

Syrian war threatens to escalate as Turkey accuses Damascus of attacking its troops

Jordan Shilton

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Turkey's Prime Minister and armed forces both accused the Syrian regime of Bashar al-Assad Thursday of conducting an airstrike on Turkish troops in the vicinity of al-Bab in the country's north, resulting in three casualties.

The incident threatens to escalate already sharp tensions between Ankara and Damascus into all-out war, posing the very real risk of direct clashes between the major powers.

Turkish Prime Minister Binali Yildirim warned in comments to Hurriyet that the attack would "not be left unanswered." Turkish warplanes at the Gaziantep air base were placed on emergency standby.

A direct Turkish attack on Syrian government forces would quickly draw Russia, a key ally of the Assad regime, even more deeply into the conflict and Turkey, as a member of NATO, could call on the alliance for support under Article 5, which obliges alliance members to come to the defense of a NATO state under attack. Such a move would mean war between NATO and Russia.

Turkish troops launched Operation Euphrates Shield in northern Syria in late August, in alliance with opposition militias organized in the Free Syrian Army (FSA) with the aim of preventing the establishment of a Kurdish enclave on the Turkish border by the People's Protection Units (YPG) fighters, which are aligned with the Kurdish Democratic Unity Party (PYD). The Syrian government condemned the intervention as a violation of its territorial sovereignty.

Ankara alleged the attack occurred as its troops sought to push into al-Bab, an Islamic State-held town it is determined to capture before Kurdish forces. Gaining control of al-Bab would enable Turkey to have a major say in the offensive to retake the ISIS capital of Raqqa and represent an important step in blocking

attempts by YPG fighters to link two Kurdish-held areas in northern Syria.

The Syrian government also recently indicated that it might be preparing to launch an offensive on al-Bab, raising the prospect of a multi-front battle over the town. Reports said pro-government forces had been seen gathering to the south.

Speaking to Voice of America, an anonymous Western diplomat stated that the alleged Syrian government attack runs the risk of causing a "potentially catastrophic escalation of the war."

While it is entirely possible that Syrian aircraft did launch the attack, there is strong evidence to suggest that Turkey is seeking to pin the blame on Damascus to legitimize its ongoing incursion. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, an opposition-aligned organization that can hardly be accused of having a brief for the Assad government, reported that the Turkish casualties were in fact caused by an ISIS suicide bombing on Wednesday. For its part, the Turkish government imposed a gag order on media reporting of the attack. The Syrian government has not commented on the incident and there has been no independent verification of Ankara's claims.

The US response to the incident was also muted, indicating the ongoing tensions between Washington and Ankara over policy in Syria. Last week, the Pentagon announced it was withdrawing its Special Forces that had been embedded in the Euphrates Shield mission since its launch in August. A Pentagon spokesman told a Turkish newspaper on Monday that the Turkish and FSA offensive on al-Bab was not being conducted as part of the international coalition's efforts to retake Raqqa.

The United States, which fomented the Syrian war in 2011 with the aim of toppling Assad, bears chief

responsibility for the more than 300,000 deaths that have occurred since and the deepening rivalries in the region. While initially endorsing Turkey's Euphrates Shield mission, it continues to depend heavily on the YPG, which it has armed and supported with up to 500 US Special Forces. Indicating the major combat role assumed by these troops in the push against Raqqa, the first US casualty in the fighting was announced yesterday after a US Special Forces soldier was killed by an improvised explosive device planted by ISIS.

The YPG, which together with a number of smaller militias is organized in the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), announced earlier this month the launch of operations to retake Raqqa. But it has been engaged in intensified clashes over the past week with Turkish-backed FSA forces. Turkey has launched a series of airstrikes against YPG fighters trying to reach al-Bab from nearby Manbij. Turkish troops have also taken the lead in the attack on al-Bab, rather than relying on their FSA allies as in previous battles. Turkey views the YPG and PYD as an extension of the banned Kurdish separatist PKK, and has vowed to press on and retake Manbij from the SDF after capturing al-Bab from ISIS.

A report on the Stratfor website, which has close ties to US intelligence, noted earlier this week that Washington was becoming concerned that Turkish clashes with the YPG could "undermine the Raqqa effort altogether." It went on to raise the prospect of clashes breaking out between the Turkish-backed FSA and Syrian government troops, which are backed by Iranian forces and Russia, if Turkey's advance into Aleppo province proceeds.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* previously noted, it is clear that the US is seeking to create new "facts on the ground" by escalating the conflict prior to the assumption of power by President-elect Donald Trump, who is yet to make his intentions clear in Syria but has indicated the possibility of improving ties with Russia. Earlier this week, it emerged that portable anti-aircraft missiles, so-called manpads, had been supplied to the US-backed Ansar al-Islam Front, an extremist Islamist militia with ties to Syria's al-Qaida affiliate.

These developments underscore the reckless character of US imperialism's drive to establish its unchallenged domination over the energy-rich Middle East. Over the course of more than two decades of virtually uninterrupted war, it has brought the region to a point

where any number of flashpoints in the Syrian civil war, not to mention in Iraq where sectarian conflicts over control of Mosul are deepening, could trigger a wider war with catastrophic consequences for the population of the region and beyond.

On Wednesday, State Department spokesman Mark Toner urged Washington's European allies to block Russian oil tankers from using their ports on their way to Syria to supply fuel for Russian airstrikes. The same day, the European Union unveiled a plan to investigate Russia for an alleged breach of EU sanctions against Syria because of its use of a Cypriot port in October while transporting jet fuel to the Assad regime.

Russian Defense Ministry spokesman Major General Igor Konashenkov retaliated angrily Thursday, accusing the US of inciting other states to block Russian counterterrorist operations in Syria. Konashenkov stated that the US had been hindering Russian operations for months "through dragging out any talks, failures to meet obligations to separate the opposition from terrorists and constant promises to some day provide information on the militants. Now the State Department "has openly called on other countries to obstruct our Air Force in fighting international terrorism in Syria."

In intervening militarily to support the Assad regime, its only Arab ally in the Middle East, Russia is only increasing the likelihood of a catastrophic military clash between the major powers.

Moscow has continued its support for the offensive by the Syrian army against civilian areas of eastern Aleppo to dislodge Jihadi rebels, dominated by the al-Qaida-affiliated al-Nusra Front. Since recommencing direct attacks on the city on November 15, Syrian and Russian airstrikes, including missile attacks launched from Russian aircraft carriers in the Mediterranean, have killed over 140 civilians. Dozens have also been killed and wounded in government-held areas by indiscriminate shelling by the Islamists.



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