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Tillerson pledges long-term US military role in Iraq and Syria

By Jordan Shilton

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US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson declared Washington’s intention to keep troops deployed more or less indefinitely in the territories now occupied by Islamic State in Iraq and Syria in remarks delivered at the beginning of a two-day meeting of the US-organized anti-ISIS coalition in Washington.

“The military power of the coalition will remain where this fraudulent caliphate has existed in order to set the conditions for a full recovery from the tyranny of ISIS,” he told an audience that included Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi. He gave no indication of when, if ever, US troops could be withdrawn from a war zone extending across Iraq and Syria, where there has been fighting of greater or lesser intensity throughout the 14 years since the US first invaded Iraq.

Tillerson also called for the establishment of “interim zones of stability” in Syria to which refugees from the US-instigated civil war that has raged throughout that country for the past six years could be forcibly returned. Areas will be deemed “safe” if they have been initially cleared of ISIS, an absurdly low standard given the deadly conflicts which continue to rage between different factions in the Syrian civil war.

He also stressed that these areas would come under the control of local governments installed by Washington, presumably drawn from the Kurds and Sunni Islamist opposition forces sponsored

by the Pentagon and CIA as part of the US war for regime change against the Assad government in Damascus.

Trump's secretary of state also demanded a greater commitment both militarily and financially from the 68 countries represented at the meeting. A State Department release prior to the meeting said a key goal would be to "accelerate international efforts to defeat ISIS."

Tillerson emphasized that US troops would effectively be engaged in a permanent occupation of neighboring Iraq. Even after ISIS is defeated in Mosul, where hundreds of civilians have been killed by the US-backed offensive on the Iraq's second-largest city, the US military would remain there, Tillerson insisted.

"Local leaders and local governments will take on the process of restoring their communities in the wake of ISIS with our support," he said. "The development of a rejuvenated civil society in these places will lead to a disenfranchisement of ISIS and the emergence of stability and peace where there was once chaos and suffering. But none of this will happen automatically. We all need to support this effort."

Such bogus claims about bringing "democracy" and "freedom" to Iraq were employed by the Bush administration in 2003 to justify its illegal invasion, which led to the deaths of upwards of a million Iraqis and helped create the conditions under which ISIS could emerge.

Under Obama and now Trump, Washington has seized on the threat posed by ISIS to justify a bloody war in the Middle East which has already claimed the lives of hundreds of thousands. Behind the propaganda, US imperialism's real goal is the consolidation of its control over the energy-rich region by bringing about regime change in Damascus and stabilizing the puppet government in Baghdad. In the process, the United States and its imperialist allies have laid waste to both countries, claimed the lives of hundreds of thousands and forced millions more to flee their homes.

In a remark that amounts to a blank check to the US to wage war wherever it sees fit, Tillerson ominously warned that ISIS could emerge anywhere after it is defeated in the current fighting. "As we stabilize areas encompassing ISIS's physical caliphate in Iraq and Syria, we also must prevent their seeds of hatred from taking root elsewhere," he said. "We must ensure ISIS cannot gain or maintain footholds in new regions of the world."

Even as the secretary of state delivered his comments, a major operation has been launched in Syria by US special forces to provide support to the Kurdish-dominated Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in an assault behind ISIS lines. US troops and SDF militia were flown into a location close to a dam on the Euphrates River which they aim to take from ISIS so as to open up a new route into Raqqa, the Jihadi group's de facto capital.

While reports sought to maintain the fiction that the US military personnel were there as "advisers," they are to all intents and purposes engaged in a combat mission. Col. Joe Scrocca, spokesman for the US military intervention in Syria and Iraq, admitted as much when he noted that the mission behind enemy lines could take "weeks" to complete.

In preparation for the offensive, US aircraft intensified its ruthless bombardment of the Raqqa area. One of these strikes destroyed a school building Tuesday that was being used to house refugees forced to flee their homes from the fighting. According to the British-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, which described the attack as a “massacre,” 33 bodies were recovered from the rubble. The casualty figure could be much higher since activists reported up to 100 people were living there. The activist group Raqqa is Being Slaughtered Silently said the whereabouts of 50 families living at the school remains unknown.

The news came just five days after US warplanes partially destroyed a mosque in Idlib Province, killing at least 42 civilians. The US military announced Tuesday it was conducting an official investigation into the incident. A statement from the US-led coalition denied striking the school near Raqqa.

An estimated 116 civilians have been killed in US-led air strikes in Syria since March 8, while in Mosul, the numbers of deaths have risen sharply as Iraqi forces and US aircraft have begun targeting the densely populated western part of the city. More than 1,000 civilians were killed or injured in February alone. In comments to the *Intercept*, journalist Anand Gopal described US air strikes in Mosul as “hitting pretty much everything in sight.” Gopal added, “It’s a real humanitarian disaster that’s unfolding as we speak.”

The blatant disregard for civilian lives is the direct product of Trump’s granting of expanded powers to the Pentagon and US military commanders in the region to launch attacks. This means that air strikes can be conducted without any oversight from the White House, insuring a more rapid and intensive pace than under Obama, when such oversight did not prevent frequent civilian casualties in Iraq and Syria.

Meanwhile, a collection of Al Qaeda affiliates and other Islamist groups continued to attack Damascus on Wednesday. Reports spoke of indiscriminate shelling by the Jihadis of the al-Mazraa district of the capital, where the Russian embassy is located. Syrian government sources reported that reinforcements had been sent to the eastern Damascus neighborhood of Jobar, as well as to the city of Hama where another Jihadi attack is under way.

The Trump administration’s intensification of the Syrian conflict takes place in a region which is increasingly destabilized and threatens to trigger a broader war with disastrous consequences. As well as the US, a number of European imperialist powers, including Britain, France and Germany, have forces deployed in the region to enforce their own great power ambitions.

Russia, which intervened in 2015 to prop up the Assad regime, is also strengthening its presence in the contested northwest of Syria, where its military personnel will carry out training of the Kurdish YPG militia, which is also receiving support from the US. This will further antagonize Turkey as Ankara is not prepared to tolerate the consolidation of a Kurdish-controlled autonomous region on its border. Ankara also views Iran with mounting hostility, accusing it of seeking to expand its influence in Syria.

Even within the US-led coalition, differences exist over Syrian policy. Speaking to the *Washington Post*, French Foreign Minister Jean-Marc Ayrault complained that he had been

“hoping for more specifics” from the Trump administration. Ayrault stated Washington had to concentrate on “all aspects” of the Syrian conflict and not just military operations against ISIS, and demanded a “clear idea” on what Russia’s role would be.

The intensification of the Syrian war and the real prospect that it could trigger a far broader conflict underscores the urgent necessity for the construction of an international antiwar movement in the working class to oppose the reckless policies of the imperialist pyromaniacs, both in the Trump administration and the capitals of Europe.