

Erdoğan's Syria interventions: the Russian alliance and handover of Aleppo



While Aleppo burned last month in a vicious offensive executed by the Assad regime, supported by Russian air power and Iranian-backed militia, Muslims around the world watched on in horror and distress. Thousands were killed and many more displaced as the Eastern part of the city was thoroughly destroyed. The Syrian Army walked across with remarkable ease. Aleppo, the symbolic heartland of the Syrian revolution, fell back into the hands of the Assad regime. On closer examination, it did not just fall; it was handed over in a deal struck between Moscow and Ankara, with the approval of Washington from as early as June 2016. Erdoğan signed on to execute the American-Russian agenda in Syria as part of the Russia-Iran-Turkey tripartite ring.

Pressure was applied on the rebels from all sides to lay down arms and leave Aleppo. Russia applied military pressure with intense and continuous bombing. Turkey's role was to apply political pressure to the rebel groups under its influence. It pushed them first to leave the fronts in Aleppo to join its "Euphrates Shield" operation in the north from August, then to not fight as the regime invaded in November and finally to be evacuated after the invasion in December. Aleppo was given to the Assad regime on a silver platter.

The role of Russia in all this, likewise Iran, comes as no surprise. The role of Turkey and Erdoğan, however, is difficult to digest for many who have pinned their hopes on him as the model Muslim ruler and potential saviour of the Muslim world. Erdoğan's recent moves in Syria have a different story to tell. In this essay, we look at the Turkish role in handing over Aleppo to the Assad regime, within the broader context of the normalisation and strengthening of ties with Russia and Operation Euphrates Shield.

Turkey's Normalisation of Ties with Russia

The Handover of Aleppo

Operation "Euphrates Shield"

Turkey embeds itself in the Russia-Iran-Syria Alliance of Evil

Concluding remarks

Turkey's Normalisation of Ties with Russia

When rogue elements of the Turkish Air Force downed a Russian jet on 24 November 2015, diplomatic relations between the two nations came to a standstill, with severe restrictions placed by Russia on Turkish trade, travel and lucrative energy projects. This represented a significant economic blow to Turkey, given that Russia was her second largest trading partner.¹

The Kremlin was unequivocal that relations would not resume until Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan issued a formal apology for the downing of the Russian jet. In late June 2016, Erdoğan obliged, apologising and vowing to take action against those responsible in a letter addressed to Russian President Vladimir Putin.² Consequently, sanctions were lifted and projects resumed as Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu announced that there should be no obstacles to trade between Turkey and Russia.³



Lavrov and Çavuşoğlu meet in Sochi, July 2016.

Following the apology, relations between Moscow and Ankara warmed quite quickly and meetings between top officials took place with remarkable urgency. Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov met his Turkish counterpart Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu almost immediately on 1 July 2016 at the Russian Black Sea resort of Sochi on the sidelines of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation Organization (BSEC) Council of Ministers of Foreign Affairs.⁴

Following this, Presidents Erdoğan and Putin met in person three times in two months. Erdoğan went first to meet Putin in St. Petersburg on 9 August 2016, then they met on 3 September during the G-20 Summit in Hangzhou, China, and finally Putin visited Istanbul on 10 October.

It is important to note that this process of normalisation of ties between the two countries began before the failed coup attempt in Turkey on 15 July 2016. Many commentators have mistakenly read the Russian-Turkish rapprochement as a post-coup move by Turkey caused by its dissatisfaction with the western response to the coup attempt. However, this is not at all the case. The Turkish apology, the Russian acceptance thereof and even conciliatory meetings between top officials all came before the failed coup attempt and continued thereafter. At most, the process was marginally slowed due to Ankara's occupation with its response to the coup attempt.

One of the important decisions to come out of the St. Petersburg summit was the establishment of a three-pillar mechanism based on enhanced consultations between the two countries' foreign ministries, intelligence agencies and general staff units.⁵ The first meeting of this new initiative was held almost straight away in Russia on 11 August, and aimed to develop a much more extensive political and military dialogue between Ankara and Moscow. In turn, top military officials have had multiple meetings since then. Russian Chief of General Staff Valery Gerasimov visited Turkey in September, with Turkish Chief of General Staff Hulusi Akar visiting Moscow in November.

¹ Daily Sabah, 17 Dec 2016: <http://www.dailysabah.com/op-ed/2016/12/17/turkey-and-russia-from-frozen-relations-to-cooperation>

² Kremlin, 27 June 2016, *Vladimir Putin received a letter from President of Turkey Recep Tayyip Erdogan*: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/52282>

³ Anadolu Agency, 25 Dec 2016: <http://aa.com.tr/en/economy/turkey-says-russia-is-keeping-its-promises-on-syria/713897>

⁴ Anadolu Agency, 1 Jul 2016: <http://aa.com.tr/en/anadolu-post/turkish-russian-top-diplomats-meet-in-russias-sochi/601067>

⁵ Ersen E, *The Turkish-Russian Dialogue in Syria: Prospects and Challenges*, Al Sharq Forum, 5 Jan 2017: <http://sharqforum.org/2017/01/05/the-turkish-russian-dialogue-in-syria-prospects-and-challenges/>

The Syrian file, as later deals and events indicate, was at the forefront of this rapprochement and top of the agenda. Russia's Ambassador to Syria Alexander Kinshchak declared on June 30 2016:

“Yesterday’s decision to normalize relations with Turkey may positively impact the settlement of the Syrian crisis. If we can develop this positive tendency in relations with Turkey and attempt to return to a real partnership on Syrian crisis settlement in addition to normalizing bilateral ties [...] this will have the most positive impact on the situation in Syria.”⁶

The very first Lavrov-Çavuşoğlu meeting in Sochi had the Syrian conflict at the top of the list of regional issues discussed.⁷ Lavrov also made clear that the normalisation of ties was in significant part motivated by the need for a “settlement” in Syria: “All this will have a positive impact on the overall situation in the region and, importantly, I hope it will help us to search more efficiently for joint approaches to the settlement of the Syrian crisis.”⁸

The Russian narrative on Syria – in origin the US narrative – was the all too familiar “war on terror” narrative, the same one abused by various oppressive regimes around the world. Turkey, from this point, adopted this narrative in full. Russia waved the terrorism card with fervour and Turkey followed suit. Russia’s self-conceived “terrorists”, conveniently, were those who did not agree to the terms set out by Russia. Lavrov was explicit in this regard, emphasising that Turkey had agreed to this logic. He said in early July after the Sochi meeting [emphasis added]:

“By now, fairly significant progress has been made, there is a ceasefire agreement from which the ISIS, Jabhat al-Nusra and affiliated groups, as well as groups that for some reason are refusing to join the ceasefire, are excluded. Those who do not want to be bombed must leave the positions occupied by Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIS. As simple as that. Today, our Turkish colleagues confirmed that they absolutely agree with this logic. Therefore, both Russia and Turkey hope that the patriotic and constructive opposition groups that for various reasons still remain in terrorist-controlled areas pull out from those areas as soon as possible. Otherwise, they will be regarded de facto as accomplices of Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIS. *I will repeat that today we reaffirmed our shared understanding on this issue in the talks with Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu.*”⁹

The Russian plan was thus quite straightforward: de-legitimise all resistance brigades as “terrorists” grouping them with ISIS, including, in particular, Jabhat al-Nusra (now Jabhat Fath al-Sham), create an artificial wedge between these “radical” factions and other “moderate” ones, consider all those who do not comply as the former, then bomb them into submission. In this way, it would assist the Assad regime re-take lost cities and also impose a “political solution”. Turkey signed on to this plan from as early as the Lavrov-Çavuşoğlu meeting in Sochi.¹⁰



Putin and Erdogan meet in St. Petersburg, August 2016.

⁶ Sputnik, 30 Jun 2016: <https://sputniknews.com/politics/201606301042208125-russia-turkey-normalization-syria/>

⁷ Russia Today, 1 Jul 2016: <https://www.rt.com/news/349165-lavrov-cavusoglu-talks-relations/>

⁸ Sputnik, 12 Jul 2016: <https://sputniknews.com/politics/201607121042809184-russia-turkey-relations-syria/>

⁹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 1 Jul 2016, *Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's remarks and answers to media questions at a news conference following the 34th session of the Council of Foreign Ministers of the Member States of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation Organisation, Sochi, July 1, 2016*: <https://goo.gl/aED21H>

¹⁰ Strategic Culture Foundation, 7 Jul 2016: <http://www.strategic-culture.org/news/2016/07/07/russia-turkey-join-together-war-terrorists.html>

Most on the ground are aware of this. Sighli, for example, a commander from the Sultan Murad rebel brigade in the northern Syrian city of Jarablus said: “Russia says they are bombing terrorists, but be it al-Nusra or Ahrar al-Sham, these are people who have fought with us to save our land.”¹¹ Erdoğan’s regime is also aware, yet willing to go along. Previously, it had long argued against Jabhat al-Nusra being classed as a terrorist organisation. Eventually, it made a full U-turn. In December 2016, Çavuşoğlu slammed claims that Turkey tolerates al-Nusra, affirming that he had repeatedly called it a terrorist group, “Our attitude toward al-Nusra is clear. I even came under fire for saying that al-Nusra should leave Aleppo. We told the moderate opposition that they should not keep al-Nusra within themselves.”¹²

Considering Russia’s strong stance in support of the Assad regime, Turkey’s normalisation of ties with Russia also signalled a significant tonal shift on Syria. No longer was Turkey speaking staunchly against the Assad regime and calling for its downfall, but instead Turkish Prime Minister Binali Yıldırım began to speak of normalisation of ties with Syria. Playing the ever expedient terrorism card¹³ in a meeting of the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) provincial leaders in Ankara on the 13 July 2016, he said: “We have returned our relations with Israel and Russia to normal. I am sure that we will return to normal relations with Syria as well.”¹⁴

Even during the devastating destruction of Aleppo in December, Turkey was noticeably quiet.¹⁵ This shift in tone was perhaps most starkly made apparent through Erdoğan’s succumbing to public censure by Russia over statements he made in late November about Turkey’s objective in Syria being to “end the rule of the tyrant al-Assad who terrorizes with state terror.”¹⁶ Putin’s response, through his spokesperson, Dmitry Peskov, was to hold him to account:

“It is a very serious statement and one which differs from previous ones and with our understanding of the situation. We hope that our Turkish partners will provide us with some kind of explanation about this.”

Putin also spoke to Erdoğan about his statements by phone. The very next day, Erdoğan retracted his statements about Assad and offered the “explanation” that Moscow had wanted:

“The aim of the Euphrates Shield Operation is no country or person but only terror organizations. No one should doubt this issue that we have uttered over and over, and no one should comment on it in another fashion or try to [misrepresent its meaning].”

Before moving to the handover of Aleppo itself, a couple of points are worth emphasising. First, as demonstrated above, Russian-Turkey plans for Syria, working towards a ceasefire en route to a “political solution” began as early as July 2016, six months before the invasion and handover of Aleppo. The handover was planned and premeditated, contrary to readings that suggest Erdoğan decided, only after seeing Aleppo being inevitably lost, to cut losses and make the most of the bad situation. This latter reading falls to explain why the situation on the ground in Aleppo changed so drastically and also to take into account the series of Russian-Turkey meetings and agreements that begin from July 2016. Second, it should be noted that the Russian agenda in Syria is neither entirely independent of nor in conflict with the US agenda as trumpeted by some elements of mainstream media. Naturally, both have their own regional political and economic interests in mind, but there is no significant conflict between the two on the path to that end in Syria. Both Russia and Turkey are working very much within the US

¹¹ Reuters, 19 Oct 2016: <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-jarablus-idUSKCN12J2CW>

¹² Daily Sabah, 29 Dec 2016: <http://www.dailysabah.com/syrian-crisis/2016/12/29/cease-fire-to-take-effect-any-time-assad-not-in-political-transition>

¹³ The Guardian, 13 Jul 2016: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jul/13/turkey-pm-greatest-goal-is-to-improve-relations-with-syria-and-iraq>

¹⁴ Hurriyet Daily News, 13 Jul 2016: <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkey-needs-to-normalize-relations-with-syria-says-pm-yildirim.aspx?pageID=238&nID=101536&NewsCatID=510>

¹⁵ Al Monitor, 3 Dec 2016: <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/12/turkey-syria-aleppo-defeat-worst-case-scenario.html>

¹⁶ Hurriyet Daily News, 1 Dec 2016: <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/operation-in-syria-only-targets-terror-erdogan-clarifies-.aspx?pageID=238&nID=106779&NewsCatID=352>

agenda and the US, far from being “sidelined”¹⁷¹⁸, has been part of and leading the process throughout albeit using different styles and means at different times.

This can be demonstrated with ease by following the American movements on Syria in the last year. We do not do so here as it is beyond the scope of this piece. Suffice it to say that the Russian narrative and objective is entirely within parameters previously agreed to with the US since late 2015. As co-chairs of the “International Syria Support Group” (ISSG)¹⁹ – convened in November 2015 six weeks after Russia’s military intervention in Syria – the US and Russia have been working together, leading the response of the UN and “international community”, on broadly the same agenda in Syria: a “political solution” whereby the “Syrian Opposition” and the Assad regime would sit together, after the imposition of a ceasefire on the ground, to form a unity government and work towards a transitional period and then the formation of a new constitution and government. Of course, this new constitution and government would be secular – as stipulated by the Geneva Declaration and UNSC Resolution 2254 which mention facilitating a secular government in Syria²⁰ and the Vienna Statements which declare that “Syria’s unity, independence, territorial integrity, and secular character are fundamental”²¹ – and acquiescent to the regional political and economic interests of foreign powers as with all other regimes in the region.

This was essentially the same agenda – in origin an American agenda – expressed in the Geneva Communiqué of 2012²², the Vienna Statements of November 2015²³ (which established the ISSG), the UN Security Council Resolution 2254 of December 2015²⁴ (whereby the UN endorsed the strategy of the ISSG), the Munich Statement of the ISSG in February 2016²⁵, ‘The Cessation of Hostilities’ Accord of the ISSG signed on 22 February 2016²⁶ by both the US and Russia, and the Vienna Statement of the ISSG of May 2016²⁷. All of these mention the same things Russia has been parroting ever since, such as the need to impose a ceasefire, one that did not apply to “terrorist organisations” including Jabhat Fath al-Sham (JFS), against whom military actions of the US, Russia and the Assad regime would continue. The more recent ‘Moscow agreement’ signed by Iran, Turkey and Russia in December 2016²⁸, whilst portrayed as sidelining the US, stipulates these very same core points, explicitly citing UN SC Resolution 2254.

The Handover of Aleppo

¹⁷ CNN, 29 Dec 2016: <http://edition.cnn.com/2016/12/29/middleeast/syria-ceasefire-russia-turkey-analysis/>

¹⁸ Politico, 29 Dec 2016: <http://www.politico.com/story/2016/12/syria-obama-putin-middle-east-233042>

¹⁹ The Syria Institute, June 2016, *The International Syria Support Group*: <http://syriainstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/ISSG-Cheat-Sheet-Secure.pdf>

²⁰ United Nations Meetings Coverage And Press Releases, 18 Dec 2015, *Security Council Unanimously Adopts Resolution 2254 (2015), Endorsing Road Map for Peace Process in Syria, Setting Timetable for Talks*: <http://www.un.org/press/en/2015/sc12171.doc.htm>

²¹ European Union External Action, 30 Oct 2015, *Final declaration on the results of the Syria Talks in Vienna as agreed by participants*: https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/5960_en

²² United Nations Action Group for Syria, 30 Jun 2012, *Final Communiqué*: <http://www.un.org/News/dh/infocus/Syria/FinalCommuniqueActionGroupforSyria.pdf>

²³ U.S Department of State, 14 Nov 2015, *Statement of the International Syria Support Group*: <https://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2015/11/249511.htm>

²⁴ UN Security Council, 18 December 2015, *Resolution 2254 (2015)*: [http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/RES/2254\(2015\)](http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/RES/2254(2015))

²⁵ U.S Department of State, 11 Feb 2016, *Statement of the International Syria Support Group*: <https://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2016/02/252428.htm>

²⁶ U.S Department of State, 22 Feb 2016, *Joint Statement of the United States and the Russian Federation, as Co-Chairs of the ISSG, on Cessation of Hostilities in Syria*: <https://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2016/02/253115.htm>

²⁷ U.S Department of State, 17 May 2016, *Statement of the International Syria Support Group*: <https://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2016/05/257295.htm>

²⁸ Sputnik Turkey, 21 Dec 2016: <https://tr.sputniknews.com/ortadogu/201612211026428478-rusya-turkiye-iran-suriye-ortak-bildiri/>

Aleppo, the symbolic heartland of the revolution, had been a bone in the Syrian regime's throat for four years. It had been a stalemate between the regime and resistance groups with neither able to take full control. The resistance groups had a strong grasp on the areas they controlled. In fact, early August saw the resistance on the front foot with its tail up as it broke the regime's siege of the city in spectacular style. Yet, in spite of all this, come December and the regime simply walks across large parts of Aleppo as if facing no resistance.



The devastation of Aleppo by Russian bombs in Nov-Dec 2016.

The reason for this was, quite simply, that Russia, Iran and Turkey cut a deal to give Aleppo to the Assad regime on a plate. Russia would devastate the city through aerial bombardment pushing it into a difficult corner with little options, Iran would assist the Syrian Army move in on the ground and Turkey would make sure that significant rebel groups would not put up a fight. They would either withdraw from the city or not put up a fight and be evacuated later. The

Turkish Foreign Minister confirmed on the 26 October that Turkey knew the Syrian regime and its supporters “want al-Nusra to withdraw from Aleppo just because they want to recapture Aleppo.”²⁹ Indeed, it was the withdrawal of the rebel groups that allowed the Syrian Army to take the city with such ease after four years of being unable to do anything of the sort. The political spin deployed was that Turkey had done great work by evacuating civilians after the invasion.³⁰ What was hidden was that Turkey had evacuated rebel groups before it and pushed others still there to not fight, allowing the invasion in the first place. This did not, of course, arise out of a vacuum. It was the result of Turkey working hand-in-hand with Russia on the Syrian file for months as demonstrated above.

Two months earlier in October, Russian President Vladimir Putin said during a visit to Istanbul:

“Together with the Turkish president, we agreed to do everything to support de Mistura's [Staffan de Mistura, the UN Secretary-General's Special Envoy for Syria] initiative on the withdrawal of military units, which refuse to lay down their arms, from Aleppo in order to end violence.”³¹

During the same visit, Erdoğan agreed to meet Russia's demand that fighters from Jabhat Fath al-Sham be removed from Aleppo. Erdoğan said about this, “The necessary orders were given to our friends, and they will do what is needed.”³²

²⁹ Hurriyet Daily News, 26 Oct 2016: <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkeys-military-operations-in-syria-targets-manbij-not-aleppo-president-erdogan.aspx?pageID=238&nID=105389&NewsCatID=338>

³⁰ Al Jazeera, 14 Dec 2016: <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/12/syria-rebels-reach-evacuation-deal-government-161213163954322.html>

³¹ New York Times, 10 Oct 2016: <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/11/world/europe/turkey-russia-vladimir-putin-recep-tayyip-erdogan.html>

³² Reuters, 19 Oct 2016: <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-jarablus-idUSKCN12J2CW>

A few days later, the Turkish Foreign Minister re-iterated this during international talks on Syria in Lausanne, telling reporters after the meeting that JFS must withdraw from military posts in Aleppo immediately for humanitarian aid to reach the city safely.³³ Humanitarian aid was used as blackmail for the achievement of political ends.

On the 16 December, during the height of the Aleppo invasion, Putin referred to an earlier conversation he had with Erdoğan during the Turkish President's visit to St. Petersburg on the 9 August, saying:



Putin and Erdogan at the World Energy Forum in Istanbul, Oct 2016.

“Judging from what I see (in Syria), things are happening in accordance with the agreements I reached with the Turkish president during his visit to St. Petersburg. We agreed that Turkey would provide every possible assistance in arranging the exit of those militants who were ready to lay down their arms [...]”³⁴

Many brigades with links to Turkey were involved in the pull out of Aleppo since August. The Sultan Murad Brigade, Suqour al-Jabal, Jaysh al-Tahrir, Jabhat al-Shamiya, Nour al-Din al-Zenki, Faylaq al-Sham and Ahrar al-Sham are just some Aleppo based rebel groups that had been pulled out of the city to assist with Turkish military operations in northern Syria, Operation Euphrates Shield (discussed in more detail in next section). Thousands of fighters from these brigades had been gradually moved out since August³⁵. Many of those who remained were pressured to lay down their arms and surrender and thus many did. The Chief of the Russian General Staff Main Operational Directorate Sergei Rudskoy announced on 19 December that around three and a half thousand fighters surrendered themselves to the Syrian authorities since the beginning of the military operations in Aleppo: “A total number of 3,406 militants of the so-called moderate opposition groups have surrendered during the liberation of Eastern Aleppo, and over 3,000 of them have been pardoned.”³⁶

Some rebel groups have, in turn, been explicit in blaming Turkey for the loss of Aleppo due to these manoeuvres which firmly tipped the scales in favour of Assad and his allies in Moscow and Tehran.³⁷ Not only did Turkey clear the field for the Assad regime and its Russian allies, it has been providing intelligence and support for Russian operations in Syria.³⁸ Russian First Deputy Chairman of the Committee on Defence and Security at the Federation Council Franz Klintsevich confirmed that Turkey had covertly joined an intelligence sharing pool formed by Russia, Syria, Iran and Iraq:

“We pass Turkey data on our radio intercepts, electronic intelligence and imagery intelligence that may be of interest to it [...] In response, they also share information. Turkey has very effective intelligence agencies and very good agents in Syria.”³⁹

Soon after the normalisation of Turkey's ties with Russia, Russian Foreign Minister Sergio Lavrov said:

³³ Daily Sabah, 15 Oct 2016: <http://www.dailysabah.com/diplomacy/2016/10/15/syria-peace-talks-end-in-lausanne-without-significant-progress>

³⁴ TASS, 16 Dec 2016: <http://tass.com/politics/919910>

³⁵ ISW, 30/08/2016: <http://www.understandingwar.org/background/turkish-incursion-northern-syria-signals-turning-point-anti-isis-fight>; Reuters, 15/12/2016: <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-turkey-idUSKBN14422U>

³⁶ Al Alam, 19 Dec 2016: <http://en.alalam.ir/news/1899626>

³⁷ Al-Monitor, 19 Dec 2016: <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/12/turkey-syria-ankara-recruit-militants-from-aleppo.html>

³⁸ Sputnik, 26 Oct 2016: <https://sputniknews.com/middleeast/201610261046745351-russia-turkey-syria-intelligence/>

³⁹ Ibid.

“It goes without saying that it is becoming even more urgent that we work together to counter terrorism. We set up a joint Russian-Turkish working group on combatting terrorism that includes representatives of the foreign ministries and intelligence agencies.”⁴⁰

Little wonder, then, that with such co-operation in play with Russia, Erdoğan had not even words of condemnation for what Russia and Assad did to Aleppo. At the same time, he was quick to claim credit for subsequent evacuations of civilians and rebels. In these too, Turkey worked closely with those responsible for the devastation and bloodshed in Aleppo, Iran and Russia.

Çavuşoğlu, while praising and justifying Russia’s intervention, declared in late December, “in this period, Russia and Turkey have trusted each other on strategic issues. Turkey and Russia have mutual trust in each other,”⁴¹ and Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif said to his Russian counterpart that, “we, you and Turkey have been able in the past five days to help evacuate innocent civilians from Aleppo as well as (facilitate) the terrorist groups to leave the city.”⁴² The “terrorist groups” being the resistance groups, not, it should be noted, including ISIS which has no presence in Aleppo.

Operation “Euphrates Shield”

Turkey’s military intervention in northern Syria, codenamed “Operation Euphrates Shield”, began on 24 August 2016. The operation aims at creating a buffer zone to push ISIS away from the Syrian-Turkish border while also, and more importantly for Turkey, forestalling the creation a contiguous Kurdish-held region in northern Syria. It would do this by clearing the regions extending from Azaz to Jarablus from ISIS and YPG (People’s Protection Units) – the armed faction of the Kurdish PYD (Democratic Union Party) – forces.

It would also be the perfect means for Erdoğan to deliver on his deal with Russia to push rebel fighters out of Aleppo. Thus, Erdoğan diverted thousands of rebels to help him clean up the border region when they were desperately needed in Aleppo. Turkey pushed the Syrian rebel groups under its influence to participate in the operation. Ankara’s use of rebel forces as a proxy force for this operation drew thousands of rebel fighters away from their war against Assad, weakening opposition lines in Aleppo.⁴³ This came not long



Cavusoglu & Kerry meet in August 2016, prior to launch of “Euphrates Shield”.

after the breaking of the siege at Ramousa in early August and subsequent regime intensification of attacks in Eastern Aleppo to make the crossing unusable and re-establish the siege. At a time when

⁴⁰ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 1 Jul 2016, <https://goo.gl/aED21H>

⁴¹ Anadolu Agency, 25 Dec 16: <http://aa.com.tr/en/economy/turkey-says-russia-is-keeping-its-promises-on-syria/713897>

⁴² CNN, 20 Dec 2016: <http://edition.cnn.com/2016/12/20/middleeast/syria-aleppo-evacuation-turkey/>

⁴³ Lund A, *Another Change of Fortune in Aleppo*, Carnegie Middle East Centre, 5 Sep 2016: <http://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/64474>

Aleppo needed all the fighters it could get, significant numbers of rebels from the Aleppo region were pushed by Turkey, and paid, to stay on the border front, instead of returning to their home city to fight.⁴⁴



Turkey enters Syria for her “Euphrates Shield” operation, August 2016.

Reports from Aleppo in late November mentioned that the quick losses of territory in Eastern Aleppo were caused by the withdrawal of large numbers of fighters from the front in Aleppo to assist Turkish forces in their Euphrates Shield operations. The Director of the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights Rami Abdul Rahman said, “Turkish orders reached the fighters its supports in the FSA to join the forces fighting ISIS as part of the Euphrates Shield.”⁴⁵

Estimates place the number of rebel fighters taking part in Euphrates Shield at some 5,000 Free Syrian Army fighters, including groups from the Sultan Murat Brigade⁴⁶, Suqour al-Jabal, Fath al-Sham Front and Faylaq al-Sham.⁴⁷ Five thousand is a substantial number. For comparison, estimates place the total number of fighters in the Jaysh al-Fath-led operation that captured the Artillery Academy and broke the siege at Ramousa in southwest Aleppo in early August at 6000-8000.⁴⁸ It was many of these, but also others, that were then moved away from Aleppo to Jarabulus for Turkey’s Euphrates Shield operation. Erdoğan’s decision to pressure the rebel groups under his influence to allow thousands of its fighters to abandon the effort to lift the regime siege of eastern Aleppo in order to spearhead the Euphrates Shield ensured the fall of Aleppo four months later.⁴⁹

For many of the rebel leaders who left Aleppo, before or after its fall, to join the Turkish intervention in the north, this was part of broader efforts to eventually re-take Aleppo. In October, a commander from the Sultan Murad Brigade named Ismail said, “Our most important target is to break the siege of Aleppo [...] This is our own idea, but in the coming days we will discuss this with our Turkish brothers.”⁵⁰ 40-year-old rebel Bessam Muhammed said, “We haven’t come all the way and fought this war to seize Jarabulus and then stay here,” and Mahmud, 26, an FSA fighter stated, “We don’t want to stop here or in al-Bab. Next is Aleppo.” Turkmen Front Brigade Commander Firaz Paşa, upon leaving Aleppo through the negotiated evacuations, said: “We are among the last six people who are leaving Aleppo ultimately. However we will return to Aleppo and fight to retake the control of our homeland.”⁵¹ Turkey, on its part however, has been unequivocal in declaring that Aleppo is absolutely not part of its plans.

The Euphrates Shield operation started with the border town of Jarabulus, held by ISIS at the time, where Turkey found quick success in driving out ISIS, pushing them to al-Bab, which Turkey has since

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Sky News Arabia, 28 Nov 2016: <http://www.skynewsarabia.com/web/article/896407/السركلمةتركيا-المعارضةتقهقر>

⁴⁶ Al Monitor, 19 Dec 2016: <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/12/turkey-syria-ankara-recruit-militants-from-aleppo.html>

⁴⁷ Hurriyet Daily News, 24 August 2016, *AS IT HAPPENED: Turkish military, coalition forces launch 'Euphrates Shield' operation in Jarabulus*: <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/live-turkish-military-coalition-forces-launch-euphrates-shield-operation-in-jarabulus.aspx?pageid=238&nid=103175&newscatid=352>

⁴⁸ Reuters, 10 Aug 2016: <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-aleppo-analysis-idUSKCN10L210>

⁴⁹ Sayigh Y, *Ceasefire in Syria: Turkish Policy Sets Syria on New Path*, Carnegie Middle East Centre, 30 Dec 2016: <http://carnegie-mec.org/2016/12/30/ceasefire-in-syria-turkish-policy-sets-syria-on-new-path-pub-66577>

⁵⁰ Sydney Morning Herald, 20 Oct 2016: <http://www.smh.com.au/world/on-syrian-border-rebel-focus-on-aleppo-not-shared-by-turkish-backers-20161020-gs6x50.html>

⁵¹ Yeni Safak, 24 Dec 2016: <http://www.yenisafak.com/en/world/we-will-retrieve-the-fatherland-aleppan-commanders-2585899>

been focused on clearing, with Russian aerial support.⁵² At the same time Russian plans were bombing Aleppo to assist the Assad regime, they were bombing Jarabulus and al-Bab to assist Erdoğan's Euphrates Shield. Manbij is another city that Turkey has its eyes on. The city had been held by ISIS, but in mid-August 2016 Kurdish forces were able to capture it. This has created a situation where there is Kurdish-controlled Manbij and Afrin on two sides with ISIS-controlled al-Bab in the middle. Turkey wants to take al-Bab to prevent the Kurdish forces from taking it and thereby connect their two sides of territory along the Turkish border.⁵³

Turkey's operation against the Kurds is significant because the YPG has been openly supported by both the US and Russia as one of the most effective fighting forces in the Syrian conflict, specifically against ISIS. Turkey has been dissatisfied with this, since it regards the Kurdish forces as terrorists. Turkey demands that the Kurds withdraw to the east of the Euphrates River and both the US and Russia have accepted this demand, in exchange for Turkey playing its part to serve their agenda in Syria.

Russia has been supporting these operations, even providing Turkey intelligence for their execution.⁵⁴ Likewise, the entire Euphrates Shield Operation has been run with US approval and support, even against their usual allies, the Kurds, including the provision of air cover from Assad regime attacks.⁵⁵ US Vice President Joe Biden was in Turkey at the commencement of the operation –

which, according to Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu had been planned with the US “from the beginning”⁵⁶ – and stressed that the US supports a “united Syria” with “no separate entity on the Turkish border.” He also reiterated Turkey's demand that Kurdish forces retreat to the east of the Euphrates:

“We have made it absolutely clear to the elements that were part of the Syrian Democratic Forces, the YPG that participated, that they must move back across the river. They cannot, will not, and under no circumstance get American support if they do not keep that commitment, period.”⁵⁷



As at August 2016; Source: AFP.

⁵² Hurriyet Daily News, 2 Jan 2017: <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkey-russia-continue-joint-airstrikes-against-isil-near-al-bab.aspx?pageID=238&nID=108021&NewsCatID=352>

⁵³ Anadolu Agency, 24 Dec 2016: <http://aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/syria-s-al-bab-turkey-s-security-gate/713436>

⁵⁴ Yalla Souriya, 24 Oct 2016: <https://yallasouriya.wordpress.com/2016/10/24/moscow-gives-intelligence-reports-to-turkey-on-the-euphrates-shield-syria/>

⁵⁵ Asia Times, 24 August 2016: <http://www.atimes.com/article/turkeys-operation-euphrates-shield-to-wipe-out-is-stop-kurdish-advances/>

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Al Monitor, 26 Aug 2016: <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/08/biden-diplomatic-triage-turkey-syria-policy-iran.html>

Turkey embeds itself in the Russia-Iran-Syria Alliance of Evil

For months now, Erdoğan has firmly embedded himself in an alliance with Russia and Iran, Assad's closest allies. The Russia-Iran-Turkey tripartite alliance now has its eyes on moving beyond Aleppo and addressing the whole of the Syrian issue. Soon after the evacuations from Aleppo, the foreign ministers of all three nations met in Moscow on 20 December 2016 and jointly issued the "Moscow Declaration".⁵⁸ These talks were aimed at extending what was done in Aleppo to other parts of Syria. Putin declared, "the next step [after Aleppo] will be to reach agreement on a complete cease-fire across all of Syria. We are actively negotiating with members of the armed opposition, with the mediation of Turkey."



The Foreign Ministers of Iran, Russia & Turkey meet in Moscow, Dec 2016.

Turkey is now running fully in line with the American-Russian agenda and narrative. Beyond the official meetings and declaration, much is afoot behind the scenes. Reports suggest that Putin has struck a series of backroom understandings with Erdoğan⁵⁹, and also that Iran has agreed to play a role on the condition that demands for Assad to go are dropped. Turkey's role in the alliance, apart from turning a blind eye to the continued brutal aggressions of Russia, Iran and Assad, is primarily to make the rebel groups under its influence comply, a task it has

said it guarantees.⁶⁰ Turkey has pledged to continue its efforts in Syria on the basis of the Geneva Declaration and UN Security Council Resolution 2254⁶¹, in other words, the US agenda for Syria.

Concluding remarks

"My family is starving in Aleppo. Thousands are starving [...] Erdoğan has left our people there to die, he has abandoned us. He sold Aleppo off to the Russians and Iranians. They made a deal and they no longer care about Aleppo."⁶²

This is how Yahya, a Turkmen resident of Jarablus, with his wife and five children back in Aleppo, summed up the situation in October 2016. Subsequent developments only affirmed the accuracy of the description. With the normalisation of ties with Russia followed by intensive dialogue and co-operations on all fronts, the Turkish regime has played a pivotal role handing over Aleppo to the Assad regime. Through military and intelligence collaboration with Russia and Iran, as they rained terror on Aleppo alongside the Assad's army, Turkey pulled the strings of rebel brigades under its influence to either move elsewhere and not put up a fight. Erdoğan has played a central role in turning the tide in Syria. What the American's and Russians could not achieve militarily has been facilitated politically by

⁵⁸ Asharq Al Awsat, 22 Dec 2016: <http://english.aawsat.com/2016/12/article55364284/eastern-aleppo-empty-turkey-end-al-bab-battle>

⁵⁹ Reuters, 28 Dec 2016: <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-deal-idUSKBN14H12V>

⁶⁰ New York Times, 29 Dec 2016: <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/29/world/middleeast/syria-cease-fire.html>

⁶¹ Anadolu Agency, 29 Dec 2016: <http://aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/nationwide-cease-fire-in-syria-to-start-friday-midnight/716462>

⁶² Sydney Morning Herald, 20 Oct 2016: <http://www.smh.com.au/world/on-syrian-border-rebel-focus-on-aleppo-not-shared-by-turkish-backers-20161020-gs6x50.html>

Turkey. Momentum is now with the Assad regime and Erdoğan, having chosen to ally himself with the likes of Putin and Rouhani, has been essential in making that happen.

All of this should give those who continue to support Erdoğan reason to seriously re-consider their position. Make no mistake: Erdoğan facilitated the invasion of Aleppo. This is betrayal of the highest order. It is one thing to not come to aid of the oppressed because of claimed lack of ability. That is a potentially valid claim, depending on the validity of the claim of inability. It is another thing to facilitate the oppression of the oppressed by explicitly siding with the oppressors. There are no excuses for that whatsoever.

{وَلَا تَوَكَّلُوا إِلَى الَّذِينَ ظَلَمُوا فَتَمَسَّكُمُ النَّارُ وَمَا لَكُم مِّن دُونِ اللَّهِ مِنْ أَوْلِيَاءَ ثُمَّ لَا تُنصَرُونَ}

“Do not incline towards those who oppress, lest the Fire should catch you, and you have no supporters other than Allah, then you should not be helped.” (Hud: 113)

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