

Syria: The Vortex of Violence

By Dr. John Bruni

This week saw mortar fire from Syrian territory elicit a direct Turkish military response. The mortar fire from Syria hit the southern Turkish town of Akçakale, killing 5 people. Turkish artillery returned fire on unspecified targets within Syria, which Turkish radar identified as the points of origin of the



‘Syrian attack’. What of course is not known is who within Syria would benefit from provoking Turkey into engaging in a broader conflict with Syria, though there are a number of suspects. Up till now the Turkish government has acted with remarkable restraint over the bloody chaos that has claimed some 30,000 Syrian lives since the Syrian civil war started in March 2011. Even when a Turkish RF-4 Phantom reconnaissance plane was shot down close to Syrian territory last June, Ankara, while obviously angered by the loss, chose its words carefully – as did NATO – neither party keen on openly intervening in Syrian affairs.

The Syrian civil war, however, is far from being a conflict that has no external participants. Reports have suggested that



within the ranks of the Syrian opposition are jihadist volunteers from Libya, Chechnya, Afghanistan and Iraq. On the side of government forces are elements of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), Iran’s special Al Quds unit, as well as some of Iran’s paramilitary Basij internal security personnel. There are also rumors of Hezbollah volunteers helping to shore up the Assad regime as a quid pro quo for the critical logistical support it provided the southern Lebanese terrorist group over the years, by acting as a supply line for Iranian weapons and ammunition. Then there is the covert support that Turkish intelligence has provided the Free Syria Army (FSA) rebels, the financial and intelligence support from FSA supporters like Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, the US, the UK and France. On the side of Damascus is the Russian Federation, eager to protect its key strategic asset in Syria, the port of Tartus, located on the

Alawite coast in Latakia province, homeland of the Alwaite religion and of the Syrian political elite. This port has been recently refurbished at significant cost to Moscow and gives the Russian Navy its only access to the Eastern Mediterranean. To a lesser extent, the People's Republic of China has also supported the Assad regime by forming a block with the Russian Federation at the UN Security Council, consequently preventing the West, or pro-FSA supporters, from taking collective military action against Assad. Sitting on the periphery of this conflict is Israel. Israel is ever watchful over events in the Levant and its northern border with Syria, particularly the Golan Heights which it took from Syria during the 1967 Arab-Israeli War. While it would be natural to assume that there would be an element of glee in seeing the Assad regime, a long-time foe of Israel, being brought down, the fact remains that Israel has possibly more to lose from a post-Assad Syria than meets the eye, especially if a new post-Assad government were to have an Islamist tilt to it. Indications are that the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood are quietly working behind the scenes, supporting Syrian rebel activity and biding their time for the axe to fall on Assad and the ruling Alawite clique. Should Sunni Islamists assume a governing role in Syria, they might be a more difficult neighbour for Israel than Assad (Hafez and Bashar) ever was.

So, what of Turkey? Being the largest, most capable Muslim power in the region, it stands that the country has the means and the motive to intervene in Syria unilaterally,

so long as it has the tacit support of its NATO partners. Presently, NATO is in no position to put together a multinational task force with Turkey at the helm. The deep financial crises of Europe, combined with the fact that many European forces are being cut back due to austerity measures, severely limits what Europe can do in support of Turkey. And does Turkey itself want the role of 'regional enforcer'?



As the Syrian civil war has dragged on, the number of internally displaced persons and refugees has hit an all-time high. There are an estimated 300,000 Syrian refugees who have fled their homeland. Many of them have gone into southern Turkey, placing enormous pressure on Ankara. Actual numbers are hard to verify. In southern Turkey and northern Syria, as a consequence of the 2009 cross-border agreement signed between Ankara and Damascus, there is visa-free travel between the two countries. Turkish police are trying to ascertain the numbers of legal and illegal refugees by forcibly rounding up illegal Syrian refugees who aren't living in refugee camps and giving them the ultimatum of either going to a camp, or returning to Syria. This policy is causing some political discord in southern Turkey where there are blood and communitarian ties on either side of the border.

Returning to the problem of who fired the shots into Turkey. Currently there is a major

FSA offensive taking place in the northern Syrian city and commercial centre of Aleppo. Government forces are holding their ground but street fighting, and the fighting outside of the city limits, has been chaotic as the FSA's command and control strains to hold together. The fact that there are many militias (including Kurdish) and jihadist volunteers who broadly constitute the Syrian rebel front, (some of whom are not technically part of the FSA but who are nonetheless fighting the Syrian government) gives pause for thought that perhaps it was one of these rogue elements who put the mortar rounds into Turkey. Being aware of the tinderbox situation that exists in Syria, and understanding that it may take just a relatively minor incident to prompt a disproportionate response from Turkey – including the possibility of a major Turkish military raid into northern Syria – such a situation could be a game changer. Why? It is unlikely that a Turkish raid into northern Syria would be a rapid, temporary operation. Once Turkey is entrenched in Syria, the FSA would request Turkish air cover for its operations against loyalist Syrian forces and perhaps even heavy military support in the form of Turkish tanks and artillery. The FSA has few heavy weapons in its arsenal except for some captured Syrian Army tanks, armored vehicles and artillery pieces. They certainly have nowhere near of what is necessary to fend off the Syrian Army; and until this situation changes, or there is the collapse of the Alawite political core, the FSA will be at a disadvantage.

There is, however, the outside chance that the Syrian military was responsible for the mortar attacks. One can only speculate that some within the Syrian military may believe that pulling Turkey into the current vortex of violence in Syria, will complicate the pro-FSA camp's calculations by turning what can be described as a civil war, as well as a strategic war by proxy, (fought between Western/pro-Western interests on the one side and Iranian interests on the other) into an open regional conflagration. This hypothetical scenario may seem at first glance counter-intuitive for the Syrian political elite and military to contemplate, but there is some logic to this. If one were to assume that the end of Alawite Syria is close at hand, and that those in power in Damascus want to remain in power somewhere in Syria, Assad (and his followers) may let Syria, as a unitary state, fall and withdraw to the mountainous Alawite homeland of Latakia. Before the



final fall of the Alawite Syrian state, the Syrian military and intelligence services may conduct a scorched earth policy, leaving little for the FSA or their allies to build upon once they finally occupy

Damascus. Should Latakia (with most of the Alawite Syrian military safely in defensive positions) then declare independence from Syria, Assad and his inner circle may have lost Syria, but would retain authority in Latakia. An independent Latakia may become an unloved state in the Middle East – akin to Belarus in Europe – but political turmoil in a post-Assad Damascus would certainly pose major long-term problems for the Syrian Sunni rump. Unhappily the Sunni Syrians might well be caught between a Mubarak-style secular autocracy or an Islamist state, neither being a satisfactory solution to long term regional stability.

It will be interesting to see how the Syrian civil war continues to evolve and whether Turkish cunning and discipline will prevent Ankara from being dragged into an open-ended war not of its choosing. On Thursday October 4th, the Turkish parliament approved the use of force against Syria for 2013. On Friday, October 5th a mortar shell landed in southwestern Turkey, in the town



of Altinozu, prompting Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan to warn that Turkey was “not far” from war with Assad’s Syria. Turkish tanks, artillery and anti-aircraft weapons have been deployed along the

border. The Syrian military on the other hand, have pulled back from the border. History will decide how the various players involved in this conflict will maneuver and counter-maneuver. At stake for Turkey is its ability to be seen as a reliable regional enforcer and stabilizer. At stake for the Alawite ruling clique in Syria, is survival.

Mortar smoke over Akçakale image:

http://i.telegraph.co.uk/multimedia/archive/02359/syria-turkey_2359579b.jpg

Syria Map:

http://www.merriam-webster.com/maps/images/maps/syria_map.gif

Erdogan image:

http://www.theepochtimes.com/n2/images/stories/large/2012/10/03/Erdogan_153236619.jpg

Map of Latakia Province within Syria:

[http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/3/3f/Latakia_in_Syria_\(%2BGolan_hatched\).svg/250px-Latakia_in_Syria_\(%2BGolan_hatched\).svg.png](http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/3/3f/Latakia_in_Syria_(%2BGolan_hatched).svg/250px-Latakia_in_Syria_(%2BGolan_hatched).svg.png)

Syria vs. Turkey image:

<http://static.infowars.com/2012/10/i/general/turksyria.jpg>