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Turkey Goes to War

By Mike Whitney
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“ISIS threatens our way of life and security...We have plans to act militarily against them in the coming days. You will see.”

— Turkish Foreign Minister Feridun Sinirlioğlu

A landslide victory in Turkey’s November 1 snap elections has removed the last obstacle in President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s drive to war. The surprise outcome of the balloting, which was widely denounced as “unfair and marred by fear and violence by international election observers”, has given Erdogan’s Justice and Development Party (AKP) 49 percent of the vote restoring single-party rule in Ankara. Shortly after the election results were announced, Prime

Minister Ahmet Davutoglu called on Turkey's political parties to scrap the existing constitution in order to grant President Erdogan nearly-limitless executive authority.

According to Turkey's Today's Zaman Davutoglu said, "I'm calling on all parties entering parliament to form a new civilian national constitution...Let's work together towards a Turkey where conflict, tension and polarisation are non-existent and everyone salutes each other in peace."

In other words, the balloting is being used to sabotage democracy and establish the supreme power of the president. Less than 24 hours after Erdogan had regained single-party control of the government, he reiterated Davutoglu's appeal for expanding presidential powers through a national referendum.

"An issue like the presidential system can't be decided without the nation," Erdogan told reporters at the press conference. "If the mechanism requires a referendum, then we will hold a referendum ... The executive presidency is not a question of our president's personal future. He has already entered the history books. The basic motivation is to make the system in Turkey as effective as possible."

So, according to Erdogan, the dictatorial powers of the president have already been established and the referendum is merely a formality.

Clearly, Erdogan wants to use the referendum to consolidate his power, establish one-man rule and terminate representative government in Turkey. He is a committed Islamist who wants to repeal democracy and create a Islamic regime that extends beyond Turkey's present borders into Iraq and Syria. This is why he has been such an enthusiastic supporter of the jihadi groups fighting in Syria.

More important, Erdogan intends to use his landslide victory to persuade the Military High Command that he has a popular mandate for his foreign policy, a policy that has amassed thousands of Turkish troops, armored vehicles and tanks on the Syrian border for a possible invasion. Up to now, the military has resisted Erdogan on this matter, but now that Chief of General Staff Gen. Necdet Özel, has been replaced as head of the Turkish Armed Forces (TSK) by the more compliant General Hulusi Akar, the plan to invade Syria and secure a so called "safety zone" along the Syrian side of the Turkish border, becomes much more probable.

The plan to annex sovereign Syrian territory and use it to launch attacks on the government of Syrian President Bashar al Assad dates back to 2012. In 2015, however, the strategy was expanded upon by Brookings analyst Michael E. O'Hanlon in a piece titled "Deconstructing Syria: A new strategy for America's most hopeless war". Here's an excerpt:

"...the only realistic path forward may be a plan that in effect deconstructs Syria...the international community should work to create pockets with more viable security and governance within Syria over time... The idea would be to help moderate elements establish reliable safe zones within Syria once they were able. American, as well as Saudi and Turkish and British and Jordanian and other Arab forces would act in support, not only from the air but

eventually on the ground via special forces. ... Western forces themselves would remain in more secure positions in general—within the safe zones but back from the front lines—at least until the reliability of such defenses, and also local allied forces, made it practical to deploy and live in more forward locations.

Creation of these sanctuaries would produce autonomous zones that would never again have to face the prospect of rule by either AssadThe interim goal might be a confederal Syria, with several highly autonomous zones... The confederation would likely require support from an international peacekeeping force....to make these zones defensible and governable,...and to train and equip more recruits so that the zones could be stabilized and then gradually expanded.” (Deconstructing Syria: A new strategy for America’s most hopeless war, Michael E. O’Hanlon, Brookings Institute)

This is the Obama administration’s basic blueprint for toppling Assad and reducing Syria into an ungovernable failed state run by regional warlords, renegade militias and Islamic extremists. US Secretary of State John Kerry confirmed our worst suspicions about this sinister plan in a speech he delivered to the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace just last week. Here’s part of what he said:

“In northern Syria, the coalition and its partners have pushed Daesh (ISIS) out of more than 17,000 square kilometers of territory, and we have secured the Turkish-Syrian border east of the Euphrates River. That’s about 85 percent of the Turkish border, and the President is authorizing further activities to secure the rest.....

We’re also enhancing our air campaign in order to help drive Daesh, which once dominated the Syria-Turkey border, out of the last 70-mile stretch that it controls.” (U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry on the Future of U.S. Policy in the Middle East, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace)

Repeat: “That’s about 85 percent of the Turkish border, and the President is authorizing further activities to secure the rest.”

Why has Obama “authorized further activities to secure the rest”?

Because no one in Washington believes that the US-backed jihadis will beat the combined forces of the Russian-led coalition which is gradually annihilating the terrorist militias across Syria. So now, Obama is moving on to Plan B, the creation of a terrorist sanctuary on the Syrian side of the Syrian-Turkish border where the US and its partners can continue to arm, train and deploy their jihadi maniacs back into Syria whenever they choose to do so. Undoubtedly, Obama’s Special Forces will be used to oversee this operation and to make sure that everything goes according to plan.

There is, of course, a question about the Kurdish militias role in this strategy. Recently, the US has air-dropped pallet-loads of weapons and ammo to the Democratic Union Party (PYD) hoping the group could help the US secure the last stretch of land along the border west of the Euphrates thus keeping vital supplylines open for the jihadis while establishing a safe

haven on Syrian territory. Erdogan violently opposes any operation that will create a contiguous Kurdish state on the Syrian side of the border.

So how will this situation be resolved? Will Obama stick with the Kurds or realign with Erdogan in exchange for Turkish boots on the ground?

No one knows just yet, but certainly a Turkish-US alliance would be more formidable than a PYD-US coalition. Judging by Washington's long history of choosing the most expedient solution to achieve its policy goals, we expect Obama to align himself with Ankara.

It's worth noting that the Turkish parliament already "approved a possible deployment of Turkish ground forces in Syria and opened the door to basing foreign troops in Turkey" back in October 2014. Using the pretext of "fighting terrorism" as an excuse for invasion, Erdogan said, "We are open and ready for any kind of cooperation...However, Turkey is not a country that will allow itself to be used for temporary solutions... The immediate removal of the administration in Damascus, Syria's territorial unity and the installation of an administration which embraces all will continue to be our priority."

In other words, Erdogan will not provide ground troops unless the US says it is committed to regime change.

Erdogan has been the strongest proponent of "safe zones", an idea that would require US warplanes to patrol the skies over Northern Syria with small groups of US troops on the ground. The plan greatly increases the probability of an unexpected clash with Russian warplanes that could lead to a direct confrontation between the two nuclear-armed adversaries.

Now check out this article that appeared in the UK Telegraph in June 2015, that was clearly premature in its prediction. The piece is titled "Turkey 'planning to invade Syria'":

"President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has authorised a change in the rules of engagement agreed by the Turkish parliament to allow the army to strike at Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (Isil), as well as the Assad regime, according to local newspapers. The aim is to establish a buffer zone for refugees and against Isil...

Turkey has urged the creation of a buffer zone protected by international forces in the north of Syria ever since the civil war sent hundreds of thousands of refugees across the border...

Turkish media were briefed on new orders being given to the military to prepare to send an 18,000-strong force across the border...The troops would seize a stretch of territory 60 miles long by 20 deep, including the border crossings of Jarablus, currently in Isil hands, and Aazaz, currently controlled by the Free Syrian Army (FSA)...(Turkey 'planning to invade Syria, Telegraph)

Readers will notice the striking similarity between Erdogan's plan and the Brookings strategy. Washington and Ankara seem to share the same view of how Syria should be carved up

following the prospective invasion. That said, it would be surprising if Erdogan and Obama are not able to iron-out their differences and settle on a way to achieve their common objective.

Erdogan has put considerable effort into removing the obstacles preventing him from launching an invasion on Syria. He's gotten the greenlight from Parliament to deploy the army if he feels there is a threat to Turkey's national security. He's effectively "internationalized" the conflict by allowing the US, UK and French warplanes to fly out of Incirlik. (which will absolve Erdogan and his minions from future legal accountability or war crimes.) And, finally, the elections provided Erdogan with the mandate he needed to convince the military that his foreign policy has the full-backing of the Turkish people. So now that he has his ducks in a row, the only question is whether he will actually launch the invasion or not?

On Wednesday, Turkish foreign minister Feridun Sinirlioğlu confirmed that Erdogan is planning to invade Syria under the pretext of "fighting terrorism". Here's an excerpt from an article in the Daily Sabah:

"Turkey has plans to launch a military operation against ISIS in the near future, the Turkish foreign minister said on Wednesday. Feridun Sinirlioğlu was at a conference on the future of Middle East, held in Erbil in northern Iraq's Kurdish region.

"Daesh [ISIS] threatens our way of life and security. [...] We have plans to act militarily against them in the coming days. You will see. We should all stand together against this danger," he said...

"We will continue our efforts to eliminate all terrorist organizations. We will act in a responsible manner so that the Kurdish region and Iraq can be successful in the fight against terror. This is a very clear message to Iraq and the Kurdish region for a bright future," he said." (Turkey in plans to launch military operation against ISIS, foreign minister says, Daily Sabah)

Naturally, none of this has anything to do with fighting terrorism, in fact, Erdogan has been the terrorists best friend allowing them to pass back and forth across the border unimpeded. What Sinirlioğlu's announcement means is that Turkey is finally ready to seize the 60 mile stretch of land referred to in the Telegraph article. As of this writing, we don't know what the White House's reaction to this Sinirlioğlu's announcement will be, but we do know that Obama is scheduled to meet with Erdogan in Ankara in less than two weeks. By then, the administration will have decided whether they will stick with the Kurds or cast their lot with Erdogan. Either way, there's going to be an attempt to create a safe zone from which Washington can continue to prosecute its war on Assad. That much is certain.

These developments suggest that Putin will have to move fast if he wants to seal the border and derail Erdogan's plan. The Russian president might have to deploy Russian Special Forces and armored divisions northward to discourage US-Turkey adventurism and to prevent the war from turning into a quagmire.

This is one situation where preemption could really pay off bigtime.