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By Bill Van Auken
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US stages military buildup to enforce deal to steal Syria's oil

The US military over the past week has been sending convoys across the border from Iraq into Syria in what appears to be a significant escalation of the US military intervention in the war-ravaged country.

According to sources in Syria, the convoys have come across at the al-Tanf crossing, where the US military maintains a garrison near the triple frontier between Iraq, Syria and Jordan. They have then traveled to US bases in the northeastern Syrian governorates of Deir ez-Zor and Al-Hasakah. Witnesses said that the convoys included tanks, armored vehicles, oil tankers and trucks bearing weapons and logistical equipment.

The buildup of the US forces east of the Euphrates River follows the revelation that Washington has concocted a deal with a newly minted American oil company, Delta Crescent Energy LLC, which has been signed by the so-called Syrian Democratic Forces, the proxy ground troops employed by Washington in Syria, which consist mainly of the Syrian Kurdish YPG militia.

Among the equipment being trucked in by the US military are believed to be components for two modular refineries to assist the company in exploiting and marketing Syrian oil.

This agreement constitutes a war crime under the Geneva Conventions, which bar the exploitation of the natural resources of an occupied country for the benefit of the occupier. In the case of the US occupation of Syria, this constitutes an even more blatant act of international piracy, as the US military presence in the country has been authorized neither by the Syrian government nor the United Nations.

The existence of the deal brokered by Washington between Delta Crescent Energy and the Pentagon's Kurdish proxies was first revealed by Republican Senator Lindsey Graham during a July 30 Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

Graham told US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo that he had been informed by the commander of the Syrian Kurdish forces, known as Mazlum Kobani, of the deal to "modernize the oil fields in northeastern Syria", and asked whether the Trump administration was supporting it.

"We are," Pompeo replied. "The deal took a little longer than we had hoped, and now we're in implementation; it could be very powerful."

It has since emerged that the principals in Delta Crescent Energy include James Cain, a North Carolina Republican Party official and former US ambassador to Denmark who gained brief notoriety by calling for the execution of Chelsea Manning, the courageous US soldier who was imprisoned for her role in exposing US war crimes in Afghanistan and Iraq by leaking to WikiLeaks hundreds of thousands of military war logs and diplomatic cables. Also on the company's board is James Reese, a former Delta Force officer who became a private security consultant and Fox News contributor after retiring from the military.

There is every reason to suspect that the company was formed as an act of political cronyism. The deal was reportedly "negotiated" under the auspices of the chief of the US Central Command (CENTCOM), Gen. Kenneth McKenzie, while US military is facilitating its implementation.

As for Pompeo's claim that this agreement could prove "powerful," it certainly is not a matter of its global economic significance, given that Syria accounts for just 0.1 percent of the world's oil reserves. Rather, the deal serves as a means of starving the Syrian government and people of resources that are desperately needed for reconstruction after nearly a decade of war, while simultaneously providing a pretext for the continued US military occupation and dismemberment of the country.

The deal is the outcome of the shift in US tactics initiated by Trump in October of last year, when he provided a green light for a Turkish invasion of northeast Syria for the purpose of driving Washington's erstwhile Kurdish allies from the border. At the time, Trump spouted a great deal of demagoguery about ending Washington's "forever wars" and pulling all US troops out of Syria.

Facing a firestorm of criticism from within the US military and intelligence apparatus, Trump backed down, announcing that he would retain a US force in Syria to “keep the oil.”

At the time he stated, “We’ll work something out with the Kurds so that they have some money, so that they have some cash flow. Maybe we’ll get one of our big oil companies to go in and do it properly.”

The announcement of the oil deal provoked bitter criticism from the Syrian government. Syria’s Ambassador to the United Nations Bashar Ja’afari spoke before the Security Council last week, denouncing Washington for “stealing Syrian oil and depriving the Syrian state and Syrian people of the basic revenues necessary to improve the humanitarian situation, provide for livelihood needs and reconstruction.” He also charged both the US and the European Union with enforcing a sanctions regime that serves to “prevent the Syrians from obtaining their basic needs of food, medicine and medical equipment, especially in light of the spread of the corona pandemic and its dire effects.”

The principal allies of the Damascus government of President Bashar al-Assad, Iran and Russia, also denounced the US oil deal as a violation of Syria’s national sovereignty. Also condemning the agreement was the government of Turkey, which is continuing its own occupation and de facto annexation of Syrian territory.

The government of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan issued a statement hypocritically denouncing Washington for “disregarding international law, violating territorial integrity, unity and sovereignty of Syria,” while going on to charge that the oil deal amounted to “financing terrorism.” Ankara regards the Syrian Kurdish YPG as a branch of the PKK (Kurdistan Workers’ Party) Kurdish separatist movement inside Turkey, which is designated by both the US and Turkey as a “terrorist” organization. The Erdogan government regards the consolidation of any Kurdish-controlled entity near its border with Syria as a threat to Turkish national security.

The oil deal has ratcheted up dangerous tensions in northeastern Syria, where US, Russian, Turkish, Syrian government and Kurdish YPG forces, along with remnants of the Islamic State (ISIS) militia, are all operating in close proximity.

Last week, on the same day, August 18, a US base near Syria’s Conoco oil field in Deir ez-Zor—now under the control of the American military and its Kurdish proxies—came under rocket attack for the first time, and a Russian major general was killed by an improvised explosive device.

The Pentagon blamed the rocket attack on Iran and Iranian-aligned militias, while the killing of the senior Russian officer was initially blamed on ISIS. There is no proof that either is the case, and there is reportedly substantial speculation that the killing of the Russian general may have been the work of Washington and its Kurdish proxies.

A day earlier, on August 17, a US convoy engaged in a firefight with Syrian government forces at a checkpoint in al-Hasakah, leaving one Syrian soldier dead and two others wounded. US and Syrian accounts of the incident were at odds, with the Pentagon claiming that the convoy came under attack from unknown elements after passing through the checkpoint, and the Syrian government reporting that the shooting began when the Syrians tried to stop the convoy. Apache helicopters were escorting the US armored vehicles.

US military officials have reported that encounters between US and Russian soldiers are virtually a daily occurrence. For its part, Russia has built up its forces in the region, strengthening its base at the Qamishli airport on the Turkish border and bringing in attack helicopters. Meanwhile, Russia has deployed some two dozen tanks and armored vehicles to the village of Mazloun, little more than a mile from a US base.

US imperialism has been at war in Syria since launching a regime change operation in 2011, using CIA-backed Islamist militias as its proxies in a bid to topple the Assad government and impose a US puppet government in Damascus. It subsequently launched a direct military intervention in Syria as well as Iraq on the pretext of combating ISIS, an offshoot of the very Islamist militias that it had previously armed and funded. The toll of these interventions numbers in the hundreds of thousands of dead and millions of displaced.

Now the US remains in Syria for the purpose of controlling and exploiting the country's oil, as part of a broader military campaign to impose a neo-colonial US hegemony in the Middle East at the expense of Iran, and the countries the Pentagon defines as "great power" rivals, China and Russia.

These aims, combined with the profound political instability driven by the economic and social crisis within the United States itself, pose a growing danger that the heightened military frictions in Syria can metastasize into a broader war, drawing in regional and major powers alike.

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