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Putin's Line in the Sand: No Regime Change in Syria

By Mike Whitney

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“Obama administration officials, who have been negotiating with Turkey for months, said Thursday that they had reached an agreement for manned and unmanned American warplanes to carry out aerial attacks on Islamic State positions from air bases at Incirlik and Diyarbakir. The agreement was described by one senior administration official as a “game changer.”

The Syrian war can be divided into two parts: The pre-Incirlik period and the post-Incirlik period. The pre-Incirlik period is roughly the four year stretch during which US-backed Islamic militias and al Qaeda-linked groups fought the Syrian army with the intention of removing President Bashar al Assad from power. This first phase of the war ended in a draw.

The post-Incirlik period looks like it could produce an entirely different outcome due to the fact that the US will be able to deploy its drones and warplanes from a Turkish airbase (Incirlik) that's just 15 minutes flying-time from Syria. That will boost the number of sorties the USAF can be able to carry out while increasing the effectiveness of its jihadi forces on the ground which will conduct their operations under the protection of US air cover. This will greatly improve their chances for success.

The *New York Times* calls the Incirlik deal a “game-changer” which is an understatement. By allowing US F-16s to patrol the skies over Syria, Washington will impose a de facto no-fly zone over the country severely limiting Assad's ability to battle the US-backed militias that have

seized large swaths of the countryside and are now descending on Damascus. And while the war cannot be won by airpower alone, this new tactical reality tilts the playing field in favor the jihadis. In other words, the Incirlik agreement changes everything.



The Obama administration now believes that regime change is within its reach. Yes, they know it will require some back-up from US Special Forces and Turkish combat troops, but it's all doable. This is why Obama has shrugged off Russia's plan for a transitional government or for forming a coalition to defeat ISIS. The US doesn't have to compromise on these matters because, after all, it has a strategically-located airbase from which it can protect its proxy-army, bomb cross-border targets, and control the skies over Syria. All Obama needs to do is intensify the war effort, put a little more pressure on Assad, and wait for the regime to collapse. This is why we should expect a dramatic escalation as we begin Phase 2 of the conflict.

Russian President Vladimir Putin knows this, which is why he's sending more weapons, supplies and advisors to Syria. He's signaling to Washington that he knows what they're up to and that he'll respond if they carry things too far. In an interview with Russia's state Channel 1, Putin said, "We have our ideas about what we will do and how we will do it in case the situation develops toward the use of force or otherwise. We have our plans."

The administration is very nervous about Putin's plans which is why they keep probing to see if they can figure out what he has up his sleeve. Just days ago, Secretary of State John Kerry phoned his Russian counterpart Sergei Lavrov to express his concerns about "an imminent enhanced Russian military buildup" in Syria. The call was a clumsy attempt to trick Lavrov into volunteering information that might shed light on what Moscow intends to do if Washington goes ahead with its regime change strategy. But Russia's foreign minister didn't take the bait. He stuck to his script and didn't tell Kerry anything he didn't already know.

But the fact is, Putin is not going to allow Assad to be removed by force. It's that simple. Obama and his advisors suspect this, but they are not 100 percent certain so they keep looking for confirmation one way or the other. But Putin is not going to provide a clear answer because he doesn't want to tip his hand or appear confrontational. But that doesn't mean he's not resolute. He is, and Washington knows it. In effect, Putin has drawn a line in the sand and told the US that if they cross that line, there's going to be trouble.

So it's up to Obama really. He can either seek a peaceful solution along the lines that Moscow has recommended or push for regime change and risk a confrontation with Russia. Those are the two choices.

Unfortunately, Washington doesn't have an "off" switch anymore, so changing policy is really not in the cards. Instead, the US war machine will continue to lumber ahead erratically until it hits an impasse and sputters to a halt. Once again, the immovable object will prevail over the unstoppable force (as it did in Ukraine), albeit at great cost to the battered people of Syria, their nation and the entire region.

Keep in mind, that the imperial plan for Syria is subtler than many people realize. As the Brookings Institute's Michael E. O'Hanlon states in his piece titled "Deconstructing Syria: A new strategy for America's most hopeless war":

"The plan... would not explicitly seek to overthrow him (Assad), so much as deny him control of territory that he might still aspire to govern again. The autonomous zones would be liberated with the clear understanding that there was no going back to rule by Assad or a successor. In any case, Assad would not be a military target under this concept, but areas he currently controls... would be. And if Assad delayed too long in accepting a deal for exile, he could inevitably face direct dangers to his rule and even his person." ("Deconstructing Syria: A new strategy for America's most hopeless war", Michael E. O'Hanlon, Brookings Institute)

This is the basic plan: To seize major cities and large parts of the countryside, disrupt supply-lines and destroy vital civilian infrastructure, and to progressively undermine Assad's ability to govern the country. The ultimate goal is to break the state into a million disconnected enclaves ruled by armed mercenaries, al Qaida-linked affiliates, and local warlords. This is Washington's diabolical plan for Syria. It is strikingly similar to the Zionist plan to "effect the division of the whole area into small states by the dissolution of all existing Arab states." ("The Zionist Plan for the Middle East", Israel Shahak) In fact, it is virtually identical.

It's clear that Obama is emboldened by the Incirlik deal and believes that, with Turkey's help, he can achieve US imperial ambitions in Syria. But it's not going to happen. Russia, Iran and Hezbollah are prepared to defend their ally Assad and stop Washington dead-in-its-tracks. Obama will have succeeded in destroying another sovereign nation and scattering its people across the Middle East and Europe. But the US mission will fall short of its original objectives. There will be no regime change in Syria. Putin, Nasrallah and Khamenei will make sure of it.