

# Turkey ramps up war threats against Syria

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Turkey has dramatically escalated its war rhetoric against Syria, placing itself at the forefront of any military intervention to depose the regime of Bashar al-Assad.

On September 4, at a meeting of the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) in Ankara, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan described Syria as a “terrorist state.”

He complained that the “massacres in Syria” had gained strength “from the international community’s indifference... The regime in Syria has now become a terrorist state. We do not have the luxury to be indifferent to what is happening there.”

Erdogan’s comments target Russia and China, which oppose measures against Syria they correctly understand to be aimed at weakening their influence in the oil-rich region and consolidating US hegemony by isolating Iran. But Erdogan has also made clear his frustration with the Obama administration in the United States, which has expressed reluctance to support Turkey’s demand for a “no-fly” or “buffer” zone on the Syrian side of the Turkish border.

Justified as a means of both protecting and stemming the tide of refugees fleeing Syria, such a move would be tantamount to a declaration of war.

Turkey has said that should the number of refugees, now estimated at 80,000, top 100,000, this could be a tipping point for action against Syria. Turkey has also accused both Syria and Iran of allowing border areas to be used as a base for separatist forces allied to the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) to attack its troops in the southeast.

Erdogan called the PKK and Syria’s Democratic Union Party (PYD), an affiliated group, a “sub-contractor organisation ... directly supported abroad by enemy countries.”

“In the north, [the Assad regime] has allotted five provinces to the Kurds, to the terrorist organization,” he

told a Turkish television station in July.

“It’s known that the PKK works arm in arm with Syria’s intelligence organisation,” said Huseyin Celik, the deputy chairman of the AKP.

Turkish tanks conducted attack-drill exercises along the border with Syria on Wednesday last week. The next day, September 6, Reuters reported that more than 2,000 Turkish soldiers, together with fighter jets and helicopters, attacked PKK positions in both southeast Turkey and northern Iraq.

After having stated that Assad is not a real Muslim, Erdogan last weekend provocatively compared what is happening in Syria with the battle of Karbala--which has central significance for Shi’ites, who regard those killed by Caliph Yazid I as martyrs. “What happened in Karbala 1,332 years ago is what happens in Syria today,” Erdogan said at a conference in Istanbul.

It was in this context that Erdogan complained to Christiane Amanpour on CNN September 5 that US reluctance to back a no-fly zone was probably “because of the pre-election situation,” given the deep unpopularity in the US of any open move to war against Syria.

The US has in fact not ruled out backing a no-fly zone and is presently engaged in a propaganda war against Moscow. Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton on Sunday spoke of Washington’s deep differences with Russia over Syria, urging increased international pressure on Assad while pledging increased support for the Syrian opposition.

The US is increasing its deployment of CIA spies on the Syrian border in a move coordinated with Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar.

DEBKAfile, a web site closely connected to Israel’s Mossad intelligence agency, ran a September 6 report throwing additional light on what is taking place.

It noted that Turkish army officers have assumed direct command of the first two Syrian rebel brigades

fighting government forces—the North Liberators Brigade in the Idlib region of northern Syria and the Tawhid Brigade fighting in the Al-Bab area northeast of Aleppo.

“Turkey is considered to have stepped directly into the Syrian conflict, marking the onset of foreign intervention,” DEBKAfile writes. “Western and Arab military circles in the Middle East expect Turkey to extend its command to additional rebel units—not all of them part of the Free Syrian Army.”

DEBKAfile notes the active involvement of the US in coordinating the response of Israel, the Gulf States, Jordan and Lebanon to events in Syria. CIA Director David Petraeus visited Ankara Monday, September 3 to discuss “the likely Syrian, Iranian and Hezbollah responses. He then flew to Israel to continue the discussion there.”

Alleging Syrian involvement on Hezbollah “turf” in southern Lebanon, DEBKAfile reports that Israel Defence Forces have “countered by placing its units guarding the Syrian and Lebanese borders on a state of alert.”

On Wednesday, September 5, an “Iron Dome” air defence battery was installed in Gush Dan to head off a potential Hezbollah missile barrage on central Israel and Tel Aviv.

It was also on that day that Erdogan described Syria as a “terrorist state”.

“Only a few of Erdogan’s listeners understood he was laying international legal grounding for expanding Turkish military intervention in Syria,” DEBKAfile states.

Erdogan’s policy is high-risk, with the escalating conflict with the nation’s Kurdish minority only the most visible example of potential blowback.

Domestically, there is significant popular opposition to a war against Syria that is viewed as an example of an Islamist movement shifting Turkey onto a new Sunni, pro-US regional axis that endangers past efforts to forge an alliance with Iran.

The military, which has been subjected to a campaign of mass arrests and compulsory retirements by the AKP, is divided on the issue and unprepared for the consequences of a war. Henri Barkey, a Turkey expert at Lehigh University in Pennsylvania, told *Foreign Policy*, “They realize this is a Pandora’s box, that you go in and God knows how you’re going to come out,”

describing such a conflict as “a no-win situation for the Turks from the beginning.”

Protests against military intervention have taken place, concentrated in particular in Antakya (or Antioch) and Hatay. Involving some 10,000 people, they are lent added significance by being a reaction to the sectarian character of the AKP’s policies.

Protesters denounced the government for allowing Syrian oppositionists to use Hatay as their base and fostering sectarian tensions. One local resident said of the oppositionists based in Turkey’s refugee camps, “They are saying, ‘After we finish in Syria, we will cut your throats here’.” Turkey “especially brought them to Antakya, to kill Alawites.”

Additional evidence of the sectarian character of the Syrian opposition and the growing influence of Al Qaeda-type Jihadi forces is provided by Jacques Bérès, 71, a surgeon and co-founder of Doctors Without Borders.

After returning from Aleppo in Syria, he told Reuters that he was surprised by the number of militants from outside Syria who had joined the fight with the goal of establishing an Islamist government. For two weeks he had treated about 40 patients a day, of which 60 percent were rebel fighters. Of these, half were from outside Syria.

“It’s really something strange to see,” he said. “They are directly saying that they aren’t interested in Bashar al-Assad’s fall, but are thinking about how to take power afterward and set up an Islamic state with Sharia law to become part of the world emirate.”

“Some of them were French and were completely fanatical about the future,” he added. They were inspired by Mohammed Merah, from Toulouse, who killed seven people in March, including three soldiers from immigrant families, a rabbi and three Jewish children.



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