

Turkey's escalating clashes with Kurdish militias in Iraq, Syria threaten war

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On December 22-23, 12 Turkish soldiers in northern Iraq were killed by Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) guerillas amid the Turkish Armed Forces' (TSK) military operations targeting Kurdish forces.

Turkey has military bases and guardhouses in Iraq, which the Baghdad government has declared illegal. The raid came amid air strikes and assassinations by Turkish forces and the National Intelligence Organisation (MİT) targeting the PKK and its Syrian ally, People's Protection Units (YPG) militias in northern Iraq and Syria. Hundreds of Kurdish political prisoners in Turkey have been on hunger strike since November 27 demanding improved conditions.

Amid Israel's genocide in Gaza and US preparations for war in the Middle East targeting Iran, rising tensions point to the danger of another war in Syria and Iraq. The Turkish forces intensified air strikes after the raid. The US-backed "Autonomous Administration of Northern and Eastern Syria" said civilian settlements and infrastructure were targeted.

Turkey's seven warplanes and 33 drones launched air strikes in the area on December 23, killing 8 people, leaving more than 2,000 residents without electricity and targeting hospitals. Thousands of people protested Turkey's attacks at a funeral in Qamishli.

While Ankara denied targeting civilians, the Turkish Defence Ministry announced that it had destroyed "a total of 71 targets consisting of caves, bunkers, shelters, oil facilities and warehouses," and "neutralized" 2,201 PKK-YPG members during the year, 81 of them in the last week.

The bloody war between the Turkish state and the Kurdish nationalist forces led by the PKK, now going on for almost 40 years, has been intertwined with the imperialist wars the US has waged in the Middle East over three decades.

Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's government was a key

supporter of the CIA-orchestrated regime-change war attempting to overthrow Syrian President Bashar al-Assad in 2011, which killed more than 500,000 people. Erdoğan's NATO-backed "peace process" with the PKK collapsed in 2015 when Washington turned the YPG into its main proxy force in Syria.

Ankara was terrified by the prospect of a US-backed Kurdish state emerging in Syria, fearing it could trigger a similar outcome in Turkey. The Turkish government has gone on the offensive against the PKK in Turkey and northern Iraq and the YPG in northern Syria.

Turkey has so far launched three major ground invasions in Kurdish-majority areas of northern Syria controlled by the YPG-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). As a result, Ankara now controls an area of 8,835 square kilometres covering more than 1,000 settlements, including cities and towns such as Afrin, al-Bab, Azaz, Jarabulus, Jinderes, Rajo, Tal Abyad and Ras al-Ayn. The Syrian government has repeatedly demanded that Ankara end its illegal occupation in the country.

Turkey aims to prevent Kurdish nationalists from dominating its entire southern border with Syria and to prevent the emergence of a Kurdish state. Ankara has established an occupation regime in these areas, which has displaced hundreds of thousands of Kurds during the military invasions. The Erdoğan government has previously announced that it will continue ground operations until it has established a 30-kilometre-deep "safe zone" along the entire Syrian border.

At a UN General Assembly in 2019, Erdoğan announced his plan to resettle three million Syrian refugees, mostly Arabs, who had fled NATO's regime-change war. He explained his plan, which amounted to an ethnic cleansing targeting Kurds, as follows:

Another important issue is the elimination of the

PKK/YPG organization in the east of the Euphrates... Our efforts to create a safe zone are ongoing... Our intention is to create a peace corridor and settle 2 million Syrians here. Once this safe zone is declared, we can settle 1.5-2 million Syrian migrants here... If we can move the depth of this zone to the Deir-u-Zor to Raqqa line, we can increase the number of Syrians returning from other parts of Europe to 3 million.

The October attack on the Turkish National Police headquarters in Ankara, claimed by the PKK, was seen by the Erdoğan government as an opportunity to advance these plans. The Ankara attack was followed by intensified air strikes against Kurdish militias in Iraq and Syria.

Ankara considered turning its escalating military operations into a large-scale ground operation in Syria. However, such an operation was not given a green light by Iran and Russia, which back the Syrian government, and the United States, which supports the YPG. On October 5, the Pentagon announced that a Turkish armed unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) had been shot down by US aircraft in Syria.

The Turkish ruling class feared that the US-backed Israeli genocidal war in Gaza could be extended to target Iran and threaten its own interests, so the Erdoğan government was forced to call for “restraint” and temporarily remove from its agenda a full-scale ground operation targeting Kurdish forces that would have increased tensions with Washington.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* recently stated, “The Turkish bourgeoisie fears that a victory in a Middle East war of Washington and Tel Aviv, both of whom back Kurdish-nationalist militias on Turkey’s borders in Iraq and Syria, could lead to the formation of a Kurdish state.”

In a statement following the deaths of 12 Turkish soldiers in Iraq on December 23, Erdoğan targeted the US, saying, “To eradicate terrorism at its source; we will continue to implement this strategy with determination until the last terrorist is eliminated. Turkey will not allow a terrorist entity in northern Iraq or Syria at any cost. We will never retreat from our fight against the hired gangs of killers who work as subcontractors for the imperialists.”

Erdoğan has repeatedly declared that he sees the US and other imperialist allies as complicit in Israel's genocide in Gaza. Yet the Erdoğan government maintains Turkey's critical trade with Israel and refuses to impose any

sanctions.

The falsity of Erdoğan’s “anti-imperialism” is epitomized by the Turkish ruling class's close ties to imperialist powers and decades-long defence of its foreign policy interests through NATO. This hypocrisy is manifested in the support of both the government and the bourgeois opposition, including the Kurdish nationalists, for NATO's expansion against Russia, with which it is de facto at war. Despite rhetoric criticism and tensions, the Turkish parliament unanimously approved Finland's accession into NATO in last March.

On Tuesday, three days after Erdoğan's accusations of 'subcontracting to the imperialists' and in the midst of Israel's NATO-backed genocide in Gaza, the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Turkish Parliament sent a proposal for Sweden's NATO membership to a vote in parliament.

Erdoğan's Justice and Development Party (AKP), its fascist ally the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) and the main opposition, the Kemalist Republican People's Party (CHP), whose candidate the pseudo-left parties supported in the presidential elections in May, voted “yes” to the proposal. The Kurdish nationalist People’s Party for Equality and Democracy (DEM) showed once again that it is not opposed to NATO enlargement by not participating in the vote, as it did in the vote on Finland.

The Turkish and Kurdish bourgeoisie are unable to bring a peaceful and democratic solution to the Kurdish question, which is intertwined with the imperialist war in the Middle East, in which they have been complicit for decades. The democratic aspirations of the oppressed Kurdish people, like those of the Palestinians, cannot be met by the imperialist powers and their reactionary regional proxies, who are primarily responsible for the carnage in the Middle East.

The only way forward is for the workers of the Middle East to unite with their class brothers and sisters in Europe, the US and around the world against imperialism and its regional proxies on the basis of an international socialist programme and to build the Socialist Federation of the Middle East.



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