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[www.afgazad.com](http://www.afgazad.com)

[afgazad@gmail.com](mailto:afgazad@gmail.com)

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<http://journal-neo.org/2016/10/18/on-putin-erdogan-meeting-in-syria-what-is-happening/>

## On Putin-Erdogan Meeting in Syria—What is Happening

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While a number of decisions worth leaving critical imprints on regional situation were taken, as was being expected, in a highly significant meeting between Russia's Putin and Turkey's Erdogan held last week in Istanbul, it is equally, or perhaps more, important to analyse the attraction Turkey has re-discovered in re-allying itself with Russia. More than anything else, it is the sense of Russia's diplomatic and military success in Syria. This sense of Russia's success has been compounded by the US' continued support of Kurdish militias. For Erdogan, therefore, Russia is a more reliable partner than the US has been, capable of preventing the creation of Kurdistan. And since an independent Kurdistan is not in the interest of both Turkey and Syria, a ready-made framework of co-operation does exist between them. Therefore, contrary to the

Western media's projections, Erdogan is not hardening his stance towards Damascus. In fact, contrary is happening and some recent indications clearly reinforce Erdogan's softened up stance.

For instance, some of Russia's recently announced decisions of considerable strategic significance have not invoked any opposition from Turkey. An outstanding of these is the decision to create a permanent **naval base** in Syria, which, by all indication underscores the fact that Russia would be expanding not only its military footprint but its military potential in the Middle East. The announcement, quite interestingly, came at a time when Putin was travelling to Turkey. That this decision did not create any tension in his meeting with Erdogan and that certain agreements were still signed and understanding over other issues was reached signifies the trajectory Russia-Turkey bi-lateral relations are taking.

Another indication of the Turkey acquiescing in to Russia's dominant position in Syria is the way Erdogan has maintained silence, quite unlike his NATO partners who are not only accusing Russia of "war crimes" but also planning to open an investigation, over Russian-Syrian recent offensive to take control of the city of Aleppo.

There are two main reasons that explain this silence. First is that, given Turkey's strong intelligence presence in the city, it is aware of the fact that Aleppo is going to fall. Therefore, there is practically no use of challenging Russia or Syrian forces. The second reason, which is deeply linked with the first, is that, much to Erdogan's satisfaction, Kurdish militias are not going to be the major or sole 'conquerors' of the city. It is mainly Syrian forces, aided by the Russian forces, who are in Syria on the Syrian leaderships' request.

These developments indicate that Turkey, for its own reasons, did not allow the US' or NATO's concerns to factor in its talks with Russia. And as both Putin and Erdogan talked in their press-conference about the need to extend co-operation with regard to providing humanitarian assistance to the residents of the city, the picture become a bit clearer with regard to what both countries are seeking. To cut the long story short, all indications suggest that Russia and Turkey are inclined to develop a blueprint on Aleppo, while leaving the US and its western and eastern allies in the cold as mere onlookers. Through Turkey, Russia has successfully 'killed' the imperative of co-operation with the US to send humanitarian aid to the residents of Aleppo.

While Turkey has acquiesced in to Russia's recent decisions of military significance, including the one to deploy missile defense systems in Syria, which imply imposition of a virtual 'no-fly zone' over the whole of Syria, this concession owes its existence to the softened stance Russia has shown towards Turkey's own military presence in Syria.

In the face of these developments, it can hardly be gainsaid that Turkey has realized that Russia has virtually killed the possibility of a direct US military intervention in Syria, and that Russia is going to stay in the country for an indefinite period. Therefore, Russian acquiescence over Euphrates Shield becomes vital. Erdogan can draw satisfaction that Moscow is displaying great reticence as regards Euphrates Shield and Turkish military intervention in Syria. Most importance, it is an existential question for Turkey that Russia is supportive of its staunch opposition to a Kurdish political entity appearing in northern Syria.

This 'mutual acquiescence' owes its existence to the policy the US is following. The Kurdish forces are viewed by the US as its most effective allies against ISIS, but warnings by Washington not to strike against them have been ignored by the Turkish military. Erdogan has recently indicated that the next target for his forces and allied units of the rebel Free Syrian Army (FSA) would be the city of Al-Bab, the gateway to the ISIS capital Raqqa. The US Defence Secretary, Ashton Carter, has stressed that Washington does not want to see Turkish forces or the FSA in Al-Bab, but instead wants them to stay "[focused on the Islamic State.](#)" The YPG is also trying to get there and, in Ankara's eyes, this is more proof of American support for the Kurds than for Turkey.

Talha Kose, an academic and senior member of a think tank, SETA, which was founded by President Erdogan's spokesman Ibrahim Kalin, said in a recently interview that "The Russians are not objecting to what Turkey is doing in northern Syria. This is partly because they are really focusing on Aleppo now, but also what Turkey is doing is not harming their interests. Turkey sees what America is doing in Syria as harming Turkish interests."

All this unambiguously shows that Russia and Turkey, which were once on opposing sides of the conflict, have started to bridge the gaps between themselves as a means to manage, if not end all together, the conflict in Syria. While it appears difficult to see this bridging up of the gaps as a fundamental strategic realignment of Turkey (read: Turkey is still a NATO member) there is no denying the fact that their mutual relationship stands on more firm ground than it was a year ago and is likely to continue to grow stronger as the sense of "mutual dependence" dawns more clearly on both sides and as Turkey realizes that its alliance with the US has done it more harm than good.