

“Operation Claw-Sword”: Erdogan’s Big New Game in Syria

Wily Sultan is caught between his electorate, which favors a Syria invasion, and his extremely nuanced relations with Russia

By [Pepe Escobar](#)

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There’s another Special Military Operation on the market. No, it’s not Russia “denazifying” and “demilitarizing” Ukraine - and, therefore, it’s no wonder that this other operation is not ruffling feathers across the collective West.

Operation Claw-Sword was launched by Turkey’s President Recep Tayyip Erdogan as [revenge](#) - highly emotional and concerted - for Kurdish terrorist attacks against Turkish citizens. Some of the missiles that Ankara launched in this aerial campaign carried the names of Turkish victims.

The official Ankara spin is that the Turkish Armed Forces fully achieved their “air operation objectives” in the north of Syria and in Iraqi Kurdistan, and made those responsible for the terror attack against civilians in Istanbul’s Istiklal pedestrian street pay in “multitudes.”

And this is supposed to be just the first stage. [For the third time in 2022](#), Sultan Erdogan is also promising a ground invasion of Kurdish-held territories in Syria.

However, according to diplomatic sources, that’s not going to happen - even as scores of Turkish experts are adamant that the invasion is needed sooner rather than later.

The wily Sultan is caught between his electorate, which favors an invasion, and his extremely nuanced relations with Russia - which encompass a large geopolitical and geo-economic arc.

He well knows that Moscow can apply all manner of pressure levers to dissuade him. For instance, Russia at the last minute annulled the weekly dispatch of a joint Russo-Turkish patrol in Ain al Arab that was taking place on Mondays.

Ain al Arab is a highly strategic territory: the missing link, east of the Euphrates, capable of offering continuity between Idlib and Ras al Ayn, occupied by dodgy Turkish-aligned gangs near the Turkish border.

Erdogan knows he can't jeopardize his positioning as potential EU-Russia mediator while obtaining maximum profit from bypassing the anti-Russian embargo-sanctions combo.

The Sultan, juggling multiple serious dossiers, is deeply convinced that he's got what it takes to bring Russia and NATO to the negotiating table and, ultimately, end the war in Ukraine.

In parallel, he thinks he may stay on top of Turkey-Israel relations; a rapprochement with Damascus; the sensitive internal situation in Iran; Turkey-Azerbaijan relations; the non-stop metamorphoses across the Mediterranean; and the drive towards Eurasia integration.

He's hedging all his bets between NATO and Eurasia.

'Close down all of our southern borders'

The green light for Claw-Sword came from Erdogan while he was on his presidential plane, returning from the G20 in Bali. That happened only one day after he had met US President Joe Biden where, according to a presidential Erdogan statement, the subject had not come up.

"We held no meeting with Mr Biden or [Russian President Vladimir] Putin regarding the operation. They both already know that we can do such things at any moment in this region," the statement said.

Washington not getting briefed on Claw-Sword mirrored Erdogan not getting invited to an extraordinary G7-NATO meeting in Bali, on the sidelines of the G20.

That meeting was called by the White House to deal with the by-now notorious Ukrainian S-300 missile that fell in Polish territory. At the time, no one at the table had any conclusive evidence about what happened. And Turkey was not even invited to the table - which profoundly incensed the Sultan.

So it's no wonder Erdogan, mid-week, said that Claw-Sword was "just the beginning." Addressing AKP party lawmakers in Parliament, he said Turkey is determined to "close down all of our southern borders ... with a security corridor that will prevent the possibility of attacks on our country."

The ground invasion promise remains: It will begin "at the most convenient time for us" and will target the regions of Tel Rifaat, Mambij and Kobane, which the Sultan called "sources of trouble."

Ankara has already wreaked havoc, using drones, on the main headquarters of the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces, whose commanders believe the main target of a potential Turkish ground invasion would be Kobane.

Significantly, this is the first time a Turkish drone targeted an area extremely close to a US base. And Kobane is highly symbolic: the place where the Americans sealed a collaboration

with Syrian Kurds to – in theory – fight ISIS.

And that explains why the Syrian Kurds are appalled by the American non-response to the Turkish strikes. They blame – who else? – the Sultan for stoking “nationalist sentiments” ahead of the 2023 elections, which Erdogan now stands a great chance to win despite the catastrophic state of the Turkish economy.

As it stands, there is no Turkish troop buildup near Kobane – just airstrikes. Which brings us to the all-important Russian factor.

Manbij and Tel Rifaat, west of the Euphrates, are much more important for Russia than Kobane, because they are both vital for the defense of Aleppo against possible Salafi-jihadi attacks.

What may potentially happen in the near future makes the situation even murkier. Ankara intel may use Hayat Tahrir al-Sham jihadis – which have already taken over parts of Afrin – as a sort of “vanguard” in a ground invasion of Syrian Kurd territory.

Selling stolen Syrian oil to Turkey

The current fog of war includes the notion that the Russians may have sold out the Kurds by leaving them exposed to Turkish bombing. That does not hold – because Russia’s influence over Syrian Kurd territory is negligible compared with the US’s. Only the Americans could “sell out” the Kurds.

The more things change, the more they remain the same in Syria. It could all be summarized as a monumental impasse. This gets even more surrealist because, in effect, Ankara and Moscow have already found the solution for the Syrian tragedy.

The problem is the presence of American forces – essentially protecting those shabby convoys stealing Syrian oil. Russians and Syrians always discuss it. The conclusion is that the Americans are staying by inertia. They do it because they can. And Damascus is powerless to expel them.

The Sultan plays the whole thing with consummate cynicism – in geopolitics and geoeconomics. Most of what is unresolved in Syria revolves around territories occupied by de facto gangs that call themselves Kurds, protected by the US. They traffic Syrian oil to resell it mostly to ... Turkey.

And then, in a flash, armed gangs that call themselves Kurds may simply abandon their “anti-terrorist” fight by ... releasing the terrorists they apprehended, thus increasing the “terrorist threat” all over northeast Syria. They blame – who else? – Turkey. In parallel, the Americans increase financial aid to these armed gangs under the pretext of a “war on terror.”

The distinction between “armed gangs” and “terrorists” is of course razor thin. What matters most of all to Erdogan is that he can use the Kurds as a currency in trade negotiations linked to bypassing anti-Russian embargoes and sanctions.

And that explains why the Sultan may decide to bomb Syrian territory whenever he sees fit, despite any condemnation by Washington or Moscow. The Russians once in a while retake the initiative on the ground – as happened during the Idlib campaign in 2020 when Russians

bombed the Turkish military forces that were providing “assistance” to Salafi-jihadis.

Now a game-changer may be on the cards. The Turkish Army bombed the al-Omar oilfield north of Deir ez-Zor. What this means in practice is that Ankara is now destroying no less than the oil infrastructure of the much-lauded “Kurdish autonomy.”

This infrastructure has been cynically exploited by the US when it comes to the oil that reaches the border with Iraq in Iraqi Kurdistan. So in a sense, Ankara is striking against Syrian Kurds and simultaneously against American robbery of Syrian oil.

The definitive game-changer may be approaching. That will be the meeting between Erdogan and Bashar al-Assad, (Remember the decade-long refrain “Assad must go”?)

Location: Russia. Mediator: Vladimir Putin, in person. It’s not far-fetched to imagine this meeting paving the way for those Kurdish armed gangs, essentially played by Washington as useful idiots, to end up being decimated by Ankara.

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Pepe Escobar, born in Brazil, is a correspondent and editor-at-large at Asia Times and columnist for Consortium News and Strategic Culture. Since the mid-1980s he’s lived and worked as a foreign correspondent in London, Paris, Milan, Los Angeles, Singapore, Bangkok. He has extensively covered Pakistan, Afghanistan and Central Asia to China, Iran, Iraq and the wider Middle East. Pepe is the author of Globalistan – How the Globalized World is Dissolving into Liquid War; Red Zone Blues: A Snapshot of Baghdad during the Surge. He was contributing editor to The Empire and The Crescent and Tutto in Vendita in Italy. His last two books are Empire of Chaos and 2030. Pepe is also associated with the Paris-based European Academy of Geopolitics. When not on the road he lives between Paris and Bangkok.

He is a regular contributor to Global Research.

Featured image: Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has his sights on Syria. Photo: Ramil Sitdikov / Sputnik

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