



Repercussions from Turkey's Intervention in Northeastern Syria

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The Edge of the Cliff

Turkey's military operation in Syria risks a wider conflict in which its own security, as well as European and U.S. interests will be harmed. Its concerns about terrorism are understandable, but not all counter-terrorism strategies are smart. Turkey's long-anticipated move in Syria has already provoked a sharp response from the United States and the EU. The new Kurdish entente with the regime of President Bashar al-Assad sets up a potential military confrontation between Turkish forces or their proxies and the Syrian army. This would make it very difficult for Turkey to disengage and would transform an irregular conflict into a conventional war. A temporary ceasefire, while desirable, does not eliminate this risk.

Under these conditions, Turkey's NATO membership should be of critical importance. However, Ankara's alliance ties, already deeply troubled, are now strained to breaking point. It is hard to imagine NATO agreeing to treat a Syrian-Turkish clash as an Article V contingency. After years of tense rhetoric between Turkey's government and its Western partners, the purchase of the Russian S-400 missile system, frictions over energy exploration off Cyprus, and numerous other small and large disputes, developments in Syria could well push Turkish-Western relations off a cliff. With the announcement of new U.S. and European sanctions, it will be very hard for either side to pull back.

In theory, the United States' withdrawal from the border area offers a geopolitical gift to the Assad regime and to Russia. But for Moscow, a Turkish-Syrian clash would impose unpleasant choices. Russia would be compelled to back Assad and abandon its project of drawing Turkey away from its Western allies. Turkish and Russian forces might even find themselves engaged, perhaps accidentally. It has happened before. Therefore, Turkey risks strategic estrangement across the board. And a protracted battle across the border may reignite an active terrorism campaign by the Kurdistan Workers' Party inside Turkey—precisely the risk Turks want to eliminate. The only clear winners will be the Assad regime and its backers.

-Ian Lesser, Vice President and Executive Director, Brussels Office



The View from Turkey

Turkey's position vis-à-vis northeastern Syria has been crystal clear. According to it, the People's Protection Units (YPG) is the Syrian branch of the Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK)—a designated terrorist organization that has been waging a campaign against Turkey for four decades. The United States has never officially denied YPG's links to the PKK, instead of creating the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) as an umbrella organization with which to cooperate as an alternative to the bad optics of working with the YPG.

While more than half of the SDF militants are not related to the YPG in any way, the leadership cadre is exclusively reserved for the YPG. The commander in chief of the SDF, Ferhat Abdi Şahin, better known as Mazlum Kobane, was part of the PKK until the outbreak of the Syrian civil war. He even sat on the organization's executive committee in 2005.

While the United States' cooperation with the YPG through the SDF started as a temporary tactical step, Turkey watched the relationship flourish right across its border with Syria. When Turkey conducted Operation Euphrates Shield in 2017, the YPG was about to gain control over a territory that stretched from Syria's border with Iraq to the Mediterranean, covering all of Turkey's border with Syria.

The United States has never denied the validity of Turkey's security concerns and has tried to find solutions, but there was a gap in perceptions of the threat levels faced by Turkey. The United States assumed the YPG's primary challenge to Turkey was related to border security and proposed assistance in mitigating the threat to the border in the short run. Turkey, on the other hand, saw the YPG's "territorialization" and increased military capacity thanks to massive U.S.-support as a long-term challenge. This is why Turkey has now acted to prevent what it saw as state-building by a terrorist organization.

-Özgür Ünlühisarcıklı, Ankara Office Director

In Washington, Frustration on Both Sides of the Aisle

No one should be surprised by the bipartisan condemnation and caustic reaction in Washington to President Donald Trump's knee-jerk decision to withdraw U.S. troops from northeastern Syria. The reaction to Turkey's military operations in Syria from Republicans and Democrats in Congress has been equally visceral. Trump's about-face in announcing limited sanctions on Turkey and the five-day "ceasefire or pause" agreement that was negotiated by Vice President Mike Pence and President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan will likely not be enough to satisfy an angry Congress.

The two major factors that are coloring the reactions in Washington are the views of the two presidents.

Trump's decision on Syria may be the tipping point for some in his party. U.S. lawmakers increasingly express concerns about the president's coziness with authoritarians, including Erdoğan and Vladimir Putin; his suspect policies toward Saudi Arabia, Russia, and North Korea; perceived misuse of his presidential powers for personal or political gain; and his deliberate and consistent mistreatment of NATO allies and partners. Some see the unceremonious dumping of the United States' Kurdish partners in Syria, who helped defeat Islamic State, as the latest example of Trump risking U.S. security interests.

On Syria, even the president's National Security Council believes he got "rolled by Erdogan," and Department of Defense officials said they were "stunned by Trump's decision," which many believe plays into the hands of Russia, Iran, and Syria's Bashar al-Assad.

President Erdoğan is another central factor—; his policies and actions over the last decade have fueled Washington's discontent. The U.S. response to Turkey's incursion in Syria may be vexing to many Turks who are expecting sympathy for their real security concerns connected to the People's Protection Units and the Kurdistan Worker's Party. However, it is—hard for U.S. policymakers to set aside festering grievances, including Erdoğan's initial reluctance to fight Islamic State in 2014, the detention of Pastor Andrew Brunson, Turkey's evasion of Iran sanctions, its recent purchase of Russian S-400 defense systems, and the democratic and free media backsliding in Turkey.

At this point, we can expect to hear more bipartisan resistance in Congress to Trump's Syria decision and Turkey's continued military action as the United States decides whether to impose new sanctions on Ankara specific to Syria, in addition to the pending S-400-related sanctions under the 2017 Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act, as well as some voices urging the expulsion of Turkey from NATO.

-Jonathan Katz, Senior Fellow, Frontlines of Democracy Initiative, Washington

Trump's Decision on Syria has Made Europe's Migration Woes Worse

Turkey's incursion into northeastern Syria heightens political tensions with the European Union at a highly sensitive time. The two parties were in the midst of fierce negotiations on their continued cooperation on managing migration and support for the estimated 3.6 million Syrian refugees in Turkey. The latest developments add further unpredictability to the migration picture.

Even before the announcement of the withdrawal of U.S. troops, the basis of cooperation on migration—the EU-Turkish statement of 2016—had become more fragile. The last two months have seen the highest number of arrivals of new migrants and refugees (not only Syrians) on the Greek islands since 2016, with over 10,000 in September alone, mostly Afghan and Syrian nationals.

While the EU has delivered on its promise of financial assistance, to date allocating about €5.8 billion to supporting refugees in Turkey, the mood in the country has grown increasingly hostile toward Syrians already present. These sentiments have been further fueled by an economic slump that has caused youth unemployment to grow to 25 percent. President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan responded by calling for a "safe zone" along the Turkish-Syrian border to which millions of people could return, something he has repeated since the beginning of the Turkish operation though details remain vague.

The sudden U.S. announcement that green-lighted Turkey's incursion has made negotiations with the country by EU member states more complicated and politically fragile, at a time when continued cooperation on migration is crucial. It also comes before the long-expected offensive by the Syrian regime on Idlib, which has been Europe's worry for months. The developing situation in Syria is also yet another demonstration that for Europe managing migration cannot be disentangled from the larger questions of security in its neighborhood, and of the United States' engagement in the region.

-Jessica Bither, Migration Fellow and Senior Program Officer, Europe Program, Berlin

The Eastern Mediterranean, Sanctions, and Turkish-EU Relations

Turkey's invasion of northeastern Syria is not the only issue straining the already tense relations between the country and the EU. A dispute over oil-exploration rights in the eastern Mediterranean are also burdening the relationship, fueling further tension.

In Ankara's perception, European economic sanctions over drilling rights and the reactions against the invasion are part of the same European and Western attempt to undermine Turkey. The so-called "Sevres Syndrome" (after the 1920 treaty) still powerfully informs Turkish views of the world and unites parties and politicians across the entire political spectrum, with the sole exception of the pro-Kurdish, leftist Peoples' Democratic Party. The ongoing tension between Turkey and the EU must be seen through this perspective. With the 100th anniversary of the Sevres Treaty next year, perceptions of a Western plot to undermine Turkey might be even more marked.

European economic sanctions and a halt to future arms exports might harm Turkey in the medium term, but in the very short term they are likely to have two different effects.

First, they will push President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan to be even more assertive and aggressive toward the EU. For him, economic sanctions are far more worrisome than a weapons' embargo. He knows that new economic problems might undermine his domestic position further. As such, he will become even more "nationalistic" than he has been over the past few years, particularly after the collapse of the peace process with the Kurds after 2015 and his alliance with the Nationalist Movement Party.

Second, both issues are seen through a nationalistic lens in Turkey. This means that the ruling Justice and Development Party and the opposition parties, which are usually divided and polarized on everything, support Turkish drilling activities in the Eastern Mediterranean and the military operation in Syria. In the very short term, the threat of sanctions and arms embargo will likely unify a country otherwise divided on almost everything, more than immediately harming military operations and Erdoğan's stance.

-Dario Cristiani, Istituto Affari Internazionali/GMF Fellow, Washington

Transatlantic Take

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