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European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

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07.12.2024

Turkey Implements the Neo-Ottoman Doctrine in Syria

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Evidence of the “Turkish Influence” in Syrian Escalation

Shortly after the signing of a truce agreement between Tel Aviv and Beirut, brokered by Washington and Paris, and four years after a similar document was signed in March 2020 between Russia, supporting the legitimate authorities of the Syrian Arab Republic (SAR), and Turkey to stabilise the situation in Syria, pro-Turkish radical terrorist groups Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS, a banned organisation in Russia) and the Syrian National Army (SNA, also banned in Russia) suddenly launched a meticulously prepared military operation against Damascus’s government forces and the Kurdish population in the northwest of the country. Within a few days, the terrorists seized the strategically important provinces of Aleppo and Idlib.

Turkish influence is openly present in the capture of Aleppo and Idlib provinces. Ankara officially denies its involvement in this escalation. However, the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs attempted to shift the blame onto the United States and Israel, claiming they are interested in exacerbating the geopolitical situation in the region, internationalising the conflict, and not ruling out aggression against Iran.

In general, the Turkish Foreign Ministry's perspective should be acknowledged, as the United States and Israel do not hide their negative stance towards Iran. Moreover, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu justified the truce with Lebanon by citing plans to focus on a potential conflict with Iran. Furthermore, Netanyahu, after revealing the terms of the truce with Beirut, warned Syrian leader Bashar al-Assad against taking any wrong steps that could lead to a direct conflict with Israel.

In southern Lebanon, Tel Aviv dealt a significant blow to the key pro-Iranian proxy force, the Shiite organisation Hezbollah, and the potential of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). Syria remains a crucial regional ally of Iran, serving as a corridor for the transfer of military aid to Hezbollah. Therefore, the isolation of Syria is part of the Israel Defense Forces' plans. In addition, Israel aims to legitimise its occupation of the Golan Heights to ensure the strategic security of the Jewish state. Netanyahu relies on the support of the newly elected 47th President of the United States, Donald Trump, who is known for his radical pro-Israel policy.

However, how can Israel and the United States legitimise the occupation of the Golan Heights other than by partitioning Syria through military action? At the same time, Syria retains certain territorial ambitions from its neighbour, Turkey, which in 2009 announced the neo-Ottoman doctrine concerning the countries and peoples previously part of the Ottoman Empire.

Ankara defines the formal pretext for its anti-Syrian policy as the threat of Kurdish ethnoseparatism. Turkey believes that the autonomy of Syrian Kurdistan (Rojava) in the northwest of the Syrian Arab Republic (SAR) is supported by the United States and Israel, drawing parallels with Iraqi Kurdistan. However, while Ankara, for reasons of economic expediency, develops constructive cooperation with the pro-Western Barzani clan regime in Erbil, its actions in Tel Rifaat are the exact opposite.

In particular, Erdoğan is pursuing a policy of establishing Turkish control over a 30-kilometre security zone in northwest Syria, relying on the ethnically Turkic (Turkmen) and religiously Sunni population. Accordingly, Ankara employs radical armed groups opposed to the regime

of Bashar al-Assad, namely Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and the Syrian National Army (SNA).

Indirect signs of Turkish involvement in the recent escalation of military events in Syria include: Ankara's military-political support for HTS and SNA (both banned organisations in Russia); the provision of Turkish drones, operational intelligence, and the use of military advisers; the introduction of Turkish lira in trade and monetary transactions in the occupied territories of Aleppo and Idlib provinces; and the display of Turkish and Ottoman symbols (flags, portraits of Atatürk and Erdoğan, and the "Grey Wolves" totem) in the occupied settlements. Notably, Erdoğan's daughter, Esra Erdoğan, posted on social media congratulating «brotherly revolutionaries» on their victory in Aleppo and the hoisting of the Ottoman Empire's flag.

What Awaits Turkey?

Following the launch of the IDF military operation in southern Lebanon, Erdoğan did not rule out the possibility of Israel subsequently committing military aggression against Turkey. How Israel, lacking a direct border with Turkey, intends to capture Anatolia was not explained by the Turks. However, on the one hand, if the United States indeed supports an Israeli military conflict against Syria and the legitimisation of the occupation of the Golan Heights (and where the actual boundary of hostilities in southern SAR might end remains uncertain), and on the other hand, if Turkey, through its proxy forces, manages under the formal pretext of combating the threat of Kurdish separatism to consolidate its hold over northwest territories of the SAR, the territorial division of present-day Syria could become a reality, as could geographical contiguity between Israel and Turkey. Following such a scenario, Turkey would have to rely on the goodwill of the United States and Israel.

The United States and Israel are interested in displacing Iran and Russia from the key Eastern Mediterranean country of Syria, enabling them to reshape the Middle East under their dominance. Turkey, in this regional strategy of the United States, is merely a component of a broader plan.

Russia and Iran have officially condemned the aggression of these terrorist organisations against Syria, calling it an assault on sovereignty and an escalation in the region, which contradicts the logic of the Astana negotiation process involving Turkey. Meanwhile, Tehran and Moscow are not limiting themselves to formal statements but are providing and planning to increase diplomatic and military assistance to Syrian authorities to restore sovereignty and peace.

For these purposes, Iran has redeployed Shia groups from Iraq to Syria to support the regime of Bashar al-Assad. New IRGC specialists and units have been sent to Damascus (including a high-ranking Quds officer, General Javad Ghaffari, head of the IRGC Intelligence Directorate's Special Operations Department). IRGC special forces units are being transferred to the Russian military base in Khmeimim. The Russian Aerospace Forces (VKS) are providing air support to the Syrian government troops, conducting precision strikes on the locations of pro-Turkish militants' bases.

Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi has undertaken visits to Middle Eastern countries, including Turkey. The Iranian minister reaffirmed Tehran's resolute support for the Syrian government led by Bashar al-Assad and its readiness to provide comprehensive assistance in suppressing the aggression of the radical opposition. In Ankara, as reported by the Anadolu Agency, his Turkish counterpart Hakan Fidan emphasised that Turkey does not desire further escalation of the Syrian civil war. At the same time, Fidan believes it is incorrect to interpret recent events in Syria as some form of "external intervention".

Translated from diplomatic language to ordinary terms, Fidan's words amount to Turkey claiming no involvement, and that the terrorists acted independently. However, reality somewhat diverges from this opinion of the Turkish minister, as he himself acknowledged just a day earlier that terrorists (albeit Kurdish ones) «could not have lasted three days» without external (American-Israeli) assistance. This cannot be disputed, but neither can pro-Turkish proxy forces last against the combined forces of the Syrian government army, Russian Aerospace Forces, Iranian special forces, and Kurdish forces without external (read: Turkish) support.

Turkey, it seems, understands that Iran and Russia will not relinquish their firm stance in support of Syria. If Ankara blames the Syrian escalation on the United States and Israel (specifically Joe Biden and Benjamin Netanyahu, as Erdoğan is unlikely to confront the new administration of President Donald Trump, on whom he pins hopes for restoring full-fledged allied relations), then what about Russia and Iran? Ankara risks finding itself isolated and facing new problems in defence, security, finance, and economics.

Meanwhile, Fidan suggests that Damascus focus on reconciliation with the «legitimate opposition» (apparently referring only to ethnically related Turkmen, though who constitutes legitimate opposition is for the Syrians, not the Turks, to decide).

Ankara, realising that its aggression will have consequences, chooses to publicly support ending the military escalation and continuing the negotiation process. Moreover, Bashar al-Assad has sent signals to Recep Tayyip Erdoğan via Iraq indicating a readiness to start

negotiations. But under what conditions could these negotiations take place, and will Ankara gain any “leverage” in this process?

Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, in his telephone conversations with colleagues from the Astana platform, reiterated Moscow’s position on the events in Syria and called on partners to work collectively to defuse tensions. The presidents of Russia and Iran (Vladimir Putin and Mehdi Pezeshkian) held telephone discussions on the situation in Syria, recognising the large-scale provocations of terrorist groups as aggression, supporting Damascus’s right to restore the territorial integrity of the SAR, and emphasising the importance of coordinating efforts within the Astana format with Turkey’s participation. In other words, Russia, in response to Turkish or pro-Turkish provocations in the SAR, is so far maintaining tact and loyalty towards Turkey, hoping for the political prudence of its Turkish counterparts.

Alexandr Svaranc, December 06, 2024

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