

Russia, Iran and Turkey issue joint declaration on Syrian settlement

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After meeting in Moscow on Tuesday, top officials of the Russian, Iranian and Turkish governments issued a joint eight-point statement of principles calling for the extension of a ceasefire throughout Syria and a negotiated settlement between the Syrian government and its opponents.

Much of the statement, dubbed by Russian officials the “Moscow Declaration,” was boilerplate. It declared the three countries’ support for “the sovereignty, independence, unity and territorial integrity of the Syrian Arab Republic,” while affirming that “there is no military solution to the Syrian conflict.”

The timing of the statement and the geopolitical alignment of its three signatories, however, make the document extraordinarily troubling for Washington.

The meeting in Moscow was convened on the basis of the stunning defeat delivered to the nearly six-year-old US-orchestrated war for regime change in Syria. Last week, Syrian forces, backed by Russia and Iran, retook eastern Aleppo, the last urban stronghold of the Islamist militias that served as US proxy forces in the fight against the Syrian government of President Bashar al-Assad.

That Turkey has now joined with Assad’s key allies, Russia and Iran, is an indication of the severity of this defeat. Previously, Turkey had served as a key state sponsor of the Al Qaeda-linked militias fighting in Syria, allowing its territory to be used as a conduit for the shipment of CIA-supplied arms and foreign fighters into the country, while dispatching elements of its security forces to provide them aid and training.

Over the past week, however, Turkey joined with Russia in brokering a ceasefire with the so-called “rebels” in eastern Aleppo, along with their evacuation together with that of thousands of civilians from the besieged enclave.

The Moscow statement declared that the three countries “welcome joint efforts in eastern Aleppo allowing for

voluntary evacuation of civilians and organized departure of the armed opposition.” The statement stands in sharp contrast to the position taken by Washington, which has waged a propaganda campaign denouncing the government’s retaking of Aleppo as a “massacre” and even “genocide.”

That Turkey, a key NATO ally for the last six decades, with the second largest army in the US-led military alliance, has joined with the two countries viewed by Washington as the principal obstacles to its drive to assert hegemony over the Middle East and Eurasia is a serious blow to US policy.

The Turkish government has sought a rapprochement with Moscow since last May, when it began efforts to assuage tensions that erupted after the Turkish air force carried out an ambush shootdown of a Russian warplane operating on the Turkish-Syrian border in November of 2015, raising the threat of an armed conflict between the two countries and potentially drawing NATO into a war with nuclear-armed Russia.

Relations between the two countries grew closer after the abortive military coup against the Turkish government of Recep Tayyip Erdogan last July, which Erdogan and his supporters blamed on Washington and Berlin.

The Erdogan government has also clashed with Washington over the US alliance with the YPG, a Syrian Kurdish militia affiliated with the Turkish Kurdish PKK (Kurdistan Workers Party), which Ankara regards as a terrorist organization and against which it has waged a protracted counterinsurgency campaign. Erdogan ordered the Turkish army into Syria last August, ostensibly to join the US campaign against the Islamic State (ISIS), but more importantly to block the YPG from establishing a de facto Kurdish state on its border.

The issuing of the Moscow statement came on the heels of Monday’s assassination in Ankara of the Russian ambassador, Andrei Karlov, by an off-duty member of an

elite Turkish police unit. While there was initial speculation that the killing could provoke a crisis between Russia and Turkey, the two governments have insisted that they are united in response to the assassination, while pro-government media and officials in both countries have made statements blaming Washington and NATO for the crime.

The affiliations and motives of the killer, 22-year-old Mevlut Mert Altintas, remain in dispute. Erdogan made a statement Wednesday categorically identifying Altintas as a supporter of the opposition Muslim cleric Fethullah Gulen, who lives in self-exile in Pennsylvania.

Erdogan and his ruling AKP party blamed Gulen supporters for the abortive July coup, and the government has since launched a massive purge of the military, the police forces and the civil service that has seen over 100,000 people sacked and some 37,000 detained.

Meanwhile, Jaish al-Fatah (Army of Conquest), the joint command center of Islamist militias dominated by the Syrian Al Qaeda affiliate, issued a statement Wednesday claiming responsibility for the assassination. Such an affiliation is in line with the statements made by the assassin after pumping nine bullets into the Russian ambassador.

While it has been widely reported that he shouted out, “Don’t forget about Aleppo, don’t forget about Syria,” it was less widely acknowledged that he began his rant in Arabic, proclaiming himself one of those “who give Mohammed our allegiance for jihad,” a slogan used by Al Qaeda.

The Turkish prosecutor’s office has announced that it is investigating why police who responded to the scene of the assassination shot and killed the assassin rather than seeking to capture him. Sections of the Turkish media have also raised questions on the same subject, pointing out that killing Altintas served to impede the investigation into his real motives. Erdogan reacted angrily to the questions, suggesting that failing to kill him could have cost more lives.

The Turkish government has obvious motives for pinning the killing on the Gulenists, which would serve to legitimize its police-state crackdown while diverting attention from the deep ties forged between the Turkish security forces and the Islamists in Syria during the war for regime change against Assad.

The editorial reaction to the assassination and the subsequent trilateral meeting in Moscow by the two “papers of record” of the US political establishment Wednesday was telling.

New York Times noted that “the most important thing to say about Monday’s dramatic assassination of Russia’s ambassador to Turkey by a lone gunman is that it has not ruptured relations between the two countries.” It concluded that “losing Turkey as an ally would be another unacceptable casualty of the Syrian war.”

The *Washington Post* was more blunt, stating that the assassination “might have been expected to derail a fragile detente between the regimes of Vladimir Putin and Recep Tayyip Erdogan.” The newspaper continued: “Instead, it has served to underline a budding alliance that could have the effect of excluding the United States from the endgame of Syria’s civil war and critically weakening US influence across the Middle East.”

The paper described the killing as a “sign that Russia may pay a price in blowback for its intervention in Syria,” but concluded that Washington may be facing “a peace [in Syria] that will empower a string of anti-US strongmen from Damascus and Tehran to Ankara and Moscow.”

These suggestions by the two most influential US newspapers that a political assassination has had the opposite of the desired effect have ominous implications, given the level of anti-Russian hysteria whipped up in recent months by both the US government and the corporate media.

This anti-Russian campaign saw the former director of the CIA, Michael Morell, tell a television interviewer last August that Washington should respond to the events in Syria by “covertly” telling the “moderate” US-backed rebels “to go after the Russians.” Asked if he meant “killing Russians,” Morell answered in the affirmative.

In his end-of-year press conference last week, President Obama said that Washington would retaliate against Moscow over allegations of Russian interference in the US election “at a time and place of our own choosing.”

Whether or not Washington had a direct hand in the murder of Ambassador Karlov, evidence points to the killing having been carried out by someone affiliated with the US proxy forces in Syria. More fundamentally, the initial reaction to the reversals for US policy in the Middle East suggest that far greater acts of violence are being prepared.



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