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European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

20 March 2018

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21.03.2018

Threat of US attack on Syria grows amid fall of “rebel” stronghold

The Syrian government of President Bashar al-Assad is reportedly taking measures to prepare for a US military strike against the capital of Damascus.

Washington has escalated its threats of a direct military attack as the Syrian army, backed by Russian air power, has made decisive advances in its siege of the Damascus suburb of eastern Ghouta, one of the last strongholds of the Western-backed Islamist “rebels.”

In the past few days, tens of thousands of civilians have streamed out of the enclave, which has been controlled by the successor to the Syrian Al Qaeda affiliate, the Al Nusra Front, and its allies. Syrian government forces have recovered 80 percent of the area, dividing what remains into three isolated pockets, each of which is surrounded.

The imminent fall of eastern Ghouta is unfolding parallel to the overrunning of the Kurdish enclave of Afrin in northwestern Syria by the Turkish army and its proxy ground troops, the so-called Free Syrian Army, which is made up in large part of ISIS and Al Nusra Front fighters. The Turkish victory has sent some quarter of a million people fleeing for their lives.

The fall of eastern Ghouta to the Assad government represents a milestone in the failure of the Western-backed and CIA-orchestrated war for regime change initiated by the US and its allies in Syria seven years ago, utilizing Al Qaeda-linked militias as their proxy ground forces. The “rebel”-held territory has been utilized to launch mortar and rocket attacks on the Syrian capital, as well as to organize car bombings and other acts of terrorism.

With the retaking of the area by the government, Washington fears a loss of leverage in its attempt to salvage its regime-change operation by pressuring for the ouster of Assad as part of an internationally brokered political settlement of the Syrian conflict.

This is what lies behind the renewed campaign over unsubstantiated allegations of Syrian government forces using chlorine gas bombs in their attack on eastern Ghouta. While Damascus, which carried out the complete destruction of its chemical weapons stockpiles under international supervision, has denied any such attack, leading figures in the Trump administration have issued direct threats of American military retaliation, directed not only against Syria, but its principal military allies, Russia and Iran, as well.

Thus, last Thursday, President Donald Trump's National Security Advisor, Gen. H. R. McMaster, delivered a speech at the Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C., insisting, "All civilized nations must hold Iran and Russia accountable for their role in enabling atrocities and perpetuating human suffering in Syria." McMaster added, "Assad should not have impunity for his crimes, and neither should his sponsors."

Similarly, the US ambassador to the United Nations, Nikki Haley, issued a warning last week to "the outlaw Syrian regime," that Washington "remains prepared to act if we must." Referring to last year's US cruise missile attack on a Syrian airfield, she added: "It is not a path we prefer. But it is a path we have demonstrated we will take, and we are prepared to take again."

The hypocrisy of the American charges and humanitarian pretensions is shameless, given the massive civilian casualties inflicted by the US military's sieges of Raqqa in Syria and Mosul in Iraq, where relentless air strikes and artillery bombardments inflicted tens of thousands of civilian casualties and reduced entire cities to rubble.

And, while condemning and threatening military action against the Syrian government and its allies, Washington's reaction to the atrocities carried out in Afrin by Turkey—which like the US has sent troops into Syria illegally, without the permission of the country's government or any international authorization—has been decidedly muted, with the State Department merely issuing statements of "serious concern."

The sentiment within sections of the US military and intelligence apparatus for an escalation of the intervention against the Assad government—and its ally Russia—found expression in a column published Monday by the *Washington Post* headlined, "Will Trump try to stop Assad's chemical weapons use?"

Written by the newspaper's "global opinion" columnist Josh Rogin, the column warns that "America's credibility is on the line" and that "If nothing happens before Eastern Ghouta

falls, Haley and McMaster's bluff will have been called. That spells disaster for upcoming diplomatic standoffs with Assad, Russia and Iran in other parts of Syria.”

These standoffs are not merely “diplomatic,” as was made clear in last month's US strike on a pro-government force that claimed the lives of a number of Russian military contractors near strategic oil and gas fields in the eastern province of Deir Ezzor. The American military action was in furtherance of Washington's aim of carving out a US-controlled zone east of the Euphrates River along Syria's borders with Turkey and Iraq. This area, covering nearly a third of Syria's territory, is to be controlled by thousands of US troops along with their main proxy force, the so-called Syrian Democratic Forces, which consists largely of the Syrian Kurdish YPG militia.

The latest US threats have been taken with deadly seriousness by Moscow. The chief of the Russian military's general staff, Gen. Valery Gerasimov, warned that Washington and its proxy Islamist militias were preparing to stage a fake chemical weapons attack to use as a pretext for a US military strike. He warned that any threat to the lives of Russian troops in Syria would be answered with “retaliatory measures both over the missiles and carriers that will use them.”

Asharq al-Awsat, the London-based “pan-Arab” newspaper controlled by the Saudi regime, published a report citing Western diplomats as saying that the Assad government was taking measures in anticipation of an imminent US attack. It claimed that Russian military personnel had been deployed at “critical locations” in Damascus in an attempt to deter airstrikes, and that the United Nations had moved some of its staff from areas it feared could be targeted.

Amid the threats of a confrontation in Syria between the world's two major nuclear powers, the overrunning of Afrin by the Turkish military and its allied Syrian Islamist militia has increased the possibility of an unprecedented military clash between two ostensible NATO allies, Turkey and the US.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan gloated Monday over the fall of the city of Afrin to Turkish forces the day before, declaring that Kurdish fighters had “fled with their tails between their legs.”

The city was largely abandoned as well by its civilian population, which feared atrocities at the hands of the Turkish military and its allied Al Qaeda-linked militias. These forces systematically looted businesses and homes in the city after conquering it, as well as knocking down a statue in the city center of the ancient mythical figure Kaveh, the blacksmith, who is seen as a symbol of Kurdish struggle against oppression.

The events, which have included the flight of some 250,000 people into the countryside without food or refuge, appear to presage a systematic ethnic-cleansing operation, in which Kurds will be permanently driven from their homes and replaced with Syrian Sunni Arab refugees living in Turkey.

Turkey's military invasion, dubbed "Operation Olive Branch" and begun two months ago, is aimed at preventing the establishment of a Syrian-Kurdish autonomous zone on Turkey's southern border. The action was provoked by Washington's announcement that it intended to continue its occupation of Syrian territory indefinitely and to organize its YPG-dominated proxy forces into a 30,000-strong "border security force."

The Turkish government views the YPG as an extension of the Turkish Kurdish PKK, against which it has waged a more than three-decades-long counterinsurgency operation. Both Washington and Ankara have formally branded the PKK a "terrorist" organization.

Speaking to an audience of judges and prosecutors in Ankara on Sunday, Erdogan declared that while the capture of Afrin was "an important stage" of the Turkish operation in Syria, "We will continue this process until we have entirely abolished the corridor through Manbij, Ayn al-Arab, Tel-Abyad, Ras al-Ayn and Qamishli."

Manbij is a city in Syria's Aleppo province west of the Euphrates River, which is in the hands of both the YPG and US Special Forces troops. The other towns mentioned by Erdogan are located east of the Euphrates, where the Pentagon is attempting to carve out a zone of US control, using the Syrian Kurdish militia as its proxy force. An advance on any of these areas poses a direct confrontation between American and Turkish troops.