

# Turkey shoots down Syrian fighter jet

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The crisis of the Turkish government is deepening. Only days before regional elections on Sunday, Recep Tayyip Erdogan's Justice and Development Party (AKP) administration is becoming increasingly unstable.

Last Thursday evening, the government blocked access to the online messaging service Twitter. Erdogan justified this by saying that the company had so far refused to delete contributions from users that had been condemned by Turkish courts. But the real reason was that the sustained corruption accusations against Erdogan and his government have mainly been spread via Twitter due to the state's control over the media. The move was to undermine this.

Along with this authoritarian measure, the government has stepped up the conflict with Syria on the eve of the elections, whipping up nationalist sentiments and war hysteria. On Sunday, the Turkish air force shot down a Syrian fighter jet that had allegedly breached Turkish air space. Prime Minister Erdogan announced the downing of the plane at an election rally and warned that anyone violating Turkish airspace should expect "hard blows."

The government in Damascus sharply condemned the attack. The Syrian foreign ministry called it "blatant aggression" by Turkey, which was "unprecedented and unjustifiable." The plane had not left Syrian territory at any point, and as a result, it had gone down on Syrian territory.

Last Friday, there were heavy clashes in Kasab, a Syrian border crossing to Turkey, in which at least 24 people were killed. According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, four jihadi groups, including the Al Qaeda-aligned Al Nusra Front, fought battles with government troops. According to the Syrian government's account, the rebels were backed by the Turkish military.

The border between Turkey and Syria is almost 800

kilometres long, and Erdogan's support for the Islamist rebels against the Assad regime has increased the flow of refugees across it. More than 700,000 refugees from Syria are currently in Turkey, leading to mounting unrest in the southern provinces. Some media reports state that Ankara is increasingly losing control over parts of the southern border areas.

Last year, Erdogan had still expected to force a rapid regime change in Syria in alliance with the United States. But then the Obama administration changed course, began talks with Iran and put its advanced military plans for an attack on Syria temporarily on hold.

Prior to this, the military coup in Egypt had already led to a worsening of relations between Turkey, the U.S. and Saudi Arabia, one of the most important investors in Turkey. While the Saudis financed the coup and the United States collaborated with them, Erdogan's government backed the Muslim Brotherhood, which was driven from power by the coup before being outlawed.

The current crisis in Ukraine and the conflict between the European Union and the U.S., and Russia, has resulted in Turkey being caught between the two fronts. After Germany, Russia is the second largest trading partner with Turkey. At the end of 2012, foreign direct investment in Turkey from Russia amounted to €9 billion. Fifty-five percent of Turkish gas imports come from Russia.

American and European economic and trade sanctions against Russia, which Turkey would have to enforce as a NATO member, would have extremely negative consequences for Turkey. The Erdogan government has therefore been striving for a diplomatic resolution and has refrained from openly criticising the Russian government.

As relations with Washington became increasingly tense, Erdogan pursued the idea for a time of joining

the Eurasian Economic Union, which was founded by Russia in 2000, and of becoming a full member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). Along with Russia and China, the SCO includes the central Asian states of Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. India, Pakistan, Iran and Mongolia enjoy observer status.

As a reaction to this, relations with Washington worsened further. In the current crisis, the Hizmet movement of preacher Fethullah Gulen is playing an important role. Gülen has lived in exile in the U.S. since 1999 and has close ties with the American state. Members of Gülen's movement hold important positions in the Turkish state apparatus, and have been accused by Erdogan of being responsible for the corruption investigations and exposures against his government and family. He ordered the firing of thousands of police officers and members of the judiciary and replaced them in order to stop the investigations.

The problems are being worsened by a rapidly developing economic crisis. Turkey currently has a balance of payments deficit of US\$60 billion and holds only US\$33 billion in foreign currency reserves. This is only enough to cover import costs for one and a half months.

Over the past three years, Turkey's budget deficit was between 8 and 10 percent of GDP. This is comparable with the position of Greece before its financial collapse in 2011. It has been financed by loans from Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states. However, relations with these states have deteriorated due to Turkey's support for the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, and they have begun to withdraw their financial backing for Turkey.

Conditions for the working class and broad sections of the population are already catastrophic. According to official figures from the Turkish Statistics Institute, 9.4 million people have no access at all to the social welfare system. This is likely an underestimation, since official figures are extremely optimistic.

According to the DISK trade union, unemployment is much higher than the official figure of 2.8 million, or 10 percent. Their calculations suggest that 4.9 million, or 16.3 percent, are without work or wages. The minimum wage, on which many workers live, equates to €280 per month and is insufficient to satisfy basic

necessities.

The massive protests that developed two weeks ago in the wake of the death of 15-year-old Berkin Elvan in more than 30 cities across the country presage major class conflicts. Elvan had been in a coma since being hit by a police teargas canister during the Gezi Park demonstrations last June.

The Erdogan government is responding to the growing opposition with authoritarian measures and brutal police violence. The regional elections this coming Sunday take place under conditions of widespread intimidation and an atmosphere of war hysteria.



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