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Trump's visit to Iraq and Washington's never-ending war in the Middle East

Donald Trump's brief, unannounced visit to Iraq on the day after Christmas was staged with a patent political motive. His appearance with assembled troops—for a grand total of 45 minutes—was aimed at shoring up support within the Pentagon as well as among rank-and-file soldiers in the wake of the resignation in protest of his defense secretary, Gen. James Mattis, following Trump's decision to withdraw US troops from Syria.

The performance was the latest in a long line of such trips, beginning with one staged by George W. Bush just a year after the US launched its catastrophic and criminal war against Iraq.

Like Trump, Bush and his successor, Barack Obama, saw the utility of appearing before captive uniformed audiences, bound by military discipline to cheer at the appropriate moments for speeches riddled with lies and stupidities in defense of unending wars of aggression opposed by the majority of the population.

Improbably dressed in a bomber jacket, the New York real estate speculator-turned president gave a performance in line with this tradition, though somewhat more buffoonish. He marveled at having to fly into Iraq under the cover of darkness with the lights off and window shades down on Air Force One, which was heavily escorted by US fighter planes.

“Pretty sad when you spend \$7 trillion in the Middle East and going in has to be under this massive cover,” Trump stated.

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The results of a quarter-century of US war in the Middle East are “pretty sad” indeed. Aside from vast resources spent in the US imperialist effort to dominate the region, there are the consequences for those who live there, over a million of whom lost their lives as a consequence of Washington’s interventions, while tens of millions have been turned into homeless refugees.

The US invasion of Iraq and the wars for regime-change initiated by Washington and its NATO and regional allies in Libya and Syria have reduced entire societies to chaos and rubble.

Ever the irrepressible liar and braggart, Trump boasted to the troops that when he took office they had not received a pay raise for 10 years and that he overrode his aides to deliver a hike of more than 10 percent. All of this was a crude fabrication, obvious to those in the audience who receive their pay from the Pentagon. Trump’s pay raise was 2.4 percent, in line with similar raises that have been provided every year over the past decade. “I got you a big one. I got you a big one,” Trump repeated idiotically.

He also used his speech to denounce his political opponents in the Democratic Party for failing to appropriate funds for his proposed border wall. He told the troops: “You know, when you think about it, you’re fighting for borders in other countries, and they don’t want to fight—the Democrats—for the border of our country. It doesn’t make a lot of sense.”

Afterwards, he signed red “Make America Great Again” hats and other campaign paraphernalia for soldiers, a direct violation of military rules barring active duty personnel from engaging in “partisan political activities.” The violation was not an oversight, but part of a deliberate effort by Trump’s fascistic administration to build up an extra-constitutional base within the US armed forces.

The thrust of Trump’s speech was the “America First” agenda that he has promoted since the 2016 campaign. He cast US military interventions--and the US deployment in Syria in particular—in starkly transactional terms. “America shouldn’t be doing the fighting for every nation on Earth, not being reimbursed, in many cases, at all,” he said. “If they want us to do the fighting, they also have to pay a price—and sometimes that’s also a monetary price—so we’re not the suckers of the world. We’re no longer the suckers, folks.”

At the same time, he boasted of the massive US military budget, which already exceeds the amount spent on armaments by the next eight major powers combined. “You’re getting such new equipment, your eyes are popping, right?” he said to the troops in Iraq.

While Trump's nationalist and populist appeals about ending US wars in the Middle East may enjoy a measure of support among soldiers who have been subjected to unending deployments, the most significant element of his speech was the vow that the US will not withdraw its troops from Iraq. He added that the al-Asad airbase in western Iraq between Baghdad and the Syrian border, where he spoke to the troops, could be used "if we wanted to do something in Syria."

As the *Washington Post* reported, "The decision allows the United States to maintain a presence in the heart of the Middle East and a bulwark against Iranian influence, while also keeping a nearby staging ground should American troops be forced to reenter Syria and engage a resurgent Islamic State."

The utter contempt for Iraqi sovereignty that characterizes these plans was in evidence throughout Trump's entire trip. Iraq's prime minister, Adel Abdul-Mahdi, failed to meet with Trump after being given just two hours' notice of his visit and being summoned to the US air base. The two major blocs in the Iraqi parliament denounced the visit and called for an emergency session to vote on expelling US troops from the country.

The political firestorm unleashed in Washington over Trump's decision to pull US troops out of Syria is driven entirely by tactical differences within the US ruling establishment and its two major parties over US imperialism's global effort to utilize its military might to offset the decline of American capitalism's position in the world economy.

Trump's "America First" policy reflects the orientation of a significant section of the US ruling class, which sees the concentration of American military might in the Asia Pacific region to offset the growing influence of China as the most pressing priority. This faction disdains longstanding alliances in favor of a nationalistic policy dedicated to the naked pursuit of US financial and commercial interests around the globe.

Trump's Democratic opponents are not bothered by the slaughter that has been carried out in the Middle East, including under the banner of the struggle against ISIS, in which the cities of Mosul in Iraq and Raqqa in Syria have been razed to the ground, with countless thousands of civilians buried under the rubble.

On the contrary, they are demanding a more aggressive policy directed at regime-change in Syria and the preparation of a direct confrontation with the main allies of the Damascus government, Iran and Russia. Their differences over Syria are bound up with allegations of Trump's supposed collusion with Moscow to win the 2016 election, which in turn are directed at forcing a more aggressive policy against nuclear-armed Russia.

This was expressed clearly by Democratic Senator Chris Coons, who declared on Sunday that Trump's decision to withdraw troops from Syria constituted "a great big Christmas gift to Vladimir Putin of Russia and to the Ayatollah Khomeini of Iran."

There is no faction within the US ruling establishment opposed to war, and Trump's decision on ending the US deployment of troops in Syria signals no end to the drive to assert US hegemony over the Middle East's oil reserves, no matter what the cost in civilian lives. It is merely part of the tactical preparations for far more devastating wars to come, first and foremost against the countries branded by the Pentagon and the national security apparatus as "revisionist powers" and "great power" rivals—Russia and China.

The absence of a mass antiwar movement in the United States and internationally is bound up with the role played by the pseudo left—groups claiming to be socialist while providing justifications for imperialist intervention and slaughter under the cynical banner of "human rights," as well as claims that the operations of CIA-funded Islamist militias in Syria constitute a "democratic revolution."

These groups, such as the International Socialist Organization and the Democratic Socialists of America in the United States, have maintained a discreet silence over the political crisis unleashed by Trump's Syria withdrawal announcement and the resignation of Mattis, apparently waiting to see which way the wind blows within establishment foreign policy circles.

The struggle against war, including the mounting threat of a nuclear Third World War, must be undertaken by the working class. The demand must be raised for the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of all US troops not only from Syria, but also from Iraq, Afghanistan, Africa and all of the hundreds of US military bases scattered across the globe.

Those who are responsible for the killing and maiming of millions in US imperialism's wars of aggression must be prosecuted for war crimes, including Bush, Obama, Trump and their top generals and civilian aides.

This requires the building of a new mass antiwar movement that is based on the working class and fights for a program of socialist internationalism to unify workers all over the world in a common struggle against the capitalist system.