

# Turkey's seizure of Afrin and the growing threat of a regional war in the Middle East

**Halil Celik****21 March 2018**

The seizure of the predominantly Kurdish-populated Syrian town of Afrin by Turkish troops and the so-called Free Syrian Army (FSA), coming amidst Washington's mounting threats of a direct military attack on the Syrian government, has not only further exacerbated Ankara's already troubled relations with its NATO partners, but opened up a new stage in the Syrian civil war that could rapidly escalate into a regional and even global war.

Indicating a shift in the Syrian Kurdish forces' military tactics toward guerrilla warfare against Turkish troops, Othman Sheikh Issa, co-chair of the Afrin's Executive Council, said on Sunday that Ankara's occupation would be met with "unparalleled steadfastness and resistance."

On Monday, the Syrian government condemned the occupation of Afrin by Turkish troops as an "illegitimate act" and called "on the Turkish invading forces to immediately withdraw from Syrian territory." In two letters addressed to the UN secretary general and chairman of the Security Council, Syria's Foreign and Expatriates Ministry accused Turkey of looting the property of the city's citizens, destroying their homes and detaining many of them, "as part of the crimes committed by the Turkish armed forces, including the ethnic cleansing policy."

In a statement issued by the US State Department on Monday, Washington declared its concern over the Turkish occupation of Afrin, which—according to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights monitor and Kurdish officials—has forced more than 200,000 people to flee amid the plundering of shops and homes by Turkish-backed FSA forces.

Calling on "all relevant actors operating in the northwest, including Turkey, Russia, and the Syrian regime, to provide access for international humanitarian organizations," the statement said: "The United States remains committed to the full and immediate implementation of UNSCR 2401, which calls for a nationwide cessation of hostilities throughout Syria for at least 30 days."

Ankara supports this UN Security Council resolution for other parts of Syria, such as Eastern Ghouta, where the

Syrian regime is carrying out an offensive against Western and Turkish-backed Islamist "rebels," but insists that it does not apply to its own invasion in Afrin, which it claims is directed against "terrorists," i.e., the Syrian Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) and its militia, the People's Protection Units (YPG), the Pentagon's main proxy force in Syria.

Similar statements against Turkey's invasion against the Kurds in Syria, dubbed "Operation Olive Branch," have previously been made by Ankara's other NATO allies, but were met with a harsh response from Ankara.

Speaking at the parliamentary group meeting of his ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) on Monday, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan criticized the US statement on the Afrin operation, saying, "They say now that they're concerned over Afrin. Where were you when we conveyed our concerns, when we asked you to clear out the terrorist groups together?" He also accused Washington of attempting to deceive Turkish authorities by continuing to provide the YPG with weaponry. "You did not give us weapons when we asked for them but gave them to terrorists instead. Now, that ammunition is in our possession," he said.

On March 14, he stated that the Turkish Army would continue its operations until clearing "both Afrin and Manbij of the terrorists." He added, "Likewise, we are going to clear the area, which extends from the east of Euphrates to our border with northern Iraq."

Previously, Erdogan responded to calls from Ankara's European allies for the Turkish government to end its invasion in Afrin by declaring that they are in no position to lecture Turkey on what it should do. "Those who massacred five million people in Algeria should first give an accounting for this, they should not call us to account. They killed hundreds of thousands of people in Rwanda and Libya, they should first give an account for this. Those who have not given accounts for these acts should not attempt to call Turkey to account," he exclaimed.

With consent of Moscow, the Turkish military and the FSA launched their Afrin invasion against the PYD/YPG,

Washington's main proxy force in Syria, on January 20. Ankara's aim was to demolish Kurdish domination along Turkey's southern border with Syria, what it refers to as a "terror corridor".

In late August 2016, the Turkish army launched its first major military operation in Syria, codenamed "Euphrates Shield," under the pretext of "strengthening Turkey's security by clearing terrorist groups from the border and maintaining Syria's territorial integrity."

The reaction of other NATO regimes to the Turkish military invasion in Syria has until now been limited to declarations of "concern" and Ankara has faced no open sanctions. This, however, doesn't mean that the NATO powers, first of all the US and Britain, will restrain themselves forever. If Turkish troops advance to Manbij and then to the eastern side of the Euphrates River, where more than 2,000 US troops are stationed, an armed conflict between the two NATO members will be almost inevitable.

The AKP government of Erdogan has been increasingly alienated from its NATO partners over several strategic issues, mainly focused on the Syrian civil war, where Ankara sees its supposed allies' strategies as a main threat to Turkey's "territorial integrity" and "national survival."

There are other critical issues, such as Turkey's purchasing of a Russian S-400 surface-to-air missile system, the trade war measures recently signed by US President Donald Trump and disputes over oil and gas exploration in the eastern Mediterranean, that are further inflaming tensions between Ankara and its NATO allies.

As another sign of deteriorating relations between the US and Turkey, the *Wall Street Journal* reported on March 11, "The US military has sharply reduced combat operations at Turkey's ?ncirlik air base and is considering permanent cutbacks there." According to the WSJ, the Pentagon has already moved A-10 close air support planes from the base, leaving only refueling aircraft, and reduced the number of US military personnel stationed there.

While drifting away from its NATO partners, Ankara has forged closer relations, including both trade and military ties, with Russia and Iran, two main targets of US imperialism. On March 12, the Russian news agency TASS reported that Moscow would accelerate the delivery of the S-400 air defense systems to Turkey. Turkish-Russian economic and trade ties also continue to grow rapidly. Ankara and Tehran are developing close ties in different areas, including commerce and tourism, as well military relations, with almost daily reciprocal visits by government officials and business representatives. The main issue of cooperation between the two countries, however, remains that of "fighting terrorism," which for Turkey is focused on Kurdish separatism.

Under conditions in which the main NATO powers—led by the US and Britain—have launched a new wave of aggression against Russia and Iran, Ankara's position within NATO is becoming increasingly tenuous, raising the specter of the collapse of the 65-year-old military alliance.

Escalating geostrategic tensions focused on the Middle East are also finding their expression within Turkey, where the most powerful section of the Turkish ruling class, represented by Erdogan, has long been aware that its own interests, and even its existence, are severely threatened by the US aim of dominating the Middle East and reshaping the political structure of the region as part of its drive toward a global war against Russia.

As Ankara comes to the brink of an open clash with its ostensible NATO allies, all the disputes between rival sections of the Turkish ruling class—repressed by Erdogan through a state of emergency, and the nationalist fervor whipped up by the official political establishment and the media over the military intervention in Syria—are inevitably rising to the surface.

This, however, will not lead to the emergence of any section within the ruling class prepared to struggle for peace, democracy and social equality. On the contrary, under conditions of ever-deepening economic and political crisis, the fight between rival factions of the ruling class will be of a strictly tactical character, with Erdogan's opponents advocating pro-Western regime change, while others gathered around him try to find another solution within the imperialist system, preferably through resolving their differences with the US and European imperialists, if possible.

It is not this or that bourgeois or petty bourgeois opponent of Erdogan, but the working class that must consistently fight against the drive toward imperialist war and its devastating economic and social consequences, including the authoritarian forms of rule prevailing in Turkey.

The Turkish working class can stop this drive to disaster only through the foundation of its political leadership, the Socialist Equality Party, based on the internationalist, revolutionary socialist perspective and program developed by the International Committee of the Fourth International, in close cooperation with Middle Eastern, American and European workers.



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