

Shifting Great Power Positions in Syria



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Executive Summary

The Turkish offensive against Kurdish-led administrations in northeast Syria resulted in Russia to emerge as the real power broker. Once the US was out of the equation in Syria following President Trump's decision to pull out, Moscow acted fast not only to secure an agreement between the Syrian Kurds and the regime but also between the Syrian regime and Turkey. Kurds coming to terms with the Assad government will be a massive boost to the regime's outlook. Despite the widespread criticism of the Turkish invasion of Syria, by several European leaders, US Senators, policymakers, the media and the celebrities, the reactions yet produced little in the form of severe concrete sanctions. But Turkey is facing pressure to stop its offensive not only from the West but also from Russia and Iran. With the potential demise of the Kurdish-led decentralisation project in Syria, Turkey would benefit highly in strategic political terms. However, this could increase medium level security risks in Turkey as the PKK-linked members of the Syrian Kurds could choose to cross borders to focus on their armed campaign against the Turkish government, their ultimate enemy.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Guney Yildiz



Guney Yildiz is a non-resident scholar at the Middle East Institute, a Visiting Fellow at the German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP) and a researcher and journalist based in London with a focus on Turkey, Syria and the Kurds in the Middle East. He had advised members of the Foreign Affairs Select Committee of the UK Parliament, as a Specialist Adviser on Turkey. He is pursuing a PhD in Cambridge on political mobilisation by armed non-state actors in the Middle East. As a journalist with the BBC News, he broke numerous top UK and international stories that have been picked up by other domestic and international broadcasters.

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Centre for Historical Analysis and Conflict Research
Robertson House, Slim Road, Camberley
GU15 4NP
Telephone: 01276 412708 Mil: 94261 2708
Facsimile 01276 412708 Mil 94261 2708

President Donald Trump's decision to withdraw from Syria, although off the cuff, is not inconsistent with Western policy. While the United States and Europe supported the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) militarily against the Islamic State, they never contemplated giving them political recognition. The Western bloc didn't push for Kurdish participation in the UN-led Geneva Process for a political settlement. And the UN-backed committee for redrafting the Syrian constitution does not include any representative from the SDF.

This almost complete international consensus on denying any say to the SDF in the future political settlement in Syria is in line with President Trump's so-called "off-script moment" that followed a phone conversation with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan on 6th of October, 2019. The decision is, therefore, an outcome of the broader failure in the West in devising a coherent policy to sustain the US presence in Syria in the face of opposition from Turkey.

Within a few days, the decision paved the way for an all-out Turkish attack on territories populated by the Kurds and Arabs, causing displacement of up to 200 thousand people and killing hundreds, including many civilians. Utilising its air supremacy, outnumbering and outgunning the Kurdish fighters as well as activating sleeper cells, Ankara took control of majority-Arab town Tal Abyad within a few days. The Kurdish majority town Ras al-Ayn (Serekaniye in Kurdish) held off until Turkey agreed to a ceasefire nine days after the offensive, under a US-brokered deal on the 17th of October.

US and Russian Mediation Efforts

President Donald Trump said he hopes he can "mediate a deal between Turkey and the Kurds" after Turkey started its long-planned military offensive against formerly US-backed SDF. By this time, with the US troops started leaving Syria and Ankara adamant about seizing the window of opportunity to grab as much land as possible in Syria, the possibility of a political settlement in the short term between Turkey and the Syrian-Kurdish representatives was a remote possibility. Throughout the years of US-engagement with the Kurdish led SDF in Syria, there was minimal, if any, appetite to mediate between the two actors.

The deal that was brokered by US Vice President Mike Pence and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo who travelled to Turkey to meet President Erdogan specifically for this issue. The de facto ceasefire agreement ended the hostilities between Turkey and the SDF for a curious 120 hours. Almost a week before the limited deal mediated by Washington, another, and an immensely more important agreement was signed, this time brokered by Moscow. Immediately after the US pull out was confirmed by Pentagon, Russian officials swiftly moved to take control of the newly emerging reality. The Turkish offensive forced the Syrian Kurds to quickly come to terms with the Syrian government, a massive boost to the regime's political and economic outlook. Top Kurdish officials from Qamishli in Northern Syria told the author of this report that Russian officials had flown to Qamishli on Friday the 11th of October to negotiate a deal with the Kurdish leadership of the SDF on behalf of the Syrian regime.

Russian officials promised the Kurds that they will work for a deal in which Kurdish rights will be respected and that they will stop the Turkish offensive if the Kurds agree to cede control of all the border areas with to the Syrian regime. Mazloum Abdi, the Commander in Chief of the SDF, said publicly: "We would have to make painful compromises with Moscow and Bashar al-Assad. But if we have to choose between compromises and the genocide of our people, we will surely choose life for our people." Once persuading the Kurds, Russians then flew the Kurdish and the Syrian government officials to Russian-operated Khmeimim Air Base in Latakia on Sunday the 13th and had the agreement signed. President Erdogan expressed dismay about the agreement between the Syrian regime and the Kurds, saying that he doesn't "even want to entertain the possibility that such an agreement exists." He stopped short of criticising Russia for brokering the deal. The US, despite doing, what is seen as a big favour to Turkey, couldn't avoid attracting dire criticism from Erdogan. The Turkish President initially told reporters that he wouldn't meet the US Vice President Mike Pence and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, who travelled to Turkey on 17th of October, to ask to discuss the possibility of a ceasefire between Turkey and the Kurds. He later changed his position agreeing to meet both.

The Russian brokered agreement between the SDF and the Syrian regime confirms Syrian army advances into the SDF controlled territory. The agreement doesn't foresee Syrian troops to be deployed to Ras al-Ayn (Serekaniye) and Tal Abyad, where the conflict is ongoing. The Russians told the Kurds that they would like to keep the SDF's structures and integrate into the 5th Corps of the Syrian army. Although the deal is only military rather than political, a political agreement is likely to follow. Within hours of US troops vacating their bases in areas such as Manbij, Russian military police took over. President Erdogan condemned the potential deal between the Kurds and the Syrian regime but stopped short of criticising Russia for brokering the agreement. The Turkish President, who continued criticising the US for suggesting that Turkey should negotiate a ceasefire with the Kurds, agreed to travel to Moscow, to discuss the situation with Russian President Putin. With backing from Moscow, the Syrian troops, albeit weak in force generation and operational and combat discipline, has effectively ended the possibility of Turkish incursion outside the areas that Turkey already moved in. It is therefore highly likely that Turkey's incursion will be limited to the area currently under attack.

Russia will now face the difficulty to keep a balance between its client, the Assad Regime and Turkey. Moscow has more sticks and carrots against Turkey. The brief, tense period that followed Turkey shooting down of a Russian jet in 2015 demonstrated Ankara that it didn't have many cards against Moscow. It is highly unlikely for the Turkish military to target Syrian army taking control of Syrian borders, especially when Russia backs them. Sources close to the Turkish military told the author of this paper that there is no appetite among the military leadership to challenge the agreement between the SDF and Assad by directly confronting the Syrian army – especially when it is backed by Russia. Turkey's main opposition party (CHP), argues that Turkey should restore links with the Syrian regime. A Presidential Adviser from Syria told us that there is very little chance for Assad and Erdogan to make up again. She said that "Syrian Turkish relations wouldn't be normalised as long as Erdogan is in power. However, trade relations and security arrangements between the two countries, under Russian guarantee could be established before too long."

Russia has at least three distinct advantages over the US with regard to its mediation efforts. First is that Moscow's leverage on its client, the Syrian government under President Bashar al Assad is much stronger than the US's leverage on Turkey. Moscow also mediates at a time the withdrawal of Russian troops from Syria is not on the table. Thirdly, Kremlin successfully employed Turkish offensive against the Kurdish-led administrations as strong leverage on the SDF leadership.

Turkey and the West in context of US pull out from Syria

Despite the widespread criticism of the Turkish invasion of Syria, by several European leaders, US Senators, policymakers, the media and the celebrities, the reactions yet produced little in the form of severe concrete sanctions. The proposed EU sanctions are tied to Turkey's drilling in Eastern Mediterranean rather than the Syria offensive. The US sanctions fell short of the much talked about crippling sanctions that President Trump mentioned. Democrat Senator Chris Van Hollen, who along with Republican Senator Lindsey Graham, leads the efforts for stricter sanctions against Turkey objected to the limited sanctions announced by Trump. Van Hollen said, "Trump's pathetic "sanctions" were mostly an attempt to derail congressional momentum for much tougher action." Suspension of arms sales to Turkey by several European states, likely to have a minimal effect on Turkey as Ankara produces a significant portion of the weapons themselves thanks to massive investment into Turkish defence industry over the last decade. President Erdogan alluded to the ineffectiveness of the sanctions by saying "We are not worried about any sanctions."

The US pull out removed contradictions between Washington's Syria policy and that of Ankara but showed no sign of bringing Turkey on board with broader US or Western policies. It is unlikely that the US's withdrawal from Syria would encourage Turkey to get on board with broader US, European and NATO policies. There is no indication that even after the US ending its support to the Kurdish-led SDF, Turkey will support the sanctions against Iran, or will stop buying weapons from Russia that are deemed incompatible with NATO defence systems. It is likely that Ankara would continue drilling activities in disputed naval territories to the West of Cyprus. Turkey's drilling activities in the eastern Mediterranean, which is one of the most contentious issues in Turkish-European relations, has a broader support base across the Turkish establishment, including Erdogan's critics.

Addressing the root cause: Turkey's Kurdish Problem

The backbone of the SDF is formed by mainly Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG), which started operating in Northern Syria at least since 2012. The YPG follows the ideology and broader strategy devised by Abdullah Ocalan, the leader of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), which initiated a campaign of armed conflict against the Turkish government in 1984. The two groups maintain close links and Turkey sees the YPG as a strategic threat mostly due to its domestic Kurdish problem.

Instead of trying to address Turkey's Kurdish problem, by utilising its leverage on both Turkey and the broader Kurdish movement that includes the PKK as well as the YPG, the US tried to prove to Turkey that the PKK and the YPG are two separate entities. Washington offered to help Turkey in its fight against the PKK while at the same time militarily supporting the YPG - a strategy ultimately failed. A senior US diplomat looks after the Turkey file told the author of this paper, a few months before the Turkish incursion that the US has no intention to mediate between the PKK and Turkey. The US was well-positioned to facilitate a new round of talks between Turkey's own Kurdish rebels and the Turkish government. It is interesting that the US didn't make use of its leverage on the PKK through its relations to the YPG in Syria to at least bring the armed conflict in Turkey to a halt in order to create a better political environment between Ankara and Washington. Such a move could also have resolved so many strategic problems that the US experiences in its relations with the Turkish government, as well as in the context of Syria and Iraq. Instead, the US has spent over a year trying to find temporary fixes to a much broader problem.

Conclusion

Abandoned by the US abruptly, the Kurds will lose their autonomy and will have to work with Russia and the regime to at least retain their land and to get protection against Turkey. Iran, on the other hand, also has leverage on the broader Kurdish movement, primarily through their influence over Iraq. Ankara will still benefit from the demise of the Kurdish-led decentralisation project in Syria. The Turkish government regarded the international recognition and visibility accorded to the Kurdish-led authorities as much a strategic threat as the military empowerment of the YPG. In the medium run though, the failure of the Kurds in Syria could end up increasing security risks for Turkey as the PKK-linked cadres of the YPG are likely to move to Iraq to focus on direct armed activities against the Turkish government, especially after a full take over of the SDF-controlled region by the Assad government.

The main conclusions that could be drawn are, firstly, that Russia is emerging as a real power broker in the Middle East. For example, a presidential adviser to Assad told the author of this paper: "Syrian-Turkish relations won't be normalised as long as Erdogan is in power. However, trade relations and security arrangements could be established under Russian guarantee before too long." Russian moves in Turkey and Syria are coherent with Moscow's broader strategy in the region. Russia is stitching itself into the fabric of the Middle East with infrastructure projects and reciprocal investments in half a dozen Arab countries. Secondly, the West cannot have both an exit from "forever wars" and the final say in who governs where. What we see now is how, when the US withdraws from overseas commitments, regional powers like Russia and Iran are eager to rush into space. Finally, the US's moving away from military interventionism, and broader disengagement from the Middle East requires more proactive political engagement by Washington. The US (and Europe) should use its position wisely to prevent conflict between the allies and partners.