

The Next Escalation: Turkey's Invasion of Syria

By [Dr. Binoy Kampmark](#)

Global Research, September 04, 2016

Region: [Middle East & North Africa](#)

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The move by Turkey into Syrian territory was given the necessary coaching by Ankara's ideologues. Conducted from the air and on the ground after weeks of scouting and reconnaissance, it saw the taking of Jarabulus and the banishment of Islamic State fighters. The anti-Assad rebels (well, an assortment of them) cheered. "Jarabulus," claimed Ahmad Othman, commander of the Sultan Mourad group, "is completely liberated."

If only this operation had been quite so forensic, cleanly confined to objectives invariably wider and more difficult to fathom. The Syrian conflict has been an object study in murkiness and orchestrated dissimilitude. Its prolongation signals, not so much clarity as readjustment for the next intervention, the next interference. The big powers continue to soil themselves; smaller powers hope for some look-in in a potential redrawing of the Syrian map.

Washington on this score was bound to dither, enthused on the one hand that Ankara was getting serious about actual military engagement, but worried about how far such engagement would go. In conjuring up monsters, the key has always been controlling them. Clio's archive is filled with instances where such control has proven impossible.

In Syria, agents and groups have resisted the wishes of their backers. As David L. Philips of Columbia University's Institute for the Study of Human Rights suggested, "Supporting Turkey's invasion and occupation of Syria would be a strategic mistake, making the United States a protagonist of Syria's civil war."^[1]

US Vice President Joe Biden was not having any of it. Ever lacking in caution, he enthusiastically weighed in, offering parcels of support. "Operation Euphrates Shield" received his enthusiastic blessing, and he even went so far as to suggest that US air power had been involved in the venture. Eye witnesses failed to spot any dropped ordinance from US fighters, but then again, Biden's command of certain facts has been shown to be faulty at points.

Biden's enthusiasm was even more misplaced given the Obama administration's backing of the Kurds. The People's Protection Forces (YPG), numbering somewhere in the order of 40,000, have been receiving weapons and air support from Washington. They stand to be disadvantaged by the Turkish move.

The operation also smacked of some form of conciliation with the Islamic State forces, or at the very least an understanding. Turkey has assiduously avoided blotting its copybook with an organisation deemed terrorist by some, or a useful business making power broker on the other. For that reason, Islamic State fighters were not in the direct line of the Jarabulus operation, saving their ammunition for a future engagement. As Turkish tanks thundered in,

IS repaired to fight another day.

Turkey's Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, a few days after the operation commenced, made his intention clear. The offensive would continue, he claimed on August 29, "until the YPG is no longer a threat." As Fehim Taştekin surmised, an equation emerged in this foggy episode of war: "that groups supported by the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), accompanied by Turkish tanks, are clashing with groups backed by the US military." [2]

The other great power in this calculation, Russia, has also been playing with the Sultan-like Erdoğan. The warming of relations between Russia and Turkey initially looked like leading to tangible results. Iran's Fars News even floated the idea, sifted from various sources, that President Vladimir Putin was more than useful to Erdoğan, not least for giving him a tip off hours before the impending coup that almost took his life. [3]

Neither government has been quite so upfront about this, given that both states were at belligerent loggerheads over the November 2015 downing of a Russian Su-24 bomber in Syrian airspace. But waters had warmed somewhat with Erdoğan's more conciliatory approach to Moscow, while Turkey's National Intelligence Organization (MIT) did admit to receiving a juicy tip off.

In dealing with Ankara, the obvious point was how far an invasion of northern Syria was going to be directed against Russia's own foes. Islamic State is an obvious foe to Moscow, but is more of a convenient alibi for Erdoğan.

The Kurds supply an odd, inconvenient piece in the puzzle of interests. They have every claim to be the most formidable presence in the area, and for that reason, an obvious target for Turkey's efforts at neutralisation. The last thing Ankara wishes to see is full-blooded Kurdish independence thriving on its borders. Any benefit for the Kurdish diaspora is deemed an internal threat to Turkish stability.

Turkey's operation was bound to overcook the new found value between Ankara and Moscow. The Jarablus operation could hardly have had the imprimatur of Moscow. There was more than a touch of irritation registered in such channels as *Kommersant*, which tends to take its draught from semi-official, if not official sources. "The operation in Syria, not coordinated with Moscow, threatens to complicate the process of normalization of bilateral cooperation" agreed between Turkey and Russia in St. Petersburg on August 9. [4]

The situation on Washington's side of this brittle fence is hardly much better. Embrace Ankara's ambitions at your peril, becoming complicit in broader historical patterns best left alone. Engaging in anything touched by Turkish ambition suggests a simultaneous, convenient relationship with Islamist forces when necessary. (Not that that has stopped US policies in the Middle East before. Think Afghanistan versus the Soviet Union; the Taliban; the malignant House of Saud). The chances of having any safe zone within the north of Syria are, at best, childish hopes. As is much in the nature of the brutal smattering of alliances across the conflict.

Dr. Binoy Kampmark was a Commonwealth Scholar at Selwyn College, Cambridge. He lectures at RMIT University, Melbourne. Email: bkampmark@gmail.com

Notes

[1] <http://dckurd.org/2016/08/31/erdogans-waterloo-turkey-invades-and-occupies-syria/>

[2]

<http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/09/turkey-syria-kurds-ankara-can-get-stuck-quagmire.html>

[3] <http://sputniknews.com/russia/20160721/1043373832/russia-warned-turkey-coup-attempt.html>

[4]

https://rbth.com/international/2016/08/26/turkey-has-gone-further-than-promised-in-syria-says-moscow_624453

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Kampmark](#)

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