

Turkey Expands Military Campaign in Syria and Iraq

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Turkey has agreed to let the so-called “U.S.-led anti-ISIS” coalition to openly use Turkish airbases at Incirlik, Diyarbakir, Batman and Malatya for coalition aircraft conducting sorties against ISIS. At the same time, Turkey began launching airstrikes targeting members of the PKK Iraqi Kurds in northern Iraq. Clearly, the Turkish agenda is not focused on combating ISIS. If it was, the Turks would have long ago sealed their borders with Syria, then ceased buying ISIS oil and training and facilitation of terrorist groups flowing into Syria from Turkish territory.

Turkey’s decision to help the “anti-ISIS coalition” is clearly motivated by its own strategic interests. One of them is limiting the expansion of armed Kurdish groups along the Turkish border.

Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan also called for a “buffer zone” on the Turkey/Syria border – which would be enforced by a no-fly zone – to “ensure security.”

The zone will extend forty to fifty kilometers into ISIS-held regions of Aleppo Province in northern Syria. Turkish sources referred to the region as a no-fly zone and claimed that Syrian Air Forces aircraft entering the zone would also be targeted. The U.S. officials including U.S. Special Envoy to the Anti-ISIS Coalition Gen. John Allen publically denied that the implementation of a no-fly zone had been “part of the discussion.” However, a real practice in the application of the ‘buffer zone” agenda will indicate opening a new staging ground allowing terrorists such as ISIS to conduct attacks deeper inside Syria. Thus, it will open for the US, Turkey and their moderate rebel allies new opportunities in opposing Bashar al-Assad’s government.

Also, a buffer zone in northern Syria will probably block any attempt by Syrian Kurdish forces to move into areas along the Turkish border west of the Euphrates River. This will allow ISIS and other extremist groups to avoid jeopardizing their supply routes through Turkey. The seizure of the border town of Tel Abyad in northern Syria from ISIS on June 15 by Kurdish YPG forces appears to have been the primary trigger which forced Turkey to reevaluate its border security policies. The prospect of further gains along the Syrian-Turkish border by Kurdish forces likely impacts Turkey to further engage with the Syrian conflict in order to ensure that the US-led campaign would evolve in line with Turkey’s own interests.

Nonetheless, the formal expansion of Turkey's role in the U.S.-led anti-ISIS coalition will likely generate a reaction in the form of retaliatory attacks from ISIS inside of Turkey. Thousands of foreign fighters have utilized Turkey and its porous border with Syria as a pathway to join with ISIS forces in Syria and Iraq, including an estimated 1,000 Turkish citizens. The members of these networks represent a key threat to Turkey's internal security. At the same time, Turkey also faces expanded internal turmoil in its southeastern Kurdish-majority provinces due to the resumption of hostilities with the Kurdish groups. These two simultaneous threat streams will likely interact to prompt instability inside of Turkey in coming weeks.

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