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By Alex Lantier
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Turkey bombs Syria after losing dozens of troops to Syrian-Russian airstrike

The Turkish military bombed targets across Syria last night and early this morning, after dozens of its soldiers died in airstrikes near the strategic town of Saraqeb in northern Syria's Idlib province.

Anonymous Western officials told the press early this morning that Turkey has requested an urgent meeting of the NATO alliance under Article 5 of the alliance's founding treaty, which calls for military consultation among members when one member state's security is threatened. The danger is growing that all-out war could erupt between NATO and the Syrian government's major international backers, Iran and Russia.



Turkish backed rebel fighters fire a howitzer toward Syrian government's forces positions near the village of Neirab in Idlib province, Syria, February 20, 2020
[Credit: AP Photo/Ghaith Alsayed]

For weeks, Syrian government troops backed by Moscow have fought to expel Turkish-backed militias from their last stronghold they built up inside Syria during the nine-year NATO proxy war in Syria. In recent weeks, Russian-backed Syrian government troops had taken back control of dozens of towns including Saraqeb. Yesterday, however, Syrian Al Qaeda-linked militias backed by Turkish troops briefly retook Saraqeb.

Earlier yesterday, Russia's Rossiya 24 television reported that Russian warplanes were under fire from Turkish troops firing antiaircraft missiles, stating: "Syrian and Russian planes are stopping the rebels again and again. But the sky above Idlib is also dangerous. The rebels and Turkish specialists are actively using portable air defence systems."

As of this writing, multiple fragmentary and conflicting reports are circulating on the initial air strike yesterday evening that killed Turkish troops. The US-backed Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR) reported that 34 Turkish soldiers had been killed in a bombing between the towns of Baluon and Al-Bara. The governor of Turkey's neighboring Hatay province, Rahmi Dogan, issued a series of announcements that nine, then 22, 29 and finally, Friday morning, 33 Turkish troops had died, and 36 had been wounded in the attack.

Turkish officials speaking anonymously told the German news magazine *Der Spiegel* that "at least 50 Turkish troops had died." However, the official speaking to *Der Spiegel* claimed it is unclear whether it was Syrian or Russian airplanes that launched the attacks.

Ankara took Twitter offline inside Turkey for several hours, amid signs of an explosive political crisis unfolding inside the Turkish government, including its mounting fear of domestic popular opposition to the war in Syria.

While Turkish television stations took normal programming off the air and ran back-to-back reports that Syrian regime forces have lost 1,709 soldiers and large quantities of military equipment, the Turkish cabinet held an emergency meeting. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan personally chaired the meeting, which was also attended by members of the opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) as well as National Intelligence Organization (MİT) chief Hakan Fidan.

During the meeting, the government announced investigations into 91 Twitter accounts for allegedly spreading criticisms of the government during the crisis.

Once Twitter was functioning again, *Yeni Şafak* editor İbrahim Karagül issued hysterical denunciations of opponents of Erdogan's war policies on social media: "Tonight, one

should carefully note down traitors, Turkey's enemies, influence agents of the [Syrian] regime, those who undermine the national solidarity ... domestic intruders on social media."

Early this morning, as the Turkish emergency cabinet meeting continued to unfold, Turkey launched artillery attacks on Idlib province and missile attacks on Latakia, Homs, and nearby areas of western Syria. It was also reported later that Israel had attacked the Syrian government's military positions in Quneitra province, from the vantage point offered by Israeli-held territory in the Golan Heights.

At the same time, Turkish officials launched a series of emergency calls to contact their US and NATO counterparts, including US Secretary of Defense Mark Esper, US National Security Advisor Robert O'Brien and NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg.

A Russian delegation headed by Vladimir Putin's special envoy for Syria Sergey Vershinin was in Ankara yesterday for talks, but they reportedly ended in a stalemate without any agreement.

The current danger of an all-out clash between Russia and Turkey is the product of nine years of a NATO proxy war for regime change waged since 2011 in Syria. Washington together with other NATO member states, along with their Middle East allies, have backed militias linked to Al Qaeda in a bid to overthrow the Syrian government, while Russia and Iran have supported President Bashar al-Assad. Both sides have proceeded as if, despite this explosive situation, they would never come to a direct NATO-Russia confrontation. Yet that is precisely what is now emerging.

The danger of a military clash that could escalate out of control into a confrontation between the NATO alliance and Russia, both of which are armed with nuclear weapons, is now very real. While contradictory messages came out of Washington last night, several top officials made clear they would consider all-out war is "on the table" as a possible response.

Told by journalists of the bombing of Turkish troops, US Ambassador to NATO Kay Bailey Hutchinson said: "Let me say this because I just learned this: Of course, everything is on the table. This is a new development. This is a big development."

US Senator Lindsey Graham similarly issued a statement yesterday calling for the establishment of a no-fly zone over Idlib—that is, for shooting down Russian and Syrian fighters over that region. "The world is sitting on its hands and watching the destruction of

Idlib by Assad, Iran, and the Russians,” Graham declared in a statement. “I am confident if the world, led by the United States, pushed back against Iran, Russia, and Assad that they would stand down, paving the way for political negotiations to end this war in Syria.”

However, Turkish media also cited a tweet by Congressional staffer Alan Makovsky, who said: “I hope US officials’ frequently stated support for ‘our NATO ally Turkey’ of late isn’t raising false expectations in Ankara... US won’t risk war with Russia to preserve Turkey’s position in Syria.”

As Turkish forces bombed targets across Syria, Erdogan’s ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) appealed to the NATO alliance for military support against the Russian-backed Syrian regime.

AKP spokesperson Ömer Çelik all but called for a declaration of war on Syria, telling CNN Türk: “The regime has become an enemy element with all its land and air elements. The necessary answer is given. The regime elements are now enemies of the Republic of Turkey. ... We will inform NATO. We call on NATO to consult. We see this as an attack by a killer regime on the international community. We expect a total reaction. Our attempts on this are continuing. The consultation process with NATO begins tomorrow morning. We expect concrete support from now on.”

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