

The Turkish Invasion of Syria: New Hope for Jihadists

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As soon as President Donald Trump ordered the withdrawal of US troops operating in northern Syria, Turkey launched an offensive against a region dominated by Arab-Kurdish militias. In order to shed light on the geopolitical aspects of this invasion, *Orient XXI* met Salih Muslim, spokesman of the Democratic Union Party, Fehim Taştekin, analyst and journalist, Agit Polat, spokesman of the Kurdish Democratic Council in France and Raphaël Lebrujah who is under bombing in Qamishlo.

THE U.S. WITHDRAWAL OPENING THE DOOR FOR TURKEY

Agit Polat, spokesperson for the Kurdish Democratic Council in France (CDK-F), Paris. — The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and the self-administration of North-East Syria have stated from the beginning that their agreements with the United States were solely tactical in nature and absolutely not strategic over the long term. We have always known that soon or later, the United States would withdraw. But today we feel betrayed, because they broke the agreement that we had concluded about the safe zone. The SDF respected that agreement and fulfilled its commitments to the letter. The SDF withdrew from two important areas: Serekeniye (Ras Al-Aïn) and Girî Spî (Tal Abyad) to make way for joint U.S.-Turkish patrols. The treachery of the United States opened the door to the current Turkish operation, which has the clear goal of annihilating the pluralistic, communal, multiethnic, and multireligious self-government that had been established in the North-East Syria. The direct consequence of this annihilation will be to strengthen jihadism and terrorism.

Fehim Taştekin, analyst and journalist, Vienna. — If Turkey were to occupy any territory in northern Syria, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan would impose three conditions before an eventual withdrawal. First, he would do everything to eliminate the Kurdish-led self-administration's democratic institutions, on the pretext that they never obtained regional or international recognition. Second, he would propose replacing the official Syrian army with his own "Syrian National Army" and do everything to obtain official recognition for it. Finally, if he fails to depose Bashar Al-Assad, he would try to bring about a partition of Syria. He has a neo-Ottoman dream of extending Turkish territory, the way Atatürk seized Alexandrette (now called Hatay) in 1938.

JIHADIST GROUPS BACK IN THE SADDLE, THANKS TO TURKEY

F. T. — More than fifty rebel groups support the Turkish invasion, and some of them are "moderate," like the Turkmen. But most of the organizations, and certainly most powerful, are jihadists, radical Islamists from an ideological and operational point of view, including Al-Qaeda, Fatah Al-Sham, ISIS, and Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham. They have that fundamentalist orientation and are operating side by side with the Turkish army, comprising the so-called "Syrian National Army," which was created by Turkey.

Salih Muslim, spokesperson for the Democratic Union Party (PYD), North of Syria. — We

have their names. Some were emirs with ISIS. Others come from villages around Girî Spî (Tal Abyad), when we drove ISIS from the area. The inhabitants of the region know them well. Clearly the Turkish invasion will allow these jihadist groups to regroup or rise anew from the ashes. Europeans should be aware of that. Terrorists perpetrated made attacks on European soil have come from Syria after passing through Turkey. Strengthening these groups will only lead to new terrorist attacks in Europe.

Turkey's treatment of the province of Afrin symbolizes best the political project that Erdoğan wants to apply in the northern Syria. Since invading Afrin in January 2018, Turkey has occupied it and is inflicting demographic changes. Before the Turkish invasion, the city of Afrin was 95 percent Kurdish; now it's only 15 percent, as a result of the ethnic cleansing carried out by Turkey and its mercenaries. They have replaced Kurds with Sunni Arabs coming from elsewhere in Syria, from Idlib and Ghouta, and many are families of jihadists who fought with ISIS or Al-Nusra. They plunder, loot, rape, kidnap people for ransom. If Turkey is victorious in its operation in North-East Syria, it will do the same there.

MOSCOW'S RISKY CALCULATION

F. T. — Russia will support the Turkish invasion only if it remains limited to northern Syria. Russia hopes to push the Kurds in the arms of Assad in Damascus. Putin would rather have Turkey than the United States in northern Syria, although he is aware that once Turkish troops have settled inside Syria, they will not leave soon. Furthermore Russia concluded recently important economic agreements with Turkey.

A. G. — Russia's main goals are to weaken the Kurds or the SDF and to obtain negotiations between a weakened SDF and the Syrian regime. It's a risky calculation because, as history proves, once Turkey is inside Syria, it will not leave voluntarily. But Russia's main objective is to pull Turkey away from NATO. Therefore it is ready to make concessions on the territorial integrity of Syria.

THE WEAKNESS OF DAMASCUS

S. M. — The Syrian regime has points of weakness that we've noticed, and it's dependent on Russia and Iran. Iran (like Israel, by the way) is dissatisfied with Russia's support for Erdoğan's operation. It has criticized the presence of Turkish troops on Syrian soil. But Russia is seeking to achieve a regional balance between Turkey and Iran. Russia does not want Iran to become too powerful either. During the our campaign to liberate Deir Ez-Zor, the Russians asked the SDF to take over the city, which is rich in natural gas. Our action came directly at the expense of the Syrian regime and of Iran.

F. T. — The position of Damascus toward the Kurds was: "Get rid of the North American troops first, and afterwards we'll see what we can do for you." But the Kurds had no guarantee that Damascus, Moscow, or Tehran would grant them the autonomy they were looking for, so how could they have asked to the United States to withdraw? Furthermore, the SDF also demanded military autonomy, which the official Syrian army was not willing to accord them.

Damascus is waiting for the right moment to send its army to northern Syria. Actually, since the balance of forces is not really in its favor, it might settle for taking Manbij and the oil fields of Deir Ez-Zor. Damascus could benefit from a limited Turkish invasion because it would weaken the SDF, and later, after concluding an agreement with the SDF, Damascus could try to regain control of the north. Assad would be happy with a weakened SDF, but does not want a permanent presence of Turkish troops in Syria. Damascus is playing with fire, because nobody can predict how far Erdoğan wants to extend his military operation into Syria.

THE SDF DEMAND FOR A NO-FLY ZONE

Raphaël Lebrujah, journalist, Qamishlo. — There is shelling everywhere now, on military targets but also civilian, a refugee camp, prisons. The Turkish army and its jihadist militias are making only slow progress, because they are facing ferocious resistance from the SDF. They are determined to resist, but they absolutely need a no-fly zone if they are to succeed. After only a few days, it's already a bloodbath here, and many people here, not only the Kurds, are in despair after the U.S. betrayal.

Chris den Hond

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