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Pentagon prepares plan to deploy ground troops in Syria

By Bill Van Auken

17 February 2017

The Pentagon is preparing plans for sending hundreds, if not thousands more US ground troops into Syria under the pretext of accelerating the campaign against the Islamic State (ISIS) in both that country and neighboring Iraq.

A proposal for the escalation of the US intervention is expected by the end of this month, following a 30-day Pentagon review of its anti-ISIS campaign ordered by the Trump administration. Other options reportedly under consideration are an intensification of US airstrikes in Syria and a more aggressive arming and training of the YPG Kurdish militia that has served as a proxy ground force in the attack on ISIS-held areas of Syria.

A Pentagon official told CNN Wednesday that “It’s possible that you may see conventional forces hit the ground in Syria for some period of time.” According to military sources, US troops could first be sent to a staging area in Kuwait before being deployed into Syria.

The web site Military.com reported Wednesday that “multiple military sources” had confirmed that approximately 2,000 soldiers from the 82nd Airborne Division’s 2nd Brigade Combat Team are being readied for deployment to the region.

NBC News, meanwhile, quoted Pentagon officials as saying that the initial force being proposed would consist of several hundred more troops, described as “enablers, force protection, and engineering advisers.” It went on to point out, however, that whatever number is decided, they would likely be augmented by other forces rotated in and out on a short-term basis.

At present there are more than 500 special operations troops operating in northern Syria, coordinating air strikes and acting as “trainers and advisers” for the Kurdish forces. Nearly 6,000 more US troops are deployed in neighboring Iraq.

If Washington decides to send thousands of US paratroopers into Syria, an effective invasion of the country, it will entail a far wider escalation, with substantial air and ground forces required to supply and protect them.

The head of the US military’s Special Operations Command reported Tuesday that an escalation of a US bombing campaign that is claiming a growing number of Syrian lives is also being considered.

Army Gen. Raymond Thomas, speaking at the National Defense Industrial Association’s “Special Operational/Low Intensity Conflict” conference in Washington, DC Tuesday, said, “There’s some recommendation in the offing for the administration to consider. We’ll see which consideration they opt for.”

General Thomas boasted to the assembled military contractors that the US intervention in the region had already killed 60,000 ISIS fighters.

“I’m not into morbid body counts, but that matters,” Thomas said. “So when folks ask, do you need more aggressive [measures], do you need better [rules of engagement], I would tell you that we’re being pretty darn prolific right now.”

This “morbid body count” is roughly triple the total number of ISIS fighters that the Pentagon estimated were in Syria and Iraq when Washington launched its “Operation Inherent Resolve” in 2014. There has been no attempt to reconcile this discrepancy, even as the Pentagon has dismissed all but a very few of the growing number of reports of civilian casualties from air strikes conducted by the US and its allies. An increase in the tempo of air strikes will only intensify this slaughter.

A deployment of US ground forces in Syria would represent a dramatic escalation of what is already a multi-sided conflict which threatens to spill over into a regional and even world war.

Last month, Trump announced in a televised interview that he was preparing an executive order directing the Pentagon to establish US-controlled “safe zones” in northern Syria, in large measure to stem the flow of refugees out of the country as part of his attempt to implement a reactionary ban on Muslims traveling into the US.

While the setting up of such zones had also been supported by his Democratic presidential rival, Hillary Clinton, the Obama administration had resisted calls by both Democratic and Republican

politicians for such an escalation of US involvement in the Syrian war. Implementing such zones would require US control of both Syrian territory and air space, creating the conditions for a direct military confrontation with the forces of the Assad government and the Russian air and ground forces that have been sent to Syria to support it against the US-backed war for regime change.

Trump's floating the idea of US cooperation with Russia against ISIS in Syria and Iraq was contradicted Thursday by his defense secretary, Gen. James Mattis. Speaking at a NATO meeting in Brussels, Mattis said, "We are not in a position right now to collaborate on a military level," with Russia, and that Moscow would have to "prove itself first" before any joint operations would be possible.

Similarly, in remarks following a meeting with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov at the G20 foreign ministers' summit in Bonn, Germany, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson took a more confrontational approach, stressing differences between Washington and Moscow over Ukraine and Crimea.

Even as Mattis and Tillerson were spelling out a harder line toward Russia, Marine Gen. Joseph F. Dunford, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, met Thursday with Gen. Valeriy Gerasimov, the top Russian military commander, in Baku, the capital of Azerbaijan, the first such high-level US-Russian military discussions since the US-backed coup in Ukraine and the subsequent US-NATO military buildup against Russia.

A statement issued following the meeting said that the US and Russian military chiefs had agreed to "enhance communications on such stabilizing measures" as were needed to avoid "unintended incidents." While the statement did not specifically name Syria, communications links aimed at avoiding confrontations between US and Russian warplanes have already been in place there since 2015. Given an escalation of the US military presence, the danger of such clashes would rise.

Aside from "unintended incidents," any major US military intervention in Syria will be aimed not primarily at ISIS or prosecuting the "war on terror," but at advancing the strategic interests of US imperialism in the oil-rich Middle East, particularly at the expense of Washington's major regional and global rivals, Iran, Russia and China.

US strategy in the region suffered a serious blow under the Obama administration, particularly since the government's retaking of eastern Aleppo last December which ended any real prospect of the US-backed "rebels" toppling the Assad government. Bitter recriminations continue within the American ruling establishment over the reversal in Syria which are closely bound up with the attempt to generate a war hysteria against Russia.

These currents were expressed in a statement issued Wednesday by the influential Washington think tank, the Center for Strategic and International Studies, titled "Half-Measures in Syria: The United States needs to go big or go home."

Written by former State Department official Jon Alterman, the statement complains that Washington has “poured billions into the Syria problem, but it remains on the sidelines of the conflict’s resolution. Russia has put far less into the fight, and it has an outsized influence on the outcome.”

Alterman goes on to argue that the supposed goal of defeating ISIS “doesn’t do much for the future of Syria” and has “the effect of supporting the Assad government without providing much influence on the terms of a Syrian settlement.”

He concludes by saying that Washington has a choice between “abandoning Syria to Assad” or acting to “enhance US leverage in Syria, presumably through increasing military activity to threaten not just the ISG [ISIS], but also those carrying out atrocities against civilian populations.” Such a strategy, he states “would risk greater conflict with Russia, but it would give the United States greater say in Syria’s future and enhance U.S. influence in the Middle East.”

In other words, what is now under consideration within the US military and intelligence apparatus and the Trump administration is the deployment of US troops to prosecute the war for regime change, posing the direct threat of a head-on confrontation between the world’s two major nuclear powers.