

Erdogan Calls Putin as Russia Seethes at Turkey's Syrian Incursion

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Global Research, August 30, 2016

[The Duran](#) 28 August 2016

Region: [Middle East & North Africa](#), [Russia and FSU](#)

Theme: [US NATO War Agenda](#)

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In the immediate aftermath of the Turkish capture of Jarablus in Syria Turkish President Erdogan telephoned his "friend Putin" on Friday 27th August 2016. The Kremlin's [account](#) of the conversation is remarkable even by its standards for its terseness:

"The two leaders discussed the development of Russia-Turkey trade and political and economic cooperation in keeping with the agreements reached in St Petersburg on August 9. Vladimir Putin and Recep Tayyip Erdogan exchanged opinions on developments in Syria and pointed out the importance of joint efforts in fighting terrorism. They agreed to continue their dialogue on the issues of the bilateral and international agenda."

The true subject of the discussion will in fact have been the Turkish capture of Jarablus in northern Syria.

Whilst it seems the Turks did inform the Russians of this move in advance, it is clear that the Russians are to put it mildly unhappy about it. Though the Turks appear to have tried to arrange talks with the Russian military leadership presumably to discuss this move - even announcing a visit to Turkey by General Gerasimov, the Chief of the Russian General Staff - no such talks are taking place, with the Russians denying that a visit to Ankara by their Chief of General Staff was ever agreed, and the Turks now saying that the visit has been postponed.

The Russian media meanwhile is carrying articles making clear the extent of Russian anger. An article in the Russian newspaper Kommersant, which is clearly based on official briefings, is accusing Turkey of "going further than promised in Syria". That this article reflects official thinking in Moscow is shown by the fact that the semi-official English language Russian news-site "Russia Beyond the Headlines" has [republished it in English](#).

The article makes it clear that Turkey did not coordinate the Jarablus operation with Moscow or Damascus, and that it was much bigger than Moscow was led to expect. The Russians are also clearly annoyed by the extent to which the operation has been coordinated by Turkey with the US, which is providing air support.

"For Moscow, Ankara's operation was an unpleasant surprise, demonstrating that the expectations for a convergence of the countries' positions on Syria that emerged after the meeting between Putin and Erdogan were premature. In deciding about the operation in Jarabulus, the Turkish leader

has sent a signal that relations with the U.S. remain a priority for him, and he prefers to act in the framework of the antiterrorist coalition led not by Moscow, but Washington.”

(Bold italics added)

I have repeatedly warned against over-high expectations that the recent rapprochement between Turkey and Russia amounted to any sort of realignment. I have also said that despite Turkish annoyance with the US over the recent coup attempt, Turkey remains a US ally, continues to be committed to regime change in Syria, and is not going to throw the US out of Incirlik or allow Russia to use the base. My only surprise is that judging from this comment it appears there were some people in Moscow who thought otherwise.

The Kommersant article then continues ominously

“According to Kommersant’s information, in case of aggravation of the situation, the Russian military and diplomats are ready to employ bilateral channels of communication with their Turkish counterparts, as well as express their concerns to the U.S. if necessary. According to Vladimir Sotnikov, director of the Moscow-based Russia-East-West centre, Ankara’s actions could seriously affect the process of normalisation of bilateral cooperation that was agreed by presidents Putin and Erdogan in St. Petersburg”.

(Bold italics added)

That suggests that behind the mild public language strong complaints have been made in private by Moscow to Ankara. Erdogan’s call to Putin looks like an attempt to assuage Russian anger, to reassure Moscow about Turkey’s intentions in Syria, and to keep the “process of normalisation” between Turkey and Russia on track. The terse Kremlin summary of the conversation suggests that Putin in response made Russian feelings and concerns perfectly clear, and that there was, in the diplomatic language of the past, “a full and frank exchange of views” ie. a row.

Why are the Russians so angry about the Jarablus operation?

Here I acknowledge my heavy debt to the geopolitical analyst Mark Sleboda who over the course of a detailed and very helpful discussion has corrected certain errors I have previously made about the Jarablus operation and has greatly enlarged my understanding of it.

In my two previous articles discussing the Jarablus operation I said that it looked to be targeted principally at the Kurds, whose militia, the YPG, has over the last year significantly expanded the area in north east Syria under its control. I also discounted the possibility that the Turkish seizure of Jarablus was intended to affect the course of the battle for Aleppo by providing supplies to the Jihadi fighters trying to break the siege there. In my latest [article](#) I said the following

“..... it is not obvious that the rebels actually need a “safe zone” in this area. They already have a corridor to send men and supplies to Aleppo through Idlib province, which they already control. Why add to the problems of setting up a “safe zone” much further away in north east Syria when the rebels

already control territories so much closer to Aleppo?”

Mark Sleboda has explained to me that the principal corridor to supply the rebels in Syria has always been through the area of north east Syria around Jarablus. In his words

“Idlib is not an acceptable supply route from Turkey to forces in Aleppo province because the Turkish-Syrian border in Idlib is mountainous terrain – small and bad roads and then long routes all the way through Idlib past SAA held territory into Aleppo province. The Jarablus Corridor north of Aleppo is and has always been absolutely vital for the insurgency,. That’s why Turkey, Brookings, etc have always placed so much priority on a no fly zone there. Now its come to realisation.”

In other words the Turkish capture of Jarablus before it could be captured by the YPG was not primarily intended to prevent the linking together of two areas within Syria under Kurdish control – though that may have been a secondary factor – but was primarily intended to secure the main supply route (or “ratline”) Turkey uses to supply the Jihadi fighters attacking Aleppo.

Beyond that it is now clear that Turkish ambitions go much further than Jarablus. Various Turkish officials have over the last two days been speaking to the Turkish media of Turkey establishing a large rebel controlled “safe zone” in this area of Syria. Moreover – as Mark Sleboda says – they have now secured US support for it, as shown by the very active role the US air force is taking in supporting the Turkish move on Jarablus.

As Mark Sleboda has also pointed out to me, creating this rebel “safe zone” within Syria has been a declared Turkish objective for over a year. The Turks have up to now been prevented from realising it because of US reluctance to provide the necessary support, and because of concern in Washington and Ankara about a possible Russian military reaction. With the move to Jarablus and beyond now carried out with US support and through Russian acquiescence obtained by stealth, the Turks have now achieved it.

What implications does this have for the war in Syria and for the continuation of the Russian – Turkish rapprochement?

Going back to the war in Syria, my own view remains that this will not in the end decide the outcome of the battle of Aleppo, where reports suggest that the Syrian army is continuing to gain ground despite the uninterrupted – and in fact increasing – flow of supplies to the Jihadi fighters across the Turkish border. My longer term view also remains that if the Syrian government succeeds in recapturing the whole of Aleppo and eventually Idlib, then it will have won the war. However what this episode shows is that the war is far from won, and that the Turks and their US backers are still prepared to go on escalating it in order to prevent the Syrian army winning it.

Beyond that I think the British reporter Patrick Cockburn may turn out to be right, that by trying to establish a “safe zone” within Syria Turkey is [overplaying its hand](#) and is taking a step that

“....would embroil Turkey in the lethal swamp lands of the Syrian-Iraqi war.”

Already there are indications that the Turkish move is provoking a local reaction from the YPG and the Kurds. Despite earlier reports that the YPG was withdrawing all its forces back across to the eastern bank of the Euphrates, there are now credible reports of scattered resistance to the Turkish move by Kurdish militia aligned with the YPG, and there are also reports of mobilisation against the Turkish move in the Kurdish areas of Syria.

In my recent article I [made the following point](#) about the potential ability of the YPG to wreck any scheme to set up a rebel “safe zone” in this part of Syria

“North east Syria is a bitterly contested area in which the dominant force is not the rebels but the YPG. It does not look like a credible “safe zone” for the rebels or a credible launch area from which to launch attacks on Aleppo. On the contrary an attempt to create a rebel “safe zone” in this area would antagonise the YPG, and would restore the alliance between the Syrian government and the YPG to full working order, leading to constant fighting in the area of the so-called “safe zone” between the Syrian rebels and the YPG. That would surely defeat the whole purpose of the “safe zone”, rendering it unsafe and effectively worthless as a “safe zone”. Of course the Turkish military could try to garrison the area to defend whatever “safe zone” it created inside it. That would however require an incursion into Syria that went far deeper than the one to Jarablus, and which would risk the Turkish army becoming bogged down in a lengthy guerrilla war on Syrian territory with the YPG. I doubt Erdogan, the Turkish military or the US would want that.”

In his [article](#) discussing the Turkish incursion Patrick Cockburn makes essentially the same point

“Turkey may be able to prevent the Kurds permanently extending their rule west of the Euphrates, but it would be a very different and more dangerous operation to attack the de facto Syrian Kurdish state, which has spread itself between the Euphrates and the Tigris rivers since the Syrian Army largely withdrew from the region in 2012.”

Setting up a rebel “safe zone” inside Syria in the teeth of the opposition of the YPG is however what Erdogan and the Turks – backed by the US – have now decided to do.

In recent days there has been some renewed talk of Russia becoming bogged down in the war in Syria. In my opinion the country that runs by far the greatest risk of getting bogged down in Syria is not Russia but Turkey, which already has to deal with an Islamist terrorist campaign and a Kurdish insurgency on its own territory – both in large part consequences of the war in Syria – and which cannot afford to add a war between the Turkish army and the potentially Russian backed YPG in Syria to its mounting problems. That however is what Turkey by its latest move now risks.

There remains the outstanding puzzle of US policy. The US actively encouraged the YPG to capture the town of Manbij – which lies west of the Euphrates – from ISIS, and provided heavy air support for the YPG operation to the capture Manbij. It is now demanding that the YPG withdraw from Manbij and from all areas west of the Euphrates, and is providing air support for a Turkish military operation that is at least in part targeted against the YPG.

It is impossible to see any logic in these moves. As I said in my previous [article](#)

“It is impossible to see any coherent strategy here. Rather it looks as if CIA and military officials on the ground in Syria have been going their own way, encouraging the YPG to expand as fast as it can, heedless of the larger consequences. The political leadership in Washington, when it finally woke up to what was happening, then had to take disproportionate steps to bring the situation back under control.”

Regardless of this, the Turkish move into Syria should bury once and for all any idea that Turkey is in the process of undertaking a geopolitical realignment away from the West and towards the Eurasian powers. Not only is Turkey still a US and NATO ally, but it is now conducting an illegal military operation against Russian opposition in Syria with US military support. That is not the action of a country in the process of carrying out a realignment and preparing to switch alliances from the West to Beijing and Moscow.

The Russians and the Turks are now talking to each other, which for several months they had stopped doing. The Kremlin’s summary of Friday’s conversation between Putin and Erdogan shows that they are still talking about improving their trade links and economic ties. However, as the Kommersant article shows, even that limited progress now appears to be in jeopardy as the two countries’ conflicting stances in the Syrian war once again threaten to pull them apart.

In other words Turkey remains, as it has always been, an ally not of Russia and the Eurasian powers, but of the US and the West, and its actions in Syria are a clear demonstration of that.

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