

Syria: NATO's Last Desperate Options in Lost Proxy War. Conventional Warfare, Ground Operations?

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As Syrian forces and their allies complete the encirclement of Syria's largest city, Aleppo, the United States and its regional allies have signaled a sudden increased interest in ground operations in Syria, including US airpower backing Turkish-Saudi ground forces.

While it is obvious the US and its allies are responding directly to the collapse of their proxy forces across the country, their most recent threats to further escalate the conflict in Syria are tenuously predicated on "fighting ISIS."

The Guardian in its article, "[Saudi Arabia offers to send ground troops to Syria to fight Isis](#)," would report:

Saudi Arabia has offered for the first time to send ground troops to Syria to fight Islamic State, its defence ministry said on Thursday.

"The kingdom is ready to participate in any ground operations that the coalition (against Isis) may agree to carry out in Syria," said military spokesman Brigadier General Ahmed al-Asiri during an interview with al-Arabiya TV news.

Saudi sources told the Guardian that thousands of special forces could be deployed, probably in coordination with Turkey.

In reality, Turkey and Saudi Arabia have played a central role in both the intentional creation of ISIS and the logistical and financial perpetuation of its activities within Syria and Iraq. This is not according only to enemies of Ankara and Riyadh, but according to their central most ally, the United States.

As early as 2012, [a Department of Intelligence Agency \(DIA\) document \(.pdf\)](#) admitted in regards to the Syrian conflict and the rise of ISIS that:

If the situation unravels there is the possibility of establishing a declared or undeclared Salafist principality in eastern Syria (Hasaka and Der Zor), and this is exactly what the supporting powers to the opposition want, in order to isolate the Syrian regime, which is considered the strategic depth of the Shia expansion (Iraq and Iran).

Mention of this "Salafist" (Islamic) "principality" (State) in 2012 is clearly when it was decided to transform US, Saudi, and Turkish-backed Al Qaeda affiliates - then called

“rebels” – officially into ISIS. To clarify just who these “supporting powers” were supporting its creation, the DIA report explains:

The West, Gulf countries, and Turkey support the opposition; while Russia, China, and Iran support the regime.

✘ It is clear then, that this sudden interest in escalation has nothing to do with ISIS and more to do with rescuing the West’s proxy terrorists before they are entirely eradicated and/or expelled from the country. Russia, who has played a pivotal role in reversing the tides against Al Qaeda and ISIS militants in Syria, has even gone as far as accusing Turkey of what appears to be an imminent military incursion into the country’s northern region.

Reuters would report in its article, [“Russia and Turkey trade accusations over Syria,”](#) that:

Russia said on Thursday it suspected Turkey was preparing a military incursion into Syria, as a Syrian army source said Aleppo would soon be encircled by government forces with Russian air support.

ISIS, as it has always been designed to be, serves merely as a pretext for justifying any prospective operation by the US and its regional allies – an operation that will be in all reality aimed at challenging and rolling back Syrian and Russian gains on the battlefield – or at the very least, providing an unassailable sanctuary within Syrian territory for the West’s defeated proxies to retreat to.

The Buffer Zone (Again)

The idea of carving out a buffer zone from Syrian territory also goes back as far as 2012 when it became apparent that Libya-style regime change would be difficult if not impossible to achieve quickly. The idea would be to switch from the fast paced, overwhelming proxy war the US and its allies had hoped to panic Damascus out from power with, to a more paced proxy war launched from NATO-occupied “safe havens” in Syria.

With NATO aircover, terrorists could safely launch operations deeper into Syrian territory, slowly expanding both the buffer zone and NATO’s defacto no-fly zone.

Eventually, it was planned, the buffer zones would lead directly to the collapse of the government in Damascus.

Again, far from a conspiracy theory, this plan was openly discussed within policy circles in Washington.

The Brookings Institution – a corporate-funded policy think-tank whose policymakers have helped craft upper-level strategy for the Iraqi, Afghan, Libyan, and now Syrian conflicts as well as plans laid for future confrontations with Iran and beyond – has been explicit regarding the true nature of these “buffer zones.” In a recent paper titled, [“Deconstructing Syria: A new strategy for America’s most hopeless war,”](#) it states:

...the idea would be to help moderate elements establish reliable safe zones within Syria once they were able. American, as well as Saudi and Turkish and British and Jordanian and other Arab forces would act in support, not only from the air but eventually on the ground via special forces.

The paper goes on by explaining (emphasis added) :

The end-game for these zones would not have to be determined in advance. The interim goal might be a confederal Syria, with several highly autonomous zones and a modest (eventual) national government. The confederation would likely require support from an international peacekeeping force, if this arrangement could ever be formalized by accord. **But in the short term, the ambitions would be lower—to make these zones defensible and governable, to help provide relief for populations within them, and to train and equip more recruits so that the zones could be stabilized and then gradually expanded.**

✘ In many ways, this has been attempted already to one degree or another in terrorist-occupied territory in Syria. As Syrian forces with Russian aircover moved into northern Aleppo, reports across the Western media complained that infrastructure underwritten by Western governments was being destroyed. This infrastructure, including bakeries literally run by Al Qaeda using flour supplied by the US government, was part of Brookings' plan to "make these zones governable."

The presence of Russian military forces in Syria has apparently prevented the West from making these zones more "defensible" through the use of direct military force aimed at Syrian troops.

How this plan will manifest itself now remains to be seen. What is most likely is a limited incursion into northern Syria into the shrinking Afrin-Jarabulus corridor before Syrian, Russian, and Kurdish forces completely fill the void. With Turkish and Saudi forces holding even a small percentage of the corridor, attempts to incrementally expand it as envisioned by Brookings may be made in the near to intermediate future.

Brookings had also envisioned coordinating Turkish operations in the north with an Israeli attack in the south - another option that is likely still being considered.

There is also the possibility of the West attempting to enter and seize a sizable piece of Syrian territory Syria's eastern most region- linking it up with territory in Iraq that appears likely to be stripped from the central government in Baghdad through similar tactics.

Best Case Scenario is Still Defeat + Costly Long-Term Standoff

The most likely result, however, would be a Golan Heights-style stand-off that could last years, if not decades.

Syria would still be able to restore peace and order across the vast majority of its territory, liquidate the West's proxies within their borders, and perhaps operate proxies of their own within seized territory - creating a costly conflict politically, financially, and militarily for Turkey.

For Saudi Arabia, the further stretching of its military forces would strain operational preparedness within the Kingdom, and further diminish its fighting capacity amid its war of aggression against neighboring Yemen. It is also another opportunity to expose inherent weaknesses in its military capabilities, further emboldening the growing arc of opposition challenging its influence throughout the Middle East.

Worst Case Scenario Threatens US Hegemony

The worst case scenario includes a NATO incursion into northern Syria being met by overwhelming resistance, blunting both its air and ground forces. With the majority of Turkish and Saudi military equipment originating in the US and Europe, it would in turn further weaken the illusion of Western military superiority upon the global stage. This could have significant impact on the integrity of both the European Union and the NATO alliance, as well as on prospective members seeking to join either or both in the near to intermediate future.

With the endgame approaching fast in Syria, Damascus and its allies may seek to invest heavily in making this second, worst case scenario the most likely outcome of any US-Turkish-Saudi incursion into northern Syria. By doing so, they may deter such a move from even being made in the first place, or the consequences unimaginable for the West should they try despite the obvious risks.

Since the prospect of a buffer zone being carved out of Syrian territory in the event of a failed regime change operation against Damascus has been literally years in the making – it is sincerely hoped that significant measures have been planned by Syria and its allies to counter it for just as long.

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