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Trump is asking Middle Eastern governments to build a military force to replace US troops in northeast Syria, and notorious war profiteer Erik Prince has been contacted for help.

BEN NORTON: It's the Real News. I'm Ben Norton. Just when it looked like the war in Syria might finally be coming to an end, the Donald Trump administration has announced new plans to maintain U.S. military influence in the country.

The Wall Street Journal reported this week that the United States is trying to assemble an army of foreign troops to militarily occupy territory in northeast Syria. There are between 2,000 and 4,000 U.S. troops who are already in Syria, although their presence is illegal under international law. These U.S. troops are mostly concentrated in the northeast, near the border of Iraq.

President Trump has claimed that he wants to withdraw U.S. troops from Syria, but his administration also wants to prevent the Syrian government from retaking this area. So the U.S. has reached out to several other countries in the region and asked if they will contribute troops to make a foreign army to occupy the region, and prevent Iran from extending its influence.

Trump is asking the extremist Gulf monarchies Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates to help fund the effort to create this international army. According to The Wall Street Journal, Trump is trying to get Egypt, under the leadership of the military dictator Sisi, to send troops to Syria. Saudi Arabia — which supported ISIS, al-Qaeda, and other Salafi-jihadist groups in Syria — has also volunteered to send Saudi troops in coordination with the U.S.

Yet even more scandalous, according to the Wall Street Journal, the prominent mercenary leader Erik Prince, who is notorious for atrocities in Iraq, has been contacted by multiple

countries in the Middle East, who are asking for his assistance in building a force inside Syria.

Joining us to discuss this is Medea Benjamin. Medea is the co-founder of the women-led peace group CODEPINK, and the co-founder of the human rights organization Global Exchange. She is also the author of several books, including her newest book, "Inside Iran: The Real History and Politics of the Islamic Republic of Iran," which was just released and which you can now purchase. Thanks for joining us, Medea.

MEDEA BENJAMIN: Hey, Ben, good to be on with you to talk about this crazy story.

BEN NORTON: Well, always glad to have you here at the Real News. So Medea, you know Erik Prince quite well, and we can talk about some of the actions CODEPINK has done vis a vis Blackwater, his notorious mercenary firm, and Erik Prince himself. Of course, we also know that Erik Prince has close ties to the Trump administration itself, particularly the secretary of education. Before we get to any of that, can you simply react to this plan? Reportedly Erik Prince has been tapped to build this international army. What is your response?

MEDEA BENJAMIN: There are so many crazy things about this story. Let's see, where do we begin. You know, there was a plan that Erik Prince was going to take over for U.S. forces in Afghanistan. And that was proposed to the Trump administration. There were people in his in his administration who liked the idea. But the Pentagon put that one down.

This plan is so crazy on so many levels. I mean, let's look at some of the players involved. You have Saudi Arabia and the Emirates, who are both bogged down in a war in Yemen and can't win that war, and the Emirates have already contracted Erik Prince. In fact, he helped put together an 800-member mercenary force that has been fighting in Yemen unsuccessfully, and includes mercenaries from other countries. In fact, he has hired people from Colombia. There's an Australian who's been killed as part of that force. So that's not working. Then you look at the other player they want is Qatar. Qatar is being boycotted by the Saudis and the Emirates, so why would they join in with those two countries?

You mentioned that Egypt had agreed. I don't know that that's true, Ben, because I've heard that Egypt is quite reluctant to do it. The Egyptians actually have quite a good relationship with Assad, because they have become close to the Russians, and Egypt is bogged down in its own fighting in the Sinai. And let me just add that the fact that they have been talking to the Egypt head of intelligence, who is a horrendous man who has been responsible for so many human rights abuses in Egypt itself is absolutely shameful. So those are just some of the things off the top of my head.

BEN NORTON: Yeah, I'll jump in for one second. The Wall Street Journal said that the Trump administration was trying to get, just to clarify, troops from Egypt. But as you mention, of course, Egypt isn't necessarily on board at the moment. Saudi Arabia has, the Foreign Minister Jubeir, has said that they would send troops. But as you said, which is another wrinkle on this entire plan, is the fact that Egypt is likely not on board at this point.

So yeah, can you speak a bit more about, what's interesting is Trump is trying to get, as you

said, all these actors that are actually fighting against each other in other conflicts, but specifically you mention the UAE and Saudi Arabia and their war in Yemen. Saudi Arabia has said that it will send troops into Syria. But of course, they're already waging a war in Yemen. Can you comment further on that? Because I think even when people do hear in the media about the war in Yemen they don't understand exactly Saudi Arabia and the UAE's role, specifically the UAE.

MEDEA BENJAMIN: Well, the UAE actually has troops on the ground. Saudi Arabia's involved through the air in a bombing campaign. The Saudis don't like to fight, and the Saudis and the Emirates had been asked earlier by the U.S. to send troops into Syria, but they declined to do so. They said, we'll just give money and support the troops that the U.S. were supporting, the Syrians.

So I think it's very unlikely that the Saudis would send its own troops into Syria. They are much more interested in trying to get a win in Yemen, where they have been bogged down in a war against the Houthis, a war that really was a civil war until the Saudis got involved, and then brought in the Iranians to back the Houthis. And it's become a proxy war there. So I think they idea that there is some kind of Arab force that one, would get along with each other, two, would be interested in going and fighting in Syria, and three, would be capable of doing it is all very pie in the sky.

The other thing that's come up is right now the U.S. troops and its allies have been using U.S. airpower to support them. And so the question comes up of would U.S. airpower be supporting a, an Arab force, and how would that work? Who would have the authority to call in U.S. airstrikes? Would the U.S. even do that? So that's another piece of the puzzle that doesn't, doesn't seem that it would have any sensible policy outcome.

BEN NORTON: Yeah. And then let's turn back to Erik Prince. Of course he is, maybe you can speak about his close links to the Trump administration, specifically Betsy DeVos. But also can you speak about what Erik Prince has been doing for years in this region?

Of course, many Americans might be familiar with the name Blackwater, but they may not realize just how notorious this group is and the amount of blood it has on his hands, particularly in Iraq.

And then also you mentioned that Erik Prince has been contracted by some of these countries already, specifically the UAE, also Somalia, to build private security forces in the region. Can you comment a bit further on what you know about Erik Prince?

MEDEA BENJAMIN: He was notorious during the days of the Iraq invasion, and so many of the employees for Blackwater were involved in killing of civilians in Iraq that there are still Department of Justice investigations going on. He's most infamous for the Nisour massacre that happened in 2007, when 17 Iraqi civilians were killed by Blackwater employees who were guarding a U.S. military convoy.

But because of all the investigation against him, he moved out of the United States in 2010. I

remember that well, because I went to his house to bid him farewell and was arrested by the Virginia police for trespassing, a case that I later won. But he moved to the Emirates, and it was rumored at the time that he was moving there because they didn't have an extradition treaty with the United States.

You talk about the relationship with the Trump administration. Well, certainly there is his sister Betsy DeVos, who is in charge of education in this country. But he also has relationships with a number of the other characters. Well, one of them the ex, which is Steve Bannon. And he has been proposing these kind of mercenary forces to the Trump administration from the time they came in. As you said, he has assembled such a mercenary force already for the Emirates. He is involved, I think he was paid over \$500 million to do that, and he is a mercenary.

All he cares about is selling himself as a pimp, I would say, to be contracted out by other countries. In the case of the Emirates, for example, it was to put down any potential democratic uprisings that might come about as a result of the Arab Spring. And now to be working with the Emirates in terms of putting down the uprising in neighboring Yemen. And who knows.

I hope we will be able to stop this plan that's being cooked up in the Trump administration, and I think it's something that John Bolton, his new national security advisor, is unfortunately quite favorable to. But I think having Erik Prince involved in anything that has to do with U.S. national security is disastrous.

BEN NORTON: Well, unfortunately we'll have to end it there. Medea, thanks so much for joining us, and thanks for shining light on this particular issue, because I think the fact that Erik Prince is even in consideration, considering, as you mentioned, the massive atrocities that he's linked to is not only something that should be incredibly outrageous, but it to me reflects the attitude of the Trump administration and its political ideology, which is ultimately not just hypermilitarism.

Trump is ramping up many of these wars specifically in Yemen and elsewhere. But also it's a combination of that hypermilitarism with this intense neoliberalism. With an intensification of privatization, tax cuts, you know, freeing, the so-called freeing of the market. And Erik Prince and his mercenary firms are the application of that ideology to the military. So thanks for joining us, Medea.

MEDEA BENJAMIN: Thanks, Ben.

BEN NORTON: And this is Ben Norton here reporting for the Real News.