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By Bill Van Auken
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Trump issues hypocritical threat over Syrian offensive

After vowing barely two months ago to withdraw all American military forces from Syria, US President Donald Trump, backed by the Democrats in Congress and the propaganda mill run by the corporate media, has issued a warning to the Syrian government and its principal allies, Russia and Iran.

Trump tweeted Wednesday: “Russia, Syria, and Iran are killing, or on their way to killing, thousands of innocent civilians in Idlib Province. Don’t do it! Turkey is working hard to stop this carnage.”



The headquarters of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), The Hague, Netherlands. (AP Photo - Peter Dejong, File)

While the tweet has not been followed by any formal declaration by the White House, State Department or Pentagon of intended US action, it has been accompanied by media coverage that largely parrots the US president's denunciations of Syria and its two principal allies for waging military operations against what CNN described as "the country's last major opposition bastion."

This use of the innocuous terms "opposition" or "rebels" is ubiquitous in media coverage of the ongoing military clashes in Syria's largely rural northwestern Idlib province.

The reality is that the province has been dominated since 2015 by the former Syrian Al Qaeda group, known as Hayat Tahrir al-Sham.

Former US special envoy to the so-called "coalition" fighting the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), Brett McGurk, described Idlib in July 2017 as "the largest Al-Qaeda safe haven since 9/11," while blaming the Turkish government for allowing the Islamist fighters to cross Turkey's border into the Syrian province.

While supposedly waging a worldwide "war on terror" directed against Al Qaeda, the CIA armed and funded the Al Qaeda-linked militias in Syria to wage a US-orchestrated war for regime change against the government of President Bashar al-Assad that has claimed the lives of hundreds of thousands and displaced millions.

With the defeat of these militias in Idlib, the so-called "rebels" promoted by Washington and its allies will have lost their last significant foothold in Syria.

Syrian government troops have reportedly retaken roughly a third of Idlib and are within two and a half miles of its major urban center, Maaret al-Numan. The United Nations humanitarian coordination agency OCHA said Friday that over the past two weeks more than 235,000 people have fled their homes in southern Iblib in the face of intense fighting and aerial bombardments. It estimated that 80 percent of those fleeing are women and children.

Trump's denunciation of the brutal methods employed by the Syrian government and its allies in Idlib province is hypocritical and driven entirely by US strategic interests in the region. The Pentagon directed far more intense bombing campaigns in the so-called struggle against ISIS, reducing the cities of Raqqa in Syria and Mosul in Iraq to rubble.

Moreover, in the now nearly two-decade-old "war on terror" waged under the false pretext of defeating Al Qaeda, US imperialism is responsible for the deaths of well over a million

civilians in Iraq, Afghanistan and other countries, along with the destruction of entire societies.

The feigned moral outrage of Trump, the Democrats and the media over Syria also stands in stark contrast to their silence on the near-genocidal war being waged by Washington's closest ally in the Arab world, the Saudi monarchy, against the impoverished population of Yemen. In one of the latest atrocities, a Saudi artillery barrage struck a busy market in Saada province that killed 17 civilians, including 12 Ethiopian refugees. The UN has described the war in Yemen as the world's worst humanitarian crisis, with conservative estimates of 100,000 killed and two-thirds of the country's population, some 24.1 million people, teetering on the brink of famine.

Trump's praise for Turkey "working hard to stop" the "carnage" in Syria is also driven by definite political calculations. An escalating conflict between Washington and Ankara is threatening to rupture Turkey's membership in the NATO alliance and further align it with Russia. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan last week threatened to retaliate against US sanctions over Ankara's purchase of a Russian S-400 missile defense system by expelling US forces from two Turkish airbases which the Pentagon has used not only to carry out its air wars in the region, but also to store nuclear weapons.

Russia and Turkey concluded a September 2018 agreement that was supposed to produce a "de-escalation" of the fighting in Idlib by creating a demilitarized zone separating Syrian government forces from their armed opponents. This was to be accompanied by a separation of a supposed "moderate" opposition from the "terrorist" Al Qaeda-linked forces. This has proven impossible, however, given the former Al Qaeda affiliate's domination of the area.

At a Thursday press conference, Russian Foreign Ministry spokesperson Maria Zakharova said that, while Moscow was "taking measures to keep the situation under control," a "terrorist enclave in Idlib cannot be tolerated endlessly." She added that the Al Qaeda-linked fighters had doubled their number of attacks in the supposed de-escalation area, resulting in the killing of 90 Syrian government troops since the beginning of December.

A Turkish delegation was in Moscow to discuss the developments in Syria this week, and Russian President Vladimir Putin is scheduled to arrive in Turkey on January 8 for further discussions. The nature of the Turkish-Russian negotiations over Syrian developments is highly complicated.

While Turkey's invasion of Syria last month was green-lighted by Trump in a phone call with Erdogan, it is evident that Moscow also gave its consent. The 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.

Turkish and Russian military units are now carrying out joint patrols in areas of the border that had previously been occupied by the YPG. The Syrian government has charged that Turkey is busing in jihadist militants and their families to take over the homes of Kurds who fled the Turkish invasion.

Moscow's assent to the Turkish incursion in northeastern Turkey may well have been given in return for Turkey accepting a Russian-backed Syrian government offensive in Idlib. Ankara's main concern is the threat of a renewed flow of Syrian refugees toward its border.

In a further indication of the complex Russian-Turkish relationship in the region, there are increasingly credible reports that Turkey is funneling Islamist militias that it had backed in Idlib province into Libya to fight in defense of the Tripoli-based Government of National Accord (GNA). The GNA is besieged by the so-called Libyan National Army of Gen. Khalifa Haftar, a former general under Muammar Gaddafi—ousted the in the US-NATO war of 2011—who defected to the US and became an "asset" of the CIA. Aligned with a rival Libyan government in Tobruk, Haftar enjoys the apparent support of Moscow, along with that of Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and France.

The sending of Islamist fighters from Syria through Turkey into Libya is a reversal of a rat line that ran in the other direction in 2011, when, with the logistical guidance of the CIA, fighters and weapons were sent from Libya into Syria to wage the war for regime change against Assad.

Meanwhile, the US continues to illegally deploy troops on Syrian territory with what the Pentagon reports is a contingent of 600 soldiers backed by Bradley armored fighting vehicles occupying Syria's oil fields in the northeastern province of Deir Ezzor. A smaller force is deployed at a base near the southeastern border crossing of Al Tanf, which sits along the strategically important M-2 Baghdad-Damascus highway. The base also provides protection and training for several anti-government militias.

The US presence is aimed at countering Russian, Iranian as well as Chinese influence in Syria and the wider region. Russia has signed agreements with Damascus to exploit Syrian oil, while Beijing has brought Syria into its Belt and Road initiative and is poised to become a principal force in the country's reconstruction. Washington intends to play the role of spoiler, using sanctions and denying Damascus access to its oil wealth to punish the Syrian population for failing to support the CIA-backed Al Qaeda militias, while seeking to prevent Russia and China from consummating deals with the Assad government.

A senior adviser to Assad said that Damascus is considering bringing an international lawsuit against Washington's illegal occupation of its oil fields. The aide, Bouthaina Shaaban, also called for "popular opposition and operations against the American occupiers of our oil."

While it is doubtful that the Assad government could mount a successful military offensive against the US troops in Deir Ezzor, the provocative and reckless operations of US imperialism in Syria and the wider region continue to threaten to ignite a far wider regional or even global war.

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