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Syria: the dangers of global posturing

The announcement that NATO is to station missiles on Turkey's border confirms the internationalisation of the conflict.

Tim Black

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On Tuesday, NATO approved the deployment of 'Patriot' anti-missile batteries along its member Turkey's border with Syria. Speaking on behalf of NATO, US secretary of state Hillary Clinton was in no doubt as to what this meant. It was a clear message to Syria: 'Turkey is backed by its allies.'

But neither should we be any doubt as to what the arraying of NATO-sponsored missiles against Bashar al-Assad's depleted arsenal means. It signifies the further, dangerous internationalisation of an already dangerously internationalised conflict. Yes, the ostensible justification for deploying the Patriots may be pragmatically security conscious – to deal with any potential chemical-weapons strike from Syria. But what it signifies is unmistakable: the West, in the shape of a Turkey-fronted NATO, is militarily set against Assad's rapidly decomposing regime. As for the Syrian people themselves, the people in whose name any regime change will be justified, they have been sidelined long ago.

That, of course, is always the problem with external intervention into the struggles and conflicts of another country. It transforms the affairs of a people, their struggles and their aspirations, into the affairs, struggles and aspirations of others. And as such, the interests of others begin to inform a conflict, shaping and directing the struggle. This is no less apparent in Syria than it was

in Libya or Iraq (two countries that have paid for intervention with massive political instability and interminable internecine conflict).

In the case of Syria, the increasing role of Turkey has been particularly striking. At the start of the uprising in March 2011, the attitude of Turkey's ruling party, the moderately Islamist AKP, was conciliatory. The Turkish government urged Assad to implement democratic reform, even drafting a speech for the Syrian president to read out to the restive populace. By August, when it became clear that the conflict was becoming more intractable, and the situation more volatile, Turkey shifted its allegiances to the anti-Assad groups. In rhetoric, the Turkish government condemned Assad; in practice, it played host to the pseudo-official opposition, the Syrian National Council, and provided a de facto base for the armed umbrella group, the Free Syrian Army.

Turkey has certainly used the spiralling conflict in Syria to indulge in a spot of moral grandstanding, too. It has provided prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan's government with a stage on which to demonstrate moral purpose, to make a display of moral leadership. In September this year, Erdogan went so far as to [criticise](#) the West's lack of interventionist zeal. 'The massacres in Syria that gain strength from the international community's indifference are continuing to increase', he said. 'The regime in Syria has now become a terrorist state. We do not have the luxury to be indifferent to what is happening there.' He later told US news channel CNN that the US had so far 'lacked initiative'.

But, unlike the UK government and the assorted bomb-happy eggheads in the media, Turkey's active opposition to Assad is not solely attributable to a domestic, existential need to demonstrate some moral purpose. It is also using the breakdown in Syria to pursue its own considerable strategic interests. For the Islamist AKP, led by the ostentatiously Sunni Erdogan, the installation of a far less secular, Sunni regime in Syria would provide Turkey's socially conservative government with a significant ally, especially against its main rival for influence in the region, Shi'ite Iran. On top of the opportunity to exert more power in the Middle East, Turkey is also keen to ensure that the unravelling of Syria does not embolden the Kurdish separatists in Turkey's midst. So with one eye to regional leadership in the east, and another to impressing its moral credentials upon the West, Turkey's rulers have good reason to take a leading role in Syrian affairs. And now, with US Patriot missiles wending their way to Turkey, its role in the conflict, its support for anti-Assad opposition groups, has the official backing of NATO.

As for NATO itself, the decision to explicitly back Turkey against Assad, to internationalise thoroughly, not to mention militarise, the conflict in Syria, stems less from an awareness of any strategic interests than from its sheer lack of purpose. Its postwar, Cold War founding mission - [paraphrased](#) as 'to keep the Russians out, the Americans in, and the Germans down' - has long since vanished. So, disoriented and wanting a *raison d'être*, NATO has in recent times tried to style itself as the armed wing of the UN, an international peacekeeper with guns. But where it was able to preen and pose in the skies over the militarily decrepit regime of Libya's Colonel Gaddafi, when it imposed a no-fly zone in early 2011, the far higher-stakes conflict in Syria has crippled its post-Libya strut. With no political will in the West for explicit military intervention, NATO has been left to dither on the sidelines. That was until Turkey offered it the opportunity to show some quasi mettle on its border with Syria. Now with Syria as the stage, it can pose once

more as the Grand Protector, the guarantor of life and security, the only thing standing between Turkey and Assad's supposed willingness to use chemical weapons.

The effect this international posturing and prodding has on the conflict within Syria, however, is deleterious. For a start, it means that the disparate anti-Assad groups working under the umbrella of the Free Syrian Army - as one observer [noted](#), the FSA is little more than 'a convenient mailbox for a diverse, unorganised collection of local fighting groups' - concentrate less on winning the support of the Syrian people than they do winning the funds and resources of external agents. *Foreign Policy* magazine [identifies](#) the principal sources of cash and weapons as Salafi networks and wealthy Syrian ex-pats, plus the Qatari and Saudi governments. But as the *New York Times* reported in July this year, the US is involved too, with CIA officers based in southern Turkey working alongside 'Syria's Muslim Brotherhood [and] Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar' to funnel to Syria's rebels 'automatic rifles, rocket-propelled grenades, ammunition and some anti-tank weapons'. So desperate has this scramble for arms and money become, and so fragmentary are the rebels, that the *Financial Times* [reported](#) that competing anti-Assad groups steal mobile-phone footage of successful assaults from rival groups and post it up on the internet as their own success - all in an attempt to impress potential donors.

More important, however, is the way in which Western moral grandstanding over Syria has forced a messy, civil conflict into a Manichean framework, with the internationally recognised forces of Good on one side, and the internationally demonised forces of Bad on the other.

Hence, over the past year, we have repeatedly seen the likes of Clinton, UK foreign secretary William Hague, and French president Francois Hollande attempt to turn the rough-and-ready conglomerate of anti-Assad forces into something it can approve of. In March, for instance, Western leaders were busy anointing a band of expatriate Syrian academics, known as the Syrian National Council, as the 'legitimate representatives of the Syrian people', regardless of what the Syrian people might think. When the SNC virtually disintegrated a few months ago (it [continues](#) now in a form dominated by the Muslim Brotherhood), Clinton called for a new opposition body on which the West could confer popular legitimacy. In a dig at the SNC, the group Western leaders had for months been falling over themselves to support, she [added](#): 'This cannot be an opposition represented by people who have many good attributes but who, in many instances, have not been inside Syria for 20, 30, 40 years.' And so we now have the Syrian National Coalition for Opposition and Revolutionary Force which was conjured up in Qatar at the beginning of November.

The tragedy here is that the Western-driven attempt to turn one side of a messy civil war into an internationally recognised agent of good is, as Brendan O'Neill [argued](#) on *spiked*, that it sanctifies the sectarianism of the conflict. And there seems little doubt that it is sectarian now. As one Syrian activist writes, '[this] civil war is devolving into a battle between Sunni rebel groups and Alawite-dominated militias fighting in support of the old regime'. And now, with the Assad constituency of Alawites (a branch of Shia Islam) and fearful Syrian Christians painted as the baddies, and the Sunni opposition groups elevated and enshrined as the goodies, foreign powers have successfully entrenched ethnic divisions. In doing so, they have ramped up the conflict's intractable, bloody potential.

It is 20 months since the residents of the smallish city of Daraa in southern Syria ventured out on to the streets in protest against the security forces' arrest and torture of a group of students for writing anti-Assad graffiti. In that time, we have seen the beginnings, no matter how incipient, of a popular uprising against Bashar al-Assad's oppressive regime turn into the endgame of a brutal, sectarian civil conflict, marshalled by the military might of NATO. Make no mistake: the fingerprints of external intervention, of Western meddling, are all over this one.