

Fighting mounts as Washington backs Turkish attack on Syria, Russia

By Alex Lantier
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The danger of all-out war in the Middle East and beyond kept escalating out of control yesterday, as bloody fighting erupted between Turkish, Syrian and Russian troops in northern Syria.

Turkish artillery units in northern Syria's Idlib province backed a coordinated offensive by Islamist opposition militias targeting Syrian government troops near Qminas and Nayrab. They initially broke through the government lines, causing heavy losses. During the fighting, the Turkish Defense Ministry reported on Twitter, 50 Syrian "regime elements" were destroyed, along with five tanks, two armored personnel carriers, two pickup trucks and a howitzer.

Syrian government troops called in Russian air strikes in response, and Russian fighter-bombers together with Syrian army counteroffensives repulsed the attacking force. The Russian Reconciliation Center for Syria claimed this counterattack destroyed "one tank, six infantry fighting vehicles and five pickup trucks containing large-calibre weapons." The Turkish Defense Ministry said two Turkish soldiers had been killed and five were wounded by the air strikes.

A war over Idlib and other regions of Syria between Turkey, Syria and Russia, the country with the world's second-largest nuclear arsenal, threatens to escalate into a global conflict between nuclear armed states. Turkey is a member of the NATO alliance, which includes the United States and the major European powers, and it is escalating the fighting in Syria because it is receiving assurances of support against Russia from Washington and the European capitals.

Led by the Turkish government and Washington, all the major powers involved in the fighting are proceeding with staggering recklessness, making bellicose statements warning that they are prepared to take military action.

On Wednesday, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan issued perhaps the starkest warning he has made

since fighting broke out on February 3 at Turkish military observation posts in the region. The Turkish president had previously given the Syrian government an ultimatum to abandon its attacks on opposition militias by the end of February or face military action from Turkey, which fields NATO's second-largest army.

On Wednesday, Erdoğan said a Turkish invasion of Syria was imminent and inevitable, and that the invasion would "end" Syrian military operations in Idlib. He said, "We are entering the last days for the regime to stop its hostility in Idlib. We are making our final warnings. ... Turkey has made every preparation to carry out its own operational plans. I say that we can come at any point. In other words, the Idlib offensive is only a matter of time."

Officials in Syrian opposition militias also insisted that Turkey is preparing for large-scale war. One told Reuters, "You can't imagine the scale of Turkish reinforcements, half of Reyhanli is now full of Turkish commandos ready to enter Syria. ... They are readying their forces for zero hour. Operations are expected to start any time."

Erdoğan's threats on Wednesday came a day after US President Donald Trump issued a statement endorsing Turkish military action in Syria, thanking Erdoğan and emphasizing that Washington and Ankara are "working together." Trump praised Erdoğan, saying, "He's fighting on Idlib. ... You have a lot of warring going on right now, a lot of warring going on, but I am dealing with President Erdoğan."

Pentagon spokesman Jonathan Hoffman said the US military believes the threat of war between Turkey and Russia is real. "We are seeing the Russians and the Turks have come very close to having more extensive conflict in the area. We are hopeful they will find a solution to avoid that," Hoffman said. Remarkably, however, he refused to say whether Washington is in contact with the different parties to the conflict over Idlib province.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitri Peskov also refused to say

how Moscow would react to a Turkish invasion of Syria. “Let us not expect the worst scenario to become a reality,” he said, adding that “if it is an operation against Syria’s legitimate authorities and armed forces, it will definitely be the worst scenario.” Moscow and Ankara negotiated a deal over Syria at Sochi in 2018, he said, but “we stopped being satisfied after militants and terrorist groups launched offensive operations against the Syrian armed forces and Russian military facilities from Idlib’s territory.”

This explosive situation is the product of nearly a decade of relentless proxy wars waged by Washington and the European imperialist powers in Syria since 2011. Initially mobilizing Al Qaeda-linked Islamist militias funded by the Persian Gulf oil sheikdoms, and then ethnic Kurdish militias, NATO relentlessly stoked up a civil war inside Syria that has cost hundreds of thousands of lives and forced over 10 million to flee their homes. The war escalated into a global proxy war, as Russia, Iran and China intervened to support the Syrian regime against NATO.

Last year, Trump withdrew US protection from Kurdish militias in northern Syria, green-lighting a cross-border raid by the Turkish government, which fears the establishment of an independent Kurdish state in northern Syria, next to the majority-Kurdish provinces of southeastern Turkey. This set the stage for a violent clash between Turkish and Syrian forces, as President Bashar al-Assad’s regime seeks to reassert control over the whole of Syrian territory.

With 3.5 million Syrians living as refugees in Turkey, the Turkish government has closed its borders with Syria, trapping up to one million Syrian refugees living in camps in horrific conditions inside Idlib province.

The alarm must be sounded. Despite Peskov’s advice to the world’s population to hope for the best, humanity is only a few steps away from a catastrophic war between the major nuclear-armed states. It is critical to politically mobilize the working class in an international, antiwar movement.

Should Russia counterattack against Turkey and large-scale fighting between Turkish, Syrian and Russian units in Syria ensue, Turkey could invoke Article 5 of the NATO alliance treaty to try to legally compel America and the European powers to declare war on Russia. This provision for collective defense requires all NATO member states to go to war if any NATO member state is the target of military aggression by an external power.

A deafening silence prevails from heads of state in the

NATO alliance over whether they will honor a request from Ankara to go to war with Russia. Russia’s TASS news agency cited an anonymous NATO diplomat of unspecified rank as saying, “NATO countries will not support the invocation of Article 5 over the death of Turkish troops in Idlib in early February.”

According to the *Middle East Monitor*, this is because Turkish military losses are taking “place during a unilateral military operation on foreign soil, which goes beyond Article 5 of NATO’s founding treaty.” That is, in this case, Turkey—and behind it Washington and the major European imperialist powers—is not the target but the perpetrator of military aggression.

As Erdoğan steps up military action against Syrian and Russian troops, however, it is plainly evident that Ankara is counting on active NATO assistance against Russia.

According to the *Independent’s* Turkish edition, Ankara has informed NATO of its plans to invade Syria and has requested that NATO enforce a no-fly zone in targeted areas ahead of the offensive. Since Russian warplanes are offering close air support to Syrian troops across the region, this means asking NATO to shoot down Russian planes to ensure that they do not threaten Turkish troops.

According to a Bloomberg News report, Turkey has asked Washington for Patriot missile batteries to shoot down Russian warplanes.

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