Turkey’s Intervention in Syria - What’s at Stake?

It’s now safe to say that US military advisors took part in the planning phase of Turkey’s military intervention in Syria codenamed Euphrates Shield, not only to restore the “strategic partnership” between Washington and Ankara, but also to pursue US strategic objectives in the region. And it is understandable, since the White House only acts when it has something for itself in any given deal. As for the strategic objective Washington is pursuing by helping Ankara, it can be briefly described as the maintenance of the balance of powers in the Middle East. American think tanks are keen to keep the two leading coalitions that are fighting ISIS pitted against each other, just like it does with political forces in Iraq, Syria and Turkey itself.

The fact that Syria’s Kurds have been thrown under the bus in maintaining this so-called balance is beyond doubt at this point, with a growing number of articles being published across the globe that support this notion.

But it was equally important for the White House to keep Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan on a tight leash, by instilling fear in his head that both the situation in northern Syria and within Turkey itself may deteriorate quickly. After all, the fact that Turkey launched a military intervention into Syria draws in a complicated conflict with a large number of players involved, including the United States, Iran, Russia and now China.

It is also possible for Turkey to ignore the influence of NATO commanders. This has happened before and the sitting Turkish government is often motivated by its own ambitions, subordinating those of Western politicians. But we must not exaggerate Turkey’s military capabilities, since this state, even in an alliance with Saudi Arabia and other Persian Gulf countries is clearly in no position to launch an all-out war against radical militants in Syria. Therefore, Ankara is only capable of carrying out a limited military operations near Aleppo, and that’s pretty much it.

But Ankara’s ambitions in Syria are closely connected with Turkey’s desperate bid to prevent local Kurds from growing any stronger, regardless of their political or religious affiliations, which is now a sort of a “red line” for Erdogan, as Turkish media sources claim. And should Syria’s troops destroy militant forces in the north-west of Aleppo, Turkey would be deprived of any chance of somehow further influencing the situation, since it will have no pretext to act.

The German newspaper Die Welt would note that the start of Euphrates Shield transformed the war in Syria into a scene of a “mini-World War III”, where along with countries such as the US, Russia, Britain, France, Germany, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Turkey, Jordan, Bahrain, Kuwait, Iran, Lebanon, Israel, non-governmental forces are at play, like the Hezbollah, local Kurds, ISIS, Jabhat al-Nusra, Ahrar al-Sham, and the Free Syrian Army (FSA).

On Sunday, Kurdish sources claimed that aircraft and artillery fire struck two villages near the Syrian town of
Jarablus, leaving 30 people dead and many more injured. Just before that, Turkish tanks that entered Syria came under fire from territory controlled by Kurdish People’s Protection Units. In addition, four rockets were launched in the direction of the Turkish city of Diyarbakır and exploded within the city's perimeter. The government blamed the shelling on the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK).

At this point Turkey is providing shelter for a total of 2.5 million Syrian refugees, and the chaos on its borders immediately has become a major threat to Ankara. And besides, a direct armed confrontation between Turkish troops and the Syrian Kurds would further polarize Ankara’s relations with its own Kurds, provoking a large range of anti-government protests that could further aggravate the internal political and economic situation of Turkey. Turkey’s actions may lead to unpredictable consequences and result in a civil war, when Kurds start expressing their discontent through the force of arms as they did three decades ago, waging an armed struggle for cultural and political rights and self-determination. Facing these prospects, Erdogan demanded Washington to let him have a “small and victorious war” in Syria.

Turkey established a 15-kilometer zone of control around the town of Jarablus and to the south of it. Contrary to the demands that Turkey’s politicians regarding the creation of a large-scale “buffer zone” in the north of Syria, Turkey’s current operation has created only a limited one. Among other things, the US administration initially set the preconditions for Ankara, demanding it not seek a long and more permanent military presence in the north of Syria. Appropriate statements from the Turkish side were made on this matter on the sixth day of the Euphrates Shield operation.

As a result of this “victorious strike at Jarablus” Erdogan has managed to somewhat strengthen the patriotic sentiments within Turkey. However, for several months the worsening financial situation of the country, poor social conditions of the population and the strengthening of the conflict with the nation's Kurdish population may result in growing conflict within Turkey in the next weeks.

When this happens, the world is likely to witness a hidden component of the Euphrates Shield plan, unknown even for Turks, with Erdogan forced to demand the assistance of the United States. The Turkish president will have an option to approach Moscow, Tehran and Beijing, as well, but should it do so, the White House would seek to replace him just as they have done in so many other nations.

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