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US to set up 30,000-strong “border force” in Syria

In a provocative step that immediately fuelled tensions with Turkey and Russia, the US announced last weekend the establishment of a 30,000-strong Border Security Force (BSF) in enclaves of Syria under the control of the American proxies fighting to topple the Syrian government of President Bashar al-Assad. The BSF will be dominated by fighters from Kurdish People’s Protection Units (YPG), alongside elements from various Islamist militias.

Having proclaimed the defeat of Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), Washington has no intention of leaving Syria. It is determined to carve out a swathe of territory from which to prosecute its goal of ousting Assad. The latest move will not only intensify the civil war in Syria but bring the US into direct conflict with Russia and Iran, which back the Assad regime, and Turkey, which regards the YPG as a direct military threat.

Colonel Thomas Veale, a spokesman for the US-led coalition against ISIS, announced that the 15,000 troops of the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) would form the core of the new army. “Currently, there are approximately 230 individuals training in the BSF’s inaugural class, with the goal of a final force size of approximately 30,000,” he said.

Testifying to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee last Thursday, David Satterfield, acting US assistant secretary of state for near eastern affairs, revealed that the Trump administration’s aims, beyond the continued suppression of ISIS, involve the consolidation of the SDF in the north and northeast of Syria, and the countering of Iranian influence.

The war against ISIS was only ever a pretext for advancing US plans for regime change in Damascus as the means for combatting Iranian and Russian influence in Syria. Far from destroying ISIS, the US, which maintains 2,000 troops in Syria, and its local proxies ensured the safety of thousands of armed ISIS fighters. According to Russia, these ISIS fighters are being trained and integrated into [anti-Assad forces](#).

Under pressure to explain why US forces are being kept in Syria, Satterfield blurted out: “We are deeply concerned with the activities of Iran, with the ability of Iran to enhance those activities through a greater ability to move matériel into Syria. And I would rather leave the discussion at that point.” In other words, the Trump administration is preparing for a war in Syria to oust Tehran’s ally Assad that could easily spill over into a wider conflict with Iran, and potentially Russia.

At the same time, the US is facing possible Turkish military action that could destroy plans for a pro-American zone in Syria. Turkey, a NATO ally, is deeply concerned about linkages between the YPG and the separatist Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), which it brands a terrorist group and has long sought to suppress. Three months ago, Turkish troops crossed the border into Syria near the YPG-controlled Idlib enclave in northern Syria.

Ibrahim Kalin, a spokesman for Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, accused the US over the weekend of “taking worrying steps to legitimise this organisation [YPG] and make it lasting in the region.” He warned: “It is absolutely not possible for this to be accepted.” Turkey would “continue its fight against any terrorist organisation regardless of its name and shape within and outside its borders.”

Erdogan condemned US support for the YPG, declaring on the weekend: “The US sent 4,900 trucks of weapons in Syria. We know this. This is not what allies do.” At a rally yesterday he reiterated his determination to “vanquish” the Kurdish militia. “We have finished our preparations,” he said. “The operation can start any time.” Erdogan accused the US of “creating a terror army on our border,” adding: “What we have to do is nip this terror army in the bud.”

The Syrian government denounced the planned pro-US border force as a “blatant assault” on the country’s sovereignty. The state-run news agency, SANA, cited a foreign ministry spokesperson as insisting that the army was determined to thwart the US “conspiracy, end the presence of the US, its agents and tools in Syria, establish full control over the entire Syria territory and preserve the country’s sovereignty.”

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov yesterday accused the US of seeking to split up Syria, saying it “does not want to keep Syria as a state in its current borders.” Washington was helping “the Syrian Democratic Forces to set up some border security zones.”

Lavrov stated: “What it would mean is that vast swathes of territory along the border of Turkey and Iraq would be isolated. It’s to the east of the Euphrates River. There are difficult relations between Kurds and Arabs there. There is a fear they are pursuing a policy to cut Syria into several pieces.”

Vladimir Shmanov, chairman of the Russian State Duma’s defence committee, warned that Russia would respond to the planned Syrian border force. “[It] stands in direct confrontation [with Russia’s interests] and we and our colleagues will certainly undertake certain measures on stabilisation of the situation in Syria,” he said.

The US announcement that it will train and equip a 30,000-strong military force is a desperate attempt to shore up its position in Syria. Diplomatically, it is Moscow, not Washington, that appears to be dictating the terms of negotiations over Syria, with plans for a conference in Sochi later this month to discuss the country’s future.

Militarily, the US-backed anti-Assad militias have suffered one defeat after another, not only because of Russian and Iranian support for the Syrian army, but because of widespread popular hostility, particularly to the reactionary Al Qaeda-linked elements supported by Washington.

The last remaining major Syrian opposition enclave of Idlib has been the focus of a major government offensive since the beginning of year. Into this volatile mix, the US has declared that it intends to stake out a claim by funding, training and arming a large new proxy army, only compounding the danger of a wider war.