



THE UNITED STATES' WITHDRAWAL FROM NORTHEAST SYRIA

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BACKGROUND

On October 6, the White House announced that President Trump had given his endorsement for a Turkish military operation in northeast Syria that would withdraw American-backed Kurdish forces near the border between Syria and Turkey. The decision marked a major shift in US policy in Syria and in the United States' anti-ISIS fight. To better understand the implications of this decision, we asked Wikistrat's experts for their analysis of the decision and its impact on Turkey.

TURKEY:

Dr. Ahmet Erdi Öztürk, Lecturer of politics and international relations at London Metropolitan University and co-editor of Edinburgh University Press Series on Modern Turkey:

“After US President Donald Trump and Turkey’s Recep Tayyip Erdogan’s strategic phone call, Turkey has launched a major military operation in northeast Syria. One might argue that Turkey is aiming for three different things: First, if Turkey can manage to create a safe zone, around two million Syrian refugees can be returned. Beyond that, as the Ministry of Defense noted, another aim of Turkey is to destroy the PKK and YPG fighters’ camps. This also might impact on Turkish domestic policy, and Erdogan can recuperate its domestic power via the atmosphere of victory and rising nationalism in Turkey. On the other hand, in terms of foreign policy, if Turkey can control the region, it will sit at the Astana table with a stronger hand against Iran and Russia. However, after European Union member states made hard and negative comments against Turkey’s military operation, one can also argue that not all of the international actors see the operation as a peaceful one and this might affect negatively on Turkey’s image in the world system.”

Soner Cagaptay, Director of Turkish Research Program and Beyer Family Fellow, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy:

“Russia is playing Trump and Syria like a chessboard: Moscow gave Ankara a green light to target YPG, a move that helped fold the group under Assad. Next, Putin will likely ask Ankara to vacate Syria in return for Assad crushing the YPG. Moscow, Tehran, and Assad will consolidate power across Syria. The US and Turkey are net losers of last weekend’s events. Although Turkey has got rid of the YPG for now, Assad will sweep it under carpet to use against Ankara on a rainy day, as did his father the PKK in the 1980s and the 1990s, while the US loses credibility with both Turkey and Kurds and Syria to Moscow and Tehran. And then, there is the great risk of ISIS resurgence following the weekend’s events. Assad is responsible for over 90 percent of civilian deaths in Syria. His brutalization of the country’s Sunni Arab majority helped germinate the seeds of ISIS. Assad coming back into eastern Syria will likely trigger ISIS 2.0.

Then there is the issue of sanctions against Turkey: the US should not sanction Turkey for something POTUS has allowed it to do. What's more, sanctioning Ankara harshly would force it to fold under Moscow, ensuring complete Russian (and Iranian) control of Syria. When Washington slapped an arms embargo against Turkey after the Cyprus War in 1975, Ankara tried hard to come back under America's security umbrella against its historic nemesis, Russia. Today, such sanctions wouldn't have a similar effect: since 2016, Moscow has been heavily courting Turkey, and sanctions would push Ankara to become Russia's friend, I am afraid."

Dr. Aykan Erdemir, Senior Fellow at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies and Former Member of the Turkish Parliament (2011-2015):

"Trump's decision to withdraw troops from northeast Syria with haste was a green light for Erdogan's cross-border operation into SDF-controlled territory. The ensuing chaos triggered US sanctions while also paving the way for the Assad regime and Russian forces to reclaim the region. In the end, Ankara has not only hurt its relations with Washington and other NATO allies but ended up with the growing influence of the Assad regime and its backers – Moscow and Tehran – on its southern border. Trump and Erdoğan's actions combined will leave both the US and Turkey in a weaker position in the Middle East in the medium term.

It is yet to be seen whether Erdoğan will use these developments to fuel anti-American sentiment at home and pivot Turkey further away from NATO or feel the need for transatlantic engagement and assurances in the face of deepening Russian and Iranian hegemony in its neighborhood. So far, both Moscow and Tehran have successfully exploited the Turkish president's political survival anxieties to shape his decisions and it is possible that they will attempt to do so again, especially given Erdogan's political and economic vulnerabilities at the face of sanctions on multiple fronts."

Dr. A. Kadir Yildirim, Fellow at the Center for the Middle East at the Baker Institute for Public Policy:

"The impulsive, contradictory, and Twitter-based nature of foreign policymaking of the Trump administration renders it a difficult task to analyze how his decision to pull US forces out of Syria might affect Turkey. Trump's insistence on withdrawal from Syria, despite domestic objections and Turkey's view of Northern Syria and the status of the Syrian Kurds as a critical national security issue, suggests that there is no easy solution to the current tension. In fact, Trump's decision to sanction certain Turkish ministries and government officials in order to appease Congress is likely to further undermine relations between the US and Turkey irreparably. Taking a longer view of US policy in Syria since the onset of the Arab Spring, however, suggests that the current conflict between the US and Turkey over Turkey's actions in Northern Syria was inevitable. It was the Obama administration's decision to work with Syrian Kurds in the fight against ISIS over its NATO ally Turkey's objections that set the two countries on a collision course. The leveling of sanctions on a NATO ally is likely to have the opposite of the intended effect and push Turkey closer to Russia.

Just as important is the domestic facet of the issue for Turkish President Erdoğan. Since at least the local elections in March 2019, Erdoğan has presided over a weakening domestic coalition. Turkey's offensive in Northern Syria has created a rally 'round the flag effect even among the center-left main opposition CHP. With an appeal to the nationalist sentiment, Erdoğan hopes to regain some of his base with this incursion into Syria. In tandem, a strong American response to the Turkish government's – what is popularly perceived as the "justified" – offensive in Syria may spur the already high anti-American public opinion to extreme levels, providing legitimacy to possible greater engagement with Russia at the expense of the US and NATO. While Erdoğan and Turkey may have taken advantage of Trump's transactional approach to foreign policymaking in the short term, this episode might mark the beginning of the end for Turkey's place in the Western alliance with serious long-term repercussions. It is hard to imagine a series of foreign policy blunders in such a short period of time with potentially such great long-term effects as the ones that deal with Northern Syria. It is definitely not the US, Turkey, or Syrian Kurds who benefit from this episode."

Dr. Alberto Gasparetto, Teaching Assistant in Political Science, University of Padova:

“In the medium term, the deal between the Syrian regime and the Kurdish fighters should not immediately have negative consequences for Turkey. It probably will turn more to Assad’s advantage than the YPG’s. Syria might also gain from such a deal by claiming some territories back in the future. Turkey might also benefit from the retreat of the Kurdish forces from North-Western Syria, where the Syrian armed forces are going to be amassed. The announced pullout of the US forces from such main cities as Kobane will also be beneficial to Russia’s emergence as the greater external power in that area. Russia will probably act as a mediator among all the parties. If Russia is able to avert eventual clashes between Syria and Turkey in the long run, Erdoğan might be satisfied to have freed Rojava from the YPG – which the Syrian regime also considers a top goal – and will negotiate with Assad the stay of troops to safeguard the rising ‘safe zone.’ As the situation is constantly evolving, it is hard to design possible scenarios. However, that’s just the official goal of Operation Peace Spring.”

Ilhan Tanir, executive editor of Ahval News:

“Trump’s ‘green light’ last Sunday evening induced Turkish administration to go forward with its invasion plans. The US administration, led by Ambassador James Jeffrey as special envoy for Syria, talked with both Turks and SDF/YPG. But what he effectively has done through these talks is give false assurances to Kurds, dismantle their defenses, and prepare the ground for the invasion. Then Trump gave the go-ahead. Knowing that the US President is on his side, Erdoğan calculated that, just like CAATSA sanctions and sanctions on Halkbank, Trump would also shield Turkey from any sanction packages from US Congress and neutralize other US institutions. Now that the Halkbank indictment is out and some limited sanctions unleashed, Erdogan may feel deceived by Trump and become even more anti-US.

Overall, the invasion is isolating Turkey more which, in turn, may make Ankara angrier in its anti-West tone with a real danger of rupture with the West on the horizon. The Syria invasion may become the final nail in the coffin of Turkey’s Western orientation.”

Orhan Gafarli, PhD candidate in International Relations at Ankara University:

“Turkey’s military operation in Northern Syria is changing the regional balance of power both within this country as well as in the Middle East region. Despite the problems in bilateral relations between Turkey and the United States on the issues of the Eastern and Western parts of the Euphrates in Syria earlier, and the danger of transforming this tension into a systemic form, it was averted at the end. Ankara and Washington got the opportunity to expand their cooperation in Syria. The White House also balanced relations between Turkey and Russia in this country. In their turn, Moscow and Damascus were given the opportunity to gain control and ensure the safety of oil locations, as well as to attract part of the Kurds to their side. Russia and Syria are expected to deepen cooperation with Ankara, also requesting more significant freedom of action in Idlib against local radicals.”

Anonymous, senior analyst at Wikistrat and Turkish academic:

“Trump’s green light for Turkey’s operation in Syria might have certain political implications on Turkish foreign policy:

1. Turkey, for a long time, planned this operation but postponed it with certain expectations from its diplomatic efforts with Washington DC. However, after testing the established mechanisms, which failed to be successful, it decided to move forward to eliminate the PKK/YPG formation on the other side of its southern border. A possible friendly fire or a crack within the alliance was prevented by the withdrawal of American soldiers from the operation zone.
2. A new channel of dialogue is open now between President Trump and President Erdoğan. Both leaders are expected to meet in November. After hitting rock bottom in August 2018, due to the case of Pastor Brunson, this is a new window of opportunity for bilateral relations. Yet there are some crucial fragilities. It seems that there is a coalition against Turkey’s operation toward the PKK/YPG in

the US. This coalition intends to use different diplomatic tools against Turkey including a sanctions bill. Depending on the scale and extent of a sanction package, bilateral relations can be damaged [in a way] that may also pave the way for an escalation of tension by imposing bilateral sanctions.

3. Turkey has advanced so fast on the ground and already controls a serious amount of territory up until now. However, it faces some problems on a public relations level as Operation Peace Spring is being portrayed as Turkey's operation against "the Kurds". Ankara has some problems in policymaking this operation as an offensive against the PKK/YPG terrorist organization at the international level."