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Tillerson declares US-Turkey relations in “crisis”

US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson unveiled a tentative agreement with his Turkish counterpart Mevlut Kavusoglu Friday after a bilateral meeting in Ankara aimed at patching up sharp differences. The meeting was part of a Middle East tour by Tillerson, who made clear that the US is in the advanced stages of preparing a major escalation of military conflict in the region.

A proposed joint mechanism for resolving disputes between the two countries was thin on detail, with neither Tillerson nor Kavusoglu providing information on precisely how it would work. Notwithstanding Tillerson’s depiction of the US-Turkey partnership as “a time-tested alliance built on common interests and mutual respect,” Ankara and Washington have increasingly been at odds over recent months and it is extremely doubtful that this latest announcement will change things.

As Tillerson admitted during the press conference, Washington’s relationship with Ankara had reached “a bit of a crisis point.” Kavusoglu was even blunter. He blamed the US for breaking promises and told assembled reporters that the two countries must decide whether “to mend fences or go in a different direction.”

Turkey remains infuriated by Washington’s reliance in Syria on the Kurdish People’s Protection Units (YPG), which Ankara considers a terrorist organisation connected to the outlawed Kurdish Workers Party (PKK) in Turkey. The Turkish military has waged a bloody crackdown on the PKK since the 1980s.

The US has at least 2,000 special forces in Syria supporting the Syrian Democratic Forces, which the YPG dominates, and US warplanes provide the Kurdish militia with air support.

Though Washington's official pretext for backing the YPG is that it is an ally in the struggle against ISIS, the US is in reality pushing for regime change in Damascus so as to sideline its rivals in the region, above all Iran and Russia.

Last month, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan ordered Turkish troops and aligned Syrian militias across the border to remove YPG fighters in Afrin and prevent the establishment of a Kurdish zone of control on Ankara's southern border.

Kavusoglu referred to the offensive at the joint press conference, accusing Washington of reneging on its pledge to remove Kurdish fighters from the city of Manbij and leave Turkey in control of the area west of the Euphrates River. Erdogan has repeatedly threatened that Turkish troops will extend their intervention eastward to Manbij, which could result in a direct clash with US special forces based there in support of the YPG.

A top US military officer in Manbij declared on February 7 that US troops would stay in the town and resist a Turkish army attack on YPG forces. In response, Erdogan blustered: "Those who say 'we will respond aggressively if you hit us' have never experienced an Ottoman slap."

Ankara was Tillerson's last stop on a regional tour, which he used to further escalate tensions with Iran. His most aggressive thrust against Tehran came during his stop in Lebanon. He ominously raised the prospect of Washington deliberately blowing apart the complex power-sharing arrangement in Beirut, both to support the aggressive posture of its chief Middle East ally, Israel, and to push back Iranian influence. Tillerson's visit took place just five days after Tel Aviv launched its largest air strikes in Syria for over 30 years, targeting a number of Iranian installations.

"It is impossible to talk about stability, sovereignty and security in Lebanon without addressing Hezbollah," Tillerson told a joint press conference with Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri, whose coalition government includes parties backed by the Shia-based group. "The US has considered Hezbollah a terrorist organisation for more than two decades now ... It is unacceptable for a militia like Hezbollah to operate outside the authority of the Lebanese government. The only legitimate defender of the Lebanese state is the Lebanese armed forces."

US imperialism's regime-change operations in neighboring Syria, where Washington has been seeking for the past seven years to topple Bashar al-Assad, has been opposed by forces from Iran and Hezbollah, which have fought on the side of the Damascus regime. With the defeat of Washington's Islamist proxies and the strengthening of Assad's control over large parts of the country, the US military responded by dramatically intensifying its

intervention. Washington's aim is to thwart the establishment of an Iranian-controlled land corridor from Tehran through Syria to Lebanon, and prevent Assad from gaining access to critical oil and energy resources in the country's east.

Over the past two weeks, the US has ratcheted up its intervention. On February 7, American aircraft attacked a column of pro-Assad forces advancing on Islamist rebel-held positions in Deir Ezzor, claiming around 100 lives. Reports strongly suggest that Russian personnel were among the dead.

Tillerson's provocative remarks Thursday demonstrate that Washington is not only prepared to perpetuate the Syrian bloodbath to block Iranian influence in the region, but also throw other countries across the Middle East into turmoil in pursuit of its predatory interests. Lebanon, which was torn apart by more than a decade of civil war in the 1980s and 1990s, remains deeply divided along ethnic and religious lines and could rapidly descend into chaos were Hariri's fragile power-sharing government to collapse.

Moreover, Tillerson's explicit denunciation of Hezbollah as a threat to "sovereignty" and "security" can only have been interpreted in Israel as a green light for Tel Aviv's preparations for a northern war in Lebanon against Hezbollah.

Demonstrating that Tillerson's threat to Hezbollah and Iran was more than a verbal warning, *al-Monitor* reported that the Pentagon will request an additional \$1.8 billion to purchase precision-guided bombs and other high-powered weaponry for use in the conflict in Syria and Iraq. This would increase the total allocation for the war by 15 percent in 2019 to over \$15 billion. The \$1.8 billion hike amounts to 20 percent more than the entire Pentagon budget for arms in the Middle East during 2017.

The fact that the arms purchased by this spending increase will be directed against Assad's forces, and his Iranian and Hezbollah allies, was underscored by the inclusion of more than \$31 million for anti-tank missiles. ISIS and the remaining Al Qaeda affiliates in Syria have no tanks.

Tillerson's statements in Beirut and the hike in Pentagon arms spending are of a piece with the Trump administration's broader offensive throughout the region to confront Iran, and consolidate unchallenged US dominance over the energy-rich and strategically significant Middle East against its chief rivals, Russia and China.

Russia, Turkey and Iran are currently in a tacit alliance that has sidelined the US in much of the diplomatic negotiations over Syria's future but they have distinct and not necessarily compatible interests in the region. Russia, for example, made no issue of the

Israeli air strikes that targeted Iranian infrastructure in Syria last week. Tillerson and other senior figures in the Trump administration will have undoubtedly taken note of this.

Moscow has also given its approval to Turkey's push into northern Syria, provided that the operation remains within certain limits and does not confront Assad's forces. The Putin regime no doubt hopes to exploit the divisions between the NATO allies to strengthen its hand in Syria against the US.

Nevertheless, the possibility of a US-Turkish rapprochement is not excluded, especially as the Trump administration moves to rapidly deepen its confrontation with Iran, not just in Syria, but across the Middle East.

Speaking to journalists in Amman on February 13, Tillerson said: "Turkey is still an important NATO ally of the United States ... We need to find a way to continue to work in the same direction." At a conference in Kuwait City the day before, he reiterated that the US was "keenly aware of the legitimate security concerns of Turkey, our coalition partner" and stands "by our NATO ally in its counterterrorism efforts."

Before Tillerson's arrival in Ankara, Defense Secretary James Mattis held talks with his Turkish counterpart Nurettin Canikli at NATO headquarters in Brussels. Mattis stated that the US and Turkey were "finding common ground" and called for a renewed focus on the campaign to defeat ISIS.

Canikli indicated a potential compromise with the US, claiming that Mattis had told him the US could separate the YPG from the PKK, and even try to make the former "fight the PKK."

However, the various imperialist and regional powers ultimately line up, the ground is being prepared for a regional bloodbath that could rapidly escalate into a direct clash between the world's major powers. This can be prevented only through the building of a socialist and international anti-war movement in the working class capable of connecting the struggle against war with the fight against its source—the capitalist system.