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Putin's “Endgame” in Syria

By Mike Whitney
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Russia doesn't want to fight a war with Turkey, so Russian generals devised a simple, but effective plan to discourage Turkey from taking any action that could lead to a clash between the two nations.

Last week, Russian warplanes intruded into Turkish airspace twice. Both incidents caused consternation in Ankara and send Turkish leaders into a furor. On both occasions, officials in Moscow politely apologized for the incursions claiming they were unintentional ("navigational errors") and that they would try to avoid similar intrusions in the future.

Then there was a third incident, a more serious incident, that was not a mistake. It was clearly intended to send a message to Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. Here's a short summary of what happened from an article at the World Socialist Web Site:

"Turkish officials claimed a third incident on Monday, when an unidentified MiG-29 fighter jet locked its radar for four and a half minutes on eight Turkish F-16 jets that were on patrol on their side of the border, in apparent preparation to open fire." ("US, NATO step up threats to Russia over Syria", World Socialist Web Site)

This was no mistake. The only time a fighter pilot adopts these protocols is when he plans to take down an enemy plane. This was a message, and while it might have been over-the-heads of the politicians and the media but, I assure you, every general in the Turkish High-Command knows what's it means. This is a wake-up call. Moscow is indicating that there's a new sheriff in town and that Turkey had better behave itself or there's going to be trouble. There's not going to be any US-Turkey no-fly zone over North Syria, there's not going to be any aerial attacks on Syrian sites from the Turkish side of the border, and there certainly is not going to be any ground invasion of Turkish troops into Syria. The Russian Aerospace Defence Forces now control the skies over Syria and they are determined to defend Syria's sovereign borders. That's the message. Period.

This is a good example of how "preemption" can actually prevent conflicts rather than starting them. By firing a shot over Turkey's bow, Moscow has dampened Erdogan's plan to annex part of N. Syria and declare it a "safe zone". Turkey will have to scrap that plan now realizing that any attempt to seize-and-hold Syrian territory will trigger a swift and powerful Russian retaliation. Seen in this light, Russia's incursion looks like an extremely effective way to prevent a broader war by simply telegraphing to potential adversaries what they can and can't do. Simply put: Putin has rewritten the rules of the game in Syria and Erdogan had better comply or else. Here's more on Turkey from Patrick Cockburn in The Independent:

"A Turkish ground invasion into Syria, though still a possibility, would now be riskier with Russian aircraft operating in areas where Turkey would be most likely to launch an incursion.

The danger for the Turks is that they now have two Kurdish quasi-states, one in Syria and one in Iraq, immediately to the south. Worse, the Syrian-Kurdish one...is run by the Democratic Union Party (PYD) which is effectively the Syrian branch of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) which has been fighting the Turkish state since 1984. Any insurgency by the PKK in Kurdish areas in

south-east Turkey in future will be strengthened by the fact that the PKK has a de facto state of its own.

It appears that Turkey's four-year attempt to overthrow President Bashar al-Assad has failed. It is unclear what Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan can do about this since support from Nato is at this stage purely rhetorical. As for Turkey's relations with Russia, Mr Erdogan says that any attack on Turkey is an attack on Nato and that "if Russia loses a friend like Turkey with whom it has co-operated on many issues, it will lose a lot." But in Syria, at least, it appears that it is Turkey that is the loser." ("Russia in Syria: Russian Radar Locks on to Turkish Fighter Jets", The Unz Review)

Poor Erdogan. He rolled the dice and came up snake-eyes. He figured he could expand his would-be Ottoman Empire into Northern Syria, and now his dream is in a shambles. Should he deploy his warplanes to N Syria and openly challenge the Russian airforce? No, he's not that foolish. He's going to stay on his side of the border, stomp his feet, and lash out at "evil Putin", but at the end of the day, he'll do nothing.

And Washington's not going to do anything either. Yes, Hillary and McCain have been calling for a no-fly zone over Syria, but that's not going to happen. Putin won't allow it and neither will the Security Council. And, on what pretext anyway? Is Obama really going to request a no-fly zone on the basis that Putin is killing "moderate" terrorists along with the "extreme" terrorists? That's not a very compelling argument, in fact, even the American people are having a hard time swallowing that one. If Obama wants something from Putin, he's going to have sit-down at a bargaining table and hash out a deal. So far, he has refused to do that, because he still thinks regime change is within his grasp. There are signs of this everywhere like this article in Turkey's Today's Zaman titled "İncirlik base to increase capacity by 2,250 to accommodate new personnel":

"A tent city within İncirlik has been undergoing reconstruction for modern prefabricated houses, which will host 2,250 US military personnel, the Doğan news agency reported on Friday. During the Gulf War of 1991, a tent city was established to accommodate military personnel serving with Operation Provide Comfort (OPC) and was shut down with the end of the OPC.

On Aug. 20, work began to transform the site of the tent city into a new area named "Patriot Town." After construction is completed, the İncirlik base will have the largest capacity among the US bases in Europe...

The expansion of the İncirlik base's capacity comes at a time when Russia has launched the biggest intervention in the Middle East in decades....Moscow's intervention means the conflict in Syria has been transformed from a proxy war.. into an international conflict in which the world's main military powers... are directly involved in fighting." ("İncirlik base to increase capacity by 2,250 to accommodate new personnel", Today's Zaman)

This article smacks of US ambitions in the Middle East. As readers can plainly see, Washington is gearing up for another war just like it did in 1991. And the US air war is going to be launched

from “Patriot Town” at Incirlik just like we’ve been predicting since July when the deal was finalized. Here’s more background from an article at Hurriyet:

“U.S. Air Force Central Command has started deploying search and rescue helicopters and airmen at Turkey’s southeastern Diyarbakir Air Base in order to help with recovery operations in neighboring Iraq and Syria, it has announced....

NATO’s Supreme Allied Commander in Europe and the commander of U.S. European Command, Gen. Phillip Breedlove, has said the mission will be temporary.

“We will be guests of the government of Turkey at Diyarbakir Air Base. There are no plans for a permanent U.S. presence at this location ... This marks yet another successful cooperative effort between the Turkish and U.S. militaries,” Breedlove said.” (“US deploys recovery aircraft in Turkey’s southeast“, Hurriyet)

“US Search and rescue helicopters” just a couple miles from Turkey’s southeastern border?

Yep. In other words, if an F-16 is shot down somewhere over Syria while trying to impose an illegal no-fly zone, then— Presto— the search and rescue helicopters are just 20 minutes away.

How convenient.

So you can see that— even though Putin has thrown a wrench in the works— the Obama team is still moving ahead with its “Topple Assad” plan. Nothing has changed, the Russian intervention just makes the future much more uncertain which is why frustrated geopolitical strategists, like Zbigniew Brzezinski, have begun to pop-up in the op-ed pages of leading newspapers blasting Putin for sabotaging their plans for regional hegemony. It’s worth noting that Brzezinski is the spiritual godfather of Islamic extremism, the man who figured out how religious nutcases could be used to foment hysteria and advance US geopolitical objectives around the world. Thus, it’s only natural that Brzezinski would want to offer his advice now in a desperate effort to avoid a legacy of failure and disgrace. Check out this clip from Politico:

“The United States should threaten to retaliate if Russia does not stop attacking U.S. assets in Syria, former national security adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski wrote in a Financial Times op-ed published Sunday, urging “strategic boldness,” with American credibility in the Middle East and the region itself at stake....And if Russia continues to pursue non-ISIL targets, the U.S. should retaliate, he added.

“In these rapidly unfolding circumstances the U.S. has only one real option if it is to protect its wider stakes in the region: to convey to Moscow the demand that it cease and desist from military actions that directly affect American assets,” he said.” (“Brzezinski: Obama should retaliate if Russia doesn’t stop attacking U.S. assets“, Politico)

The people who Brzezinski breezily refers to as “American assets” in Syria are terrorists. It’s that simple. Putin doesn’t distinguish between the “moderate” terrorists and the “radical” terrorists, the good terrorists and the bad terrorists. It’s a joke. They’re all in the same pool and they’re all going to meet the same fate. They all have to be rooted out, apprehended or killed. End of story.

By tweaking the war on terror narrative in a way that supports some, but condemns others, the Obama administration has backed themselves into an ideological cul de sac from which there is no way out. What they are doing is wrong and they know it is wrong. And that’s why it’s going to be so difficult to make the case for war. In a recent “must see” interview, Putin called out Obama on this very point. Here’s what he said:

“President Obama frequently mentions the threat of ISIS. Well, who on earth armed them? And who created the political climate that facilitated the current situation? Who delivered arms to the area? Do you really not know who is fighting in Syria? They’re mercenaries mostly. They are paid money. Mercenaries work for whatever side pays more. We even know how much they are paid. We know they fight for awhile and then see that someone else pays a little more, so they go there.....

The US says “We must support the civilized, democratic opposition in Syria”. So they support them, arm them, and then they join ISIS. Is it impossible for the US to think one step ahead? We do not support this kind of policy at all. We think it’s wrong.” (Putin explains who started ISIS, you tube, 1:38 to 4:03)

See? Everyone knows what’s going on. Barack Obama is not going to initiate a confrontation with Russia to defend a fundamentally immoral CIA program that has gone south. He will, however, do what the US always does when dealing with an adversary that can actually defend itself. He’s going to hector, harass, threaten, demean, demonize, ridicule, and bully. He might launch another attack on the ruble, or fiddle with oil prices or impose more economic sanctions. But he’s not going to start a war with Russia, that’s just not going to happen.

But don’t give up hope just yet, after all, there is a silver lining to this fiasco, and all of the main players know exactly what it is.

It’s called Geneva. Geneva is the endgame.

Geneva is the UN-backed road map for ending the war in Syria. Its provisions allow for the “establishment of a transitional governing body”, the “participation of all groups... in a meaningful national dialogue,” and “free and fair multi-party elections.”

The treaty is straightforward and uncontroversial. The one sticking point, is whether Assad will be allowed to participate in the transitional government or not.

Putin says “Yes”. Obama says “No”.

Putin is going to win this battle. Eventually, the administration will cave in and withdraw their demand that Assad step down. Their plans for regime change through the use of jihadi-proxies

will have failed, and Putin will have moved the Middle East one step closer to a lasting peace and genuine security.

That's the silver lining and that's how the war in Syria will end.