

Turkey - A Study in Geo-Political Malevolence

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The recent shooting down of a Russian military plane by Turkish air force jets has brought a great deal of media focus on the role of Turkey in the Syrian conflict. Knowledgeable observers of the four year-long civil war have been aware of Turkey's role from the outset as a conduit for the infiltration of Syrian territory by Islamist militants who have had training camps provided for by the Turkish Army High Command.

However, a wider spectrum of the global audience to the Syrian tragedy has become more acquainted with the allegation of Turkish logistical support for and financial relations with the so-called Islamic State. The reason for the Turkish taking down of a warplane which posed no threat to its security can only be based on the premise that Turkey is worried about the success of Russian airstrikes and the gains made by the Syrian Arab Army in reclaiming territories lost to insurgent Islamist militias and sought to punish the Russians for their role in this inconvenient turn of events. Further, the conduct of the Turkish government in the immediate aftermath of the incident by calling for a meeting of members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, appears to have been an attempt to draw the military alliance headed by the United States into direct opposition to the Russian Federation.

When Russian president Vladimir Putin condemned the Turkish action as a "stab in the back by the accomplices of terrorists" he was not only enlightening the world about that nation's role in the creation and sustenance of the Islamic State, he was also giving insight into the modus operandi of those operating at the helm of the Turkish state; one that has fashioned Turkey into an untrustworthy operator in international affairs - both as a partner within a military alliance and as an ostensibly friendly neighbouring state.

The deep irony is that the government led by Recep Tayyip Erdogan is one which predicated its regional outlook on a much vaunted 'Zero Problems with Neighbours' stance. Far from this, his foreign policy demarches; seemingly a recurring series of conspiracies, attempts at entrapment, blackmail and betrayals have set Syria ablaze with death, destruction and displacement. The unruly hand of Erdogan has at specific junctures risked escalating the crisis into a full blown regional war along sectarian lines, and even more direly threatened to edge the conflict towards a confrontation between the nuclear armed powers of NATO and Russia.

The background to Turkish involvement in the Syrian crisis is one which has its roots in an historical rivalry between both nations and is nurtured by a confluence of geo-political objectives of the present leadership in Turkey with those of the nations with whom it is formally allied; that is, the United States and NATO, as well as its informal alliance with the conservative Arab monarchies that comprise the Gulf Co-operation Council. This extends to an arguably symbiotic relationship that Turkey has with the state of Israel.

Antagonisms between Turkey and Syria go back to the aftermath of the First World War when following the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire, both modern Turkish and Syrian states were created. Right from the outset, mutual animosities festered over the twin issues of territorial and water rights.

Despite the secular framework undergirding both states, this rivalry was maintained during the era of the Cold War with the Turks becoming full-fledged members of NATO while the Syrians maintained a close relationship with the former Soviet Union.

The relationship was not helped by Turkish cooperation with Israel, a state to which Syria remained resolutely opposed. A low point was reached in 1998 when both nations came to the verge of all out war over Syrian support for guerrillas of the PKK, the Kurdish separatist organisation.

However by the late 2000s a rapprochement between both countries had developed to the extent that Syrian President Bashar al Assad described Turkey as "Syria's best friend." Erdogan for his part referred to the Syrians as "brothers."

Those sentiments, given the present circumstances, have long been buried.

Under Erdogan's leadership, Turkey has developed a foreign policy that aims to project Turkish influence within the Middle East and beyond. Regardless of the accuracies or inaccuracies attendant to descriptions of it as 'neo-Ottoman' in nature, it is clear that it is characterised by its assertiveness. Turkey's initiatives consistently display a bold and ruthless approach whether the Turkish state is functioning as an intermediary, a facilitator or as a provocateur.

For instance, it was at Erdogan's insistence in 2008 that the Syrians reluctantly began tentative talks with Israel. A few years later, Turkey served as the conduit through which Jihadis, fresh from NATO's successful expedition in overthrowing the government of Muammar Gaddafi, were transported to Syria to wage the present insurrection against Assad's government.

The Turks cherish the idea of serving as the "ultimate energy bridge between east and west", hence the proposition made to Assad prior to the conflict that he accede to a plan by Saudi Arabia and Qatar to build a natural gas pipeline from the Gulf to Turkey which would supply Europe with natural gas. The offer was made by Erdogan to counteract a plan to deliver Iranian gas to the same destination through a pipeline which would extend through Iraq and Syria. Assad rejected this offer.

It sits on what is reputed to be one of the world's largest water reserves and in 2014 did not hesitate to cut off the water supply to the River Euphrates by effecting a gradual reduction in the pumping of the river. This led to a drastic fall in the water levels of the man-made Lake Assad.

More recently, Erdogan is using the plight of refugees from the war he has helped create in Syria as a bargaining chip to "re-energize" talks on Ankara joining the European Union as well as to ease visa restrictions for Turks visiting the bloc.

Seeking the fracture of the Syrian state is a clear geo-political objective of Erdogan, and Turkey's involvement in this endeavour fits neatly in with other nations with similar aspirations.

The United States for one unveiled its 'Greater Middle East Project' during the administration of George Bush which proposed an overhaul of the political map of the Middle East of a kind not envisaged since the region was carved up between France and Britain, the victors of World War One.

It was a plan which was a logical expression of the Wolfowitz Doctrine which called for the untrammelled use of American military might in shaping the post-Cold War geo-political landscape.

Such thinking had been put to paper by a policy document prepared by the now defunct Project for the New American Century, a neoconservative think tank which called on the United States to "challenge" regimes which were hostile to its "interests and values". Among those on the list was the Syrian state.

Syria was on the list of seven countries to be taken out over a five year period according Wesley Clarke, the retired US army general who had served as supreme commander of NATO.

The balkanisation of the Middle East has always factored in the foreign policy objectives of the state of Israel. The policy plan devised by Oded Yinon in the early 1980s emphasized the vulnerability of multi-faith and multi-tribal Arab nations created by European imperial powers with Syria been assessed as "fundamentally no different from Lebanon except in the strong military regime which rules it."

The thinking behind *A Clean Break: A New Strategy for Securing the Realm*, a policy document prepared in 1996 for Benjamin Netanyahu during his first tenure as Israeli prime minister was to work in concert with its allies Turkey and Jordan to "contain, destabilize and roll-back" those states posing threats to all three. The strategy as with the PNAC document specifically mentions the "weakening, controlling and even rolling back" of Syria.

While the rejection of Turkey's natural gas pipeline proposal may likely have played a decisive factor in turning Erdogan against Assad's Syria, the insurrection was begun under the cover of the so-called 'Arab Spring'. Recruitment and financing of Sunni Islamist insurgents came from the Sunni powers of the Gulf Co-operation Council.

Arms supplies such as a "major airlift" of "3,000 tons of weapons" from Zagreb as reported by London's *Daily Telegraph* in March of 2013, found its way to Syrian rebels through Turkey.

The sectarian nature of the conflict is evident and the imposition of a Sunni-led replacement to Assad's government is a goal shared by Erdogan. Erdogan leads what is termed the 'soft Islamist' Justice and Development Party which has nonetheless sought to modify the secular creed of state established by Kemal Ataturk. Erdogan's sectarian motives are implicit in all his political manoeuvrings Assad ruefully noted during an interview he granted to a Turkish newspaper journalist in 2012.

It was for long an open secret that the Erdogan government was complicit in the rise of Islamic State. The formidable Turkish army which has dutifully kept a lid on any military threats emanating from the de facto Kurdish state in northern Iraq did nothing to help crush the militias of the Islamic State when they emerged as a force following the infamous blitzkrieg in Iraq back in 2014.

And even allowing for the plausible excuse of wanting to avoid the potential complications associated with intervening in another country, Turkey deliberately failed to close its porous borders to Islamist volunteers.

Last year, Sky News Arabia reported the discovery of official exit stamps administered by Turkish border control on passports seized by Kurdish fighters indicating that foreign militants seeking to join Islamic State had entered Syria with the full knowledge of the Turkish authorities.

This open border policy so far as the insurgents were concerned extended to trading in illegal oil garnered by the Islamic State from oil wells it seized in Northern Syria. It is a lucrative trade in which members of Erdogan's own family including his son Bilal, are intimately involved.

The bombing of these trade routes and crossing points during raids conducted by the Russian Air Force along with the more general turning of the tide gains by the Syrian Arab Army against insurgents doubtlessly influenced the decision to stage the dangerously provocative act of shooting down a Russian warplane.

The Sukhoi Su-24M tactical bomber aircraft by the reckoning of the Turkish government had traversed its borders for a period of time amounting at most to 17 seconds. The Russians denied that their plane entered Turkish airspace or that its crew had been given 10 warnings in five minutes.

Whatever the truth of this matter, Erdogan's rank hypocrisy was clearly on display when he claimed that his country's F-16 fighter jets "shot down the Russian plane in line with Turkey's rules of engagement".

Back in June of 2012 he had furiously denounced the decision of the Syrian decision to down a Turkish F-3 Phantom fighter jet for violating Syrian territory. "A short-term border violation can never be a pretext for an attack", adding, "Even if the plane was in their airspace for a few seconds, that is no reason to attack. It was clear that this plane was not an aggressive plane. Still it was shot down."

When a Russian warplane had admittedly temporarily violated Turkish airspace which the Russians attributed to the Russian pilot's evasive action after a Turkish jet had 'locked on' to his plane, the Turkish Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu had spoke the following the words:

We'll warn any country that violates our borders in a friendly way. Russia is our friend and neighbour. There is no tension between Turkey and Russia in this sense. The issue of Syria is not a Turkish-Russian crisis.

The downing of the Russian fighter plane appears to have been the latest in a number of incidents which the Turkish government have cynically sought to manipulate as a means of drawing the United States more directly into the conflict; this through the mechanism of invoking Article Five of the North Atlantic Treaty which states that an attack on one Ally shall be considered an attack on all allies.

The willingness and even desperation of the Turks to involve the United States as an active participant mean that some observers do not rule out the Turks staging a 'false flag' attack, i.e. facilitating or directly participating in an act of war or a war crime and then blaming it on another party in order to discredit them and, if necessary, to justify a military response.

It is claimed by some that Islamist rebels based in Turkey had access to serin gas prior to the Ghouta Chemical attack which opponents of the Assad government sought to blame on his forces. President Obama, reluctant to approve direct involvement by the United States, had earlier announced that the use by the Assad government of chemical weapons would constitute the crossing of a red line.

Seymour Hersh, the Pulitzer Award winning investigative writer, claimed to have seen a classified US Defense Intelligence Agency document which referred to “chemical facilitators” based in Turkey and Saudi Arabia “were attempting to obtain sarin precursors in bulk, tens of kilograms, likely for the anticipated large scale production effort in Syria.”

In March of 2014, a tape recording was released of a conversation said to have been between Hakan Fidan, the Head of Turkish Intelligence, Davutoglu, then the foreign minister and other high-ranking officials discussing the possibility of launching an attack on the tomb of Suleyman Shah, the grandfather of the founder of the Ottoman Empire which is located in Syria.

Davutoglu is heard to say that “the prime minister”, meaning Erdogan, said that “in current conjecture, this attack (on the tomb) must be seen as an opportunity for us”.

To this Fidan replies, “I’ll send four men from Syria, if that’s what it takes. I’ll make up a cause of war by ordering a missile attack on Turkey; we can also prepare an attack on Suleyman Shah Tomb if necessary.”

The response from Turkey’s foreign ministry said that the tape had been “partially manipulated” and was a “wretched attack” on national security.

Such deceptions are not unknown in Turkish history. It is a nation rich with high level intrigue and manufactured violence. The Istanbul Pogrom of 1956 or *Septemvriana*, which saw the slaughter and displacement of ethnic Greeks, was orchestrated by the government of Adnan Menderes.

This involved getting a Turkish usher at the consulate in Thessaloniki to plant a bomb that would damage the building acknowledged as the birth home of the revered Attaturk. Although the man was arrested and made a confession, the Turkish press remained silent about this and announced that the consulate had been bombed by Greeks.

The rise of Erdogan and his ‘soft-Islamism’ which has implemented economic policies that have succeeded in increasing the level of the nation’s prosperity ostensibly offered a break with the murky past.

For decades, Turkey endured successive military regimes which were brought to power and sustained by the use of NATO’s secret army unit known as ‘Counter Guerilla’ as well as associations with fascist groups such as the ‘Grey Wolves’. It was during this period that the *Derin devlet*, literally meaning ‘deep state’ became an entrenched feature of its governance.

But while Erdogan’s rule has introduced reforms and seen the purge of many in the military, it has failed to do away with the negative hallmarks of the corrupt state including the country’s reputation as the conduit for the supply and distribution into Europe of Afghan originated heroin.

His handling of foreign affairs have left much to be desired even when taking into account the amorality frequent in the conduct of the relations between nations. His defiance of international law, conventions and opinion has included the creation of a buffer area with Syria resulting in the advancing of Turkish borders by eight kilometres.

Meanwhile, there is no word from his government condemning the apparent war crime committed by Turkman guerrillas in either killing a defenceless pilot parachuting to earth or lynching him on his landing.

He has attacked Kurdish militias when have taken the fight to Islamic State and even his declarations about carrying out a military operation against the Islamic State in the “near future” are treated with disbelief and merely create the suspicion that he will use any purported operation as cover to wage war against the Kurds.

Such duplicity and such hypocrisy are, of course, not the sole preserve of Erdogan. The Western powers at the helm of which is the United States insist that they are fighting a war on terror, but arm terrorists in a conflict which was planned and organised well in advance of the cover provided by the so-called Arab Spring.

The creation of the entity now termed Islamic State by covert manipulation of United States intelligence agencies is admitted by retired US General Wesley Clarke as well as by the recently retired director of the Defense Intelligence Agency, Lt. General Michael Flynn.

The still frequent recourse to the term ‘moderate’ rebels by US President Barack Obama and British Prime Minister David Cameron is baffling in the extreme given the evidence from a welter of disparate sources which confirm that the overwhelming majority of those Syrians who have taken up arms against Assad are guided by a Sunni Islamist ideology, the same ideology that fuels the foreign jihadists who have descended on Syria, many of them routed through Turkey.

It is an ideology to which Erdogan, who rejects the term ‘moderate’ or ‘soft’ Islamism as insulting Western constructs, subscribes. For all his protestations, this view may tend to offer confirmation that he is sympathetic to the tenets espoused by the Islamic State.

But it is of course conduct that speaks louder than words. His failure to close the borders with Syria, the provision of training camps, the existence of trade routes and supply lines along with evidence of constant communications between militants and Turkish officials speak of an active and sustained collaboration with the Islamist militants who seek to overthrow the secular government of Bashar al Assad.

The pages of an objectively written history will not likely be kind to Recep Erdogan’s role in fomenting and prolonging the unmitigated catastrophe that is Syrian Civil War.

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