

German Chancellor Merkel announces NATO intervention in Aegean Sea

Ulrich Rippert
11 February 2016

German Chancellor Angela Merkel returned to Ankara on Monday, the latest of several trips to Turkey since the beginning of this year. She met there with Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu and President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. While stopping the flow of refugees and border security were again on the agenda, this time political and military collaboration against Russia was at the heart of the talks.

Both Merkel and Davutoglu condemned the Russian bombardment of civilians in Aleppo and warned of a “humanitarian catastrophe.” At a joint press conference they stated, “We are horrified at the suffering which has emerged among the people due above all to bombing from the Russian side.” The Turkish-Syrian border region, where tens of thousands are currently fleeing, shows the “real extent of misery.”

The previous week had seen a major offensive by Syrian government troops, supported by Russian airstrikes, to take back Aleppo. With a pre-war population of over 2 million, Aleppo is Syria’s largest city in addition to being one of the region’s oldest, occupying a strategically important position between the Mediterranean Sea and Euphrates river.

So-called anti-Assad rebels have controlled part of the city for some time, using it to wage their war against the government in Damascus. Government troops, with Russian support, have now begun to reconquer this territory, at the same time disrupting an important supply route linking the Islamist militias to Turkey.

The US government and its allies in the region, especially Saudi Arabia and Turkey, have reacted angrily. The rebels, within which Islamist militias like the Al-Nusra Front play the leading role, have long been supplied by Ankara and Washington with weapons, money and logistical support.

Last week, the UN’s Syrian envoy broke off peace talks shortly after their commencement, and the Saudi regime in Riyadh has announced its readiness to deploy ground troops.

Since then, the flood of refugees out of Syria, which has been stalled at the Turkish border after Ankara closed it, has been exploited for an all-out campaign against Russia. Demagogic media reports combine pictures from 20 years ago during the Chechnya war with photos from Aleppo. The call for a military intervention, which could lead to direct conflict with Russia, is assuming an hysterical tone.

Die Welt on Monday accused Russian President Vladimir Putin of “avenging...the Turks and Germans” with the attack on Aleppo, and bluntly threatened that “to leave a battle to a warrior like Putin out of weakness could quickly backfire.”

The exploitation of the plight of the refugees fleeing Aleppo as the pretext for this campaign is utterly hypocritical. The US and its allies have been encouraging the civil war in Syria for years, turning millions into refugees. The Turkish government is currently waging war against its Kurdish minority, the brutality of which is comparable with the events in Aleppo.

Kurdish cities, like the historic trading centres of Diyarbakir, Cizre and others have been turned into battlefields. 1.3 million civilians have been impacted by a 24-hour curfew for six weeks. At the end of January, human rights organisations counted 200 deaths and over 200,000 refugees.

Yet while Merkel in Ankara condemned the “inhumane” Russian attacks and accused Moscow of bombarding the civilian population, she failed to mention the war in the east of Turkey. She is striving for close cooperation with the Erdogan government so

that it will block the victims of the wars in Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan from fleeing to Europe.

Merkel promised to rapidly make available the €3 billion the European Union committed in November to build refugee camps in Turkey. The Technical Assistance Centre (THW) would in the future support Turkey's disaster relief agency Afad with the provisioning of refugees. The EU border protection agency Frontex is also to be provided with additional military equipment.

But Merkel's most important announcement was that in the future, NATO would secure the sea passage between Turkey and Greece. According to a *Tagesspiegel* report, she agreed to this with her Turkish counterpart Davutoglu without discussing it beforehand with the other NATO members or NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg.

"This time, Angela Merkel took NATO by surprise," *Tagesspiegel* wrote. However, there was within NATO "certainly sympathy for an inclusion of the alliance in dealing with the refugee crisis." Italy, for example, which is the destination for many refugee boats, would be thankful for any support, according to NATO circles in Brussels.

Stoltenberg said Tuesday that the initiative to combat "smugglers" would be seriously considered. He had already discussed the plan by telephone with German defence minister Ursula Von der Leyen (Christian Democrats) and her Turkish counterpart Mehmet Fatih Ceylan. Today, the NATO defence ministers intend to concretise the proposal at a summit in Brussels.

With their plan for a NATO intervention in the Aegean Sea, Merkel and Davutoglu are basing themselves on a strategic concept adopted by the alliance in 2010 at its Lisbon summit. Combatting human trafficking was defined as a task of NATO. Using this argument, the NATO mission in the Aegean is to be presented as a humanitarian action against smugglers. But in the context of mounting tensions with Russia, it could quickly become the prelude to a direct NATO intervention in the Syrian war.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact