
Kurds Warn of Massacre by Islamic State, Turkey Stops Short of Action

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Turkey said it would do what it could to prevent Kobani, a predominantly Kurdish town just over its southern border, from falling into Islamic State hands but stopped short of committing to any direct military intervention.

US-led forces have been bombing Islamic State targets in Syria and Iraq but the action has done little to stop their advance in northern Syria towards the Turkish border, piling pressure on Ankara to intervene.

Esmat al-Sheikh, head of the Kurdish forces defending Kobani, said the distance between his fighters and the insurgents was now less than one km (half a mile).

"We are in a small, besieged area. No reinforcements reached us and the borders are closed," he told Reuters by phone. "My expectation is for general killing, massacres and destruction ... There is bombardment with tanks, artillery, rockets and mortars."

Islamic State has earned a reputation for extreme violence, carrying out widespread killings including beheadings in the Syrian and Iraqi territory it has seized.

Two large clouds of smoke rose up to the east of Kobani and there were several loud explosions from further inside the town as shelling continued and gunfire rang out, a Reuters correspondent on the Turkish side of the border said.

Fighters from the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) tried to push the insurgents back,

firing missiles lit up by bright red tracers from the town and striking Islamic State targets in a village a few kilometres to the east.

The frontlines between the Kurds and Islamic State, a Sunni Muslim group still commonly known by its former acronyms of ISIS and ISIL, are fluid.

Idris Nassan, deputy foreign minister in a local Kurdish administration, said the YPG had been able to blunt Islamic State gains over the past two days on the southeastern front.

"There are clashes every minute of the day. The YPG pushed ISIS back yesterday in the southeast of Kobani. ISIS were two km from Kobani (to the southeast) but they are now four km," he said. "From time to time there are shells by ISIS that reach the centre of the city. Three hours ago there was a bomb that landed in Kobani. I haven't heard about casualties."

The British-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said the eastern, western and southern fronts had not seen significant changes since Thursday, when Islamic State fighters tightened their grip around Kobani.

But that at least 25 shells had hit the town, coupled with heavy clashes on the eastern and southeastern fronts on Friday.

TURKEY "NOT AT FAULT"

Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu said Turkey would do what it could to prevent Kobani from falling to Islamic State but stopped short of committing to the sort of military intervention that the Kurds have been crying out for.

"We wouldn't want Kobani to fall. We'll do whatever we can to prevent this from happening," Davutoglu said in a discussion with journalists broadcast on the A Haber television station.

Parliament gave the government powers on Thursday to order cross-border military incursions against Islamic State, and to allow forces of the U.S.-led foreign coalition to launch similar operations from Turkish territory.

But Davutoglu appeared to pull back from any suggestion that this meant Turkey was planning a military incursion, saying such a move could drag Ankara into a wider conflict along its 900 km (560-mile) border.

"Some are saying 'Why aren't you protecting Kurds in Kobani?' If the Turkish armed forces enter Kobani and the Turkmens from Yayladag ask 'why aren't you saving us?', we would have to go there as well," he said, referring to another ethnic minority in Syria across from a Turkish border town.

"When the Arab citizens across from Reyhanli say 'why don't you save us as well', we'd have to go there too."

Defence Minister Ismet Yilmaz was also quoted as telling reporters that it would be wrong to expect imminent military action after the parliamentary motion passed.

Ankara fears military intervention could deepen the insecurity on its border by strengthening Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and bolster Kurdish fighters linked to the Kurdistan Workers

Party (PKK), which has waged a three-decade insurgency against the Turkish state.

Jailed PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan said on Wednesday peace talks between his group and Turkey would collapse if Islamic State militants are allowed to carry out a massacre in Kobani.

Davutoglu said it was wrong to link the two issues. "If Kobani falls, Turkey is not at fault. If Kobani falls, this shouldn't be tied to the solution process (with the PKK)."

SIGNS OF PROGRESS IN IRAQ

Islamic State has carved out swathes of eastern Syria and western Iraq in a drive to create a cross-border caliphate between the Euphrates and the Tigris rivers, terrifying communities into submission by slaughtering those who resist.

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The United States has been carrying out air strikes in Iraq against the militant group since July and in Syria since last week with the help of Arab allies. Britain and France have also struck Islamic State targets in Iraq.

There have been some successes on the ground. In Iraq, Sunni tribes have joined pro-government forces in recent days for several major battles against the militants. The Shi'ite-led government in Baghdad and the United States hope this is a sign of increasing cooperation across sectarian lines to save the country.

When Islamic State fighters tried to storm the Tigris River town of Dhuluiya north of Baghdad this week, they were repelled by a rare coalition of Sunni tribal fighters inside the town and Shi'ites in its sister city Balad on the opposite bank.

Further north, another powerful Sunni tribe fought alongside Kurdish forces to drive Islamic State fighters from Rabia, a town controlling one of the main border checkpoints used by fighters pouring in from Syria.

Village by village, Kurdish forces in northern Iraq have regained around half the territory they gave up in August when Islamic State militants tore through their defences in the northwest, prompting the United States to launch airstrikes in September, its first since 2011.

Turkey insists the air strikes alone will not contain the Islamic State threat, and wants

simultaneous action to be taken against Assad's government, including the creation of a no-fly zone on the Syrian side of the border.

"You know what will happen if there isn't a no-fly zone? ISIL bases will be bombed and then the Syrian regime, Assad, who has committed all those massacres, believing that he is now legitimate, will bide his time and bomb Aleppo," Davutoglu said.
