

Turkish Provocations of Syria Can Trigger WWIII

by Jeffrey Steinberg

Oct. 14—After more than a week of shelling back and forth across the Syrian-Turkish border, Turkey has moved tanks and artillery units close to the Syrian border, and threatens to go to war. According to a statement by NATO head Anders Fogh Rasmussen on Oct. 9, NATO has already revised contingency plans to enter any border war with Syria in support of NATO member Turkey. “All necessary plans are in place,” he said, should the occasion arise.

A senior U.S. intelligence source reports that the Turkish strategy is to use the continuing artillery fire to drive the Syrian Army back from the border area, to allow the Free Syrian Army to establish a safe zone inside Syrian territory. Turkey, along with France and Great Britain, is pushing for NATO to establish a no-fly zone over that “liberated” zone in northern Syria.

Within NATO, the only real opposition to such an action is coming from the United States, led by the Joint Chiefs of Staff, who adamantly oppose a no-fly zone or any other direct U.S. military involvement. This week, former U.S. Defense Secretary Robert Gates continued his public warnings about the danger of a new war in the Middle East. Not only has he called any Israeli or U.S. attack on Iran “catastrophic”; he told the *Wichita Eagle* Oct. 13 that he also opposed the creation of a no-fly zone over Syria, warning that it would begin with an act of war—an air campaign to destroy Syria’s air defenses and air force—and can only escalate from there.

What Gates is referring to is the British-Obama-led Libya model of forced regime change being applied in Syria, one that, as the top Russian leadership has repeatedly stressed, can lead directly to World War III.

Russia Is Now Involved

The fact that the confrontation between Turkey and Syria can escalate into a clash between NATO and Russia, became glaringly obvious last week.

On Oct. 11, the Turkish Air Force forced a Syrian commercial jet to make an emergency landing inside Turkey. The plane was held on the ground at the Ankara airport for more than eight hours, and the Turkish government later claimed that it had received a “tip” that the plane was carrying weapons to the Assad regime, in violation of international sanctions. In fact, the plane was, according to subsequent Russian news reports, *and to admissions by State Department spokeswoman Victoria Nuland*, carrying radar equipment which is perfectly legal, and is regularly transported aboard commercial flights.

The Turkish action caused a huge uproar in Russia, with TV news footage showing injured passengers. Adding insult to injury, the Turkish authorities refused access to the plane by Russian consular officials—as is standard diplomatic protocol.

In response to the incident, Russian President Vladimir Putin convened an emergency session of the Russian Security Council to discuss the Turkish action.

Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov followed that meeting by calling on the Syrian and Turkish militaries to establish direct lines of communication to avoid a border incident that could trigger a full-scale conflict.

Col. W. Patrick Lang (USA ret.), who runs an authoritative website closely followed by active duty U.S. military officials, warned that the Turkish-Syrian border skirmishes could be a “Guns of August” incident, setting off a general war. Lang has been a leading voice expressing skepticism about the original cross-border mortar fire, suggesting that the Syrian government had no interest in giving Turkey a pretext to draw NATO into the conflict, and that the Free Syrian Army also possessed the 120 mm mortar of the type that hit across the border, killing five civilians in a small village in southern Turkey.

The Turkish daily *Sabah* reported Oct. 12 that Turkey has asked NATO to redirect its ABM radar at Kurecik, Turkey, to Syria. The same day Turkey scrambled two fighter jets to the Syrian border, after a Syrian military helicopter allegedly bombed the Syrian border town of Azmarin, Reuters reported.

Turkish tank forces at the border have been reinforced by 60 additional tanks to a total of at least 250, and by an additional 25 F-16 jet fighters, Voice of

Russia and RIA reported Oct. 12 from the Turkish daily *Hürriyet*. There is also a war of words. Turkey’s chief EU negotiator, Minister Egemen Baris, recently said, “Turkey’s military power is enough to wipe out Syria in a couple of hours.” Parliamentarian Samil Tayyar of Turkey’s ruling AKP party said on television Oct. 12, “If Turkey wants, it can reach Damascus in three hours,” *Sabah* reported, as translated in www.al-monitor.com.

Not Quiet on the Iran Front

The war fever was further intensified when David Rothkopf of *Foreign Policy* online magazine published a report that the U.S. and Israel have worked out plans for a joint attack on Iran’s nuclear facilities—an attack that could take place before the Nov. 6 U.S. Presidential elections. The Rothkopf article was greeted with deep skepticism, based on the well-known opposition to an attack from the Joint Chiefs of Staff and related military/intelligence circles, and given the fact that Rothkopf is close to Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu’s ambassador to the United States, Michael Oren.

But, Rothkopf’s assertion that Obama would attack Iran *before* the election—presumably as a means of getting a “patriotic” surge in votes to aid his troubled cam-

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paign—was immediately picked up by the security commentator for *Yedioth Ahronoth*, Ron Ben-Yishai. In an Oct. 11 article, Ben-Yishai, citing Rothkopf's article, wrote that "similar remarks are being heard from people who are close to the White House and the Pentagon. According to these sources, who are currently visiting the Middle East, the U.S. has a plan of action in place for an aerial bombardment of a number of Iranian nuclear sites, and the preparations for such an operation have already been completed. According to one of the American sources, such an attack can be launched 'at any moment.'"

The Rothkopf article was published a week after a contrary article by Mark Perry in the same online magazine, in which Perry revealing details of Israeli options for attacking Iran, including an "Entebbe Option," i.e., a commando assault on the Iranian nuclear enrichment facility at Fordow. The Perry article was intended to throw a monkey wrench into Israeli war plans, whereas the Rothkopf article was aimed at hyping the electoral advantages for Obama in launching a combined attack with Israel.

The Rothkopf article was so provocative that Baruch Bina, the deputy Israeli ambassador in Washington and a former director general of the North America division of the Israeli Foreign Ministry, got into a dispute with Oren over the leak, which he warned was jeopardizing U.S.-Israeli relations. As the result, Netanyahu immediately fired Bina.

The issue of an attack by Israel on Iran is of such a sensitive nature that leaks like the Rothkopf story have immediate consequences. The bottom line is that an Israeli or Israeli-American attack on Iran cannot be ruled out, even as we enter the final weeks before the U.S. Presidential elections.

Other Fronts

The situation in the Asia-Pacific region is also on a short fuse. The island dispute in the East China Sea between Japan and China remains a point of friction, even though both countries have apparently agreed to accept the idea that the island is disputed territory, and should be resolved at some future time when frictions between the two countries are greatly reduced (see following article).

However, the Japanese Self-Defense Forces are scheduled to hold joint maneuvers with the U.S. on Okinawa in November. The scenario for the maneuvers: a joint U.S.-Japanese military operation targeting a remote island that has been grabbed by an enemy nation.