

Idlib war escalates as Turkey announces military operations against Syria

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Over the weekend, Turkey intensified its conflict with the Syrian government forces in Syria's Idlib province, announcing a military offensive and shooting down two Syrian jets. The reactionary nine-year, US-led proxy war in Syria is escalating into a war between the Turkish and Syrian states, threatening to start a war between the entire NATO alliance and Syria's ally, Russia.

On Sunday, Turkish Defense Minister Hulusi Akar said Turkey's armed forces had launched "Operation Spring Shield"—an undeclared war—against Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's regime, after a Syrian strike killed at least 34 Turkish soldiers Thursday inside Syria. Akar said Turkish forces had "neutralized ... a drone, eight helicopters, 103 tanks, some 70 howitzers, three air defence systems and 2,212 Syrian government troops" since Thursday.

Shortly afterwards, the Defense Ministry said, "We destroyed two SU-24 regime jets downed after attacking our jets." It also claimed to have bombed Syrian air defence systems, and Turkey's state-owned Anadolu Agency reported that the Turkish army bombed Al-Nayrab military airport in Aleppo with armed drones on Sunday.

This was just a day after the Russian Foreign Ministry said, "Both sides confirmed their goal to reduce tensions 'on the ground' while continuing the fight against terrorists," after days of talks in Ankara. However, it is apparent that Turkey and Russia are pursuing opposed aims and preparing for war.

Syrian state news agency SANA confirmed the shootdown of two Syrian aircraft by Turkey, "while the two aircraft were carrying out a mission against armed terrorist organizations in the Idlib area." The pilots reportedly parachuted safely.

The Russian Defence Ministry responded that it could not guarantee the safety of Turkish aircraft over northern Syria, after Damascus shut Idlib province's airspace. Amid an increasingly aggressive offensive by Turkish-led forces receiving statements of "solidarity" from both Washington and NATO, there is a risk of a new retaliatory Syrian or Russian air strike on Turkish troops.

Since the beginning of the February, Turkey has lost more than 50 soldiers in Syria, fighting to defend its military outposts and Al Qaeda-linked proxies in Idlib against Russian and Iranian-backed Syrian government troops.

While Ankara accuses Damascus and Moscow of violating the 2018 Sochi agreement by fighting to retake Idlib, including Turkish military posts there, Moscow has charged that Turkey has failed to fulfill its pledge to separate "radical" Islamist militias from "moderates."

The Turkish government's claims to only be defending "moderates" and civilians against indiscriminate Syrian attacks are blatant lies. Idlib's most powerful "rebel" group is Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, which both the United Nations and Turkey designate as a terrorist group, and which is led by the former Syrian affiliate of Al Qaeda, upon which the NATO powers have relied for years in the Syrian war.

Turkish and international media endlessly seek to whitewash this group. Just last week, Turkish stated-owned TRT World published an article titled "Can Hayat Tahrir al Sham gain international legitimacy?" Citing its leader Abu Muhammad al Jolani's interview with the International Crisis Group, it claims: "The group now eschews much of Al Qaeda's ideology after decoupling from the group in July 2016."

While using these forces against the Syrian regime, Ankara is also seeking direct support from its NATO allies against Russia, risking a clash between nuclear-armed powers. On Saturday, after meeting with his US counterpart Mike Pompeo in Qatar, Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu told reporters that Ankara is asking Washington for Patriot missiles to challenge Russian control of Syrian airspace.

Asked Saturday about Ankara's request for anti-aircraft missiles, Trump replied, "We are discussing this issue with President Erdoğan." This is another turnaround, after Washington refused to sell Turkey Patriot missiles and removed it from the F-35 fighter program when Turkey decided to deploy Russian S-400 anti-aircraft missiles.

Yesterday, Erdoğan also reportedly spoke to French

President Emmanuel Macron to demand “NATO’s concrete and clear solidarity.”

At issue also is the horrific anti-refugee policy led by the European imperialist bourgeoisie. Erdoğan has opened Turkey’s western borders to more than 4 million refugees so they can travel on to Europe, hoping to force the European powers into supporting his policies, at which point he would again seal the borders. Erdoğan aims to win NATO support not only for Turkish war aims in Syria, but also for plans to resettle Syrian Arab refugees in majority-Kurdish regions of Syria. This would cut across Kurdish militas’ attempts to set up a Kurdish pro-state in the region.

Also, after Erdoğan declared, “We are not obligated to take care of so many refugees,” a fascistic attack targeting Syrian homes and workplaces took place this weekend in Elbistan, in Turkey’s southern province of Kahramanmaraş.

Amid widespread popular opposition to Ankara’s war in Syria, President Erdoğan made his first public remarks on Saturday following Thursday’s disastrous losses in Syria. The speech principally aimed to prevent any eruption of social opposition to war amid growing social inequality, declining living standards and a worsening economic crisis inside Turkey and internationally.

Erdoğan declared, “The main target is Turkey, not Syria.” Conflating Turkey’s ongoing occupation of northern Syria targeting US-backed Kurdish militias with its military presence in Idlib, he said: “If we do not clear our borders from terrorists now, we might have to fight bigger wars inside Turkey later on.”

Erdoğan also laughingly shared his conversation with Trump, sparking angry comments on social media. On Twitter, more than 200,000 people almost immediately used a hash tag “Why are you laughing Erdoğan?” to express their opposition to war.

The targets of the social anger include not only the Erdoğan government, but also the opposition Republican People’s Party (CHP). While CHP has tactically criticized Turkish military operations in Idlib, it has supported the war mandates in the parliament for years and bears direct responsibility for the Turkish government’s war in Syria. It also promotes chauvinist, anti-Syrian propaganda.

The CHP has signed a joint statement on Thursday together with its far-right ally the Good Party, the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) and its government coalition ally, the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP). It asserted a “right of reprisal” against “attacks on our soldiers.”

The Kurdish-nationalist Peoples’ Democratic Party’s (HDP) “no” votes on war mandates in parliament, based on opposition to military operations targeting the People’s Protection Units (YPG), the main US proxy force in Syria,

are not based on a principled, anti-imperialist or anti-war position.

The dangerous escalation between Turkey and Russia is leading to stepped-up attacks on press freedom. After a right-wing nationalist gang tried to raid the homes of three Sputnik Turkey employees in Ankara on Saturday, the journalists and Sputnik-Turkey’s chief editor in Istanbul were detained, questioned and, hours later, released.

One released journalist said, “We were completely absurdly charged over an article that we did not write and have nothing to do with,” a reference to the ‘Stolen Province,’ an article on the southern border province of Hatay, which joined Turkey in 1939 after a referendum that Syria refused to recognize.

Last month, Turkish state media outlets like TRT World published reports questioning Turkish-Syrian borders, showing maps of the “Aleppo Vilayet in the Ottoman Empire” on the basis of a “National Pact” declared by Turkish nationalist forces during the independence war. It “covered current Turkish territories, the Ottoman Aleppo Vilayet and Ottoman Mosul Vilayet, which corresponds to present-day northern Iraq.” Yesterday, the pro-government *Daily Sabah* also published an article titled “Crimea: Story of a twice stolen peninsula.”

Opposing imperialist war and defending refugees are tasks of the international working class. The only way out of the growing danger of war, including between nuclear-armed powers, is to build an international anti-war movement in the working class, across the Middle East and internationally, on the basis of an internationalist socialist program.



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