

Syria: Dangerous Fracture in US, Turkey and Russian Interests, as Operation to Oust ISIS from Raqqa Begins

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After six years of constant conflict between the great powers in and around Syria, the US, Russia and Turkish military leaders have gathered in Antalya, Turkey to discuss how best to coordinate their operation to drive the Islamic State of Iraq and Sham/Levant (ISIS/ISL) from Raqqa. Discussions also include operations in Iraq. Some are calling this summit a potential game changer, but that really depends on whether the new game is any improvement to the situation.

This high-level meeting included General Staff, Turkish Chief of General Staff Gen. Hulusi Akar, Russian Chief of General Staff Gen. Valery Gerasimov, and Chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff General Joseph Dunford.

On the surface, it's certainly good to see the top US, Russian and Turkish brass at the same table. Granted, this development is a direct result of the change in government in Washington, even while back home Capitol Hill is engulfed in a fit of anti-Russian hysteria where any overture or bilateral meeting between a US and Russian official is being billed as a prelude to treason. Indeed, no military dialogue with Russia would have been possible under President Obama, who seemed to be married to his Administration's stated policy of regime change in Syria and arming and supporting Sunni extremist militant groups, many who are designated as terrorists, in Syria – both policies that are vehemently opposed by Moscow.



[According to one Turkish official](#), speaking on condition of anonymity, the results of this trilateral meeting “could change the whole picture” in Syria. Will it be a change for the better?

That all depends of course, on the sincerity of Turkey, which, since the very beginning of this conflict in 2011, has been the number one facilitator for the war across its southern border, by allowing its country to [provide safe haven to tens of thousands of terrorist fighters](#), as well as maintaining continuous supply lines in and out of Syria.

For nearly six years, Turkey has allowed its border city of Gaziantep to be used as [the main ISIS supply center](#) for terrorist commerce, including the trafficking of stolen goods, antiques – and also [children](#) and human [organs](#) too. It's also the central terrorist hub for ‘opposition fighters’ – a place for recruiting, housing, training, dispatching and providing medical triage for terrorists wounded in Syria.

All this has been done under the watchful eye and supervision of NATO member state Turkey. A number of dubious western-funded 'NGOs' like the [White Helmets](#) are based in Gaziantep. Likewise, the joint US-NATO military facility at Incirlik Air Base is nearby, which has been used for various special training, equipping and deployment operations involving 'rebel' fighters. Without Turkey's facilitation in these matters, the Syrian War might have ended years ago, with countless lives saved.

In addition, despite hollow denials by the government, Turkey has provided ISIS its main financial lifeline by [trafficking in oil, stolen by ISIS](#) from Syria, and laundered through Turkey for sale on the open market.

Meanwhile, the US military has begun its roll-out of ground assets into Syria. You wouldn't know it if you were watching CNN though, who kept mostly busy covering 'Women's Day' this week, along with labouring over idiosyncratic aspects of Obama-Trumpcare. This week reports suggest that the [Pentagon just deployed a 3rd Ranger US battalion](#) based out of Fort Benning, Georgia... *inside of Syria*. You would think this would be headline news, if nothing else but to ignite what is left of the liberal anti-war movement in the US who should jump at the chance to attribute this latest military action to their symbol of evil, President Donald Trump. Even FOX News passed-up on the patriotic scene of an armoured convoy of M1126 Stryker Armoured Vehicles flying *Old Glory* while parading through the northern Syrian countryside.

The US forces were heading for the outskirts of Manbij where they'll be joined by Kurdish YPG forces, camped there under the latest US-sponsored militia *banner de jour*, a confab known as the 'Syrian Democratic Forces' (SDF). If the US media kept mostly quiet about this deployment, aside from a few casual media and web references, then that's probably what the Pentagon wanted.

Here's where the tension lies: the United States may also have sent in ground assets as show of force in support of its allies the YPG (Kurdish People's Protect Units in Syria). This is a potential spat between the two NATO member states – which is a major problem for Turkey. The Turkish government considers them a terrorist organisation, an appendage to its nemesis the Kurdish [PKK](#). It's also a problem for Russia too, insofar as Russia is attempting *détente* with Turkey by coordinating military operations as they pertain to fighting ISIS in northern Syria, and with the eventual joint siege of Raqqa.

It gets worse – in addition to the Rangers armoured regiment, on Thursday the US also [announced](#) that additional US Marines from an amphibious task force have also been deployed to Syria from their ships in the Middle East, setting up artillery positions in range of Raqqa. So, that's it – Trump is now busy putting American boots on the ground inside Syria, and meanwhile the US media and liberal establishment are still too busy obsessing over baseless Russian Hacking conspiracy theories. If there was ever a moment in history that demonstrates just how useless the Fourth Estate in America has become, this is that moment.

According to one Turkish official, this US alliance with the YPG would be an unacceptable obstacle to Turkey's ambitions in Syria:

"... It appears that the U.S. may carry out this operation with the YPG, not with Turkey. And at the same time the U.S. is giving weapons to the YPG," the official said.

Reuters also [reports](#):

“Ankara has been pressing the United States to change its strategy for fighting Islamic State in Syria by abandoning the YPG and instead drawing on Turkish-backed Free Syrian Army (FSA) rebels to retake Raqqa. Turkey views the YPG and its political affiliate the PYD as an extension of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), which is waging an insurgency against the Turkish government.”

Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan maintains that his military's next target is Manbij, but the only problem is the town is already controlled by the SDF. To make matters worse for Turkey, after battling with Turkish-backed FSA rebels west of Manbij at the beginning of March, the Manbij Military Council (SDF and related militias) quickly struck a deal, apparently brokered by Russian officials, to hand over front-line villages to Syrian government control – effectively preventing the area from coming under Turkish control. This move has reportedly incensed Erdogan who hoped to keep the area under Turkish control. The situation is already complex, and therefore highly risky for the diverging interests of US and Turkey. Suffice to say, if there's no serious coordination between all parties, not just the US, Russia and Turkey, but also the Syrian army and its allies – then the chances of success drop dramatically. That said, Manbij could easily end in tears for everyone.

Back in August 2016, western media blotted-out another important story – when [Turkey invaded Syria](#). As usual, crickets from CNN, FOX and the rest of the press corps. At the time, Turkey was supposedly working with “Allied Syrian rebels” backed by both the United States and Turkey – to seize the ISIS-held border town of Jarabulus in Syria, allegedly to cut off ISIS's last supply *into* Turkey. Looking at Turkey's longstanding interaction with ISIS to date, this seemed improbable. The “allied rebels” working with Turkey included the ‘Free Syrian Army’ and [Faylaq al-Sham](#); both are known radical militant terrorist groups whom the West spuriously lists as “moderates.” This terrorist joint force then proceeded to march through the streets of Jarabulus flying their “Syrian Independence Flag” (the infamous green, black and white [flag](#) adopted by the Syrian ‘opposition’). Shortly after Turkey's illegal invasion, it was reported that [ISIS had actually left the town a week or so earlier](#) indicating that it was most likely tipped-off in advance (by whom?) and had evacuated the border town up before Turkey's ‘surprise’ invasion. A possible cover story for this was that US airstrikes ‘drove ISIS out.’ Bear in mind, Turkey is doing all of this *inside* Syrian territory, without any invitation from Damascus.

In terms of fighting ISIS in this part of Syria, only the Kurdish forces have a proven track record of fighting – and winning – against ISIS. Compare this to Turkey's matador-style relationship with ISIS, which does not have a track record of effectiveness, and who could blame them, after all, Turkey is host enough of them within its own borders. The last thing Ankara would want to do is to get on the bad side of its house guests. If anything, Turkey seems to favour ISIS, particularly if they prove useful in achieving Ankara's own containment objectives against both the Kurdish YPG and the Syrian Army, but also in assisting with Turkey's other stated objective which is the ouster of Bashar al Assad.

It should also be noted that in August 2015, PKK leader Cemil Bayik based in Iraqi Kurdistan, [told the BBC](#) that Turkey is protecting ISIS by attacking Kurds. Based on the events on the ground over the last 18 months, and not the rhetoric of the Erdogan government, this statement appears to be factually true.

In grand Ottoman style, Turkey is calling their regional conquest “[Operation Euphrates Shield](#)”. Turkish military claims it is fighting terrorists, but all evidence suggests that it is undermining the Syrian government forces at every turn.

Czech-born American journalist Andre Vltchek [recently spoke to one resident](#) who aptly described the farce along the Turkish-Syrian border:

“‘Jarabulus is under the control of the Turkish military. Just imagine: the Turkish government doesn’t allow Syrian President Assad to send fighter jets nearer than 3 kilometers to the border, but it allows ISIS to come as close as 3 meters. We should have never interfered with the domestic policy of Syria, and there would be peace!’”

One thing that Turkey and the US agree on is to freeze out the Syrian Army and its allies as much as possible, presumably, so they can broker the eventual carving-up of this part of Syria into semi-autonomous ethnic cantons (sowing the seeds for a future territorial dispute, in the great colonial tradition) and other hackneyed constructs like ‘Safe Zones’ and certain refugees camps which will certainly grow out of the eventual multi-nation attack on Raqqa. How does Damascus feel about the Turkey, the US and its ‘Coalition’, alongside Russia – all making plans that will most likely end up in Syria losing significant chunks of its territory and natural resources? In that sense, Russia is playing a key role here, and can possibly act as a mediator between Turkey and Syria.

Like the operation to retake Mosul in Iraq, the operation to retake Raqqa in Syria will likely result in at least half of the city’s 200,000 population fleeing towards Turkey, and so the US and Turkey would like nothing more than to play the saviour for the global media, taking credit for “saving countless lives” and looking after all of those poor ‘victims of war.’ Already in Mosul, the US-led Coalition is responsible for [killing hundreds of civilians](#) through its airstrikes, and who knows how many more from artillery and crossfire. Considering the relative success of the retaking of East Aleppo by the Syrian Army, in conjunction with the Russian military and its ground partners, Lebanese Hezbollah militias and Iranian Special Forces, liberated a large urban area from four and half years of terrorist occupation under Al Nusra Front and its assorted ‘rebel’ (terrorist) affiliates like Arar al Sham and others – it would make sense to bring in the Syrian Army, Russia and their ground partners into the fold to help defeat a common enemy – ISIS, but that is not what is happening. This is a segregated affair.

Whatever Turkey’s interests are in this story, one thing is for sure it is not publicising them to the world. Divergent interests and fundamental goals might result a serious fracture in how this delicate operation will be negotiated and executed, and this could mean more unintended consequences, not just for Turkey, US, Russia, and let’s please not forget Syria, but for the entire region, and possibly the world. Turkey will most certainly use this opportunity to take control of that which it believes is its rightful booty, and use this result to help reshape the region as part of its own ‘*Great Middle East Project*’, Ankara’s overlay to the [US-NATO blueprint](#) of a similar name.

Below is a segment from earlier this week with Press TV, where we discussed some of the dynamics at play with the current trilateral strategy negotiations between Russia, Turkey and the US:

Clearly, despite their differences in bedfellows, both Turkey and US see this operation as a race against time – not against ISIS, but against the Syrian government – who are making rapid advances through previously held ISIS territory toward Raqqa by holding key positions in Deir Ezzor, a key gateway to Raqqa, and more importantly Manbij – thus cutting-off any further Turkish advances into its self-styled ‘buffer zone’ which it has carved out (on paper) in northern Syria.

Turkey has staked a tremendous amount of military and also *political* capital in the facilitation of ISIS and other terrorists fighting in Syria since as early as 2010-2011, so one might suspect whether or not Turkey has plans to use its buffer zone to safely evacuate elite ISIS fighters to safety in Turkey, allowing them to *fight another day*, after safely disperse back to their respective countries of origin – back to China’s Xinjiang province, in the case of the fierce [Uyghur militants](#), along with battle-hardened NATO-friendly fighters hailing from Kosovo, Dagestan, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Somalia, France, the UK and the list goes on.

Why Turkey insists on being in control of a situation that it has played a founding role in creating – is beyond analysis at this point. It seems that events and geopolitical outcomes may have overtaken any possibility of *adjudicating* the crimes of the sponsors of this horrific war against Syria. If that’s the case, then this will be an even greater tragedy because, as was the case with NATO member states’ sponsorship of extremist brigades in Kosovo, no one will be held to account, which increases the chances of another repeat in the future.

For the United States and Trump, it’s still all about “Defeating ISIS”. How they square this with Turkey’s regional hegemonic designs may determine how the final act of this tiresome epic eventually plays out.

An American-born writer, global affairs analyst, Patrick Henningsen is founder and Executive Editor of [21st Century Wire](#) and is a regular guest commentator for RT International and host of the successful [SUNDAY WIRE](#) weekly radio show broadcast globally over the Alternate Current Radio Network (ACR), and on AM terrestrial radio in the US with ‘Patrick Henningsen LIVE’ on [Independent Talk 1100 KFNX](#) in Phoenix. His work has appeared in a number of international publications including the UK Column, The Guardian and Consortium News.

NOTE: As turned out, I had to go to a Russian news agency, RT’s video outlet [RUPTLY](#) in order to first see images of this US military deployment in Syria. If we had to rely solely on the US media, we’d all be extremely under-informed (it would be great to see someone make this point at the upcoming March 20th [US Congressional Hearings](#) on alleged ‘Russian meddling’ into the US elections).

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