

Amid Turkish war threats, Ankara and Washington to build “safe zone” in Syria

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On Wednesday, the Turkish Defense Ministry stated that Turkish and US military officials agreed to build a “safe zone” in northern Syria. According to Turkey’s state-run Anadolu Agency, the 30-to-40-kilometer (18-to-25-mile) wide “safe zone” will be controlled by Turkey in coordination with the United States.

The Defense Ministry statement said, “During the talks, the immediate implementation of measures to address Turkey’s security concerns was discussed in detail.” It added, “In that respect, as a first step to establish a safe zone, it was decided that a Joint Operations Center in Turkey will be established soon for coordination and control with the United States.”

This statement comes after three days of talks between Turkish and US military officials and weeks of growing threats and preparations by President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s Justice and Development Party (AKP) government for an invasion across the Turkish-Syrian border.

Washington made clear its opposition to such an operation against its main proxy force in Syria, with which US Special Forces are embedded. US Defense Secretary Mark Esper warned that it would be “unacceptable” to the US, adding that it would prevent unilateral interventions.

Last weekend, President Erdoğan declared in Bursa that “We have entered Afrin, we have entered Jarabulus, and we have entered Al Bab. Now we will enter east of the Euphrates. We shared this with Russia, we shared this with America. A security corridor should be formed in that region.”

Erdoğan was referring to two previous Turkish military attacks in northern Syria targeting the Kurdish-nationalist People’s Protection Units (YPG) militia, the main US proxy force in Syria.

On August 24, 2016, just five weeks after the failed

NATO-backed coup attempt to topple Erdoğan, he ordered the first Turkish invasion of Syria, Operation Euphrates Shield, targeting YPG forces. This was followed by “Operation Olive Branch” in January 2018. Turkish armed forces and their Islamist “Free Syrian Army” proxies still occupy parts of northwest Syria, including Afrin city.

As it seeks to build a “safe zone” east of the Euphrates, Ankara’s main aim is to smash the Kurdish-led proto-state there and chase the YPG militias, which are linked to the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), out of the region. Ankara has long insisted that it needs to extend the “safe zone” it controls in northwest Syria east of the Euphrates. The Erdoğan government has also hypocritically exploited the Syrian refugee crisis in Turkey, with the full support of the opposition Republican People’s Party (CHP). The Kurdish nationalist Peoples’ Democratic Party (HDP) has been silent on the growing antirefugee campaign in the recent period.

On Tuesday, Erdoğan declared that Turkey’s military operations in Syria would not only resolve the migrant issue, but also help Syrians return to their country. The CHP, its far-right ally the Good Party and their media supporters have long called for holding referendums on sending Syrians back home and whipped up chauvinism by blaming them for unemployment, poverty and social inequality.

As the traditional party of the Kemalist bourgeois elites, the CHP has openly declared its support for a new invasion of Syria. On July 31, 2019, while visiting the Türk-İş trade union confederation, CHP leader Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu said: “Turkey must ensure its own security in Middle East policy. In this context, there may be a peace corridor or special zone [in Syria].”

On Wednesday, the HDP and smaller Kurdish

nationalist parties issued a joint statement against “ongoing attacks on the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) [in Iraq] and attack threats against Northern and Eastern Syria.” They declared, “We condemn Turkish and Iranian invasions on sovereign areas of the KRG and the Northern Syria Democratic Autonomous Government.”

In line with their bankrupt, pro-imperialist strategy, they appealed to the very powers whose wars have ravaged the Middle East for decades to assist them. Their statement urged the “United Nations, NATO, European Council, EU Commission and international institutions” to counteract Turkey and Iran, and thus contribute to a “solution.”

In fact, what predominates across the Middle East is the inability of any of the region’s capitalist powers to halt the decades-long imperialist bloodshed. Amid US war preparations against Iran, launching a new Turkish military operation to set up an illegal “safe zone” in Syria could easily spin out of control and turn into a regional or even world war, involving an open conflict between the United States and Russia.

Erdoğan, while working with the Pentagon, is pressing forward. “We’ll move the process which we started with the Euphrates Shield and Olive Branch operations forward to a different phase very soon,” he told the 11th Ambassadors' Conference in Ankara on Tuesday, adding, “We expect clear steps from the US over extradition of the FETÖ ringleader to Turkey and halting the arming of the PKK/YPG terror groups.”

Ankara blames the US-based preacher Fethullah Gülen and what it calls the “Fethullahist Terrorist Organization” (FETÖ) for the 2016 coup attempt. This failed coup, backed by Washington and Berlin, reflected growing tensions between US-led NATO powers and Turkey. The NATO powers, especially the US, deemed unacceptable Turkey’s turn towards closer relations with Russia and China amid its growing conflicts with the US and other NATO allies over strategic issues like their backing for the Syrian Kurdish militias.

It was shortly after the 2016 coup that the AKP began to talk about buying Russian S-400 anti-aircraft missiles. In the ensuing three years, Ankara has maintained its support for Al Qaeda-linked Islamist forces against the Russian- and Iranian-backed Syrian regime, while launching two military operations against

the YPG and developing a shaky alliance with Moscow and Tehran based on limiting US power in Syria.

Despite the latest US-Turkish agreement on building an illegal “safe zone” in Syria, deep and explosive differences between the two governments remain. In the wake of the first delivery of S-400 missiles to Turkey last month there is growing bipartisan pressure on US President Donald Trump to impose sanctions on Turkey under the anti-Russia Countering America’s Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA).

Last week, Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu warned Washington that Ankara could retaliate against US sanctions by closing NATO military bases in Turkey. He said, “We are currently running the process [of retaliatory measures], whether it’s İncirlik, Kürecik [a US radar base in Turkey] or other issues.” NATO’s İncirlik air base was a key center of the failed 2016 coup. According to a report accidentally published by NATO, 50 of the 150 US nuclear weapons stored in Europe are at İncirlik.

For now, as Erdoğan pursues a zig-zag policy of criticizing and seeking an accommodation with Washington to gain more regional influence, Trump has said he will withhold sales of F-35 jets to Turkey but has refrained from further sanctions.



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