

Trump Escalates Syrian Proxy War

At the start of the Trump presidency, it looked like the U.S. covert “regime change” war in Syria might be ending, but it has returned, zombie-like, in a slightly different form, reports Steven Chovanec.

By Steven Chovanec

Back in February, it was quietly reported that the CIA had discontinued its support program to rebels in Syria. A month later, a knowledgeable source from the region disclosed to me that the Trump administration and the Saudi defense minister, Prince Mohammed bin Salman, had agreed during their meetings in mid-March for the Gulf states to re-open supply channels to their rebel proxies.

This was done, the source said, to keep the Syrian government’s army and its allied Russian air force occupied so that the U.S. and its Kurdish allies could continue dividing northern Syria, establishing a zone-of-influence throughout the lands they recapture from the Islamic State.

Concurrent with this was a similar effort in the southeast, where U.S. and Jordanian backed forces have been battling ISIS while attempting to establish control over the border with Iraq. The strategy was to use the fight against ISIS as a pretext for establishing a de-facto occupation of Syrian territory, where in the Kurdish-held regions the U.S. has already established multiple military bases and airfields.

A major motivation behind Russia’s push to establish de-escalation zones, now implemented after a deal was reached with Iran and Turkey, was to free up the Syrian army and Russian air force to launch operations eastward against ISIS and counter the US efforts.

After the agreement came into effect the Syrian army began operations aimed at reaching the Iraqi border at the al-Tanaf crossing along the Damascus-Baghdad highway and to recapture the ISIS-stronghold of Deir Ezzor further north.

Both the U.S. and Syria have voiced intentions of taking Deir Ezzor, which is home to strategic oil resources, yet now because of the de-escalation agreement it is highly improbable that the U.S. will be able to stop Syria and Russia from taking the city.

The parallel measures by the U.S. and Russia signify a race between the two major powers to capture as much territory as possible from the Islamic State before the other side is able to do so.

Under the guise of “defeating ISIS,” both powers are essentially carving out their own spheres of influence throughout the country, dividing it between U.S.- and Russian-backed regions, leading to an inevitable showdown between the two sides over the fate of the country and its territorial integrity.

Countermeasures

There are also suggestions that some sort of deal has been reached between the two sides. The *Wall Street Journal* recently reported that Syria and Russia have for the first-time voiced support for the U.S.-backed offensive to retake Raqqa, ISIS’s de-facto capital, as long as the Kurds who dominate the coalition make good on their agreement to hand over administration of the city to a local council afterwards, which is expected to return governance back to the Syrian government.

Yet at the same time, U.S. and Jordanian-backed rebels in southern Syria, supported from a U.S.-led Military Operations Center in Jordan, have been battling with the Syrian army in an attempt to halt their eastward push along the Baghdad-Damascus highway toward the Iraqi border.

At the border, the al-Tanaf crossing is currently occupied by U.S. Special Forces and British SAS, as well as rebels supported by the Pentagon. Before the de-escalation zones were implemented, Syria and its allies were powerless to stop the U.S.-backed forces from consolidating control of the border and the southeast, yet now are battling against them with the goal of establishing a link between Damascus and the Iraqi border.

Concurrently on the Iraqi side, the Iraqi government has sent forces supported by the U.S.-backed coalition to secure the border triangle with Jordan and Syria and to meet up with the U.S. forces at al-Tanaf.

While the U.S. has pressed the Iraqi government to launch this operation, to extend U.S. control along the border and project its influence into southern Syria, Washington has specifically prevented the inclusion of the Iranian-backed Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF). At the behest of the U.S., Baghdad has instead sent the PMF on a separate operation to secure the border from ISIS further north to the West of Mosul.

The reason was to prevent the Syrian army from linking up with Iranian-backed forces at al-Tanaf and thereby establishing a connection between the governments of Damascus and Baghdad.

This connection would have allowed Iran to create a land-line linking itself to Lebanon, from which Hezbollah could have been directly supplied. This would have formed a direct geographical connection between the “Shia Crescent” – Iran,

Syria, and Hezbollah – which all oppose U.S. efforts at power-projection in the region.

While preventing this connection will not end cooperation between the bloc, allies in the Gulf and Israel will be happy to see forces hostile to Damascus along the Syria-Iraqi border, and Washington would be pleased to establish influence within the heart of the “Axis of Resistance”. This also would prevent increased cooperation between Iraq and Syria in the fight against ISIS, cooperation that the government in Baghdad has desired.

Syria, for its part, is attempting to reestablish its presence in the east. In addition to securing the border, creating a link between itself and al-Tanaf would potentially reopen cross-border trade with Iraq, allowing much needed supplies to re-enter the country while increasing its connection to the government in Baghdad.

The prospect of Syria’s likely capture of Deir Ezzor also carries important strategic implications. Deir Ezzor is rich in oil-reserves, and ISIS’s ability to control and sell its oil had been a major factor in its establishment of a Caliphate. Internal Department of Defense documents from 2012 warned that if the extremist opposition was able to establish control over the oil-rich Deir Ezzor and Hasaka regions there was good chance that a “Salafist principality” would be declared, one which could extend across the Iraqi border into al-Qaeda’s old pockets in Mosul and Ramadi; something that transpired a two years later.

The U.S. and Syria have clashed over Deir Ezzor in the past. In 2016, the U.S.-allied air force attacked the Syrian army stationed there in what the U.S. claimed was a mistake, but the devastating air strike enabled ISIS to advance and nearly eliminated Syria’s presence in the region.

CIA Restarts its Rebel Program

In addition to the other maneuvers comes the U.S. decision to formally supply the YPG, a coalition of Kurdish factions supported by Arab groups, with weapons to aid their operation to take Raqqa. The U.S. has been arming the YPG all along, yet now that support is out in the open and intensifying.

This has angered Turkey, a NATO ally, whose main goal in Syria has been to prevent a contiguous Kurdish entity from forming along its borders. The U.S., on the other hand, has allied with the Kurds, who have proven to be their most effective proxies against ISIS.

However, in April an FSA officer disclosed to *Al Jazeera* that Turkey and the U.S. were trying to create a unified rebel army between the FSA and the rest of the northern opposition. This faltered due to fractional differences, and

instead it was agreed to create a unified command structure under the support of a military operations room in Turkey, which is supported by the U.S., Turkey, Western Europe, and the Gulf states.

In support of this effort the CIA has partially reestablished its rebel-support program that had been frozen since February. This raises questions, as one of the groups that had previously been supported, Nouri al-Din al-Zinki, is openly allied with Syria's al-Qaeda branch, al-Nusra, in the Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) coalition, which Nusra dominates.

Similarly, other groups that have joined this new formation include those that have integrated themselves within Ahrar al-Sham, a hard-line Salafist group with an extreme Islamist vision for the future of Syria. Although it has also fought in alliance with Nusra, Ahrar al-Sham has succeeded to a degree in portraying itself as moderate.

Despite quarrels and flare-ups, Ahrar al-Sham remains allied to Nusra and maintains good relations with the group, as they are integral partners and together dominate the opposition. In reality the FSA is a chimera, as it is completely integrated underneath a command structure dominated by al-Qaeda and its allies.

Not surprisingly then, the FSA commander stressed that this new alliance would fight the Syrian army and not against HTS or Nusra.

According to Syrian analyst Ahmad Aba Zeid, it is possible that the U.S. decision to reopen the CIA program was related to negotiations with Turkey concerning U.S. support for the Kurds and the operation to take Raqqa. Turkey had demanded that the U.S. abandon the Kurds and instead use Turkish-backed rebels. Turkey opposes the ongoing Kurdish-U.S. alliance. President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has recently gone so far as to directly attack the YPG, which operates alongside U.S. Special Forces, compelling Washington to send its own troops to the front lines to stop further aggressions.

It is possible that the U.S. agreed to unfreeze the CIA program and aid the Turkish-backed rebels as a consolation for choosing the Kurds to take Raqqa. In this context, Turkey's involvement in the de-escalation zones agreement raises further questions.

Since the de-escalation zones allowed the Syrian army and Russia to directly counter U.S. maneuvers in the east, it is possible that Turkey signed on to the agreement to limit the success of the U.S. in its support for the Kurds and the territory the Kurdish factions have been able to acquire as a result. After all, the FSA source said that the CIA specifically told the rebels not to attend the

Astana talks, where the agreement was signed, and without Turkey the negotiations would never have gone through.

If this is true, the U.S. decision to overtly intensify its support for the Kurds could have been a shot aimed against Turkey for signing onto the agreement. It is difficult to decipher exactly how this has all played out, yet it is clear that despite differences the U.S. and Turkey are continuing to work together to support the rebels against the Syrian government.

Extremist Opposition

As the CIA reopens its rebel supply lines, it's important to note that the entire opposition is dominated by al-Qaeda and other radical Islamists. While pro-regime-changers in the U.S. have repeatedly blame the rise of ISIS on the U.S. not sufficiently sponsoring the "moderate" rebels, in reality the program of supporting the moderates was the major factor that empowered the jihadists. The so-called "moderates" were never separate from the extremists, and often were only called "moderate" to justify U.S.-support.

Despite knowing its support was empowering extremists, the U.S. continued to do so, realizing that it was necessary in order for the goal of overthrowing the Syrian government to have any realistic chance of success. This created the situation today where the opposition is dominated by al-Qaeda and filled with sectarian extremists.

Today in Idlib, where the FSA is being supported by the CIA, al-Qaeda and its coalition completely dominate the rebel forces. Rebels routinely pass at least half of their U.S.-supplied weapons to Nusra while the U.S.-approved "moderates" only operate under license from al-Qaeda.

It is important to realize the true history of this failed CIA program and the terrorism it has wrought on Syria. It's also important to understand how the fight against ISIS is currently being utilized to potentially fracture and partition Syria under the guise of eliminating the threat of terrorism.

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