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US troops confront Russian convoy near Syrian oil fields

US troops in northeastern Syria confronted a Russian military convoy last weekend, refusing to allow it to proceed down a major roadway near the town of Rmelan in al-Hasakah province.

While the incident ended with the Russians withdrawing back to their base and with no shots fired, the confrontation laid bare the sharp tensions that are building up in the area following the shift in US policy after US President Donald Trump green-lighted a Turkish invasion of the border region last October and subsequently ordered the redeployment of US troops to Syria's northeastern oil fields.



An American military convoy in Syria [Credit: AP Photo/Baderkhan Ahmad]

The confrontation was first reported by the Turkish state news agency Anadolu, which cited its sources in the Syrian-Turkish border region.

The US government-run outlet Voice of America said that the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights had reported the incident on Tuesday and quoted a local reporter, Nishan Mohammed, who said he had witnessed the standoff between the US and Russian troops.

“This is the third incident that occurred within a week,” Mohammed said in a phone interview with VOA. The YPG Kurdish militia, which the Pentagon has employed as its proxy ground force in Syria, reportedly also blocked Russian forces from accessing a road through the area last week.

Russian forces moved into the area as part of an agreement reached with Turkey to conduct joint patrols along the Syrian-Turkish border in the wake of the Turkish incursion, which was aimed at driving the Kurdish YPG militia from the area. Ankara regards 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.

While Russian troops took over at least three abandoned US bases on the border, the American military has, according to the Turkish media, built up a new network of at least 11 bases and military outposts in northeastern Syria, including five in al-Hasakah province, four in Deir Ezzor and two in Raqqa.

According to the Pentagon, the US has little more than 500 troops deployed in northeastern Syria, but along with military contractors and forces rotated in and out from neighboring Iraq and elsewhere in the Middle East, the number is undoubtedly higher.

Trump had repeatedly vowed that he was withdrawing all US forces from the country, only to bow to pressure from both Democrats and Republicans, as well as from within the military and intelligence apparatus, and leave troops in Syria. He has now repeatedly advanced the position that US forces are in Syria to “take the oil,” even suggesting that he intends to bring in a US-based energy conglomerate like ExxonMobil to exploit Syria’s resources, an act of pillage that would constitute a war crime.

In an interview last week with Laura Ingraham, a right-wing Fox News host, Trump dismissed criticism that he had “left troops in Syria,” stating, “Do you know what I did? I took the oil.”

When Ingraham attempted to re-phrase Trump’s statement, suggesting that he meant to say he had left US forces behind to guard Syria’s oil installations against ISIS, he cut her

off, declaring, “I don’t know, maybe we should take it, but we have the oil. Right now, the United States has the oil. We have the oil.”

Similarly, at a rally last week in Wisconsin where he boasted of his criminal assassination of Iran’s General Qassem Suleimani, Trump told the crowd: “People said to me, ‘Why are you staying in Syria?’ Because I kept the oil, which frankly we should have done in Iraq.” He went on to insist that “I did pull out,” but “We have the oil, really secure. We’ll see what happens with it.”

Whatever Trump’s gangster illusions about stealing Syria’s oil and turning a profit off of it, the deployment of US troops in the oil fields represents a continuation of the essential strategy pursued by US imperialism over the course of the bloody CIA-orchestrated war for regime change that has raged in Syria for nearly nine years, beginning under the Democratic administration of President Barack Obama. The aim is to deny energy resources to the Syrian government of President Bashar al-Assad in order to deepen the country’s economic crisis and deny it the ability to reconstruct its devastated cities and infrastructure.

In terms of profitability, Syria’s oil is of very limited importance. Before the regime change war robbed it of its oil fields, the country produced less than 400,000 barrels of oil a day.

The Damascus government has, however, signed multiple contracts with Russian oil firms connected to the Kremlin to revive production in the country’s northeast and begin exploration of offshore oil deposits in the eastern Mediterranean.

The US troops are also being kept in Syria to sabotage these plans and to counter both Russia’s and Iran’s influence, as well as that of China—which stands to win reconstruction projects—in both Syria and the broader Middle East.

The dangers posed by this strategy were made clear in February 2018 when a pro-Syrian government force that included large numbers of Russian military contractors advanced on an oil and gas field held by Washington’s Kurdish YPG proxies. The US military responded with a devastating assault by attack helicopters, an AC-130 gunship and artillery massacring scores of the fighters.

The Russian government subsequently said that it would retaliate against any attack on its forces in Syria. With US, Russian and Turkish military forces operating in a small

geographical area, each pursuing their own conflicting interests, the threat of an armed confrontation spilling over into a major war is only growing.

With the support of Russia and Iran, the Assad government has succeeded in re-asserting its control over most of the country, outside of the US/YPG-occupied area in the northeast and part of Idlib province in the northwest, the last remaining redoubt of Western-backed Al Qaeda-linked militias. Its position, however, is far from secure as the country's economic and social crisis continues to deepen.

The value of the Syrian pound has been cut in half over the past 12 months, in large measure as a result of the financial meltdown in neighboring Lebanon, which has served as Syria's main point of access to hard currency under conditions in which the country has been subjected to a near total financial and economic blockade by Washington and its allies.

The stunning depreciation of the national currency has meant a spiraling increase in prices for basic goods under conditions in which an estimated 80 percent of the population is living below the poverty line, and 50 percent of Syrians are unemployed.

Anger over deteriorating social conditions erupted into protests in the government-controlled southern city of Suwaida, where residents took to the streets for two days running, chanting "This is a government of thieves." Security forces did not seek to suppress the demonstrations.

In the end, even if the bourgeois nationalist government of Bashar al-Assad is able to eradicate the last remnants of the Al Qaeda-linked militias that were unleashed upon the country by Washington and its allies, it will face a far more intractable threat from the struggles of the Syrian working class.

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