

Amid Mosul offensive, Turkey denounces US policy, stakes claims in Balkans

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The US-directed attack on Mosul and fallout from the failed coup against President Recep Tayyip Erdogan in July, backed by Washington and the European Union (EU), is fueling explosive tensions inside Turkey and in Turkey's relations with the major imperialist powers.

Desperate to stabilize his regime, Erdogan is stoking nationalist sentiment and implicitly reserving the right to intervene militarily across the former Ottoman empire. In several incendiary speeches, he has staked territorial claims not only in the Middle East, but in the Caucasus and, perhaps most explosively, in the Balkans. This drew condemnation from officials in Greece, which fought three wars with Turkey in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and nearly went to war with Turkey amid the 1974 Turkish invasion of Cyprus.

Speaking Monday in Istanbul, Erdogan attacked Washington for blocking Turkish participation in the Mosul attack—in which it is relying on ethnic Kurdish militias, towards which the Turkish government is deeply hostile—and for harboring the US-based cleric Feithullah Gulen, the leader of the Gulen movement that Erdogan accuses of masterminding the July coup.

“Operations are underway in Mosul,” Erdogan declared. “What do they say? They say, ‘May Turkey not enter Mosul!’ How come I don’t enter? I have a 350-km border and I am under threat from across that border. ... Turkey will take part in the Mosul operation and hold a seat at the table. It is out of the question for us to remain outside. Because there is history in Mosul for us.”

In a previous October 14 speech, Erdogan had bluntly attacked Washington for relying on Kurdish militias in Mosul: “Shame on you! Is your partner in NATO the [Kurdish] PYD/YPG [militias] or is it Turkey? If it is Turkey, then you must come to the table with us and take your step with us.”

In Istanbul, Erdogan also accused Washington of complicity with terrorism due to its alliance with Gulen: “How come a judicial system can protect terrorist organizations and terrorist leaders? How come the Green Card is provided to a terrorist? He is living in luxury on a 400-acre farm and managing his operation from there? Whom do you think you are deceiving?”

Erdogan's claims on Mosul were part of a series of territorial claims he has made in recent days, including on Western Thrace, which includes much of southern Bulgaria and northern Greece.

At Recep Tayyip Erdogan University in Rize province on October 15, he said, “Can we leave Mosul on its own? We are present in the history of Mosul. And what is it they are doing now? They are plotting to grab Mosul from the people of Mosul ... Turkey cannot turn its back on Aleppo. Turkey cannot disregard its kinsmen in Western Thrace, Cyprus, Crimea, and anywhere else. We cannot leave Libya, Egypt, Bosnia and Afghanistan alone with their own problems.”

He added, “You see something from us in any Middle Eastern and North African country you stop by between Hatay [on Turkey's border with Syria] and Morocco. You definitely come across a trace from our ancestors at every step you take along the geography extending from Thrace to Eastern Europe.”

Yesterday, Greek President Prokopis Pavlopoulos warned that Erdogan's statements called into question the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne. That treaty finally ended the Allied powers' conflict with Turkey in World War I—which sealed the destruction of the Ottoman empire and the colonial carve-up of much of the Middle East between France and Britain—and delineated the existing border between Greece and Turkey.

Pavlopoulos said, “the rhetoric of Turkish President Erdogan, in any perspective, even the most benevolent,

unfortunately directly or indirectly undermines the Treaty of Lausanne, not to mention Greek-Turkish relations and relations between the European Union and Turkey.”

Greek media also initially carried a report that Erdogan was planning a referendum on Western Thrace. The report were later denied, but that was not before the Greek Foreign Ministry issued a statement denouncing the report, saying it “is provocative and undermines regional stability.”

This followed Erdogan’s public attack on the Treaty of Lausanne last month. He insisted that it was not a “victory” and declared, “we gave away the (Greek) islands that you could shout across to” from Turkey’s Aegean Sea coast.

Greek Defense Minister Pannos Kammenos replied, “Efforts to cast doubt on international treaties lead to dangerous paths,” adding that Turkey should not “pursue” those paths.

The explosive political and military tensions underlying Erdogan’s statements are the product of a quarter century of relentless wars and interventions by the imperialist powers. Since the US-led Gulf war against Iraq in 1991—the year that the Soviet bureaucracy moved to restore capitalism and dissolve the USSR, removing the main military obstacle to US-NATO wars—the NATO powers relentlessly intervened in the Middle East and the Balkans. These wars have cost millions of lives and turned tens of millions of people into refugees.

Wars in Iraq and Yugoslavia, followed by the US-backed Georgian attack on Russian forces in the Caucasus in 2008 and finally NATO wars launched in Libya and Syria in 2011 have definitively smashed the regional state structure that emerged from World War I and World War II.

As NATO’s confrontation with Russia and the Russian-backed regime in Syria now threatens to unleash a third world war, conflicts deeply rooted in the history and geopolitics of European and Middle Eastern capitalism are reasserting themselves. The ominous statements and threats made by Turkish and Greek officials illustrate how the diplomats and military general staffs of all the powers are being caught up by a vast global crisis beyond the ability of any national state to control.

Erdogan’s government—having backed the Libyan

and Syrian wars under NATO pressure and abandoned its so-called “zero problems with neighbors” foreign policy—has been unable to adapt to all the chaotic twists and turns of Washington’s Syria policy. Terrified that the Syrian war could lead to the formation of a Kurdish state appealing to Kurdish separatist sentiment in Turkey itself, Erdogan has opposed US alliances with Syrian Kurdish militias. This led Ankara into escalating conflicts with NATO, and particularly with Washington, over Syria.

The tacit support Washington and the EU gave the July coup reflected growing concern over Erdogan’s statements earlier this year that he might move closer to Moscow and Damascus.

While Erdogan superficially appeared to have worked out better relations with Washington after the coup—launching a US-backed invasion of areas of northern Syria held by the Islamic State (IS) militia—it is clear that none of the underlying conflicts have been resolved. Rather, each successive military escalation intensifies the international contradictions. Now, Erdogan’s reckless nationalist appeals are only setting the stage for even broader and more explosive clashes and wars in the Middle East and Europe.



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