



INFO PACK

A Milestone on a Long Road

Turkey's Objectives East of the Euphrates

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Introduction

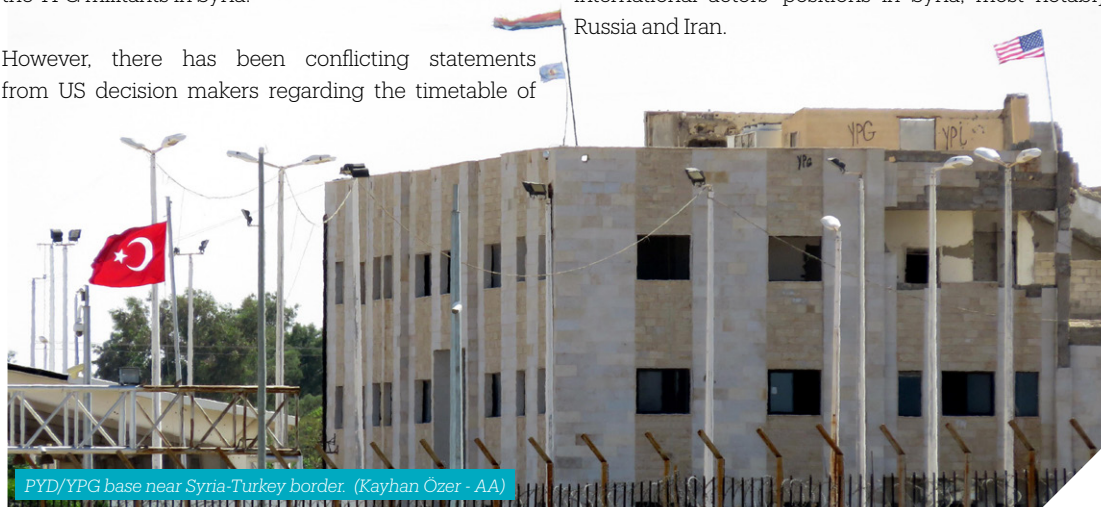
The US and Turkey reached an agreement in June 2018 vis-à-vis the removal of PYD/YPG terrorists from the northern Syrian town of Manbij. In line with the deal, the two NATO allies' military personnel on the ground have carried out several joint patrols. However, the US' reluctance to initiate a total removal of PYD/YPG forces from Manbij resulted in increased tensions between Ankara and Washington. As the US continued to waver in its decision to implement the terms of the agreement, Turkey's President Erdoğan announced on December 12th that Turkey would begin a new military operation into Manbij and east of the Euphrates within a few days, in what would be Turkey's third military campaign in Syria in two years.

On December 19th, US President Donald Trump announced via Twitter that the only reason for the US military presence on the ground in Syria was to fight against Daesh. In light of this, he announced the withdrawal of US military and diplomatic personnel from the country. Turkey welcomed the withdrawal decision being a long-time critic of the US support to the YPG militants in Syria.

However, there has been conflicting statements from US decision makers regarding the timetable of

the withdrawal and the conditions under which the withdrawal will actually take place. . On January 6th, President Trump's National Security Advisor John Bolton stated that the US will continue to support its allies in northern Syria, namely the PYD/YPG. The announcement sparked harsh criticism from Turkish officials. In light of these developments, it is unclear how both the US withdrawal process and any potential Turkish operation aimed at the YPG will proceed.

This info-pack aims to provide the necessary background of recent developments in Syria as it relates to Turkey's involvement in the northeast of the country in particular. Firstly, it gives a detailed timeline of significant events regarding the War in Syria. Secondly, it outlines the US policy in Syria including the support provided to the PYD/YPG. A section is also devoted to the nature of PKK and its links to PYD/YPG. Thirdly, the Turkish position on the War in Syria is thoroughly examined, including the cross-border military operations undertaken in the country. Finally, expert views have been compiled in order to shed light on the reasons behind the US withdrawal, the implications for Turkey's national security, and the effects on other international actors' positions in Syria, most notably Russia and Iran.



PYD/YPG base near Syria-Turkey border. (Kayhan Özer - AA)

TIMELINE

15 March 2011

Demonstrations erupt in the city of Deraa after security forces arrest and torture a number of teenagers for drawing graffiti on their school's wall in support of the Arab Spring. The security forces opened fire, killing scores of protestors.



12 June 2012

The UN officially states that Syria is in a state of civil war.

22 June 2012

A Turkish F-4 Phantom reconnaissance jet is shot down by the Syrian regime

20 August 2012

US President Obama declares that he establishes a "red line" against the use of chemical weapons in Syria

23 September 2014

The US-led coalition launches an aerial campaign against Daesh in Syria and Iraq after the terrorist group takes control of Mosul. The US, Turkey, Jordan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE take part.

14 October 2014

The US supports the YPG, the Syrian affiliate of the PKK terrorist organisation, against Daesh in the battle for Kobane with air support, weapons and medical aid.

29 August 2015

The US and Turkey carry out their first joint operation in the Syrian conflict, conducting 20 airstrikes against Daesh in northern Syria near the town of Marea where both countries have agreed to establish a safe zone.

27 February 2016

The US and Russia reach an accord for the cessation of hostilities across Syria, excluding groups considered as terrorist organisations.

24 August 2016

Turkey commences Euphrates Shield military operation to tackle with terrorist organisations in northern Syria.

22 December 2016

After four years under opposition control, the Syrian regime takes full control of Aleppo. Civilians and opposition members are evacuated from formerly opposition-held parts of the city after an agreement brokered by Turkey and Russia.

4 April 2017

The Assad regime is accused by the US, the UK and Turkey of carrying out a chemical attack on Khan Shaykhun in Idlib. Over 70 civilians are killed, and over 300 severely injured.

8 May 2017

The US makes clear its intention to continue arming YPG, against the wishes of Turkey.

17 October 2017

Daesh is entirely driven out from Raqqa, its de-facto capital in Syria.

20 January 2018

Turkey launches Operation Olive Branch against the YPG controlled city of Afrin and drives YPG militants out completely by March.

17 September 2018

Turkey and Russia reach an agreement regarding the situation in Idlib, the last stronghold of the opposition.



They declare that an agreement has been reached to establish and monitor a 15- 20km demilitarised zone around the perimeter of the province.

■ 12 December 2018

Turkish President Erdoğan announces that Turkey will carry out a military operation into the east of Euphrates River in Syria in a couple of days. Furthermore, he adds that "we have completed our preparations."

■ 19 December 2018

The US President Donald Trump's decision to pull US troops out of Syria has come after a phone call with President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Trump tweets that "All US military forces will be pulled out once final stages of the last operation against ISIS is complete."

■ 21 December 2018

President Erdoğan elucidates that after the telephone call with President Trump, Turkey decides to postpone its cross-border operations into eastern Euphrates controlled by YPG.

■ 23 December 2018

After a phone call with President Erdogan, Trump tweets: "We discussed ISIS, our mutual involvement in Syria, & the slow & highly coordinated pull out of U.S. troops from the area. After many years they are coming home. We also discussed heavily expanded Trade."

■ 24 December 2018

Turkey's defence minister Hulusi Akar says that preparations for a military operation in Syria are proceeding as planned.

■ 25 December 2018

Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu declares that Turkey is determined to cross to the east of the Euphrates River in Syria as soon as possible.

■ 27 December 2018

President Trump visits to US troops in Iraq. He announces, "I talked with President Erdoğan. He wants to defeat Deash and will do it."



■ 28 December 2018

Syrian regime alleges that deploys its army to Manbij area after YPG calls to deter Turkey.

■ 31 December 2018

Pentagon officials announces that President Donald Trump has agreed to allow about four months for the US military troop to pull out of Syria due to the reality, logistics and physics.

■ 03 January 2019

During a cabinet meeting President Trump declined the claim suggesting he has given any timetable for the withdrawal.

■ 06 January 2019

John Bolton, President Trump's National Security Advisor, says that the US withdrawal from Syria does not mean the cut of US support to the PYD/YPG, causing Turkish officials to once again harshly criticize the US position.



The US and the War in Syria

Since the onset of the Syrian crisis in 2011, the US position has been marked by ambivalence and the lack of a coherent and concrete strategy. The US position during the initial phases of the protests was one of supporting calls for political reforms, to which ends they advised the Syrian regime. Needless to say, the regime did not take the advice. In August 2011, President Obama made a definitive statement and asked Assad to step down. This statement was taken as a sign of a potential shift in US policy that would seek to remove the Assad regime from power. In August 2012, President Obama added to speculation the US may be shifting to policy of regime change when he stated that the use of chemical weapons by the regime constituted a 'red line' that would trigger US military intervention if crossed. A year later in August 2013, the Syrian regime attacked Ghouta, near Damascus, with chemical weapons. The US administration remained inactive. Over time, it became clear that US objectives in Syria were ambivalent and noncommittal, leading to a situation on the ground that gave ample room for the rise of non-state actors such as the PYD/YPG and Daesh. The lack of US commitment to support moderate opposition against Damascus and push for a political transition of regime also provided Russia and Iran with a fertile ground to expand their spheres of influence.

The fall of Mosul to Daesh in June 2014 was a shock for the US administration. While the US formed an international coalition to launch air strikes against Daesh targets in Syria and Iraq, a long-term strategy to defeat the group was lacking. After much criticism about the lack of strategy,

President Obama revealed his plan aiming to degrade and destroy Daesh in September 2014. This design relied primarily on air strikes, without having to put American 'boots on the ground'. In Syria, despite Turkish offers to work jointly with the US to combat Daesh, the US chose to work closely with the YPG, an offshoot of the PKK, considered as a terrorist organisation by Turkey, the US, and the EU. Therefore, supporting, arming, and training a terrorist group, the YPG has stoked tensions in the US bilateral relations with Turkey.

Following the election of Donald Trump, his administration continued the Obama era policy of supporting the PYD/YPG forces on the ground despite Turkey's objections. Trump did not, like his predecessor, choose to have any direct military confrontation with the Syrian regime with the exception of a cruise missile strike targeting Syrian air bases from where a chemical attack was launched in April 2017. However, in line with his "America First" policy, Trump made it clear that in his mind the US military presence in Syria was towards limited objectives and once achieved, he would withdraw US forces, estimated to number around 2000 personnel, from the country. Following a phone call with Turkish President Erdogan on December 19th 2018, President Trump announced that he would be giving the order to withdraw American forces.



US Support for the PYD/YPG

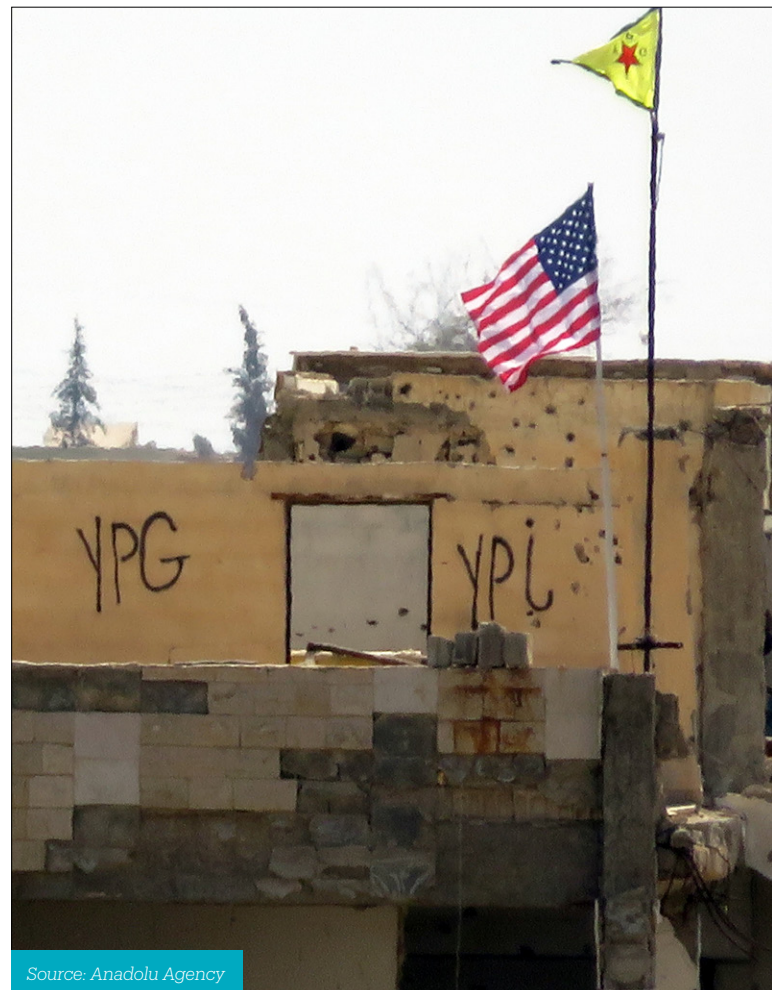
After the failure of the “train and equip” programme that aimed at training moderate opposition in Syria, the US adopted a new policy in Syria aimed at supporting the PYD/YPG on the ground. The decision was officially announced in 2014 during the battle for Ayn al-Arab in which the US assisted the PYD/YPG forces fighting against Daesh with air strikes. Turkish authorities immediately criticised this support saying that the PYD/YPG is nothing more than the Syrian branch of the PKK. Additionally, the PYD/YPG's focus on their own political project, as opposed to the wider goals of the Syrian revolution, as well as their inaction against the Syrian regime engendered intense criticism from the mainstream opposition.

The PYD/YPG's fight against Daesh has led to the rapprochement between the terror organisation and the US. Although the US considers the PKK as a terrorist organisations, it refuses to formally acknowledge the PYD/YPG as their Syrian wing in order to use the terror group as its proxy in the region. The US denial of the link between the PYD/YPG and the PKK comes even at the expense of multiple testimonies offered by top officials at Washington, such as the former Secretary of Defence Ash Carter during a senate hearing.

US support was heavily criticised by experts in the region and policymakers who acknowledged the link between the PKK and the PYD/YPG. In May 2017, the US announced that it would directly provide heavy weaponry to the PYD/YPG, including heavy machine guns and anti-tank weapons for the assault on Raqqa - the self-proclaimed capital of Daesh in Syria. The US authorities claimed that the arms provided to the PYD/YPG were only to be used against the Daesh militants in the Raqqa assault and would be returned once Daesh was eliminated from the city. However, even after the capture of Raqqa from Daesh, the US continued arming and training the PYD/YPG militants.

The US has on many occasions tacitly acknowledged the ties that exist between the PKK and PYD/YPG. An example of this appears on the CIA's website of enlisted terrorist organisations. Under terrorist organisations, the CIA enlists Salih Muslim as both the leader of the PYD and the leader of the PKK's Syrian branch. What is alarming, however, is that according to NATO sources, NATO declared the PYD as a terrorist organisation in a meeting in 2013 and the US ratified this decision further supporting the notion that

the US acknowledges the ties between PYD/YPG and the PKK. The PYD and PKK in Syria aim to realise some form of autonomy that will indisputably create grave security challenges for Turkey. The aforementioned examples further demonstrate that US foreign policy contradicts itself. Finally, the US announced on January 15, 2018, that it would form a “border security force” under the command of PYD/YPG forces, consisting of up to 30 thousand officers. This caused tremendous fury in Turkey, with President Erdogan stating, “the US is trying to form a terror army on our southern border”. Former US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson said in a speech at Stanford University that the US “owes an explanation to Turkey for saying that it supports the creation of a border security force in northern Syria.”



Source: Anadolu Agency

US Military Presence in Syria and its Cooperation with PYD/YPG

The US has 2000 soldiers and 18 military bases across Syria mainly in the northeast along the Turkish border.

In late November, the US army fortified areas of northern Syria along the roughly 100-kilometre border with Turkey's southern Sanliurfa province.

US support helped the PYD/YPG to spread across 1/3 of Syria, thus posing a major threat to Turkey.

The US has provided more than 5 thousand truckloads of arms to YPG including anti-tank missiles, armoured personnel carriers and drones. On many occasions, Turkish forces captured such weapons in operations against PKK.

According to Amnesty International, the PYD/YPG has forced Arab and Turkmen villagers to leave their villages and threatened to call in US air strikes if they rejected.

In a Senate hearing in 2016, Former Secretary of Defence Ashton Carter admitted that PYD/YPG were linked to the PKK, which is also considered as a terrorist organisation by the US.

The US Chief of Staff announced that they are forming a border army in the region. According to the US plans the 'army' will be composed of 40 thousand men, most of whom belong to the YPG.



OPERATION OLIVE BRANCH REGION
 OPPOSITION AND ANTI-REGIME ARMED FORCES
 OPERATION OLIVE BRANCH REGION
 YPG/PKK
 REGIME FORCES
 DAESH
 US BASES
 US OBSERVATION POINTS

PYD/YPG's Terror Structure in Region East of Euphrates

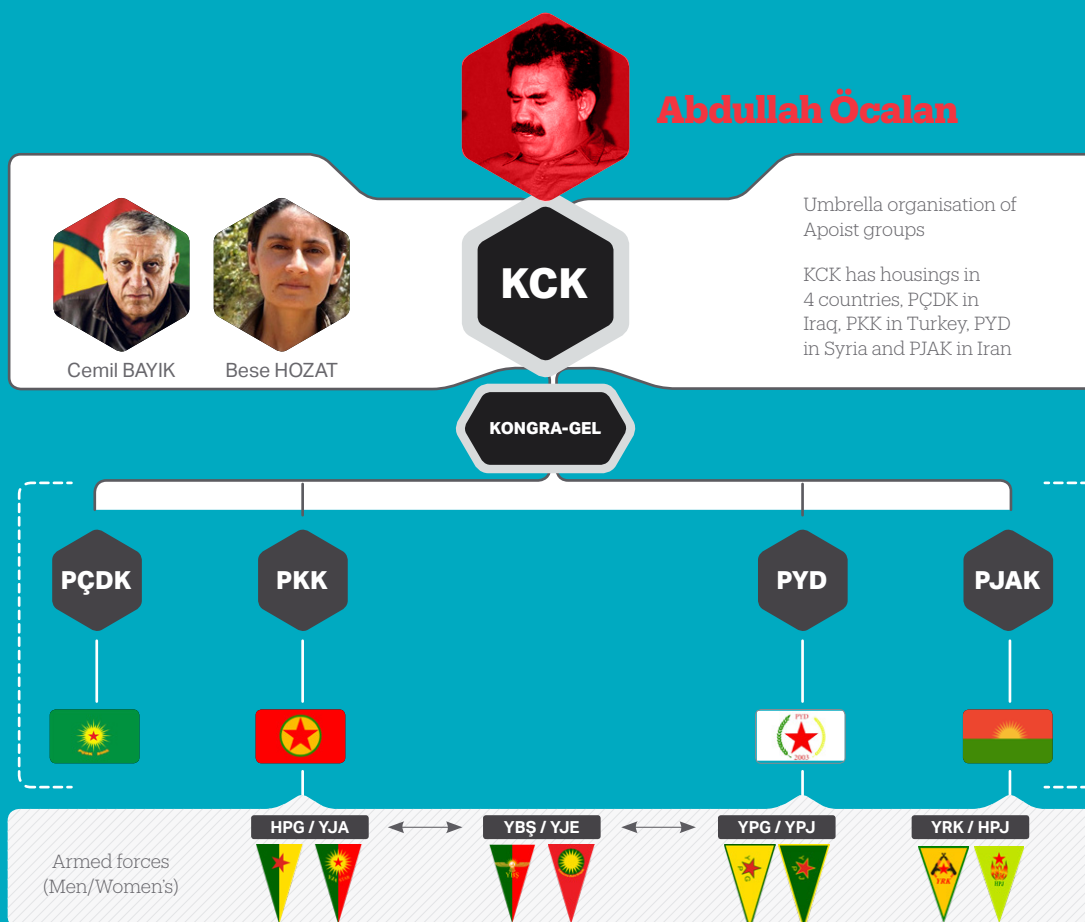
The group controls Syria's most productive regions. Rich oil fields and most of the agricultural lands of the country are occupied by PYD/YPG.

Following Operation Olive Branch, the group lost most of its land in Western Syria. The group controls mainly eastern parts of the Euphrates River and the Manbij region.

Until today the PYD/YPG has forcibly displaced 1.7 million people.

PYD/YPG controls more than 45 thousand square kilometre of land which comprises nearly 1/3 of Syria.

PYD/YPG also controls 70 percent of Syria's electricity production.



Source: TRT World



An image taken from memory card of cameras belonged PYD/YPG terrorists shows children stand with their guns at a probable training camp. (Source: AA)

The PKK and its Syrian Offshoot PYD/YPG

The PKK was established by Abdullah Öcalan in 1978 and is recognised as a terrorist organisation by many countries and international organisations including Turkey, the US, the EU and the NATO. Since 1984, Öcalan and his supporters have been perpetrating terrorist attacks primarily in Eastern Anatolia and the southeast of Turkey with the aim of seceding from Ankara.

Abdullah Öcalan led the PKK from Syria where he was safeguarded by the Syrian regime, taking the two countries to the verge of armed conflict. Following intense pressure from Turkey, Syria deported Öcalan in 1998. Öcalan was then captured in Kenya in 1999 and the conflict between Turkey and the PKK temporarily waned as the PKK declared a unilateral ceasefire. However, the PKK saw Iraq's invasion by the US and the subsequent instability in the region as an opportunity to reignite its terrorist activities. In parallel the PKK formed branches in Iran, Iraq and Syria. The PYD, and its armed wing the YPG, were formed in Syria as a result of such efforts. These

branches were directly under the command of KCK – the umbrella organisation of the PKK.

A process to end terror and achieve reconciliation was initiated by the Turkish Government in 2013. Although a lot has been achieved in regard to social reconciliation among the respective communities, the process ended after the PKK restarted its attacks in 2015. During this time, the PKK and its offshoot in Syria the PYD/YPG gained a massive advantage in Syria as the regime gradually lost its control in the north, and for this reason the group rejected any calls to disarm, which was a requirement of the peace process. With the start of the Syrian Civil War in 2011, the Syrian regime moved its troops from northern Syria allowing the PYD/YPG to fill the void left by the regime and declared the establishment of its own administrative region along the Turkish border.

The US Withdrawal from Syria

On December 19th, US President Donald Trump announced that he had ordered the withdrawal of over two thousand US soldiers from Syria. He justified his decision on the ground that the threat from Daesh had largely been eliminated, thereby obviating the need for the US troops to stay in Syria. He said in a tweet: "We have defeated ISIS [Daesh] in Syria, my only reason for being there during the Trump Presidency."

Trump's decision came after Turkey revealed its plan for a military operation against the YPG forces in East of the Euphrates in Northern Syria. This is the area where the US military bases and troops are located. Turkey conducted two military operations -Operation Euphrates Shield against Daesh and Operation Olive Branch against YPG in order to eliminate terrorist attacks originating from the region and cut off their ties and support to the PKK terrorist inside Turkey. Despite Turkey's strong criticism of the US support for the YPG, the US has continued to deliver weaponry to the terrorist organisation, which has long caused tension between two countries.

This unexpected decision caused mixed reactions from other countries. Turkey and Russia welcomed the decision while France and UK reaffirmed that they would maintain their engagement in the region. Moreover, within the Trump administration, US Secretary of Defence James Mattis resigned from his post over the withdrawal decision, followed by the resignation of Special Presidential Envoy for the Global Coalition to Counter Daesh Brett McGurk.

The details and timeline of the announced withdrawal process has become fluid and unpredictable following a meeting between President Trump and US Republican Senator Lindsey Graham. Senator Graham announced that President Trump has reconsidered the withdrawal

process in a fashion that ensures that Daesh will be permanently destroyed, Iran will not fill in the void and YPG/PYD will be protected. In line with the Senator Graham's statement, President Trump later acknowledged that a more cautious schedule for the withdrawal of troops will be pursued. In a tweet, Trump stated that US troops are slowly being sent back home while fighting against the final remnants of Daesh. Considered with the resignations over the withdrawal decision, this latest backtrack has further revealed the internal dispute within the US administration over the US's Syria policy.

In line with Senator Graham's statement President Trump's National Security Advisor John Bolton reiterated that the US withdrawal was conditioned upon protection of the PYD/YPG and the complete elimination of Daesh. In response to these statements Turkish officials criticised US support to terrorist organisations. As such, Turkish presidential spokesman Ibrahim Kalın stated that terrorists cannot be allies of the US. He further said that "aim of Turkey's fight against the PKK and its Syrian extensions (PYD/YPG) is to rescue the Kurds from the cruelty and oppression of this terrorist group." Right after the withdrawal announcement presidents Erdoğan and Trump had agreed to coordinate the withdrawal process and prevent a power vacuum in the region. Additionally, Turkey had reaffirmed its commitment to continue fighting against the remnants of Daesh and YPG terrorists. However, the latest developments have injected more uncertainty into the process. Of particular concern for Turkey are the American-provided weapons possessed by the YPG. US officials have made statements to the effect that the weapons will be taken back following the defeat of Daesh, something Turkey expects the Americans to follow through on.

Turkey on the War in Syria

In the context of the uprisings that took place across the Arab world beginning in 2011, Turkey had declared its position to be on the side of the people and has tried to remain in line with the demands of the Arab world for freedom and democracy. Throughout Syria's six-year war, Turkey has been among the staunchest supporters of the moderate opposition and efforts to achieve a political solution to the crisis. Turkey has supported all diplomatic efforts by the UN, the Organization of Islamic Countries, and the Arab League to achieve a peaceful political transition since the beginning of the conflict. Currently Turkey gives full support to Geneva Talks, Astana Process and the Germany, Russia, France and Turkey Quartet which met in Istanbul on October 27th 2018.

Having deep seated historical, cultural and societal ties with its neighbour, Ankara has taken part in every platform that has aimed at finding a solution to end the ongoing conflict. Together with Russia and Iran, Turkey initiated new trilateral talks on Syria in the Kazakh capital

of Astana in January 2017. Although important steps have been taken in the course of these talks, they have not, as of yet, been able to provide a lasting political solution to the conflict. Most recently, Turkey brokered a deal with Russia regarding the last opposition stronghold in Syria, Idlib which prevented a humanitarian catastrophe. It is widely held that this deal could very well represent the last real chance for a political solution to the conflict.

Moreover, Turkey launched two unilateral military operations inside northern Syria to eliminate terror threats along its 911 km border. In August 2016 Operation Euphrates Shield was launched by Turkey together with the Free Syrian Army against Daesh. Turkey's Operation Olive Branch, launched in January 2018, focused on YPG terror enclaves in the city of Afrin. Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan recently announced that a third operation to eliminate PYD/YPG presence on North-eastern Syria was due to begin soon.

Operation Euphrates Shield

Operation Euphrates Shield was initiated after several PKK and Daesh attacks targeted civilians in Turkish cities. Due to the threats directed and carried out by the PKK and Daesh, Turkey took steps to clear its southern border with Syria from terrorist organisations in order to prevent further attacks targeting Turkish security forces and civilians.

Turkey's move was acknowledged to fall within the right of self-defence, as established under UN Charter Article 51. President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said that the Operation Euphrates Shield was not an invasion, but rather part of an effort to resettle the local Arab and Turkmen populations back in their towns. The operation also aimed to create a de facto safe zone to halt the mass flow of refugees. The main objectives of the operations were to remove the increasing threat of terror within the borders of Turkey, provide border security for Turkey, and protect Turkey's national interests in Syria.

The Operation subsequently removed Daesh from the border town of Jarablus on the Euphrates River, and secured a 100-kilometer stretch of the border. It was followed by the liberation of the Daesh stronghold

of al-Bab, located 30 kilometres south of the Turkish border on February 23, 2017. Operation Euphrates Shield came to an end on March 29, 2017.

Additionally, al-Bab had a greater significance for the PKK and its Syrian offshoot the YPG than it did for Daesh. If the PKK and YPG had taken al-Bab, it would have meant the establishment of a PYD/YPG-controlled corridor running across northern Syria. Control of al-Bab by Turkish Forces and Free Syrian Army triggered the way for subsequent operations against Daesh, as well as eliminating the chance of an YPG corridor being established in Turkey's southern border.

Turkey instigated the rebuilding of al-Bab upon the successful completion of the operation. One of the first steps in rebuilding al-Bab was the construction of a hospital. The rebuilding of schools followed and by autumn 2017, primary education in the city had recommenced. In April 2017, Turkey pledged to build a satellite city in al-Bab capable of hosting 80 thousand people. Since the establishment of security in these areas, it is reported that more than 160 thousand Syrian refugees living in Turkey have returned to Syria.

Operation Olive Branch

On January 20th 2018, Turkey declared the start of a military operation called Operation Olive Branch in Syria's Afrin region, which borders Turkey's south-eastern cities of Hatay and Kilis. Within two months, Afrin was cleared of PYD/YPG terrorists as Turkish Armed Forces and Free Syrian Army Forces declared victory on March 18th.

An official statement released by the Turkish Armed Forces laid out the objective and scope of the operation. According to this statement, Operation Olive Branch aimed to neutralise terrorist organisations such as the YPG and Daesh in the Afrin region in order to provide security and stability across Turkey's border as well as in the region more generally. Additionally, it aimed to create a passage of safe return, so that displaced Syrians could return home.

President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan of Turkey explained the intentions of Turkey in the operation by stating

that "we do not have any negative thoughts on Syria's territorial integrity and its independent, prosperous future. On the contrary, we are taking these steps to ensure our own national security, as well as of our 13 million Syrian brothers and sisters -- who have been displaced -- [their] security, peace and future"

Operation Olive Branch has inflicted heavy damage to the PYD/YPG and PKK. Turkey claims to have 'neutralised' up to 3,820 terrorists in the course of the operation. 52 Turkish soldiers have been killed and 229 wounded, while approximately 300 members of the Turkish-backed Free Syrian Army were also killed.

One of the objectives of this operation was to enable Syrians who were forced to leave Afrin to return. Since the re-establishment of security in the city it has been reported that approximately 130,000 Syrian refugees living in Turkey have returned to the region.



Turkish commando units during Operation Olive Branch 2018. (Burak Milli - AA)

Turkey's Objectives East of the Euphrates

Turkey considers the PYD/YPG as the Syrian offshoot of the PKK. Therefore, Ankara has opposed the PYD/YPG's self-declared rule in north-eastern Syria since beginning of the Syrian Civil War because the presence of terrorist organization is seen as an existential threat to Turkey national's security, regional stability and Syria's territorial integrity. Although the PYD/YPG has been successful in drawing support from the West by identifying itself with another label in Syria, it has not been able to successfully to persuade the Turkish government with such tactics. Turkey regards the PYD/YPG's presence along the long border between Turkey and Syria as a threat to its national security.



Turkish troops deployed to the Syrian border (Halil Fidan - AA)

The group has been using its strongholds in the border region as a passage to infiltrate in to Turkey. It was revealed that the assailant of a car bomb that exploded in a police centre in Turkey's city of Gaziantep on May 1, 2016, originated from Afrin. On many occasions Turkish authorities have discovered tunnels in the area used by the group for such purposes. According to the Turkish officials, the group has also used US trained members in terrorist attacks inside Turkey, such as assaulting police and military posts particularly in eastern Turkey and bombings in city centres. Moreover, Turkish authorities also seized sophisticated weapons such as TOW missiles given to PYD/YPG by the US in operations against the PKK. Because of such menace, Turkey has long been perusing a strategy to eliminate PYD/YPG from the region.

In accordance with its aims, Ankara demanded assurances from Washington to push PYD/YPG from Manbij located

on the western bank of Euphrates River. The two countries agreed on a timetable in June 2018 that foresaw PYD/YPG's withdrawal from the Arab majority Manbij within three months. However, little has been done by the US to push PYD/YPG out from the region to eastern bank of Euphrates River. On the eastern side of the Euphrates, Turkey has been shelling PYD/YPG posts on the Syrian side of the border in an effort to eliminate terror threats. However, Washington's reluctance regarding the PYD/YPG's withdrawal from Manbij and increasing threat of terror on Eastern Euphrates has led Turkey to plan a large-scale operation similar to the aforementioned Euphrates Shield and Olive Branch Operations to secure the rest of its border lands from terrorist threats.

On December 14th 2018, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan declared that Turkey would start its expected offensive to the PYD/YPG held area on Eastern Euphrates in couple days. In his speech Erdogan also warned the US to stick on the agreement over Manbij and to stop supporting PYD/YPG. On December 19th, following a phone call with Erdogan US President Donald Trump announced that the US would pull its troops in Syria immediately. Erdoğan later stated that Turkey decided to postpone its operation east of the Euphrates, stating that "the telephone call with President Trump, the contacts of our diplomacy and security units and statements by America have all led us to wait for a while." However, in the following days, US administration announced that the withdrawal of the US troops will take place according to a gradual plan of months. As of yet, the withdrawal plan has not been detailed by the US government.

The Withdrawal of US forces will lift the risk of conflict between the two NATO allies. In the light of these recent developments, Ankara has apparently postponed the operation until withdrawal of the US troops from Syria is complete. Trump has also said that the withdrawal will be coordinated with Turkey. Although the scale of the future operation is still not clear, looking at the prior Turkish operations and the recent decision of the US, it can be predicted that Turkey will push PYD/YPG from its border deeper into Syria. The most likely scenario thereafter is that Ankara will hold onto the regions south of its border until a suitable political resolution to the Syrian war is achieved.

What's next?: Expert Views

Experts from various fields of study have different perspectives regarding the US decision to withdraw its forces from Syria and potential implications thereof. Experts consulted in the preparation of this report provided their perspective on the following questions:

- **What are the reasons behind the US' decision to withdraw?**
- **How will Turkey's national security and prospective operation east of the Euphrates be affected?**
- **How will the strategic positions of the Syrian Regime, Russia, Iran and other forces be affected by the US withdrawal?**



Talip Küçükcan

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1. Although the US decision to withdraw from Syria took the international community by surprise, this decision is consistent with both the Obama and Trump Administrations. Since the US occupation of Iraq in 2003 and eventual withdrawal of most of its forces, the US has expressed its desire to gradually disengage from the conflicts in the Middle East, perhaps with the exception of the Arab-Israeli dispute. The stated objective for the presence in Syria was secure victory over Daesh and President Trump now believes that the mission is completed. With this decision, if implemented fully, the US has declared that it will not play a direct role in finding a political solution to the Syrian conflict by using their military deployment as leverage. The future shape of Syria, it seems, is no longer viewed in the strategic interest of US foreign policy.

2. First of all, Turkey had no categorical objections to the presence of US military troops in Syria as long as it does not provide support to Turkey's adversaries. Moreover Turkey has welcomed US contribution to the diplomatic efforts to resolve the Syrian conflicts since onset of the crisis. Secondly Turkey established working relations with the US on combating ISIS, supporting and training the moderate opposition groups and weakening the Syrian regime for a democratic transition. What Turkey objected was the US support to PYD/YPG which Turkey sees as terrorist group threatening Turkey's national security and regional stability. If US withdrawal from Syria also means ending its support to PYD/YPG, Turkey will welcome such a development. If, however, the US continues its support to PYD/YPG, this will remain as an issue between the two allies. Turkey stated now and then that it is committed to clean its border region from PYD/YPG and launch an operation sooner or later. These operations are well calculated and does not depend on the US withdrawal only though such a move might comfort Turkey if/when an operation begins.

3. Russia and Iran have both well established their presence in Syria over the years and have been providing support to the Assad regime in Damascus which had territorial gains due to such support. In fact, the US presence with 2000 soldiers and its proxy (PYD/YPG) did not really pose a serious challenge to the policies and practices of Assad Regime, Russia and Iran. Therefore, US' withdrawal decision should not be seen as a green light to these actors as they were already acting on their own will and US did not pursue an active policy against Russia and Iran on the ground as its stated objective to remain in Syria was to fight ISIS. At a much later stage, the US Administration declared that until Iran leaves the country, US forces will remain in Syria. However, as President Trump declared, the US gave up this objective as well at least for the time being.



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1. The reasons behind the withdrawal of US forces from Syria are clearly explained by US president Donald Trump himself who emphasized in his statement that Daesh has been decimated both in terms of numbers of its members on the ground as well as its capacity to plan and carry out attacks from Syria. The decision to withdraw represents a continuation of the policy of former president Barack Obama, which could be summarized as lending various forms of military and logistical supports to US's friends and allies without necessarily putting American boots on the ground. Yet, Obama himself had to give a pause to his policy following incidents of chemical weapons use in Syria since 2013 and the chaos created with the



emergence and expansion of the influence of Daesh in 2014. Hence, Obama had decided to send American soldiers to Syria. It seems, Donald Trump now believes the mission of the active military service personnel is over and those who will remain in Syria will continue to provide logistical as well as intelligence support to those who are said to "continue to fight ISIS".

2. Despite an endless number of warnings issued by top Turkish statesmen, academics, diplomats, military personnel, journalists and intellectuals regarding Turkey's longstanding resentments toward the United States' support for the PYD/YPG neither the previous Obama administration, not the current Trump administration seemed to have changed the policy of lending large amounts of military, logistical and intelligence support to this groups. Hence, Turkey was left with no option other than to carry out a large-scale military operation toward the regions controlled by YPG/PYD in Syria, to the east of the Euphrates River, which could, however, cause serious tensions between Turkey and the United States. Such incidents would have dire consequences for Turkish-American bilateral relations. Apparently, Trump's decision to withdraw active military personnel will considerably diminish such an eventuality.

3. The decision to withdraw active military personnel from Syria is not likely to cause a significant change from the perspective of the Syrian regime, Russia or Iran. The US will continue to lend logistical as well as intelligence support in addition to its abundant political backing in various platforms toward the PYD/YPG and other Kurdish groups in northern Syria and Iraq as has been the case since the first Gulf War of 1991.

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1. At the highest level, the withdrawal is in line with the US strategy of shifting its strategic centre of gravity to the Pacific. The US Middle East policy has been about keeping Israel secure by rolling back Iran, keeping the oil prices stable by keeping the oil centres stable, and combating terrorism in its source. The PYD is not a useful tool for the first two of these policies while the last one of combating

terrorism has already been achieved for Trump. Hence, this is the reason why the withdrawal decision is taken by Trump.

2. The best case scenario for Turkey was to cooperate with Russia in the region west of the Euphrates and with the US in the region east of the Euphrates. If the withdrawal really occurs, then Turkey will have to deal with Russia in all of Syria. This is a challenge for Turkey as Russia's hand is stronger, however the two countries have so far learnt how to work together while diverging on many aspects in Syria. In this new equation, the PYD/YPG will try its best to serve to Russia or some other power against Turkey. The prospect success, however, remains slim given that

Turkey remains persistent in its aim of eliminating the PKK's extension in Syria.

3. Russia will be the most relieved one as it has now no other actor in the field in its own scale in terms of military capacity, local roots, territorial size of the sphere of influence, etc. Iran must be relieved too, however there is no sign that Trump will stop going after Iran in Syria and elsewhere. Even further and firmer measures might be waiting for Iran in the broader region. As for the Syrian regime, it will follow where Russia pushes it. As for the opposition groups in Idlib, they might worry that Russia is now unchallenged in Syria, however the pro-Turkey groups would follow Turkey's brokerage.



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1. Looking from the outside, US President Trump appears to have taken his decision at the spur of the moment. It contradicts US policy as articulated by his national security advisor John Bolton who had laid out that US troops would remain in Syria as long as Iran was militarily present in the country. The decision will play well to Trump's basis which does not favour US overseas military intervention after almost two decades of war in Iraq and Afghanistan. Trump moreover is playing to his base at a moment that his domestic problems, including Robert Mueller's investigation of Russian meddling in US elections, Trump's business practices, and Congressional

opposition to his backing of Saudi Arabia in the wake of the killing of journalist Jamal Khashoggi are putting greater pressure on him.

2. The US withdrawal works in favour of Turkish ambitions regarding the Kurds given that the Syrian Kurdish YPG, viewed by Turkey as a terrorist extension of the Kurdish Workers Party (PKK) will no longer enjoy the support it had from the United States. To Turkey's long-term rather than short-term detriment, it will remove whatever incentives there may have been for a political rather than a military solution to the Kurdish issue.

3. The US withdrawal effectively confirms Syrian president Bashar al-Assad's victory in the civil war and cements the positions of Russia and Iran in the country. The withdrawal not only will fuel impressions, much like former US President Barak Obama's failure to adhere to his chemical weapons red line in Syria, that the US is not a reliable ally. Moreover, it will strengthen Russia and Iran's ability to influence developments in the Middle East. The recent visit to Syria by Sudanese President Omar Bashir, like Assad accused of war crimes, suggests that Arab states that in the past had demanded Assad's removal from power have accepted his continued control of the country.

Conclusion

Since the beginning of the War in Syria in 2011, the US approach has sought to avoid a direct engagement of the kind experienced in Afghanistan and Iraq. However, the sudden rise of Daesh in Iraq and Syria led the US to put boots on the ground. Now that Daesh is largely defeated and most of its territory taken back, there is, according to the position of US President Trump, no reason for the US to stay in Syria. As the experts pointed out, the decision is in accordance with the US strategy to sidestep direct interventions.

The US has used PYD/YPG against Daesh in order to minimize the scale of its forces in Syria. However, the PYD/YPG is considered to be a branch of the PKK, which has been waging a war against Turkey for more than three decades. Therefore, US support to the group has endangered Turkey's security and strained relations between the two NATO allies.

The US decision to withdraw its forces came at a moment when Turkey announced its intention to begin a military operation into the region east of the Euphrates occupied by the PYD/YPG. If the US withdrawal goes forward in coordination with Turkey, as discussed, and leads to US support for Turkey's operation to secure its borders, this may lead to an improvement of relations between the two allies. However, if Washington's attitude towards Turkey's concerns do not change, already strained relations between Ankara and Washington may break down to an

irrecoverable point. Details of the US withdrawal are still not clear, but given the deep ties between two countries it is more likely that the administrations will work on trying to save the alliance. One can say that Turkey's position will be more essential for the NATO alliance considering US shift to Pacific and aggressive policies of Iran and Russia in the region.

Since the announcement of the US withdrawal, the PYD/YPG has engaged in talks with the Syrian regime for protection against Turkey. However, relations between the two have been controversial. The regime opposed PYD/YPG's self-declared federation in Northern Syria and refused to recognise it. The regime is aware that PYD/YPG's ultimate aim is to form an independent state. Therefore, the Syrian regime rejects power sharing proposals by the PYD/YPG.

The PYD/YPG and the Syrian regime announced that the regime forces have been deployed to PYD/YPG held Manbij. However, the presence of regime forces in the region is still not confirmed. Details of any possible agreement are not clear. On the other hand, Turkey also announced that it will continue its operations in Syria until the terror threat to its borders from the region is eliminated. It is unlikely that getting under regime umbrella will save PYD/YPG. It is also debatable how valuable the PYD/YPG is for the Syrian Regime.



Turkish Armed Forces in Syria during Operation Olive Branch. (Eren Bozkurt - AA)



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