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What's behind U.S. troop withdrawals announced for Syria and Afghanistan?

The announced withdrawal of the remaining 2,000 U.S. troops from Syria and a partial withdrawal from Afghanistan does not mean an end to the Pentagon's aggressive militarism and endless U.S. wars – in Syria, in Afghanistan, in the region or globally.

The U.S. military has 170,000 troops stationed outside the U.S. in 150 countries, in more than 800 overseas bases. Nearly 40,000 are assigned to classified missions in locations that Washington refuses to even disclose. Because the Pentagon has continually renamed and shuffled its forces in the Middle East, it's impossible to know how many troops are on standby and how many are on rotation.

But this surprise “troop withdrawal” announcement — regardless of its limitations, regardless of U.S. military strength — exposes the increasingly untenable U.S. imperialist global position and the fraying condition of all of its historic alliances.

The announcement has opened a chasm within U.S. ruling circles. Resignations from the Trump administration and ensuing denunciations are calling the attention of the masses to the heated conflict.

The top echelons of the Democratic Party and corporate media “talking heads” are in an uproar of opposition. They are attacking Trump for “caving in” to Iran and Russia and allegedly endangering national security — by which they mean he is harming U.S. imperialist interests.

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Their charges only confirm that both the racist Trump and his ruling-class opponents are imperialist war criminals and enemies of the people of the world. The pro-militarist criticisms of Trump are themselves reactionary.

A progressive working-class analysis

Trump's abrupt announcement — with no known discussion with policy makers, without any consultation with co-conspirators in the NATO war alliance — is indeed a departure from the U.S. hegemonic strategy of the past 75 years.

That departure is behind “Mad Dog” Mattis's resignation as Trump's Secretary of Defense. Mattis, lauded as the “grownup” in the Trump cabinet, has bulwarked relations with U.S. allies using his Pentagon position. His nickname comes from his infamous statement about U.S. war in Afghanistan: “It's fun to shoot some people. You know, it's a hell of a hoot.” (New York Times, Feb. 4, 2005) Mattis is also notorious as the U.S. commander responsible for the deaths of hundreds of Iraqi civilians in Fallujah in 2004.

Mattis' resignation reflects how the announced withdrawal is a dramatic break with countries that have collaborated with the U.S. in Syria, such as France, Germany, Belgium and Britain. All of them are former colonial powers that destroyed Indigenous cultures and looted the Americas, Africa and Asia.

The rulers of these countries were all determined to re-colonize the Arab world after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Other willing partners in imperialist crime were Saudi Arabia and Israel. They were willing to commit to war on Syria based on the assumption they would share in the looting of the country. Their official threadbare cover was that they were fighting a “war on terror.”

Trump surprised them with this major U.S. policy shift in the region, which increases imperialist instability.

U.S. tries to exploit national differences

According to numerous media reports, Trump made his decision based on a long phone call with Turkish President Erdogan. Erdogan has threatened to launch a military operation against U.S.-backed Kurdish YPG forces in northeast Syria, where U.S. troops are based. Erdogan made it clear that the U.S. cannot have Turkey as an ally and also have a Kurdish U.S.-proxy statelet.

This is an unsolvable dilemma for the U.S. imperialists, whose corporate rulers have not been able to destabilize Syria and carry out “regime change.” Washington's open demand from day one was the resignation of President Bashar Assad and all existing government officials. It hasn't happened.

The U.S. goal was the appointment of a Syrian government, subservient to Western interests, which would establish an electoral process under the control and vetting of the major imperialist powers. This is the meaning of the vague term “regime change.”

On Washington’s drawing board, it looked like an easy plan.

To this end, the U.S. political-military establishment attempted to exploit every possible difference, based on the many religious, ethnic and national groups within Syria, including the Kurdish forces. The entire U.S. and Western effort was to carve Syria into pieces, all in the name of “defending” oppressed nationalities and “democracy.”

This effort to weaponize sectarian differences was implemented with the influence of the reactionary Saudi regime. Foreign-funded mercenary death squads operated openly in Syria. Supplies were air-dropped in massive quantities.

The outside imperialist and Saudi efforts sought to mobilize reactionary elements in the majority Sunni Arab population against Christians, Alawis, Druzes, Shi’a, Yazidis, Armenians, Kurdish, Turkmen and numerous smaller national, ethnic and religious groupings and recent refugees. Among Syria’s 23 million population (counting those who have recently left the country) are more than a half million Palestinian refugees and 1.5 million Iraqi refugees.

The U.S. spent eight years orchestrating participation of Western imperialist powers and Gulf monarchies in its imperialist endeavor. Despite four years of bombing that decimated the country’s infrastructure, the introduction of tens of thousands of heavily armed and well-funded mercenaries, intense international political pressure, and strangling economic sanctions, Syria still remains unconquered.

Solidarity combats sectarian division in Syria

Syria resisted the attempted takeover on two fronts. Of course, the government organized a defensive military struggle. But the most important weapon was the constant reliance on the fact that Syria is a mosaic of many religious, ethnic and national groupings that are all able to coexist through a secular state.

The positive face of the struggle to maintain national independence was visible in every picture, every delegation, every mobilization and every mass rally. These stressed the rich cultural diversity and the unity of the whole people.

Syria also invited Hezbollah’s well-organized military units from Lebanon, and then Iranian and Russian military assistance, to aid in defense against this imperialist attack, part of an expanding regional conflict.

Almost all the tens of thousands of reactionary foreign mercenaries funded and trained by the U.S., Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates have now been defeated, along with the fanatical ISIS forces who held large areas of Syria. Though each armed group was capable of massive destruction, the different mercenary militias were divided and competed with each other, based on who was sponsoring them.

National pride in Syria's accomplishments and defense of Syria's sovereignty succeeded in keeping the country intact.

Diminishing U.S. ability to dominate globe

The U.S. has been dealt a different but similar failure in Afghanistan. Despite an open and direct U.S. invasion of the country in 2001 and years of occupation, with the rotation of a million troops, Washington's brutal "pacification" program in Afghanistan has failed. Corruption may be endemic in an occupation, but so is resistance. Today, not one base of occupation or one national road in the country is secure.

The Afghanistan war is now the longest in U.S. history, with no end in sight and no prospect of establishing a stable puppet regime.

An additional crisis for U.S. imperialism is mounting international opposition to the civilian casualties and starvation in Yemen. Even with U.S.-supplied high-tech arms and a U.S. naval blockade, its proxy, Saudi Arabia, has not succeeded in crushing resistance in Yemen.

Meanwhile, against all possible odds, the Palestinian resistance continues against U.S.-proxy Israel. This resistance is a 21st-century reality that even the latest generation of U.S.-provided weapons cannot seem to reverse.

Despite the confident, aggressive tone of Trump's sudden announcement, it nevertheless reflects a diminishing U.S. capacity to dominate the world — regardless of who is in the Oval Office. The current media and political brouhaha is about where to lay the blame for this diminished capacity, and how to reverse the slide of U.S. power.

Media speculation is that Trump, faced with a wall of political opposition for his racist, sexist and anti-migrant actions, is cynically trying to shore up his own base. Though Trump's base is racist and right-wing, it sees no interest for itself in another U.S. war — just like every other sector of the U.S. masses.

Trump actually made campaign promises to withdraw U.S. troops from Syria and end U.S. involvement in Afghanistan — but no one in U.S. ruling circles expected him to follow through on those promises.

Why Syria is on U.S. hit list

Syria has been targeted by the U.S. for decades based on its militant Arab nationalism, its support of the Palestinian struggle, its opposition to the Israeli state — which is an imperialist beachhead in the region — and its nationalized oil and state-regulated economy.

Before being placed on the U.S. hit list, Syria had a relatively high standard of living and rate of development in the region.

The U.S. effort to destroy Syria moved into high gear when President George W. Bush included Syria in his 2002 “Axis of Evil” list of countries slated for overthrow. In 2013, Washington imposed economic sanctions on Syria that were intentionally dislocating. Washington charged Syria with not making the “right decisions” at the time of the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq.

Wikileaks documents exposed CIA subversion plans in 2006, and its efforts in fomenting dissent and supplying weapons drops by 2009.

In 2011 U.S. operatives began to manipulate the mass ferment that toppled U.S.-supported military dictatorships in Egypt and Tunisia, called the “Arab Spring.” This ferment gave the U.S. an opening for undercover efforts to topple the anti-imperialist governments in Libya and Syria.

Seven months of U.S. bombing did succeed in ripping apart Libya in 2011, thereby shredding every development gain in a country that had enjoyed the highest standard of living in Africa. The extensive development aid that Libya had provided throughout Africa was left in ruins. The U.S. immediately seized the opening to position new military bases throughout Africa.

Obama administration officials, especially Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, all but announced that they expected a similar and even faster success in Syria. The early predictions were that, under direct U.S. pressure, the Syrian government would collapse within weeks.

Washington invited all its allies to participate in the shredding of Syria. Not wanting to be left out of the promise for future looting, France, Britain Turkey, Canada, Australia, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the UAE funded proxy attack forces. Jordan provided open-border training camps. Israel provided backdoor access through the Syrian province of Golan that Israel has occupied since 1967.

An endless series of international conferences on Syria, hosted by the United Nations or the European Union, were held in Geneva, Washington, London, Paris, Brussels and Berlin. A rotating assortment of collaborators who had no base in Syria were appointed to

set up a new proxy government. These puppet forces could not agree with each other and their contending backers maneuvered endlessly.

The existing Syrian government was never a participant in any meaningful way in these grand conferences to decide the future of their country.

Then Secretary of Defense James Mattis repeated the arrogant U.S. demand as recently as August 2018: “Our goal is to move the Syrian civil war into the Geneva process so the Syrian people can establish a new government that is not led by Assad.”

Other “humanitarian conferences” were held to focus on the 5.5 million Syrian refugees who had fled the destruction. But the conferences’ real purpose was also to raise demands for a “negotiated settlement” that gave international bodies some effective control over Syrian sovereignty.

Each of these conferences made it clear that no aid in reconstruction or resettlement would be forthcoming unless there was a government in place that was to their liking.

Additional in the effort to legitimize the U.S. takeover was a multi-pronged effort on social media to demonize Syria and its leadership. It was a campaign intended to silence and demoralize any opposition.

Many good community-based activists, who knew little about Syria, were taken in. Even those who resisted the U.S. war message absorbed a deep suspicion of the forces fighting to defend Syria, as a secular state, from the concerted effort to pull it apart.

What is role of Turkey and Kurds?

The day before Trump’s Dec. 18 announcement to withdraw U.S. troops from Syria, there was a meeting in Geneva on Syria — one that excluded the U.S. and imperialist EU countries.

Instead, meeting on the future of Syria were the foreign ministers of Russia, Iran and, surprisingly, Turkey.

These three countries are opposed, for different reasons and interests, to the uninvited, massively destructive U.S. role in Syria. At the recent conference, according to the Guardian newspaper, they pledged to move forward with “a viable and lasting Syrian-owned, Syrian-led, UN-facilitated political process.” (Dec. 18)

Turkey, an especially strategic member of the U.S.-commanded NATO military alliance, has been sharply opposed to the U.S. use of the YPG Kurdish forces in Syria. Turkey is engaged in a decades-long war against the national aspirations of the 15 million oppressed Kurdish population in Turkey, where the Kurds make up almost 20 percent of the population.

The much smaller Kurdish minority in Syria, amounting to 1.5 million, decided to take advantage of the vacuum created by the weakened central Syrian government to establish a long-sought Kurdish homeland as an autonomous area. They did not, however, call for the overthrow of the Syrian government or of President Assad's ouster.

The political umbrella representing the Syrian Kurds, the SGF, has held official meetings with the Syrian government in Damascus. At these meetings President Assad made it clear that the government welcomed "open doors" and discussion with the Kurds, but that all foreign occupiers, including the U.S. and Turkish forces, must leave Syria.

The Syrian Kurdish delegation made it clear that their goal is a political deal to safeguard their autonomy. The Syrian central government, engaged in a struggle to save the whole country, did not oppose Kurdish autonomy. The future federated status of the Kurds was left open. (tinyurl.com/ycrvng9b)

In May 2017 Washington, anxious to create a statelet or proxy state in the oil-rich area of northeast Syria, armed the Kurdish YPG forces in an effort to create an army dependent on the U.S. With al-Qaeda ISIS forces on one side and a U.S. bombing onslaught on the other, the Kurdish YPG militias were boxed into an alliance with the U.S.

The Turkish regime appeared apprehensive that U.S. arms supplied to Iraqi Kurds with the U.S. aim of keeping Iraq divided, and U.S. arms supplied to Syrian Kurds with the U.S. aim of keeping Syria divided, would easily reach the more numerous and more oppressed Kurds in Turkey.

Current hand wringing by the U.S. media that Trump's announced withdrawal means a U.S. military presence will no longer "protect" the Kurds in Syria is disingenuous.

The U.S. goal all along has been to establish its own base in the region and keep all other forces divided and in contention.

Now Turkey's participation with Russia and Iran in the recent conference, and the growing possibility of Turkey's break with NATO — perhaps even military intervention where Turkey's army confronts U.S. forces — has caught Washington in a tangled web of its own making.

Russia, Iran or — ? Which country is next?

Russian and Iranian assistance to Syria is defensive in character.

If the U.S. were to succeed in overturning the government in Syria — as it did in Iraq and Libya — certainly Russia and Iran, which both resist U.S. domination, seem likely to be next on the U.S. list for attack.

The antiwar movement also needs to remain vigilant. U.S. forces are still massed on the ground in the Near East, in drone bases in African countries, in naval convoys off the shores of China and in the Far East.

There are still U.S. troops, aircraft carriers, nuclear subs and drones in the immediate area of Syria, looking for a new opportunity or a staged provocation.

As the Pentagon did in Iraq, there are many ways to rebrand or rename U.S. troops in Syria and launch a new imperialist initiative.

Antiwar and progressive forces need to maintain a clear and consistent demand to bring all U.S. troops and advisors home, close the bases, and end all occupation and sanctions.

Sara Flounders has traveled twice to Syria in solidarity delegations during the U.S. war against that country. She is co-director of the International Action Center and helps coordinate the United National Antiwar Coalition, the Hands Off Syria Campaign, and the Coalition Against U.S. Foreign Military Bases.