

Syria war escalates in run-up to G20 summit meetings

Johannes Stern, Alex Lantier
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In the run-up to announced meetings between Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan with both US President Barack Obama and Russian President Vladimir Putin at the G-20 summit in China, the NATO intervention in Syria continues to escalate.

Turkish fighters bombed three sites around the Syrian villages of Arab Ezza and al-Ghundura yesterday. These are west of the strategic town of Jarabulus, which was captured by Western-supported militia fighters backed by Turkish armor, artillery and jets on August 24. Turkish forces are now operating roughly in the center of the 90-km stretch of territory that Ankara says it wants to clear from Islamic State (IS) fighters as well as from Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG).

Turkish forces also stepped up operations in Kurdish regions of Turkey itself. The army announced that 27 militants of the banned Kurdistan's Workers' Party (PKK) were killed in the Çukurca district of the southeastern province of Hakkari on Friday.

Speaking ahead of his departure to the G-20 summit, Erdoğan vowed that Ankara would never permit "the establishment of a terror corridor along our southern border in northern Syria." He stressed that the international community did not have to choose between "Daesh [the Islamic State, IS], the YPG, or the PYD [the Syrian Kurdish Democratic Union Party] terrorist organizations."

"There are no differences between these terrorist organizations in terms of method, targets and points of view regarding human life," Erdoğan said, adding that his government viewed "statements from some circles from the West with astonishment." He dismissed claims by US officials that the US-backed YPG militias and the PYD have returned east of the Euphrates River: "They are saying the YPG has crossed back. We are saying, no, they haven't, based on our own observations."

While the NATO powers are all pressing for escalation

in Syria, deep divisions persist between Ankara, whose main aim is to prevent the formation of a Kurdish state in northern Syria, and Washington, which wants to maintain its YPG/PYD proxies as tools against IS. Erdoğan said, "Those who act with the logic of 'the enemy of Daesh is our friend' are deluded and in a position of being a friend to other terror organizations."

Turkish Prime Minister Binali Yıldırım, speaking at a celebration of his first 100 days in office, also said that the Turkish "government will not make concessions" to Kurdish forces inside Turkey. Instead, he reiterated that Turkey, which recently improved its diplomatic ties with Israel and Russia, aims to normalize relations with Egypt and even Syria.

"Turkey has started a serious attempt for normalization of relations with Syria and Egypt. In foreign policy, our principle is to increase our friendships while reducing hostilities," Yıldırım stated.

Putin is still exploiting Ankara's attempts to improve its relationship with Moscow after the aborted US-backed coup against Erdoğan in July. In an interview in the Pacific port city of Vladivostok on Thursday, Putin said he "valued" the Turkish apology for shooting down a Russian bomber deployed to Syria last year. "We see a clear interest on the part of Turkey's president in restoring full-scale relations with Russia," he said.

Asked about Ankara's offensive in Syria, Putin said both countries "have a mutual desire to come to an agreement about the region's problems, including the Syrian one."

The Russian president also signaled that he is in principle open to a deal with the imperialist powers over Syria: "We're gradually, gradually heading in the right direction. I don't rule out that we'll be able to agree on something in the near future and present our agreements to the international community."

According to Bloomberg News, Putin "warned other

powers to accept gradual change in Syria rather than pushing for the overthrow of the country's leader." He cited the examples of Libya and Iraq, where US-led regime change led to the "collapse of the state" and the spread of terrorism. He described talks between Moscow and Washington as "very difficult" due to continuing differences over US support for Islamist militias in Syria.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov complained that Washington is backing forces tied to Al Nusra, the Al Qaeda affiliate in Syria: "Many groups that Americans consider acceptable for negotiations have in fact allied with Al Nusra. Al Nusra, meanwhile, uses them to escape attacks. This is a situation that cannot continue indefinitely."

Despite attempts by Turkish and Russian officials to work out an arrangement with Washington, conflicts between the major powers intervening in Syria are intensifying. Washington and its European allies aim principally to topple Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's regime and deal a humiliating blow to Russia. This agenda is still being actively pursued, even as Washington engages in talks at the G20.

Britain and France called for aggressive action against the Syrian regime after the UN Joint Investigative Mechanism (JIM) issued its report on alleged chemical weapons use in Syria, on Tuesday.

To be blunt, such allegations of Syrian chemical weapons use, at this point, have no credibility whatsoever. The NATO powers have repeatedly used fabricated reports of Syrian poison gas attacks, like at Houla in 2012 and Ghouta in 2013, to concoct a case for a US-led war against Syria based on lies, presenting war as an act of conscience to halt attacks on civilians. They exploited the Houla massacre to withdraw their ambassadors from Syria; Washington and Paris nearly used the Ghouta attack as a *casus belli* to bomb Damascus in September 2013.

Both massacres, it turned out, were carried out by the US-backed opposition, according to detailed reports by the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung and investigative reporter Seymour Hersh, respectively. After the FAZ report on the Houla massacre, the BBC admitted that its reporting had been based purely on opposition statements.

The JIM report appears to have similarly been concocted with the aim of providing fuel to the imperialist war drive against Syria.

While the JIM issued its report to the public with great fanfare last week and presented it to the UN Security Council this week, it had little concrete evidence. Citing

nine alleged chemical attacks in Syria, it declared that there was "sufficient" evidence to conclude that poison gas was used in three of the nine cases. It attributed two to the Assad regime using chlorine, a 21 April 2014 attack in Talmenes and a 16 March 2015 attack in Sarmin involving primitive barrel bombs dropped from helicopters, and one, a 16 March 2015 mustard gas attack in Marea, to ISIS.

Even though the JIM report presented no significant evidence to support its claims, London and Paris demanded that the UN Security Council respond by imposing new sanctions on Syria. British Ambassador to the UN Matthew Rycroft said the UN Security Council would be "looking at the imposition of sanctions and some form of accountability within international legal mechanisms," while French Ambassador to the UN François Delattre called for a "quick and strong Security Council response," such as "sanctions on those who are responsible for these acts."

Insofar as the JIM report did not name anyone responsible for ordering the attacks, or prove that the opposition—which has previously overrun Syrian airfields—was not using helicopters and barrel bombs, however, its conclusions are worthless.

After listening to the presentation of the JIM report, Russian Ambassador to the UN Vitaly Churkin charged that evidence in the report "could have been fabricated by the forces opposed to Damascus and terrorist groups, perhaps not without outside help." He added, "There is nobody to sanction in the report which has been issued. It has no names, it contains no specifics... If we are to be professional, we need to question all the conclusions."

Syrian Ambassador Bashar Jaafari objected that the JIM's "conclusions lack any physical evidence, whether by samples or medical reports that chlorine was used."



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