

Syria - A Confused Trump Strategy Lets Erdogan U-Turn Again

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There are two new developments on the Syrian front. The Islamic State suddenly changed its tactic and the Turkish President Erdogan again changed his policy course.

In the last 24 hours news announcements about victories against the Islamic state (ISIS) rapidly followed each other:

- The Kurdish U.S. proxy forces in east Syria (SDF) announced that it had reached the northern bank of the Euphrates between Raqqa and Deir Ezzor. This cuts the ISIS communication line between the two cities.
- Turkish forces and their “Syrian rebel” mercenaries have been attacking Al-Bab east of Aleppo for nearly four months. They made little progress and incurred huge losses. Late yesterday they suddenly broke into the city and today [took control of it](#). Various sources claim that a deal was made between the Turkish forces and ISIS for the latter to evacuate Al-Bab unharmed and with its personal weapons. It is not yet known what price Turkey paid in that deal.
- South of Al-Bab the Syrian Army is moving further east towards the Euphrates and [took](#) several villages from ISIS. The Syrian move is largely designed to cut the roads between the Turkish forces around Al-Bab and the Islamic State forces in Raqqa. (This now might become a race.)
- Further south another Syrian Army group is moving east towards Palmyra.
- In the eastern city of Deir Ezzor the Syrian army garrison is under siege by Islamic State forces. A few weeks ago the situation there looked very dire. But with reinforcements coming in by helicopter and massive Russian air force interdiction the position held out quite well. In recent days the defenders took several hills from a retreating ISIS.
- In Iraq the army, police and the various government militia are pushing towards south Mosul. Today the airport south of the city fell into their hands with little fighting. Like everywhere else ISIS had stopped its resistance and pulled back. Only a few rearguards offered tepid resistance.

While ISIS was under pressure everywhere the sudden retreat on all fronts during the last 24 hours is astonishing and suggests some synchronicity. A central order must have been given to pull back to the buildup areas of Raqqa in Syria and south Mosul in Iraq.

But ISIS has nowhere to go from those areas. Mosul is completely surrounded and Raqqa is mostly cut off. After the massacres they committed everywhere ISIS fighters can not expect any mercy. They have made enemies everywhere and aside from a few (Saudi) radical clerics no friends are left to help them. The recent retreats are thereby likely not signs of

surrender. ISIS will continue to fight until it is completely destroyed. But for now the ISIS leaders decided to preserve their forces. One wonders what they plan to stage as their last glorious show. A mass atrocity against the civilians in the cities it occupies?

When in late 2016 the defeat of the “Syrian rebels” proxy forces in east-Aleppo city was foreseeable the Turkish President Erdogan switched from supporting the radicals in north-west Syria to a more lenient stand towards Syria and its allies Russia and Iran. The move followed month of on and off prodding from Russia and after several attempts by Erdogan to get more U.S. support had failed. In late December peace talks [started](#) between Syria, Russia, Turkey and Iran with the U.S. and the EU excluded.

But after the Trump administration took over the Turkish position changed again. Erdogan is now [back to betting](#) on a stronger U.S. intervention in Syria that would favor his original plans of installing in Syria an Islamic government under Turkish control:

Ankara understands today that Trump is aggressive toward Iran and gave his blessing to Saudi Arabia. Therefore Erdogan is taking a new position: hiding behind Saudi Arabia, mimicking the US hostility towards Iran and, in consequences, declaring himself once more against the Syrian President Bashar Assad.

The new Turkish position was [confirmed](#) by Senator John McCain’s visit to the Kurdish YPG and U.S. Special Forces in Kobani. McCain came via Turkey. An earlier visits to the YPK by U.S. special envoy Brett McGurk had been condemned by Ankara. Outside of a wider agreement such McCain’s antics would not be allowed.

The U.S. is allied with the Kurdish YPK in Syria who are blood-brothers of the Kurdish PKK group in Turkey which the Turkish government has been fighting for decades. The YPG fighters are good and reliable light infantry fighters. They work together with U.S. special forces and are well regarded.

Turkey offers to send its own ground troops [together with Saudi forces](#) to liberate Raqqa from ISIS. <snark>The expertise the Saudi military shows in Yemen combined with the Turkish military prowess in its “Euphrates Shield” operation in Syria will surely will be welcome by the U.S. military. </snark>

But there are bigger strategic issues at stake and some agreement between the U.S., Turkey and the Saudis [has been found](#) (adopted machine translation):

[T]he sudden transformation of the Turkish position occurred after a lengthy conversation conducted with the US president, Donald Trump, and the visit by the head of the U.S. intelligence agency (CIA). A re-shuffling of the cards took place which induced another turn in Ankara on the Syrian file.

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The new U.S.-Turkish understandings that fixed the bridge between President Erdogan and the old U.S. ally is based on the escalation of hostility to Iran and the (re-)establishment of a “Sunni axis” led by the Turkish president. It includes the establishment of a buffer zone in Syria as a prelude to a partitioning [of Syria] scenario.

This is essentially a fall back to the positions taken by the Obama administration in 2011/12.

The lessons learned since will have to be relearned. The signals from the U.S. military now suggest the introduction of additional regular ground troops in support of a U.S. proxy force and an eventual U.S. protected enclave in east-Syria. The YPK is the only reliable proxy force available to the U.S. and it needs heavier weapon support to take on Raqqa. But U.S. boots on ground in the Middle East have never been a solution. They are a guarantee of extended fighting and eventual failure.

The strategic view is contradictory. The U.S. wants to fight the Sunni radical forces that Saudi Arabia grows and pampers. Even while ISIS gets diminished new such forces are already growing in Iraq. Any anti-radical strategy that builds on cooperation with the Saudis will fail.

It is impossible to get Turkey and the YPK/PKK to fight on one side – McCain visit or not. The U.S. would lose its only reliable proxy force in Syria should it make common cause with Erdogan in the fight about Raqqa. Any anti-Kurdish Turkish-U.S. controlled “safe zone” in north Syria will come under fire from all other sides on the ground. Any U.S. base in Syria will be the target of various regular and irregular forces. In the long term the new plans are doomed and Erdogan’s latest u-turn is unlikely to be rewarded.

But until then we can expect more bloodshed and more fighting in Syria. As Eljah Magnier [comments](#):

The US policy in Syria seems frantic and far-fetched without efficient powerful allies on the ground, and is unable to retake cities from ISIS with its Kurdish proxies alone. And the “honeymoon” between Washington and Riyadh will certainly have a substantial negative effect on the war in Syria. This will increase the closeness between Russia and Iran, but the tension between US and Russia is also expected to increase: one side (the US) wants partition and the other (Russia) wants a unified Syria without al-Qaida and ISIS, and without Turkey occupying the north of Syria and a Saudi Arabia return to the Bilad al-Sham. At this stage, it is difficult to speculate on what this clash of incompatible objectives will produce on the ground in Syria.

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