

The fate of North and East Syria after US withdrawal

by Bazo Bekes - 18/01/2019 20:41



On December 19th, 2018, the world learned about Donald Trump's hasty decision to rapidly withdraw all U.S. military personnel from Northern Syria/Rojava— much to the [surprise](#) of his own military advisors, including [Secretary of Defence James Mattis](#), as well as regional and global allies and foes. The 2,000 US troops stationed in the region had been providing military support to the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), an alliance of Kurds, Arabs, Turkmen, Syrians and other local forces, to fight against ISIS on the ground. The SDF have been able to liberate, and defend, regions in Northern and Eastern Syria from ISIS and other terrorist organisations— in fact, they liberated more territory from ISIS than any other actor in the conflict. After years of war that resulted in over 8,000 casualties, the SDF recently liberated ISIS' last major stronghold of Hajin, east of the Euphrates River. While ISIS has been vastly weakened, [experts](#), [US officials](#), and military [commanders](#) have stated that the terrorist group has not yet entirely been defeated— and that the fight must continue to prevent its re-emergence.

On December 31st, Trump announced his decision to extend the period for the US troops' withdrawal to "several months". According to some reports, this decision was influenced by the Turkish president, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, who was taken by surprise when Trump suddenly declared his intention to rapidly withdraw. Erdogan had been threatening to invade Northern Syria for several weeks, in a plan similar to Turkey's Operation Olive Branch, which devastated Afrin in early 2018. However, Trump's unexpected decision seems to have forced him to materialize those threats. Subsequently, Erdogan informed Trump that his army was not ready for such a task. He must have requested that Trump slow down the withdrawal, and give him more time to prepare for yet another aggressive cross-border invasion to undermine both Kurdish territorial gains and the fight against ISIS.

Erdogan's "safe zone": another Afrin?

For the Kurdish, Arab, Syriac, Turkmen and Circassian communities that have built the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria and fought ISIS on the ground, another invasion by Turkish forces and auxiliary Turkish-backed Free Syrian Army (T-FSA) militias would be disastrous. Afrin, one of the only enclaves in the country that was spared from violence, provides a clear example. Afrin was a primarily Kurdish region in northwestern Syria. Most of its residents were Muslim, with sizable minorities who practiced the Alevi and Yezidi faiths. Religious freedom, women's rights, and the right to democratic political participation were guaranteed for all. Before the Turkish war of aggression, the region hosted thousands of IDPs from places like Aleppo. During Operation Olive Branch, hundreds of civilians were killed by Turkish airstrikes, while more than 150,000 Kurdish civilians were displaced. These people still remain in the region of Shehba, where there is little to no access to international humanitarian aid.

As the T-FSA was looting and stealing the property of Afrin's residents the Turkish state began to implement illegal policies of demographic change, forcing Kurds out of Afrin and replacing them with Arabs in systematic acts of ethnic cleansing against the native Kurdish population. Among their other war crimes were the destruction of ancient sites, the replacement of Kurdish names of streets, schools, official buildings, and villages with mainly Turkish names, and the prohibition of Kurdish education in schools. Women's rights activists have reported a huge increase of systematic sexual violence against women. In August 2018, Amnesty International accused Turkey of turning a "blind eye" to serious violations by its allied groups in Afrin, such as the kidnapping of Kurdish civilians for ransom by T-FSA militias. There have been multiple reports of Turkish forces operating human trafficking rings, whilst Yezidi Kurds have been faced with forced conversions. The Turkish army and T-FSA have

seized and destroyed olive harvests and trees from local families and stolen hundreds of tons of olives— a crime that [Turkey's Minister of Agriculture](#) confessed to in November 2018. These products have reportedly been [exported by Turkey and sold to the EU](#) countries. Since the majority of civilian casualties in Afrin were a result of Turkish aerial attacks, the people in Northern Syria, including religious minorities like Christians, have been calling for a no-fly zone to spare them from the same fate.

At the moment, a [Turkish military build-up](#) on the border is happening, and [auxiliary FSA units](#) (made up of ex-ISIS and Al-Qaeda members) are amassing near Kurdish towns in Northern Syria. Erdogan is aware that the fighters east of the Euphrates are better situated than the forces he faced in Afrin, since Afrin was geographically separated from the rest of the SDF-held areas in Northern and Eastern Syria and logistical circumstances limited the Kurdish defence at the time. Because of this, Turkey has now requested major [U.S. military support including airstrikes, transport and logistics](#) for its planned offensive against North Syria.

Turkey, Russia, and Idlib

Russia has stated that they will [coordinate](#) with Turkey after the withdrawal of US troops. The Kurds have little reason to trust the rival of the US, however— especially given that Russia coordinated with Turkey and allowed the [Afrin invasion](#) to go ahead. This leads one to speculate whether there is an agreement between Russia and Turkey that trades Northeast Syria for Idlib. Idlib [houses](#) most of the terrorist factions in Syria, and is currently protected by the Turkish state in coordination with Russia.

In recent weeks, however, [infighting](#) has re-erupted between the different extremist factions inside Idlib, mainly between the al Qaeda-affiliated [Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham \(HTS\)](#) and the [National Liberation Front \(NLF\)](#), supported by the T-FSA. This can be interpreted as an attempt by each group to consolidate power inside Idlib in preparation for an assault by Syrian and Russian forces. Subsequently, we may witness some, if not all, of these groups being recruited by the Turkish state and integrated into the T-FSA.

It is worth noting that NLF is a coalition of several terrorist organisations, including the infamous Nour al-Din al-Zenki Movement, which are [supported by the Turkish state](#). Turkey has demonstrated in the past its ability to integrate many of these terrorist groups, [including](#) former members of al-Qaeda and ISIS, under its command— as was done in Jarabulus and Al-Bab . It later used these same groups [to invade Afrin](#). These same groups are now retrained and armed by the Turkish state with one clear objective: to fight the Kurds alongside the Turkish Army. The

HTS military chief recently stated his [support](#) for the planned Turkish offensive against the Kurds and Northern Syria. One could argue that Al-Qaeda and IS elements have become part of NATO through their de facto alliance with Turkey.

International Solutions

As this has gone on, the United States has sought to prevent Northeast Syria from negotiating with Assad to protect Syrian sovereignty against a possible Turkish incursion and slaughter of civilians. US president Trump has demonstrated that he is not a reliable ally, [a sentiment shared by French president Emmanuel Macron](#). His announcement to withdraw his forces from Northern Syria at a time when the Turkish state is threatening with a comprehensive military assault, and proposing a Turkish occupied 20 mile deep [“safe zone”](#) on the border of Turkey inside of Northern Syria, has been interpreted as leaving the Kurds vulnerable to mass slaughter. A Turkish-controlled [“safe-zone”](#) was subsequently [rejected by senior political leader Aldar Khalil](#), who stated that the deployment of UN forces could be an acceptable alternative.

Turkey’s aggressive stance vis-à-vis the majority-Kurdish areas of Syria derives from its nationalist ideology that is hostile to all Kurdish self-determination and culture, as evidenced by its decades-old war within its own borders. In addition, the political system governing Northern Syria— which is based on grassroots direct democracy, ethnic and religious co-existence, and women’s liberation— follows the philosophy of jailed left-wing Kurdish leader Abdullah Öcalan. [For years, the Turkish state has been accused of directing ISIS](#) to attack the Kurds. This led senior figures of the Obama administration such as [Joe Biden to imply Turkish complicity in the rise of ISIS](#). Recently, [US officials](#) have emphasised [Turkey’s tendency to see the Kurdish people as a greater evil than ISIS](#). Due to Turkish pressure, the Kurds, who make up a significant portion of Syrian society, have been systematically excluded from international efforts to resolve the crisis, such as the UN-led Geneva conferences, even at times when the SDF held nearly one-third of Syrian territory.

One option to prevent yet another catastrophic humanitarian crisis in the region could be a safe zone headed by European powers, mainly France, to fill the void left by the US and guarantee the safety and rights of the Kurds and other minorities from any Turkish threats. Indeed, the French president [Emmanuel Macron criticised Trump’s abrupt withdrawal](#), and [vowed to support the Kurds](#) in Northern Syria. There are also Kurdish-friendly Arab coalitions, who could support the Kurds, perhaps alongside French troops, to counter the Turkish threat. However, if this promise of support does not swiftly materialise, the Kurds will be forced to negotiate with Assad in exchange for greater Kurdish rights and a semi-autonomous region in Northern Syria. However,

this may not serve Russian interests, as Russia seeks to appease Turkey for geopolitical and economical gains, as well as its attempts to compromise NATO. Russia wants to ensure the safety and maintenance of its only naval base in the Middle East, in Tartus, to ensure its influence in the region. Furthermore, Russia certainly has not forgotten the downing of its fighter jets by the Turkish state in 2015, nor the assassination of its ambassador Karlov by a Turkish police officer in Ankara in 2016.

Additionally, similarly to Turkey, Iran may also oppose any Kurdish autonomy in Northern Syria in fear of its Kurdish population inside of Iran and their centuries-old struggle for self-determination. Iran asserts tremendous influence in Iraq's domestic affairs thanks to the Shiite-led government and the establishment of the Popular Mobilisation Units (PMU) militia to fight ISIS. It has established a land route to cross into Syria through Iraq, and now wants to ensure an uninterrupted route to reach Lebanon through Iraq and Syria to directly arm and train the Hezbollah militia and build military bases inside of Syria to continue its fight against its long-time foe, Israel.

It is evident that further military operations will not result in an end to this already 8-year-old catastrophic war. For the sake of peace and stability, a UN-led political solution should be encouraged— and must include the leaders of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria.