

Turkey prepares joint action with US in Syria

Bill Van Auken
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The Turkish government is prepared to carry out a joint assault with the US on the Islamic State (also known as ISIS) “capital” in Raqqa, Syria, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has told the Turkish media.

Erdogan made the remarks to journalists on board his plane returning from the G20 summit in Hangzhou, China, where he said US President Barack Obama had proposed the joint action.

“Obama particularly wants to do something together [with us] about Raqqa,” Erdogan said, according to the daily *Hurriyet*. “We have told him that this is not a problem for us.” He added that top level military commanders from both sides should meet and “then what is necessary will be done.”

Turkey launched what it has dubbed “Operation Euphrates Shield” two weeks ago, sending troops and tanks across its border to attack both ISIS positions and those of the Syrian Kurdish separatists of the Syrian Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) and its armed wing, the People’s Protection Units (YPG). The Kurdish forces have been employed as the Pentagon’s main proxy forces in terms of ground operations against ISIS, receiving weapons, funding, training and support from US special operations units on the ground in Syria.

Turkey has backed its own “rebels,” comprised of Sunni Turkmen and Arab Islamist militias, to not only attack ISIS but drive the Kurdish forces out of areas that they had wrested from ISIS with US backing. From the outset of the intervention, it has been evident that these forces are Turkey’s main target. Ankara fears that continued military successes by the YPG could consolidate an autonomous Kurdish region on its border and encourage Turkey’s own Kurdish separatist movement, the PKK, with which the Syrian Kurdish movement is politically aligned.

Turkey’s deputy prime minister, Nurettin Canikli, told the media that Turkish forces had so far killed a

combined total of 110 ISIS and Kurdish fighters. Three Turkish soldiers were reportedly killed in an ISIS rocket attack on Tuesday, while another died at the outset of the offensive in clashes with the YPG.

The Turkish official added that, after having secured the border area, Turkish forces could push further into Syria.

It appears that is what the Turkish military is preparing. Syrian sources reported Wednesday that Turkish warplanes struck targets in the ISIS-held town of Al-Bab, which is 180 kilometers northeast on the highway leading to Raqqa. At least 14 civilians were reportedly killed in the Turkish bombardment.

A battle for control of Al-Bab could prove particularly bloody and involve multiple antagonists in addition to ISIS. Turkish forces and Turkish-backed Islamist militias are advancing on the town from the west, the Russian-backed Syrian army is within striking distance from the south and US-backed Kurdish forces are approaching from the north and east. The main Turkish objective appears to be to prevent the Kurdish militia from taking Al-Bab, which would allow them to join their main enclave in northeastern Syria with territory they control in the northwest.

Turkish officials are already speaking of the latest incursion carving out a “de facto safe zone” that would divide Syrian Kurdish controlled areas in the east and west of the border area and leave Turkey in a more or less permanent occupation of a swathe of Syrian territory.

A spokesperson for the YPG said that the group had asked US forces to take a stand in their defense against the Turkish offensive. “They replied that a decision will be made in Washington,” he said.

Meanwhile, Russia’s Foreign Ministry issued a statement Wednesday expressing concern over Turkey’s offensive into Syria. “This calls into question the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Syrian

Arab Republic,” it said, adding, “We call on Ankara to refrain from any steps which can further destabilize the situation in Syria.” It pointed out that the Turkish operation had been launched without either the permission of the Syrian government or authorization by the United Nations.

Turkey established closer relations with Moscow last month in the wake of the abortive July 15 coup, which was widely seen as having been backed by Washington. The de-escalation of tensions played a significant role in freeing Ankara’s hand to launch its Syrian operation. After an incident in November of last year in which Turkish warplanes ambushed and shot down a Russian jet in the border area, relations were broken and the threat of a major armed conflict between Russia and Turkey, a member of the US-led NATO alliance, rose sharply.

The Erdogan government now appears to be disposed to pursuing its own interests by playing off Washington and Moscow, whose strategic objectives Syria—under the veneer of a common struggle against terrorism—are diametrically opposed.

Secretary of State John Kerry and Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov are set to meet in Geneva on Thursday and Friday, the Russian Foreign Ministry reported. Washington has demanded the implementation of an immediate ceasefire, particularly in the area of Aleppo, where a government offensive has thrown back the Al Qaeda-linked militias that Washington and its allies have backed in the five-year-old war for regime change in Syria.

“We’re not going to take a deal that doesn’t meet our basic objectives,” US deputy national security advisor Benjamin Rhodes told reporters during a stop by President Obama in Laos.

These “objectives” were spelled out Wednesday in a 25-page “transition plan” issued by the so-called High Negotiations Committee, a front representing the Islamist militias and Syrian exile politicians aligned with various powers and their intelligence agencies that was cobbled together by the Saudi monarchy. It demands the ouster of “Bashar al-Assad and his clique” within six months and the installation of a “transitional governing body” that would rule the country for 18 months leading up to elections.

How such a body would be selected is not specified, but the transparent aim is to impose a regime in

Damascus that would be aligned with Washington and its allies, thereby achieving US imperialist aims of furthering hegemony over the oil-rich Middle East and further isolating Russia and China.

The insistence on these objectives coupled with the increasing weakness of US-backed forces on the ground in Syria and the new aggressive intervention by NATO member Turkey are creating an extremely volatile situation in which the threat of a direct confrontation between the world’s two foremost nuclear powers, the US and Russia, is growing.



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