

US-Turkish tensions mount over plan to arm Syrian Kurdish militia

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The US announcement that President Donald Trump has given his authorization for the direct US arming of the Syrian Kurdish militia, the People's Protection Units (YPG), was met with heated protests from the Turkish government of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, who is set to visit the White House next week.

The Pentagon has determined that the YPG represents the only local force that can serve as a credible US proxy on the ground in Syria in the bid to drive the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) out of the northern city of Raqqa. The US is opposed to the city being retaken by forces loyal to the Syrian government, which Washington has sought to overthrow, while the so-called Free Syrian Army that the CIA had backed in the war for regime change has been largely routed and is dominated by the Syrian branch of Al Qaeda and similar groups.

Previously, under the Obama administration, Washington had indirectly funneled arms to the Kurdish militia through the so-called Syrian Democratic Forces, which includes the YPG and a far smaller Syrian Sunni Arab contingent. Hundreds of US special operations troops have also been deployed in Syria to provide assistance and training to the Kurdish militia.

Under the new plan, the US military will ship small arms, ammunition, machine guns, armored vehicles and engineering equipment to the YPG, according to Pentagon officials. US Col. John Dorrian, a spokesman for the US military in Baghdad, said that the weapons shipments had been pre-positioned and could be delivered to the Kurdish militia "very quickly."

The position of the Erdogan government is that the YPG represents a branch of the outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which has waged an on-again,

off-again guerrilla war in Turkey itself for over three decades. Not only Ankara, but also Washington and the EU, have labeled the PKK as a "terrorist organization."

The Turkish government fears that the crisis in Syria, which it played a major role in creating by backing Islamist "rebels" in the more than six-year-old war for regime change, will pave the way to the carving out of an autonomous Kurdish territory on its southern border. Erdogan ordered troops into Syria last year under the pretext of battling ISIS, but for the real purpose of driving a wedge between Kurdish cantons in the east and west of northern Syria.

More recently, on April 25, Turkish warplanes carried out airstrikes against YPG positions in northern Syria, killing at least 20 Kurdish fighters. Washington condemned the attack and responded by deploying hundreds of US troops equipped with Stryker armored vehicles to serve as a buffer between Turkish forces and the Syrian Kurds.

The level of tensions between Washington and Ankara found expression last week when Turkish presidential adviser Ilnur Cevik warned in a radio interview that if the YPG and its US special forces advisers "go too far, our forces would not care if American armor is there, whether armored carriers are there. ... All of a sudden, by accident, a few rockets can hit them."

Erdogan, who is scheduled to arrive in Washington on May 16, said that Turkey's "patience has ended" with the US decision to arm the YPG. "I want to believe that Turkey's allies will side with us, not with terrorist organizations," he said.

Turkey's foreign minister, Mevlut Cavusoglu, told reporters during a visit to Montenegro Wednesday, "Both the PKK and the YPG are terrorist organizations and they are no different, apart from their names. Every

weapon seized by them is a threat to Turkey.”

Meanwhile the Republican People’s Party (CHP), the main bourgeois opposition party, called for Erdogan to “reconsider” his trip to Washington, saying that the US decision had put Turkey in “a weak position.”

The humiliation of the Turkish regime over the Trump administration’s decision was compounded by the presence in Washington on the day of its announcement of Erdogan’s advance team, which included Chief of General Staff Gen. Hulusi Akar, presidential spokesman İbrahim Kalın and National Intelligence Agency (MIT) chief Hakan Fidan. The three had held meetings with their US counterparts and Trump’s national security advisor, Gen. H.R. McMaster.

The *Washington Post* Wednesday quoted an unnamed Turkish official as saying that the officials delivered the “message to the Trump administration...that Turkey reserves the right to take military action,” while suggesting that airstrikes could be intensified.

US Defense Secretary James Mattis, who was in Turkey just days before the announcement of the decision to directly arm the YPG, dismissed the protests from Ankara. “We’ll work out any of the concerns,” he said during a visit to Lithuania. “We will work very closely with Turkey in support of their security on their southern border. It’s Europe’s southern border, and we’ll stay closely connected.”

The *Wall Street Journal* Wednesday provided a concrete indication of what Mattis meant by support for Turkish security. The US, the newspaper reported, is beefing up the capabilities of a so-called intelligence fusion center run by the CIA and other US intelligence agencies in Ankara “to help Turkish officials better identify and track the Kurdistan Workers’ Party, or PKK.” The plan will reportedly double the capacity of the center, while providing drones and other US intelligence assets.

Thus, US intelligence will assist the authoritarian regime of Erdogan to hunt down and kill Kurdish militants in both neighboring Iraq and Turkey itself. There is every reason to believe that, once the Syrian Kurdish forces of the PYG have completed their mission in Raqqa, the same resources will be provided to go after them.

The Pentagon’s present reliance on the Kurdish militia against ISIS—itself a product of the US

interventions in Iraq and Syria—is merely a temporary tactical initiative in the protracted and bloody campaign by US imperialism to impose its hegemony over the Middle East by means of invasions, bombing campaigns and wars for regime change.



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