

Trump's Plan B for Syria: Occupation and Intimidation

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*On January 17, **Secretary of State Rex Tillerson** announced the creation of a de facto autonomous Kurdish state in east Syria that will be supported by the United States and defended by a US-backed "proxy" army of occupation. Tillerson's announcement was made at a confab he attended at Stanford University at the Hoover Institute. According to The Hill:*

Secretary of State Rex Tillerson on Wednesday outlined a new U.S. strategy in Syria, hinging on maintaining an indefinite military presence in the country with the goal of ousting the government of Syrian President Bashar Assad and keeping militant groups at bay.

Speaking at the Hoover Institution at Stanford University, Tillerson sought to make the case for an extended U.S. military role, backed by a United Nations-brokered political solution, in the war-torn country.

A U.S. withdrawal, he said, would likely have disastrous consequences.

"Total withdrawal would restore Assad and continue brutal treatment of his own people," Tillerson said. (Tillerson outlines plan for long-term US military role in Syria", The Hill)

Tillerson's comments underscore the fact that recent setbacks in the 7-year-long conflict, have not dampened Washington's determination to topple the elected government of Syria and to impose its own political vision on the country. They also confirm that the United States intends to occupy parts of Syria for the foreseeable future. As the article clearly states:

The secretary's remarks on Wednesday signaled his most explicit endorsement yet for long-term U.S. military presence in the country. (The Hill)

On Thursday, Tillerson backtracked from his earlier statement saying his comments had been "misportrayed".

"That entire situation has been misportrayed, misdescribed, (and) some people misspoke. We are not creating a border security force at all," (Tillerson said)

Regrettably, the media did not "misportray" Washington's intentions or policy. In fact, the details have been circulating since last weekend when an article appeared in The Defense

Post announcing the creation of 30,000 man border security force. Here's an excerpt from the article:

The U.S.-led Coalition against Islamic State is currently training a force to maintain security along the Syrian border as the operation against ISIS shifts focus. The 30,000-strong force will be partly composed of veteran fighters and operate under the leadership of the Syrian Democratic Forces, CJTF-OIR told The Defense Post.

"The Coalition is working jointly with the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) to establish and train the new Syrian Border Security Force (BSF). Currently, there are approximately 230 individuals training in the BSF's inaugural class, with the goal of a final force size of approximately 30,000,"Public Affairs Officer Colonel Thomas F. Veale said....

"The BSF will be stationed along the Euphrates River Valley - marking the western edge of the territory within Syria currently controlled by SDF - and the Iraqi and Turkish borders," he said. (The Defense Post)

As we have noted before, Washington is determined to throw up an iron curtain along the Euphrates consistent with its plan to split Syria into smaller parts, support the central government's enemies, and create a safe haven for launching attacks on the government in Damascus. Seen in this light, the 30,000-man "border security force" is not a border security force at all, but a slick Madison Avenue-type sobriquet for Washington's proxy army of occupation. The fact that "The Coalition told The Defense Post that 'north army' was not a recognized term in Syria," indicates the importance Washington places on its particular "product branding". The "border security force" (BSF) moniker helps to conceal the fact that Washington has armed and trained a mainly-Kurdish proxy-army to pursue Washington's strategic objectives in Syria which include toppling the government of Bashar al Assad, splintering the country into smaller tribal-run territories, and installing a compliant stooge in the Capitol who will follow Washington's diktats.

In order to achieve those goals, Washington has had to make critical concessions to its Kurdish allies in the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which is 'an alliance of militias in northern and eastern Syria dominated by the Kurdish YPG.' The Kurds expect the US to honor its demands for a Kurdish homeland, an autonomous statelet carved out of Syria's northeast quadrant, the portion of territory east of the Euphrates captured during the fight against ISIS. Tillerson's announcement confirmed that the US will support the defense of this territory by its Kurdish proxies inferring that the Trump administration has thrown its weight behind the unilateral creation of a Kurdish state in east Syria. (Publicly, the US opposes the creation of Kurdistan, but its actions on the ground, indicate its support.) Naturally, this has not gone over well with the other countries in the region that have struggled to contain Kurdish aspirations for a homeland. The leaders of Syria, Iran, Iraq and Turkey all oppose the emergence of a Kurdistan, although Turkey's president Erdogan has been the most outspoken by far. According to the Turkish daily Hurriyet:

President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan threatened to thwart the creation of a U.S.-backed 30,000-strong border security force manned mostly by the People's Protection Units (YPG) in northern Syria. Turkey's armed forces completed preparations for an operation against the YPG in their strongholds Afrin, in northwestern Syria, and Manbij, in northern Syria, Erdoğan said on Jan. 15 at an opening ceremony in Ankara.

“The operation may start any time. Operations into other regions will come after,” the president said, noting that the Turkish army was already hitting YPG positions.

“America has acknowledged it is in the process of creating a terror army on our border. What we have to do is nip this terror army in the bud,” Erdoğan said....“We won’t be responsible for the consequences.” (The Hurriyet)

It’s worth noting that the US never consulted its NATO ally, Turkey, before initiating its current plan. This suggests that the foreign policy wonks who concocted this misguided scheme must have thought that Erdogan and his fellows would be duped by the paper-thin public relations smokescreen of “border security”. Washington’s reliance on Information Operations and propaganda may have clouded its judgement and impaired its ability to understand how their public relations scam could blow up in their faces. (which it did.)

Despite the foofaraw, there’s nothing new about Washington’s determination to establish a permanent military presence in Syria, in fact, that has been the plan from Day 1. The basic US strategy in Syria has been modified many times in the last few years, particularly after Syrian forces liberated Syria’s industrial hub, Aleppo, which was the turning point in the conflict. Since then, news has circulated about a Plan B, which accepts the reality that Assad will remain in power after the war has ended, but redirects US efforts towards more achievable goals like seizing the vast expanse of land east of the Euphrates which can be used for future regime-destabilizing operations.

The basic outline for Plan B was presented in a Brookings Institute report by chief military analyst, Michael O’ Hanlon. Here’s a clip from his 2014 article titled “Deconstructing Syria: A new strategy for America’s most hopeless war”:

...the only realistic path forward may be a plan that in effect deconstructs Syria....the international community should work to create pockets with more viable security and governance within Syria over time... Creation of these sanctuaries would produce autonomous zones that would never again have to face the prospect of rule by either Assad or ISIL....

(“Deconstructing Syria: A new strategy for America’s most hopeless war“, Michael E. O’Hanlon, Brookings Institute)

The occupation of east Syria by Kurdish proxies is consistent with O’ Hanlon’s basic plan to fragment the country and create pockets of resistance that will be supported by the US. It is a variation of the divide and conquer theme the US has used in numerous times in the past.

Plan B is Washington’s fallback position now that regime change is no longer within reach. The strategy suggests that Washington never planned to leave after ISIS was defeated, but always intended to stay on to establish bases in the east, (According to Bloomberg News, the US now has 10 permanent bases east of the Euphrates) support an army of occupation, and continue the war against the current government. That’s still the plan today, notwithstanding Washington’s failed attempt to conceal its motives behind its pathetic “border security force”. Erdoğan and the rest have already seen through that sham and expressed their unhappiness.

The problem with Plan B is that it presumes that Russia and its coalition partners will try to liberate Kurdish-held east Syria and, thus, get bogged down in a bloody and protracted

conflict that turns out to be a strategic nightmare as well as a public relations disaster. This is the scenario that Washington is hoping for. In fact,

Trump's chief national security advisor Lieutenant General H.R McMaster has written extensively on the topic and explained exactly how to undermine the efforts of an advancing army. Here's an excerpt from a presentation McMaster gave at the Center for Strategic and International Studies on May 4, 2016. He said:

“...what is required to deter a strong nation that is waging limited war for limited objectives on battlegrounds involving weaker states ... is forward deterrence, to be able to ratchet up the cost at the frontier, and to take an approach to deterrence that is consistent with deterrence by denial, convincing your enemy that your enemy is unable to accomplish his objectives at a reasonable cost rather than sort of an offshore balancing approach and the threat of punitive action at long distance later, which we know obviously from - recent experience confirms that that is inadequate.”

“Forward deterrence”? This needs to be clarified.

What McMaster is saying, is that, instead of threatening to retaliate at some time in the future, the US should use ‘deterrence by denial’, that is, make it as hard and as costly as possible for Russia to achieve its strategic objectives. (McMaster's comments focus on Russia's involvement in Syria.) By supporting its Kurdish fighters and establishing permanent US bases, McMaster thinks the US can frustrate Russia's effort to restore Syria's borders which is one of the primary goals of the mission. The objective of forward deterrence is not to win the war, but to prevent the enemy from winning. The downside to this theory is that- when neither side prevails- there is no political settlement, no end to the fighting, and no path for returning people to their homes so they can resume their lives in peace and security. It is, in fact, a plan designed to perpetuate the suffering, perpetuate the destruction and perpetuate the bloodletting. It's a solution that provides no solution, a war without end.

More importantly, “Forward deterrence” is a military strategy that ignores the broader political situation which has been adversely impacted by Washington's ‘border security forces’ announcement. Now the cards are on the table and all the main players can see what the US really has up its sleeve. Leaders in Syria, Iraq, Iran and particularly Turkey can see that Washington is not an honest broker, but a crafty and cold-blooded opportunist willing to throw even its allies under the bus to achieve its own narrow geopolitical objectives.

As a result, Erdogan has moved closer to Russia which has sent up red flags in Washington as one would expect. After all- in the broader scheme of things- Turkey is more important to the US than Ukraine. It is the essential landbridge and energy hub that is destined to bind Europe and Asia together into the world's biggest free trade zone. If Turkey breaks out of Washington's orbit and moves into Moscow's camp, Washington's plan to ‘pivot to Asia’ will collapse in a heap.

So while McMaster might think that forward deterrence will prevent Russia from achieving its objectives, it's clear that the policy is already working in Putin's favor. Every miscue that Washington makes only adds to Putin's credibility and reputation as a reliable partner. Simply put: The Russian president is gradually replacing Washington as the guarantor of

regional security. This is a tectonic development and one that US powerbrokers will definitely regret in the future.

A 'changing of the guard' is underway in the energy-rich Middle East, and Washington is the odd-man-out.

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