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By Bill Van Auken
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Trump's Syrian withdrawal order sparks political firestorm in Washington

An apparent order by US President Donald Trump for the withdrawal of all 2,000 US troops deployed in Syria over the next 60 to 100 days has sparked consternation and sharp opposition from the Pentagon, top Democrats and Republicans on Capitol Hill as well as Washington's NATO allies.

The withdrawal order, which was leaked to the media by senior officials within the administration and the military, was given what apparently constituted a confirmation by a brief tweet from Trump Wednesday declaring, "We have defeated ISIS in Syria, my only reason for being there during the Trump Presidency."

This was followed later in the day by a statement from White House spokeswoman Sarah Sanders, declaring "We have started returning United States troops home as we transition to the next phase of this campaign," adding, "The United States and our allies stand ready to re-engage at all levels to defend American interests whenever necessary."

The White House announcement was followed by yet another statement from the Pentagon, whose spokeswoman Dana White flatly contradicted the US president, declaring that "the coalition has liberated ISIS-held territory, but the campaign against ISIS is not over." ISIS is an acronym for the Islamic State terror group.

"We will continue working with our partners and allies to defeat ISIS wherever it operates," she said, giving no details as to a timeline, noting "force protection and operational security reasons."

Meanwhile, Reuters quoted an unnamed US official as stating Wednesday that all US State Department personnel operating inside Syria were being evacuated from the country within 24 hours.

The official also said that the withdrawal plans flowed directly from an agreement reached between Trump and Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan during a telephone conversation last Friday. "Everything that has followed is implementing the agreement that was made in that call," the official said.

The call was reportedly made to discuss Turkey's concerns over the presence of the Syrian Kurdish separatist YPG militia near the Syrian-Turkish border. The YPG is the main element of the Syrian Democratic Forces, the proxy ground force that the US has backed in northeastern Syria. Erdogan, whose government views the YPG as an extension of the Turkish Kurdish separatist PKK, against which Ankara has waged a decades-long counterinsurgency campaign, has repeatedly threatened that a Turkish intervention against the YPG is imminent. Turkish forces, including armor, have reportedly been deployed to the border.

While Washington is no doubt anxious to avoid a potential military confrontation with Turkey, a member of the NATO alliance, the Trump White House has taken other measures aimed at restoring US-Turkish relations, which have been strained since the abortive July 2016 military coup, which enjoyed covert backing from Washington.

Just hours before the withdrawal announcement, the State Department informed Congress of a proposed $3.5 billion dollar deal to sell Turkey Patriot anti-ballistic missile systems, manufactured by Raytheon. Ankara had previously signaled its intention to buy S-400 surface-to-air missile systems from Russia. Such a purchase would have precluded Turkey's purchase of US F-35 warplanes, and would have brought the country's relations with NATO to a breaking point.

The announced withdrawal of US troops may signal a green light to the Erdogan government to launch its threatened invasion of eastern Syria and drive Kurdish forces from the border. In the absence of US troops, the YPG may seek to reach an accommodation with Damascus, restoring control of the region to the Syrian government of President Bashar al-Assad.

The illegal US occupation of Syria, begun under the Obama administration in October 2015 without authorization from either the United Nations or the Syrian government, was expanded under Trump, with at least 2,000 US troops deployed in northeastern Syria as well as special forces near the borders with Iraq and Jordan in the south.

The launching of the so-called war on ISIS in Syria signaled a shift from the failed US strategy of "regime change" based upon CIA support for Al Qaeda-linked militias in a bloody war to bring down the Assad government. US troops on the ground in Syria coordinated a savage campaign of airstrikes and bombardments that reduced the city of Raqqa and other towns controlled by ISIS to rubble.

While during the presidential campaign of 2016 Trump had vowed to withdraw US troops from Syria, Pentagon, intelligence and other national security officials had dissuaded him against acting on the promise.

Figures like Defense Secretary James "Mad Dog" Mattis, National Security Advisor John Bolton and chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Joseph Dunford have reiterated—including just weeks ago—a strategy based on an open-ended US military presence in Syria aimed at rolling back both Iranian and Russian influence and ultimately securing Washington's original aim of overthrowing Assad and imposing a more pliant puppet regime in Damascus.

For his part, Dunford stated earlier this month that the US military was only one-fifth of the way towards its goal of training and arming a force of 35,000 to 40,000 proxy troops in northeastern Syria to provide "security" over what would effectively be a US protectorate carved out of the Middle Eastern country.

In occupying northeastern Syria, the US military and its proxies have seized control over roughly a third of the country, including, most crucially, Syria's oil and natural gas fields as well as its eastern border with Iraq. By maintaining this domination, Washington's aim was to preclude any reunification and reconstruction of the war-ravaged country and continue the murderous conflict until the US achieved its strategic aims.

The announcement of the planned withdrawal drew sharp criticism from leading Republicans in Congress, who appeared to have been blindsided by the shift in policy.

Senator Lindsey Graham described the withdrawal as "a huge Obama-like mistake," invoking previous Republican criticisms of Obama for withdrawing US troops from Iraq in 2011.

"The decision to pull out of Syria was made despite overwhelming military advice against it," Republican Senator Marco Rubio tweeted. "It is a major blunder. It [sic] it isn't reversed it will haunt this administration & America for years to come."

Also apparently caught unawares by the apparent shift in US policy in Syria was Washington's closest NATO ally. British Defense Minister Tobias Ellwood issued a statement declaring that he "strongly disagreed" with Trump's decision. "It [ISIS] has

morphed into other forms of extremism and the threat is very much alive," he said in a tweet.

Among those who did receive an advance warning was Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. "The US administration has told me that it was the president's intention to pull out their troops from Syria. They clarified that they have other ways to wield their influence in that arena," he told the Israeli daily *Haaretz* .

The main instrument of US "influence" has been devastating US airstrikes, which have been launched from bases in Qatar and elsewhere in the Middle East. Meanwhile, the US maintains a force of at least 5,000 troops across the border in Iraq, capable of delivering artillery fire into eastern Syria.

The announced withdrawal of US troops from Syria will undoubtedly intensify the internecine conflicts within the US ruling establishment and state, while at the same time increasing tensions within the Middle East. It is not a harbinger of any deescalation of the armed conflicts in the region. With or without "boots on the ground" in Syria, Washington's military aggression against Iran and Russia will only intensify.