

Syrian and Russian troops sweep into Manbij as US withdraws

Tue, 2019-10-15 15:58

MANBIJ, Syria: Turkey ignored US sanctions and pressed on with its assault on northern Syria on Tuesday, while the Russia-backed Syrian army roared into one of the most hotly contested cities abandoned by US forces in Donald Trump's retreat.

Reuters journalists accompanied Syrian government forces who entered the center of the city of Manbij, a flashpoint where US troops had previously conducted joint patrols with Turkey.

Russian and Syrian flags were flying from a building on the city outskirts, and from a convoy of military vehicles.

US forces announced they had pulled out of the city.

A week after reversing US policy and moving troops out of the way to allow Turkey to attack Washington's Syrian allies, Trump announced a package of sanctions to punish Ankara.

But the measures – mainly a hike in steel tariffs and a pause in trade talks – were less robust than financial markets had expected, and Trump's critics derided them as too feeble to have an impact.

The Turkish lira, which had fallen on the expectation of tougher US measures, recovered after the sanctions were announced, as did its bond and stock markets, with traders noting that Trump had spared Turkish banks.

Trump's unexpected decision to withhold protection from Syria's Kurds after a phone call with Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan a week ago swiftly upended five years of US policy in the Middle East.

The withdrawal gives a free hand to Washington's adversaries in the world's deadliest ongoing war, namely Syrian President Bashar Assad and his Russian and Iranian allies.

The United States announced on Sunday it was withdrawing its entire force of 1,000 troops from northern Syria. Its former Kurdish allies immediately forged a new alliance with Assad's Russia-backed government, inviting the army into towns across the breadth of their territory.

Russian-backed Syrian forces moved swiftly to fill the void left by departing Americans from Manbij west of the Euphrates river, which Turkey has vowed to capture.

"We are out of Manbij," said Col. Myles B Caggins, spokesman for the US-led coalition in Syria. Troops "are executing a deliberate withdrawal from northeast Syria."

A group of journalists accompanied by Syrian army personnel journeyed into Manbij city where upon their arrival a group of people gathered, waving the Syrian flag and pictures of Assad.

However the reporters left when gunfire was heard and a group of some 10 young men in Kurdish YPG uniforms began breaking cameras and yelling.

Syrian state media said SDF fighters had opened fire on a march organized by the people of Manbij to welcome the army.

Trump's pullout ends joint US-Turkish patrols of the Manbij area under a deal aimed to persuade Turkey not to invade.

Syrian state television broadcast footage of what it said was government troops entering Manbij on Tuesday, under their new deal with the Kurds. A resident inside the city told Reuters the Syrian troops were on its outskirts. Turkey-backed Syrian fighters said they would continue their advance toward Manbij.

A Reuters cameraman on the Turkish frontier reported heavy bombardment on Tuesday morning of the Syrian border town of Ras Al-Ain, where a spokesman for the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces reported a fierce battle was taking place.

Opinion

This section contains relevant reference points, placed in (Opinion field)

Trump has defended his reversal of US policy as part of a plan to withdraw the United States from “endless” wars in the Middle East.

But his critics, including senior figures in his own Republican Party, cast it as a betrayal of the Kurds, loyal allies who lost thousands of fighters as the principal ground forces in Washington’s battle against Daesh.

The Democratic speaker of the House of Representatives, Nancy Pelosi, said Trump’s sanctions were too little, too late.

“His announcement of a package of sanctions against Turkey falls very short of reversing that humanitarian disaster.”

Turkey says it aims to defeat the Kurdish YPG militia, which it sees as terrorists for their links to separatists in Turkey, and to create a “safe zone” where millions of Syrian refugees can be resettled.

The United Nations says 160,000 people have fled their homes as Turkish forces advance. The Kurdish administration puts the number of displaced at 270,000.

The UN Human Rights office said on Tuesday Turkey could be held responsible for war crimes by fighters under its direction, potentially including the assassination of Hevrin Khalaf, a leading Kurdish politician killed on the side of a highway on Saturday by gunmen who posted the incident on the Internet.

Turkish-backed fighters have denied blame for her murder.

Erdogan, who has pledged to continue military operations come what may, said Turkey was giving the world a chance to bring peace to the region.

“The international community missed its opportunity to prevent the Syrian crisis from pulling an entire region into a maelstrom of instability,” he wrote in the Wall Street Journal. “The European Union – and the world – should support what Turkey is trying to do.”

The Syrian army deployments into Kurdish-held territory evacuated by Washington are a victory for President Bashar Assad and his most powerful ally, Russia, giving them a foothold in the biggest remaining swath of the country that had been beyond their grasp.

Trump allies insisted Washington had not given its blessing to the Turkish offensive, and demanded a cease-fire.

“The United States of America simply is not going to tolerate Turkey’s

invasion in Syria any further,” Vice President Mike Pence said. “We are calling on Turkey to stand down, end the violence and come to the negotiating table.”

Trump’s sanctions include reimposing steel tariffs and halting talks on a trade deal. But bilateral trade between Turkey and the United States is small – around a tenth the size of Turkey’s trade with Europe. Washington’s most effective form of economic leverage would be to hinder Turkey’s access to US financial markets, a step Trump has so far avoided.

“The sanctions are not related to banking, so the markets will have a positive perception,” said Cem Tozge, asset management director at Ata Invest.

In a potentially more damaging blow, German carmaker Volkswagen said it was postponing a final decision on whether to build a 1 billion euro (\$1.1 billion) plant in Turkey, citing concern over “current developments” after international condemnation of the incursion.

European countries have criticized the offensive but have limited their response so far to announcing suspensions of arms sales, although weapons account for only a small fraction of EU-Turkish trade.

Trump said US troops would remain at a small garrison at Tanf in southern Syria “to continue to disrupt remnants” of Daesh. The base on the southern border is hundreds of miles away from the Kurdish area in the north that had previously been the main US theater.



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Erdogan vows no Daesh fighters will escape Syria
Kremlin envoy calls Turkish military operation in Syria 'unacceptable'

[Kremlin envoy calls Turkish military operation in Syria 'unacceptable'](#)

Author:

Reuters

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Tue, 2019-10-15 11:53

MOSCOW: The Kremlin's envoy for Syria on Tuesday called Turkey's military offensive in northeast Syria "unacceptable" and denied Ankara's operation had been cleared by Moscow in advance, Russian news agencies reported.

Alexander Lavrentiev, Russian President Vladimir Putin's envoy for Syria, was speaking to reporters in Abu Dhabi during an official visit there by Putin.

He made his comments after Turkey ignored new sanctions from the United States to press on with its assault on northern Syria while the Russia-backed Syrian army entered one of the most hotly contested cities, filling a void created by Donald Trump's abrupt retreat.

When asked if there had been an advance agreement between Russia and Turkey about Ankara's operation, Lavrentiev was cited as saying:

"No. We had always urged Turkey to show restraint and always considered some kind of military operation on Syrian territory unacceptable."

Lavrentiev's comments, which suggest growing tensions between Turkey and Russian, came a day after the Kremlin complained that Turkey's incursion was "not exactly" compatible with Syrian territorial integrity.

"The security of the Turkish-Syrian border must be ensured by the deployment of Syrian government troops along its entire length," said Lavrentiev.

"That's why we never spoke in favor or supported the idea of Turkish units (being deployed there) let alone the armed Syrian opposition."

Lavrentiev said Turkey's actions risked upsetting delicate religious sensitivities in northern Syria.

In particular, he said the area was populated by Kurds, Arabs and Sunnis who

would not take kindly to their lands being resettled by people who had never lived there, a reference to Turkey's plan to house refugees from other parts of Syria there.

Lavrentiev confirmed that Russia had brokered an agreement between the Syrian government and Kurdish forces that saw the Kurds cede control of territory to Syrian troops.

Those talks had taken place at Russia's Hmeimim air base in Syria among other places, he said.



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[Britain to halt new defense export licenses to Turkey: UK foreign minister](#)

Author:
Reuters
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Tue, 2019-10-15 10:52

LONDON: Britain is to halt new arms export licenses to Turkey as a result of concern over its military operation against Kurdish forces in northeast Syria, the foreign minister Dominic Raab said on Tuesday.

“The UK government takes its arm export control responsibilities very seriously and in this case, of course, we will keep our defense exports to Turkey under very careful and continual review,” Raab told parliament.

“No further export licenses to Turkey for items that might be used in military operations in Syria will be granted while we conduct that review.”



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US demands Syria cease-fire, slaps sanctions on Turkey over incursion
EU countries stop short of arms embargo for Turkey

[**UAE and Russia sign deals worth \\$1.3bn**](#)

during Putin's Abu Dhabi visit

Tue, 2019-10-15 10:52

ABU DHABI: Vladimir Putin signed deals worth more than \$1.3 billion with the United Arab Emirates on Tuesday as his Gulf tour came to an end in Abu Dhabi.

The Russian president arrived in the UAE's capital earlier in the day, following his visit to Saudi Arabia where he met King Salman and Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman in Riyadh.

Putin was greeted by the Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi, Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al-Nahyan, at the Presidential Airport with a 21-gun salute.



Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed with Russian President Vladimir Putin during arrival honors. (AFP)

He then arrived at the Presidential Palace Qasr Al-Watan where there was an official welcoming ceremony.

The pair struck six agreements, including one on shared investments between Russia's sovereign wealth fund and the Emirati investment fund Mubadala.

Deals worth more than \$1.3 billion, notably in the energy, advanced technology and health sectors, were tabled during Putin's visit, according to the Russian Direct Investment Fund (RDIF).

"You will not be disappointed by your Russian partners," Putin said as he arrived.

Sheikh Mohammed tweeted: “This historic visit reflects the strength of UAE-Russia relations, which we will continue to jointly promote at all levels for the mutual benefit of our nations.”

I welcome President Vladimir Putin as an honoured guest to the UAE. This historic visit reflects the strength of UAE-Russia relations, which we will continue to jointly promote at all levels for the mutual benefit of our nations. pic.twitter.com/tFVGXuzKsC

– محمد بن زايد (@MohamedBinZayed) [October 15, 2019](https://twitter.com/MohamedBinZayed/status/1175000000000000000)

“Among the Gulf countries, the UAE is the leader in terms of trade with Russia,” Kremlin adviser Yuri Ushakov told reporters ahead of the Gulf tour.

In 2018, commerce between the two countries tabled some \$1.7 billion.

As Putin made his way to the presidential palace, jets painted the sky white, blue and red – the colours of the Russian flag – and cannons fired a ceremonial salute.

The streets of Abu Dhabi were lined with Emirati and Russian flags, while road signs that usually display traffic warnings instead greeted Putin in Arabic and Russian.

Putin and Sheikh Mohammed also met Emirati astronaut Hazza Al-Mansoori, who last month became the first Arab to reach the International Space Station on board a Russian rocket.

“We are ready to continue providing all the necessary assistance to the United Arab Emirates in the space sector,” Putin told Sheikh Mohammed.

المقر الرئيسي لأدنوك يزدان بصورتي #محمد_بن_زايد و #بوتين بمناسبة
زيارة الرئيس الروسي
للدولة. #الأسبوع_الإماراتي_الروسي#العلاقات_الإماراتية_الروسية#الإمارات_تر
pic.twitter.com/juYUGbFoFP #وأم جِب_بالرئيس_بوتين

– وكالة أنباء الإمارات (@wamnews) [October 14, 2019](https://twitter.com/wamnews/status/1174000000000000000)

In the build up to his visit Abu Dhabi lit up its famous landmarks with colors of the Russian flag to mark Putin’s return to the UAE, his first official visit since 2007.

#أبوظبي تضيء أبرز معالمها بألوان علم جمهورية روسيا الاتحادية احتفاءً
بزيارة الرئيس الروسي فلاديمير بوتين إلى دولة الإمارات العربية
المتحدة. #الإمارات_ترحب_بالرئيس_بوتين pic.twitter.com/IA4eiCoujI

– Abu Dhabi Government Media Office (@admediaoffice) [October 14, 2019](#)

ADNOC's headquarters at the Abu Dhabi Corniche was displaying at its facade a huge LED portrait of Putin and Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed in a firm handshake – apparently taken during the latter's visit to Moscow in 2017 – as well as the Russian flag.

Other landmarks that also draped their buildings with Russia's flag colors were Emirates Palace, Marina Mall, Khalifa University, Capital Gate Hotel, Abu Dhabi Global Market and the UAE Cultural Foundation.

"The visit reflects the strong overall strategic partnership between the two countries and will enhance their cooperation in vital sectors," Sergei Kuznetsov, the Russian ambassador to the UAE, earlier said, adding that the visit will strengthen the relations between the two countries, especially in light of their strategic partnership.

Kuznetsov also stressed that the Russian president's visit to the UAE represented a marked progress in the bilateral relations between the two countries.

*With AFP













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وكالة الأنباء
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UAE, Russia discuss regional cooperation Abu Dhabi's Mubadala flexes muscles

in Russia

[Erdogan vows no Daesh fighters will escape Syria](#)

Author:

AFP

ID:

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Tue, 2019-10-15 07:39

ISTANBUL: Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan vowed not to allow any Daesh fighters to escape northern Syria, in an editorial published Tuesday, following fears from Western nations over its offensive in the region.

"We will ensure that no ISIS (Islamic State) fighters leave northeastern Syria," Erdogan wrote in the Wall Street Journal.

But he added that Western countries were hypocritical to worry that Turkey's operation against Kurdish militants risked a mass escape of jihadists.

"The same countries that lecture Turkey on the virtues of combating ISIS today, failed to stem the influx of foreign terrorist fighters in 2014 and 2015," Erdogan wrote.

The United States slapped sanctions on Turkey Monday as it demanded an end to the military operation, accusing its NATO partner of putting civilians at risk and allowing the release of extremists.

Kurdish authorities claim the Turkish assault makes it difficult to maintain security at their detention centers.

They say 800 Daesh family members escaped a camp at Ain Issa on Sunday, and five jihadists broke out of another prison on Friday.

Turkey says Kurdish forces have deliberately set free detainees "to fuel chaos in the area." Some relatives of Daesh family members have made the same claim to AFP.

Ankara has vowed to take control of all detention centers in its operational area. "We are prepared to cooperate with source countries and international organizations on the rehabilitation of foreign terrorist fighters' spouses and children," Erdogan wrote in the Wall Street Journal editorial.



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Kurds 'may be releasing' Daesh prisoners in Syria to get US involved:
TrumpTurkey to go its own way on Syria safe zone: Erdoğan