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Turkish attack on Syrian Kurds marks major escalation in Middle East

Late Wednesday night, the Turkish army launched an intensive artillery attack on Syrian Kurds in Afrin, a multi-ethnic region in northwestern Syria controlled by the US-backed Democratic Union Party (PYD) and its militia, the People's Protection Units (YPG).

This attack, announced long ago by President Recep Tayyip Erdogan with the words “we can come unexpectedly overnight,” currently takes the form of a massive artillery bombardment. However, Ankara's threats show that they are preparing to launch an outright military occupation that could provoke war with Syria and a direct clash with US forces.

The initial step for a Turkish invasion of Afrin came hours after a meeting of Turkey's National Security Council (NSC) chaired by President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, in Ankara. In a statement issued after the meeting, it warned that “Necessary steps would be taken immediately and resolutely to defeat any threat against Turkey from western Syria in the first stage.” In a comment aimed at the Kurdish groups, it added, “The establishment of a terror corridor and the formation of a terrorist army across the border will not be allowed.” The statement also criticized the United States as follows: “It is regrettable that a state, which is part of NATO and our ally in bilateral relations, declares the terrorists as its partner and provides them with weapons, without any concern for our safety.”

After a Cabinet meeting following the NSC, Bekir Bozdag, Turkey's deputy prime minister and government spokesman, told reporters, “Turkey has reached the limits of its patience. Nobody should expect Turkey to show more patience.”

As the Turkish army launched its artillery attacks, the Syrian government warned yesterday that its air defenses stand ready to defend Syria against any “act of aggression.” According to the Syrian state news agency SANA, the Assad government will consider any Turkish military operations trespassing over Syria’s borders as an attempt to attack and violate the country’s territorial integrity. That is, as an act of war.

Meanwhile, former PYD leader Saleh Moslem warned Ankara that if the Turkish army attacks Afrin, the war will rapidly spread back into Turkey itself. Earlier this week, General Sipan Hemo, the YPG Commander, told the Kurdish news agency ANF that they “will strongly respond to whoever attacks and threatens Afrin, Rojava or anywhere else, be it Erdogan or someone else.”

A bitter conflict is emerging, above all between Ankara and Washington. The Trump administration has once again enraged Ankara with its recent threat to build a 30,000-strong border protection force drawn from the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), the Pentagon’s main proxy on the ground, which is dominated by the Kurdish YPG. In response, Ankara has sent Chief of General Staff Hulusi Akar and National Intelligence Organization (MIT) head Hakan Fidan to Moscow.

They are now looking for support from Russia in Syria, including on “the use of Syria air space,” while also staying in close contact with Iran on the issue.

This points to the deep internal tensions that are tearing apart the NATO military alliance between the United States, Canada, the European powers, and Turkey. While a member of the NATO alliance, Turkey is seeking support from the alliance’s main target—Russia—against the Kurdish forces long supported by the United States and its European allies in Syria.

While apparently triggered by the US announcement of the creation of the border protection force, the Turkish aggression has long been under preparation. Ankara has repeatedly demanded the withdrawal of the PYD/YPG from Afrin, and asked Putin to remove Russian troops from the area, so that the Turkish army could take its “own measures to secure the borders.”

The Turkish government’s attack on Afrin is a reactionary act of militarist aggression, stemming from its deep hostility to the Kurdish population. It is the outcome of the Turkish bourgeoisie’s collaboration with a quarter century of imperialist wars in the Middle East launched by Washington and its European allies. They have devastated whole societies in Iraq and Syria, turned tens of millions of people into refugees, and left more than a million dead.

Washington and its European allies initially convinced the Turkish bourgeoisie to support and participate in the proxy war in Syria, because it initially shared the two principal aims of the imperialist powers themselves. The first was to prevent the spread of mass revolutionary movements in Tunisia and Egypt, which had overthrown two US-backed dictators, to the whole Middle East. The second was to strengthen NATO's influence at the expense of Russia and Iran, by toppling their main regional ally, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.

Ankara enthusiastically participated in the imperialist proxy war in Syria, helping arm and protect Islamist militias that carried out attacks and terror bombings across Syria, which was part of the global strategy of US imperialism: to try to consolidate its declining world hegemony through the use of its residual military power in wars targeting Russia and China.

As NATO's Islamist proxies failed to topple Assad, however, and Washington turned ever more to Kurdish forces as its main proxy force in the region, Ankara turned ever more against US plans. The US war for regime change targeting Assad not only destroyed Syria, but also led to a US attempt at violent regime change inside Turkey itself—as Erdogan himself ended up on a hit list of Middle East heads of state targeted for murder by imperialism.

As its relations with NATO and the European Union rapidly deteriorated, Ankara made a major shift toward a rapprochement with Russia and China, igniting a bitter conflict with the Obama administration and its European allies. In July 2016, a section of Turkey's military launched an abortive putsch out of NATO's Incirlik air base, encouraged by Washington and Berlin.

Having escaped assassination, thanks to a mass mobilization of working people that defeated the coup, Erdogan imposed a state of emergency and succeeded in winning the April 2017 constitutional referendum to consolidate his power. He also ordered the Turkish army to launch its own invasion of Syria, "Operation Euphrates Shield," against both the Islamic State (IS) militia and the Kurdish-nationalist People's Protection Units. Also, together with Moscow and Tehran, he initiated the Astana talks for a "solution" in the Syrian civil war.

The Erdogan government's warmongering attitude in Syria has nothing to do with the real interests of the working people, as his henchmen allege. Having participated in the imperialist powers' slaughter of the workers and oppressed masses of Syria despite broad

popular opposition to the war inside Turkey, it is now launching another bloody onslaught for its own strategic interests.

The Turkish military operation against Afrin will doubtless further escalate tensions within NATO, bringing Turkish troops not only into conflict with the US-backed Kurdish militia, or with Syrian troops who are still continuing their march northwards in the country. Turkish soldiers also risk entering into conflict with approximately 2,000 American troops in the territories controlled of the YPG/PYD.