
TURKEY OFFERS RUSSIA JOINT OPERATIONS AGAINST ISIL

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The proposal would see the two powers put aside their differences to fight the "common enemy" of ISIL.

Turkey has called on Russia to carry out joint operations in Syria against the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) group, after crucial talks between President Vladimir Putin and his Turkish counterpart Recep Tayyip Erdogan aimed at ending a crisis in ties.

The comments by Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu came as a Turkish delegation was in Russia for talks aimed at coordinating actions on Syria and other bilateral issues.

"We will discuss all the details. We have always called on Russia to carry out anti-Daesh [ISIL] operations together," Cavusoglu said in a live interview on Thursday with the private NTV television, adding that the proposal was still "on the table".

Cavusoglu urged Russia to fight against the "common enemy" of ISIL fighters in Syria.

"Let's fight against the terrorist group together, so that we can clear it out as soon as possible," the minister said, warning that otherwise the group would keep on expanding and spread into other countries.

Erdogan visited Russia's second city of St Petersburg on Tuesday - his first trip abroad since the July 15 coup attempt.

It was also his first direct meeting with Putin since the shooting down of a Russian fighter jet by Turkish air forces on the Syrian border in November that caused unprecedented damage to relations.

NATO member Turkey was long criticised by its Western partners for not playing a full role in the fight against ISIL but upped its involvement last year by offering US forces use of an airbase near the Syrian border for raids against the group.

Turkey has also carried out air and artillery strikes against ISIL of its own, although it is believed to have halted the operations following the Russian plane incident.

The three-person Turkish delegation in Moscow, made up of representatives from the military, intelligence and foreign service, is responsible for implementing decisions made at Tuesday's summit, Cavusoglu said.

"I believe the mechanism will contribute to this process," he added.

Cavusoglu said close cooperation between Turkey and Russia would help prevent incidents in the future such as the plane crisis.

"Many countries are engaged in Syria actively. There could be mistakes," he said.

"In order to prevent that, we need to put into practice the solidarity and cooperation [mechanism] between us including sharing of real-time intelligence."

Cavusoglu said real-time communication was also needed between the two presidents and the military officials of the two countries.

Political Calculation

Zeina Khodr, Al Jazeera's correspondent reporting from Ankara, said the talks between Turkey and Russia marked a clear "shift in position".

Just a few weeks ago Turkey accused Russia of carrying out massacres in Syria and not fighting ISIL, instead choosing to target the "so-called moderate opposition" in Syria, Khodr said.

"The rhetoric, really the language, has changed," she said.

"At the same time, Turkey's relationship with the West and the United States is quite tense at the moment. They could use this really as a pressure card," Khodr said.

"Is this a tactical alliance or strategic alliance? At the end of the day we have to remember that the views of Turkey and Russia on Syria are still very different," she said.

"This could be a political calculation on the part of Turkey and Russia."

Oubai Shahbandar, a former US Department of Defence official who currently serves as an adviser to the Syrian National Coalition, told Al Jazeera: "There may be some rapprochement, but there's still a major divergence when it comes to Turkey's objectives in Syria and the Russian regimes as well."

Moscow is one of the principal backers of Bashar al-Assad's government and militarily intervened in the war in Syria on his behalf in October 2015. Turkey, on the other hand, strongly backs several prominent anti-government rebel groups and has said that a political transition in Syria that includes Assad is not possible.

"When it comes to the Russian position in Syria, we really haven't seen a meaningful shift. In fact, just hours ago, before the so-called temporary ceasefire in Aleppo, we saw instances of barrel bombs full of chlorine gas dropped in rebel-held neighborhoods in Aleppo city."

"The Russian regime is already also launching punitive daily strikes against Saraqeb, a city in northwest Syria where a Russian helicopter was shot down last week. So we haven't really seen anything meaningful on the ground in terms of the Russians' decision to stop launching the air strikes."