

Turkey attacks Syria after stray shelling

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Turkey's military attacked Syria Wednesday after a stray shell from Syria killed five people in a Turkish border town. With Ankara invoking NATO's collective defense agreement, the danger is rising of a direct Western intervention into the 18-month-old civil war in Syria.

Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan's office issued a written statement Wednesday evening announcing that Turkish artillery had opened fire on Syrian forces.

Sources in Damascus reported that various targets had been hit in Idlib, a city of approximately 100,000 in northwestern Syria, which has been the scene of some of the fiercest fighting in the civil war.

"Our armed forces in the border region responded immediately to this abominable attack in line with their rules of engagement," the Turkish statement said. "Targets were struck through artillery fire against places in Syria identified by radar. Turkey will never leave unanswered such kinds of provocation by the Syrian regime against our national security."

The statement added that Turkey contacted NATO chief Anders Fogh Rasmussen to request an "urgent meeting" of NATO members. A longstanding member of the US-led alliance, Turkey can convene such a meeting under Article IV of the NATO charter, which allows member states to seek consultations when their security is threatened.

After a late night meeting in Brussels, NATO issued a statement saying that it "strongly condemns Syria, expresses solidarity with Turkey, and warns Syria to end its violent acts and violations of international laws."

The Turkish attack was ordered in response to what was apparently an accidental strike by a Syrian mortar on the town of Akçakale on Turkey's southeastern border with Syria. One shell struck a house in the town's residential section, killing a woman and her four children. It was by no means clear which side was responsible for the shelling, however, and some commentators in Turkey suggested that it could have been deliberately staged with

the aim of provoking a Turkish intervention.

Syrian Information Minister Omran Zoabion offered condolences over the deaths and called for restraint, saying that the Syrian government was investigating the incident. He attributed the tensions to a situation "on the border with terrorist groups that are spread along it and pose a threat not only to Syria's national security but also to regional security."

According to the statement from Erdogan's office, the response to the shelling fell under the changed rules of engagement announced by the Turkish government after a Turkish warplane was shot down after invading Syrian air space on June 26. At that time, Turkey announced that any Syrian forces approaching the border would be treated as a hostile threat. Since then, the Turkish military has beefed up its presence in the area.

Turkish television networks Wednesday reported that more tanks and special forces troops have been rushed to the border.

The threat of retaliation had already been issued by Ankara last weekend after another incident in which stray fire struck Akçakale on September 28, but without causing any casualties. Turkey threatened that any repeat of such fire would provoke a response.

Heavy fighting has been raging between Syrian government forces and Western-backed insurgents on the Syrian side of the border for the last three weeks.

Tensions had risen to such a level that just on Tuesday Russia had issued an appeal for restraint and a warning to the Western powers not to use the situation as a pretext for intervention.

Russia's Deputy Foreign Minister Gennady Gatilov cautioned that the Western-backed "rebels" might deliberately provoke fighting on the border with the aim of drawing Turkey into the conflict.

"In our contacts with partners in NATO and in the region, we are calling on them not to seek pretexts for carrying out a military scenario or to introduce initiatives such as humanitarian corridors or buffer zones," Gatilov said.

Speaking to the press during a state visit to Kazakhstan, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said that Washington was “outraged” by the Syrian shelling, adding that she would be speaking to the Turkish foreign minister to determine “the best way forward.” She described the spillover of Syria’s civil war into Turkey as “very, very dangerous.”

Unlike the woman and children killed in Akçakale, the Turkish government is hardly an innocent victim. Nor does Washington have any moral standing to proclaim “outrage” over the bloodshed.

Turkey has provided its territory as a base of operations for the so-called Free Syrian Army, while allowing the US to set up a CIA command-and-control center in Adana, the southern Turkish city that also hosts the US Incirlik Air Base. From there the CIA coordinates the flow of weapons, materiel, money and foreign fighters to wage a war aimed at toppling the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and replacing it with a more pliant puppet.

The Turkish government has argued strenuously for the imposition of a “humanitarian corridor,” which would inevitably require the direct intervention of NATO warplanes and ground forces.

Turkish military officers have reportedly been sent into Syria to direct military operations of the insurgents.

Ankara’s bellicose policy toward Syria is deeply unpopular among wide layers of the Turkish population, which see Turkey serving as a pawn in US imperialism’s strategy of asserting its hegemony over the Middle East.

The Turkish press reported that the deaths in Akçakale had caused an angry demonstration by townspeople, who demanded the resignation of the local government. Police used tear gas and pepper spray against the crowd before the district governor was taken away in an armored car.

Border tensions have also been fueled by the increasing assertion of autonomy by Syria’s Kurdish population in the country’s northeast near the Turkish frontier. Ankara has charged that the Syrian Kurdish movement is allowing Turkish Kurdish guerrillas of the PKK (Kurdistan Workers Party) to operate there and has threatened intervention. Fighting between the Turkish military and the PKK has become the most intense in decades since the outbreak of civil war in Syria.

The Turkish-Syrian border clash came on the same day that a massive terrorist attack killed nearly 50 people and left at least another 100 wounded in the center of Aleppo, Syria’s largest city and its commercial hub. Many of the victims were civilians.

A series of blasts, reportedly caused by at least two suicide car bombs and mortar attacks, ripped through Aleppo’s Saadallah al-Jabiri Square near a hotel and a Syrian army officers’ club. The force of the explosions ripped the facades off buildings facing the square and gouged a deep hole in the roadway.

Syrian state television condemned the bombings as terrorist attacks and broadcast photographs of the bodies of three men said to be involved. All were wearing military uniforms and reportedly wore explosive vests, but were shot before they could detonate them.

The suicide bombings in Aleppo came barely a week after a similar attack on the Syrian army headquarters in Damascus.

Such suicide attacks are the hallmark of Al Qaeda-linked Islamist forces, including thousands of fighters who have poured into Syria from Libya, Iraq, Saudi Arabia and as far away as Pakistan and Chechnya. These elements are playing an increasingly prominent role in what has become a bitter sectarian struggle egged on by Washington and its allies.

One of these jihadist groups, the so-called Al-Nusra Front, which has played a major role in the fighting in Aleppo, issued a statement Wednesday claiming responsibility for the summary execution of 20 Syrian soldiers captured at the Hanano military garrison. The statement referred to the murdered conscript soldiers as “heretics,” a characterization used to describe the minority Alawite sect of which Assad is a member, as well as other non-Sunni Muslim populations.



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