

The crisis in Iraq and the response of the Turkish ruling class

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The offensive in Iraq of the al-Qaeda-affiliated terrorist group Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) has not only revealed the destructive character of the US-led imperialist interventions in the Middle East, but also the corrupt and cynical character of its regional allies—first and foremost, the Turkish ruling class and its political representatives.

The ISIS seized the Turkish Consulate and kidnapped 49 people, including Consul General Öztürk Yılmaz, on June 10, one day after the abduction of 31 Turkish truck drivers in the Iraqi city of Mosul. The AKP (Justice and Development Party) government seemed stunned by these unexpected developments.

On Sunday, June 15, during his visit to Trabzon, a city in the eastern Black Sea region of Turkey, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan told the journalists that his government was “closely following” the events and would “decide what kind of steps can be taken”. Erdoğan pointed to the latest fighting in Tal Afar, a town with some 400,000 Turks, both Sunni and Shiite, neighbouring on the Syrian border. He said that the developments in Tal Afar “must not be underestimated”. He also blamed “some circles inside and outside of Iraq” for growing sectarian divisions.

One day earlier, Deputy Foreign Minister Naci Koru told reporters that Turkey was “contacting the [militants] through various channels. We are conducting several contacts on different platforms” for release of hostages. At his daily press briefing on Sunday, Koru ruled out assertions that Ankara was planning to launch military operation to rescue the hostages. “Our first priority right now is the safe release of our citizens, there is no such plan on our agenda”, he said. The Associated Press, citing an unnamed official, reported last week that the government is negotiating directly with the militants in Mosul.

According to a statement from the foreign ministry

released on Saturday, there were approximately 7,000 to 10,000 Turkish citizens in Iraq. It called on Turkish citizens in Mosul, Kirkuk, Salahaddin, Diyala, Anbar and Baghdad to leave those provinces as soon as possible.

Ankara’s “cared child” in Syria has become the “holy terror” in Iraq. The AKP government, which has armed, financed and trained the Islamist fighters against the Baath regime and Kurdish nationalists in Syria, joined its Western allies to condemn Al Nusra, another al-Qaeda-linked group in Syria, as a “terrorist group” only some 10 days ago, with a delay of one and a half years. Ankara has not yet condemned ISIS as a terrorist organisation openly. The government spokespersons are content to condemn al-Qaeda and its affiliated organisations in general.

Answering the opposition party’s accusation that the very same forces who hold Turkish diplomats and citizens hostage in Mosul have been supported by the AKP government in Syria, Deputy Prime Minister Bülent Arınç said on June 13 that there was no help “knowingly” from Turkey to these forces.

The cynical and hypocritical character of these words is clear in light of Ankara’s persistent demands for its Western allies to provide more equipment to the so-called Free Syrian Army (FSA) in the summer of 2012. The AKP government then resisted US plans to reorganise the “Syrian opposition” in November 2012, and took the risk of harming its relations with American imperialism. In accordance with Ankara’s fantasy of a new Middle East led by “moderate Sunni Turks”, the Turkish Intelligence Organisation (MİT) undertook the mission of supporting Sunni Islamist forces from the Muslim Brotherhood to Al Nusra and ISIS.

The abduction of 80 Turks in Mosul revealed two tendencies in the bourgeois opposition. One of them is the Turkish nationalist tendency represented by the main opposition Republican People’s Party (CHP) and the extreme right Nationalist Movement Party (MHP).

Despite few differences, they held the government responsible for the attack on the Turkish consulate in Mosul and for the kidnapping. They also declared their support for a possible military intervention in Mosul.

On June 12, the CHP withdrew its motion of no confidence against Erdoğan, due to the events in Mosul. Referring to the need for “national unity”, CHP’s Deputy Chairman of the Parliamentary Group Akif Hamzaçebi said, “Today, we regard lending assistance to the government as a task”.

In an interview with daily *Hürriyet*, Rıza Türmen, who has been a judge at the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) and is now a deputy for the CHP, admitted that the CHP could support a motion for a military operation in Mosul, which, in his opinion, would be in accordance with international law. “A military operation is very risky, but legally Turkey has an authorisation based on international law,” he said.

Spokespersons of the CHP, however, continue to criticise the government. On Friday, CHP’s leader Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu argued that the government has dragged the country into a quagmire in the Middle East. He said that the government should resign after the hostages are returned to Turkey.

The second opposition to the government consists of liberal intellectuals who supported the AKP government until 2010, in the name of “democratisation process”. They see the radical Islamists as a threat to Turkey’s security and stability, and have called on the AKP government to revise its policies in the Middle East. According to these liberal opponents of the government, the increasing influence of ISIS in Iraq and Syria will also produce a more precarious security situation and pose the danger of a direct terrorist attack within Turkey. Last September, ISIS threatened the Turkish government with a series of “suicide attacks” in Istanbul and Ankara. It also claimed responsibility for the twin car bombings in Reyhanlı, a town in the southern province of Hatay that killed 53 people last year.

One should recall that during the operation in Syria, Turkey declared that it would retaliate in the event of an attack on a small Turkish territory in Syria surrounded by ISIS forces, irrespective of who was responsible for the attack. Shortly after these threats, it was exposed that high-level government officials were discussing launching rockets against this territory in order to create a pretext for Turkish military intervention in Syria.

There are also claims in the media that Iraqi soldiers detained four Turkish military intelligence officers on

May 30 in Fallujah, on charges of training militants of ISIS. On Friday, CHP deputy chairman Sezgin Tanrıkulu mentioned the claims and asked Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu if it was true. According to the Turkish press, he also asked “whether Turkey is exporting arms and ammunition to Syria without official customs declarations, stressing that according to Ministry of Customs and Trade data, Turkey appears to be sending only weapons used for sporting purposes to Syria.”

Apparently, with the aim of legitimising a possible military intervention, there are a growing number of reports and interviews in the Turkish media that attribute ISIS’s offensive in Iraq to the cooperation of former Baathist army officers and Sunni tribes with it.

However, in an interview with Turkish daily *Radikal* on June 15, Mosul governor Atheel al-Nujaifi, who fled from the city after it was seized by ISIS, dismissed the claims that former Baath army officers and other Sunni groups were giving support to and fighting alongside ISIS. “When the [Iraqi] army retreated, these groups took control in their own areas. However, this does not mean that they fight alongside ISIS.... ISIS and the Baathists are on different roads. They are not the same and cannot be,” al-Nujaifi said.

Meanwhile, during his visit to Ankara on June 16, NATO secretary-general Anders Fogh Rasmussen called for the immediate release of Turkish diplomatic staff kidnapped by ISIS militants in Mosul. “We follow the dangerous developments in Iraq with great concern. I condemn the unacceptable attack on the consulate general in Mosul,” he said.

The offence of ISIS in Iraq is an expression of the ongoing ethnic and sectarian redivision of the Middle East, deliberately sparked by US imperialism and its regional allies almost 25 years ago. Rasmussen’s visit to Ankara and the decision of the Obama administration to send military forces to the Persian Gulf are clear signs of the preparation for another imperialist invasion of Iraq and Syria, in which the Turkish ruling class would inevitably take part.



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