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US and Russian military units clash in Syria

In an incident that poses the stark danger of an escalating confrontation between the world's two major nuclear powers, the Pentagon has reported that four US troops were injured in a collision between their armored vehicle and a Russian patrol in Syria this week.

Moscow and Washington have traded charges, each blaming the other for the incident, which unfolded on Tuesday morning outside of the Syrian town of Al-Malikiyah located near Syria's northeastern triple border with Turkey and Iraq.



US and Russian armored vehicles in Syria. [Credit: Russian MoD]

US National Security Council spokesman John Ulliot issued a statement Thursday charging that a Russian armored vehicle had “struck” a US Mine-Resistant Ambush Protected (MRAP) vehicle. Accusing Russian forces of having committed “unsafe and

unprofessional actions” in violation of “de-confliction protocols” worked out between Washington and Moscow in December 2019, Ulyot added threateningly that “US forces always retain the inherent right and obligation to defend themselves from hostile acts.”

The Pentagon reported that four American soldiers had suffered “mild concussion-like” symptoms as a result of the collision.

For its part, the Russian military charged that the incident was the fault of the US military, the outcome of an apparent provocation. A Russian Defense Ministry statement released following a telephone conversation between the chief of the Russian military’s General Staff, Gen. Valery Gerasimov, and his US counterpart, Gen. Mark Milley, said that the incident stemmed from “an attempt to block the Russian patrol.” It added that the patrol and its route had been cleared beforehand between the two sides.

Videos of the incident taken from a Russian armored vehicle appears to show the US vehicles attempting to intercept the column as it moved across an open field. The Russian convoy was accompanied by an MI-8 attack helicopter, which hovered over the American armored vehicles.

The incident is by no means the first posing the threat of a direct confrontation between US and Russian troops in northeastern Syria. Last month, Air Force Maj. Gen. Kenneth Ekman, the deputy commander of US forces in Iraq and Syria, told reporters at the Pentagon that American and Russian forces were coming into contact almost “every day.” He acknowledged that Moscow and Washington are pursuing their own interests in the country, and “those interests aren’t quite aligned.”

Indeed, Washington has been involved in military operations inside Syria since 2011, when the CIA armed and funded Islamist militias as a proxy ground force in a war for regime change aimed at toppling the government of President Bashar al-Assad and installing a pliant American puppet in Damascus. Beginning in 2014, it launched a direct US military intervention in Syria—using the Kurdish YPG militia as a proxy ground force—under the pretext of combatting the Islamic State (ISIS), a mutation of the very same Islamist militias that it had previously supported. For its part, Russia began providing key strategic air support in defense of the Assad government against ISIS and US-backed Al Qaeda-linked militias in 2015.

Tensions and the threat of direct confrontation have only escalated since US President Donald Trump announced that he was withdrawing US forces from Syria and greenlighted

a Turkish invasion in October 2019 aimed at driving Washington's erstwhile Kurdish allies from the Syrian-Kurdish border.

Faced with a firestorm of opposition from within the US military and intelligence apparatus to a total pullout, Trump shifted to what he proclaimed was a policy to "keep the oil," with US troops redeployed to the oil producing areas of the northern Syrian governorates of Deir ez-Zor and Al-Hasakah.

Trump reiterated this policy in a barely coherent statement at the White House last week, when he declared, "As you know, in Syria we're down to almost nothing, except we kept the oil... we left, but we kept the oil."

At the end of last month, it was revealed that the Trump administration has backed a deal ostensibly struck between a newly created US oil company, Delta Crescent Energy LLC, and the Pentagon's Kurdish proxies. The company, headed by a right-wing Republican former ambassador and an ex-Delta Force officer and Fox News contributor, is supposed to begin exploiting and selling Syria's oil in direct violation of the Geneva Conventions, which bars occupying powers from exploiting the resources of the occupied for their own benefit.

This is only the latest war crime committed by US imperialism in Syria since it launched its regime change operation, which has claimed the lives of hundreds of thousands and turned millions into refugees. It is maintaining a regime of unilateral sanctions tantamount to a state of war, condemning the vast majority of Syria's population to poverty and sabotaging the response to the spreading coronavirus pandemic.

With the move to begin directly exploiting Syria's oil, while actively denying access to the Syrian government, which desperately needs the resources for reconstruction, the Pentagon appears to have escalated its presence in the war-torn country, sending convoys across the border from Iraq with weaponry and heavy equipment.

Russia has also accused Washington and its Kurdish allies of reanimating the remnants of ISIS in order to turn them against the Syrian government and its allies, including Iran and Russia.

The Russian news agency Sputnik quoted an unnamed spokesman for Russian forces in Syria who said that there has been a recent outbreak of terrorist attacks, which Moscow attributes to former captured ISIS fighters who have been released by Washington's Kurdish proxies under an "amnesty program."

The armed actions of these elements “benefit the United States,” the spokesman said, serving to both “disrupt the process of socio-economic reconstruction of Syria” and “justify [US] presence in the country’s east.” It should be added that this resurgence of terror attacks provides a counterweight to the growth of popular opposition among Arab tribes in the northeast to the domination of US force and their Kurdish proxies.

Russian military investigative units are apparently focusing on this connection between the Pentagon and former ISIS fighters in their investigation of the August 18 killing of Russian Maj. Gen. Vyacheslav Gladkikh, who lost his life to an improvised explosive device while passing near a US-controlled Syrian oil field.

Amid the mounting and dangerous US-Russian tensions, Trump’s ostensible political opposition in the Democratic Party—including the phalanx of former US military and intelligence operatives who have rallied behind its presidential candidate Joe Biden—is attacking his administration from the right, accusing it of being insufficiently aggressive against Russian forces in Syria.

Senator Tammy Duckworth, who used her speech to the Democratic convention last week to brand Trump the “coward-in-chief,” demanded that the US president “speak out against Vladimir Putin and demand answers as to why his troops are harassing and injuring our troops in Syria.”

Senator Steny Hoyer, the Democratic House Majority Leader, issued a statement declaring that “The news today of an encounter between U.S. and Russian forces in Syria underscore the dangers of this Administration’s lack of a strategy to protect our troops, support our allies, and promote an end to the conflict there that secures our interests ... We must not allow Russia to secure effective control over Syria and threaten the stability of that part of the world.”

Brett McGurk, the former Special Presidential Envoy for Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS, who has become a foreign policy surrogate for Biden, tweeted on Wednesday, “Russian military forces are ramming and injuring US troops in Syria. No competent [commander in chief] would leave our troops in this position.”

The threat of an eruption of US militarism, not only in Syria, but in Eastern Europe, the South China Sea, the Persian Gulf and elsewhere, is growing steadily, not only unhindered but inflamed by the global coronavirus pandemic. Any one of these hot spots can provide the spark for a global conflagration.

The hysterical response of the Democrats to the collision between US and Russian armored vehicles in northeastern Syria makes it clear that the advent of a Biden administration will only intensify this threat.

The struggle against a new world war, together with the fight against the pandemic, the defense of jobs and social rights and defeating the threat of dictatorship, cannot be advanced one inch by means of an electoral strategy in support of Biden and the Democrats. Rather, it requires a strategy based on the class struggle and guided by a revolutionary socialist and internationalist program.

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