

Turkey escalates involvement in Iraq-Syria war

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Turkey's Defence Minister Ismet Yilmaz accompanied foreign ministry and army officials to Iraq earlier this month to sign bilateral agreements with the Iraqi government in Baghdad and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Irbil. His stated purpose was to share "intelligence information as part of efforts in the fight against the ISIS [Islamic State in Iraq and Syria] threat."

Yilmaz declared that Turkey would do its best to support the Iraqi government. "Turkey is willing to do its part for the Iraqi army for its counterterrorism efforts by logistically supporting it and sharing intelligence," he pledged. "We are also ready to train and equip Iraqi army and Peshmerga forces."

The day before his announcement, two Turkish C-130 cargo planes landed at Muthenna Air Base, about 20 kilometres east of Baghdad, to deliver military supplies to the Iraqi army. Earlier, Yilmaz stated that Turkey was part of the anti-ISIS coalition and would make a "further contribution" to defeat the jihadists. He said, "Turkey has begun to actively contribute to the coalition. ... When the time comes, Turkey will make an assessment that takes into account our national interests and fulfils our responsibilities of coalition membership."

He did not make it clear whether Turkey's "active" contribution to the anti-ISIS coalition would include participation in the joint campaign of Iraqi forces, Kurdish Peshmerga and Shiite militia, backed up by air support from the US-led coalition, to reclaim Mosul province, under ISIS control since June 2014.

His statement came after the exiled governor of Mosul, Atheel al-Nujaifi, spoke with the Iraqi Kurdish online news web site Rudaw, claiming that Ankara, having agreed to send weapons and supplies to Iraqi forces, would take part in the offensive to recapture Mosul from ISIS. He also said that Turkey would train and equip about 3,000 Mosul residents to fight against ISIS. The training would take place in the KRG.

Turkey's *Daily Sabah* said that despite al-Nujaifi's claims, sources close to the government state that Turkey would not

put boots on the ground in Iraq or send weapons to Iraq, but would assist the anti-ISIS fight in other ways. Following a meeting between Iraqi Vice President Usama al-Nujaifi (Atheel al-Nujaifi's brother) and Turkish Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu, Ankara pledged "all kinds of support for the stability of Iraq," the paper reported.

This follows a February 18 agreement with Washington to "train and equip" Syrian opposition forces in the central Anatolia province of Kirikkale. Their task will be to fight both ISIS and the Syrian regime of President Bashar al-Assad. The chief of the Turkey general staff, General Necdet Özel, joined military chiefs from 25 countries involved in the US-led coalition at a meeting in Riyadh, where he pledged Ankara's commitment to the military campaign against ISIS.

Turkey was until recently reluctant to play an active role in the US-led coalition, and was subject to considerable criticism from the Western powers for allowing foreign fighters to cross into Iraq and Syria via Turkey to join ISIS, following ISIS's capture of vast swathes of Iraqi territory, posing a threat to Western oil interests.

ISIS's capture in June last year of 49 hostages, 46 of whom were staff members in the Turkish consulate in Mosul, provided Ankara with an excellent excuse for not joining the military campaign so as "not to risk the lives of the hostages."

However, Ankara's position shifted after ISIS released the hostages following some three months of secret negotiations, allegedly after Ankara offered some 180 prisoners in exchange. Under growing pressure from its Western allies, Ankara started to issue statements condemning ISIS as "a terrorist group having nothing to do with Islam."

US officials, including US Vice President Joe Biden, Secretary of State John Kerry and Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel, flew to Ankara to force the government to give the coalition forces expanded access to the Incirlik Air Base, which is close to Syria and Iraq. They demanded Ankara's participation in a train-and-equip program, along with other regional allies of US imperialism.

Ankara's first open military operation came on February 21, just after it signed up to the train-and-equip program. The evacuation of 38 soldiers guarding the Suleyman Shah tomb besieged by ISIS militants in Syria was a preliminary operation, which facilitates Ankara's military activities in Syria. After evacuating Turkish soldiers and moving the Tomb of Suleyman Shah, officially recognized as on Turkish territory, to a site on the Turkish-Syrian border, Ankara appears to have positioned itself against ISIS.

The operation with Syrian Kurdish forces to evacuate the site was a necessary step to remove possible threats in advance of any large scale ground operation in Syria, which would also strengthen the pro-imperialist anti-Assad forces.

In a related development at the beginning of March, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan visited Saudi Arabia, accompanied by a delegation that included Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu, Economy Minister Nihat Zeybekci and Deputy Prime Minister Numan Kurtulmus, in an attempt to repair relations between Ankara and Riyadh. Relations between the two countries deteriorated drastically following the July 2013 military coup led by General Abdel Fattah el-Sisi that toppled the Muslim Brotherhood-led government of President Mohammed Mursi, with whom Ankara had developed close ties.

Erdogan has consistently accused the "international community," including Saudi Arabia, of hypocrisy for giving legitimacy to Sisi and the military coup. Ankara's refusal to accept the Sisi government prompted Cairo to cut ties with Turkey and expel the Turkish ambassador. Ankara declared Egypt's ambassador to Turkey persona non grata.

Qatar, the Muslim Brotherhood's other main supporter in the region, came under heavy pressure from the US and Saudi Arabia to rebuild friendly relations with Cairo, leaving Ankara almost completely isolated. After Qatar expelled some MB members last year, Erdogan said, "If they [the Muslim Brotherhood leaders in exile in Qatar] request to come to Turkey, we will review these requests case by case." A number of exiled MB leaders, who had previously been living in Qatar, are now living in Turkey.

Erdogan's visit to Riyadh coincided with the visit by el-Sisi to Saudi Arabia, which, together with the United Arab Emirates and Kuwait, is the main financial backer of the Egyptian junta. The timing of the visits prompted speculation about a potential Saudi-brokered reconciliation between Ankara and Cairo. Erdogan ruled out any meeting or reconciliation, telling journalists who asked whether he would meet Sisi in Riyadh, "You must be joking. It's out of the question."

He emphasised that it was up to Egypt to take positive steps to normalize relations with Turkey. Sisi, appearing on Al-Arabia television, said that the timing of their visits was

just a coincidence and urged Ankara to "stop interfering in Egypt's internal affairs."

Turkey's diplomatic isolation has started to cost it economically. Cairo has refused to renew its ferryboat agreement with Turkey for a roll-on roll-off ferry route between Iskenderum and Port Said, which replaced Turkey's transit routes via Syria to Iraq and the Gulf, after it expires on April 20. The alternative, transit via the Suez Canal, will prove costly to Turkish exporters to the Middle East. Turkish companies in Libya are owed \$4.5 billion and construction equipment worth \$7 billion, while a further \$1.2 billion worth of machinery was looted from Turkish construction sites during the NATO-led war to topple the Gaddafi regime.

Turkey supports the Islamist-controlled National General Congress and the government of Omar al-Hasi in Tripoli against the Tobruk-based government appointed by the Assembly elected in June 2014.

Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates are supporting the Tobruk-based government and former General Khalifa Haftar, who has close links with the CIA, against the Tripoli government. Following the execution of 21 Egyptian Copts by Islamists pledging allegiance to ISIS, the Tobruk government expelled Turkish companies from Libya.

Facing growing economic and political problems before the June parliamentary elections, with Erdogan seeking a two-thirds majority to replace Turkey's existing constitution with one that makes him an executive rather than a ceremonial head of state, Turkey's decision to take an active role in the military operation against ISIS and Syria threatens to draw Ankara ever deeper into the quagmire created by US imperialism.



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