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www.afgazad.com

afgazad@gmail.com

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By Bill Van Auken
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US claims “ceasefire” deal in Turkey’s invasion of Syria

The Trump administration claimed Thursday that it had achieved a major diplomatic victory by negotiating a “cease-fire” in the eight day old Turkish offensive against the Kurdish YPG militia in northern Syria. The US president had himself green-lighted the invasion in an October 6 phone call with his Turkish counterpart Recep Tayyip Erdogan, and then pulled back US Special Forces troops deployed on the Syrian-Turkish border to facilitate the operation.

Announced at a press conference convened by US Vice President Mike Pence and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo at the US embassy in Ankara, the existence of a “cease-fire” was immediately denied by Turkish officials, who asserted that they would never reach such a deal with “terrorist” forces. Ankara regards the YPG, which served as the Pentagon’s main proxy ground forces in the so-called war on the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), as a branch of the PKK, the Kurdish separatist movement in Turkey, against which it has waged a brutal counterinsurgency campaign for the past three decades.

The Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs released a 13-point “Joint Turkey US Statement on Northeast Syria” Thursday afternoon. Nowhere does the document mention a cease-fire, instead stating that Turkey will “pause” its offensive in Syria for 120 hours “to allow the withdrawal of the YPG.” Once the Kurdish militia is driven from the Syrian-Turkish border—the principal objective of the Turkish invasion—the military campaign dubbed Operation Peace Spring will be halted, according to the terms of the agreement.

The document begins by affirming the status of the US and Turkey as NATO allies and goes on to declare Washington's understanding of Ankara's "legitimate security concerns on Turkey's southern border" and to affirm a commitment to "protecting NATO territories and NATO populations against all threats."

Mevlut Cavusoglu, Turkey's foreign minister, said after the meeting between Erdogan and the US officials, "We got what we wanted ... This means that the US has approved the legitimacy of our operations and aims."

The deal also promises that no new US sanctions will be imposed against Turkey, and that existing sanctions will be lifted once the military operations in Syria are brought to a halt.

The invasion by the Turkish army has killed several hundred and sent at least 200,000 Syrian Kurds fleeing south for their lives. Atrocities have been attributed to Turkish-backed Islamist militias, drawn from the same Al Qaeda-linked forces that were previously armed and funded by the CIA in the regime change war against the government of President Bashar al-Assad.

Preening before the cameras in Fort Worth, Texas, Trump described the deal with Turkey—which amounted to Washington's ceding to all of Ankara's demands—as historic, "something they've been trying to get for 10 years, everybody, and they couldn't get it." He asserted that "millions of lives" had been saved, as if the shaky pause in the fighting on Syria's northern border meant an end to the country's eight year old conflict. He credited the deal to his "unconventional" approach and "rough love."

In a rare statement of truth, Trump blamed the Obama administration for having "lost more than half a million lives in a very short period in the same region" during the protracted regime change operation launched in 2011.

The day before the Pence-Erdogan meeting in Ankara, Trump had told a White House press conference that the fighting on the Turkish-Syrian border had "nothing to do with us" and was "not our problem." He referred dismissively to the YPG, which suffered some 11,000 casualties in the US intervention in Syria, suggesting that they were mercenaries who were "paid a lot of money to fight," adding that they were "no angels."

In response to growing bipartisan criticism, the White House also released an October 9 letter to Erdogan in which Trump warned the Turkish president that he would be seen as a "devil" if Turkey continued its offensive, while telling him "Don't be a tough guy. Don't

be a fool!” Turkish officials reported that Erdogan threw the letter in the trash and responded by stepping up the military assault in Syria.

The joint statement issued Thursday declares US-Turkish agreement on the establishment of a “safe zone in order to address the national security concerns of Turkey,” adding that this zone will be “primarily enforced by the Turkish Armed Forces and the two sides will increase their cooperation in all dimensions of its implementation.”

The statement gives no precise definition of the “safe zone,” nor spells out what role the US will play in its imposition. Pence told the press conference in Ankara that it would extend roughly 20 miles south of the Turkish-Syrian border but gave no indication of what length of the border it would cover. The Erdogan government has indicated its intention to occupy a 200-mile strip covering all of northeastern Syria from the Euphrates River to the Syrian border with Iraq.

Ankara has long advocated the creation of a “safe zone” inside the Syrian border, both to break up the semi-autonomous region carved out by the Kurds, and to create an area for the training and arming of Islamist militias in order to escalate the bloody sectarian civil war launched with the purpose of overthrowing Assad. Erdogan has also stated his intention to send millions of Syrian Sunni Arab refugees from Turkey into the “zone,” an exercise in ethnic cleansing against the Kurds.

The demand for such a “zone” has been echoed by US Republicans like the late Senator John McCain, as well as Democrats such as Hillary Clinton, who made it part of her 2016 presidential platform. Both supported it as a means of prosecuting the war for regime change in Syria.

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The commander of Kurdish forces in Syria, Mazloun Abdihas, told Kurdish television that the YPG militia and the so-called Syrian Democratic Forces, which previously fought as US proxies, will abide by the agreement announced in Ankara. He added, however, that the so-called cease-fire covers only the 60-mile strip of territory between the Syrian border towns of al Abyad and Ras al-Ain, where the Turkish armed forces have concentrated their offensive.

The US-Turkish proposal for carving out a “safe zone” is further complicated by the deployment of Syrian government troops along with Russian military units, which have moved into the cities of Kobane and Manbij, taking over bases abandoned by the US

Special Forces that Trump ordered to withdraw. Syrian government troops have also moved into Raqqa, the former “capital” of ISIS which was decimated by US airstrikes.

The Kurdish militia forces announced on Sunday that they had invited the Syrian government and Russian forces to fill the vacuum left by the withdrawal of US troops in order to protect the population from the Turkish invasion. According to some reports, YPG militiamen in the border areas have integrated themselves into the government forces.

While Pence claimed at the press conference in Ankara that the Erdogan government had agreed not to engage in any military action in the Syrian city of Kobane, Foreign Minister Cavusoglu directly contradicted the US vice president, saying, “We did not make any promises about Kobane,” and that the issue would be discussed with Russia.

The 120-hour deadline for the completion of the withdrawal of YPG forces from the border area and the initiation of a full halt to Turkish military operations neatly coincides with Erdogan’s scheduled trip to the Black Sea resort city of Sochi for a meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin.

Russia has insisted that control over Syria’s northern border, along with all Syrian territory, must be placed under the control of the Damascus government. At the same time, Moscow has expressed sympathy for Turkey’s “security concerns” and pledged that YPG forces will be removed from the border area.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and his Iranian counterpart Mohammed Javad Zarif on Thursday agreed in a phone call on the need to stabilize the border area east of the Euphrates River by means of a “dialogue between Damascus and Ankara, as well as between the Syrian authorities and representatives of Syrian Kurds,” according to a statement from the Russian Foreign Ministry.

Trump’s order for a partial withdrawal of US troops from northeastern Syria—pitched as a fulfillment of his populist and nationalist promise to end America’s “forever wars” in the Middle East and Afghanistan—has triggered a political firestorm in Washington.

The US House of Representatives Wednesday voted 354-60 for a resolution condemning Trump’s action in Syria, with Republicans supporting it by a 2:1 margin.

The *Wall Street Journal*’s editors, normally right-wing backers of Trump’s policies, published an editorial Thursday titled “Kurds 354, Trump 60.”

“The rebuke sends a message of eroding trust in the President’s foreign-policy judgment that could carry over to other issues,” the editorial states, in a pointed reference to the threat of impeachment. It adds: “Mr. Trump is wrong in assuming that all Republicans are following him on a path of retreat from global commitments. Most Republicans still believe in American global leadership and the robust use of military power when warranted.”

While condemning the “betrayal” of the Pentagon’s erstwhile Kurdish proxy forces, the principal concern among politicians of both big business parties is that Trump has ceded ground in the Middle East to both Russia and Iran.

Faced with mounting political crisis, as well as intensification of the class struggle and social tensions within the United States, the threat of an escalation of US militarism in the region will intensify, regardless of the deal struck in Ankara. The danger is that the increasingly complex conflicts on the Syrian-Turkish border can erupt into a wider war, dragging in the entire region as well as the world’s two major nuclear powers, the US and Russia.

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