

US coordinates with Turkey in proxy Syria war

By Chris Marsden
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US efforts to bring down the regime of Bashar al-Assad in Syria focus on collusion with Turkey's ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP).

Turkey is the only regional power that could successfully front a proxy war with Syria, behind which Washington could call the shots. The AKP is also viewed as the best political force to head a Sunni-based regional alliance movement incorporating Saudi Arabia and Qatar.

The US has worked to coordinate the military operation in Syria through the Syrian National Council (SNC) and the Free Syrian Army (FSA), which are controlled by Ankara and made up of most of the forces the US would seek to impose as a post-Assad client regime. This includes not just its own long-time assets, drawn from ex-members of the Baathist regime and its nominally liberal bourgeois opponents, but above all the Muslim Brotherhood.

The Brotherhood has already formed regimes with which the Obama administration is working in Tunisia and Egypt to secure US regional interests in the aftermath of the fall of Zine El Abidine Ben Ali and Hosni Mubarak.

Along with these layers, the US also relies on Al Qaeda elements from Iraq, Libya and elsewhere to act as shock troops, funded and armed by the Saudi and Qatari governments.

The FSA, no less than the Al Qaeda-linked groups, operates as a Sunni sectarian force. But a command structure based in Turkey and the presence of a few trusted "liberal" figures in its ranks has been used by Washington in a concerted propaganda effort to conceal the sectarian character of the opposition and its ties to Al Qaeda elements.

However, the growing role of Salafist forces has proven politically embarrassing to the US. Thus, for

weeks, US officials have been placing reports in the media stressing that it has CIA operatives working to control the supply of arms to the insurgency—which the *New York Times* described as being "funnelled mostly across the Turkish border by way of a shadowy network of intermediaries including Syria's Muslim Brotherhood and paid for by Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar...."

US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's visit to Istanbul on Saturday aimed to strengthen US/Turkey cooperation and reinforce US operational control of the insurgency. Clinton made her most significant statement when she raised the possibility of establishing a no-fly zone, but her remarks also referenced "very intensive operational planning" by military and intelligence officials that aims to "get into the real details."

Washington's broader regional ambitions were underscored that weekend by coordinated announcements by the Treasury and State Department accusing Iran and Hezbollah of training Syrian army forces. A Treasury statement cited Hezbollah's secretary general, Hassan Nasrallah, as personally overseeing the operation.

Turkey has made repeated indications that it is ready to mount a military incursion into Syria, citing the threat posed by the control established by Kurdish groups over border areas. Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan has warned, "We have three brigades along the border currently conducting manoeuvres there.... It is out of the question for us to tolerate a structure of the terrorist organisation in the north of Syria...."

On August 7, Erdogan made an incendiary attack on Assad, asking, "Can we even say that he is a Muslim?"

Citing the danger of a Kurdish insurrection is not just a device for justifying a military assault on Syria.

Erdogan faces the threat of mounting unrest among Turkey's 20 million Kurds and the prospect of a separatist movement emerging in Syria's northeastern border area.

Syrian border regions are under the de-facto control of the Democratic Union Party (PYD) and the Kurdish National Council (KNC). The PYD is the more substantial force and is affiliated with Turkey's Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK).

Erdogan has attempted to counter the PKK's influence by seeking an accommodation with Massoud Barzani, the president of Iraqi Kurdistan. These efforts have been far from successful, with Barzani lending his support to the effort to establish a Syrian Kurdish enclave. Moreover, the attempt to cultivate Barzani has angered the Sunni-dominated central government in Iraq, particularly a deal to set up a pipeline to carry oil and gas from Kirkuk to Ceyhan and developing trade worth billions of dollars.

Kirkuk is a disputed city that the Kurds want to incorporate into their region. Turkey's foreign minister, Ahmet Davutoglu, this month made a provocative visit to Kurdistan that included a visit to Kirkuk.

Iraqi prime minister Nuri al-Maliki said in a statement Saturday that Turkey is "dealing with the [Kurdistan] region as an independent state, and this is rejected by us."

Total of France has also been told it will be required to sell its minority stake in the Halfaya oilfield in Iraq unless it cancels a deal acquiring licences controlled by the Kurdistan Regional Government.

Writing in *Middle East Online*, James M. Dorsey notes that the potential fallout from the proxy war in Syria "ranges from the exodus of many of its 2.1 million Christians from what they fear will be a Sunni-dominated post-Assad Syria, to the emergence of Kurdish areas in Syria as a new flashpoint in Turkey's intermittent war against Kurdish insurgents. It also risks a greater assertiveness of Turkey's Alevis, a Shiite sect akin to Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's Alawites that account for 20 percent of its population."

For this reason, Erdogan's Syrian policy has aroused significant opposition within Turkey. In *Milliyet*, for example, Metin Munir denounced the government for "seeking to gain points through its pro-Sunni and anti-Jewish policies.... Syria is being divided, which

poses an extreme threat to Turkey."

Erdogan has described Kemal Kilicdaroglu, leader of the main opposition Republican People's Party as being "just like" the Baath Party in Syria.

The PKK calculates that it will succeed in establishing an autonomous or independent region in Syria and can strike its own deal with the US and other imperialist powers. The August 13 edition of *Rudaw*, produced in Erbil, the capital of Iraqi Kurdistan, interviews a prominent former member of the PKK leadership council, Nizamaddin Taj.

He states that a "Syrian Kurdistan" can be created, just as "the Kurds of Iraq benefited from the American invasion of Iraq," providing only that Barzani does not compete with the PKK "due to pressure from Turkey or a goal of seizing power quickly in Syrian Kurdistan."

"The Muslim Brotherhood in Syria is the only party that can seize power after the collapse of Assad, but Israel, the US and Europe are very worried about the Muslim Brotherhood of Syria and believe that they are different than the Muslim Brotherhood groups of Egypt and Tunisia," he surmises. "The world needs a player in Syria that could rival the Sunnis in Syria. The Alawites cannot play this role. Therefore, the Kurds in Syria will become an important partner in the new Syrian state."

Under such incendiary conditions, Erdogan's operations on Syria's border can become not only the occasion for a direct assault on Damascus and Aleppo, in alliance with Washington, but for a conflict that would also be waged on the soil of Iraq and Turkey itself.

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