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Turkey invades Syria to attack US-backed Kurdish forces

On Sunday, at 11 AM local time, Turkish tanks and infantry invaded Afrin, a majority-Kurdish multi-ethnic region in northwestern Syria. The Turkish forces are targeting the US-backed Syrian-Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) and its militia, the People's Protection Units (YPG), which control Afrin. At the same time, the Free Syrian Army (FSA), Ankara's proxy force in Syria, attacked Afrin from the south and east, supported by Turkish tanks and Special Forces.

This aggression by Turkey is a reckless escalation that will exacerbate the conflicts raging across the Middle East and intensify the danger of war between the major powers. With Moscow's tacit support, Turkey is attacking the YPG, the backbone of the main US proxy force in Syria, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) militia. The danger of this triggering a clash between US forces and Russian and Turkish forces in Syria, and all-out war between the United States and Russia, is very real.

The ground invasion, code-named "Olive Branch," came after hours of Turkish air strikes on Afrin, including strikes on an airfield used by US forces to deliver equipment and arms to the SDF.

It signifies a historic breakdown of the NATO alliance, of which the United States and Turkey are both members. Given that the Turkish invasion apparently has support in Berlin, it reflects deep and mounting conflicts between the major NATO powers.

In the first hours of the operation on Sunday, Turkish Prime Minister Binali Yildirim told reporters that its aim was to create a 30-kilometer "safe zone" along the Turkish-Syrian

border. He said the operation would proceed in four phases, without giving further details. It seems likely to continue eastwards to Manbij, a region occupied by the SDF since it fought Islamic State (ISIS) forces in August 2016.

That development provoked Operation Euphrates Shield, an invasion by the Turkish army to block the Kurdish offensive in Syria and break up what Ankara called “a terror corridor along the Turkish border.”

Initial press reports of the Turkish attack were contradictory. Turkish officials and media unanimously hailed the operation as a great success. However, the YPG claimed to have repulsed Turkish and FSA forces “after fierce clashes.”

The Kurdish Communities Union (KCK), an umbrella group including the PKK (Kurdistan Workers’ Party) of Turkey and Kurdish organizations in Syria and Iran, condemned the operation and declared it would “stand by Afrin with all its strength.” In a written [statement](#), it accused Russia and Syria of “permitting Turkey to attack Afrin.”

The offensive threatens to provoke civil war in Kurdish-majority areas of southern Turkey. Speaking in Bursa, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan vowed to crush all opposition within Turkey to the war, including from the pro-Kurdish Peoples’ Democratic Party (HDP). “Whoever takes to the streets on the call of HDP, KCK and PKK should know that our security forces will keep a tight rein on them and they will pay a heavy price,” he said.

Late yesterday, Turkish media reported three missile attacks in the southeastern Turkish province of Reyhanlı, killing one and wounding 32 civilians.

Within Turkey, Erdogan’s Justice and Development Party is using the invasion to escalate its crackdown on political opposition, with the support of the opposition Republican People’s Party and the fascistic Nationalist Movement Party. Hundreds of people protesting the invasion were arrested in several Turkish cities. The judiciary launched investigations of Democratic Society Party (DTP) Co-Chair Leyla Güven, HDP spokesperson Ayhan Bilgen and HDP Deputy Co-Chair Nadir Yıldırım for criticizing the Afrin invasion.

Turkey was able to launch the operation only due to tacit Russian support. Moscow withdrew its forces stationed in Afrin as part of the Russian intervention against NATO-backed Islamist militias in Syria, and allowed Turkish aircraft to operate in the region’s air space. It also mediated for Turkey in relations with the Syrian and Iranian governments, which criticized the invasion.

Yesterday, Russian officials blamed Washington for the attack, saying it took “provocative steps” by saying it would arm the YPG and use it to control the Syrian-Turkish border.

The Syrian Foreign Ministry said Syria “strongly condemns the flagrant Turkish aggression on the city of Afrin, which is an integral part of Syrian territory, stressing that this aggression is the most recent in a series of Turkish transgressions against Syrian sovereignty.” It dismissed claims by Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu that Turkey had informed Syria beforehand, calling them “lies that the Turkish government continues to spout.”

Iran, Syria's main regional ally, said it hoped that “the operation will immediately come to an end.”

Turkey’s invasion of Syria is the outcome of decades of escalating carnage and imperialist war in the Middle East, led by Washington, since the Persian Gulf War and the Stalinist bureaucracy’s dissolution of the USSR, both of which occurred in 1991. With the removal of the Soviet military threat, Washington was free to launch ever bloodier wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria and beyond, with the aid of some or all of its NATO allies. It is increasingly clear, however, that the growing international conflicts provoked by these wars, including Ankara’s outrage over US reliance on Kurdish proxy forces, have reached an entirely new stage.

As Turkey moves to destroy the main US proxy force in Syria, NATO is on the verge of collapse and Washington is increasingly isolated. It faces a powerful coalition of opponents in the Middle East that enjoys support even among Washington’s nominal European allies. It is responding by announcing a military strategy that centers on preparations for total war against nuclear-armed powers such as Russia and China.

Initial US statements on the invasion were unclear and self-contradictory. US State Department sources said that Secretary of State Rex Tillerson had spoken to his Russian and Turkish counterparts about “securing stability in the north of the country,” but gave no details. Pentagon officials said they “encourage all parties to avoid escalation and to focus on the most important task of defeating the Islamic State.”

In fact, the Pentagon on Friday unveiled a National Defense Strategy that proclaims the “war on terror” to have been supplanted by the need to prepare for war against rival great powers. “Great power competition—not terrorism—is now the primary focus of US national security,” Defense Secretary James Mattis said as he unveiled the document, which singles out Russia and China as the preeminent threats to US global dominance.

The US is clearly concerned with the Turkish invasion. The Center for American Progress, a Washington think tank, warned that it “could trigger a new, bloody phase of the long-running Syrian civil war” and “may also be aimed at the United States,” which “has spent three years balancing a troubled relationship with Turkey with the imperatives of the counter-IS campaign in Syria.” The Center for American Progress statement continued, “With the end of that campaign in sight, that balancing act is once again teetering on the brink.”

The contrast to the policy of Germany, the leading European power, could not be more striking. Berlin appears to have green-lighted the invasion. Last Wednesday, as Turkish artillery strikes on YPG positions began and Erdogan’s National Security Council threatened to invade Syria, a delegation of high-level Turkish security officials arrived for two days of friendly talks in Berlin. In these talks, German and Turkish officials discussed measures against the Kurds.

As the German press discussed Berlin’s “new turn back” toward Turkey, German Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel said Berlin intended to have “better negotiations” with Ankara, “for the benefit of Turkey, Germany and Europe.” Berlin announced a new crackdown on PKK activities in Germany, with the Federal Prosecutor’s Office opening 130 investigations.

Berlin also signaled that Turkey will continue to enjoy German military support even after attacking US proxies in Syria. It did so by moving to fast-track Turkey’s requests for the modernization of its German “Leopard” tanks by Rheinmetall. “The federal government is showing itself to be flexible in its new turn back towards Turkey,” *Der Spiegel* wrote. “According to *Der Spiegel*’s sources, Berlin now wants to give the nod to a multi-million-euro arms deal with Ankara.”

These statements of German support for Turkey even as it bombards US proxy forces in Syria point to the profound tensions tearing apart the NATO military alliance and the escalating danger of direct conflict between the major world powers.