

# Turkey pushes for ground invasion of Syria

Bill Van Auken  
17 February 2016

Turkey is pressing for the US and its allies to launch a ground invasion as the only means of ending the nearly five-year-old civil war in Syria, an official in Ankara told the media Wednesday. “We are asking coalition partners that there should be a ground operation,” said the official, who was authorized to speak on the condition of anonymity. “We are discussing this with allies.”

While adding that such an invasion would not take the form of a “unilateral military operation from Turkey in Syria,” the official insisted, “Without a ground operation, it is impossible to stop the fighting in Syria.”

The potential support for such an escalation of the Syrian war has found expression in a concerted propaganda campaign, particularly in Europe, over the deaths of some 50 civilians in attacks on hospitals and schools in northern Syria on Monday. The Western media and several European governments have blamed the deaths on the Syrian government and the Russian forces supporting it, charges that both Damascus and Moscow have denied.

Earlier this month, both Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, which, like Turkey, are key patrons of the Islamist militias in Syria, announced that they were prepared to send troops into the country. The Saudi royal regime transferred four of its warplanes to Turkey’s Incirlik air base.

Asked what the goal of such a ground operation would be, the Turkish official replied, to remove “all terror groups from Syria,” adding that Turkey included in this category not only the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), but also Syrian Kurdish forces and the Syrian government itself.

While insisting on the need for the “international coalition” to participate in any invasion, the Turkish official left open the possibility of unilateral action if this failed to materialize. “Of course, it is difficult to

reckon what could happen in 10 days,” he said. “If conditions change, there might be some options.”

These statements came as Turkey continued its bombardment of northern Syria with long-range artillery for a fourth consecutive day. The target of the Turkish fire is the YPG, or People’s Protection Units, the Syrian Kurdish militia.

Backed by Russian air strikes, the YPG has made major military advances near the Turkish border against Al Qaeda-linked Islamist forces supported by Ankara and the West. Meanwhile, troops loyal to the Syrian government of President Bashar al-Assad have scored similar victories around Aleppo, which was Syria’s largest city and commercial center before the US-orchestrated war for regime-change. This war has claimed the lives of over a quarter of a million Syrians and turned 11 million more into homeless refugees.

During a visit to Ukraine—undoubtedly staged in a deliberate bid to ratchet up tensions with Russia—Turkish Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu said Tuesday that Turkey would continue its bombardment of Turkish territory until the YPG withdrew from the strategic border town of Azaz.

The Turkish shelling and demands for an outright invasion of Syria reflect the growing desperation of the imperialist powers and their regional allies over the reversals suffered in their attempt to overthrow the Assad government by arming and funding Salafist jihadi forces in a sectarian civil war.

The government of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has declared its support for the so-called war against ISIS initiated by the US with bombing campaigns in both Iraq and Syria. Ankara has used this campaign, however, as a cover for launching its own military assault against Kurdish forces in both of those countries, together with a bloody crackdown against the population in Turkey’s predominantly Kurdish provinces. It has drawn an equal sign between ISIS, the

PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party) and the Syrian Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) and its military arm, the YPG, branding them all as "terrorist."

Ankara's immediate concern is to prevent the YPG advances from linking up two separate Kurdish enclaves in northwestern and northeastern Syria, effectively creating an autonomous Kurdish territory on Turkey's southern border.

At the same time, both the Erdogan government and the Saudi monarchy are determined to prevent the advances by the YPG and Syrian government forces from cutting off the last supply routes that have been used to funnel massive quantities of arms and supplies to the Islamist militias in an operation coordinated by the CIA.

Any Turkish-Saudi intervention would be directed at crushing the Kurds and supporting the Islamists. Both these aims would quickly pose the direct threat of a military confrontation with the Syrian government and the Russian forces that are supporting it.

Given Turkey's premeditated ambush of a Russian warplane on the Turkish-Syrian border last November, it is certain that any attempt to send Turkish planes into action over Syria would provoke a swift response. Russia has deployed advanced S-400 antiaircraft weapons systems in Syria for just such a purpose.

Less than a week after the US, Russia and the other 15 members of the International Syria Support Group agreed in Munich on a "cessation of hostilities" by the end of this week, the five-year-old conflict appears to be closer than ever to erupting into a regional and potentially global conflict.

Syrian President Assad issued a warning to this effect on Monday, saying that any ground invasion of Syria would have "global repercussions" and that Turkish and Saudi forces would find that such an adventure would be no "picnic."

Assad's statement follows similar warnings by Russian Prime Minister Dimitri Medvedev, who said last week that such an intervention would pose the danger of "sparking a new world war."

The hysteria being whipped up over the 50 civilian casualties reported on Monday is an indication that the threat of a wider war is steadily growing. The French and British governments followed Turkey in alleging that the Syrian and Russian governments were guilty of "war crimes."

More substantively, German Chancellor Angela Merkel voiced her support for a "no-fly zone," a long-time demand of the Turkish government, which wants to carve out a cordon of Syrian territory as a means of better organizing the war for regime-change, quelling the Kurds and containing the flow of refugees.

Russia denied responsibility for the attacks on the schools and hospitals, insisting that it had no forces capable of firing the missiles that were said to have hit them. The worst of the attacks took place in Azaz, where Prime Minister Davutoglu vowed Turkey would mount "a severe response" to the Kurdish offensive.

The Syrian ambassador to Moscow, Riad Haddad, charged that one of the hospitals had been the target of a US air strike.

The furor over alleged Russian and Syrian government "war crimes" stands in stark contrast to the utter silence of Western governments and media over the deaths of civilians resulting from air strikes by the US-led coalition, which have killed roughly 1,000 in Iraq and Syria since they began in August 2014.

Amid the growing international tensions, it was announced in Syria that Hashem al-Sheikh, also known as Abu Jaber, has been named the new commander of the so-called "rebels" resisting the Syrian government advance on the city of Aleppo. He was, until last September, the leader of Ahrar al-Sham, a hardline Salafist jihadi militia founded by Al Qaeda veterans from Afghanistan. It has fought in close alliance with Al Qaeda's Syrian affiliate, the al-Nusra Front, as well as Chechen Islamist fighters. These are the elements that Washington and its allies routinely refer to as the "moderate opposition."



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