

Turkey prepares for military escalation in the Middle East

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Amid signals by the Trump administration that it plans to step up military involvement in the Middle East, Ankara is preparing to expand its intervention in the wars in Syria and Iraq, while also threatening Iran.

On February 27, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan met separately with Defense Minister Fikri Is?k and General Hulusi Akar, the chief of Turkey's General Staff. These meetings came three days after the Turkish army officially stated that, acting together with the Free Syrian Army (FSA) militia, it had brought the Syrian town of al-Bab fully under its control.

While no statements emerged from Erdogan's meeting with Isik and Akar, they likely discussed operations against not only the Islamic State (IS) in Syria, but also the Syrian Kurdish nationalist Democratic Union Party (PYD) and its military organization, the People's Protection Units (YPG). Turkey is also preparing for a broader campaign against IS and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in Iraq.

Last week, Akar was in the southeastern Turkish provinces of Kilis and Gaziantep to visit military units. Ankara has already deployed thousands of troops, backed by heavy artillery, along its Syrian and Iraqi borders.

Meanwhile, Massoud Barzani, President of the Iraqi Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), visited both Erdogan and Turkish prime minister Binali Yildirim.

Barzani met with Erdogan on February 26, along with the chief of Turkey's National Intelligence Organization (M?T), diplomats and energy officials.

The Turkish government made no official statement. But according to a statement issued by the KRG, Erdogan and Barzani "spoke of the ongoing military operation against the terrorists of the Islamic State in the city of Mosul, where President Barzani reiterated his position of the importance of planning for the post-

liberation of the city." For months, Iraqi government forces, including US-backed Kurdish fighters, have been engaged in a bloody effort to retake Mosul from IS.

The statement from Barzani's office also pointed to Ankara's support for the Iraqi Kurdish leadership. It said: "President Erdogan stated that Turkey will continue to support the Kurdistan Region during these difficult times, as the collective effort against the terrorists of the Islamic State continues."

The next day, Barzani met with Yildirim to discuss similar issues—the struggle against IS, Ankara's economic support for the KRG, Turkey's oil supply, and the fight against the PKK in Iraq's Sinjar region.

All these developments point to a further escalation of military conflict in the region by the Turkish government, together with the other major powers.

At the Munich security conference on February 19, Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu said that Iran, Russia's largest ally in the region, was "trying to create two Shiite states in Syria and Iraq... Iran wants to make Syria and Iraq Shiite... This is very dangerous. It must be stopped." Less than a week before, Erdogan had accused Iran of trying to partition Iraq and Syria.

Tehran responded sharply. On February, 20, Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman Bahram Ghasemi declared: "We are acting patiently, but there is a limit to that... We hope that such statements are not made again. If our Turkish friends continue with this attitude, we will not remain silent," he said.

Afterwards, the Turkey-Iran Business Forum, which executives from at least 100 Turkish firms were scheduled to attend on February 25 in Tehran, was postponed.

Ankara has long complained of Tehran's intervention in the Syrian war and its growing influence in Iraq. The

conflict between Turkey and Iran over Iraq and Syria, however, did not keep Ankara from aligning with Russia and Iran during ostensible peace talks on Syria in Astana.

The row between Ankara and Tehran has intensified since the new US administration placed Iran on its target list.

Despite its efforts to cultivate ties with Russia, Erdogan's Justice and Development Party (AKP) government has time and again stated its intention to improve its relations with the United States. It has not concealed its hope of launching a joint operation against IS with the United States under Trump. On February 16, Turkish Defense Minister Fikri İhsanoglu told journalists that the Trump administration has a different approach to Syria: "They are not insisting any more that the operation should definitely be carried out with the [Kurdish] YPG. They haven't yet made up their minds."

Three days later, Erdogan said that Turkish troops would assist taking the Syrian city of Raqqa from IS if Ankara reaches a deal with Washington. This came just two days after the Turkish Chief of General Staff met with his US counterpart at Incirlik Air Base in Turkey, rolling out a plan to retake Raqqa which excluded the PYD and the YPG. According to the Turkish media, the plan also envisages a 54-kilometer-long, 20-kilometer-wide corridor to be held by the Turkish-backed FSA.

The Turkish government denounces the PYD/YPG as terrorist groups that are linked to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which is carrying out an armed struggle against Ankara. Washington, in contrast, has treated them as reliable partners in the fight against IS and Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's regime. The US has pared back its support for the FSA and sponsored the Kurdish-dominated Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) as its new main proxy, creating tensions with Ankara.

Ankara responded by launching its own operation, "Euphrates Shield," to push Syrian Kurdish forces to the eastern side of the Euphrates River. Washington responded in November 2016 with the SDF's "Operation Euphrates Wrath," which is aimed at retaking Raqqa from IS.

Hoping to shift US policy under Trump, Ankara now claims that several thousand FSA fighters, supported by Turkish advisors and air power, are ready to engage in

a joint operation with Washington to take Raqqa, providing the Kurds are sidelined.

It is unclear whether Trump will accept Ankara's proposal to replace the Kurdish-dominated SDF with Turkish-backed FSA forces. The alternatives are stark, however: a negative reply will further alienate Ankara, while a positive one would improve US-Turkish relations at the expense of Turkish-Russian relations.

In recent days, Russian-backed Syrian troops and Turkish-backed FSA forces have clashed near al-Bab, which the FSA captured last week from IS. Russian mediation halted the conflict. Meanwhile, on March 1, Turkish troops and FSA fighters reportedly attacked villages west of Manbij—a town on the west side of the Euphrates River, from which Ankara has vowed to purge Kurdish forces.

As it bargains with Trump and quarrels with Iran, Ankara is still seeking to promote its relations with Russia, both commercial and especially military. During his scheduled March 9-10 visit to Russia, Erdogan is to meet with Russian President Vladimir Putin and attend a meeting of the High-Level Russian-Turkish Cooperation Council. The two leaders are expected to discuss Turkey's request to purchase Russian S-400 air defense missile systems.

Whether Trump continues to support the SDF or decides to accept Ankara's proposals and cut off the PYD/YPG, Ankara's plans to step up its interventions into both Syria and Iraq will further aggravate an already volatile situation.



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