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Did the War in Syria Just Become a Regional War?

The Shifting Battlefield

by ERIC DRAITSER

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There are growing indications that the war in Syria has now entered a new and dangerous phase that threatens to engulf the entire Middle East in a broad regional war. The news that Iran has sent significant numbers of Iranian, Iraqi, and Afghan troops to take active part in defense of Syria has the potential to transform the conflict into one with global implications as Iran's key regional rivals – Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Israel – continue to support jihadi factions in their war against the government of Bashar al-Assad.

The escalation of the conflict comes in the wake of significant victories for the Al Qaeda affiliated Nusra Front, the Islamic State, and other foreign-backed terror groups in and around the major Syrian city of Idlib. As Reuters reported, sources with knowledge of internal discussions in Damascus have confirmed that the Syrian government had acknowledged strategic losses and was prepared for a lengthy and costly summer defense campaign. While undoubtedly true, there are key elements left out of the narrative of “impending collapse” and Damascus being “overpowered” by the Islamic State.

Chief among the crucial points omitted from the majority of western media coverage is the vital support that Turkey has provided, and continues to provide, to jihadi groups in Syria's northwest. And it is quite likely that it was the direct military intervention of Turkish troops that spurred

Tehran to finally sign off on a direct intervention of their own, using a combination of Iranian military and Shia militias from regional allies. Aside from Turkey though, Iran sees in Saudi Arabia and Israel two countries that have also been demonstrably providing overt and covert support to the anti-Assad extremist groups in order to further their own agendas. In this way, it seems that the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khomeini has finally abandoned the cautious approach in order to provide much needed support to his ally Assad, and to maintain the Shia alliance of Hezbollah-Syria-Iran.

While the war in Syria has been dominating headlines for more than four years now, it has clearly now reached a turning point. Only by combining an understanding of the situation on the ground with the reality of the politics and competing interests, can one discern both what is happening, and where this war is going.

The Shifting Battlefield

Reports on the ground in Syria convey a sense that the war has shifted dramatically in recent days. From the widely held, though pridefully repressed, feelings of concern and trepidation felt in the last weeks of May, to a growing sense of optimism and hope, the very mindset of ordinary Syrians and soldiers alike has considerably altered. As a journalist and resident of the strategically critical Mediterranean port city of Latakia told Counterpunch “I can confirm [that Iranian and allied forces have landed], and we are all hopeful.”

This new sanguineness is in stark contrast to just days earlier when Latakia was rocked by a devastating explosion which killed at least four civilians, including a father and his two children. Though there were conflicting reports as to what caused the explosion – some sources saying a downed drone, others that it was caused by rocket fire – the inescapable fact is that the incident put the formerly stable, and staunchly pro-government, port city on edge. With the fall of Jisr al-Shughour to the Al Qaeda affiliated Nusra Front and other terror groups in neighboring Idlib province in late April, citizens of Latakia became fearful of the growing uncertainty of the coastal region.

And it is against this backdrop of anxiety and consternation that the Iranian, Iraqi and Afghan allied forces arrived a few days ago. Sources in Latakia who asked to remain anonymous due to security restrictions regarding reporting troop movements have confirmed to Counterpunch the reports circulating in Arab press regarding a significant deployment of troops arriving there. Indeed, as of the morning of Thursday June 4, military sources have confirmed the commencement of battles in Idlib province and the liberation of at least five villages surrounding Jisr al-Shughour from Nusra control.

In addition, it has now been reported that Syrian military forces have been involved in heavy fighting against Nusra forces near the strategic town of Zayzoun, considered crucial for maintaining the security of supply lines to Idlib, as well as against ISIS elements in al-Hasakah governorate in the northeast of the country. This coordinated campaign illustrates the broad scope of the Syrian military effort, namely securing the northern tier of the country along the length of the Turkish border.

Simultaneously, Hezbollah units have been involved in fierce battles against various foreign-backed terror groups to secure a large swath of territory in the Aarsal Heights and valley along the Lebanon-Syria border. Sources with knowledge of the situation informed Counterpunch that many of the heights previously held by these groups have been retaken by Hezbollah units since the counteroffensive began on June 4. Seen in tandem with the significant tactical victories against Nusra in the Qalamoun Mountains, there is a clear sense that, despite losses in recent months, including the much decried Islamic State seizure and occupation of the ancient city of Palmyra, the tide is turning.

It has become increasingly clear that Syrian, Hezbollah, Iranian and allied forces have coordinated their counteroffensive against ISIS, Nusra and their jihadi partners, and that this is the epicenter of the fighting, from the Lebanese border regions of Qalamoun to the northeastern reaches of al-Hasakah and the Turkish frontier. And it is along this volatile Syrian-Turkish border that the politics and covert war takes on a new dimension. For while the world is busy debating Assad and regime change, it is Turkey that has made itself an active party to the war.

The Turkish Gambit

It is no secret that Turkey has been one of the most vocal advocates of regime change in Syria, with President Erdogan repeatedly calling for Assad's ouster. Indeed, in many ways Ankara has made itself into the political and diplomatic leader of the anti-Assad forces in the region, hosting both the Syrian National Council and National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces. However, Turkey has also played host to a variety of terrorist groups that have been at the forefront of the war against the Syrian government. In this way, Turkey has been an incubator for jihadi mobilization in its attempt to direct the course of events in Syria.

In 2012, the New York Times confirmed that the CIA was busily funneling weapons into the hands of anti-Assad forces from the Turkish side of the border, using their connections with the Muslim Brotherhood to do so. However, it has also come to light that Turkish intelligence has been front and center in the ongoing campaign to arm and resupply the terror groups such as Nusra and others.

Just this week, at precisely the moment that a major offensive was taking place along the Turkish-Syrian border, President Erdogan himself publicly called for a life sentence against Can Dündar, Editor-in-Chief of the Turkish daily Cumhuriyet after its publication of video footage confirming the widespread allegations that Turkish trucks, ostensibly loaded with humanitarian supplies, were actually filled with arms bound for terror groups fighting against Assad, and that those trucks were operated by Turkey's National Intelligence Organization (MİT). Despite calls from Human Rights Watch (an organization deeply hostile to the Assad government) and other organizations demanding that Erdogan's government drop the investigation, Ankara seems to be pushing forward with the intimidation and repression of journalists, signaling just how important the covert destabilization program is to Turkey's regional plans.

But far from solely a covert destabilization war, Turkey has been directly involved on the ground in Syria both in active military and support roles. In fact, transcripts of wiretaps obtained by Cumhuriyet, and presented in Turkish courts, along with shocking video footage, have confirmed

what numerous eyewitnesses have stated: Turkish security forces have been directly involved in shelling and support operations for Nusra front and other jihadi groups in and around Kassab, Syria, among other sites. This is a crucial piece of information because it explains just why those terror groups were able to successfully capture that region in 2014, and recapture it this year. Eyewitnesses in Kassab have confirmed to Counterpunch what Syrian soldiers speaking on condition of anonymity had reported, namely that Turkish helicopters and heavy artillery were used in support of Nusra and the other terror groups during both the 2014 and the current campaign.

Of course this policy of alliance with anti-Assad terrorists has been part of Turkey's *modus operandi* since the beginning of the conflict. In 2012, Reuters revealed that Turkey had "set up a secret base with allies Saudi Arabia and Qatar to direct vital military and communications aid to Syria's rebels from a city near the border... 'It's the Turks who are militarily controlling it. Turkey is the main coordinator/facilitator. Think of a triangle, with Turkey at the top and Saudi Arabia and Qatar at the bottom,' said a Doha-based source."

And earlier this year, Turkey made a much publicized military incursion into Syria, ostensibly to "evacuate" the tomb of Suleyman Shah, the grandfather of Osman I, founder of the Ottoman Empire. Using armored vehicles and Turkish Special Forces, Ankara carried out its operation, though there was, and still remains, much speculation as to the real intent of Erdogan's government which many in Syria believe intended not to carry out a historical preservation mission, but to prevent Syrian military forces from scoring a crushing defeat against ISIS militants in the area. Whatever Turkey's motives, the action was a clear violation of Syria's sovereignty, one that was carried out opportunistically as Damascus fought to regain control of territory from ISIS.

So, from the broadest perspective then, Turkey's deep involvement in fomenting the Syria war, and its close ties to terror groups to further that aim, is beyond debate. It is self-evident then that Ankara is trying to use this war, and the subsequently weakened Iranian alliance, to further its regional ambitions.

The Other Players

Turkey is certainly not alone in fomenting the war in Syria and providing much needed aid and comfort to the various extremist groups. Both Saudi Arabia and Qatar have been directly linked to financing and supporting jihadis, while Jordan has also been documented as having played a significant role. Not to be forgotten, Israel has provided much needed medical, and presumably other forms, of aid to Nusra and other elements.

The Saudis have for years been seen as the global epicenter of Wahhabi extremism, providing much of the funding for such networks. As the Council on Foreign Relations Terrorism Task Force Report of 2002 made plain, "For years...Saudi Arabia [has] been the most important source of funds for al-Qaeda." It is an open secret that Saudi intelligence is deeply involved with far-reaching terror networks that, to varying degrees, act as an adjunct of Saudi power projection.

Or, as then Secretary of State Hillary Clinton stated in US embassy cables released by Wikileaks, “donors in Saudi Arabia constitute the most significant source of funding to Sunni terrorist groups worldwide... Saudi Arabia remains a critical financial support base for al-Qaeda, the Taliban, LeT [Lashkar-e-Taiba] and other terrorist groups.” Indeed, Clinton’s statements were confirmed by Vice President Biden who made the direct connection to Syria in an infamous, and controversial, speech at Harvard’s Kennedy School of Government, when he stated:

Our allies in the region were our largest problem in Syria. The Turks were great friends... [and] the Saudis, the Emirates, etcetera. What were they doing?... They poured hundreds of millions of dollars and tens of tons of weapons into anyone who would fight against Assad — except that the people who were being supplied, [they] were al-Nusra, and al-Qaeda, and the extremist elements of jihadis who were coming from other parts of the world.

So, as even the Obama administration itself has admitted, Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf monarchies, along with Turkey, have been directly arming and financing precisely those terror groups waging war against the Syrian Government today. Moreover, as The Guardian reported in 2013, Jordan, like Turkey, has been the site of a major effort to train so called “rebels” (read jihadists). The comprehensive effort could not be any clearer.

And then of course there is the curious case of Israel, that nation that, more than any other, wields the threat of terrorism as a political weapon to justify everything from its foreign policy against Iran to its policies vis-à-vis the Palestinians. Perhaps then it comes as a shock to some that the United Nations Disengagement Observer Force (UNDOF) reported in December 2014 that, “UNDOF sporadically observed armed members of the [Syrian] opposition interacting with IDF across the ceasefire line in the vicinity of United Nations position 85.” As the June 10, 2014 UNDOF report indicated, “[UNDOF] observed armed members of the opposition transferring 89 wounded persons from the Bravo side across the ceasefire line to IDF and IDF on the Alpha side handing over 19 treated and 2 deceased individuals to the armed members of the opposition on the Bravo side.”

This clear collaboration between Israel and the terror groups needs to be understood in its proper context – Israel’s continued participation in the war against Syria. Also in December of 2014, within days of the above referenced UNDOF report, Israel carried out multiple air strikes against Syrian Government targets around Damascus international airport, in direct violation of international law. In fact, as has been well documented, since the war began in 2011, Israeli military forces have conducted a number of air strikes against Syrian targets. So, taken in total, Israel, along with Turkey and the Gulf monarchies, is part of the regional war effort targeting the Syrian Government.

Syria as Regional War

And so, in June of 2015, with Syria continuing to struggle against a full-fledged international campaign to bring regime change, Iran has finally, and unmistakably stepped into the fray. Despite there still being debate as to exactly which forces Iran has deployed, and the specific numbers, it is clear that Tehran has judged that the Turkish intervention, coupled with the

participation of its Saudi and Israeli rivals, has forced its hand, necessitating a direct intervention. The stakes could not be higher.

With Iranian military forces operating mere miles from both the Turkish and Israeli borders, the potential for a direct military confrontation between the region's powers is very high. Were such a scenario to play out, one could easily imagine a direct shooting war that would amount to a full-scale regional conflict. Israel and Turkey would both be immediately involved, with other regional actors lurking in the background. With Saudi Arabia still embroiled in its boondoggle in Yemen, its military participation might be hamstrung, but its indirect involvement would be unmistakable in the form of increased support for Nusra and other factions. Essentially, it is a conflagration scenario that would have global implications.

Naturally, all parties want to avoid such a nightmare scenario as it is unlikely that any of them would be able to escape unscathed. However, there is perhaps a political motivation for Iranian involvement. Tehran may be calling the bluffs of Ankara, Riyadh, and Tel Aviv, demonstrating unequivocally that when Iranian president Rouhani stated last week that "The Iranian nation and government will remain at the side of the Syrian nation and government until the end of the road," he meant it. Iran is showing the world that the mutual defense treaty it has with Syria is very much still in play, and that the protracted war against Damascus has not changed anything.

Those interested in peace and stability certainly hope that Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Israel, and the other parties to this war are getting that message loud and clear.

With tensions high over escalations in Ukraine and the South China Sea, the potential for global conflict has never been higher. Those who trade in doomsday prognostication are certainly busy these days. But perhaps it is Syria and the Middle East where the true global conflict is taking place.

The question is: has anyone noticed?