region's airspace.

While the US military's announcement made no mention of Russia, the purpose of the deployment is clear. The actions were designed to "ensure the safety and security of Coalition forces," Centcom spokesman Captain Bill Urban said in a statement, adding that Washington "does not seek conflict with any other nation in Syria, but will defend Coalition forces if necessary."

The deployment is ostensibly a response to an incident at the end of last month in which four US troops were injured in a collision between US and Russian armored vehicles near Syria's northeastern triple border with Turkey and Iraq. Washington accused the Russian military of "unprofessional" conduct and a violation of "de-confliction protocols," while Moscow charged that the US forces provoked the incident, attempting to block a previously announced Russian patrol.

On the same day that the Pentagon announced the escalation of the illegal US military occupation in Syria, Trump repeated his semi-coherent explanation of US policy in the country, telling a White House press conference: "We are out of Syria other than we kept the oil. I kept the oil. We have troops guarding the oil. Other than that, we are out of Syria."

US military forces have been concentrated in Syria's northeastern governorates of Deir ez-Zor and Al-Hasakah, the center of Syria's oil production. While the official rationale for the occupation is the continuation of the 2014 intervention launched against ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria), the reality is that US troops are there to deny the Syrian government access to energy resources that are desperately needed for the country's reconstruction after nearly a decade of armed conflict.

Washington is continuing a regime change policy it initiated in Syria in 2011 with the CIA's arming and funding of Al Qaeda-linked militias in an attempt to overthrow the government of President Bashar al-Assad. Since then, hundreds of thousands of Syrians have lost their lives and millions have been displaced by fighting. The US is maintaining a regime of sanctions against Damascus that is tantamount to a state of war, condemning the Syrian population to poverty and hindering the battle against the COVID-19 pandemic.

In a blatant violation of the Geneva Conventions, the Trump administration has handed exploitation of the oil fields—via a deal signed with the Pentagon's Kurdish proxy ground forces and overseen by Centcom—over to a hastily formed US oil company, Delta Crescent Energy, whose principal partners are a right-wing Republican former ambassador and an ex-Delta Force officer and Fox News contributor.

In an apparent bid to formalize US control of the oil-producing area by means of a colonial-style carve-up, Washington's special envoy on Syria James Jeffrey arrived on September 20 at a US military base in Hasaka to oversee unity talks between two rival Syrian Kurdish factions, the Kurdish National Council in Syria (ENKS) and the Kurdish national unity parties (the largest of which is the PYD, the political arm of the

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YPG militia, the main component of the Syrian Democratic Forces, the Pentagon's proxy military force).

The aim of the talks is the formation of a Kurdish "autonomous authority" to serve as a political facade for a permanent US military occupation of the Syrian oil-producing region. This initiative also has the backing of the Macron government in France.

The move has heightened tensions with both Russia, which backs the Assad government, and Turkey, which has repeatedly intervened in Syria to prevent the formation of an autonomous Kurdish entity. It regards the US proxies in the YPG militia as a branch of the PKK Kurdish separatist movement in Turkey, labeled by both Ankara and Washington as a terrorist organization.

Trump green-lighted the Turkish military intervention in October of last year, which pushed Kurdish forces back from the Syrian-Turkish border. At the time, Trump demagogically claimed he was bringing all of the US troops in Syria "home," only to reverse himself after a firestorm of criticism from within the US military and intelligence apparatus, declaring troops would remain behind to "take the oil."

There are also mounting tensions between Russia and Turkey over the Turkish military occupation of Idlib province in northwestern Syria and its backing of anti-government Islamist militias there. Russian jets reportedly carried out multiple airstrikes in Idlib on Sunday, targeting camps of the Islamist militia Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), whose dominant faction is the former Syrian affiliate of Al Qaeda.

Talks between Ankara and Moscow broke down recently over Russia's demand that Turkey reduce its presence in Idlib, estimated at some 10,000 troops, and cede control of the strategic M4 highway to the Syrian government. Instead, Turkey has dispatched even more armored vehicles to the area.

The conflicting interests and objectives of the US, Russia and Turkey, which all have significant military assets deployed in close proximity to each other in Syria's north, are a powder keg that can be set off by any miscalculation or provocation.

US military aggression in Syria is joined with the relentless US campaign against Iran, the closest ally of Damascus, which has taken its latest form in Washington's invoking of the "snapback" of United Nations sanctions that were suspended with the 2015 nuclear accord between Tehran and the world's major powers. All of the other signatories to the agreement, including Washington's erstwhile European allies, the UK, France and Germany, have rejected this attack, insisting that the US has no standing to invoke the sanctions, having unilaterally abrogated the agreement in 2018. Nonetheless, Washington has announced a set of new unilateral anti-Iranian sanctions and is threatening secondary sanctions against countries trading with Iran.

The threat of an eruption of US militarism in Syria, against Iran or in Eastern Europe or the South China Sea has only been intensified by the global coronavirus pandemic and the social, economic and political crisis gripping American capitalism.

The Trump administration's embarking upon a new war as an "October Surprise" designed to shock the electorate in advance of the presidential election—or create the pretext for martial law—is a real and present danger. If it were to do so, it would be able to count on the complicity and support of the Democratic Party, which has repeatedly criticized the administration from the right as being too soft on Russia and China, in particular over the recent armored car sideswiping incident in Syria.

The threat of a new war, with the potential of triggering a global nuclear conflagration, cannot be answered within the framework of the electoral contest between Trump and Biden. It requires an independent strategy of the working class, based upon the class struggle, and guided by a revolutionary socialist and internationalist program.

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