

US pressures Turkey to curb attacks on Syrian Kurds

Patrick Martin
30 August 2016

President Obama and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan will meet this coming weekend, the White House said Monday, as tensions mounted between Washington and Ankara over the Turkish invasion of Syria. The meeting will be held in China, where both Obama and Erdogan are to participate in the Group of 20 summit of leading economic powers on September 4-5.

The Obama-Erdogan meeting was announced as a series of US spokesmen criticized the actions of the Turkish military in Syria. After ousting Islamic State (ISIS) militants from the border town of Jarabulus, Turkish forces, allied with the US through NATO, have turned their guns against Syrian Kurdish forces sponsored and armed by the United States. Dozens were killed Sunday in a series of bombardments as Turkish artillery and air strikes hit several villages held by Syrian Kurdish forces, including Jeb el-Kussa, where at least 20 died and 50 were wounded.

The Turkish invasion, dubbed Operation Euphrates Shield, while initially billed as an offensive against ISIS, quickly became an extension of the protracted civil war inside Turkey between the Turkish military and guerrillas of the separatist PKK (Kurdistan Workers Party). The Syrian Kurds, allied to the PKK, are organized in the YPG militia and the PYD party, which have become the main forces backed by the Obama administration in northern Syria.

The trigger for the Turkish incursion was not the Islamic State, which has controlled the section of the Syrian-Turkish border west of Jarabulus for several years without interference by Turkey, but the advances by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), an umbrella group dominated by the YPG, which crossed the Euphrates River and captured the town of Manbij from Islamic State after a 10-week battle.

Turkish forces crossed the border August 24 and drove Islamic State out of Jarabulus. Then, together with Sunni

Islamist militias allied with them, they began seizing villages that had been taken by the SDF-YPG in the course of their own offensive against ISIS. A reporter for Al-Jazeera said, referring to the Turkish forces and their militia allies, “their main target is to take over Manbij. YPG fighters maintain a significant presence along that area with their local allies.”

Kurdish forces withdrew in the face of the Turkish onslaught, but in some cases did not move east of the Euphrates, as demanded by Turkey, but south through Manbij, maintaining their beachhead on the western side of the river. The SDF’s military council in the region declared in an online statement, “We, the military council of Jarabulus and its countryside, announce the withdrawal of our forces to the line south of the Sajour River to preserve the lives of civilians and so that no pretext remains for continued strikes on villages and civilians.”

In the first days of the invasion, which began while Vice President Joseph Biden was in Ankara, US officials indicated their support for the Turkish attack, hoping that it would help create better conditions for realizing the main US goal of overthrowing Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, who is allied with Iran and Russia.

But Monday saw an escalating series of warnings to Turkey from US officials. Brett McGurk, the US special envoy for the campaign against ISIS, wrote on Twitter, “We want to make clear that we find these clashes—in areas where [ISIS] is not located—unacceptable and a source of deep concern. We call on all armed actors to stand down.”

Defense Secretary Ashton Carter, at a media appearance with the visiting defense minister of India, said that he would be meeting with the Turkish defense minister, Fikri Iski, next week in Europe. He said, “We have called upon Turkey to stay focused” on the fight against ISIS “and not to engage” the Kurdish forces. “We’ve called on both sides not to fight one another, not to fight each other,” he

said.

After announcing the upcoming Obama-Erdogan meeting, Deputy National Security Adviser Ben Rhodes told reporters at the White House, “Further action against the SDF would complicate efforts to have that united front” against ISIS. At their meeting in China, he went on, Obama and Erdogan would discuss the situation in Turkey since the attempted military coup of July 15, as well as the war in Syria and the refugee crisis that it has produced.

Meanwhile, the Syrian government, which has exercised no control over the region in question for several years, condemned what it called “repetitive breaches, aggression and massacres” committed by Turkey against the Syrian people in the area around Jarabulus. The Syrian Foreign Ministry sent two messages Monday to UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, accusing Turkey of “full-fledged crimes against humanity.”

Turkish officials reiterated their demands that the Syrian Kurdish forces cross back east of the Euphrates River or the Turkish military would continue to attack them. “So long as they don’t, they will be a target,” said Mevlut Cavusoglu, the foreign minister.

Posturing as the defender of Syrian Arabs against aggression by the Kurds—the stance adopted by ISIS as well—Cavusoglu claimed, “In the places where it has moved, the YPG forces everyone out—including Kurds—who do not think like it does and carries out ethnic cleansing.”

Deputy Prime Minister Numan Kurtulmus declared Monday that one goal of the Turkish military intervention was to prevent the YPG from gaining control of the entire Syrian-Turkish border, from the northeast to the Mediterranean Sea. “If that happens, it means Syria has been divided,” he told the Turkish broadcaster NTV, adding, “We are in favor of Syria’s territorial integrity.” He denied Turkey was entering the war in Syria, saying, “We are not pursuing an aim of becoming a permanent power in Syria. Turkey is not an invader.”

Perhaps the most intransigent comment came from Omer Celik, a Turkish cabinet minister, who dismissed US demands that the country fight ISIS but not the Kurdish YPG. “No one has the right to tell Turkey to ‘fight this terror organization but don’t fight that terror organization,’” he said.

The Turkish government brands all Kurdish separatist forces as “terrorists,” whether located in Syria, Iraq or Turkey itself. The Erdogan regime regards the advance of the YPG in Syria as a deadly threat, when combined with

the existence of a Kurdish Regional Authority in northern Iraq, and the renewed attacks by the PKK in southeastern Turkey itself. While the Kurdish forces are divided politically, Ankara fears efforts to link up Kurdish speakers in southeastern Turkey, northern Syria and northern Iraq in a future independent Kurdistan.

The complex political situation is made even more complicated by the fact that the Syrian Arab forces allied with the Turks and with the Syrian Kurds respectively each have a US government sponsor. The CIA arms and trains the Sunni Islamist militias that are loosely referred to as the “Free Syrian Army,” while the Pentagon has helped create the SDF. The result is that separate US-backed Syrian militias are fighting each other.

According to press reports, Jaysh al Tahrir, an Islamist militia described by Washington as a “moderate rebel group,” has received several TOW anti-tank missiles from the US and is presumably now using them against the SDF, which has Pentagon Special Forces operators embedded within it, who could now find themselves targeted by missiles supplied by their own government.

This possibility only demonstrates the increasing recklessness and irrationality of the policy of US imperialism in Syria and throughout the Middle East. After 13 years of warfare, beginning in Iraq and now extending into the civil wars in Syria, Yemen and Libya, the United States has devastated a vast region. Washington bears the main responsibility for the deaths of several million people, the creation of tens of millions of refugees, and destruction on a scale not seen since World War II.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact