

NATO backs Turkish/US regime-change offensive in Syria

By Jean Shaoul
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NATO on Tuesday gave President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan unanimous support for Turkey joining the US-led military offensive against the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), which is being used as a cover to escalate Washington's intervention against the Syrian regime of President Bashar al-Assad.

The quid pro quo secured by Turkey involves US support for attacks on Kurdish forces that, until last week, were being hailed by Washington, Berlin and other NATO powers as the bedrock of the anti-ISIS struggle.

NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg said, "We stand in strong solidarity with our ally Turkey... to address instability on Turkey's doorstep and on NATO's border."

Turkey, which has a one million-strong army, the second largest in NATO, is planning to invade Syria, seize territory and establish buffer zones along the Turkish border that will allow its forces to target ISIS militants. Such zones will also provide staging posts against the Syrian Kurdish forces of the Democratic Unity Party and its militia, the Popular Protection Units (PYD/YPG).

They will, in addition, create a safe haven for so-called "moderate" anti-Assad forces armed and financed by the US and its allies, to prepare a drive to overthrow the regime in Damascus, which is allied with Russia and Iran.

The PYD/YPG is allied to Turkey's outlawed Kurdish Workers Party (PKK) and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq, and has set up an autonomous region in northeast Syria. Ankara is opposed to a Kurdish autonomous region in Syria, fearing that it could spread to include southeastern Turkey.

While the US had for several years rejected Erdoğan's Justice and Development Party (AKP) proposals for "no fly zones" in Syria, it has now agreed to "safe zones" that are tantamount to the same thing.

For more than a decade before the 2003 invasion of Iraq, the US used "no-fly zones" over northern and

southern Iraq to keep Iraqi aircraft out of the sky and target Iraqi air-defence systems. Under the cover of establishing similar zones in Libya, supposedly to protect anti-Gaddafi protesters, the US and NATO in 2011 waged an air war and coordinated proxy ground forces to overthrow the regime and ultimately murder its leader.

The latest plans are a blatant attack on Syrian sovereignty and amount to a de facto declaration of war on Damascus. They are part of Washington's broader strategy of dominating the entire resource-rich Middle East.

Ankara has agreed that the US can use Turkish air bases at Incirlik and Diyarbakir to attack ISIS targets in Syria and Iraq. Washington has refused to name the "moderate" forces it is backing in Syria because there are no effective anti-Assad fighting forces other than various Islamist militias, including ISIS and al-Nusra, which is linked to Al Qaeda, as well as the Kurdish militias.

For all its talk of a global war on terror, in its supposed efforts to contain ISIS, the US military will likely provide air cover for Al Qaeda-linked forces on the ground, serving as their de facto air force.

The 90-minute meeting in Brussels was preparation for a full blown NATO war for regime-change in Syria. It was called at Turkey's request under Article 4 of the NATO Treaty, to enable Ankara to consult with its allies over threats to its security.

Erdoğan said, "At the moment, Turkey has come under attack and is exercising its right to defend itself and will exercise this right until the end." He added, "there could be a duty for NATO, and we ask NATO to be prepared for this."

He was referring to the suicide bomb attack in the southeastern and mainly Kurdish town of Suruç last week that killed 32 activists planning to travel to the Syrian city of Kobane and assist in its reconstruction. The Turkish government says the attack was led by ISIS, but ISIS has

not claimed responsibility.

The bomb blast in Suruç sparked attacks by the PKK, which were used as a pretext for a government clampdown on internal opposition, including the arrest of over 1,000 suspected members of ISIS, the PKK and leftist groups. In the past few days, five Turkish security personnel and four civilians have been killed in clashes.

On Sunday night, Turkish fighter jets hit PKK targets in northern Iraq. The PKK said the attacks meant the end of the fragile ceasefire agreed in 2013 after 30 years of armed conflict that claimed some 40,000 lives.

Mevlut Cavusoglu, Turkey's foreign minister, told reporters on Monday that he would explain the security threats facing his country, saying, "We expect solidarity and support from our NATO allies." He refused to draw any distinction between ISIS and the PKK, saying, "There is no difference between PKK and Daesh [ISIS]. You can't say that PKK is better because it is fighting Daesh."

One of the most striking features of the emergency NATO meeting was that all the European powers seem prepared to support Turkey's plans, which threaten a much wider regional conflagration and an upsurge of internal strife within Turkey itself.

This is despite stated misgivings from Germany, home to nearly four million Turks, including around one million Kurds. Germany said Turkey's response should be commensurate with the threat it faced and urged that Ankara's peace process with the Kurds be continued.

This is political cynicism of the highest order, given that Ankara is already waging war against the Kurds. Berlin previously established close links with the KRG in northern Iraq, arming the Iraqi Kurdish Peshmerga militia and, indirectly, the Syrian Kurds. Germany is also training Peshmerga fighters.

Now it appears that both the European powers and Washington are prepared to ditch the Kurds, their former allies against ISIS, and back Turkey. They evidently believe that Turkey, the 17th largest economy, is a more valuable regional asset in their own endeavours to control the Middle East and out-manoeuvre Russia and China.

For the first few years of the Syrian civil war, Turkey--largely supported by Washington--actively supported ISIS and other Islamist forces in an effort to overthrow Assad, contain the Kurds and prevent the emergence of a Kurdish state in Syria. More recently, and under pressure from the US following the emergence of ISIS as a threat to US interests in Iraq, it moved reluctantly to a low-profile, anti-ISIS approach.

After the US backed away from war against Assad in 2013, Turkey found itself thwarted in its efforts to utilise an alliance with the US to establish itself as the regional power broker. It believes this can now be achieved. Prime Minister Ahmet Davuto?lu told CNN Monday that the existence of ISIS is the result of international inaction against the Assad regime in Syria.

"Assad lost this legitimacy long before," he said. "Unfortunately, because of inactivity of the international community, he continued his crimes and he created a power vacuum... Eliminating ISIS is, of course, a strategic objective, but there should be some other elements. We have to have a strategy about the future of Syria."

As well as being shaken by the frequent about-turns in US policy that have destabilised the region, the AKP government faces increasing unrest on the domestic front, with wildcat strikes in the auto industry as the economy stalls after years of rapid growth. There have in addition been large street demonstrations, militant roadblocks and the torching of vehicles, especially in Istanbul and the eastern, mainly Kurdish, provinces.

Having lost its overall majority in the June elections, the AKP has thus far been unable to form a coalition government. A significant element in Erdo?an's calculations is that he can promote a climate of fear to enable the AKP to secure a parliamentary majority in any new elections.

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