

Turkey, Russia, Iran sign deal on Syria after shooting of Russian ambassador

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Yesterday, top Russian, Turkish, and Iranian officials met in Moscow and signed a declaration they billed as ending the US-instigated war in Syria. Coming after Russian-backed Syrian army units captured the key city of Aleppo from US-backed Islamist fighters, the deal shows that moves to improve ties between the three countries are continuing despite Monday's assassination of Russia's ambassador to Turkey, Andrei Karlov.

"Today, experts are working on the text of the Moscow declaration on immediate steps towards resolving the Syrian crisis. It is a thorough, extremely necessary document," Russian Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu said at a meeting with his Iranian counterpart, Hossein Dehghan.

Shoigu dismissed US and European initiatives in Syria, declaring that "attempts to agree on joint efforts undertaken by the US or their partners were doomed. ... None of them exerted real influence on the situation on the ground."

The initiative was hailed by officials from Turkey, in a sharp turnaround from Turkey's support for US-backed Islamist opposition militias in the early years of the war. "Now we are observing a very successful operation to liberate eastern Aleppo from fighters, the evacuation of the families of the opposition from Aleppo," said Turkish National Defence Minister Fikri I?k.

Meeting with his Russian and Iranian counterparts, Sergei Lavrov and Javad Zarif, Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu said cooperation between Russia, Turkey, and Iran had "brought about definite successes" in Aleppo. He said he hoped "to spread it to other districts of Syria."

The expulsion of the Islamist opposition from Aleppo and developing collaboration between Moscow, Ankara, and Tehran mark a major setback for Washington and its European allies. For five years, US imperialism tried to topple Syrian President Bashar al-Assad by backing

Islamist militias, a strategy it later expanded to include backing Kurdish nationalist forces in Syria, as well. While this operation was marketed as a revolution in the US and European media, it collapsed because the US-backed forces lacked any real popular support.

Though Turkey is a NATO ally of the United States, Ankara is reacting to the victory of the Syrian regime, Russia, and Iran in Aleppo by developing ever closer ties to Russia. During the launch of a Turkish-Russian joint investigation into Karlov's murder, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said Ankara and Moscow would "not let anyone harm Turkish-Russian relations."

Anonymous Turkish officials told the media that Moscow and Ankara both "know" that the US-based movement of exiled cleric Fethullah Gülen was behind the assassination of Karlov.

This drew a protest from US Secretary of State John Kerry, who criticized "rhetoric coming out of Turkey with respect to American involvement or support, tacit or otherwise, for this unspeakable assassination yesterday because of the presence of Mr Gülen here in the United States."

These events point to the deep instability in world politics and the rising danger of world war after the NATO powers' setback in Syria, and the election as US president of Donald Trump, who has openly questioned whether the NATO alliance serves US interests. Turkey has been a NATO ally of the United States for six decades, with the second-largest army of the alliance. Yet, after five years of war in Syria during which the NATO powers launched a warmongering campaign against Russia, the Turkish regime is moving ever closer to Russia.

Since 2012, Ankara's NATO partners have repeatedly expressed their concern over Turkey's possible split from its Western allies, as conflict between Washington and Ankara came out over US support to Kurdish nationalists,

which the Turkish government denounces as terrorist organizations.

Last year, after the territorial gains of the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq (ISIS), the Obama administration founded the so-called Syrian Democratic Forces. It engaged the Syrian Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD), the Syrian branch of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), and its militia, the People's Protection Units (YPG), as its main proxies in Syria. This terrified Ankara, which views Kurdish separatism in Turkey and neighbouring Syria as an existential threat.

The deep crisis of the Turkish regime's foreign policy intensified when, in November 2015, Turkey shot down a Russian jet over Syria. While Moscow stepped up its deployment of missile units, fighters, and warships to the region—threatening an all-out war with Turkey that could have escalated into a world war between NATO and Russia—it ultimately only imposed economic sanctions on Turkey.

Amid escalating damage to the Turkish economy and fears that NATO allies, notably in Europe, might not intervene to aid Turkey in a war with Russia, the Turkish regime shifted its foreign policy. It began mentioning a possible rapprochement with Russia and the Syrian regime. In May 2016, Erdogan discharged his prime minister, Ahmet Davutoglu, who had previously declared that he ordered the shooting down of the Russian fighter, and apologized to Russia.

This set the stage for Washington and Berlin to tacitly back a coup attempt that nearly succeeded against Erdogan on July 15, and which Ankara blamed on Gülen's movement. It was reportedly averted thanks to timely warnings from Russia. This inflamed the already explosive tensions not only inside Turkey, but above all, between Erdogan's government and the major NATO powers.

The Turkish government has reacted by manoeuvring ever more desperately between its ostensible allies in NATO and the major Eurasian powers, Russia and China. In recent months, amid growing economic ties between China and Turkey, Erdogan has repeatedly declared that Turkey might join the China-led Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), claiming this would allow Ankara "to act more freely."

This drew a sharp reaction from NATO. Visiting Istanbul last month for the NATO Parliamentarians Assembly, NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg met with Erdogan and said, "I am sure Turkey will do nothing that could impair the concept of joint defence ... and

NATO unity."

Above all, however, Ankara sought closer ties to Russia. Earlier this month, the Russian and Turkish prime ministers, Dmitri Medvedev and Binali Yildirim, met in Moscow. They agreed that "the normalization of the Syrian situation is a priority task for our countries and it will definitely serve to the benefit of the whole region, not to mention Syria, which is currently in a very complicated situation."

On December 6, Yildirim criticized NATO for "hesitation" and "foot-dragging" in Syria: "Nice words are exchanged about defending civilization against terrorism. But the big terrorist networks challenging us today operate across borders." He described the Turkish-Russian initiative as a push for a "forceful and united international front to eradicate terrorism."

Erdogan's government also seems to hope the Trump administration will take a "soft" line on Russia and offer Turkey more political leeway. Speaking to the pro-government *Daily Sabah* paper on December 5, Turkish Foreign Minister Çavuşoğlu said, "The Trump administration is one we could cooperate with," claiming that Trump is "a pragmatic person. Many of our views overlap."

Such hopes that Trump's election will stabilize the situation and dampen explosive tensions in US relations with Turkey and the Middle East are built on quicksand. Trump has announced an aggressive "America first" policy and is signalling an offensive against China, as well as the cancellation of the nuclear treaty with Iran. What is emerging is not a stabilization of US imperialist policy, but the eruption of even more explosive crises.



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