

Turkish government presses for military escalation in Syria

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In the wake of the April 7 US missile strike at Syria's Shayrat air base, the Turkish government is pressing for military escalation and attacking Russia for not withdrawing its support to the Syrian regime. In an attempt to restore its position in the Middle East and prevent the creation of a Kurdish state along its southeastern borders, it is seizing on the chemical attack in Idlib province and the ensuing US missile attack to escalate the drive for regime change in Syria.

On April 9, Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu told journalists that after the US strike he asked his Russian counterpart, Sergei Lavrov, to withdraw Moscow's support for the Syrian regime. "You should leave your persistence on [Syrian President Bashar] al-Assad and let the transition government begin," he told Lavrov in a phone call.

Cavusoglu also criticized both Russia and the US for "competing" to win over the Kurdish nationalist People's Protection Units (YPG). "It's not acceptable that the two superpowers are competing over a terrorist organization," he said. The YPG is the Syrian offshoot of the outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party, a guerrilla organization that fights for the formation of an independent Kurdish state inside Turkey.

Cavusoglu also made a point of stating that his government was not in a position to choose between Russia and the United States.

He was echoing the reaction to the US missile attack by President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, who warmly welcomed the attack and called on Moscow to reconsider its support for Assad. In a televised interview on April 8, he dismissed the Astana talks on Syria, initiated by Russia and Turkey in parallel to the US-backed Geneva talks, stating that "unfortunately it did not develop as we wanted." Instead, he hoped "that Russia will get involved as well" in the US-led regime

change operation.

Earlier in the same day, Foreign Minister Cavusoglu signaled his support for US military escalation against Syria. He said last week's attack on Syria would only be "cosmetic," unless it was followed by more attacks. "If this remains limited to just one air base, if this regime can't be removed from Syria, it will remain a merely cosmetic intervention," he said. He reiterated Ankara's insistence on carving out "safe zones" inside Syria and the "need to implement a transitional government in Syria as soon as possible."

Ankara's reckless and warmongering attitude on Syria was perhaps best expressed by Turkish Deputy Prime Minister Numan Kurtulmus just after the US missile attack: he described it as "significant and meaningful," and stated, "we do not only want to hear words, but we want to see action."

Continued military action by the NATO powers against Syria threatens to escalate into all-out war with Russia and Iran, however. Russia, supposedly Turkey's main partner in the Astana talks, has strongly condemned the strike against the Shayrat air base as a US "act of aggression." The Russian Foreign Ministry has stated that Moscow will take "a range of measures to protect key Syrian infrastructure and reinforce and improve the effectiveness of the Syrian armed forces' air defence."

Turkey's economically and strategically critical relations with Russia are again threatened with complete collapse. Before Ankara moved to build bridges with Russia last June, the two countries came to the verge of war in November 2015, when the Turkish air force downed a Russian plane that had allegedly violated Turkish airspace. Moscow called the Turkish government an "accomplice of terrorists" and imposed economic sanctions on Turkey, depriving the Turkish

economy of an estimated \$10 billion.

Last July 15, when US-backed sections of Turkish military attempted to topple Erdogan in a coup, Putin was the first major world leader to call and offer his sympathies to the Turkish president. In August, Erdogan travelled to Russia for a St. Petersburg summit, where he met with Putin and discussed how to improve economic and military ties. Despite ongoing differences over the future of the Syrian regime, Ankara and Moscow initiated the Astana talks to organize a cessation of hostilities in Syria.

Now, the US missile attack on Syria—a harbinger of more and broader military action to come—is throwing this collaboration into doubt, as Erdogan turns towards Washington and its preparations for war with Syria and, ultimately, Russia.

The US bombing came as Turkey’s own military intervention in Syria is in deep crisis. Turkish forces are still occupying a swath of territory all the way to Al Bab. On March 29, a day before US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson’s visit, Ankara announced that Operation Euphrates Shield had been “accomplished.”

Ankara launched its “Operation Euphrates Shield” last August to fight the Islamic State (IS) and, above all, to push the YPG-dominated Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), the main proxy force of the US imperialism in Syria, back to the eastern bank of the Euphrates River. Just a month ago, after the capture of Al Bab from IS, Ankara stated that its offensive would continue to the SDF-held town of Manbij, and then to the IS stronghold, Raqqa. Ultimately, however, the Turkish army only managed to seize a narrow strip of Syrian territory and capture Al Bab at the cost of high casualties.

Adding to Ankara’s troubles, both Moscow and Washington have signaled in recent months that they will back and work with Kurdish nationalists in Syria. Russia has deployed military personnel to Afrin, the largely Kurdish-populated northwestern area of Syria and part of the YPG-controlled de facto autonomous region of Rojava, while the US Army is protecting Manbij with hundreds of Special Forces troops.

Operation Euphrates Shield’s objectives have not been accomplished, and the Turkish regime appears to be recklessly hoping to improve its military posture through a major US military escalation. Ankara is also discussing an escalation of its own military intervention

into Iraq.

The Turkish president stated last week that the next stage of Operation Euphrates Shield would include northern Iraq. In an April 4 televised interview, Erdogan said, “There are the Tal Afar and Sinjar situations [in Iraq]. We also have kin in Mosul.” Such a military adventure in Iraq threatens to ignite a military conflict with Iraq and Iran, while escalating the simmering civil war between the Turkish army and the PKK within Turkey.

The Turkish government’s warmongering meets with no real opposition inside the Turkish bourgeois establishment, however. Last October, the opposition Republican People’s Party (CHP) voted for a resolution in the Turkish parliament that extended the government’s authority to launch cross-border operations for a year.

The pro-Kurdish Peoples’ Democratic Party (HDP), for its part, objected to Turkish military operations in Syria and Iraq, but only on the grounds that they target Kurdish nationalists; they enthusiastically welcomed the US-led regime-change operations in Syria.



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