Syrian conflict further escalates as pro-Syrian forces enter Afrin

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22 February 2018

With the entry of a convoy of militias backing the government of President Bashar al-Assad into the Syrian canton of Afrin on Tuesday and Turkish troops responding with heavy artillery bombardment, the danger of a direct military confrontation between Turkish and Syrian troops has increased.

It opens the door to a further escalation in the civil war in Syria, where Turkish and Syrian armies, Iran-linked militias backing the Damascus government, Russian and US troops, and several proxy forces, including Kurdish nationalists and several Islamic groups, are present.

According to Reuters, the pro-government forces were welcomed by the Kurdish People Protection Units (YPG), which have set up three autonomous cantons in northern Syria, including Afrin, since the onset of the Syrian conflict in 2011. Ankara regards this as a threat because of the links of the YPG to the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), which has been engaged in a guerilla war inside Turkey for three decades.

On January 20, Turkey launched its Operation Olive Branch to clear YPG militants from Afrin. According to Turkish officials, this operation has cost the lives of 1,651 Kurdish fighters and 32 Turkish troops, while 7 Turkish civilians were killed and 125 wounded in cross-border attacks launched by the YPG. With its operation Euphrates Shield, the Turkish army began direct intervention in northern Syria in August 2016 to stop the YPG linking Afrin along the Turkish-Syrian border to other largely Kurdish-populated territories in northeastern Syria.

Speaking to the parliamentary group of his ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) earlier on Tuesday, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said that Ankara had worked with Russia to prevent any deployment by pro-Syrian government forces. “Preparations in the field take some time. In the coming days we will lay siege to Afrin city. It’s very important that every place we go remains secure,” he said. “Thanks to the siege, the YPG will have no room to bargain with the Syrian regime.”

In an attempt to belittle the growing danger of escalation, Erdogan stated later in the day that the issue of the entrance of the pro-Damascus militia in Afrin was “closed for now.” At a press conference with his Macedonian counterpart Gjorge Ivanov, he said: “Yesterday, we agreed on these issues in talks with Putin and Rouhani. Unfortunately, you know, these kinds of terrorist organisations have taken the wrong step with the decision.” On Monday, Erdogan had discussed the issue with Russian President Vladimir Putin and Iranian President Hassan Rouhani in separate telephone conversations.

In a parliamentary group meeting on Tuesday, Devlet Bahceli, the leader of the fascistic Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), the main ally of Erdogan, warned Syrian President Bashar al-Assad about the consequences of a possible support to Kurdish forces. He said: “If he enters Afrin and stands with the PKK/PYD/YPG, he will suffer the consequences.” On February 6, Bahceli declared before his parliamentary group that “Afrin should be destroyed and the terrorists should be set on fire.”

On Monday, Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu said in an interview with Kanal 24, a private broadcaster, “It is obvious that they [the regime] did not enter [Afrin] yet, but more terrorists are coming to the region especially from the East.” Emphasising that “it does not pose any problem for Turkey, if Syrian regime forces enter Afrin to fight the terrorist group,” he added: “But if the regime enters there to support and protect YPG/PKK-Daesh [Arabic abbreviation for the ISIS], no one can stop the Turkish army.”

Cavusoglu was answering a question about a report by Syria’s state-run news agency SANA, that the pro-government militia “Popular Forces” would enter Afrin soon. SANA’s report, however, left no doubt that the “popular forces are to arrive in the Afrin area soon to support locals against the aggression launched by the Turkish regime on the area since January 20.”

According to SANA, “The Turkish regime has been waging a barbaric aggression on Afrin area for almost a month, using various types of weapons and shells including the internationally prohibited chlorine gas, killing and injuring hundreds of civilians and destroying infrastructure, properties, and historical landmarks.”

Meanwhile, Turkish Deputy Prime Minister and government spokesman Bekir Bozdag has called SANA’s report unrealistic, saying “Although Syrian official news agency SANA reported that some forces linked to the Syrian regime will enter Afrin, this news has not been confirmed by the official authorities. It

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is unrealistic, not related to the fact."

The Turkish Presidential spokesman ?brahim Kalin dismissed an agreement between the YPG and Syrian government as propaganda on his official Twitter account. He wrote: "It is clear that the reports about a deal between the regime and the PYD/YPG have the purpose of propaganda. But that does not mean there has not been a set of dirty and secret negotiations."

These comments came after Badran Jia Kurd, an adviser to the Kurdish-led autonomous administration in northern Syria, told Reuters on Sunday that a deal had been struck for the Syrian army to go into Afrin soon to help fight the Turkish assault.

But YPG spokesperson Nouri Mahmoud denied on Monday that such an agreement with the Damascus government had been reached, adding that pressure from Russia had prevented the deal from going ahead so far. Mahmoud said that there was only "a call from us for the Syrian army to come in and protect the borders."

According to a press statement from the Kremlin on the phone conversation between Putin and Erdogan, "In discussing the situation in Syria special attention was paid to ways of further enhancing cooperation in the Astana format [a reference to the deal reached in talks in Kazakhstan last year]. The readiness was confirmed for tight coordination of efforts by Russia, Turkey and Iran for the sake of achieving effective operation of the de-escalation zones and advancing the political process in line with the agreements achieved by the Syrian National Dialogue Congress in Sochi."

Speaking Monday at the opening of the Valdai Discussion Club's conference, dubbed "Russia in the Middle East: Playing on All Fields," Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov expressed Russia's concerns over Syria's sovereignty and territorial integrity, calling on Washington "not to play with fire in Syria."

"We cannot but observe with concern attempts to disintegrate Syria. Such concerns arise after studying the plans which the US is starting to implement on soil, chiefly east of the Euphrates [the largely Kurdish-populated area controlled by the YPG]. ... I once again call on our American colleagues not to play with fire and measure their steps proceeding not from immediate needs of today's political environment, but rather from long-term interests of the Syrian people and of all peoples of this region, including the Kurds, of course, be it Syria or Iraq or other countries of the region," Lavrov said.

Referring to US support to the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) and its YPG militia, Lavrov also accused the US of taking provocative steps in Syria, "which led to an escalation of tensions with Turkey," adding, "and you know what is now going on in Afrin."

Previously, Lavrov accused Washington of "seeking to isolate a vast part of the Syrian territory from the rest of the country in violation of Syria's sovereignty and territorial integrity." In an interview with the Euronews television channel on Friday, February 16, the Russian foreign minister said: "A US taskforce and other units are illegally staying in Syria, without any invitation from Damascus (the legitimate government) or a United Nations Security Council mandate. … Obviously, the United States has some strategy, which, I think, is geared to keep its military presence in Syria forever. … They are seeking to do the same in Iraq and in Afghanistan, in spite of all their previous promises."

Not only Moscow but also Tehran have reiterated the necessity of respecting Syria's sovereignty and territorial integrity. In a phone call with the Turkish president late on Monday, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani said that "fighting terrorism, driving terrorists out of Syria and countering separatist moves in the region are among the common goals of Iran and Turkey," As the Fars News Agency reported, Rouhani added, "Iran and Turkey are pursuing common goals in regional and international developments."

In September of last year, Ankara and Tehran applied punitive measures against the Kurdish regional government in Iraq and launched military exercises on their borders in support of the Iraqi central government, as the KRG proceeded with an independence referendum. Faced with imminent sanctions and the prospect of a military intervention, however, the KRG had to retreat.

Russia, Turkey and Iran are currently in a tacit alliance that has sidelined the US in much of the diplomatic negotiations over Syria's future, but they have distinct and not necessarily compatible interests in the region.

Having given its approval to Turkey's push into northern Syria, providing that the operation remains within certain limits and does not confront Assad's forces, Moscow was playing on the divisions between the two NATO allies, Ankara and Washington, to strengthen its hand in Syria against the US.

The Putin regime, however, has also the aim of moving the Syrian Kurdish nationalists away from the Pentagon, and retains close ties with them, in contrast to both Ankara and Tehran. Thus, the "Kurdish question" has once more become a factor bringing Iran, Turkey and Iraq closer together, not only as a historically unsolved common problem but also due to the US involvement that increases their fear of Kurdish separation. This may also include the Syrian government.

This development has revealed the reactionary character of Ankara's invasion in Afrin as a reckless move that would exacerbate the conflicts raging across the Middle East and intensify the danger of war between the major powers, which can be prevented only through the building of a socialist and international anti-war movement in the working class.

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