



The Explosion On The Turkish-Syrian Border Continues

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Executive Summary

- Turkey continued to escalate both the cross-border clashes and the active preparations for a war with Syria in the second week of October 2012. The political expediency of the continued escalation for Erdogan is increasingly apparent. Under current political circumstances, there is no way Erdogan and the AKP can reverse their bellicose policies.
- During this week, Ankara moved even closer to escalating the border crisis cognizant that such an escalation might lead to major war. Subsequently, Ankara suddenly put the entire Turkish military on a “high state of readiness” – the country’s highest short of an active war. Turkey also started to implement unilaterally the no-fly-zone.
- On October 11, the Middle East expert considered Erdogan’s Guru submitted a memo to Erdogan arguing that a Turkish-Syrian war “is necessary”.
- Turkey is raising the ante politically by stressing the applicability of the Srebrenica principle – the imperative for R2P – for the situation in Syria.
- Meanwhile, Damascus offered Ankara to discuss directly how to defuse the border crisis before it was too late. So far, there have been no reaction and no reply from Ankara.

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ANALYSIS

Turkey continued to escalate both the cross-border clashes and the active preparations for a war with Syria in the second week of October 2012. Furthermore, the political expediency of this continued escalation has become increasingly apparent.

The almost war crisis with Syria is becoming Ankara's primary instrument of diverting public opinion from the deteriorating economy, rising inflation, growing shortages and overall internal stability, and gain support on the basis of patriotism and nationalism. The initial success and the political stakes involved make it increasingly difficult for Erdogan and official Ankara to simply walk away from the brewing crisis.

Most important is the dramatic change in Erdogan's political fortune. Back in late September, the public rejected the AKP's restrained policy regarding Syria. Polls published on 28 September showed that public support for the government's Syria policy hit a rock bottom of mere 18 %. A populist movement like the AKP could not tolerate such a state of affairs. Indeed, the assertive and bellicose policies adopted since late September already had a dramatic impact on the Turkish public opinion. New polls published on October 12 showed that the support for the AKP has risen to 51.2 % of likely voters. The government's Syria policy was identified by the vast majority of potential voters as the primary reason for their change of opinion. Erdogan himself is the primary winner of Ankara's policy change. The October 12 polls found out that 59.5 % of likely Turkish voters supported both Erdogan's election as president in 2014 and the preceding constitutional reform that would grant significant more power to Turkey's president. Under such political circumstances, there is no way Erdogan and AKP can reverse their bellicose policies.

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On October 8, Ankara was formally informed by Brussels that the EU Accession reports (to be released on October 10) would be extremely negative. Brussels has serious concerns about Ankara's overall progress in meeting political and governance criteria for full EU membership. The reports listed in great detail problems with Turkey's freedoms of expression, assembly and association, lengthy prosecution and detention periods, discrimination against the Kurdish, Alevi and religious minorities, as well as Turkey's refusal to cooperate in resolving the Cyprus issue. Politically, the EU's harsh reports reinforce the prevailing sentiment among an overwhelming majority of Turks that Turkey should abandon efforts to join the EU and focus instead on the ascent of Turkey as a regional power in Turkey's traditional spheres of influence. Therefore, senior Turkish officials asserted on October 8 that time was ripe to show the EU "who needs whom" in terms of access to the Middle East and Central Asia, and especially Persian Gulf, Caucasus and Central Asian energy resources and supplies.

The looming EU reports reinforced Ankara's urgent imperative to focus public attention on patriotic-nationalistic themes, and the border conflict with Syria is presently the primary venue. On October 8, Turkish President Abdullah Gül met with senior AKP politicians and addressed the forthcoming escalation in the crisis with Syria. Gül said Ankara would continue to attack Syria to protect against shelling and other operations against Turkey. "The worst-case scenarios are taking place right now in Syria," Gül said. "Our government is in constant consultation with the Turkish military. Whatever is needed is being done immediately as you see, and it will continue to be done." Gül opined that the civil war in Syria could not be maintained indefinitely and stressed that the



only outcome Turkey can accept is that Assad must leave unconditionally. "There will be a change, a transition sooner or later," Gül predicted. "It is a must for the international community to take effective action before Syria turns into a bigger wreck and further blood is shed, that is our main wish." Should the international community refuse to rise to the challenge, Turkey will have to go alone.

On October 9, Ankara moved even closer to escalating the border crisis cognizant that such an escalation might lead to major war. Erdogan and his inner circle are convinced that the current situation could not continue much longer. Moreover, Erdogan and his inner circle interpret the defiance of the Damascus media – namely, the assertion that the Ottoman Caliphate no longer exists and therefore Ankara cannot dictate to Damascus – as a Syrian challenge to Turkey's ascent as a regional power. Such a state of affairs is unacceptable to Erdogan's Ankara and is considered far more threatening than a possible Syrian military action on the border.

Ankara's apprehensions of a possible defeat should war breaks out were allayed by Rasmussen's statement that "[the NATO allies] have all necessary plans in place to protect and defend Turkey if necessary." Rasmussen also reiterated Turkey's right to act. "Obviously Turkey has a right to defend herself within international law," he said. "I would add to that that obviously Turkey can rely on NATO solidarity." Erdogan and his inner circle interpret Rasmussen's statement as an endorsement of assertive actions by the Turkish military (in response to Syrian provocations), and a guarantee that should a major escalation and intervention in Syria collapse and Turkey faced set-backs – the US and NATO will come to Turkey's help and save it from embarrassment and defeat. To a leadership obsessed with dignity and honor – this is a major consideration.

The other major issue facing Ankara was the question to what extent Assad's passivity and self-restraint are limited to the developments along the Turkish-Syrian border. Toward this end, Turkey asked for a major change in the joint naval exercise with Egypt conducted on October 7-to-14 in the eastern Mediterranean. Originally, Bahr al-Sadaka ("Sea of Friendship") was to focus on a Turkish task force coming to save Egypt from Israeli aggression. The Turkish Naval Forces participating in the exercise include two frigates, two fast attack craft, one replenishment tanker, two landing ships, one marine infantry company, two helicopters and one special forces team. They were to join a larger Egyptian contingent and jointly land forces in the western desert coastline – fighting for an area occupied by the "notional enemy". However, Erdogan and Morsi decided at the last minute that Bahr al-Sadaka will also include joint blockading of enemy ports, the interception of supplies coming to these ports, fighting off challenges by the naval forces protecting these ports, and landing forces to capture coastal facilities. Morsi's office justified the last minute changes by emerging "real life concerns" that might require both navies to jointly undertake similar missions. Dead silence is coming out of official Damascus.

On the morning of October 9, Turkish Chief of General Staff Gen. Necdet Özel, Land Forces Commander Gen. Hayri Kivrikoglu and the commander of the 2nd Army Lt. Gen. Galip Mendi conducted an inspection tour of the entire Syrian-Turkish front from Hatay near the Mediterranean coast to Akcakale. In Adana, they got a detailed briefing from the commanders of the 2nd Army which is deployed along the border with Syria. They were also briefed at the Sixth Army Command in Iskenderun. According to Turkish senior officers and intelligence officials deployed in the border area – the key message of Özel (an Erdogan stalwart with political aspirations) and Kivrikoglu was that this time the situation is very serious and that war might break out any moment.

Özel told the senior officers and officials about a meeting he had with Erdogan on October 7 – that is, before starting on his inspection tour. "You have to be ready at every moment to go to war if it is necessary. If you are not ready for this, you are not a state, if you are not ready for this, you are not a nation," Erdogan said according to Özel. Erdogan reiterated that Turkey does not want war, but warned that Syria's continued provocations



and aggression are testing Turkey's resolve. "Nobody should attempt to test Turkey's decisiveness and sensibility," Erdogan told Özel. The government had already undertaken all necessary legal steps and had parliament formally endorse a memorandum authorizing possible war and cross border operations. Erdogan stated that nobody can be certain "what will happen if a war were to begin and bring us to that point. You should be ready for it and have the memorandum in hand. What is necessary will be done if it becomes necessary." Özel interprets the meeting as pre-war instructions and so told the senior officers and officials he met.

On the next day, October 10, official Ankara focused on warding off political criticism regarding the EU reports. Still, the Turkish government was mostly preoccupied with the escalating crisis with Syria. Senior officials held a series of high-level consultations and deliberations on what to do next regarding Syria. Erdogan concluded that inaction was no longer an option because Syria was "the bleeding heart of humanity and the whole Islamic world." The overall feeling of an impending escalation was also articulated by Özel in a meeting with officers in Akcakale: "We responded and if [the shelling] continues, we will respond with more force."

On the night of October 10, the Turkish government suddenly put the entire Turkish military on a "high state of readiness" – the country's highest short of an active war – because of "the simmering tensions along the border with Syria" and the threat they constitute to Turkey. Senior Turkish officials very close to Erdogan acknowledged that the Syrian military has so far refrained from responding to the escalating Turkish shelling. The readiness is primarily aimed to deter Damascus from changing its inaction. "We want to give a strong message to the Syrian regime that Turkey is determined to protect its borders and people and is ready to do whatever necessary – that is the meaning of high-level readiness," the senior officials explained. Still, the senior officials had no explanations why Erdogan decided to raise the readiness level so suddenly and without any Syrian provocation to warrant such a move.

As a result of the "high state of readiness" several armor, artillery and mechanized infantry units of the Turkish military started deploying from central Turkey to the border with Syria.

Meanwhile, Turkish senior intelligence officials provided an explanation. Despite the Turkish shelling and the de-facto 10 km buffer zone, the Syrian security forces in the greater Aleppo area have markedly improved their interceptions of opposition resupply efforts from Turkey. As well, acting on tips from the citizenry, the success rates of the raids by the Syrian security forces have increased tremendously in recent weeks. Consequently, the opposition has lost several key commanders, highly experienced fighters, and huge weapons caches. Meanwhile, weapons supplies to the rebels have virtually dried up as a result of the Syrian interdiction of convoys. The opposition in Aleppo now lacks heavy weapons and even small arms ammunition is running low. Consequently, there are growing rivalries and divisions between the remnants of the indigenous rebels and the better-equipped outside Jihadists and criminal gangs.

For Ankara, the uprising in Aleppo has been the key to Turkey's Syria policy – namely, the emergence of a "Syrian Benghazi" whose plight will warrant Arab-Muslim and even international intervention. However, despite the immense efforts of Turkey, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Libya and the international Jihadist movement – the fighting in Aleppo are being stifled by the combined impact of the unshakable rejection of the opposition by the people of Aleppo and the growing success of the Syrian security services. For Erdogan's Ankara, this means that the *raison d'être* for Turkish-led intervention in, and ultimately domination of, Syria is fading away.

Consequently, the Turkish senior intelligence officials opined, Erdogan has become desperate to guarantee the strategic achievements for Turkey before the winter. Erdogan is petrified that in the absence of intervention –



comes spring, the destitute Syrian population will emerge from the harsh winter so desperate as to accept food and humanitarian aid from anybody, including Bashar al-Assad and his allies. At that point, the quest for regional leadership will be over for Turkey. Moreover, Erdogan seems to be apprehensive about the possibility that if Romney wins the US presidential election – Turkey will lose its preferential status in Washington and the ensuing freedom of action it currently enjoys with Obama. Hence, Erdogan seems desperate to provoke a crisis legitimizing Turkey's intervention. If the plight of Aleppo cannot provide such an excuse – a Syrian reaction to building Turkish military pressure on its border might do the trick, explained the Turkish senior intelligence officials.

Therefore, Erdogan decided to continue escalating the crisis. On the morning of October 11, Erdogan started moving steadily toward unilaterally declaring a "no-fly-zone" over Syria. The first phase will be over the buffer zones and the areas subjected to Syrian "atrocities" and "war crimes" – with Aleppo, Idlib, Homs and Hama topping the list. When Damascus refuses to comply with what amounts to a blatant attempt by Ankara to coerce victory in the war – Ankara will expand the "no-fly-zone" to the rest of Syrian territory.

Senior Turkish officials very close to Erdogan keep warning that he is adamant on brining the crisis to a successful resolution – Turkish hegemony. Toward this end, Erdogan is ready to adopt risky and audacious strategies. He is convinced that sooner or later Assad will snap, will over-react to any one of the Turkish provocations, and will thus provide Erdogan the legitimate excuse to "react" and "retaliate". Hence, Erdogan's Turkey will keep tightening the screws while getting ready for the snap and its aftermath. Regarding the "no-fly-zone" – Erdogan insists Qatar, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the GCC will send aircraft – albeit in small numbers. These, however, will suffice to making the undertaking an Arab-Islamic intervention.

Meanwhile, the Middle East expert considered Erdogan's Guru (who is also responsible for the April 2012 study on the buffer zones) has just chaired a small team of experts who are also AKP stalwarts. Also on October 11, the team submitted a memo to Erdogan in person arguing that a Turkish-Syrian war is necessary.

The memo argues that since March 2011 Turkey has been dragged into Syrian affairs without any real strategic-regional benefit. On the contrary, Turkey's regional posture has deteriorated, and "Syria has become a source of threat to Turkey's national security." In the absence of a viable opposition leadership - Syria is rapidly evolving into "an Iraq-like" entity where even with a government in place terrorism, low-intensity conflict, and anti-Turkey sectarianism prevail. Turkey cannot permit the emergence of another Iraq on its southern border. "Permanent chaos in Syria is a scenario of horror for Turkey."

The memo warns that Turkey should not undertake unilateral steps for fear of inciting Arab-Turkish disputes. "If Turkey goes to war with Syria, it will be waging a war against Arabs for the first time since the Ottoman period. Such an action may raise enmity between Turks and Arabs." The main outcome of such enmity might be that the mantle of the hero and leader of the Greater Middle East will be handed over from its current "hero" Erdogan to the Arab Morsi. Hence, it is preferable that any future intervention and war be Arab-Islamic by definition though Turkish led and dominated.

Ultimately, the memo concludes, Turkey's own national security and vital interests supersede any concern about Arab sensitivities. Therefore, it is imperative for Ankara "to take every necessary measure" to ensure that a stable Syria is consolidated or else the spread of instability would harm Turkey's vital interests. Therefore, "Ankara no longer has the luxury of staying indifferent to Syrian domestic matters" and to the collapse of the situation inside Syria. The memo stresses that under current conditions "there is no return. Turkey now has



to work on measures and options by which the conflict is ended and Syria is stabilized.” The memo recommends that Turkey should “at this stage to extend further support to the opposition groups and supply heavy arms to them to ensure the creation of a buffer zone along the border.” Should these measures fail to deliver quick results – “a war between Turkey and Syria is necessary.”

On October 12, Turkey kept raising the tension along the Syrian border while beginning to implement the proposed unilateral no-fly-zone. In the morning, the Turkish Air Force scrambled F-16s to challenge a Syrian Air Force helicopter over Azmarin and neighboring towns – off the village of Hacıpasa in Turkey’s Hatay province. Intense battles were going on in the area in the last few days with opposition forces arriving from Turkey failing to breakthrough to the town of Azmarin and nearby villages. The helicopter mainly directed Syrian artillery fire from surrounding hills. It did drop a few small bombs on opposition anti-aircraft weapons. The bulk of the fighting was taking place 12 - 15 kms from the Turkish border – that is, outside the 10 km buffer zone. When the Turkish fighters arrived, they made a few low level passes over the Syrian position some 20 kms inside Syria. The Syrian helicopter withdrew quickly to avoid entanglement. By nightfall, the fighting continued. The opposition forces were pushed back toward Turkey. The opposition forces now hold a line about 8 kms from the border. The major question is whether the Syrian forces continue to push them into the buffer zone.

Meanwhile, the Turkish military completed a major build-up in the central front. Two-hundred and fifty tanks, as well as related artillery, missile and fighting vehicles were deployed to the Syrian border in the Sanliurfa, Mardin and Gaziantep provinces. As well, 30 additional fighters (15 F-16s and 15 F-4s) deployed to Diyarbakir – raising the total number of reinforcement fighters to 55. The flow of military convoys from northern and central Turkey to the Syrian border continues. Presently, the Turkish military already has an approximate 5:1 advantage over the Syrian military in the key sectors along the border. There is no place along the border where Turkish advantage is below 2:1. The Turkish build-up continues unabated while the Syrians are not making any move.

On October 12 - 13, Turkey also started raising the ante politically by stressing the Srebrenica principle – the imperative for R2P. The Turkish government organized an international conference in Istanbul with VIPs from the West and the Arab World, as well as icons of the Bosnia crisis of the 1990s.

Erdogan set the tone in a fiery speech. He rebuked the UNSC for preventing humanitarian intervention in Syria in response to the unfolding humanitarian tragedy. It is inconceivable that the international community is repeating the very same mistakes that led to massacres in Bosnia in the 1990s. “How sad is that the United Nations is as helpless today as it was 20 years ago when it watched the massacre of hundreds of thousands of people in the Balkans, Bosnia and Srebrenica,” he told the conference. He found it incredulous that the international community still fails to intervene in Syria. “The UN Security Council has not intervened in the human tragedy that has been going on in Syria for 20 months, despite all our efforts,” Erdogan said. “There’s an attitude that encourages, gives the green light to Assad to kill tens or hundreds of people every day.” Erdogan suggested that in the absence of international intervention – Turkey must take the initiative and intervene in order to save the innocent victims.

Other speakers were equally critical of the absence of international intervention. Arab League Secretary General Nabil Elaraby also criticized the UNSC for not taking any action on the Syrian issue. “The bloodshed and devastation of [Syria] is taking place before our eyes. This situation is a threat against international peace and security. The Security Council should intervene,” he said. Elaraby then demanded the abolition of veto power in the UNSC in order to clear way for humanitarian interventions.



Davutoglu explained that Turkey was taking sides in the Syrian crisis on the basis of humanitarian concerns and not political or sectarian preferences. Turkey is committed to the people of Hama, Homs and Aleppo “who are doing all the effort for their dignity.” He stressed that Ankara was motivated by humanitarian concerns for all Syrians. “Turkey is against al-Assad not because of his religious sect, but because of his policy of oppression. Turkey will be on the side of justice throughout history forever,” Davutoglu declared. “For us, there is no difference between a Muslim and Christian in Syria; there is no difference between a Sunni, an Alevi [=Allawite] or a Nusayri [=Druze]. All Syrians are the same for us and they are all our brothers.” Davutoglu reiterated Erdogan’s and Elaraby’s earlier demands that there should be a profound changing of the decision-making process within the structure of the UN permitting humanitarian interventions despite the objections of superpowers.

Regarding the relevance of the Bosnia precedent, Ankara paraded several Bosnian and Kosovar leaders who hailed Turkey’s commitment to resolving humanitarian crises. “I am proud of Turkey because of what it is doing in Syria,” said Haris Silajdzic (the former PM of Bosnia and Herzegovina). “Turkey does this in the name of humanity, for all of us. We Bosnians know what it means when hundreds of people are killed and suffer every day.”

Meanwhile, Damascus offered Ankara, via Moscow, to discuss directly how to defuse the border crisis before it was too late. The idea of direct discussions was first raised by Lavrov. “Damascus welcomes the initiative of Mr. Lavrov to set up a mechanism of direct contacts between Syria and Turkey on security issues,” the Syrian Ministry of Foreign Affairs reacted immediately.

On the morning of October 13, Damascus reiterated that Syria accepts and supports “the necessity of having a mechanism of direct security communication between Syria and Turkey” in order to prevent a war from breaking out. Damascus notified the Russian ambassador of Syria’s “readiness to establish a joint Syrian-Turkish security committee to undertake finding a mechanism to control the security situation on both sides of the border in the framework of respecting the national sovereignty of the two countries.”

So far, there have been no reaction and no reply from Ankara.

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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