

Turkey's "Illegal Invasion" of Syria: Operation "Euphrates Shield" Turns Into Operation "Occupation"

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Turkey's operation 'Euphrates Shield' that had originally begun as the operation to drive the Kurdish militias back to the eastern side of Euphrates River is now turning into a mission to create a 'safe zone' inside Syria to reinforce not only its own position in the region but also to buttress the Turkey-backed militias controlling the eastern part of Aleppo city.

The decision has come at a time when US-Russia sponsored ceasefire has failed to hold and when battles on various fronts have once again escalated to the point of extremely heightened confrontation. This particular course of action is likely to put Turkey back on confrontation course with Syria and Russia and pave the way for the NATO forces' direct entry in the conflict. Some recent most developments strongly indicate that things are now turning to this direction.

President Recep [Erdogan redefined the scope of 'Euphrates Shield'](#) in a major statement on Monday, September 19. Having first taken over the Syrian border towns of Jarablus al-Rab, Turkish troops are "now going down as far as al-Bab", i.e., 30 kilometres further inside the Syrian territory, as he put it. Erdogan posed the question that is on everyone's lips: "But why are you going down there?" Then, he offered an answer himself: "We need to rid these places from being a threat to us". Simple though it looks, Turkey's decision indicates the critical turn the Syrian-conflict is likely to take in the month to come.

One day after Erdogan's announcement, the Turkish government submitted a motion to the parliament for extending the mandate authorizing the Turkish Armed Forces to take military action in Syria. The proposal seeks one more year authorization for the government to carry out cross-border military operations against "terrorist threats" and allows deployment of foreign troops on Turkish territory too.

The new plan, to put in simplest terms, is to create a safe zone in Syria the size of the Grand Canyon, a campaign that could be one of the biggest foreign military interventions in its modern history. Needless to say, Erdogan's new plan involves political and military risks. Militarily, this plan implies deployment of thousands of Turkish soldiers in Syria for years and increase risks of a possible military confrontation with Syrian forces as also with its biggest allies: Russia and Iran. Politically, it is likely to put its relations with regional and extra-regional powers on an entangled path. Already, Erdogan has largely ignored the criticism from Moscow, Tehran and Damascus that the Turkish incursion is a violation of international law and an infringement of Syria's sovereignty (read: Erdogan outlined this plan only four days after the visit by the Russian Chief of General Staff Gen. Valery Gerasimov to

Ankara on September 15).

However, it is not this side of the conflict that Erdogan is set to annoy, his drive against Kurds, many believe, is also likely to further fracture Turkey's relations with the US. However, given the lukewarm attitude of Western powers, including the US, towards the concept of 'safe zone', this is least likely to happen. It is so because Erdogan seems to have anticipated that when a zone actually materializes, its *raison d'être* as a strategic foothold inside Syria will at once become obvious to NATO. Hence, the September 20 motion, which is most likely to be passed by the parliament in its upcoming session, to authorize deployment of foreign (NATO/US) troops in Turkey and the related authorization to use Turkish territory as a transit route too.

Needless to say, there is no love lost between Erdogan and Kurdish militias and Turkey's moves directly indicate that its primary motivation is to contain the Kurdish militias in a corner. In the first week of September, Turkey's defence minister said the YPG should not be allowed to lead any operation on [Raqqa](#) and that "local forces" should be used instead. He added that Turkey would not tolerate the YPG extending their territory "by using the Daesh operations as an excuse".

On Tuesday, September 5, Erdogan was reported to have said he and the US president Barack Obama were seeking to work together to push ISIL out of Raqqa. But like Turkey's fight for Jarabulus and towns on the Syrian border, the battle for Raqqa carries more significance for Erdogan than the removal of ISIL, for it is mainly about limiting the gains of the YPG and expanding Turkey's influence in Syria.

"Raqqa is one of the issues the US and Turkey are currently discussing. We need to demonstrate our presence in the region. If not, the terrorist groups such as Daesh, the PKK and the Syrian offshoot the People's Protection Units [YPG] will occupy the vacuum," he said, according to the pro-government Daily Sabah newspaper.

This is quite evident that any on-the-ground involvement in the push for Raqqa by Turkey would bring its forces on to a battlefield that the YPG-dominated Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) have long been contesting. The move could also see Turkey's troops, along with the rebel groups it supports, passing through or near areas which Syrian Kurds regard as their heartland.

In this context, the current push for the control of al-Bab carries a double advantage for Ankara. Firstly, Ankara estimates that it would give a major push for its project to create a 'safe zone' inside Syria, which will be free of attack by Russian and Syrian jets or ground forces and become a *de facto* Turkish enclave. Secondly, it also estimates that the control of al-Bab, which is only 50 kilometres northeast of Aleppo city, would enable Turkey to significantly reinforce the rebel forces controlling the eastern part of Aleppo city.

The primary question that one must be asking is: what critical objective(s) Erdogan is seeking to materialize out of this expanded military presence in Syria? By pushing for the control of al-Bab, Raqqa and Aleppo city at the same, not only is Turkey planning to drive the Kurds out of the focus but also preparing to become a major negotiator/stakeholder, alongside and on part with US and Russia, in any final settlement of the conflict. How did Erdogan achieve this feat? Simply put, he has quite stealthily inserted Turkey into the crucial fault lines in regional politics by cunningly exploiting the geopolitical rivalry between

the US and Russia in Syria and the related 'great game' unfolding in the Black Sea region. His plan, in this context, is to maintain enough Syrian territory under his occupation for as long as the new US president arrives next year and the agenda for "regime change" in Syria is reborn.

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