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Russia in Syria: Air Strikes Pose Twin Threat to Turkey by Keeping Assad in Power and Strengthening Kurdish Threat

The country is finding itself increasingly at odds with the US, Russia and Iran over developments in the conflict

PATRICK COCKBURN
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Russian planes carried out 71 sorties and 118 air strikes against Islamic fighters in Syria over the past two days compared to just one air strike by the US-led coalition – and this single strike, against a mortar position, was the first for four days.

The Russian air campaign in Syria is far more intense than the US-led attempt to contain the “Islamic State” (Isis) that has focused on helping the Syrian Kurds and attacking Isis-controlled oil facilities in eastern Syria. Countries affected by the Syrian conflict sense that its nature is changing and are seeking new strategies to take account of this.

The US says it will increase the number of its air strikes and possibly make limited use of special forces to target Isis leaders. The problem for the US is that, aside from Syrian-Kurdish Peoples’ Protection Units (YPG), which number about 25,000 fighters, it does not have an effective partner on the ground in Syria capable of identifying and giving the coordinates of targets to attack. Russia is providing an air force for the Syrian army, the largest military force in Syria and one which, unlike the Kurds, is not confined to one corner of the country.

Turkey is seeking an effective way to respond to two developments in Syria this year that are much against its interests. One is the start of Russian air strikes in support of President Bashar al-Assad on 30 September which makes Turkey's policy of removing the Syrian leader, even if he is to be allowed to stay for a transition period, look unrealistic. The Russian presence also makes any direct Turkish military intervention increasingly risky.

All attention in Turkey is on the parliamentary elections on 1 November, but last Sunday there was an ominous clash in Tal Abyad, a town on the Syrian-Kurdish border captured by the YPG from Isis in June, in which Turkish forces twice opened fire with machine guns on the Kurdish paramilitaries. Nobody was injured, but the Turkish Prime Minister, Ahmet Davutoglu, confirmed that the Turkish army had targeted the YPG. He said that Turkey would not allow the Syrian Kurdish force "to go west of the Euphrates and that we would hit it the moment it did. We hit it twice."

Although it is not playing much of a role in the election, Turkey's policy towards the war in Syria has been a complete failure. Its aim was to get rid of Mr Assad and his regime, but both are still power. Even more seriously, whatever Ankara's intentions at the start of the conflict in 2011, it did not dream that four years later the Syrian Kurds, 10 per cent of the Syrian population, would have established a de facto state they call Rojava in north-east Syria which runs along half of Turkey's 550-mile Syrian Kurdish border.

Furthermore, the mini-state is tightly controlled by the PYD, the Syrian branch of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) with whom the Turkish army has been fighting since 1984.

As uprisings overthrew or destabilised regimes across the Arab world in 2011, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, then Prime Minister, and his Justice and Development Party, imagined that what was lauded in the West as their successful "moderate Islamist" government would be the model for incoming regimes everywhere.

But this never happened and today Turkey sees the Syrian Kurds – controlling a swathe of territory between the Tigris and the Euphrates – expanding under the cover of US air strikes along its southern frontier. Hence, Mr Davutoglu's warning against the YPG crossing the Euphrates and seizing Jarabulus, the last Isis-held border crossing with Turkey, and then pushing on to link up with the Kurdish enclave at Afrin.

This is a serious threat to Turkey. Its access to Syria and ability to influence events there is becoming more limited. Professor Serat Guvenc, of the Department of Foreign Relations at Kadir Has University in Istanbul, says that, if this happens, "Turkey will be insulated from the Sunni Arab Middle East".

Cross-border military intervention by the Turkish armed forces might prevent the YPG advancing to Afrin, but Professor Guvenc, while denying any professional military knowledge, says this would require an army corps or perhaps 35,000 soldiers. It is also a move that would be opposed by the US and Russia.

Turkey is a member of Nato and over Syria is aligned with Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the Sunni states of the Gulf. But it is increasingly at odds with Russia and Iran, two powers in its near neighbourhood, and has serious differences with the US over its Syrian policy.

A shooting war with the Syrian Kurds would be bound to fuel the conflict between the Turkish state and its Kurdish minority. Few Turkish voters know or care about the failure of Turkey's policy in Syria, but it is already having a calamitous effect on their lives.