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Turkey and Bulgaria: NATO Members on Opposite Sides of the Syrian Barricades

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1/4/2016

The years of armed conflict in Syria and the recent successes of government forces have exacerbated internal conflicts within the North Atlantic Treaty Organization due to the different understandings by members of this military alliance of its goals and objectives in Syria.

There is increasing evidence that the United States and a number of other NATO member countries operating in Syria provided support to the terrorist groups the Islamic State (IS) and Jabhat al-Nusra. During the liberation of Aleppo, huge arsenals of weapons and ammunition produced in Bulgaria, a NATO member country, were discovered by Syrian government forces. They included nearly 4,000 projectiles for the Grad multiple rocket launcher system, ammunition for anti-tank guns, and rocket-propelled grenades. At least eight warehouses abandoned by the terrorists were also discovered, containing two million rounds for heavy machine guns. The ammunition left behind by militants bore VMZ labels – the Bulgarian weapons manufacturer Vazovski Mashinostroitelni Zavodi.

The very fact that this involves the illegal sale of weapons using old licences transferred to Bulgaria by the Soviet Union clearly demonstrates the mores that currently prevail on NATO's eastern flank. Who gets their hands on these weapons is even more revealing, however, and it is the very same terrorists who are conducting operations against NATO forces, among others,

including against Turkey's regular army. This is the main reason why tensions have intensified between Ankara and Washington.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has said he has proof that the US-led coalition is supporting terrorists in Syria, including the Islamic State. «*We have evidence of this, including photographs and video footage*», Erdoğan announced at a press conference in Ankara.

IS militants recently released a video recording of two captured Turkish soldiers in Syria being burned alive. And even though Turkey's Deputy Prime Minister Numan Kurtulmuş has stated that Ankara cannot yet confirm the video's authenticity, it has stirred up public opinion in Turkey. Turkish media has started questioning the objectives that should be pursued by Turkey's Syria policy, the importance of a dialogue between Ankara, Moscow and Tehran, and the extent of the West's responsibility for what is happening in Syria, particularly NATO.

«The fact that Turkey has been able to achieve such coordination with Russia is being met with a mixture of bewilderment and anger by its NATO allies, primarily the US and the European Union. They are worried that these developments will distance Turkey from Europe and Euro-Atlantic structures. They are afraid that organisations like the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and the Eurasian Economic Union will become a magnet for Turkey», writes the Hürriyet newspaper. It continues: *«In relation to the Syrian issue, Turkey has caught a wave with a group of other countries that it was unable to catch with the West, and when examining the reasons for this, the West would benefit from looking to itself for blame»*.

So one NATO member country – Bulgaria – is arming militants and terrorists with modern weapons, then these same militants and terrorists are using these weapons to kill the soldiers of another NATO member country – Turkey. Around four dozen soldiers have been killed in the operation launched by Ankara in Syria in August 2016. According to Turkish sources, at least 16 Turkish servicemen were killed in and around the terrorist-controlled city of Al-Bab on one day alone, 22 December.

It is hardly likely that NATO's military commanders are unaware of the ambiguity of the current situation, a situation in which the US and Bulgaria on the one hand and Turkey on the other are fighting on opposite sides of the Syrian barricades. Yet it is clear that Washington and Brussels are simply incapable of reviewing their priorities. Because the West is pursuing just one objective in Syria – to oppose Russia. Due to Turkey's own involvement in the fighting in Syria, it has been the first to experience the full tragedy of the situation.

Washington and its closest allies are still talking within the framework of an anti-Russian geopolitical paradigm. And US State Department spokesman Mark Toner could not think of anything better to call the Turkish President's accusations other than «ludicrous», although the facts suggest otherwise. In particular, the fact that the terrorists' capture of Palmyra was only possible owing to the suspension of operations by the US-led coalition on other fronts.

The fight against terrorism cannot tolerate double standards and it seems that Turkey has started to realise this.

There is little doubt that further development of the Syrian peace process in the format of Turkey's emerging cooperation with Moscow, Tehran and Damascus could provoke a response from the US, Saudi Arabia and Qatar. It is therefore necessary to watch out for attempts to destabilise the situation both in Syria and in Turkey in the run up to a meeting set to take place in Astana (Kazakhstan) at the beginning of 2017 between the leaders of Russia, Turkey and Iran.

The principles of Euro-Atlantic solidarity are at serious odds with Turkey's state interests. Much will depend on the position of the Turkish leadership itself.