



Explosion on the Syrian-Turkish Border

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Executive Summary

- Erdogan's Ankara is determined to capitalize on the escalating crisis along the Turkish-Syrian border in order to start a strategic turn-around of the crisis in Syria even if it means military intervention and a major war. Erdogan is increasingly apprehensive about the evolving policy of the Obama White House, and is therefore determined to secure the vital interests of Turkey and its Islamist allies before the dreaded US "October Surprise".
- There is a profound difference between the world view of the US and the West, and that of neo-Ottoman Turkey. This difference and the fear of an imminent compelled resolution of the Syria crisis are pushing Ankara into taking drastic moves.
- The new Turkish-Egyptian alliance formulated by President Muhammad Morsi is making historical difference in the world view and grand strategy of Erdogan's Ankara. With Egypt providing a Sunni-Arab backing, Turkey feels more confident to adopt audacious policies.
- Thus, the unrelated though concurrent developments along the Turkish-Syrian border and elsewhere in the region since late September are the beginning of laying the political ground for an Arab-Muslim-led intervention in the Syrian quagmire.
- The big question is how long will Bashar al-Assad's Damascus tolerate without fighting back the Turkish artillery's controlling of wide sectors of the Syrian border and effecting the change by force of the strategic situation in Aleppo.

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ANALYSIS

Recep Tayyip Erdogan's Ankara is determined to capitalize on the escalating crisis along the Turkish-Syrian border in order to start a strategic turn-around of the crisis in Syria even if it means military intervention and a major war. Erdogan is increasingly apprehensive about the evolving policy of the Obama White House, and is therefore determined to secure the vital interests of Turkey and its Islamist allies before the dreaded US "October Surprise".

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There is a profound difference between the world view of the Obama White House and the rest of the West, and that of neo-Ottoman Turkey.

Obama's Washington is convinced that out of the ashes of Syria there will emerge another Islamist-ruled modern state like Egypt, Libya, Iraq or Tunisia. Erdogan's Turkey is considered the role-model for these Islamist governments.

Erdogan's Ankara is increasingly thinking in terms of a post-Qemalist neo-Ottoman Turkey and formulates Turkey's long-term interests, strategies and policies accordingly. The evolving situation in Syria has become Turkey's litmus test. Significantly, all the leading regional forces in and around Syria are united in the conviction that the current situation cannot go on indefinitely and that therefore some kind of a resolution to the fratricidal carnage is imminent. Ankara is determined to ensure that Turkey's interests dominate once the crisis comes to an end.

The new Turkish-Egyptian alliance formulated by President Muhammad Morsi is making a historical difference in the world view and grand strategy of Erdogan's Ankara.

Before Morsi's ascent, Turkey was torn between two regional approaches to the Syrian and Mashriq crisis. On the one hand, there was the possibility of consolidating a Sunni north-south bloc with Saudi Arabia that will confront an Iran-dominated Shiite east-west axis. On the other hand, there was the possibility of building with Iran a coalition of the outside forces that will destroy the Fertile Crescent of Minorities and suppress the Arabian hinterland (Arab al-Jazira). Turkey's near total dependence on highly subsidized Iranian oil and gas further complicated Ankara's decision making. Ultimately, Turkey's objective has always been controlling Sunni Islam and Arabia's oil.

After Morsi's ascent, Cairo introduced a grand strategic arrangement based on a wider alliance of outside forces – now Egypt-Turkey-Iran – encircling the Mashriq, jointly destroying the Fertile Crescent of Minorities, and ultimately suppressing and controlling the Arab al-Jazira. At the same time, this tripartite alliance will also be creating a Sunni majority bloc – Turkey and Egypt – strong enough to contain Iran without alienating it. Turkey and Egypt will be able to capitalize on this dynamics to gain the willing subservience of the Sunni Arab world – Syria, western Iraq, Jordan and Saudi Arabia.

Historically, the Ottoman Caliphate ruled the huge Mashriq by manipulating a devastated and oppressed Fertile Crescent of Minorities, while domineering the myriad of the Arab tribes, clans and extended families that lived in the Arab al-Jazira surrounded by the Crescent. Fractured and devoid of national identities – these localized Arab entities could not resist the Ottoman overlordship.



Presently, Ankara's two preconditions for success in Syria and beyond closely resemble the Ottoman legacy: (1) the destruction of the Fertile Crescent of Minorities – the historic buffer between Arab al-Jazira and the outside forces; and (2) the destruction of the Mashriq states – mainly Syria – in favor of weak fractured Islamist entities. Achieved together, these steps will effectively recreate the traditional socio-political tapestry that served the later-days Ottoman Caliphate (of which British-ruled Egypt was not a part). Indeed, the primary outcome of the current phase of the Syrian crisis is the demise of the modern Syrian state in favor of amalgamation of localized sub-state entities based on tribes and clans that are focused solely on self-preservation and self-survival. And the demise of the Syrian state already reverberates in Lebanon, Iraq and Jordan.

Meanwhile, the entire Greater Middle East dreads the "October Surprise". Hence, increasingly desperate undertakings are contemplated by local powers for before Eid al-Adha (26 October). There is a common conviction – an article of faith – among Arab, Turkish and Iranian leaders that the Obama White House is planning a major Libya-style military intervention in Syria in order to divert the attention of the American voter and make an Israeli attack on Iran impossible. But such an intervention is bound to provoke an Iranian offensive-by-proxy involving the HizbAllah, Shiite militant groups along the Persian Gulf coast and Yemen, a myriad of Jihadist groups, and perhaps even select Syrian, Iraqi and Yemenite forces.

For the region's leaders, this type of an "October Surprise" looms as a huge viable threat they cannot afford to either ignore or withstand. For the Sunni-Islamist trend – dominated by Ankara, Cairo and the international Muslim Brothers, who have so far won the Intifada's and Awakening (ironically, with massive US help) – neither the return of American-Western dominance, nor an Iranian by-proxy triumph, is acceptable. Therefore, it is imperative for Ankara, Cairo and the other Arab elites to preemptively reverse the emerging dynamics virtually at all cost.

It is therefore imperative for Ankara, Cairo and their allies to negate the dominance of a regional war and/or US-led NATO intervention, either in Syria or the Persian Gulf. Ankara, Cairo and their allies don't have problem with the US and NATO bombing Syria – whatever the reason and excuse. Their dread is the day after. Washington might want to capitalize on an intervention dominated by US-led Western forces in order to empower the Islamists and form a centralized government in Damascus the way Washington did in Tripoli. In contrast, Ankara and Cairo are adamant on empowering a very weak and subservient entity in Damascus as a first step toward domineering the Mashriq. The key lies in a post-war Damascus that will be incapable of, and unwilling to, prevent the destruction of the minorities and the consolidation of a viable Syrian state.

Thus, for Ankara, Cairo and their allies an Arab-Muslim-led intervention as presented by the Emir of Qatar Hamad Bin Khalifa Al Thani at the UN is fast becoming a viable option. The preferable outcome, however, remains the dismemberment of Syria as a result of an internal upheaval wrought by the misery and destitute of the population. Then, Ankara, Cairo and their allies would be able to deploy "peace keeping" and "nation building" Arab-Muslim forces with international support, rather than invading and risking major confrontation with the Syrian armed forces. But time is short and both Eid al-Adha and the "October Surprise" are looming high so that a near-term intervention in the name of an Arab-Muslim R2P might soon be unavoidable. (However, there always exists the option to manipulate Obama's Washington into coming to the aid of such an Arab-Muslim intervention should it be on the verge of failure due to Assad's resistance.)

Hence, there is a palpable sense of foreboding throughout the Greater Middle East.

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Examined in this context, the unrelated though concurrent developments along the Turkish-Syrian border and elsewhere in the region since late September are the beginning of laying the political ground for an Arab-Muslim-led intervention in the Syrian quagmire. The sole reason for this undertaking is preempting the “October Surprise” Obama desperately needs.

On September 28, a few 120 mm mortar shells hit Akcakale, southern Sanliurfa province. This was a strange incident since the area is essentially quiet with the closest fighting near the Syrian-Turkish border some 120 - 150 kms to the west. Speaking at the UN, Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu warned on the next day that “if such breaches towards our borders continue we are reserving our rights and we are exercising our rights.” Also around September 28, the North Liberators Brigade (which is controlled by Turkish intelligence) was moved by Turkish intelligence from Antakia to the Killis area. The same day, both ORSAM (an Erdogan-affiliated think tank) and a known front of Turkish intelligence distributed an April 2012 study on safe havens in Syria with the comment that its relevance and applicability have markedly increased.

On September 29, the Al-Arabiya satellite news TV began broadcasting a series of revelations about the war in Syria on the basis of purported Top Secret documents stolen from Damascus by high-level defectors and brought to Turkey. Al-Arabiya is owned by the House of al-Saud but broadcasts from Doha, Qatar. The first installment is titled: “Syrian President Bashar al-Assad ordered the killing of two Turkish air force pilots who were captured after their fighter jet was shot down on June 22, 2012”. The gist of the story is that the two Turkish pilots survived the downing of their aircraft, but were later executed by the Bashar al-Assad administration on his personal order. Turkish media started to demand retribution against Syria.

Also on September 29, Morsi dispatched his confidant Sayf Abdel Fattah to Ankara to inform the Turkish government that “Egypt may take part in an Arab military intervention in Syria, provided this does not open the door to Western intervention.”

On September 30, Morsi made a 12-hour visit to Ankara to discuss with Erdogan the situation in Syria. At the end of the visit, Morsi told his staff that he and Erdogan agreed that the situation in Syria can’t be permitted to continue. “We cannot sleep as we watch our brothers like this in Syria. We will not calm or settle down until an end is put to the bloodshed. Until the will of the Syrian people, to elect their leader and have the current oppressive regime removed, is met.” Turkey and Egypt agreed to “stand by the people and support them against the oppressor who is killing them.”

On October 1, a high level Egyptian security delegation secretly left Cairo for Damascus. The delegation was expected to be in Syria for two days. The delegation took to Damascus an offer and an ultimatum formulated by Morsi and Erdogan.

On October 2, rather than meet the Egyptians, Bashar al-Assad visited Aleppo. He inspected the security operations and ordered major reinforcements (over 30,000 troops and 2,000 combat vehicles) to complete the pacification of the city. Significantly, there would be no change of the deployment of the 5-division-strong Corps deployed near the Turkish border arrayed against a Turkish force twice their size.

Also on October 2, very senior Syrian officials met with the Egyptians. The Egyptians told the Syrians that Cairo, Ankara and Doha concluded that “Syrian President Bashar al-Assad has no role in any future negotiations.” The Egyptians added that “it is too late for reform” in Damascus because “the current regime cannot be reformed” given the actions “it has recently committed against the people. [The regime] must be changed.” In response, the Syrian officials stressed that Damascus planned to continue fighting and had no intent to surrender to any



ultimatum.

Also on October 2, Turkey closed schools in several towns and villages near the border with Syria. The reason was that Syrian military operations were getting “reckless” and “too close to the border” –thus risking cross-border escalation.

On October 3, the Tawhid Brigade (which is controlled by Turkish intelligence) conducted a major martyrdom-bombing operation at the heart of Aleppo. (As with all Jihadist martyrdom operation, the strike was claimed by the Al-Nusra Front for the People of Sham.) Initially, three car-bombs exploded and created immense damage to a cluster of buildings. Shortly afterwards, two more car-bombs exploded with anti-personnel bombs in order to kill a maximum number of security and emergency personnel. The string of bombing caused a total of over 50 fatalities and over 150 wounded. The Syrian opposition in Turkey launched a media outcry about the intolerable situation in Aleppo.

Also on October 3, a couple of 120 mm mortar shells once again hit Akcakale – causing five fatalities and seven wounded. This shelling provided Ankara with the legitimate justification to move on Damascus. Turkish heavy artillery started shelling Syrian bases and military installations along the entire border.

Also on October 3, Qatar announced plans to invest \$3.6 billion to build an oil refinery in Egypt. Doha specified that the project and funds are part of “a personal strategy of the Emir” Hamad Bin Khalifa Al Thani to help Egypt’s “first Islamist president” and reward him for supporting policies and strategies of great importance to Qatar - the Syria policy being the first.

On October 4, Erdogan ordered the Turkish military and intelligence to capitalize on the Akcakale incident in order to drastically change the strategic situation along the entire Turkish-Syrian border area by creating a buffer zone all the way to the shores of the Mediterranean, with emphasis on Killis – the gateway to Aleppo that is 250 kms to the west of Akcakale. Later that day, Turkey’s parliament has authorized by a 320 - 129 vote “cross-border military action” against Syria “as deemed necessary by the government”. The bill gives the Turkish government “a one-year-long permission to make the necessary arrangements for sending the Turkish Armed Forces” into Syria in light of the “negative impact of the ongoing crisis in Syria on our national security, as well as on regional stability and security.”

Militarily, Turkey stepped up the retaliatory artillery strikes in the pre-dawn hours (that is, even before the Parliamentary authorization). The main weapon-system used by the Turkish military are numerous batteries of T-155 “Firtina” howitzers (155/52 caliber gun system & maximum range of 40 km) – somewhat heavier than the single 120 mm mortar used by the Syrians. According to Turkish senior officers in the border area, Ankara ordered the Turkish Army to keep up its cross-border shelling and expand the theater well beyond the Akcakale area. The initial objective of Turkish artillery was Rasm al-Ghazi, a Syrian military center south of Tell Abayad that controls the border area but is not the place from where the mortar shells had been fired. According to Turkish military officials, several Syrian soldiers were killed in the shelling and heavy damage was inflicted on the Syrian military facilities. The Syrian army did not return fire.

According to Turkish senior officers in the border area, the main objective of the Turkish artillery is creating a 10 km-deep buffer strip by continuous artillery barrages. Turkish artillery will keep hitting Syrian military targets including bases, outposts and forces on the move. Several bases and outposts were already hit but Turkish artillery would keep expanding the buffer strip zone westwards all the way to the Mediterranean. The senior officers acknowledged that a near-term objective was to expand the “saturation bombardment” beyond the



10-km depth in the area north of Aleppo. Turkish forces were instructed to start establishing a 50-km deep protected corridor from the Killis region of southern Turkey all the way to Aleppo.

Also on October 4, Qatari and Syrian opposition senior officials met in Doha. After the meeting, the Syrians briefed Arab diplomats that once the fighting ends soon in Aleppo – the “liberated Aleppo” will become “the Benghazi of Syria” (thus alluding to the role of Benghazi in instigating the NATO intervention and the ensuing empowerment of the Islamists in Libya).

Also on October 4, Iran’s First Vice President Mohammad Reza Rahimi rushed to Ankara to consult with Erdogan about the rapidly escalating crisis. Rahimi reminded Erdogan of Turkey’s dependence on the highly subsidized Iranian oil and gas. Erdogan was conciliatory in the first meeting with Rahimi.

Also on October 4 in the afternoon/evening, Turkish artillery fire ceased in the Akcakale area in the east. Concurrently, Turkish artillery stepped up shelling along the western border from Hatay to the Aleppo area. Syria refrained from responding despite recurring damage and casualties.

Overnight on October 4/5, Turkish artillery resumed fire in the Akcakale area. The Syrian military attempted to send convoys to the bases hit by Turkish artillery – most likely to repair the damage and replace lost equipment. Turkish artillery fired on these convoys and the main roads they attempted to take. Widespread damage and Syrian casualties were reported. As before, the Syrian forces did not return fire.

On October 5, Erdogan met with his national security team and concluded: “We are not far from war with Syria.”

Also on October 5, Syria delivered a conciliatory message to Turkey via Rahimi who was still in Ankara. Damascus stressed that Syria does not want war with Turkey. Therefore, Syrian forces will unilaterally respect the 10 km deep buffer zone. Even though Syria does not have any evidence Syrian forces are responsible for the shelling of Akcakale – Syria nevertheless regrets and apologizes for the casualties and damage. At the same time, Damascus stressed, there would be no compromise over Syria’s determination to suppress the revolt and restore order in Aleppo, Idlib and other cities in the northwest. Syrian forces south of the buffer zone will intercept and crush any infiltration attempt from Turkey. While Syrian forces will go out of their way to avoid cross-border shelling – Syria will not tolerate Turkey’s continued support for, and sheltering of, terrorists operating inside Syria.

Also on October 5 at mid-day, Damascus formally agreed to accept a de-facto 10-km buffer zone in the two critical areas demanded by Ankara. Syrian forces completed most of the necessary redeployments. The map of the agreed upon zones is virtually identical to the priority buffer zones identified in the ORSAM report.

Also on October 5 in the evening, Erdogan convened another meeting with his national security elite. He reiterated Turkey’s basis position on war with Syria. “We are not interested in war, but we’re not far from it either.” Erdogan told the meeting that “Turkey will deploy forces into the border buffer areas in order to ensure that incidents [like Akcakale] do not happen again.” Asked to clarify, Erdogan did not rule out deployment of Turkish ground forces across the Syrian border.

On October 6, two mortar shells hit near the village of Guvecci, southern Hatay province. The shells hit 50 meters inside Turkey. All Syrian forces had already vacated the 10 km buffer zone and were thus out of range. Nevertheless, Turkish artillery opened up immediately on Syrian army positions near Khirbet al-Jouz and Darkoush – both about 16 kms from the Turkish border. Significantly, the Turkish shelling “happened” exactly when



Syrian opposition forces crossed in from Turkey took over without battle the series of Syrian military positions on the road to Khirbet al-Jouz. These positions are about 2 km from the border and had been vacated by the Syrian military as part of the unilateral acceptance of the buffer zone. The Free Syrian Army invited the Arab and Turkish media, raised their flag over the facilities, and made fiery statements that this was the first step on the road to Damascus. Other opposition forces attacked the Syrian positions near Khirbet al-Jouz and Darkoush just as they were being shelled by Turkish artillery. Official Damascus is seething with fury.

Also on October 6, Turkish military started running convoys to an area south of Suruc town, southern Sanliurfa province. The convoys include large numbers of tanks, artillery, troops and “missile defense systems”. Suruc is on the road to Ayn-al-Arab (just inside Syria) that leads to Manbij, on to al-Baab and into the eastern approaches to Aleppo. This is the main infiltration route around the Syrian Army Corps deployed north of Aleppo.

On October 7, Turkey resumed shelling Syrian targets all over the Akcakale area – the original point of contention. Turkish artillery fire was heavy and aimed to complete the destruction of Syrian military facilities. According to official Ankara, the justification was a single shell that hit an open area some 200 meters inside Turkey.

Also on October 7, a senior Turkish official described Erdogan’s reading of the situation with Syria. “Artillery fire can be retaliation for the first attack of an enemy. If Syria continues firing on Turkish territory despite the many warnings Turkey has issued so far, Ankara may consider an alternative method of pre-emptive operations. If deadly attacks continue, pre-emptive operations would become plausible. A state cannot wait for another deadly attack to retaliate!” The official concluded by raising this question: “Thus, one timely question is: Does the Turkish-Syrian tension facilitate the solution of the Syrian crisis or does it introduce many other factors that may complicate the process?”

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This heretic’s musings on the evolution of the situation along the Turkish-Syrian border can be summed up in two words: Too neat. Too many coincidences favorable to Ankara. Too many events befitting Erdogan’s self-interest.

This distinction was not lost on many in the Syrian and Turkish opposition.

On October 5, Syrian nationalist opposition posted a video on YouTube with the following caption: “This is a leaked video of those ‘Free Syrian Army’ (FSA) terrorists responsible for the NATO false flag attack against the Turkish town of Akcakale in southern Turkey. Those terrorists are based in Tell Abayad in al-Raqqa province near Aleppo. The FSA terrorists are known to be equipped with mortar shells as shown in this video as well. The mortar shells are Russian-made, as the FSA terrorists state in the video, since they are stolen ammunition from the Syrian Army’s arms depots.”

October 6, the Turkish tabloid *Yurt* (a pro-military leftist-nationalist paper known for its close relations with the military and intelligence elites now being purged by Erdogan’s government) claimed that they have documented proofs that the original mortar shells that hit Akcakale on October 4 had been fired by the Free Syrian Army at the instruction of Ankara. *Yurt*’s Editor-in-Chief Merdan Yanardag wrote that he had information from a reliable source that “Turkey was the side which sent the mortars to the members of so-called ‘the free army’.” The provocation is part of an effort to entangle Turkey in a war in Syria. “Those [sic] information affirm



that the Government of Erdogan’s wrong policy was behind the falling of the mortar in the town that claimed the lives of 5 Turks.” Yanaradag wrote.

And so, the Turkish artillery shelling along the Turkish-Syrian border continues to spread and escalate. Turkey-sponsored predominantly-Jihadist Syrian opposition forces are permitted, if not encouraged, to exploit the artillery barrages in order to consolidate gains they could not have dreamed about on their own. So far, Syrian forces did not return fire or challenge the Turkey-origin forces. The big question is how long will Bashar al-Assad’s Damascus tolerate without fighting back the Turkish artillery’s controlling of wide sectors of the Syrian border and effecting the change by force of the strategic situation in Aleppo.

On October 7, a Turkish senior official opined that Turkey and Syria “probably aren’t headed for a full-scale war – yet.”

Remarks: *Opinions expressed in this contribution are those of the author.*

About the Author of this Issue

Yossef Bodansky has been the Director of Research at the International Strategic Studies Association [ISSA], as well as a Senior Editor for the *Defense & Foreign Affairs* group of publications, since 1983. He was the Director of the Congressional Task Force on Terrorism and Unconventional Warfare at the U.S. House of Representatives between 1988 and 2004, and stayed on as a special adviser to Congress till January 2009. In the mid-1980s, he acted as a senior consultant for the U.S. Department of Defense and the Department of State. He is the author of eleven books – including *Bin Laden: The Man Who Declared War on America* (*New York Times* No. 1 Bestseller & *Washington Post* No. 1 Bestseller), *The Secret History of the Iraq War* (*New York Times* Bestseller & *Foreign Affairs Magazine* Bestseller), and *Chechen Jihad: Al Qaeda’s Training Ground and the Next Wave of Terror* – and hundreds of articles, book chapters and Congressional reports. Mr Bodansky is a Director at the Prague Society for International Cooperation, and serves on the Board of the Global Panel Foundation and several other institutions worldwide.



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