

US and Turkey planning new military operations along Syrian border

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The US and Turkey are planning joint military operations to seal off the Turkish-Syrian border, US Secretary of State John Kerry and Turkish Foreign Minister Feridun Sinirlioglu told the media in separate remarks.

“Seventy-five percent of Syria's norther border has so far been shut down. And we are entering an operation with the Turks to shut off the remaining 98 kilometers,” Kerry said in a CNN interview Tuesday, two days after departing from the G20 summit in Turkey.

“We have certain plans to terminate the Daesh [Islamic State in Iraq and Syria—ISIS, also referred to as ISIL] presence on our border,” Sinirlioglu told Turkish media Wednesday. “Once these plans are finalised, our operations will intensify. You will see this in the coming days.”

“We are pressing the button for the ‘ISIL-free zone’ that was publicly mentioned earlier,” an unnamed Turkish official told *Hürriyet*.

US Secretary of State John Kerry has described the plans as a “cleaning operation” and said that the operation would begin soon, according to unnamed military officers and diplomats cited by *Hurriyet*.

The “Free Syrian Army” will supply ground forces for the operation and the US and Turkey will provide air support, the officials said. What this means is far from clear, as the Free Syrian Army is largely a political fiction, with the vast majority of the armed militias fighting the Syrian government aligned with either the Islamic State or the Al Nusra Front, the Syrian affiliate of Al Qaeda.

The Pentagon has been operating in the region primarily through Syrian Kurdish forces organized in the YPG or People’s Protection Units, while the Turkish government has attacked these same forces, which are linked to the Turkish Kurdish organization,

the PKK (Kurdistan Workers’ Party) against which Ankara is waging a counterinsurgency campaign.

The Turkish government has been pressing for any border-sealing operation to include the creation of a “safe zone” or “ground zone” inside Syria, which it would undoubtedly use to prosecute its campaign against the Kurds.

The Obama administration has publicly distanced itself from such plans, however. Speaking at the G20 meeting Monday, President Barack Obama cautioned that “a true safe zone requires us to set up ground operations” and could turn into a “magnet” for terror attacks.

The proposed US-Turkish operation is the latest move aimed at deepening the US military's penetration of northern Syria. Recent weeks have seen the US launch new special forces ground operations in the country, marking the first officially acknowledged deployment of US ground forces into Syria.

The US has also joined the surge of airstrikes launched by Russia and France under the pretext of retaliating for last week’s Paris terrorist attacks. On Monday, the US began airstrikes against oil infrastructure said to be controlled by ISIS, bombing a tightly packed set of nearly 300 civilian fuel trucks, destroying at least 115.

Russia has deployed several new weapons systems, never before used in combat, against targets in Syria this week, according to Russia Today. New types of long-range bombers based in Russia attacked suspected ISIS locations with cruise missiles, as did Russian submarines patrolling the eastern Mediterranean. Russian planes flew more than 120 missions and hit more than 200 targets on Tuesday alone.

French forces launched dozens of strikes against northern Syria, with total French strikes over the

weekend surpassing the previous total launched in the entire seven-week-long French air campaign.

British MPs were debating the possibility of strikes by the British air force Wednesday, with signs that the Parliament would vote to approve the new "comprehensive" military package for Syria drawn up by Prime Minister David Cameron.

"The mood has changed. Before they were asking for us to intervene in a civil war, now it is more an act of self-defence against an aggressor," one MP told the Guardian.

Amid the continuing escalation of fighting on the ground and in the air, there are indications that some form of rapprochement may emerge between Russia, France, and possibly the US and other powers.

The Obama administration has markedly softened its rhetoric toward Russia, as part of efforts to forge a political deal with Russia that would de-escalate the conflict and facilitate a negotiated neocolonial carve up of Syria.

Obama referred to Putin as a "constructive partner" after discussions at the G20 in Turkey. The Russian president was similarly conciliatory.

"It's not the right moment to judge who is better and who is worse. It's necessary to look forward and pool efforts to fight the common threat," Putin said.

Putin called Assad a "secondary issue" and has signed onto an agreement supporting a "Syrian-led and Syrian-owned political transition."

Such a deal would likely preserve large sections of the Damascus regime, which has maintained a decades-long alliance with Moscow. Many enclaves now controlled by militia groups tied to the US, Turkey, the GCC and the NATO powers would likely receive de facto autonomy under such an arrangement, which would likely exclude certain radical Islamist factions, such as Al Nusra and the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS).

In effect, the US would allow Russia to keep some degree of its previous influence over Syria in exchange for Moscow's cooperation in stabilizing and containing the social cataclysm produced by four years of CIA-backed civil war.

If the Obama administration is prepared to pursue such a deal in Syria, it will not be out of a desire for peace, but rather as a tactical move to cut US losses as the Pentagon seeks to reposition the bulk of its

resources for a confrontation with China in East Asia and with Russia in Eastern Europe.

At the same time, powerful forces are pushing for various forms of military escalation, making clear that any political deal will face ferocious opposition from within the US political and military-intelligence establishments.

Speaking to an audience of military school cadets in South Carolina, US presidential candidate Jeb Bush called for US forces, including ground forces, to use "overwhelming force" against ISIS.

"The United States—in conjunction with our NATO allies and more Arab partners—will need to increase our presence on the ground," Bush said.

US Senator John McCain on Tuesday similarly called for 10,000 US ground troops to invade Syria in support of an even larger European and Arab ground force. In a report posted by the *Wall Street Journal*, Washington Institute for Near East Policy director Michael Singh called for a new strategy "designed to compel Mr. Assad to step aside or to incentivize his supporters to abandon him."

"Mr. Assad's military position appears stronger than it did months ago, and a recent diplomatic declaration from Vienna is, if anything, weaker on the question of his departure than preceding statements," Singh wrote.

US media are increasingly citing military "experts" to the effect that Russia's military campaign has eliminated the possibility of removing Assad through US-proxy forces and US air strikes alone.

"Drones and air strikes are tools of war, but they are not a strategy. The destruction of the Islamic State requires capable ground forces," a top US army officer told Bloomberg.

"Competent ground forces are fundamental to the joint force equation for finding and defeating adversaries. Attempting to impart this competence to another ground force is folly," a RAND Corporation analyst said.



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