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Is Turkey Planning to Destabilize Lebanon?

Col. (ret.) Dr. Jacques Neriah



Source: CIA

- Turkish leadership saw the uprising in Syria and Egypt as an opportunity to change the regimes opposed to Turkey's policies in the Middle East. Turkey looked at two targets: Egypt and Syria. In both countries, the Islamic opposition was headed by the Muslim Brotherhood, natural allies of the Turkish President Erdogan.

- Turkey saw the developments in Syria as an opportunity to intervene and topple the Alawite regime. Turkish military intelligence was instructed to assist rebel factions opposed to the Assad regime almost from the very first days of the civil war in Syria.
- Testimony in Turkish courts alleges that rocket parts, ammunition and semi-finished mortar shells taken from Turkish intelligence depots were carried in trucks accompanied by state officials to parts of Syria under hardline Islamist rebel control.
- Turkey may have chosen to take advantage of the already boiling situation in Lebanon between Hizbullah and its Sunni opponents and try to provoke a renewed civil war in Lebanon.
- Greek authorities intercepted a ship recently, loaded with a Turkish shipment of weapons, supposedly destined to Muslim radicals in the northern part of Lebanon.

The outburst of the so-called Arab Spring caught Turkey by surprise. After a period of hesitation, the Turkish leadership saw the uprising in Syria and Egypt as an opportunity to intervene and change the regimes opposed to Turkey's policies in the Middle East and replace them with Islamic regimes close to Turkey's ideological stand.

Specifically, Turkey looked at two targets: Egypt and Syria. In both countries, the Islamic opposition was headed by the Muslim Brotherhood, natural allies of the Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, and was challenging the traditional leaderships in an effort to topple them. Egypt fell first to the hands of the Muslim Brotherhood through a much contested democratic process which brought to the presidency the Muslim Brotherhood's candidate to the rejoicing of Turkey's leadership.

However, it took the Egyptian Army one full year to recover and force the Muslim Brotherhood President Mohammad Morsi to step down and retake the reins of power and the full control of the country – to Turkey's dismay. Since then relations between Ankara and Cairo have been poisoned by Ankara's open criticism of the Sisi regime and by the accusations made by Egypt of Turkish interference in its internal affairs.

In July 2015, Egyptian authorities went as far as accusing Turkey of conducting subversive activities in the Sinai Peninsula following the arrest of Turkish agents by Egyptian Intelligence.¹ Even though the domestic situation in Egypt is still frail and Islamic terror is still very active both in Sinai and inside Egypt, the military have succeeded in keeping Egypt's unity and avoiding a civil war.

Unlike Egypt, events that unfolded in Syria contributed to the collapse of the nation-state that had existed there since its 1945 independence from French colonial rule. Assad was confronted at the beginning by the traditional enemies of the Alawite regime. However, with the unraveling of the war, the Muslim Brotherhood were marginalized first by military groups which had rallied under the banner of the Free Syrian Army (FSA), whose official announcement of establishment was made in Turkish territory under the auspices of Turkish Intelligence, and then by other radical Muslim factions,

some Al-Qaeda-inspired and others directed by the Islamic State in Syria and the Levant (ISIL), later to become the Islamic State (IS) in 2014.



Turkish agents among ISIS fighters captured in Sinai in 2015.² (Egypt Daily News)

Turkey saw the developments in Syria as an opportunity to intervene and topple the Alawite regime. Accordingly, Turkish Military Intelligence (MIT) was instructed to assist rebel factions opposed to the Assad regime almost from the very first days of the civil war in Syria and more so from the end of the 2013 and early 2014. The magnitude of the Turkish involvement in Syria was uncovered by a Turkish prosecutor and court testimony from Turkish gendarmerie officers quoted by Reuters,³ both contradicting Turkey's denials that it had assisted the rebels with weapons, training and shelter, and by doing so indirectly contributed to the rise of the Islamic State in Syria. According to this report, Syria and some of Turkey's Western allies say Turkey allowed fighters and arms over the border, some of whom went on to join the Islamic State militant group. Testimony by gendarmerie officers in court documents reviewed by Reuters alleges that rocket parts, ammunition and semi-finished mortar shells taken from MIT depots were carried in trucks accompanied by state intelligence agency (MIT) officials to parts of Syria under the hardline Islamist rebel group Ahrar al-Sham. The Salafist group included commanders such as Abu Khaled al-Soury, also known as Abu Omair al-Shamy, who fought alongside al Qaeda founder Osama bin Laden and was close to its current chief Ayman al-Zawahiri.

Much has been written about the Turkish involvement in the Syrian conflict, its bias against the Kurds, and its double-faced attitude towards the IS. But it is not the purpose of this paper to depict an already known and well-documented interference.

However, unlike the past, it seems that Turkey has decided to adopt a different approach to the destabilization of Syria following the military intervention of Russia which has enabled thus far the Assad regime's chances not only to survive the storm but even to capture positions lost to the rebellion since 2012. Until now Turkey had chosen to shelter, train, arm, and finance rebel groups, and allow almost total free movement of jihadists inside Turkey en route to their units inside Syria and Iraq, and even allow them to spend vacations in summer resorts on the southwest coast of Turkey. In some cases Turkey was even accused of assisting the Islamists in their battles against the Kurds in Kobani and Tel-El Abyad and even bombing Kurdish villages and troop concentrations. It took the United States long and strenuous efforts to convince the Turks to allow the coalition forces to use the Turkish Incirlik airbase against the IS in Syria and Iraq. When Turkey finally announced it was joining the air efforts against the IS, it soon appeared that most of the strikes were carried out against Kurdish targets rather than those of the IS.

If one could describe the Turkish vector of support to the rebels, one could say that this vector could be represented as a figurative arrow directed from Turkey south and westwards in an effort to push Assad's loyalists to the coastal line and to force Assad to fight his last battle from his traditional strongholds. However, the Russians changed the equation to the detriment of the rebels and created a new situation that demanded new answers and solutions.

Turkey Turns to Lebanon

It now appears that in its efforts to destabilize Assad, Turkey may have chosen to take advantage of the already boiling situation in Lebanon between Hizbullah and its Sunni opponents and try to provoke a renewed civil war in Lebanon. Sending weapons to radical Sunni Islamists in northern Lebanon is but the tip of the iceberg and much remains to be seen on the ground before reaching such a conclusion. However, if this proves to be right, then, by doing so, the Turks would have created two new fronts: one that would attack the Latakia region from the south moving northwards and the other one that would generate civil war in Lebanon between Sunnis and Shiites, a situation that would force Hizbullah to withdraw its troops from Syria and return home to fight. By doing so, the Syrian regime would be deprived of some of its best troops and weakened, thus allowing the rebels assisted by Turkey to initiate renewed offensives in order to take back territory they have lost since the beginning of October 2015.

This theory finds support in an article written by Fabrice Balanche, a French professor and specialist on Syria's political geography, a currently visiting fellow at the Washington Institute. His article⁴ published on February 5, 2016, analyzes the situation after the Syrian campaign supported by Iran, Hizbullah and Russia succeeded in cutting the northern insurgency supply line to Turkey. His remarks about possible countermeasures by the Turkish and Saudi supporters of the insurgency in his article are worth underlining:

...Turkey and Saudi Arabia may not remain passive in the face of major Russian-Iranian progress in Syria. For example, they could set up a new rebel umbrella group similar to Jaysh al-Fatah, and/or send anti-aircraft missiles to certain

brigades. Another option is to open a new front in northern Lebanon, where local Salafist groups and thousands of desperate Syrian refugees could be engaged in the fight. Such a move would directly threaten Assad's Alawite heartland in Tartus and Homs, as well as the main road to Damascus. Regime forces would be outflanked, and Hizbullah's lines of communication, reinforcement, and supply between Lebanon and Syria could be cut off.

This, of course, would partly explain the news that Greek authorities have detained a cargo ship, Kuki Boy, flying a Togo flag, on the island of Crete since February 28, 2016. The ship, loaded with weapons, was supposedly destined for Muslim radicals in the northern part of Lebanon. The ship, which had left the Turkish port of Mersin on February 4, 2016, was bound to reach the port of Tripoli in Lebanon. Intercepted by the Greek Coast Guard off the coast of Rhodes Island 63 miles southeast of the Turkish resort town of Bodrum, the ship was forced to dock at the port of Souda in Crete.⁵



Six containers of illegal arms detained in Greece⁶ (Fleetmon.com)

Moreover, the report about the incident comes amid mounting political tension as Saudi Arabia and fellow Gulf States continue to take punitive measures against Lebanon (the annulment by Saudi Arabia of \$4 billion in financing of weapons from France is but one example) in anger over what they see as Hizbullah's destructive influence over the country. According to one⁷ Sunni politician in Lebanon, Saudi Arabia was courting Syrian refugees in Lebanon with the goal of establishing an anti-Hizbullah Sunni militia. The politician said Saudi Deputy Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman sees Sunni Syrian refugees with military training as a way to harass Hizbullah, and he may be using Saudi philanthropic organizations that provide aid to refugee camps as a way to court potential militia recruits.

It was only logical that the uncovering of the weapons on the ship bound for Lebanon would trigger harsh criticism from pro-Hizbullah media. The immediate reaction was

aired by Hassan Nasrallah, leader of Hizbullah, in his latest speech. While adopting a confrontational attitude towards Saudi Arabia, which had convinced the Gulf Arab monarchies to consider Hizbullah as a terrorist organization and to treat it accordingly, Nasrallah pointed at Turkey and its regional allies – Israel and Saudi Arabia – and accused them of trying to destabilize Lebanon, and pledged that he would not fall into the trap set by his enemies.

The pro-Hizbullah media in Lebanon chose also to accuse Turkey and Saudi Arabia directly of destabilizing Lebanon as part and parcel of a greater scheme to bring down the Alawite regime in Syria. A pro-Hizbullah newspaper, Al-Akhbar,⁸ published an article warning that "foreign powers" seek to "explode the Lebanese arena." The pro-Hizbullah newspaper then claimed that Turkey had gathered "statistics in Lebanon, and collected information on the presence of 84,000 Lebanese of Turkmen origin about their location, their types of business and their political presence." However, Al-Akhbar did not explain what Ankara wanted to do with this supposed information. Instead, the paper claimed that Ankara was "working forcefully along with the Qataris in northern [Lebanese] areas in particular" to hamper support for the Future Movement headed by former Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri.

No doubt the latest events have emphasized once more the already known picture of the fighting alliances – Syria and its allies (Russia, Iran and Hizbullah) on the one hand, and Turkey in concert with Saudi Arabia and Qatar on the other hand. Cynically, both alliances are fighting on the same turf and conducting their confrontation through proxies. It appears now that both rival alliances are looking for the possible game changer in Syria which might turn out to be frail, paralyzed and divided Lebanon.

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Col. (ret.) Dr. Jacques Neriah, a special analyst for the Middle East at the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, was formerly Foreign Policy Advisor to Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and Deputy Head for Assessment of Israeli Military Intelligence.

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Notes

1 See more at: Col. (ret.) Dr. Jacques Neriah, July 14, 2015, <http://jcpa.org/article/egypt-accuses-turkey-of-subversion/>

2 Egyptian Armed Forces Captures Foreign Terrorist and Foreign Secret Agents working with Sinai Daesh Terrorist, Egypt Daily News, <http://www.egyptdailynews.com/news%20edn%208july%20Egypt%20captured%20foreigners.htm>

3 Humeyra Pamuk and Nick Tattersa Exclusive: Turkish intelligence helped ship arms to Syrian Islamist rebel areas, <http://mobile.reuters.com/article/idUSKBN0061L220150521>

4 <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-battle-of-aleppo-is-the-center-of-the-syrian-chessboard>, The Battle of Aleppo Is the Center of the Syrian Chessboard, February 5, 2016

5 Greek Coast Guard detains Turkish ship carrying weapons to Lebanon By News Desk - 01/03/2016 ,<https://www.almasdarnews.com/article/30579/> | Al-Masdar News

<http://www.almanar.com.lb/french/adetails.php?eid=289573&cid=18&fromval=1&frid=18&seccatid=23&s1=1#.VtcS4AV-Vd8.mailto>

6 <https://www.fleetmon.com/maritime-news/2016/11715/lebanese-freighter-trader-6-containers-illegal-arm/>

7 Lebanon: Saudi Arabia Is Courting Syrian Refugees, Politician Says, March 1, 2016, <https://www.stratfor.com/situation-report/lebanon-saudi-arabia-courting-syrian-refugees-politician-says>

8 <https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/NewsReports/566679-pro-Hizbullah-daily-lebanon-targeted-for-explosion>, <http://www.moonofalabama.org/2016/03/syria-turkish-saudi-countermove-in-lebanon-threatens-attack-on-latakia.html>

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Dore Gold, Publisher; Alan Baker, ICA Director; Lenny Ben-David, Managing Editor. Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs (Registered Amuta), 13 Tel-Hai St., Jerusalem, Israel; Tel. 972-2-561-9281, Fax. 972-2-561-9112, Email: jcpa@netvision.net.il. In U.S.A.: Center for Jewish Community Studies, 7 Church Lane, Suite 9, Baltimore, MD 21208; Tel. 410-653-7779; Fax 410-653-8889. Website: www.jcpa.org. © Copyright. The opinions expressed herein do not necessarily reflect those of the Board of Fellows of the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs.

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