

# Suleiman Shah and Turkey's Election Invasion of Syria: Wag the Dog Turkish-Style or Something More?

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*The Turkish opponents of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan and his beleaguered government have claimed that a distressed Erdogan may try to start a conflict with Syria and even invade Syrian territory. The Republic People's Party (CHP) and Kemal Kilicdaroglu, the leader of the CHP, have even warned the Turkish military not to attack Syria. According to the CHP and Erdogan's other opponents, the aim of a Turkish invasion of Syria by Erdogan is to invoke patriotic sentiments domestically. The aim of a conflict with Syria is to manipulate the Turkish population for electoral reasons, they have warned...*

Turkey is slated to hold municipal elections on March 30, 2014. Prime Minister Erdogan's declining Justice and Development Party (AKP) is nervous about the Turkish municipal elections. The AK Party is afraid that it will perform badly.

A series of events have taken place which have given credence to the arguments and accusations against the AKP leadership. The first starts with Ankara's claims that it was concerned about a historic relic inside Syrian territory known as the Tomb of Suleiman Shah. As a result of the purported and questionable threats by the Syrian anti-government forces against the Tomb of Suleiman Shah, Turkey authorized its troops on March 16, 2014 to enter Syrian territory to protect the historic site.

The historic figure's crypt is located inside Syrian territory. On the basis of an agreement signed by France and the Grand National Assembly of Turkey in 1921, before Syria became an independent republic (and the Ottoman Empire was officially dissolved), Suleiman Shah's grave is considered Turkish territory. Turkish troops have been stationed there as guards since that time to protect the historic site.

Following Ankara's proclamation that it would defend the Tomb of Suleiman Shah, Turkey downed a Syrian military jet on March 23, 2014. The downing of the Syrian jet signaled the escalation of tension between the AKP government and the Syrian government. That, however, was interrupted by a shattering political scandal tied to YouTube.

The conversations of Turkish officials discussing how to manufacture a pretext to invade Syria were leaked through YouTube on March 27, 2014. The YouTube videos are analogous to the Ukraine regime change leak of the US State Department's Assistant-Secretary Victoria Nuland. The Turkish leaked conversations also fit into the patterns of an internal struggle inside Turkey under which the conversations of Erdogan and Turkish officials had been leaked earlier.

## The Downing of a Syrian Aircraft by Turkey

If the claims of Erdogan's Turkish opponents are factual, what do they disclose about the shooting of a Syrian military jet by the Turkish military in late-March 2014? Ankara originally claimed that the Syrian aircraft had violated its airspace alongside another Syrian warplane that reversed course after Turkish jets were scrambled. The Turkish government also alleged that it gave four warnings to the Syrian military jet before shooting it down, but the Syrian government responded by saying that Ankara was categorically lying and that the Syrian jet was on a combat mission inside Syrian airspace over the Latakia District.

The General Staff of the Turkish Armed Forces released a statement about the incident near the Syrian-Turkish border. The Turkish military statement is an omission of guilt that supports what the Syrians have said. Putting a shadow of doubt on Ankara's claims that its airspace was violated, the Turkish military affirmed that the Syrian warplane crashed 1.2 kilometres inside Syrian territory. The statement of the General Staff of the Turkish Armed Forces says that the Syrian aircraft went down at «1,200 meters to the south of the border on the Syrian territory in Kasab region.»

The geography of Kasab is important. It is a predominately-Armenian northern town near the Turkish border that is situated in the Governate of Latakia and its constituent Latakia District. Although Latakia Governate is mostly known for being the Syrian province with a high concentration of Alawites, it has a diverse population and its northern part is inhabited by many Christian Armenians. Towns like Esguran and Karadash are populated by ethnic Armenian. Kasab is also a name to remember; it will be mentioned again by other sources. The reports around the Syrian town paint the picture of some type of Turkish operation in the area and new push to open a new front in Syria or to reinforce the northern front.

It is also worth noting what the British-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights has said about the downing of the Syrian jet by Turkey. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights is no friend of the Syrian government. It has supported regime change in Syria and has been caught fabricating vast amounts of information about the Syrian conflict just to promote the anti-government militias and ideas promoting regime change in Damascus. Despite its anti-government position, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights also contradicts the AKP government's claims about downing the Syrian jet for violating Turkish airspace. The British-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights has stated that the Turkish military «targeted a Syrian fighter bomber as it struck areas of the northern province of Latakia» while the Syrian military plane was engaged in an attack on the anti-government insurgents.

Regardless of the facts, Prime Minister Erdogan and his government have gone out of their way, in their characteristic wind-baggery, to threaten a «heavy response» against the Syrians. Days after the Syrian aircraft was shot down by the Turkish military, Ankara also started a rhetorical campaign to portray a picture of itself as a victim that was only reacting to provocation. The AKP government claimed that (1) Turkish warplanes were scrambled previously to prevent a Syrian aircraft from violating Turkish airspace and (2) that the Syrian military had been continuously harassing Turkish military jets patrolling their own Turkish airspace by intimidation, through putting a radar lock on the Turks for targeting or firing purposes. Two points should be clarified about the latter Turkish grievance about the radar lock: it has no legal bearing nor does it signal any aggression against Turkey by the Syrians. Unlike frequency jamming, locking onto a target with a radar tracking system is not an act of aggression or a violation of sovereignty.

Ankara's grievance was purely rhetorical and contrary to the facts about defensive military procedures. The units that are the target of any radar lock may become aware they are being monitored by a defensive tracking system that could fire on them, but this is not an offensive move. The radar locking is clearly a defensive stance on the part of Damascus which the Syrians and any other country have the right to do.

What Syrian units were doing with the Turkish jets is a clear indicator that Syria does not trust the Turkish government whatsoever. The Syrian military monitors Turkish warplanes inside Turkish airspace as a security precaution. The reasons for this are that the Syrians believe that Turkish warplanes could violate Syrian airspace or conduct some type of mission against Syria at any given moment.

### **A Turkish Offensive in the Governate of Latakia?**

Focus must turn to the Tomb of Suleiman Shah now. Away from Latakia Governate and the Mediterranean coast, this mausoleum is located in the northern part of the Aleppo Governate of Syria. Before the downing of the Syrian military jet, Prime Minister' Erdogan's AKP government had repeatedly said that it was worried about the safety of the historic crypt.

Suleiman Shah was a Central Asian tribal chieftain from Merv, which is located in modern-day Turkmenistan. What makes him significant is that he was the grandfather of Osman I, the founder of the Ottoman Empire. This is why Suleiman's tomb has historical importance to Turkish history and to Turks.

Despite the three years of fighting, the Turkish-guarded historic site was never threatened by either the government or insurgent camps inside Syria. Ankara, however, begun claimed that it was afraid that its own insurgent allies in Syria would attack the historic site. Thus an alarm was sounded by the AKP about the safety of the mausoleum. Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu even held a conference from Van to address his government's concerns about the relic's safety.

Foreign Minister Davutoglu, however, went beyond the airing of concerns from Turkish authorities. Davutoglu vowed that Turkey would retaliate without the slightest hesitation to any attack on the Tomb of Suleiman Shah. He also clarified that Turkey had made preparations to intervene if the site or the Turkish guard unit stationed there should come under any form of attack. Vatan, a Turkish newspaper, quickly outlined that what Davutoglu meant was that Turkey was preparing to send troops across the Syrian border into Aleppo.

Threats in the form of a video against the historic site in Aleppo Governate were uploaded on YouTube days later. In the uploaded video the anti-government insurgents fighting in Syria warned the Turkish government that Ankara had a few days to surrender the historic site or that they would alternatively destroy it. The AKP used this to support its newest pretext for intervention into Syria. The video was uploaded on March 21, 2014.

In the same timeframe as the downing of the Syrian military jet, it was also reported by Turkish sources with varying degrees of emphasis that the Turkish Armed Forces had sent military ground units into the Syrian town of Kasab and its environs. Some sources said that the Turkish units were illegally escorting anti-government insurgents into Syrian territory, that wounded insurgents were also being taken back to Turkish military field hospitals (similar to the ones that Tel Aviv has setup in the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights for the

insurgents), and that the Turkish military was getting involved in expanding the combat zone in Syria.

Erdogan and the Turkish government were clearly planning something alongside the entire Syrian-Turkish border. Turkey has militarily helped the insurgents in their armed offensive on Kasab and Latakia District against the Syrian military. The downing of the Syrian aircraft was part of the Turkish support for this operation against Syria. The anti-government forces inside Syria would claim that they captured and secured government-controlled town of Kasab during this time period too.

In the United States, the Armenian Bar Association would send a letter of distress to the US government on March 25, 2014. The group would demand that the Obama Administration condemn the Turkish military incursion into Kasab. Members of the Armenian community would blast Turkey as being legally responsible for the violence in Syria and for the hardships and deaths of ethnic Armenians in Kasab and the Governate of Latakia.

### **Leak Wars: Erdogan, Davutoglu Caught Red Handed like Nuland, Catherine Ashton?**

Bombshell revelations were made shortly after. Leaked conversations between Turkish officials about their plans in Syria were released. The leaks were made through two YouTube videos that were uploaded on March 27, 2014. One video was a little over seven minutes long, while the other was about nine minutes long.

Before this, Prime Minister Erdogan had been facing a steady stream of leaks exposing his government's backdoor dealings and activities. Erdogan and AKP officials have blamed the Gulenists, an influential international movement run by a US-based Turkish preacher, for the previous leaks. Although the latest leaks could possibly be part of the internal conflict between Erdogan and the Gulenists inside Turkey, they could also be the work of a foreign intelligence agency.

Leaks of US and European Union officials have proven the increasing efficiency that divulging the secret conversations of governments has on exposing the underlying agendas of Washington and its cohorts. The leak of US Assistant-Secretary Victoria Nuland and US diplomat Geoffrey Pyatt illustrated how the goal of Washington in Ukraine had been regime change in Kiev and installing Arseniy Yatsenyuk as the prime minister of Ukraine. A later leak involving Catherine Ashton being told by Estonian Foreign Minister Urmas Paet that the head doctor for the Euromaidan protesters expressed views that Yatsenyuk and lead opposition politicians could have been involved with the killing of civilians also put into serious question the narrative being peddled by the US, Canada, and the European Union about the protests in Kiev.

The Turkish leaks illustrate that Turkish authorities have been planning on manufacturing an incident with Syria. The basis for this could have and could be political motivations aimed at securing an AKP victory in the Turkish municipal elections being held at the end of March. The leaks revealed that, during a conversation, Foreign Minister Davutoglu tells Hakan Fidan, the chief of the Turkish National Intelligence Organization (MIT), that an attack could help them.

Ahmet Davutoglu says, the «Prime Minister said that in the current conjuncture of time, this attack [on the Tomb of Suleiman Shah] must be seen as an opportunity for us.» Davutoglu is

positing the use of an incident at the historical mausoleum as a pretext for a Turkish incursion into Syria. It remains to be seen if he was talking about the upcoming municipal elections strictly or if he could have been talking about the insurgent's military offensive in northern Syria or even something else.

Hakan Fidan's response, however, goes further. The MIT boss responds to Davutoglu with the following proposal: «I will send four men from inside Syria, if that is what it will take. I will make up a reason for war by ordering a missile attack on Turkey. We can also prepare a direct attack on the Tomb of Suleiman Shah if necessary.»

### **Suleiman Shah's Tomb: Where Ottoman History's Start is Where Neo-Ottomanism Ends**

The reaction of the Turkish government to the leaks was quick. AKP authorities have said that the leaks are manipulated to paint the dialogue in a malicious way to undermine their government and Turkey. The AKP has called the leaks a serious threat to Turkish national security. As a result the Turkish government quickly blocked all YouTube use and access inside Turkey. This was done so that the Turkish population could not get access to the leaked conversations.

Several things needed to be analyzed and reflected on. The timing of the leaks, released only days before the March municipal elections in Turkey, is worth reflecting on. So are the assertions by the AKP that there is a conspiracy to topple the Turkish government.

Regardless, the unraveling events bring new life to the «neo-Ottoman» failures of Prime Minister Erdogan and Foreign Minister Davutoglu. Their visions of Turkey as an imperialist power have crumbled and the final nails are being hammered into its coffin. Some would argue that their neo-Ottomanism was really «pseudo-Ottomanism» the whole time. The two and the AKP have been slowly digging their own political graves through their Syria policy.

In a case of historical irony, Turkish history may in conceptual terms start at the Tomb of Suleiman Shah whereas Recep Tayyip Erdogan's seems like it may start its ending there. There is a lot of grumbling in the lower ranks of the AKP about Erdogan. He has lost a lot of popularity, even among AKP loyalists. The municipal and regional elections are a litmus test for Prime Minister Erdogan and his AK Party. If the AKP does badly, Erdogan and his close associates will face an internal revolt in the AKP. This is why the March 2014 elections are so important for them and why it is not unfathomable that they would create a new crisis with Syria for the sake of protecting their political careers.

### **A Response to the Events in Ukraine?**

This entire scandal is more than a Turkish-style case of «Wag the Dog.» The consequences are unpredictable and could lead to escalation. They also come at a time where there is a US and NATO buildup on the western borders of Russia and Belarus in Eastern Europe and the Black Sea.

The Eurasian chessboard is in motion. The events in Syria and Turkey should not be viewed in a vacuum from other events in the broader world as if they are unrelated to one another. The pieces are moving on the geopolitical chessboard. Some type of confrontation between Turkey and Syria could very well be an answer to the events in Ukraine and Crimean reunification with Russia. In other words, a Turkish conflict with Syria may not merely be a

ploy to help the AK Party during the March 2014 elections alone.

Additionally, the leaks further expose the involvement of the Turkish government in supporting the insurgency in Syria. Whatever remaining doubts that members of the AKP grassroots had that the AKP leadership is not corrupt, should go flying out the door. AKP leaders are not the pious Muslims they portray themselves as, they are conniving businessmen and liars that hide behind faith.

Deputy Chief of Staff of the Turkish Armed Forces Lieutenant-General Yasar Guler is also part of the leaked conversation between Davutoglu and Hakan Fidan. Lieutenant-General Guler describes that what was being discussed between the Turkish officials was the ignition of a war between Turkey and Syria. In context of what was being discussed, he recommends during the conversation that Turkey increase its combat support for the insurgents inside Syria by making additional deliveries of weapon ammunition to their fighters.

Before these leaks, in January 2014, a scandal was caused when Turkish law enforcement personnel stopped an undercover MIT truck heading to Syria secretly. The MIT truck was filled with weapons for the insurgent fighters killing civilians and trying to topple the Syrian government. An embarrassed AKP claimed that “supplies” were merely being delivered to Syrian Turkmen and then refused to say anything more citing national security for the secrecy.

As a result of the increasing global public cognizance about the nefarious role of the Turkish government in destabilizing Syria, Turkey’s own collaborators and allies have been publicly distancing themselves from Prime Minister Erdogan and the AKP slowly — at least in part. Ankara should take note: there are now reports with unnamed officials from places allied to Turkey that are washing their hands clean of the actions of Turkey — making it sound like Turkey has been a maverick supporting Al-Qaeda with no US or NATO involvement. These same people will not hesitate to abandon Turkey after it does their dirty work in the Black Sea or Middle East for them.

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