

Shots fired amid Russian-Turkish naval standoff in Aegean

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Russian forces fired warning shots at a Turkish fishing vessel during a tense standoff in the Aegean Sea on Sunday, according to the Russian government.

Russia's defense minister summoned counterparts from Turkey's embassy in Moscow for discussions in the wake of the incident. The Turkish officials were "given a tough explanation about the potentially disastrous consequences from Ankara's reckless actions towards Russia's military contingent fighting against international terrorism in Syria," a statement by Russian defense officials said.

The Russian officials warned their Turkish counterparts that the government of Russian President Vladimir Putin harbors "deep concerns about more Turkish provocations."

The Russian government has made clear that it views the incident as a deliberate provocation by the Turkish navy. According to Russian officials, the warning shots were fired after the Turkish ship continued to follow a collision course, steaming directly towards the Russian destroyer while refusing to answer radio transmissions and visual warning displays by the Russian crew.

The Turkish vessel finally diverted, "drastically changing course" according to the Russian account, only in response to the warning shots, before passing the Russian destroyer at close quarters, within less than half a kilometer, all while continuing to maintain complete radio silence, according to Russian officials.

The encounter is the latest in a series of spiraling provocations and recriminations between Moscow and Ankara in the wake of the November 24 shoot down of a Russian Sukhoi fighter jet along the Turkish-Syrian border. The shoot down, the first downing of a Russian plane by a NATO military force in more than 50 years, was clearly approved in advance by the US and NATO command, and was carried out to humiliate and punish

Moscow and create conditions for stepped up intervention by the Western powers in Syria and throughout the region.

The weeks since the November 24 shoot down have seen continuously growing tensions between the US-aligned Turkish regime and Russia. Russian President Putin responded by denouncing the attack as a "stab in the back" and publicly accusing the Turkish government of supporting Islamic State in Iraq Syria (ISIS) militarily and systematically purchasing cheap oil extracted by the extremist militia in northern Iraq.

When Turkey and its US-NATO backers staunchly defended the shoot down, Russia responded by imposing economic sanctions against Ankara and deploying advanced anti-aircraft systems to northern Syria.

Beginning on December 3, Turkey launched new ground operations inside northern Iraq, sending hundreds of heavy infantry to Bashiqa, near Mosul. According to regional analysts, the Turkish incursion was launched as part of plans to secure effective Turkish control over northern Iraq, as part of Ankara's efforts to block the formation of an independent Kurdish state, suppress opposition from Kurdish groups internally, and shore up Ankara's position in relation to Iran and Saudi Arabia, the other main contenders for dominance at the regional level.

The Shia government in Baghdad and other pro-Iranian forces inside Iraq have responded to the Turkish moves by organizing angry demonstrations and issuing threats of armed attacks against the Turkish forces.

Shi'ite militias staged anti-Turkish demonstrations over the weekend, burning Turkish flags and chanting "Death to Turkey. Death to Erdogan." The Turkish presence was an act of "foreign aggression" which Iraq must resist "using all possible means," leader of the

Shi'ite Badr Organization militia Hadi al-Amiri told crowds in Baghdad Sunday.

In statements referring to Turkish incursion over the weekend, Russia's top diplomat made clear that Moscow views the move as essentially an act of war against Iraq and rejects Turkish claims that this mission is part of the war against ISIS.

"What is happening in northern Iraq is an illegal action by Turkey, an invasion of the territory of a neighboring state, and on such a scale that it is hard to justify with arguments about preparation, training and so on. We are concerned about it," Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Gennady Gatlov told the media on Sunday.

With Ankara refusing absolutely to withdraw its forces, there is every indication that Iraq is becoming a new venue for the multi-sided proxy war being fought between the US and Russia on the other side of the border.

"The tension between Turkey and Iraq could soon open a new front in the Middle East. A war between these two countries cannot be ruled out any longer," the German paper *Deutsche Wirtschafts Nachrichten* (DWN) noted.

The danger of a direct war breaking out between Russia and Turkey was underscored last week, on December 6, when a Russian soldier pointed a rocket launcher menacingly toward the shores of Istanbul, as his ship passed through the strategic waterway that cuts through the center of Istanbul.

The intervening week has seen heated exchanges between the two governments. Over the weekend, Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu warned that Turkey is growing impatient with Russian provocations. Cavusoglu accused Russia of seizing on "every opportunity" to exact revenge for the downing of the Sukhoi jet.

In an address to the nation Sunday, Russian President Putin issued thinly veiled condemnations of the Turkish and US governments for their support of hardline Islamist militias as part of their efforts to overthrow the Syrian government.

Russian efforts to fight terrorism in Syria have been hampered by "attempts to use [terrorists] for some selfish goals," and "criminal, bloody business with terrorists," Putin said, before going on to announce that Russia would cancel discussions with Ankara over joint

involvement in a large pipeline project.

While they represent a key index of the explosive tensions building up in the region, the series of provocations and counter-provocations by Turkey and Russia are ultimately a secondary expression of the global US war drive, in which Washington is striving to consolidate its military and political stronghold over the Middle East. The origins of the expanding Middle Eastern war centered on Iraq and Syria lie not in the maneuvers of the Putin government, but in the decades-long US military and covert operations targeting more Russian-aligned governments, such as those of Syria and Iran, throughout the region and beyond.

At present, Washington is continuously escalating its military interventions in both countries. In the lead up to the November 24 shoot down by Turkey, the US was massing new forces along the Turkish-Syrian border, including deployment of new squadrons of US F-16 jets to airbases in southeast Turkey, and launching new US-Turkish operations in the border area. The US is escalating its operations on both sides of the Syria-Iraq border, Defense Secretary Ashton Carter told the Senate Armed Services Committee.

The latest developments in the Aegean represent an ominous warning for the international working class. The constant drumbeat of incidents is posing over and over again the danger that the Syrian civil war, which has developed rapidly into a general region-wide conflict since being fomented by the US and NATO powers beginning in 2011, may at any time leap to the level of a direct global confrontation between nuclear-armed powers.



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