

Turkey employs fighter jets against Syrian Kurds, what a precedent?

Overnight November 19, and early in the morning of the next day, Turkish air force carried out intense and simultaneous air raids against the Kurdish fighters in both north Syria and Iraq claiming several lives of military personnel destroying as well infrastructure.

Turkish state- run media said Turkey's new aerial cross-border offensive, dubbed "Operation Claw-Sword" targeted bases of Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK) in Qandil, Asos, and Khakurk in Iraq, and those of People's Defense Units (YPG) in Kobane, Tal Rifat, Jazira and Derik in Syria.

The attacks by the Turkish air force follows threats by Turkish officials to mount a new military invasion into north Syria on the background of Istanbul explosion on November 13 in which Turkish officials pointed the finger at Syrian Kurdish fighters.

The Syrian observatory for Human Rights (SOHR) said about 25 airstrikes were carried out by Turkish warplanes on sites in the countryside of Aleppo and Hasaka.

In Derik alone 13 people were killed in the Turkish air raids including Issam Abdullah a journalist working for Hawar News Agency (ANHA).

However, on the days that followed, an unprecedented aerial campaign (mostly mounted by drone strikes) was unleashed by Turkish air force against Rojava focusing largely on eastern Qamishli countryside against military personnel and infrastructure.

The air raids against Rojava seem utterly different in the sense it is the very first time that Turkish aircraft carry out so extensive air raids by employing fighter jets against targets extending from Afrin in the west up to Derik in the east.

Turkish officials said Kurdish "separatists" in Syria were responsible for the Taksim Avenue explosion, a claim categorically denied by Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) a U.S.- backed Kurdish- led force with YPG making its backbone. Six people were killed and 81 others reported injured.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan- seeking to complete his country's so-called 32 km "safe zone" beneath its southern border in north Syria- said he was going to retaliate against YPG.

Turkey had already carried out three military incursions into northern Syria. These were "Operation Euphrates Shield" in 2016 in the area of Jarablus, "Operation Olive Branch" in 2018 in Afrin and "Operation Peace Spring" in 2019 in both Sere Kaniye (Ras al-Ain) and Tal Abyad.

Late in May, the Turkish President announced his country was going to take Tal Rifat in north Aleppo and Manbij in far east. However, unexpectedly Erdogan changed his mind following a meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin in Sochi on August 5, saying- or claiming so- that he was going to engage in a reconciliation process with the Syrian regime instead. However, the bid yielded no results.

It remains a secret what did Putin tell Erdogan at the Bocharov Ruchey Presidential Palace in that famous resort city on the Black Sea. However, since that date, the Turks had drone strikes as an

appealing alternative against north east Syria known otherwise as Rojava. Throughout summer and autumn, drone strikes were common occurrences against Syrian Kurdish fighters in Rojava.

Most significantly, the hostile rhetoric against Rojava rose again in the aftermath of the Istanbul explosion. According to the Turkish version of the story, Ahlam al-Bashir, a Syrian Kurd- admitted the perpetrator, a claim that could easily gain credence in Turkey.

In retrospect, on April 25, 2017, Turkish war planes hit a headquarter of YPG in Mount Qara Chokh near Derik. However, it remained an isolated case ever since.

Prior to "Claw- Sword," the vast majority of Turkey's air strikes against Rojava were carried by drones which as an evasive weapon cannot be looked at as an airspace violation. However, the employment to the air of fighter jets needs the in advance tacit okay of global powers controlling Syria's air space.

50 aircrafts and 20 drones took part in Operation Claw- Sword. The warplanes took off from six different bases across Turkey and carried out simultaneous operations against the targets.

Turkish minister of defense, Hulusi Akar, said it has been the largest, most comprehensive and most effective air operation in the recent period.

Drone strikes used to hit isolated targets, and although civilian lives were mostly reported in such surgical strikes, however, no mass destruction was caused.

In the military sense of the word, by replacing drones with fighter jets, Ankara seems to be changing the rules of engagement against the Syrian Kurds, a procedure that needs intense coordination with other powers operating in Syria; Russia and the U.S.

While the air space in north Aleppo, Kobane and north Hasaka being monitored by Russia, the U.S. troops have always shown they maintained a foothold in Derik in the triangle border where Syria, Turkey and Iraq meet. Time and again, U.S. troops maintained Derik was under their control. Late in summer, the U.S.- led Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS and SDF mounted military trains in the area.

In Iraq, Turkey has always employed helicopters, drones and fighter jets against PKK fighters. However, owing to the rugged mountains of Kurdistan results have always been short of the desired effect- until recently where drone technology has tilted the balance to the favour of Turkey.

However, in north Syria the idea seems a different one. With no mountains to befriend the Kurds, the flat geography of Rojava and its vicinity to the Turkish border and airfields all serve Turkey.

While Russia- a main backer supporter of the Syrian President Bashar Assad- and the U.S., the main supporter of the SDF in the fight against the Islamic State (Isis) oppose apparently Turkey's acts against Syrian Kurds, and call for de-escalation, the actual reality on the ground may reveal something else.

Last Tuesday, two fighters of the U.S.- trained Anti-Terror Units (YAT) were announced killed and three others injured in a drone strike on the combined American- Kurdish 'Life Stone' base in east Hasaka, some 50 km distance from the Turkish border.

A day prior, an SDF car close to the "al-Mabaqer" Russian base in Tal Tamr in north Hasaka, was hit by a similar act in which an SDF fighter was killed. This, among others, signify the U.S. and Russia turn a blind eye to Turkey's acts.

On the same very day, Erdogan hinted at a ground operation into Syria and Iraq saying Claw- Sword was not to remain limited to an aerial operation. However, as Ankara has recently changed the rules of engagement in north east Syria a ground offensive seems an unlikely one at least for the time being.

As Russia seeks to return east Euphrates to the control of the Syrian regime, the Kurds fear another abandonment by the U.S. similar to 2019's.

Yesterday, SDF's Commander- in- Chief, Mazlum Abdi said Turkey was preparing a ground offensive against Tal Rifaat, Manbij and his birthplace city; Kobane.

However, it is a most likelihood that the Turks- for a while- would try to wear down the Syrian Kurdish fighters in a war of attrition prior to any cross- border ground offensive beneath its southern border in Rojava whose prospects on the ground are seemingly very high ones even though Turkish tanks have not received the orders to roll yet.

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