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A forceful Assad regime could soon face western troops in Syria

Paul Iddon
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Early last month, the United States deployed Army Rangers to the northwestern Syrian city of Manbij to prevent a clash between Turkish-backed forces and the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces. Shortly after, it was announced that US Marines were being deployed to Syria's north-east to provide artillery support to the SDF's offensive against Raqqa, ISIL's stronghold in Syria.

The Syrian government opposes these deployments. The Syrian ambassador to the United Nations, Bashar Al Jaafari, said: "Any military presence on our territory without the approval of the Syrian government is an illegitimate presence.

"Those who are truly fighting ISIL are the Syrian Arab Army with the help of our allies from Russia and Iran," he added.

This visible increase in US ground presence in Syria was also denounced by Syrian president Bashar Al Assad, who branded them "invaders". While the US anti-ISIL coalition continues to operate in Syria without coordinating with Damascus, the Syrian regime will, at least verbally, oppose their presence.

This isn't to say that Damascus is gearing up to fight American servicemen on their soil. But it may more forcibly challenge these forces as ISIL is being rolled back.

For its part, Washington has stressed the temporary, ad hoc nature of these latest deployments. Up to 1,000 American troops – operating in both advisory and combat roles – are in northern Syria today.

That number could rise by as much as another 1,000 as part of US president Donald Trump's goal to speed up ISIL's defeat. This would make the US presence on the ground in Syria much more overt and conspicuous.

Washington maintains a de facto no-fly zone over areas where its troops operate in Syria. This was evidenced last August when Syrian warplanes bombed Kurdish forces in the north-eastern city of Hasakah – where they were clashing with pro-regime militia forces – near some US special forces. US Air Force F-22 Raptors were scrambled to the area, forcing Syrian bombers to divert from making a second bombing run.

Damascus also slammed the Turkish incursion into north-west Syria's Aleppo province since it began late last August. The Turks have captured swaths of north-west Syria from ISIL, including Al Bab.

Al Bab was the largest city the militants controlled on the west side of the Euphrates River after their loss of the nearby city of Manbij to Kurdish-led forces just before Turkey launched its incursion. While Turkey initially limited the number of its own troops in the operation – instead outsourcing the fighting to Free Syrian Army and other Syrian militiamen which it provided with artillery, air and armour support – they steadily increased as the siege of Al Bab dragged on. Some estimates put the total number of Turkish soldiers on Syrian soil as high as 1,300 – which is not insignificant.

Ankara also wants to leave its FSA proxies in control of Syrian territory it captured from ISIL in last August – including Al Bab – to prevent its Syrian Kurdish adversaries from linking-up their territories in the region and to secure its border region.

Turkish officials are adamant that they will not cede control of Al Bab back to Damascus. Even though Ankara has said its operation in Syria is now complete, it hasn't specified if it will withdraw troops and has left open the possibility of future operations in Syria.

Were it not for Russian assistance, Turkish jet fighters would not have been able to operate over Syrian airspace last November, since Damascus threatened to shoot them out of the sky. It's unclear if Russia would continue to try to prevent Damascus from doing so after Turkey has removed ISIL from north-west Syria – an action that Russia has supported militarily.

Russian and Iranian forces, as well as Iran's proxy, the Lebanese-based Hizbollah militia, as Mr Jaafari mentioned, are the only foreign powers Damascus has permitted to operate and fight on Syrian soil on its behalf.

Damascus has also more forcibly challenged Israeli air strikes on its territory. Since at least January 2013, Israel has targeted weapons systems in Syria it doesn't want the Hizbollah militia in Lebanon to get its hands on.

In March, an Israeli strike deep in Syrian territory – Homs province – resulted in Syria firing long-range anti-aircraft missiles against Israel's attacking fighter-bombers. The Israelis evaded the missiles and Damascus threatened retaliation for any future strikes.

Mr Al Assad seems emboldened by his victory over the opposition in Aleppo last December. He has said he aims to reconquer the entirety of Syria and, given his recent battlefield victories, seems to believe he is in a position to do so.

In the coming months, as the ISIL threat winds down and the Syrian army begins consolidating control over more of the country – it has forces south of Al Bab and is also advancing across central Syria – they might start actively challenging the presence of foreign troops more forcibly.