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Turkey demands US back war to topple Syria's Assad

By Bill Van Auken

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As forces of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) appeared poised to overrun the predominantly Kurdish town of Kobani Tuesday, Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan spelled out demands that Washington back a ground war aimed at toppling the Syrian government of President Bashar al-Assad.

The dramatic events on the Syrian-Turkish border have served to underscore the incoherence of the policy guiding Washington's new war in the Middle East as well as the steadily mounting pressure for the Obama administration to mount a full-scale ground operation encompassing both Iraq and Syria, with the certainty of catastrophic consequences.

"I am telling the West—dropping bombs from the air will not provide a solution," Edogan told an audience of Syrian refugees in the southeastern province of Gaziantep Tuesday. "The terror will not be over...until there is cooperation for a ground operation."

Declaring that Kobani "is about to fall," the Turkish president reiterated his demands for the imposition of a no-fly zone over Syria and a buffer zone along the Turkish-Syrian borders. These measures would entail an intensive bombardment of Syrian military installations and a general offensive to overturn the Syrian government. He also called for the arming and training of Syrian "rebels."

Last week, the Turkish parliament voted to authorize Turkey's armed intervention in Iraq and Syria as well as to allow the deployment of foreign forces on Turkish soil for the same purpose. Turkey, however, has thus far limited itself to deploying troops and tanks on the border, in sight of Kobani, while refraining from any action against the ISIS forces besieging the town.

The main function of this deployment has been to block the crossing of Kurdish fighters and armaments to relieve Kobani, which has been besieged by ISIS on three sides and blockaded by Turkey on the fourth in a kind of hammer and anvil operation.

For its part, the US military has staged only a few largely symbolic air strikes in and around Kobani. A Pentagon spokesman told NBC news Tuesday that it was not providing "close air support" for Kurdish fighters and was pursuing an "Iraq first" strategy in relation to air strikes against ISIS.

The position of the Turkish government and the news that ISIS fighters had entered Kobani, engaging its defenders in street fighting, touched off angry demonstrations by Turkish Kurds in Istanbul, Ankara and cities across the country. At least ten people were reported killed Tuesday, including from live fire from security forces, and many more were injured. Turkey's Interior Minister Efkan Ala denounced the protests as "treason," and the government imposed curfews in two provinces, including in districts near the Syrian border.

The Turkish Kurds blame the Erdogan government for the growth of ISIS, which it fostered by allowing free passage of fighters and arms across Turkey's border with Syria. This correct assessment was substantiated by US Vice President Joe Biden's remarks last week at Harvard University that Turkey and the Sunni Gulf state monarchs "were so determined to take down Assad" that they "poured hundreds of millions of dollars and tens, thousands of tons of weapons" into the hands of Al Qaeda-linked forces, including ISIS.

Biden has since been engaged in a round of apologies for lifting the veil on both the US-backed war for regime change in Syria and the fraud of Washington's "war on terror."

The response of Turkey, which shares a 500-mile border with Syria, is the clearest indication that the conflicting agendas and strategic aims of the various countries cobbled together in President Barack Obama's coalition are leaving the US-led war in a shambles.

In addition to its demand that this war be waged simultaneously against the Assad government, which ISIS is fighting as well, Ankara is determined that its intervention not strengthen the Kurdish forces in Syria, which is the only other force that has seriously resisted ISIS.

The resolution passed by the Turkish parliament authorizing the use of military force specified that it was directed not just against ISIS and Syria, but also the Kurdish guerrilla movement the PKK, with which the Erdogan government has been engaged in peace negotiations. Ankara is determined that the anti-ISIS operations not strengthen Kurdish forces in either Syria, where they have set up an autonomous zone, or in Turkey itself.

The Turkish daily *Hurriyet* reported that the leader of the Democratic Union Party (PYD), the Kurdish political party in Syria, Salih Muslim, had met with Turkish intelligence over the weekend asking that Turkey allow supplies and Kurdish fighters to cross the border into Kobani.

Muslim reportedly was told that Turkey would agree to such demands only if the PYD would “take an open stance against the Syrian regime,” join the “Free Syrian Army,” distance itself from the PKK and dismantle the autonomous Kurdish zone in Syria—conditions that are politically impossible for the PYD to accept.

As Turkey pressed Washington to commit to a ground war and to combine the campaign against ISIS with an offensive to overthrow the Syrian government, political pressure on the Obama administration from within Washington was mounting along similar lines.

Republican Senators John McCain and Lindsey Graham published a joint statement in the *Wall Street Journal* Tuesday entitled, “To defeat Islamic State, Remove Assad.” They charged the Obama administration with having “no effective policy to remove Bashar Assad from power and end the conflict in Syria.”

The statement insisted that the campaign in Iraq and Syria could not be successful without “embedding US military advisers with our foreign partners as they head into combat,” and that Washington must act to “militarily degrade the Assad regime, upgrade the moderate opposition, change the momentum of the conflict and create conditions for a political solution.”

The two senators acknowledged that “these would not be minor military operations,” but argued that failing to act would only “postpone the problem.”

Similarly, Leon Panetta, who served as both CIA director and defense secretary under Obama, deepened his public attack on the administration’s Iraq-Syria policy Tuesday, condemning the US president for ruling out the deployment of American ground troops.

“I take the position that when you’re commander in chief that you oughta keep all options on the table... to be able to have the flexibility to do what is necessary in order to defeat the enemy,” he told the news network. “We’re conducting air strikes. But to make those air strikes work, to be able to do what you had to do, you don’t—you don’t just send planes in and drop bombs. You’ve gotta have targets. You’ve gotta know what you’re goin’ after. To do that, you do need people on the ground.”

From the beginning, the US military intervention has had the strategic aim not of crushing ISIS, which is a creation of the CIA and Washington’s regional allies, but of installing a more pliant puppet regime in Syria and solidifying US hegemony over the entire oil-rich region.

However, there is little doubt that the Obama administration is anxious to postpone any major escalation of this new US war in the Middle East until after the midterm elections four weeks from now. Both the crisis pervading its current operations, and the steady drumbeat of political pressure, however, may force its hand.

