

US, Turkey at odds over Syria intervention

By Patrick Martin
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A top-level US delegation arrived in Ankara Thursday for talks with Turkish leaders amid a mounting crisis on the Syria-Turkey border, where Syrian Kurds are besieged in the town of Kobani by thousands of fighters mobilized by Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS).

The two US representatives are retired General John Allen, the Obama-appointed coordinator of the US-led military coalition attacking ISIS forces, and Brett McGurk, the State Department official handling the diplomatic side of the imperialist intervention.

The Turkish newspaper *Hurriyet* reported that Allen met late Thursday with Turkish Foreign Ministry Under Secretary Feridun Sinirlioglu.

The Obama administration is pressing the Turkish government either to send ground troops across the border to break the siege of Kobani, or to allow armed Turkish, Syrian and Iraqi Kurds to come to the defense of the town. The government of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has so far refused, demanding a public US commitment to the overthrow of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and the establishment of a no-fly zone in Syria and a US-protected buffer zone along the Syria-Turkish border.

Both Washington and Ankara agree on the ultimate goal of overthrowing Assad, but they have sharp differences over the means to accomplish this, particularly in their attitude to the Syrian Kurdish militia YPG, now hemmed in by ISIS forces on three sides in Kobani.

The Erdogan regime regards the YPG, which is an offshoot of the Kurdish separatist PKK in Turkey, as a major danger, since its control of a relatively autonomous Syrian Kurdish region sets an example for the much larger Kurdish population in southeastern Turkey. The Turkish government classifies both the YPG and ISIS as “terrorists” and is quite willing to have them fight each other to the death around Kobani.

If anything, Turkish policy has been to promote ISIS as part of the anti-Assad campaign in Syria. As US vice president Biden admitted last week, Turkey has allowed thousands of ISIS recruits to pass through its territory to Syria to join the Islamist group.

This attitude has triggered a political upheaval in the Kurdish-populated region in Turkey, with anti-government rioting in which at least 22 people were killed Tuesday and Wednesday. By Thursday, the government had decreed a state of emergency in six provinces in southeastern Turkey. Turkish police openly sided with ISIS against the Kurds this week, reportedly shouting pro-ISIS slogans during street battles with Kurdish protesters.

The Obama administration is under increasing pressure, from the military-intelligence apparatus, from its Kurdish allies in northern Iraq, and from warmongering critics in both the Republican and Democratic parties, to intervene more aggressively in Syria.

US warplanes have stepped up their bombing of ISIS positions around the beleaguered city Wednesday and Thursday, and the airstrikes seem to have at least temporarily slowed the advance of ISIS forces, which control about one-third of the enclave. There were reports that ISIS reinforcements were sent from Raqqa, the group’s de facto capital, to support the attack on Kobani, joining in street-to-street fighting in the city.

A steady stream of imperialist officials has passed through Ankara in an effort to influence Turkish policy. NATO secretary-general Jens Stoltenberg and Turkish foreign minister Mevlut Cavusoglu held a joint news conference Thursday after their talks. “It is not realistic to expect Turkey to conduct a ground operation on its own. We are holding talks,” Cavusoglu said. “Once there is a common decision, Turkey will not hold back from playing its part.”

An unnamed senior Ankara official went further,

rebuffing criticism of Turkey's inaction and blaming the Obama administration for having "dragged their feet for a very long time before deciding to take action against the catastrophic events happening in Syria."

Cavusoglu emphasized that any intervention in Syria must aim to remove the Assad government. "As long as Assad stays in power, bloodshed and massacres will continue," he said. "The Assad regime is the cause of instability and therefore a political change is necessary."

Stoltenberg said the Turkish proposal for a buffer zone or no-fly zone in Syria was not "on the table" in any NATO discussions of the crisis, although French President Francois Hollande has publicly backed it. There were conflicting reports from Washington, with Pentagon spokesman Admiral John Kirby saying a buffer zone was a topic "of continuing discussion" while White House press secretary Josh Earnest said it wasn't "under consideration right now."

The conflicting reports are not merely mixed messaging, but reflect the actual incoherence of both US and Turkish policy on the Syrian crisis. Both Washington and Ankara seek the removal of Assad, but the Turkish government regards the Kurdish separatists as a more immediate target, while the Obama administration seeks to use ISIS as its pretext for escalating military operations in the region.

While the American media has give nonstop saturation coverage to atrocities like the ISIS beheading of captured journalists and aid workers, the portrayal of the group as a major threat to the population of the NATO countries is ludicrous.

As a commentary posted on *Politico.com* noted, with an estimated 30,000 armed men, ISIS has "significantly fewer fighters than each of its opponent forces: the Kurdish Peshmerga fighters, Iraqi and Syrian government forces and even potential Sunni tribal rivals. Simply put, ISIL is surrounded by enemies with greater fighting power."

Turkey has an army of nearly 700,000, the sixth largest in the world and by far the largest in the Middle East, heavily equipped with US and European-made weaponry, including a large air force. Nonetheless, NATO secretary-general Stoltenberg was at pains to suggest that a few thousand ISIS fighters on the Turkish border constituted a threat that could justify military intervention under Article Five of the NATO

charter.

While Washington and NATO have been prodding Turkey to intervene, the government of Iran issued a formal *demarche* over the Turkish parliament's action last week, giving Erdogan authority to send Turkish troops across the border. Iran warned of "irreparable consequences" if Turkey violated the sovereignty of Syria, which is Iran's sole ally among the Arab states of the Middle East.

Iranian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Marziyeh Afkham said Tehran would send troops to fight ISIS in Kobani if requested by the Assad government. "Kobani is part of Syria's sovereignty and territorial integrity and if the Syrian government makes a demand, we will be ready to provide any assistance it wants," she said Wednesday in Tehran.

Iran has already suggested it would send troops across the border into Iraq to fight ISIS if the Sunni Islamist group approached too closely to Iranian territory.

The conflicting maneuvers of all the powers involved in the Syrian crisis only underscore the reckless and incendiary character of US policy in the region. The US-instigated war has the potential to spread far beyond its current focus in eastern Syria and western Iraq, and become a more general conflagration in the Middle East and even beyond.

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