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Washington backs Turkey as border clashes mount with Syria and Russia

According to a White House statement, US President Donald Trump “expressed concern over the violence in Idlib, Syria and thanked [Turkish President Recep Tayyip] Erdoğan for Turkey’s efforts to prevent a humanitarian catastrophe,” during a phone call at the weekend. This comes amid growing clashes in recent weeks by both US and Turkish forces with Syrian government troops inside Syria, after nine years of a NATO proxy war for regime change in the country.

Deputy Press Secretary Judd Deere said, “President Trump conveyed the United States’ desire to see an end to Russia’s support for [Syrian President Bashar al-Assad] regime’s atrocities and for a political resolution to the Syrian conflict.”

Clashes between Turkish troops and Syrian army units in northwestern Syria’s Idlib province have killed 14 Turkish troops and dozens of Syrian soldiers since the beginning of the February, as Russian and Iranian forces back Syrian units advancing on Al Qaeda-linked US proxy forces in Idlib.



Turkish soldiers fire a missile at Syrian government position in the province of Idlib, Syria, February 14, 2020 [Credit: AP Photo/Ghaith Alsayed]

A direct clash between US and Syrian forces, involving Russian troops, occurred last week. On Wednesday, a 22-year-old Syrian was killed while another man was injured during a protest by local people against US troops near the village of Khirbet Amo, east of Qamishli in northeast Syria. A Russian military statement declared, “Only thanks to the efforts of the Russian servicemen who arrived at the scene of the incident was it possible to prevent a further escalation of the conflict with local residents.”

After a first clash on February 3 killed eight Turkish soldiers, on February 10 five more died and five were wounded, according to the Turkish Defense Ministry.

On February 4, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo declared Washington’s support for Ankara, saying, “We stand by our NATO ally Turkey in the aftermath of the attack.”

It is increasingly clear that Washington considers growing tensions between Ankara and Moscow as a critical opportunity to mobilize Turkey against Russian as well as Iranian influence in the region.

Last week, top US Syria envoy James Jeffrey visited Ankara, calling for closer collaboration with Turkey not only in Syria but also in Libya, especially against Russia, “We are both very concerned about the role of Russia in Libya and in Syria, in general, and in the Idlib offensive.” He said Washington has “very close geostrategic objectives with Turkey in the two areas where you have forces committed right now, in Libya and in Syria.”

For some time, Ankara has prepared a direct military confrontation with Syrian forces, deploying nearly 1,250 trucks and military vehicles as well as 5,000 soldiers in Aleppo and Idlib. At least eight Turkish military posts have been besieged by Syrian soldiers in February, according to the London-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, which is closely tied to the US-backed “rebels.” Turkey had 12 military observation posts in Idlib and has reportedly built several more.

The Erdoğan government has accused Syria and Russia of violating the Sochi agreement, a September 2018 deal to establish a jointly patrolled “demilitarized zone” between the Syrian regime and NATO-backed “rebels” in Syria’s northwestern Idlib province. Ankara also blames Syria and Russia for “killing civilians” in Idlib. According to the Turkish state-owned TRT World, “more than 1,800 civilians there have been killed in attacks by

the [Syrian] regime and Russian forces since then, flouting both the 2018 cease-fire and a new one that started on January 12.”

Ankara also claims there is a threat that more than 1 million people from Idlib will be pushed across the Turkish-Syrian border. “We are already hosting 3-and-a-half to 4 million people. Unfortunately, we are not in a position to accept another million,” Erdoğan said Saturday.

Ankara is also coordinating its policy with Berlin and calling for support from within NATO. After German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas warned of a “humanitarian catastrophe” if fighting in Idlib continues, Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu said, “There are already people coming to our border and, with Germany’s support, we are going to build temporary shelters, but these are temporary solutions.”

Moscow blamed the crisis on the aggressive policies of Turkey and NATO, however. On Wednesday, Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said, “We see the reason for the current deterioration is due to Turkey’s chronic noncommitment under the Sochi memorandum of September 17, 2018, and the transfer of Turkey-controlled groups to northeastern Syria.”

On the same day, the Russian Defense Ministry said Turkey’s inability to separate “opposition” from terrorist groups in Idlib is a key cause of the ongoing escalation there. The Defense Ministry added that terrorist groups are using the civilian population of Idlib as human shields to hide from “retaliatory fire of government troops.”

Last week, Al Qaeda-linked Islamist militias also shot down two Syria Army helicopters in Idlib and Aleppo. An unnamed Russian state source told Sputnik on Saturday, “The US MANPADS which were in service with the Turkish armed forces, which the militants did not have access to before, fell into the hands of the terrorists thanks to Turkish deliveries.”

On Wednesday, Erdoğan openly threatened Syrian forces, declaring, “In the event of the tiniest harm to our soldiers at observation posts or anywhere else, starting today, I declare that we will hit regime forces in Idlib and anywhere else.” He also claimed that “In Idlib, the [Syrian] regime and Russian forces and Iranian militants are constantly committing massacres. Turkey will not just watch this happen.”

Erdoğan’s accusations against “Iranian militants” echo Washington’s Middle East policy, amid the US war preparations against Iran after the US drone murder of Iranian General Qassem Suleimani on January 3. Before this, Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad

Zarif had Tweeted: “Iran reiterates its readiness to facilitate dialogue among brother neighbors Turkey and Syria.”

Despite ongoing diplomatic talks and multiple phone calls between Erdoğan and his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin this month, Turkish officials’ statements show the shaky alliance between Ankara and Moscow is on the verge of collapse.

Last Tuesday, Turkish Defense Minister Hulusi Akar told the Associated Press, “NATO, Europe and the international community must deal with the attacks of the Assad regime in Idlib, and provide serious, concrete support to those fighting against it.”

In İstanbul on Saturday, Erdoğan declared, “The solution in Idlib is the [Syrian] regime stopping hostilities and withdrawing to the borders in the agreements. Otherwise, we will handle this before the end of February.” Appealing for support from Turkey’s NATO allies, he added, “We would like to do this with the support of our friends.”

Ankara’s appeals to Washington for military support underscore the growing and very serious danger that the bloodshed in Syria could escalate into a direct military confrontation between the NATO alliance and Syria, Iran and nuclear-armed Russia.

Ankara’s reckless intervention in Idlib is also driven by its longstanding policy of preventing the formation of a Kurdish state in the region—a strategic priority of the Turkish bourgeoisie.

The Turkish army invaded northeastern Syria last October to drive the US-backed Kurdish nationalist People’s Protection Units (YPG) from the Turkish-Syrian border after Washington abandoned the YPG, which had served as its main proxy force in Syria. Before this latest offensive, Turkish forces and their Islamist proxies had occupied parts of northwestern Syria, including Jarabulus, Al-Bab and Afrin, since 2016. Although Ankara claims its presence in Syria is legal according to the Turkish-Syrian Adana accord of 1998, Damascus denies this, arguing that it never invited Turkish troops inside Syria.

This explosive situation and the growing danger of conflict between nuclear-armed powers highlights the necessity of building an international anti-war movement based on the working class in the Middle East and around the world.

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