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By Bill Van Auken
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Pentagon chiefs say US troops to stay in Syria for years

Barely two months after US President Donald Trump’s demagogic announcement that he was pulling US troops out of northeastern Syria to fulfill his campaign promise to bring a halt to Washington’s “endless wars,” the senior civilian and uniformed Pentagon chiefs told a House panel Wednesday that there is no foreseeable end to the American presence there.

Defense Secretary Mark Esper and Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Gen. Mark Milley maintained in their testimony to the House Armed Services Committee that the US military was staying in Syria to assure the “enduring defeat” of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), and that the fulfillment of that goal is likely years away.



American military convoy stops near the town of Tel Tamr, northern Syria [Photo: AP Photo/Baderkhan Ahmad]

“My assessment at this point is that if we do not retain an intelligence capability that allows us to collect and see and then act with a strike capability on ISIS in Syria then the conditions for re-emergence of ISIS will happen,” Milley told the committee. “It will take some time, it will probably take maybe six to twelve months, but ISIS will reemerge if the US went to zero.”

Esper went even further, insisting that US military forces had to remain in Syria not so much to counter any existing military force, but rather an “ideology”.

“I think the defeat, if you will, will be hard because it’s an ideology,” Esper told the House panel after repeated questions regarding US strategy in Syria. “It’s hard to foresee anytime soon we would stamp it out,” he added.

Both Esper and Milley attempted to dodge questions about Trump’s green-lighting of a Turkish invasion of Syria in October. This Turkish incursion was aimed at driving the Syrian Kurdish YPG militia, which had served as the US military’s proxy ground force, away from the Turkish-Syrian border. Ankara views the YPG as a “terrorist” extension of Turkey’s own PKK Kurdish separatist movement, against which it has fought a bloody counterinsurgency campaign for decades.

They also deflected questions about Trump’s subsequent justification for a continued US presence in Syria on the grounds that they were being deployed to “take the oil”, which he said could be exploited by a US corporation like ExxonMobil. Both Esper and Milley claimed to have no knowledge of any plan to steal Syria’s oil, even though US troops, backed by Bradley armored fighting vehicles, have been deployed in the Deir Ezzor oil fields of northeastern Syria.

The US occupation of the oil fields serves to cut off the government of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad from a vital resource for the reconstruction of a country that has been decimated by the eight-year-old war for regime change orchestrated by the CIA. It also represents a direct provocation to Russia, which has signed deals with Damascus to extract oil, as well as China, which previously had oil investments in Syria and is poised to play a leading role in the country’s reconstruction.

Significantly, Esper seemed to identify Washington’s ostensible NATO ally, Turkey, as the principal challenge to US operations in Syria, stating that Turkey’s incursion into the

northeast of the country had “complicated the battle space.” He described the Turkish-backed Islamist militias deployed against the YPG as a “wild card” that could provoke a wider conflict in the region and said that Erdogan’s stated intention of settling more than a million Syrian refugees in the border areas threatened “turmoil”.

In his testimony, Esper repeated a refrain that he has sounded in recent days about Turkey “spinning out of NATO’s orbit.”

Washington and Ankara are increasingly at loggerheads, with the Turkish government of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan demanding that NATO support its position that the US proxy in Syria, the YPG, is a “terrorist” organization.

In the wake of the NATO summit in London, Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu said that Ankara would veto the implementation of plans for an anti-Russian military buildup in the Baltics unless the US-led alliance agreed to support the campaign against the “terrorist” YPG. “It would be unfair if some countries supported the plan to defend the eastern flank and at the same time refused to agree on a similar plan for us,” he said.

Meanwhile, the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee has approved legislation imposing sanctions on Turkey for contracting with Russia for the deployment of its S-400 missile defense system. Ankara has threatened to retaliate against any US sanctions with measures of its own, including the possible exclusion of US forces from Turkey’s strategic Incirlik airbase.

The US military is remaining in Syria’s northeast with what it claims is a force of 600 troops, along with a detachment of at least 200 more special forces troops near the southern border crossing of al-Tanf. With the inclusion of military contractors and troops rotated in and out on a temporary basis, the real deployment is probably at least twice these numbers. While American forces are currently occupying Syria’s oil fields, their mission is neither to “take the oil,” as Trump proudly proclaimed, nor to combat a shattered ISIS.

Rather, they are continuing the same strategic objectives that underlay the CIA-orchestrated war for regime change initiated under the Obama administration eight years ago. Washington still seeks the overthrow of the government of President Bashar al-Assad and its replacement with a more pliant puppet regime in Damascus. Moreover, it is determined to roll back the influence of the Assad government’s principal backers—Iran and Russia—not only in Syria, but throughout the oil-rich Middle East.

Esper gave a somewhat more candid explanation of the US deployments in the region when he told the House committee that, “The United States strategy in the Middle East seeks to ensure the region is not a safe haven for terrorists, is not dominated by any power hostile to the US, and contributes to a stable global energy market.”

He stressed that the determination of US troop levels in the region was bound up with Washington’s global strategy of preparing for confrontation with US imperialism’s “great power” rivals, in the first instance, Russia and China.

To the extent that Democrats on the House committee challenged Esper and Milley, it was from the standpoint of concerns over Trump’s twists and turns over US policy in Syria strengthening the influence of Russia in Syria and the broader Middle East.

Esper insisted that Washington was engaged in a “responsible” drawdown of forces from the region in order to “reallocate” them to the “great power conflicts.”

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