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Turkey to Undermine Russia-US Peace Effort in Syria

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Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu said on Wednesday, May 4, that Islamic State (Daesh) militants must immediately be pushed back from an area in Syria near the Turkish border and work to achieve that was underway. The statement is a response to what happened on the last day of April near Karkamis town of Gaziantep. Turkey suffered great material damage.

«Daesh should be cleared from the Manbij region southwards at once and we are doing the necessary work for that», the official said in comments broadcast on NTV, referring to a northern Syrian town that has been used as a logistical route by the group.

Turkey is ready to send ground forces into Syria to tackle Islamic State militants if need be, Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu said later on May 4, as the news came that two more rockets fired by extremists struck a Turkish border town.

President Tayyip Erdogan said, Turkey would respond to all rockets fired by Islamic State and vowed that the jihadists would suffer greater losses if they continued their aggression.

Three T-155 Firtina tracked howitzers were destroyed by fire coming from Syria on April 30. The Firtina self-propelled artillery system is included in the list of the top 10 howitzers in the world.

The incidents have started to occur increasingly often with Turkish military positions and border towns shelled by extremist groups, but a direct attack to knock out the howitzers is unparalleled.

It's important to note that the attack could be launched only by personnel well trained to use sophisticated weapons. It's interesting that Turkey does not say which exactly weapon was used for the mission – the information it certainly has at its disposal. Different stories are going around. The only thing one can say for certain is that the strike was too accurate to be delivered by a mortar or a grenade launcher. It leaves only advanced anti-tank systems. Who possesses such weapons and how they got into Syria? That is the question.

Indeed, the Turkish leaders have made very interesting statements. The escalating cross-border attacks make Turkey take action. The US DoD announced last week that it would move rocket artillery into Turkish territory to help support local opposition forces fighting across the border in Syria.

It is unclear whether the systems will also be used for other purposes by Turkish forces.

The question is not only what kind of retaliatory measures Ankara is going to take, but who is it going to fight? It's not clear who has done it. One can only guess. The Islamic State (IS), as well as some other extremist groups, says it is responsible. But the IS has a long story of fruitful cooperation with Turkey.

Smaller extremist groups are unlikely to have trained personnel and weapons to do it. But there is an exception to every rule.

In theory, it could be Kurds. Ankara uses the howitzers of this type to strike them.

Kurds have a legitimate right to defend themselves.

Turkey knows well that Kurdish Peshmerga paramilitary formations are the only force on the ground capable of effectively fighting IS militants. When Turkey strikes Kurds, the US shies away from meddling in. The mess when everybody fights each other seems to be viewed as not such a bad thing in Washington.

The balance is not tipped because Islamic State militants are fighting Syria's government troops, Kurdish formations are fighting the IS and Turkey is striking Kurds. As a result, nobody is decisively winning. This controlled chaos is taken advantage of by the US. A drawn-out conflict increases the chances to overthrow the Syrian government of President Assad. Russia's support for Damascus spoils the picture. On and off, the US has rebuked Turkey for striking Kurds, making statements mainly intended for public consumption. Turkish President Erdogan has never taken it seriously. In mid-February, he ordered troops to cross the Syrian border into the Kurds-held Rojava, a region within Aleppo, after a warning not to do so by the United States.

True, the forces had to withdraw, but the goal was not to achieve a military success, but rather give a signal that Ankara was ready for a major invasion of the Aleppo province in case Kurds announce Rojava's autonomous status. The US also opposed the idea of creating the autonomy. This policy may result in Kurds questioning the wisdom of their alliance with the United States.

While the hostile attitude on the part of Turkish government hampers the Kurdish efforts against the IS and the like, the extremist groups, which had no interest in illegal oil business with the Erdogan government, turn against Ankara. The goal is to make Turkey a part of the «new caliphate» they strive to create. The extremists have intensified provocative activities on the Turkish border to make Ankara deploy reinforcements to protect it. Robbing Peter to pay Paul, Turkey faces a Catch-22 situation as a result. This is an equation with many unknowns.

Aleppo has been the scene of the worst surge in fighting in recent days, wrecking the first major ceasefire of the five-year-old civil war, sponsored by the United States and Russia, which had held since February. The parties have taken the leading roles in diplomacy since Moscow launched a military operation last year that tipped the balance of power in favor of Syrian government. In an effort to revive the ceasefire, temporary local truces have been put in place in two parts of Syria, but those have not been extended to Aleppo, Syria's largest city before the war and its biggest strategic prize now.

Russia and the US have recently joined together in an effort to include Aleppo into the peace process. A cessation of hostilities in the Syrian city of Aleppo was announced on May 4.

Washington and Moscow have announced a new joint center in Geneva to monitor the ceasefire, to be staffed around the clock by US and Russian officers. «*This is a major step forward toward a more intensive coordination of the efforts by Russia and the US*», Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov noted.

This is a great chance for Aleppo and the peace effort in Syria. There are forces that can undermine the efforts. Turkey is the one. The time is propitious for the United States to take a stance and convince Ankara to give peace a chance. Moscow and Washington have started a serious business. It does not mesh with double standards policy.