



Turkey's offensive against Afrin - a risk too far?

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The autonomous Kurdish region of Rojava in northern Syria is as much a thorn in the side of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's government as the pro-Kurdish party, the HDP, in Turkey itself. The HDP's campaign was a real threat to his victory in the referendum for his authoritarian constitution. Thanks to a massive intensification of state repression, the sixth extension of the state of emergency and the imprisonment of thousands of opposition activists, however, he has continued to rule with an iron hand.

Although he has successfully muzzled the Kurdish movement in Turkey so far, Erdogan has not yet been able to influence developments in Syria as he has wanted to since 2011. Despite his sending weapons and soldiers to Syria and supporting the reactionary forces of the Free Syrian Army, FSA, the city of Qamishli (Kurdish: Qamislo) and the Canton of Afrin (Curonian: Efrîn), ruled by the Kurdish PYD, were on the verge of unification. With the strengthening of the PYD in Syria, he feared a linking up with the Kurds in Turkey, which would put in question existing national borders in the Middle East.

Since the Assad regime also wants to prevent any such geographical redivision at all costs, it gave the Turkish military a free hand in the north and did not protest against the invasion by Turkish troops. For months now, they have been engaged in battles with the forces of the Syrian Defence Force, SDF, which are largely financed by the USA and, since January 19th, they have been bombing the positions of the YPG/YPJ. The deployment of ground troops began on 20 January. Although Russia controls the airspace and the Assad regime has announced that all Turkish aircraft will be shot down, the Turkish army has so far been able to operate undisturbed.

Turkey, Germany and the USA against Russia and Syria?

The tanks that rolled across the Syrian border are Leopard IIs, made in Germany. Further deliveries to Turkey were announced a few days ago. After the Foreign Ministers Gabriel and Çavuşoğlu met in the private, cosy atmosphere of Gabriel's home in Goslar, they both declared how closely they were connected by personal friendship. In an interview with the German newspaper, Tagesschau, Gabriel justified the deliveries to Turkey (for 10 years now, by the way) on the basis of the supposed alliance of NATO partners in the fight against the so-called "Islamic State", IS. In fact it has been known for a long time that Turkey is not fighting IS, on the contrary, IS fighters have been given medical treatment in the south of the country and IS groups can organise undisturbed even in large Turkish cities, while the border for civilian refugees from Syria is closed off by a wall.

While Erdogan has already announced that he will soon attack the eastern cantons around the city of Manbij (Kurdish: Minbic) in order to prevent a "terrorist corridor", the German Foreign Office has called on all the parties involved to act prudently and not to let any new violence erupt.

The fact that this is clearly a war of aggression by Turkey against the Kurds is suppressed. At the same time, a back door is left open for a joint fight against "terrorists". In Germany, too, attacks on the democratic rights of the Kurdish movement have increased massively in recent weeks, as evidenced by arrests on demonstrations, house searches and the initiation of legal proceedings. The French government is more clearly calling on the Turkish Government to stop the offensive against the Kurds and instead to focus on the fight against the terrorists of IS.

What is particularly explosive here is the stand-off between the two NATO partners Turkey and the USA, which

obviously have conflicting interests. However, as long as Turkey does not take any major military action, the confrontation has been played out on the margins with talk of travel warnings and visa restrictions. After the USA announced that it would send a 30,000 strong force to Northern Syria to establish a "security zone" together with the YPG/YPJ, the Turkish army prepared itself for the invasion. The White House has repeatedly advised the Turkish government to refrain from attacking Syrian-Kurdish territories.

Foreign Minister Tillerson, however, then denied that he had ever announced the despatch of the 30,000 troops in Northern Syria. At best, the press release must have been formulated incorrectly. This "misunderstanding" will undoubtedly be discussed in the next few days, when the NATO Deputy Secretary-General, Rose Gottemoeller, will travel to Turkey. For Turkey's governing Justice and Development Party, it is unacceptable that the US might supply more weapons to the Kurds in Syria in order to expand its own area of influence in Syria. Even though it is cut off from the rest of the Kurdish territories, the attack on Afrin is a delicate undertaking for Erdogan. He is taking the risk, however, because the domestic political situation needs a foreign policy success.

While the effects of this attack on Turkish-American relations are not yet certain, it is already clear that the USA is abandoning the Kurds. Even during their alliance, they limited aid to Rojava to military assets that served the United States' purpose and refused to supply equipment for economic reconstruction. There is no doubt that the weakening of the Kurdish people is also a setback for the USA, because they have practically no other reasonably reliable allies in Syria and thus will have little say in the reorganisation of the country. Nonetheless, they are certainly not prepared to risk a further deterioration of relations with Ankara for the Kurds.

Of course, Russia also viewed the attack with mixed feelings but it soon became clear that it would accept the situation. Shortly before the attack on Afrin, the units of the Russian army stationed there were withdrawn and the flight ban against Turkish war planes has not been implemented. A few days ago, a meeting was held in Moscow between the head of the Turkish secret service, the chief of the general staff and the Russian government at which the advance into Afrin was no doubt discussed. On this two forces are pulling in the same direction, both want to get rid of the Kurds and thus destroy the only reliable partner of the USA in Syria.

Erdogan's domestic political reasons

There are, however, also important domestic political reasons behind the attack. In 2019, Turkey is facing the most important elections since the Erdogan came to power. The presidential and parliamentary elections will take place simultaneously in November at the latest. The constitutional amendments to the 2017 referendum will then enter into force. Whoever wins this election will be both head of state and head of government with great power, because the office of prime minister will be abolished. The current candidates are Recep Tayyip Erdogan, who has already secured the approval of the Nationalist Movement Party, MHP. His biggest rival is Meral Aksener with her newly founded İyi Parti (Good Party), a spin-off from MHP. The İyi has already reached 20 percent in opinion polls and would thus be the third-strongest party in parliament after the CHP. The MHP is currently losing a lot of votes and members and at best could only be a makeweight for the AKP.

The HDP must also fear for its entry, even if it is still well ahead of the MHP in the polls. It is currently operating under the threat of being banned and its political leaders are in prison. Given that the AKP is aware of the plight of its only ally, the MHP, a reduction of the threshold to 5% is currently under discussion. The wave of resignations by AKP mayors should also be seen as a preparation for the election. The most prominent example is the mayor of Ankara, Melih Gökçek, who resigned "voluntarily" after 23 years in office after the AKP narrowly lost in the constitutional referendum in Ankara in 2017. As in Gökçek's case, their places will be taken by more promising politicians.

The Republican People's Party, CHP, has also upgraded and last week elected Canan Kaftancıoğlu as chairman of Istanbul's largest local party. The fact that less than 24 hours after taking office, a trial was opened against her for terrorist propaganda for the PKK and DHKP-C (Revolutionary People's Liberation Party Front) and the accusation of "humiliation of the Turkish state and insult to the President" makes her likeable at first glance. In fact, she belongs to

the left wing of the party, openly supports the struggle for women's rights, describes the genocide against the Armenians as such, and was in solidarity with the Gezi protests and the Kurds in Kobanê. She also strongly condemned those who brutally defended the AKP regime on the night of the coup on 15 July 2016 and called for united action between CHP and HDP.

However, the hope that her election will bring fresh air into the CHP, and at least open the eyes of those who still hope they can cooperate with the AKP, has already turned out to be an illusion. CHP chairman Kılıçdaroğlu agreed with the AKP's war frenzy and declared on 19 January: "No country can tolerate the intrusion of terrorist organisations along its borders. Our heroic army has our confidence, and Operation Olive Branch our support.?"

The illusion of many leftists that it would be possible to build a democratic front against the AKP together with the CHP has once again been exposed as completely wrong. Those who really see themselves as democratic and supportive of the Kurds' struggle should leave this chauvinist, racist party.

All the same, Erdogan is also under pressure to succeed. The difficult domestic political situation is not only reflected in the party placings, it is also becoming increasingly difficult for the AKP to maintain itself on the economic front. The proclamation of the minimum wage of 1600 lira at the beginning of the year triggered a storm of outrage, at least in the social media. The chairman of the union DISK believes that the minimum should be at least 2300 lira per month, but the minimum wage is set by the government and the employers.

Youth unemployment has decreased in recent months, but still stands at 20%. If you take a closer look at where these young people work, you usually find them in highly dangerous jobs like in the construction industry, where dozens of people die every year as a result of accidents. After military service, which traumatises many young men, the rural population in particular lacks employment and training prospects. These and other problems are not currently being translated into big protests on the streets, but rather into a huge flight to Europe - first and foremost by the middle class, who can afford it.

Although Erdogan fires off rhetoric in all directions and appears to be unimpressed and strong, it is clear that he needs foreign policy successes and a ramping up of Turkish nationalism to maintain his rule. The USA's support in the fight against the Kurds is no longer certain, there is a feeling that the influence so laboriously built in Syria is now slipping through his fingers while his power is dwindling in domestic politics so he is now counter-attacking on the foreign policy front.

The attack rolls on

On the morning of January 19, pictures of large white buses crossing the Syrian border in Southern Turkey circulated on the Internet. This was not a school trip; on closer inspection one could see it was salafists and Jabhat Fatah Fatah asch-Scham crossing the border to attack the YPG/YPJ in Afrin together with the Turkish military. Shortly afterwards, the first reports of heavy bombardment of Kurdish positions followed and the PYD announced that they would not only fight the attacks in northern Syria, but that they would also take their fight against Erdogan into Turkey.

The fight between the Turkish military and the PYD is not a fight between equally strong, or even comparable, opponents. Turkey, one of the most important states in NATO's alliance, plays a key role for the USA in controlling the region, despite all differences. The PYD, on the other hand, is currently serving as part of the SDF, it is the strongest political force in northern Syria, playing a role that justifies the presence of the US, but it is a non-state military unit that challenges the existing borders.

The history of the Kurdish people is well known for examples of involvement in local power struggles on the side of one of the imperialisms which has promised them autonomy or even a state of their own. When the struggle is over, however, they are dropped like a hot potato, and now they are facing the same fate again. The USA realises it would risk turning Turkey towards Russia if it cooperated permanently with the PYD.

With the defeat of the Kurds in northern Syria, one of the biggest obstacles to the reorganisation of Syria would have

been overcome. Not only Turkey, but also Assad has a big interest in this.

What position do revolutionaries have to take in this situation?

The attack on the Kurds in Syria is a reactionary and criminal Turkish project, which is tolerated by all the imperialist powers. Revolutionaries must therefore stand for the defeat of the Turkish army and for the Kurds' right to self-determination throughout the Middle East.

It is therefore also necessary to call for an immediate halt to all arms deliveries to Turkey and for the withdrawal of the German Bundeswehr from the region. In order to nip in the bud the justified uprising against Assad and the democratic revolution in Syria, reactionary forces such as the al-Nusra front (today: Jabhat Fatah asch-Scham) and other Salafists were financed and they are now fighting side by side with the Turkish army.

The borders between Turkey and Syria must not be opened up for these forces, but for the Syrian refugees - down with the wall! The intervention of the imperialists in Syria transformed the legitimate struggle of the opposition into one of the deadliest conflicts of the 21st century. Defeat the Turkish invasion! Solidarity with the Kurdish liberation struggle! Immediate withdrawal of all imperialist forces!

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