

Tensions over Syria further undermine Turkish-NATO relations

By Halil Celik
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Despite the decision of the UN Security Council for a ceasefire across Syria, which the Turkish government ostensibly supported, Ankara has sent additional special forces troops to prop up its operation in the Syrian Kurdish enclave of Afrin. Two days ago, Turkey's Deputy Prime Minister Bekir Bozdag told NTV that Ankara has deployed special police and gendarmerie forces to Syria's Afrin region "in preparation for the new battle that is approaching."

Turkey's Dogan news agency also reported that gendarmerie and police special forces teams have entered Afrin to take part in urban fighting and to hold villages which Turkish forces have seized.

Speaking at his ruling Justice and Development Party's (AKP) provincial congress in Sanliurfa on Sunday, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan once more confirmed that Turkish troops are "moving toward Afrin."

"We will clear Manbij of the terrorists and continue our fight until there is not even a single terrorist left along our borders," he said. When his followers chanted, "Chief, take us to Afrin," Erdogan called on citizens with notification to be ready, though there was "no need at the moment."

Turkey had launched its "Operation Olive Branch" on January 20 to clear militants of the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) from Afrin. According to the Turkish general staff, more than 2,000 Kurdish fighters and 33 Turkish troops have been killed, while seven Turkish civilians have lost their lives and 125 others have been wounded in Turkish towns as a result of cross-border shelling by the YPG. Turkish officials also insist that there have been no civilian casualties in Afrin.

Syria's state-owned news agency SANA, however, presents a very different picture. On Sunday, SANA

reported that "the continuous Turkish aggression on the Afrin area has resulted in the killing and injuring of more than 700 civilians, the displacement of thousands of civilians from their homes, the suspension of education in hundreds of schools, and the destruction of infrastructure and services."

Following weeks of an international campaign over the attack of the Syrian government on the eastern city of Ghouta, the UN Security Council unanimously approved a resolution on Saturday demanding a 30-day ceasefire across Syria "without delay."

Turkish government officials, however, insist that the resolution does not apply to the invasion in Afrin, which it claims is directed against "terrorists." Bozdag said on Sunday, "The decision will not impact our Olive Branch operation in the Afrin region."

On Monday, Erdogan and his French counterpart Emmanuel Macron had a phone conversation over the latest developments in Syria. Macron told Erdogan that a UN call for a ceasefire across Syria also applied to Syria's Afrin region, where Turkish troops are preparing a siege of the town of Afrin. The conversation came a day after phone calls between Macron, Germany's Angela Merkel and Russian President Vladimir Putin over the Syrian crisis.

According to a statement issued by the French presidency, Macron told Erdogan that it was imperative to fully respect the ceasefire—another sign of opposition to the Turkish invasion within NATO.

Amid growing conflicts over the Syrian war, another point of contention in the deterioration of relations between Ankara and its European partners came to light when the Czech authorities arrested Saleh Muslim, a top Kurdish politician and former co-chairperson of the Syrian Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) on Sunday. He was released two

days later after he promised to cooperate with the Czech authorities.

Muslim's arrest came at the behest of Turkey, where a high criminal court had filed a case against him for a 2016 terrorist attack in Ankara. He was charged with "damaging national unity and integrity, deliberate murder, damaging public property and transferring dangerous materials." Recently, Turkey's Interior Ministry had listed Muslim as a "most wanted terrorist" and offered a bounty of nearly \$1 million for his capture.

Turkey has officially requested the extradition of Muslim from the Czech Republic. Bozdag claimed that he was "a leader of a terrorist group and still actively plotting terrorist attacks against Turkey."

The arrest of Muslim by Czech authorities provoked a harsh response from the Kurdish leadership in Iraq and Syria. According to a statement published on the official website of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), Kurdistan Regional Government Deputy Prime Minister Qubad Talabani called for his release.

Thus, the controversy over Muslim has been added to various other conflicts that have brought EU-Turkish relations to the brink of collapse.

Less than two weeks after US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson's Middle Eastern tour, during which he tried to patch up sharp conflicts between Washington and Ankara, Turkey-US relations are as fragile as before.

Last Thursday, US State Department spokeswoman Heather Neuert said that Washington has contacted many countries to explain the significance of the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA), and what possible consequences would arise in the wake of arms agreements—above all Turkey's purchasing of Russian-made S-400 missile systems—with Moscow.

On January 30, the Trump administration published a list of Russian politicians, oligarchs and firms affected by sanctions on the basis of CAATSA and announced it would cut off US arms sales to any country doing business with any banned Russian firms. Rosoboronexport OJSC, the producer of S-400, is included in the list of Russian firms banned by Washington.

Earlier this month, the chairman of the Defense Committee of the Russian Federation Council, Colonel General Viktor Bondarev, made public that Syria, Iraq,

Sudan and Egypt are potential clients for the S-400 defense systems. In December, Ankara signed a deal to buy S-400 missiles from Russia, despite expressions of concern and criticism from its NATO allies.

The US has already called on Turkey to reconsider "possible consequences" of its decision to purchase the S-400 system, while proposing to find a way to boost Turkish air defense capabilities as an alternative to the Russian deal.

Turkey will be the first NATO member country to acquire the Russian S-400 system, which Moscow has so far only sold to China and India.

The Turkish government, however, continues to ignore Washington's threat of sanctions. Yesterday, Turkey's pro-government daily *Sabah* cited comments of the Turkish Deputy Prime Minister Fikri Isik, saying, "When the US includes the company selling the S-400 system in its sanctions list, there is a possibility that Turkey might be indirectly affected by this. However, they cannot impose direct sanctions against Turkey."

The ever-growing militarist rhetoric of the Turkish government, its recklessness in the ongoing military operations in Syria and its indifference to its NATO allies cannot be demised as merely an attempt to whip up nationalism to further domestic political aims. Under conditions in which various imperialist and regional powers are paving the way to a regional war that could rapidly escalate into a direct clash between the world's nuclear-armed major powers, Ankara's latest moves are clear signs that the Turkish ruling elite is fully engaged in the drive to war to further its own predatory interests.

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