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afgazad@gmail.com

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By Bill Van Auken

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Putin stages “mission accomplished” visit to Syria

Russian President Vladimir Putin paid a surprise visit to Syria Monday, delivering a laudatory speech to Russian troops at the Hmeimim air base in the country’s coastal province of Latakia and meeting with his Syrian counterpart Bashar al-Assad.

Russia intervened in Syria at Assad’s request beginning two and a half years ago, providing air support and other aid that proved critical in reversing the gains made by Al Qaeda-linked “rebels” that had been armed and financed by the CIA, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and the Sunni Gulf oil monarchies.

Putin’s visit came just days after he and the Russian Defense Ministry had declared a “complete victory” over the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), which has been routed from all major Syrian cities, reduced to a few pockets along the Euphrates River in eastern Deir Ezzor province.

Putin said he had ordered the military to withdraw “a significant part” of the Russian military contingent from Syria. At the same time, Moscow has made it clear that it will hold onto the Hmeimim air base, which has been the command and control center for Russia’s military operations in the country since the fall of 2015, as well as the Russian naval base at Syria’s Mediterranean port city of Tartus.

Putin declared in his address to the Russian troops, “If the terrorists raise their heads again, we will strike them with blows, the likes of which they have never seen.”

The plan for Putin to land in Syria was kept secret until after his plane had touched down. Coming barely three months before Russia’s presidential election, in which Putin is running for another six-year term, the Russian president’s speech had a “mission

accomplished” theme, aimed at promoting his image as a defender of Russia’s national interests on the world stage.

His claims that Russia’s intervention had secured Syria’s sovereignty and brought the bloody war begun in 2011 to an end, however, are undoubtedly premature.

In addition to residual Russian forces remaining in Syria, the US has recently acknowledged its deployment of fully 2,000 troops in the country, while indicating it has no intention of withdrawing them, despite the Syrian government’s denunciations of the American intervention as an illegal aggression. Documents released by the Turkish government indicate that the Pentagon has set up at least a dozen bases on Syrian territory. The Pentagon responded to Putin’s announcement with open skepticism, while making clear it would not follow Moscow’s lead in terms of troop withdrawals.

“Russian comments about removal of their forces do not often correspond with actual troop reductions, and do not affect US priorities in Syria,” Pentagon spokesman Maj. Adrian Rankine-Galloway said.

The spokesman added that US troops would “continue to operate in Syria in support of local forces on the ground to complete the military defeat of ISIS and stabilize liberated territory, in turn allowing for displaced Syrians and refugees to return.”

This marks the second time that Putin has announced a withdrawal of Russian forces. In March of 2016, the Russian president declared that Moscow’s mission in Syria had been “on the whole accomplished,” making it possible to pull out the “main part” of Russia’s military force in the country. However, Russia’s intervention intensified in the subsequent months, particularly in the fight to defeat Islamist “rebel” forces in eastern Aleppo.

The US and Western corporate media waged a propaganda campaign denouncing Russia for the civilian casualties caused by its bombing campaign, while Washington denounced Moscow for striking targets that it described as the “anti-government opposition,” consisting for the most part of the CIA-backed rebels operating in alliance with the Syrian affiliate of Al Qaeda.

As the United States ramped up its own air war on both sides of the Syrian-Iraqi border, leading to a far greater number of deaths, the media’s concern for civilian casualties rapidly dissipated.

While both Moscow and Washington claim that their respective interventions in Syria are aimed at combating terrorism, and ISIS in particular, the reality is that they have pursued different and diametrically opposed aims. In the case of US imperialism, the goal from 2011 to the present has been regime change directed at imposing a US puppet government

in Damascus and strategically weakening the regional influence of Syria's two main allies, Iran and Russia.

The attempt to achieve this objective through the promotion, funding and arming of "rebels" dominated by the al-Nusra Front, Syria's Al Qaeda affiliate, and related Islamist militias such as ISIS, resulted in a debacle.

Subsequently, Washington has steadily escalated its direct military involvement in the country on the pretext of backing the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), a proxy force comprised almost entirely of the YPG, the Syrian Kurdish militia, in a war against ISIS. However, as has recently been revealed by both the BBC and the former chief spokesman of the SDF, the Pentagon and its proxies have repeatedly organized the evacuation of ISIS forces from besieged cities in order to turn them against the advance of Syrian government troops.

The aim of Moscow's intervention has been to prop up its principal Arab ally in the Middle East. A major concern was the prospect of Assad's overthrow and the imposition of a US puppet government leading to a deal providing Qatar access to Syrian territory for a gas pipeline directed toward Western Europe. Assad had rejected the Qatari monarchy's demands for such an agreement, which would undermine the profit interests of Gazprom, Russia's largest corporation, and the ruling capitalist oligarchs that Putin represents.

Russia also justifiably feared that the overthrow of the Assad regime would result in Syria becoming a base for Al Qaeda-linked Islamist fighters drawn from Russia's Caucasus region to launch a campaign, backed by the CIA, to destabilize and ultimately dismember the Russian Federation.

Despite this undeniable defensive element to Moscow's intervention in Syria, which was launched under conditions of a concerted campaign by the US and its NATO allies to militarily encircle and subjugate Russia, it has provided no progressive solution to the crisis wracking Syria or any way forward for the Syrian working class and oppressed.

The character of Russia's intervention in the region was underscored by the two subsequent legs of Putin's Middle East trip, which saw him touch down in Cairo for talks with the Egyptian dictator Gen. Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, and then Ankara for a meeting with Turkey's autocratic President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. Moscow has reportedly reached an agreement with the Sisi regime allowing Russian warplanes to use Egyptian bases, further antagonizing Washington. While in Cairo, Putin signed an agreement for Russia to build Egypt's first nuclear power plant.

In Turkey, meanwhile, Erdogan announced that the visit would be followed by the final negotiations for Ankara's purchase of a Russian S-400 surface-to-air missile system . The plan to deploy this system, which would not be integrated into NATO's air defense network, has further escalated tensions between Turkey and its erstwhile Western allies.

As the ostensible aim of both sides—the defeat of ISIS—is being realized, the threat of a direct confrontation in Syria between the world's two major nuclear powers grows ever more acute. In recent weeks, the US and Russian militaries have traded charges of provocations by each others' warplanes over the Euphrates River valley, with the Pentagon warning that they could result in the shoot-down of a Russian jet.

This threat was issued against the backdrop of an increasingly dangerous escalation of nuclear tensions between Washington and Moscow. Last Friday, the US State Department issued a statement marking the 30th anniversary of the signing of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF Treaty) in which it said that the Trump administration is “pursuing economic and military measures intended to induce” Moscow to comply with the terms of the agreement.

The statement went on to make clear that Washington is prepared to invoke alleged Russian violations as a pretext for scrapping the treaty altogether and embarking on a path leading to a nuclear confrontation. The Pentagon, the State Department warned, is conducting a “review of military concepts and options, including options for conventional, ground-launched, intermediate-range missile systems, which would enable the United States to defend ourselves and our allies.”