

Turkey threatens to invade Syria amid tensions with Washington

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20 December 2018

On December 12, at the Turkish Defense Industry Summit, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan vowed to launch a new military operation east of the Euphrates River in northern Syria in coming days, targeting the Kurdish nationalist groups.

He dismissed arguments that US support for Kurdish nationalists was necessary to fight the terrorist threat from ISIS: “There is no ISIS threat in Syria any longer. This is only a tale. We said before and we are saying now that we will start the operation in east of the Euphrates in a few days to save it from the separatist terrorist organization. It is clear that the purpose of US observation points in Syria is not to protect our country from terrorists, but to protect terrorists from Turkey.”

This reflected longstanding concerns in Ankara over US support for the Kurdish nationalist People’s Protection Units (YPG) in Syria, an affiliate of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK), the Kurdish separatist movement against which Ankara has waged a bloody counter-insurgency for more than 30 years in Turkey. Ankara opposes Kurdish autonomy in Syria, fearing that it will provoke demands for Kurdish autonomy in eastern Turkey.

To crush the Kurdish nationalist forces, Erdogan has twice ordered the Turkish army to launch its own bloody invasions of Syria: “Operation Euphrates Shield” (in August 2016) and “Operation Olive Branch” (in January 2018), directed against the US-backed YPG.

Erdogan’s December 12 speech was a direct response to the announcement made by Department of Defense spokesman Rob Manning on December 11. “At the direction of Secretary (James) Mattis, the US established observation posts in the northeast Syria border region to address the security concerns of our NATO ally Turkey,” Manning said.

Mattis had announced that Washington would establish observation posts in northern Syria near the Turkish

border in order to share military intelligence on Kurdish movements into Turkey. Mattis’ remarks were framed as an attempt to reassure Turkey that US support for the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which is comprised largely of YPG troops, would not harm Ankara’s interests. Ankara rejected this, however, seeing it as an unacceptable proposal to place US troops athwart a Turkish attack on Kurdish forces in Syria.

As high-level talks continued, US-Turkish relations were nearing the breaking point. While Washington and its European imperialist allies had initially launched the Syrian war in 2011 using Turkey as a base to resupply Islamist militias fighting the Syrian regime, Turkey’s planned invasion threatened to provoke a direct clash with US troops in Syria.

While Erdogan rejected US attempts to mollify Ankara by pledging to monitor the Kurdish nationalists, US officials rejected Ankara’s claims that its planned invasion of Syria was compatible with US interests. Thrusting aside Erdogan’s statement that “Turkey’s target is never US soldiers,” US officials promptly warned Turkey against attacking Washington’s Kurdish proxies.

US Department of Defense spokesman Commander Sean Robertson said: “Unilateral military action into northeast Syria by any party, particularly as US personnel may be present or in the vicinity, is of grave concern. We would find any such actions unacceptable.” He added, “We believe this dialogue is the only way to secure the border area in a sustainable manner, and believe that uncoordinated military operations will undermine that shared interest.”

Despite the reference to “shared interests,” powerful forces in Washington saw Ankara’s determination to crush the Kurds as a major obstacle to its plans to harness the Kurdish nationalists to Washington’s plans for a military confrontation with Russia and Iran.

In a phone call Friday with Erdogan, Trump discussed Turkey's concerns, and the two "agreed to continue coordinating to achieve our respective security objectives in Syria," the White House stated.

Erdogan denounced the Kurdish nationalist groups as terrorist and demanded a shift in US war policy to accommodate a bloody Turkish assault in Syria.

Erdogan spoke at the meeting of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, warning Washington that "85–90 percent of the people living in Manbij are Arabs, but they have completely given it to those terrorist organizations. They have promised us to clear that area and send them east of the Euphrates, but they have not. Now, we say, you either clear it or we enter Manbij... Turkey has already lost a lot of time to intervene in the terror swamp east of the Euphrates. From now on, we cannot afford even a one-day delay."

Now, with Trump's announcement Wednesday of a withdrawal of US troops from Syria, it appears that Washington is preparing to throw its Kurdish nationalist allies to the wolves, removing obstacles to a Turkish attack. YPG officials have responded by announcing that they may ally with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad to fight off a Turkish invasion of Syria.

YPG general commander Sipan Hemo told the London-based *?arku'l Avsat* newspaper: "Turkey is making every effort to destroy the achievements of Kurds and sees it as a priority job. They sent their forces to the border and bombed inside of Syria." He called on the Syrian regime to protect Syria's borders, saying, "we are ready to talk about the mechanisms to protect the borders and cooperation against Turkey."

Erdogan's maneuvers to try to work out a common war strategy with US imperialism in the Middle East are thoroughly reactionary. They pave the way for not only more bloodshed inside Syria, but also Ankara's continued collaboration in Washington's plans for strategic and military intervention in Eurasia.



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