

Turkish incursion into Syria would be disastrous, say experts

Source: [Sunday's Zaman](#)

The possible invasion of Syria by Turkey, allegedly masterminded by President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in an effort to postpone the upcoming general election in June and to oust Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, spells serious danger for Turkey, according to academics and international relations experts.

The rumor of Turkey's possible incursion has spread like wildfire since Gürsel Tekin, the deputy chairman of the main opposition Republican People's Party (CHP), told the media on May 7, that the Turkish government was planning to send ground forces to Syria within two days, saying that the government's reckless policies would drag Turkey into an intractable conflict. Erdoğan is accused of pressing for the invasion after reports that the ruling Justice and Development Party (AK Party) is performing badly in the polls.

The Turkish Constitution has a provision in Article 78 which allows for elections to be postponed, stating: "If holding new elections is deemed impossible because of war, the Grand National Assembly of Turkey may decide to defer elections for a year."

Tekin demanded a direct refutation of the claims he said he'd learned from a "trusted source," from either Erdoğan or Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu. The response came from the latter when he ruled out an imminent military incursion into Syria, claiming that the balance is shifting in favor of the Syrian opposition. In remarks published on May 9, Davutoğlu also said

there that were no new developments between Saudi Arabia and Turkey regarding Syria, despite several reports which suggest that the two countries have been aligning their efforts to step up assistance to Syrian rebels fighting to overthrow Assad.

Despite Davutoğlu making an effort to play down the allegations, many international news agencies have already published reports on Erdoğan's new-found love for the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and its newly elected monarch, King Salman bin Abdulaziz al Saud. "Casting aside U.S. concerns about aiding extremist groups, Turkey and Saudi Arabia have converged on an aggressive new strategy to bring down Syrian President Bashar Assad" wrote the Associated Press on May 7.

Top commander's absence stokes controversy regarding incursion

The unexpected and highly unusual medical leave of the top commander of the Turkish Armed Forces (TSK), Gen. Nejdet Özel, also sparked a fresh wave of rumors within the Turkish media that the leave was a result of a standoff between Erdoğan and Özel over the latter's disillusionment with a plan to invade Syria in an attempt to postpone the upcoming elections.

Özel's medical leave has garnered special interest in the media both because it is highly unusual for the TSK to announce the vacation or medical leave of a chief of General Staff and because Özel's temporary departure comes only months before his term is to come to an end in August. The top commander's true intentions will be made crystal clear if he returns to his post as top commander of the TSK when the time allotted for his medical leave comes to an end.

Academic: Turkey entering Syria would be worse than US entering Vietnam

Selim Savaş Genç, an associate professor of international relations at Fatih University, explained to Sunday's Zaman that the speculated invasion of Syria by Turkey and Saudi

Arabia would be disastrous for Turkey and would have worse consequences for the country than Vietnam had for the United States. "Vietnam was thousands of miles away from the US, but Syria is on our [Turkey's] doorstep," he said.

The Vietnam War was a lengthy and costly armed conflict that cost the lives of more than 3 million people, including 58,000 Americans, when it pitted the communist regime of North Vietnam and its southern allies, known as the Viet Cong, against South Vietnam and its principal ally, the US. The Vietnam War finally ended in 1975 with the final withdrawal of US forces and the unification of Vietnam under communist control.

"Also, who is Turkey going to fight? Will it fight ISIL [the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant]? Will it fight al-Qaeda? Will it fight Iran [Hezbollah]? Will it fight them all?" asked Genç. "Is Turkey ready to go to war with Russia and Iran? If by chance they [Russia and Iran] shoot one of Turkey's ships or down one of Turkey's fighter planes, will they [the government] say, like they did before, that the ship or plane did not bear the Turkish flag?"

On Tuesday, in his condemnation of an attack on a Turkish-owned ship by forces loyal to Libya's internationally recognized government, in which one crew member was killed, Erdoğan warned that Turkey's response would have been different had the ship been sailing under a Turkish flag.

The Iranian factor in Syria

Turkey and Saudi Arabia may be biting off more than they can chew in Syria, as Iran's influence in the country and Russian technical support pose but two of many obstructions that the invading countries might face. Iran has led an extensive effort to maintain Assad's government in power long enough to be able to weather the storm of the civil war.

Tehran and Ankara back opposing sides in the civil war, which

pits rebel forces that include radical Sunni Muslim fighters from ISIL against Assad, Tehran's closest regional ally. Turkey, which has called for Assad to step down, has been criticized for being the main transit point for foreign militants crossing into Syria to fight his forces, while Iran has supported him both militarily and politically.

The military advances by ISIL challenge Tehran's strategy of projecting power from the Gulf to the Mediterranean through its mainly Shiite allies in Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon. Tehran has blamed the West for the rise of ISIL, which controls swathes of Syria and Iraq, but also suggests the need for common action in confronting the group.

Iranian Revolutionary Guard troops fighting on behalf of the Assad regime have reportedly withdrawn from a number of battlefronts and redeployed to strategic points around the Syrian capital, according to a report on the online news portal now.mmedia.me which covers issues in the Middle East.

Also, the Italian news agency Adnkronos International (AKI) reported in April, "The Iranian leadership has withdrawn [IRGC fighters] because there is no strategic advantage for their forces in many areas and they have suffered heavy losses."

AK Party founder: Turkey couldn't protect own land, let alone invade Syria

Former Minister of Foreign Affairs Yakar Yakış also talked to Sunday's Zaman, highlighting the risks Turkey would be undertaking by contributing to an incursion into Syria and saying that Turkey's aggressive tone toward its neighbors is the wrong move.

"When [previously] there were acts of grandstanding and people saying that we [Turkey] would reach Damascus within three hours, we had to be very careful when undertaking the operation to the [Süleyman Şah tomb] which is only 30 kilometers from Turkey's border. Damascus is 400, maybe 500

kilometers away,” said Yakış, remarking, “Let’s not forget, Turkey had to ask for assistance from regional actors such as the Kurdish factions [already active there].”

AK Party deputy Şamil Tayyar predicted on a TV program in 2012 that “Turkey would reach Damascus within three hours” if it wanted to.

“Guessing when the Syrian regime will fall is like guessing [the time of] an earthquake, it might happen in three days, but it may not happen over the next three years,” said Yakış, hinting at Davutoğlu’s remarks of three years ago, when he said, while still the minister of foreign affairs, that the “painful situation in Syria would not last that long,” and that it was more appropriate to note the time of Assad’s ousting as “weeks and months, not years.”

However, the past four years have shown Assad’s ability to keep a firm grasp on power no matter the cost, killing over 200,000 Syrians in the process. Sharing a long border with Syria, Turkey has also welcomed Syrians escaping the civil war and officially currently hosts around 1.6 million Syrian refugees, but the real figures are thought to be substantially higher.

Yakış, who is also one of the founders of the Justice and Development Party (AK Party) said, “If the practice of trying to topple the government in a neighboring country becomes commonplace, then other countries may try the same thing [against Turkey].” When asked if Turkey faced such a threat, Yakış said: “The only country that can do that [topple the government] is Russia. I hope our [Turkey’s] relations with Russia never [reach] such a bad point,” continuing, “Turkey entering Syria is hard, Turkey exiting Syria is nearly impossible.”

Turkish-Russian relations have seen lows and highs during the tenure of Russian President Vladimir Putin, as both have

common interests such as building a pipeline to transport gas to Europe via Turkey's western regions, but are also at odds with each other on issues such as Putin's unflinching support for Assad and his recent use of the word "genocide" to refer to the mass killings of Armenians at the end of World War I under Ottoman rule. Putin traveled to the Armenian capital of Yerevan to attend the ceremonies marking the centennial of what Armenians claim was the genocide of Ottoman Armenians in eastern Anatolia during World War I.

The Foreign Ministry released a statement regarding Putin's remarks, saying: "We reject and condemn the labeling of the 1915 events as 'genocide' by the president of the Russian Federation, Vladimir Putin, despite all our warnings and calls. Such political statements, which are a flagrant violation of the law, are null and void for Turkey."