

# TURKISH TROOPS IN SYRIA

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IS IT ALL ABOUT THE KURDS FROM NOW ON?



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- From 2011 to August 2016, Turkey aimed for a regime change in Syria by arming various Islamist and jihadi factions, without direct military intervention.
- The direct military intervention that began in August 2016 is designed to block the continuous enclave of PKK-affiliated Syrian Kurds, and to clear the border areas of Islamic State (Daesh) militants. It also serves to establish a sanctuary for Turkey-backed Syrian Islamist rebels.
- Turkey is keen on limiting the military intervention both temporally and territorially – if the Syrian government resolves to take a harsh stance against Kurdish autonomy in Rojava, Turkey is likely to make a de facto deal with the Syrian government.
- If the Syrian government allows Kurdish autonomy within a federal state structure, Turkey will try to use both conservative Syrian Kurdish groups and proxy Islamist groups in order to destroy such an autonomous PKK-affiliated state structure next to its border.
- Regarding Syria, Turkey is now returning to the long-held republican strategic culture that refrains from regime-change attempts in other countries.

## Turkey's stance on Syria until 2017

Turkey has played a major role in the Syrian conflict that started in 2011. It has armed and financed various Sunni Islamist and jihadi groups, the Al Qaeda affiliate Ahrar al-Sham being the most significant Turkish proxy army fighting against the Syrian government forces. A new phase began in August 2016 with a direct military operation called 'Operation Euphrates Shield'. At the start of the operation, Turkey had approximately 350 men stationed in Syria. With regard to international law, Turkey is now an occupying force in a sovereign neighbour country.<sup>1</sup> Together with various groups under the Free Syrian Army banner, Turkey currently occupies around 2000 square kilometres of land in Syria.

Turkey and Syria conducted pragmatic and even friendly relations before 2011, but once Turkish leaders failed to convince the Syrian government of the need for political reforms, Turkey quickly embarked on a regime-change policy. Within this, all groups declaring that they would fight against the Syrian government forces were seen as worthy of Turkey's support. This meant that Turkey started to arm and finance not only Sunni militants loosely gathered under the banner of the Free Syrian Army, but also various jihadi factions that soon took the leading role in anti-Asad armed insurgency. Turkey's stance thus meant that the international jihadi network was allowed to use Turkey's territory as a platform for military operations in Syria, and as a transfer country for jihadi militants entering Syria and Iraq – thus allowing the notorious 'jihadi highway' that Turkey has been rightly accused of in recent years.<sup>2</sup>

From 2011 to August 2016, Turkey had three main priorities in Syria: 1) ousting the Syrian government by arming the Islamist and jihadist insurgency; 2)

helping the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood to power; and 3) preventing the formation of the PKK-affiliated (the Kurdistan Workers' Party, designated as a terror organization by Turkey, the USA and the EU) autonomous Kurdish state in northern Syria.

In addition to these three aims, a fourth aspect has emerged in the latter part of the period in question, especially since June 2015 when Turkey finally, after protracted US pressure, allowed the international coalition bombing the Islamic State (Daesh) to use Incirlik air base in its operations. This changed the relationship between Daesh and Turkey rather dramatically, since from then onwards Daesh declared Turkey to be one of its main targets. Turkey was subsequently forced to take the terrorist group seriously – one must recall that even as late as in August 2014 Turkey's then Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu refused to define Daesh as a terror group and described it as a coalition of frustrated Sunni youngsters.<sup>3</sup>

In addition to its transformed relationship with Daesh, Turkey's policy in Syria has recently been shaped by the country's complicated relationship with Russia. For a couple of weeks, the two countries seemed to be almost on the brink of war after Turkey shot down a Russian fighter jet on the Turkish-Syrian border in November 2015. Harsh rhetoric notwithstanding, Turkey immediately tried to seek de-escalation, and the 'normalization' of Russo-Turkish relations was achieved by the end of 2016. An important aspect of this normalization was Turkey's decreased support for anti-Asad insurgency – the groups supported by Turkey on the Aleppo front, for example, were withdrawn from the city and transported instead to fight Daesh and Syrian Kurds elsewhere.

This briefing paper will look at the key changes regarding Turkey's stance on the conflict in Syria. The main questions concern what Turkey is trying to achieve with the ongoing direct military operation, what options it has for achieving these goals, and how Turkey's future options are crucially dependent on other actors' (the Syrian government, various

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1 See, for instance, Shane Reeves and David Wallace, "Has Turkey Occupied Northern Syria?", *Lawfare*, September 22, 2016, available at: <https://www.lawfareblog.com/has-turkey-occupied-northern-syria>, last accessed 13 Feb 2017.

2 A team of scholars at the prestigious Columbia University has gathered a list of documents and reports indicating Turkey's help for various jihadi groups, including the Islamic State (Daesh), available at: [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/david-l-phillips/research-paper-isis-turke\\_b\\_6128950.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/david-l-phillips/research-paper-isis-turke_b_6128950.html), last accessed 13 Feb 2017.

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3 "Davutoğlu işiD'e yine 'terörist' diyemedi, 'meşrulaştırıcı' laflar etti", *Diken*, 7 August 2014, available at: <http://www.diken.com.tr/davutoglu-isiside-yine-terorist-diyemedi-mesrulaştirici-laflar-etti/>, last accessed 13 Feb 2017.

Syrian Kurdish groups, Russia, and the new US administration) policies.

### Operation Euphrates Shield – what to expect?

The Turkish military invasion in Syria seems to have three main goals: firstly, ridding the border areas of Daesh militants; secondly, in doing the latter, ensuring that the areas cleared of Daesh will not end up in the hands of Syrian PKK-affiliated groups – the Democratic Union Party (PYD) and its armed wing, YPG; thirdly, and especially, maintaining a Turkey-dependent Syrian Sunni Islamist force capable of future operations.

From the very beginning, the invasion was designed as a joint operation between the Turkish Armed Forces and the rather poorly organized Free Syrian Army units, some of which are hard-core Sunni Islamist and even jihadi factions. In this respect, Turkey has built its military operation on a very problematic idea of fighting extremist Islamists with ‘moderate Islamists’. One can argue with considerable justification that the Syrian insurgency as a whole is a Sunni Islamist insurgency, where the presence of extremely radical and violent jihadi groups, such as the Islamic State (Daesh) and Jabhat al-Nusra, allows commentators to define other Islamist militants as ‘moderate’. The truth is that these groups, such as Ahrar al-Sham and Jaish al-Islam, which are representing militant Salafi ideology, would not be called ‘moderate’ in any other context.<sup>4</sup> Due to direct military intervention, the Turkish Armed Forces are now forced to cooperate with unruly militias in order to fight a bunch of Salafist extremists on the one hand and Kurdish militias on the other – on foreign soil. One can argue that the first phase of the military operation, accomplished within five months, has been more or less successful in that the areas in question have been cleared of Daesh, and the formation of a continuous Kurdish enclave along the Turkish southern border is now blocked for the time being. However, the second phase, the attempt to conquer

the strategically important town of Al-Bab, is yet to be accomplished due to heavy Daesh resistance.

With each passing day, it becomes increasingly unlikely that Turkey and its Syrian Islamist proxies could conquer Al-Bab without some sort of engagement with Syrian government forces and pro-government militias. The Syrian army is by now some four kilometres away from the city, led by Tiger Forces Commander Suheil al-Hassan.<sup>5</sup> It is thus expected that Daesh forces in Al-Bab cannot hold the town for much longer. This development increases the prospect that Turkish forces and Syrian government forces, both accompanied by their unruly militias, will come face to face in the coming months.

A highly complicated game is thus emerging in northern Syria where all parties involved – Turkey, Syrian Kurds, local non-Kurdish communities such as Arabs, Syrians and Turkmens, and the Syrian government – need to carefully calculate their own objectives and alliances.<sup>6</sup> As if this was not enough, there is a lot of confusion regarding what to expect from the new US administration on the one hand, and Russia on the other. At the time of writing, Turkey’s leadership seemed to be on the verge of abandoning the Al-Bab operation and concentrating instead on building pro-Turkish Syrian forces in the areas already under control.

### Turkey’s two main alternatives regarding the Syrian Kurds

At least one thing is certain regarding the complex setting currently emerging in Syria: Turkey is going

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4 See, for instance, Joshua Landis, *Regime Change Without State Collapse is Impossible in Syria*, available at: <http://www.joshualandis.com/blog/regime-change-without-state-collapse-is-impossible-in-syria-landis-inter-viewed-by-rt-sophieco-2/>, last accessed 13 Feb 2017.

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5 Tiger Forces (Qawat Al-Nimr) is a special forces unit of the Syrian Arab Army, which functions primarily as an offensive unit in the Syrian Civil War.

6 In the aftermath of the Syrian uprising, which quickly turned into a bloody civil war, the Kurds set up three federal entities in the north corners of the country, which together make up their political enclave called Rojava. The three cantons of Cizre, Kobani and Afrin are predominantly Kurdish-inhabited areas but have sizable Arab and Assyrian communities. For further information, see “Kurds and Damascus meet over tensions, future of Rojava”, *Rudaw*, 29 December 2016, available at: <http://www.rudaw.net/english/middleeast/syria/29122016>, last accessed 13 Feb 2017.

to do everything it can in order to prevent the formation of an autonomous PKK-affiliated Kurdish state in northern Syria. The PKK, with its four decades-long campaign to destroy the Turkish state by armed insurgency, is perceived as an existential threat by the Turkish authorities. What is currently developing in northern Syria is thus fundamentally linked to Turkey's own Kurdish issue, which after some positive developments a few years back, is now again on a crisis-ridden trajectory of Turkey-PKK warfare with no end in sight. As long as the PKK-affiliated PYD/YPG are the dominant Kurdish forces in northern Syria, the Turkish government will perceive these areas as an extension of the terrorist PKK on the Syrian side of the border, and thus claim they are a legitimate target of Turkish counter-terrorism operations.

A great deal is therefore riding on the Syrian government's and the Kurdish PYD/YPG forces' future relationship, irrespective of whether Turkey at some point forms a de facto alliance with the Syrian government in order to keep the Kurds at bay. That stage, if it ever materializes, will only be reached if the dynamics of the Syrian conflict are crucially changed. Thus far, from the very beginning of the armed conflict, the Syrian Kurdish forces represented by PYD/YPG and the Syrian regime forces have mostly declined to clash with each other, both parties seeing the jihadist/Islamist rebel factions as their main enemy.

It is no secret, however, that the Syrian government is not exactly enthusiastic about the self-ruling Kurdish cantons in the north of the country. On the other hand, PYD leader Salih Muslim has made it explicitly clear that they do not wish the Syrian government to lose the war as long as brutal jihadi factions are roaming Syrian territories – as Muslim himself put it in September 2015, in this context Asad's fall would be 'a disaster for everyone', including the Kurdish autonomy project in Rojava.<sup>7</sup> However, at this point it is very difficult to tell how

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7 "Syria civil war: Kurdish leader says collapse of Assad regime 'would be a disaster' despite its treatment of his people", *The Independent*, 24 September, 2015, available at: <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/syria-civil-war-kurdish-leader-says-collapse-of-assad-regime-would-be-a-disaster-despite-its-10515922.html>, last accessed 13 Feb 2017.

this uneasy relationship will develop when northern Syria has rid itself of Islamists (those who advocate a privileged social and political role for Islamic belief) and jihadis (those who advocate religiously sanctioned warfare). As noted above, Turkey has used its Islamist and jihadi proxies to strike the PKK-affiliated Syrian Kurds. Further, it has tried to gather the more conservative Kurdish groups under its own umbrella in order to counter-balance the left-leaning, Öcalan-inspired Kurds of the PYD/YPG. One can argue that the teachings of PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan provide the Turkish PKK and the Syrian PYD/YPG with a common ideological frame, but there is considerable variation among different actors with regard to how this shared ideology should be interpreted and put into practice.

Thus, Turkey's future policy regarding the Syrian PKK-affiliated Kurdish state/autonomy project depends on the future relationship between the Kurds and the Syrian central government. If the Syrian government reaches a deal with the Kurds that in some significant manner allows an autonomous local governance within a federal state, Turkey is likely to continue its current policies. This means it will try to enhance conservative Syrian Kurds' political posture, for example the groups included in Syria's Kurdish National Council<sup>8</sup> (thus playing Kurd against Kurd), and further increasing its support for various Syrian rebel factions that continue to reject the Syrian government's authority. On the other hand, if the Syrian government ends up taking a strict centralist stance, trying to violently suppress Rojavan autonomy, Turkey will form a de facto alliance with the Syrian regime in crushing the emerging Kurdish state in its embryonic form.

### Turkey's actions vis-à-vis other external players

As is generally well known, the Syrian conflict is being played out at several interlocking levels, from grass-roots local and tribal politics and changing loyalties, to regional actors (Iran, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Turkey, Hezbollah) competing for power and prestige, to the American-Russian confrontation.

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8 The Kurdish National Council (KNC - Encûmena Nistimani ya Kurdi li Sûriyê, ENKS) is a coalition of Syrian Kurdish parties not aligned with the PYD/YPG, which includes about a dozen Syrian Kurdish parties.

The issue most poorly understood is the local level, especially regarding the Sunni middle class in cities like Damascus and Aleppo, where it has tended to take a pro-government stance from the very beginning, seemingly anxious about the class and sectarian nature of the Sunni insurgency. Turkey's leadership in particular has been influenced by an incredibly black-and-white framing of the conflict, seeing it as a minority regime's violence against the Sunni majority. Turkey's incumbent Justice and Development Party (the AKP) represents a political movement whose many leading figures are deeply attached to Turkish political Islam, a tradition within which Turkey has been deemed to become the leader of the Sunni Islamic world. There is little doubt that from 2011 to circa 2015, Turkey's Syrian policy was based on the idea of quickly replacing the Syrian government with a Muslim Brotherhood regime more or less dependent on Turkey.

In this sense, Turkey's changed stance on Syria – which is now an ambiguous mix of enduring neo-Ottoman dreams and practical 'realpolitik' designed to accommodate firm Russian backing for the Syrian regime – has recently turned out to be a possible game changer. In other words, if Turkey completely abandons its previous regime-change agenda and thus abandons its Islamist proxies, it is very likely that other regional supporters of the Sunni insurgency, like Saudi Arabia, will gradually refrain from making new and extensive investments in Syria.

Further, for a long time now, Turkey has had severe problems in justifying its anti-Kurd actions to its main nominal ally, the USA, which for its part perceives the PYD/YPG as its main ally against Daesh jihadis. On the other hand, the US administration has itself experienced enormous problems in coming up with a coherent policy regarding Syria. For one thing, it has armed the Syrian insurgency without knowing who it should support exactly. By way of an example, in September 2014 *The New York Times* observed that American officials acknowledged the government's lack of deep knowledge about the rebels. 'We need to do everything we can to figure out who the non-ISIS opposition is,' said Ryan C. Crocker, a former United States ambassador to Iraq and Syria, also explicitly stating that 'Frankly, we don't have a clue'. On the other hand, it perceives not only Daesh but also Syrian Al Qaeda as explicit national security threats, and yet many of the

groups the US supported have cooperated with Al Qaeda from the very beginning.<sup>9</sup>

Whereas the new US administration's Syrian policy is still unclear, Turkey's government representatives have now publicly stated that their Syrian policy was a failure from the start, and that Turkey can no longer realistically demand Asad's departure. This new stance is most of all designed to find common ground with Russia in Syria, and its main purpose is to 'normalize' Turkish-Russian economic and political ties. Regarding the USA and Russia, Turkey above all wants these two main powers to end their political and material support for Syrian PKK-affiliated Kurdish groups – an aim that is nowhere in sight at the moment.

### Conclusion

There is considerable disagreement over what the Syrian Kurdish enclave (Rojava) represents. For some, it is a sanctuary of progressive gender equality and the headquarters of a heroic anti-Daesh struggle, while others see it as a Marxist militia bastion utilizing child soldiers indoctrinated in the ideology of Abdullah Öcalan. For Turkey, the answer has always been clear: it is the PKK state being erected on the Syrian side of the border, with considerable foreign (American) help. One can thus argue that there was a severe contradiction in Turkey's Syrian policy: the violent ousting of Asad by funding Sunni Islamist insurgency and international jihadis created the need for and possibility of a secular-oriented Kurdish autonomous enclave in northern Syria, right next to Turkey. Now it seems that Turkey has mainly abandoned its regime-change policy, is trying to keep some of the Syrian Sunni forces under its influence for possible future circumstances, but most of all is concentrating on blocking the emergence of an autonomous Kurdish state. On the other hand, the AKP government under President Erdoğan realizes it has to downplay its neo-imperial and pan-Islamist plans as the realities on the ground now make it too costly to maintain these long-cherished visions. All

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9 See, "U.S. Pins Hope on Syrian Rebels With Loyalties All Over the Map", *The New York Times*, September 11, 2014, available at: [https://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/12/world/middleeast/us-pins-hope-on-syrian-rebels-with-loyalties-all-over-the-map.html?\\_r=1](https://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/12/world/middleeast/us-pins-hope-on-syrian-rebels-with-loyalties-all-over-the-map.html?_r=1), last accessed 13 Feb 2017.

of this results in a foreign policy that is unpredictable and in which Turkey's alliances may change almost overnight. With some over-simplification, it would not be amiss to conclude that from now on Turkey's Syrian policy is all about the Kurds, and that this will determine which settlement Turkey comes to support.

With this policy adjustment, Turkey's foreign policy is on its way to 'factory settings' in the sense that within the traditional republican military-strategic paradigm Turkey is refraining from operations outside Turkey's borders – excluding the hunt for PKK militants. Whereas the regime-change policy and the attempts to propel the Muslim Brotherhood to power in Syria were clear deviations from Turkey's republican strategic culture, the fight against the PKK in Syria can be seen as an extension of the domestic anti-PKK operations. Judged against this new policy adjustment that perpetuates long-held Turkish strategic culture, it is highly unlikely that the Turkish Armed Forces would engage in direct combat with the Syrian government forces. If such a prospect emerges, for example in the Al-Bab district, Turkey is likely to step back as soon as it finds an honourable way to do so.

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