

With US backing, Turkey prepares to seize buffer zones inside Syria

Peter Schwarz
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After agreeing last week to join the US-led war against the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), Turkey is preparing to seize buffer zones within Syria, backed by US warplanes and Syrian opposition militias. This escalation follows weeks of talks with a high-ranking US delegation, and a phone call between Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan and US President Barack Obama.

“What we are talking about with Turkey is cooperating to support partners on the ground in northern Syria who are countering ISIL,” an unnamed senior US official told the *Wall Street Journal*, referring to one of the ISIS’s alternate acronyms. “The goal is to establish an ISIL-free zone and ensure greater security and stability along Turkey’s border with Syria.”

The US Air Force is now using Turkish airbases at Incirlik and Diyarbakir to attack IS targets in Syria and Iraq. The *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (FAZ) wrote, “The authorisation given to the Americans to use the Incirlik airbase for attacks on IS has been linked to the (alleged) Turkish plan to establish a no-fly-zone 90 kilometres long and up to 50 kilometres deep [55 miles by 30 miles] in northern Syria.”

US and Turkish officials told the *Journal* that planning for the intervention is ongoing. US and Turkish warplanes would provide air support for opposition militias. Planners are apparently concerned that US-backed Syrian opposition militias will fail to hold the zone, however, which could lead to direct Turkish intervention to seize the buffer zone in Syria.

Preparation for a US-Turkish intervention in Syria marks a major escalation in the imperialist-led re-division of the Middle East. While the intervention’s ostensible target is ISIS, it is also aimed at the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and Kurdish forces in northern Syria and Iraq, bordering Turkey.

Plans for Ankara to seize Syrian territory with US support are a blatant violation of Syrian sovereignty. The

US and Turkish governments, who have previously declared they wanted regime change in Syria, “are both expecting this new phase of the campaign to put pressure on Mr. Assad,” the *Journal* reported.

Details of the US-Turkish plans emerged after Assad admitted in a nationwide televised address this weekend that the Syrian army now faces severe manpower shortages. There is increasing speculation that Iran, Assad’s main Middle Eastern backer, may also cut support to Assad after signing its recent nuclear agreement with Washington.

The agreement between Washington and Ankara is based on a sordid deal. In exchange for Ankara’s participation in the war against ISIS, the US gave the go-ahead for attacks on Kurdish organisations, which, until now, were in the forefront of the fighting against ISIS and were in part supported militarily by the US.

The main target of the Turkish attacks over the weekend was not ISIS, but the Kurdish Workers Party (PKK) and its Syrian branch, the PYD/YPG. While the Turkish air force claimed to have fired on ISIS targets without violating Syrian air space, they penetrated deep into northern Iraq to bomb PKK positions. According to reports from the Kurdish YPG militia, confirmed by the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, Turkish tanks attacked their positions in the northern Syrian village of Sor Maghar. Ankara denied targeting the PYD/YPG, however.

Ankara thereby brought an end to its six-year peace process with the PKK, amid growing concerns that the rise of Kurdish forces in Iraq and Syria threatened its basic strategic interests. The FAZ cited a recent study by the Centre for Middle Eastern Strategic Studies in Ankara: “Without a military intervention by Turkey (in Syria), it is highly likely that the Kurds will conquer the territory between the (Kurdish-controlled) cities of Afrin and Kobani in Syria.”

“A completely Kurdish-controlled belt from Iraq in the east to Syria in the west,” the FAZ wrote, “would however ‘cut the geographic connection between Turkey and the Arab world.’” Since the danger of “an independent Kurdish state emerging from the breakdown of the Iraqi state” would rise, Ankara wanted to “at least block the emergence of a further contiguous area of Kurdish rule in Syria.”

Ankara is combining attacks in Syria and northern Iraq with repression against domestic opposition within Turkey. Hundreds were detained over the weekend, including PKK supporters, ISIS supporters and political activists.

On Sunday evening, the government banned a peace march in Istanbul by the pro-Kurdish People’s Democratic Party (HDP) to commemorate the victims of the Suruç attack. In Suruç, a suicide bomber killed 32 and injured around 100 people who had planned to travel to the Syrian-Kurdish city of Kobani to help with reconstruction. The government seized on the attack to justify war with ISIS.

With the attacks in Syria and domestic repression, the governing Justice and Development Party (AKP) and President Tayyip Erdogan are responding to a growing political crisis. The AKP, which has ruled Turkey since 2002, lost its absolute majority in parliament in June, when the Kurdish HDP surpassed the 10 percent hurdle for parliamentary representation. Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu has until August 23 to find a coalition partner, which he has not been able to do thus far. Thereafter, Erdogan can dissolve parliament and call fresh elections.

Many observers believe that by intervening in Syria and attacking the PKK, which is retaliating with attacks in Turkey, Erdogan intends to provoke hysteria over war and terrorism to enable the AKP to secure a parliamentary majority in new elections.

Turkey’s strong economic growth rates, which guaranteed the AKP’s parliamentary majorities, have been hit hard. This year’s growth target of 4 percent will not be met, and next year’s projection is just 3 percent. Regional wars, sanctions against Russia, and falling global prices have slashed Turkey’s export and tourist revenues. In addition, Ankara claims, the influx of 2 million refugees from Syria and Iraq has cost \$6 billion so far.

Erdogan and the AKP confront a foreign policy blind alley, however. Their perspective of becoming the leading regional power in the Arab world, in the tradition of the Ottoman Empire, suffered its first major setback two

years ago when the Egyptian military overthrew President Mohammed Mursi, with whose Muslim Brotherhood the AKP was allied.

In Syria, Ankara pushed for the overthrow of the Assad regime. Like Washington, it initially supported the opposition, including ISIS, which was allowed to operate virtually unhindered in Turkey. When ISIS moved into Iraq and endangered the Baghdad regime, Washington carried out a U-turn and began bombing ISIS. While holding firm to its goal of overthrowing Assad, it began supporting ISIS’s opponents. Ankara did not join in this policy shift, because it feared the emergence of an independent Kurdish state in Northern Iraq and Syria.

Ankara is now embarking on an incendiary attempt to resolve the differences with Washington, provoked by the deepening crisis in the Middle East, through military escalation.

Significantly, this strategy is escalating tensions within NATO. Washington is supporting attacks on the PKK, and the White House issued a statement declaring that Turkey can defend itself against terrorist attacks by Kurds.

This raised sharp differences within Europe, however. German Chancellor Angela Merkel and Defence Minister Ursula Von der Leyen called on Turkey not to endanger the peace process with the Kurds. Berlin is arming the Iraqi Kurdish *peshmerga* militia, and indirectly the Syrian Kurds in the process, and is training their fighters.

A *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (FAZ) editorial described the differences between America and Europe as “quite major.”

“Washington is apparently ready to pay the price of an escalation of the Kurdish conflict by Turkey to secure more firepower against IS,” wrote Nikolas Busse. “By contrast, the Europeans are more focused on the peace process between Ankara and the Kurds, even though it hasn’t progressed very far recently. ... It would be better if this transatlantic disunity was not pushed to the limit.”

A NATO conference is to take place today at Turkey’s initiative to discuss these differences.



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