

German-US tensions intensify following Turkish attack on Kurdish minority

By Stefan Steinberg
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The military offensive launched a week ago by Turkey against the Kurdish PKK in northern Iraq and the Kurdish People's Protection Units (PYD/YPG) in Syria has led to increasing tension between Germany and the US. While the US administration and the NATO general secretary have declared their support for the Turkish aggression against the Kurdish organizations, German politicians and sections of the media are highly alarmed about the latest somersault in American foreign policy.

The deterioration in US-German relations flows directly from the cynical deal struck between Washington and Turkey. In exchange for the use of air bases inside Turkey for US air raids inside Syria, and Turkish participation in these raids, Turkey has been given a free hand to attack positions controlled by the PKK and the PYD inside Iraq and Syria.

Just a few months ago Kurdish fighters were being praised by the US and European media as the West's best allies and fighters against ISIS in Iraq and Syria. Now American officials have declared their solidarity with Turkey's bombing campaign against the Kurds. 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."

While the White House and State Department have declared that the purpose of acquiring Turkish military help was to fight Islamic State (ISIS) militants, the regime in Ankara is more concerned at preventing Kurdish militias from creating a corridor stretching across northern Iraq and Syria to the Mediterranean, which could form the basis for an independent Kurdish state.

In addition to renewed bombing of Kurdish targets in northern Iraq over the weekend the government of

Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan has exploited the carte blanche from Washington to step up the repression of the moderate Kurdish HDP party, which acquired over 10 percent of the vote in the recent federal election and stripped Erdogan of an overall majority. In the past week Erdogan has declared that peace negotiations with the Kurds are finished and has launched a legal investigation into Selahattin Demirtaş, head of the HDP.

At the NATO meeting held last Tuesday, delegates gave their support for Turkey joining the US-led military offensive against ISIS, but the government in Berlin in particular has made clear its disquiet. It fears that the renewed alliance between the US and Turkey could expand the wars and conflicts already raging across large swathes of the Middle East.

In a comment titled "Quite bad friends" in the latest edition of *Die Zeit*, editor Josef Joffe warns that Obama's policy could lead to a direct military confrontation between the US and Syria, which in turn risks military conflict with Syria's allies Russia and Iran. The two "bad friends" in the headline are Germany and the US, and Joffe notes that Berlin is "not amused" by the latest US foreign policy about-turn, which has completely undermined German-US agreement on policy towards Turkey.

Both the German chancellor and defence minister warned that while Turkey was entitled to take action against those responsible for the terror attack on the Kurdish town of Suruc, the Erdogan government should ensure that dialogue with Kurdish organisations continues.

Germany has a direct stake in the region. In line with the new aggressive foreign policy formulated most clearly by German president Joachim Gauck nearly two years ago, the Berlin government decided it was not

prepared to stand aside and be merely an observer in further conflicts.

At the start of 2012 the German parliament agreed to send Patriot anti-aircraft missiles to southern Turkey as part of a NATO initiative, and in 2015 dispatched 250 soldiers to Iraq to train Peshemerga Kurds in the fight against ISIS. Now Berlin fears that German soldiers could be caught in the crossfire between Kurdish militants and the US-Turkish bombing campaign.

Security measures for the German soldiers stationed in Turkey have been strengthened in the past week and they have been instructed not to leave their barracks in military uniform.

The foreign policy speaker of the Greens, Omid Nouripour, has said the government should consider withdrawing the German troops following the Turkish attacks against the PKK. It was necessary to recognise the solidarity principle inside NATO, but only in the case of the defense of an ally, Nouripour declared. Turkey's actions were of an offensive nature.

Similar arguments were put forward by the CSU security speaker Florian Hahn, who declared that the new scenario in southern Turkey means that the stationing of the Patriot missiles was no longer necessary. The call for the withdrawal of the German presence has also come from the Social Democratic Party and the Left Party.

In addition to the threat to Germany's own foreign policy ambitions in the Middle East, the government in Berlin is worried that the escalating conflict could have direct domestic consequences. Around 3 million citizens of Turkish origin live in Germany, with almost a quarter of Kurdish origin. There have already been demonstrations by Kurdish organisations in Germany protesting against the Turkish bombing campaign and there are concerns in ruling circles that the conflict could spill over into frictions between the Turkish and Kurdish communities in Germany.

Berlin also fears a wave of new mass migration following the escalation of fighting in Iraq, Syria and Turkey itself. Already around 2 million refugees from the fighting in Iraq and Syria have fled to Turkey. A new military front inside Turkey raises the prospect of masses of refugees turning this time towards Europe and Germany for shelter. This is a development the German government is seeking to avoid at all costs.

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