Turkey leads US-sponsored military encirclement of Syria

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Despite widely reported concerns of blowback in Syria due to the arming of jihadist groups, a military build-up on Syria's borders is proceeding apace.

Racep Tayyip Erdogan's Islamist government in Turkey is leading the way, using the pretext of stray mortar fire from Syria that killed five civilians to legitimise the deployment of 250 tanks, jets, helicopter gunships, troops, artillery emplacements and antiaircraft batteries on the border.

The Turkish Parliament recently granted war powers to Erdogan to send troops into Syria. Daily targeting of Syrian facilities was followed last week by the use of F16s to force down a civilian Syrian Airlines Airbus en route to Damascus from Moscow, with claims that it was carrying Russian weaponry.

Erdogan used the United Nations Security Council as a platform to attack Russia and China—"one or two members of the permanent five"—for vetoing anti-Syrian resolutions and demand an overhaul of the Security Council.

Turkey, along with the Gulf States led by Qatar, is also behind a push to unite Syria's divided opposition forces, with the explicit aim of overcoming the qualms of the Western powers over arming the opposition and backing it militarily. There is an agreement to announce a joint leadership on November 4 at a conference in Qatar, just two days before the US presidential elections.

Foreign supporters "are telling us: 'Sort yourselves out and unite, we need a clear and credible side to provide it with quality weapons,'" a source said.

Ensuring an effective command structure under the nominal discipline of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and the actual control of Turkey and its allies requires the inclusion of rival military leaders Riad al-Asaad, Mustafa Sheikh and Mohammad Haj Ali (all defectors from the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad), as well as various leaders of provincial military councils inside Syria. Funds are also being funneled into the Local Coordinating Committees—hitherto held up by various ex-left groups around the world as being independent of the imperialist powers.

UN Arab League mediator Lakhdar Brahimi is making great play of urging Iran to arrange a four-day cease-fire beginning October 25 to mark the Muslim religious holiday of Eid al-Adha. He is saying less about a proposal, more indicative of the UN's role, to dispatch a 3,000-strong troop force to Syria.

The *Daily Telegraph* reported that Brahimi "has spent recent weeks quietly sounding out which countries would be willing to contribute soldiers" to such a force, ostensibly to be made operable following a future truce.

The direct involvement of US and British forces would be "unlikely", given their role in Iraq, Afghanistan and Libya, so Brahimi "is thought to be looking at more nations that currently contribute to Unifil, the 15,000-strong mission set up to police Israel's borders with Lebanon."

These include Germany, France, Italy, Spain and Ireland—"one of which would be expected to play a leading role in the Syria peacekeeping force."

The proposal was leaked by the Syrian National Council (SNC), with whom Brahami met in Turkey at the weekend. On Monday, the SNC was meeting for a two-day summit in the Qatari capital, Doha. Qatar's prime minister, Sheikh Hamad bin Jassem al-Thani, took the occasion to push for military intervention in Syria. He told reporters, "Any mission that is not well armed will not fulfil its aim. For this, it must have enough members and equipment to carry out its duty."

The SNC's 35-member general secretariat was meeting in Doha to discuss "the establishment of

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mechanisms to administer the areas which have been liberated" in Syria, according to sources.

Discussions of the direct involvement of European troops in Syria are in line with confirmed reports that the US and Britain have despatched military forces to Jordan, for the purported purpose of policing its border and preventing a spill-over of the conflict.

US Defense Secretary Leon Panetta acknowledged the move at an October 10 meeting of NATO defence ministers in Brussels. The US has repeatedly issued denials of a growing military presence in Turkey located at the Incirlik airbase, but Panetta confirmed that Washington had "worked with" Turkey on "humanitarian, as well as chemical and biological weapons issues."

The next day, the *Times* of London and the *New York Times* reported that Britain too has upward of 150 soldiers and military advisors in Jordan. Jordanian military sources said France may also be involved.

Anonymous senior US defence officials told Reuters that most of those sent to Jordan were Army Special Operations forces, deployed at a military centre near Amman and moving "back and forth to the Syrian border" to gather intelligence and "plan joint Jordanian-US military manoeuvres."

There is "talk of contingency plans for a quick pre-emptive strike if al Assad loses control over his stock of chemical weapons in the civil war," Reuters added.

Turkey's bellicose stand has produced widespread media reports that the US and other NATO powers risk being "dragged into" a wider regional war. This in part reflects real concerns and divisions within imperialist ruling circles and in part an effort to conceal the Western powers' instrumental role in encouraging military conflict.

Attention has been drawn to the refusal of NATO to heed appeals by Turkey for it to invoke Article 5 of its charter authorising the military defence of a member nation. But despite this, NATO has publicly gone a long way towards endorsing Turkey's actions.

NATO Secretary-General Anders Fogh Rasmussen told reporters at the same Brussels summit that "obviously Turkey can rely on NATO solidarity… Taking into account the situation at *our southeastern border*, we have taken the steps necessary to make sure that we have all plans in place to protect and defend Turkey," [emphasis added].

The previous day, a senior US defence official said, "We engage with Turkey to make sure that should the time come where Turkey needs help, we're able to do what we can."

In an indication of the type of discussions taking place in the corridors of power, several policy advisers have gone into print to outline their proposals for a proxy military intervention by Turkey to which the US could then lend overt support.

Jorge Benitez, a senior fellow at the Atlantic Council, urged in the October 15 *Christian Science Monitor*: "To preserve its credibility in Turkey and the region, NATO should offer radar aircraft and/or rapid reaction forces."

"Too much attention has been focused on the question of invoking Article 5, the alliance's mutual defence clause," he added. Other options were available. Before the US-led war against Iraq in 2003, he noted, Turkey had requested a consultative meeting under Article 4 of the NATO treaty "to discuss how the alliance could help Turkey deter an attack from Iraq."

Using this pretext, NATO approved Operation Display Deterrence, including the dispatch of four AWACS radar aircraft, five Patriot air defence batteries, equipment for chemical and biological defence, and "more than 1,000 'technically advanced and highly capable forces' to support Turkey during the Iraq conflict."

Soner Cagaptay of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy published an article in the October 11 *New York Times* on a three-point strategy he called "the right way for Turkey to intervene in Syria."

He urged Turkey to "continue the current pattern of shelling across the border every time Syria targets Turkey" in order to "weaken Syrian forces" and let the FSA "fill the vacuum;" to "combine shelling with cross-border raids to target Kurdish militants in Syria;" and, if things "get worse along the border," to stage "a limited invasion to contain the crisis as it did in Cyprus in the 1970s."

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