

Syria fighting escalates as ceasefire deadline approaches

By Bill Van Auken
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Fighting in Syria continued to escalate Monday, posing the threat of a far wider and more dangerous war even as the deadline for the “cessation of hostilities” agreed to in last week’s talks in Munich drew nearer.

Turkish artillery shelled towns south of Turkey’s border with Syria for a third straight day in a bid to halt an offensive by the Kurdish People’s Protection Units (YPG), the military wing of the Syrian Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD).

The human cost of the war’s escalation was made clear Monday with the United Nations report that at least 50 people had been killed in attacks on hospitals and schools. Turkey and its Western allies blamed Russia and Syrian government forces for the attacks, while Moscow and Damascus insisted they had been carried out by Turkey and the so-called “coalition” led by the US.

Two of the hospitals hit were in the northwestern Syrian city of Azaz, which occupies a strategic point on the Turkish-Syrian border. Turkey’s prime minister, Ahmet Davutoglu, vowed to reporters Monday that Ankara would “not let Azaz fall” and would mount “a severe response” to the Kurdish advance.

The intensifying clashes on the Syrian-Turkish border have placed the five-year-old conflict in Syria on a hair trigger for provoking a global confrontation involving a dizzying array of antagonists and contradictory alliances.

The gravest danger stems from the mounting tensions between Russia and Turkey, both of which are now involved in military strikes against contending armed groups within Syria.

Since September 30, Russia has carried out air strikes against Sunni Islamist militias that have been backed, funded and armed by Turkey and Washington’s other

principal regional allies, Saudi Arabia and Qatar, with the coordination of the CIA.

Then, in November, a deliberate ambush of a Russian jet by Turkish warplanes on the Syrian-Turkish border brought the two countries to the brink of war.

Within recent weeks, an offensive by Syrian government forces, backed by Russian warplanes as well as Hezbollah fighters from Lebanon and Shia militias based in Iraq, has succeeded in cutting off a main supply route from Turkey into Syria while nearly encircling the “rebel”-held eastern part of Aleppo, once Syria’s largest city and commercial center.

At the same time, the YPG and its allies in the so-called Syrian Democratic Forces have overrun areas close to the Syrian border that had previously been held by the al-Nusra Front, Al Qaeda’s Syrian affiliate, along with allied Sunni Islamist militias.

The Turkish government has branded the Syrian Kurdish party and militia as “terrorist” organizations because of their links with the PKK (Kurdistan Workers’ Party) in Turkey itself. The government broke off a two-year ceasefire with the PKK last year, using its supposed entry into the US campaign against the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) as a cover for air strikes against PKK camps in neighboring Iraq. Since then, Ankara has launched a bloody crackdown against Turkey’s Kurdish population, resulting in the deaths of hundreds of civilians.

The Turkish government’s principal aim in Syria is not to fight ISIS, which it has supported with arms and funding, but to prevent the consolidation of a Kurdish enclave on its southern border.

The latest escalation has also been driven by tensions between the US and its NATO ally Turkey over the role of the YPG. Washington has supported Turkey’s branding of the PKK as a terrorist organization, but has

balked at imposing the same designation on the YPG, which has collaborated with the US in the anti-ISIS campaign, proving itself one of the few reliable and effective ground forces inside Syria.

The government of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan was outraged by the January 30 visit by the Obama administration's diplomatic envoy dealing with the US war in Iraq and Syria to the Syrian town of Kobane, where he met with Syrian Kurdish representatives, including one who is reportedly wanted by Turkish authorities for activities as a PKK militant.

Erdogan publicly challenged the Obama administration, demanding that it choose between its alliance with Ankara and the "YPG terrorists." This challenge was subsequently answered by the State Department, which declared its solidarity with the Turkish regime's internal crackdown on the Kurds while insisting that it viewed the Syrian Kurdish militia as an "effective force...in fighting Daesh [ISIS] and in taking—retaking territory."

Last week, asked about the US-Turkish tensions over the YPG, Prime Minister Davutoglu replied cryptically, "Just wait, you'll see." The meaning of his words has been made clear by the Turkish army's long-range howitzers pounding the Syrian border region for the past three days.

Speaking after the Munich Security Conference on the weekend, Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu said that Turkey and Saudi Arabia "could enter into a ground operation" inside Syria, adding that the Saudi monarchy was sending its warplanes to the Turkish base of Incirlik.

Moscow has denounced the Turkish bombardment as a "provocative" act of aggression and "obvious support for international terrorism," vowing to bring the matter to the United Nations Security Council on Tuesday.

The Obama administration, meanwhile, has called for Turkey to halt its shelling and for the Kurdish YPG to stop taking territory from the Al Qaeda-linked militias. Ankara responded with an angry condemnation of the State Department line, saying that it "put Turkey on a par with a terrorist organization."

A ground invasion by either Turkey or Saudi Arabia would almost certainly result in a military confrontation with Russian and Iranian forces backing the Assad government, posing not only the outbreak of a far wider regional war, but also a US response in

support of its two key regional allies, bringing the world's two largest nuclear powers into a military confrontation.

In a further indication of the dangers of military escalation, German Chancellor Angela Merkel told the *Stuttgarter Zeitung* that she now supports Turkey's proposal for the imposition of a "no-fly zone" over Syria. "In the present situation it would be helpful if there were an area over which none of the warring parties would fly air attacks—a sort of no-fly zone," she said.

Turkey has been pressing for the creation of such a zone for years, seeing it as a means of carving out a buffer area to halt the influx of Syrian refugees while at the same time imposing military control that could block the advance of the Syrian Kurds.

Merkel suggested that such a zone could be created through negotiations, stating, "If it's possible for the anti-Assad coalition and the Assad supporters to come to an agreement, that would be helpful."

This is, of course, nonsense. The "anti-Assad coalition" does not exist. The main forces on the ground in the border area are the Al Qaeda-linked militias, including ISIS and the al-Nusra Front, which have rejected any negotiations.

None of the sectarian militias opposing the Assad government have embraced the so-called "cessation of hostilities" agreed to by the US, Russia, and the other 15 members of the International Syria Support Group in Munich last week. No Syrians, either for or against the government, were party to the deal.

The deadline for the so-called cessation is this coming Friday, but the events on the ground indicate that the US-backed war for regime change will produce only a continued escalation of death and violence.

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