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Turkey expands invasion of Syria

By Jordan Shilton

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With support from the US Air Force and military “advisers,” Turkish soldiers expanded their invasion of northern Syria Thursday.

Operation Euphrates Shield is being justified by Ankara as necessary to seize the town of Jarablus from Islamic State forces and push back the Syrian Kurdish People’s Protection Units (YPG) east of the Euphrates River. In reality, the military operation marks a major escalation of the US-backed regime change operation in Syria aimed at overthrowing the government of Bashar al-Assad in Damascus which threatens to plunge the entire region into conflict and draw in the major powers.

This was underscored Wednesday by a statement released by the White House in response to a United Nations-sponsored investigation which claimed that Assad’s forces had conducted two chemical weapons attacks over the past two years. Even though the inquiry found it impossible to apportion blame for the use of chemical weapons in six of the nine cases it examined, White House National Security Council spokesman Ned Price baldly declared in a statement, “It is now impossible to deny that the Syrian regime has repeatedly used industrial chlorine as a weapon against its own people in violation of the Chemical Weapons Convention and UN Security Council Resolution 2118.”

The Obama administration has repeatedly exploited fabricated allegations of chemical weapons use to increase pressure on the Assad regime and create a pretext for war. Earlier this month, unverified claims of a government chlorine gas attack in Idlib province were widely trumpeted, while confirmed instances of gas attacks by opposition forces on civilians in Aleppo were ignored.

Washington came to the brink of full-scale war with the Assad regime in August 2013 when a manufactured campaign claiming that the Syrian government had launched a chemical weapons attack in Gouta near Damascus was concocted, as a subsequent investigation by journalist Seymour Hersh proved. A substantial section of the political and military establishment in the US have never forgiven Obama for deciding against direct US intervention.

Predictably, Price made no mention of the atrocities conducted by the so-called moderate Islamist forces being financed and armed by the CIA and US military in Syria. The US-initiated war for regime change has seen Syria's population shrink from 22-24 million to 17.1 million people, of which 12.2 million require humanitarian assistance and 8.7 million are internally displaced refugees. A further 4.8 million Syrians were recorded as refugees abroad by the UN in July.

The United States' backing for the Turkish invasion, including from Vice President Joseph Biden who happened to be visiting Turkey the day it was launched, adds further fuel to a highly combustible political and military situation in the Middle East. Little more than a month has passed since a US-backed coup sought to overthrow the Erdogan government in Ankara, which was in part motivated by the Turkish president's attempts to rebuild ties with Russia and Iran. Those tensions were on display Wednesday as Biden was questioned about the extradition of Turkish cleric Fathullah Gülen, who lives in Pennsylvania and is blamed by Erdogan for masterminding the 15 July coup attempt.

It is clear that Washington's support for the Turkish invasion is aimed at creating the conditions for a broader intervention to topple the Assad regime. Turkey intends to establish a zone under its control in northern Syria along the Turkish border so as to block the emergence of a Kurdish-controlled area. But the seizing of Syrian territory in violation of international law prepares the ground for a direct clash or fabricated attack involving Assad's forces that would serve as a justification for a wider NATO intervention. This would increase the likelihood of a war with nuclear-armed Russia, which intervened in Syria last year to defend its sole military base outside of the former Soviet Union and prop up its main ally in the region.

Just days before the Turkish intervention, the US accused the Assad regime of carrying out bombing raids close to an area where US special forces were operating in support of the YPG militia fighting ISIS in the town of Hasakeh. General Stephen Townsend, the US Army's military commanding officer in Iraq and Syria, subsequently warned that US forces would defend themselves if they felt threatened—a tacit threat that Syrian government forces, or their Russian allies, would be fired upon.

Townsend also unveiled plans to step up US airstrikes in Syria and Iraq to assist its local proxy forces in the capture of Mosul and Raqqa from ISIS.

The Russian defence ministry reported Friday that two ships in the Mediterranean fired long-range cruise missiles for the first time against Jihadi targets within Syria. This comes on the heels of Moscow's use of Iranian air bases to fly attacks in Syria.

Washington's policies in Syria and the region more broadly are shot through with contradictions. Efforts at a rapprochement with Ankara threaten to undermine its previous policy in Iraq and Syria of relying on Kurdish militias, which have been supplied with extensive weaponry and training by the US and its allies, as key collaborators in the fight against the Islamic State. That this could have explosive consequences beyond these two countries by further stoking the civil war already raging in Turkey was shown on Wednesday, when the leader of the Turkish opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) narrowly avoided two assassination attempts by Kurdish Workers Party (PKK) militants.

Even the immediate consequences of the Turkish incursion remain difficult to predict. Turkish and western officials claimed Thursday that YPG forces west of the Euphrates had begun retreating, but Kurdish representatives contacted by AP refused to confirm this. Turkey reportedly gave a deadline of a week for Kurdish forces to retreat.

Late yesterday, Turkish forces reportedly opened fire on US-backed YPG units south of Jarablus in what the Anadolu news agency referred to as warning shots. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights reported that the YPG advanced eight kilometres northwards in a move aimed at preempting territorial gains by Turkish-backed Syrian rebels. Colonel Ahmad Osman, head of the Sultan Murad Group fighting alongside Turkey, explicitly threatened direct confrontation with the YPG if they failed to retreat. "We are currently planning not to confront them, but if we have to confront them, we will," he told Reuters.

Clashes involving Turkish troops and the Kurdish militias could rapidly see the Syrian conflict, which has already claimed an estimated 400,000 lives, spill over into Turkey, a NATO member home to substantial deployments of US and other NATO forces and weaponry.

The very real prospect of a regional war rapidly spiralling out of control and engaging the major powers is the product of more than a quarter century of war waged by US imperialism and its allies throughout the Middle East, beginning with the 1991 Gulf War against Iraq. The sectarian divisions flaring up in Syria and across the region and the destruction of entire societies are rooted in Washington's reckless drive to secure its hegemony over the world's most important oil-producing region at the expense of its geopolitical rivals, above all Russia and China.

The US media has responded to the latest escalation of military violence in the Middle East by stepping up its propaganda campaign in favour of all-out war. Two pieces in the *New York Times* by two of the paper's most notorious warmongers, Roger Cohen and Nicholas Kristof, attempted to provide Washington's predatory imperialist interests with a veneer of "humanitarian" propaganda.

Cohen denounced Obama in his piece for his refusal to intervene more aggressively in Syria and pinned the blame exclusively on Russian President Vladimir Putin and Assad for the bloody civil war. Lamenting Obama's failure to wage war in Syria in 2013 following the previous

manufactured chemical weapons claim, Cohen proclaimed, “No outcome in Syria could be worse than the current one. Assad’s bomb-spewing jets and his airfields should have been taken out early in the war, before ISIS. The red line should have stood.”

In a nauseating piece of human rights hypocrisy, Kristof equated the Assad regime with Nazi Germany by arguing, “Today, to our shame, Anne Frank is a Syrian girl” and urging Obama “to do more to try to end the slaughter in Syria.”

These proponents of human rights imperialism ignore the fact that such well-worn pretexts have been invariably employed to legitimise a vast escalation of US-led militarist violence that has claimed the lives of millions of men, women and children across the region and beyond. Nor does it seem to trouble Cohen and Kristof that Washington’s allies in the Syrian bloodbath are extremist Islamist forces which only one month ago were the official Syrian section of the al-Qaida terrorist network.