

Turkey Escalates War Threats after Terror Attacks

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The Justice and Development Party (AKP) government in Turkey has seized upon a terrorist attack carried out in the capital of Ankara as a pretext for escalating its military campaign against Kurdish-dominated regions in eastern Turkey, northern Syria and Iraq.

At the same time, Ankara is pushing ahead with plans for a ground invasion into Syria. In so doing, NATO member Turkey is deliberately stoking a conflagration in the entire region and risking a military confrontation with Russia, which could rapidly develop into all-out war between the great powers.

On Thursday, the Turkish military command announced that its warplanes had bombed PKK (Kurdistan Workers Party) positions in northern Iraq the previous night. Targets were attacked in the Haftanin border region—an area considered to be a stronghold of the PKK militia.

On Friday, Turkish Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu boasted in a televised speech: “Our armed forces conducted a large-scale operation against the Haftanin camp. ... Around 70 members of the separatist terrorist organization ... were neutralized.”

In an attack on a military convoy in the Turkish capital of Ankara on Wednesday night, at least 28 people were killed and another 60 injured. All of the dead except one were members of the Turkish military. The attack took place just a few hundred metres from the parliament and Turkish army headquarters. At least six people were killed in another attack on Thursday on a military convoy in the predominantly Kurdish province of Diyarbakir in southeastern Turkey.

Davutoğlu and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan promptly assigned responsibility for the attack to the PKK along with the Syrian Kurdish organizations, the Democratic Union Party (PYD) and the People’s Protection Units (YPG), and vowed retaliation.

Erdoğan announced that Turkey would “use its legitimate right to defend itself at all times and everywhere. ... These actions only serve to increase our determination to retaliate in Turkey and abroad to such attacks on our unity and our future.” The terror tested the patience of Turkey, Erdoğan declared, adding menacingly: “If someone fires on Turkey, he will receive a clear answer.”

Davutoğlu threatened: “Yesterday’s attack was directly targeting Turkey and the perpetrator is the YPG and the divisive terrorist organization PKK. All necessary measures will be taken against them.” Davutoğlu vowed that Turkey would continue to shell YPG positions in northern Syria and equated the YPG with the terrorist organizations Al Qaeda and Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), insisting that they could not be a party to Syrian

peace talks.

The Turkish prime minister asserted: "This attack has been carried out by the members of the terrorist organization inside Turkey together with an individual YPG member who had crossed from Syria." Davutoglu then identified the suicide bomber as Salih Neccar, born in 1992 in the Kurdish town of Amudah in northern Syria.

Representatives of the PKK, the YPG and the PYD categorically rejected the allegations launched by Ankara. The PKK commander Cemil Bayik told the PKK-affiliated agency Firat on Thursday: "We do not know who did it. It might, however, have been in retaliation for the massacres in Kurdistan."

A member of the YPG told reporters, "We have no connection to the man who is named as the assassin."

The PYD denies any connection to the attacks and has no record of carrying out any actions in Turkey. Its leader, Saleh Muslim, accused the Turkish government of exploiting the attacks to escalate the fighting in northern Syria. "We vehemently deny responsibility," Muslim said in a telephone interview with Reuters. "Davutoğlu is preparing something else. They have bombarded us for a week, as you know. I can assure you that not a single YPG bullet was fired in the direction of Turkey. They don't consider Turkey an enemy."

Whoever has followed events in Syria and the fiercely aggressive response of the Turkish government in recent days can only conclude that the latest terror attacks play into the hands of Davutoğlu and the Turkish government.

For the past week, the Turkish Air Force has bombarded YPG positions in northern Syria and the Turkish army has shelled them with artillery on the Turkish-Syrian border. On Tuesday, the US, which works closely with the YPG in the latter's offensive against ISIS in Syria, called upon Turkey and the Kurdish militia to end their conflict. Erdoğan replied angrily that such a proposal was "not up for debate" and that Turkish security forces would carry out their fight against the "Kurdish terrorists in Syria" to the bitter end.

He accused the UN and the West of being passive for too long with regard to the fighting in Syria. "Right now I have difficulties understanding the United States. Why do they not call the PYD and YPG terrorists? Why do they say they support the YPG?" On Thursday, Turkey summoned the ambassadors of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council.

Turkey has intensified its rhetoric in the wake of the attacks.

"Those who directly or indirectly support a group hostile to Turkey risk losing their status as a friend. ... We cannot tolerate any NATO country, including first and foremost the US, having relations with a terrorist organization that attacks us in the heart of Turkey,"

Davutoğlu declared. He said the Syrian regime was "directly responsible" for the attacks, calling the YPG "a pawn" of Damascus, and insisting that Turkey had the right to take all measures against the Assad regime.

Regarding Russia, which supports the Syrian army in its offensive in northern Syria,

Davutoğlu stated that Moscow's condemnation of the attacks was a "positive sign", but was not enough. "I warn Russia again against using terrorist organizations against innocent people in Syria and Turkey," he said.

How can one account for the thoroughly reckless and aggressive stance of the Turkish government?

Recent weeks have seen the collapse of the Western-backed Turkish strategy to forcibly topple the Assad regime through arming and financing so-called moderate Islamist "rebels" in Syria.

An article on the news website al-Monitor states: "On Feb. 3, the Syrian army and its allies dealt a strategic blow to Ankara when they cut the land route between Aleppo and the Bab al-Salameh border crossing with Turkey in the Turkish province of Kilis."

The road link was important for Erdoğan and Davutoğlu for one reason in particular. Al-Monitor writes:

"The fighters, weapons, munitions and various supplies that flowed via this route to Aleppo allowed the rebels to sustain their military presence in Syria's most populous city and therefore preserve their political ambitions in the conflict. ... Thus, with the fall of Aleppo, Ankara would find itself largely sidelined from the Syrian process."

Since then, there are increasing indications that the Turkish regime is planning a ground offensive in Syria to rescue its dwindling influence and prevent the emergence of a Kurdish-occupied territory in the north of Syria. Just one day after the Syrian army occupied the Turkish-Syrian route to Aleppo, a spokesman for the Russian Defence Ministry stated that Turkey was "actively preparing for a military invasion in Syria. ... We're detecting more and more signs of Turkish armed forces being engaged in covert preparations for direct military actions in Syria."

According to reports, the Turkish military has been reticent up until now about a military invasion in Syria. The Turkish newspaper *Hurriyet* reported recently that the Turkish army would not invade Syria without a resolution from the UN Security Council.

Erdoğan and Davutoğlu have been seeking for some time to change this attitude. An article on al-Monitor, significantly entitled, "Can Erdogan bully Turkey's armed forces into invading Syria?" reports the Turkish president pushing for an early intervention in Syria. Erdoğan has repeatedly spoken of an "mistake" in 2003 when Turkey refused to march alongside the US into Iraq. Now this "mistake" should not be repeated in Syria.

Already in 2014, Davutoğlu had sought, in his capacity at the time as Turkish defence minister, to provoke an invasion by the Turkish army. A leaked audio recording revealed that he had met with, among others, the head of the Turkish intelligence service MIT, Hakan Fidan, to discuss the possibility of an attack on Turkey from across the Syrian border, or at the grave of Suleiman Shah—a former Turkish enclave inside Syria—serving as a pretext for a full-scale Turkish intervention of Syria. At one point in the conversation, Davutoğlu declared that such an attack "in the current situation should be seen as an opportunity for us".

Today, the Turkish government is less isolated than in 2014, and enjoys, in particular, greater support from the German government. Just two days ago, German Chancellor Angela Merkel confirmed in a government statement her support for a no-fly zone in Syria, a central demand of the Erdoğan government and an important prerequisite for a Turkish military invasion in Syria. After the latest terror attacks, she stated that the German government stood “alongside Turkey in the fight against those responsible for such inhuman acts”.

The threat of another major war is becoming more acute on a daily basis. Russian Prime Minister Dmitri Medvedev warned at the Munich Security Conference last weekend against the danger of a “new world war” should Western or Arab ground troops invade Syria, adding, “The Americans and our Arab partners must think it through: do they want permanent war?”

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