

Turkey continues bombing Kurdish forces in Syria, threatens ground invasion

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After bombing Kurdish nationalist militias in northern Syria and Iraq last weekend, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has said a ground invasion is imminent. In recent days, more than 100 people have been detained in cities such as Istanbul and Diyarbakir for protesting against the cross-border attacks. Ankara claims its air strikes are retaliation for the November 13 terror attack in Istanbul, which killed six civilians.

“While we will continue our air strikes without interruption, we will also get on the terrorists on the ground at the most appropriate time for us,” Erdogan said Wednesday. He announced plans to “close the entire southern borders from Hatay to Hakkari with a security strip,” hinting that he could extend Turkey’s occupation of areas in northern Syria, ongoing since 2016, to Iraq.

About possible invasion targets, Erdoğan said: “We have already created part of this strip with the cross-border operations we have carried out [in Syria]. We will take care of the rest step by step, starting with the sources of trouble like Tel Rifaat, Manbij, Kobani.”

A Turkish army offensive targeting Kurdish forces threatens to unleash large-scale conflict, displacing masses of people. The militias making up the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) reportedly control around 100,000 fighters.

Last Sunday, Turkish Defense Minister Hulusi Akar said, “Air Operation Claw-Sword was successfully carried out, [with] all aircraft returned safely to their bases after the operation.”

However, after two civilians, including a child, were killed on Monday in rocket attacks from northern Syria on the Karkamis district of Gaziantep, inside Turkey, the Erdoğan government again bombed and shelled YPG-SDF positions. Ankara blamed Kurdish forces for the rocket attacks. Kurdish forces denied this, however, asserting that like the Istanbul bombing, it was carried out by Turkish-controlled Islamist forces.

The opposing sides made conflicting statements about the air strikes. While Turkish officials claim to have killed “326 terrorists,” the SDF claimed 12 Turkish soldiers and eight Islamist fighters were killed in “legitimate defense” operations. At least 11 civilians, including a journalist, have also reportedly died.

The London-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR) said Turkish air strikes have killed 45, including eight more SDF fighters yesterday. It said 18 of the dead were Syrian government soldiers. Syrian troops have reportedly deployed to SDF-held areas in recent months, with Russian backing, amid talks between the SDF and Damascus.

SOHR and Kurdish sources said airstrikes hit the area around Al-Hol in northeastern Syria, where they claim “ISIS families are present.” According to a recent UN report, “50 percent of Al-Hol’s total population (currently about 56,000 individuals) is under the age of 12. They find themselves deprived of their rights, vulnerable and marginalized.”

These conflicts are the product of the 11-year proxy war waged in Syria by the NATO powers, led by Washington. Initially, amid working class uprisings in Egypt and Tunisia in 2011, they armed Al Qaeda-linked militias in Syria to topple President Bashar al-Assad. When the Islamist ISIS militia then emerged in Syria and invaded Iraq, the NATO powers launched a “war on ISIS,” making the SDF in Syria based around the Kurdish-nationalist People’s Protection Units (YPG) their main proxies.

The Turkish bourgeoisie was dismayed by the rising influence of the YPG and the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK), fearing Kurdish nationalist sentiment in Turkey itself. In recent years, it has launched repeated cross-border attacks on Kurdish nationalist forces in Syria and Iraq.

This conflict is now even more explosive due to the

NATO war on Russia in Ukraine in which Turkey has tried to mediate, given its strong ties to both Russia and Ukraine.

Now, maneuvering between Washington and Moscow, Erdoğan aims to get a green light to invade Syria and attack US-backed Kurdish forces—both from Washington, his NATO ally, and from Moscow and Tehran, who back Assad. Ankara has threatened to veto Sweden and Finland's NATO membership if NATO does not give it a free hand in Syria and Iraq. It is also trying to normalize relations with Assad after working for years to destroy his regime.

Washington, which already abandoned its Kurdish allies to a Turkish invasion in 2019, has criticized Erdoğan's offensive. Today, there are around 900 US troops and several US bases in northeastern Syria in YPG-held areas, which Ankara sees as a major threat.

On Wednesday, the Pentagon expressed its “concerns” over “escalating actions in northern Syria, Iraq, and Turkey. This escalation threatens the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS's years-long progress to degrade and defeat ISIS. ... Recent air strikes in Syria directly threatened the safety of US personnel who are working in Syria with local partners to defeat ISIS and maintain custody of more than 10,000 ISIS detainees. Moreover, uncoordinated military actions threaten Iraq's sovereignty.”

Turkish attacks also threaten Russian troops in Syria. According to the Syrian Kurdish-nationalist ANHA news agency, Turkish strikes hit a location in Syria's Tal Tamr district, killing two SDF fighters and narrowly missing Russian troops who had left shortly before.

On Thursday, Russian Foreign Ministry Spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said, “We understand Turkey's concerns about threats to its national security, but at the same time we believe that a ground operation on Syrian territory will only escalate tensions in the region and lead to an increase in terrorist activity.”

According to AP reports, Erdoğan also wrote to Assad, calling “for the return of the Syrian army to areas now controlled by the Kurds, for action to prevent Kurdish fighters from using Syrian gas and oil, and for Syrian refugees in Turkey to be returned to Syria.” Erdoğan reportedly declared he was ready to send envoys to Damascus. Assad, however, rejected this, proposing to meet in a third country.

Kurdish-nationalist forces continue to emphatically reject Ankara's claim that they carried out the Istanbul attack, which it uses to justify its offensive. SDF leader Mazlum Abdi told *Al Monitor*, “I believe [the terror

attack] was an act of provocation that was conceived by the Turkish government in order to lay the ground for the war against us.”

Abdi blamed the attack on “Syrian opposition groups operating under Turkey's control.” He said three brothers of Ahlam Albashir, who was arrested for planting the bomb in Istanbul, died fighting for ISIS, and that, “Another brother is a commander in the Turkish-backed Syrian opposition in Afrin.” Albashir, whose testimony was leaked to Turkish pro-government media, allegedly identified her brother Mohamed as a “senior commander in the Free Syrian Army,” a Turkish-backed Islamist militia. However, she also reportedly claimed to be affiliated to the YPG.

Abdi also linked Erdoğan's launching of the attacks to the Turkish 2023 elections, stating: “But most immediately there is the question of elections in Turkey. ... Erdoğan and his government are laying the ground, setting the public mood for the forthcoming elections.”

Abdi underlined the Kurdish nationalists' willingness to deal with Ankara, claiming Erdoğan had “two paths” ahead of him: “He can either reach an agreement with the Kurdish movement, and that would give him an edge in the elections, or ignite a war. They've chosen war.”

The Kurdish nationalists have, however, no perspective for stopping the bloodshed. Ahmet Karamus, co-president of the Kurdistan National Congress (KNK), has said, “We call on NATO, the US, Russia and the European Union to fulfill their promises and agreements to the Kurdish people and not to remain silent.” Such impotent appeals to the US-led NATO powers, which over 30 years have killed millions in the Middle East in wars of plunder, expose the bankruptcy of Kurdish nationalism.

Halting the conflict in Syria, Iraq and preventing further escalation requires uniting and mobilizing the international working class on an independent revolutionary program against imperialism and all its local capitalist collaborators. The call by the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) to build a mass global youth movement to stop the reckless escalation towards World War III, featured at its December 10 online meeting, is critical to this struggle.



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