

How Will the U.S. Withdrawal from Syria Change Dynamics of the Conflict?

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- How will the U.S. withdrawal reshape the inter- and intra-group dynamics in Syria?
- How will the withdrawal influence Turkey's planned operation east of the Euphrates?
 - How will this decision affect U.S.-Turkey relations?

THE STATEMENT

On December 19, 2018, U.S. officials stated that the Pentagon has an order to move troops out of Syria as quickly as possible, and began to inform partners in northeastern Syria of their plans to begin an immediate pullback of American forces from the region where they have been trying to wrap up the campaign against the Daesh. Shortly after the *Washington Journal* report, President Trump wrote on Twitter, "We have defeated ISIS in Syria, my only reason for being there during the Trump Presidency."¹ In a statement, White House Press Secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders confirmed, "We have started returning United States troops home as we transition to the next phase of this campaign." She pointed out that "[t]hese victories over ISIS in Syria do

not signal the end of the Global Coalition or its campaign."² Additionally, U.S. officials told Reuters that all U.S. State Department personnel are being evacuated from Syria within 24 hours and U.S. troops will pull out of Syria in a time frame of between 60 to 100 days.³ This development came after Turkey's military decisiveness to clear its border of the terrorist threat, Turkey's airstrikes against PKK positions on the Sinjar and Karajak Mountains in Iraq, and the phone call between President Erdogan and Trump. The decision by Trump will be a turning point in the Syrian conflict, but how this development will reshape Turkish-Ameri-

1 Dion Nissenbaum, Nancy A. Youssef and Vivian Salama, "In Shift, Trump Orders U.S. Troops out of Syria", *The Wall Street Journal*, December 19, 2018, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-military-preparing-for-a-full-withdrawal-of-its-forces-from-northeastern-syria-11545225641>

2 Kevin Breuninger, "White House Says the US Is Pulling Its Troops from Syria After Trump Declares Victory over ISIS", CNBC, December 19, 2018, <https://www.cnbc.com/2018/12/19/us-wants-to-pull-troops-from-syria-as-trump-declares-victory-over-isis.html>

3 "U.S. State Department Personnel Being Evacuated from Syria - U.S. Official", Reuters, December 19, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-trump-syria-evacuation/us-state-department-personnel-being-evacuated-from-syria-us-official-idUSKBN1OI1Z3>

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can bilateral relations over Syria remains unclear. More importantly, the questions of how Turkey's planned operation in northeast Syria will be influenced, and how the Astana process and the Sochi agreement for Idlib will be affected by this development also remain open. Lastly, the repercussions of the decision on the nature of the Syrian Democratic Forces and the National Army, and its effect on the YPG/PKK relationship with the Assad regime will be effective.

THE TIMING OF THE STATEMENT

The statement becomes more important in light of its timing: in April 2018, President Trump told his National Security Staff to finish their mission against DAESH in Syria within six months,⁴ while the White House's recent move follows a phone call on December 14 between Donald Trump and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan⁵ after the Turkish President's declaration regarding an imminent military operation against the YPG/PKK terrorists east of the Euphrates in Syria. "Everything that has followed is implementing the agreement that was made in that call," a U.S. official said.⁶ Turkey has opposed and criticized the U.S. support of the YPG under the banner of the Syrian Democratic Forces. U.S. officials argued that their co-operation with the YPG-led Syrian Democratic Forces in the fight against DAESH is tactical; however, the partnership led to great concerns for Turkey's security as Turkey opposes a terrorist-corridor along its 900 km long southern border with Syria. In this regard, President Erdogan officially proclaimed a military operation against the YPG/PKK threat in Syria, underlining

⁴ Elise Labott and Kevin Liptak, "Trump Gets Testy as National Security Team Warns of Risks of Syria Withdrawal", CNN, April 5, 2018, <https://edition.cnn.com/2018/04/04/politics/donald-trump-syria-troops/index.html>

⁵ "Erdoğan, Trump Agree to Better Coordination in Syria in Phone Call", *Daily Sabah*, December 14, 2018, <https://www.dailysabah.com/diplomacy/2018/12/14/erdogan-trump-agree-to-better-coordination-in-syria-in-phone-call>

⁶ "BREAKING — Washington's Decision to Pull Troops out of Syria Came After Trump-Erdogan Call; "Everything That Has Followed Is Implementing the Agreement That Was Made in That Call," US Official Says", *Daily Sabah*, December 19, 2018, <https://twitter.com/DailySabah/status/1075428805211230209>

that U.S. force would not be targeted or harmed.⁷ On December 17, James Jeffrey, the U.S. special envoy for Syria, stated: "We don't have permanent relations with sub-state entities."⁸

With President Erdogan's declaration, the Turkish-trained National Army, a centralized body of the armed Syrian opposition which is linked to the Syrian Interim Government and which fought with the Turkish Armed Forces against the YPG/PKK in Operation Olive Branch, declared its readiness to combat the YPG/PKK east of the Euphrates with 15,000 fighters.⁹ Before the official declaration by the Turkish President, the National Army started to prepare itself for the planned operation east of the Euphrates.¹⁰ On December 15, the United States threatened the political and armed Syrian Opposition against participating in any operation east of the Euphrates by saying that the U.S. might target them if they pose a threat to U.S. soldiers deployed in the region.¹¹ However, this threat backfired as the National Army¹² and the Turkish-backed National Front for Liberation,¹³

⁷ "Erdogan Says Turkey Will Start New Military Operation against US-Backed Kurdish Fighters in Syria within Days", *The Telegraph*, 12 December 2018, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2018/12/12/erdogan-says-turkey-will-start-new-military-operation-against/>

⁸ Ahmet Salih Alacaci, "America's Support for SDF Not Long-Term: US Syria Envoy", *Anadolu Agency*, December 18, 2018, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/americas/americas-support-for-sdf-not-long-term-us-syria-envoy/1341718>

⁹ Sarah Dadouch, "Up to 15,000 Syrian Rebels Ready to Back Turkish Operation in Northeast", *Reuters*, December 13, 2018, <https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-mideast-crisis-syria/up-to-15000-syrian-rebels-ready-to-back-turkish-operation-in-northeast-idUKKBN1OC1IR>

¹⁰ "The Syrian National Army Opens Camps to Equip Its Fighters for the Battle of East Euphrates", *Nedaa Syria*, December 9, 2018, <http://nedaa-sy.com/en/news/10260>; Ömer Özkipçik, I was told that Turkish-backed National Army started preparing for the war east of the Euphrates. According to my source, a special formation called '20th Brigade' was formed to be trained and equipped to fight against #YPG. Formation is claimed to consist of 2000 special units", Twitter, December 8, 2018, <https://twitter.com/OmerOzkizilcik/status/1071471638796005377>

¹¹ Adham Kako and Levent Tok, "Don't Back Turkish Operation, US Threatens Syria Group", *Anadolu Agency*, December 15, 2018, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/dont-back-turkish-operation-us-threatens-syria-group/1340031>

¹² "بيان || صادر عن هيئة الأركان العامة في الجيش الوطني", National Army, December 16, 2018, <https://twitter.com/Syrnal1/status/1074255712019251200>

¹³ "الجيش السوري الحر #الجبهة الوطنية للتحرير بيان#", National Front for Liberation, December 17, 2018, <https://twitter.com/alwataniaTahrer/status/1074653092942090241>

which is based in Idlib, declared their support for the planned operation.

On December 17, an attempt was made by U.S. officials to position the Syrian Peshmerga from northern Iraq at the Turkish-Syrian border to prevent a Turkish military operation against the YPG/PKK. As James Jeffrey confirmed,¹⁴ 100 Syrian Peshmerga went into Syria. The first 100 Syrian Peshmerga forces negotiated with YPG representatives in the town of Derik, but after the YPG's clear rejection, the Syrian Peshmerga returned to northern Iraq.¹⁵

Although there is no direct link in terms of timing, on the same day as the declaration to pull U.S. troops out of Syria, the U.S. State Department cleared Turkey to purchase a package of Patriot systems with an estimated price tag of \$3.5 billion. According to the announcement, the purchase would cover the procurement of 80 Patriot MIM-104E Guidance Enhanced and 60 PAC-3 Missile Segment Enhancement missiles. In addition to the missiles, the package also includes four AN/MPQ-65 Radar Sets, four Engagement Control Stations, ten Antenna Mast Groups, twenty M903 Launching Stations, and five Electrical Power Plant III systems.¹⁶ The announcement of the Patriot purchase package by the U.S. State Department may indicate U.S. intentions to increase cooperation with Turkey.

Looking at the statement's timing, it seems like Turkey's decisiveness urged the U.S. administration to act in Syria. It appears that attempts by certain U.S. officials to find a solution or to prevent the operation failed, and, as a result, the Trump administration made a game-changing decision.

¹⁴ Jasper Mortimer, "US Official Speaks out against Possible Turkish Offensive in Syria", *Al Monitor*, December 18, 2018, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2018/12/us-syria-turkey-kurds-rojava-peshmerga-erdogan-jeffrey-ypg.html>

¹⁵ Zana Amed, "Convoy of Roj Peshmerge left Dêrik and returned to #KRG after being denied entry into western #Kurdistan by #Rojava authorities. There's no Peshmerge in Rojava currently", Twitter, December 18 https://twitter.com/zana_med/status/1075098740942356480

¹⁶ Aaron Mehta, "Turkey Cleared by US for \$3.5 Billion Patriot Missile Deal, Despite S-400 Row", *Defense News*, December 19, 2018, <https://www.defensenews.com/global/europe/2018/12/19/turkey-cleared-by-us-for-35-billion-patriot-missile-deal-despite-s-400-row/>

IMPLICATIONS

If it really goes through, the U.S. withdrawal will affect Syria and the dynamics of the conflict in a way which may be described as a turning point in the conflict. While Turkish President Erdogan made clear that Turkey has no problem with the American presence in Syria - as opposed to the presence of the YPG/PKK and the support given to them –, the main issue of the Russian, Iranian, and Assad regimes has been the U.S. presence in Syria and not the presence of the YPG/PKK. In this regard, a full withdrawal of the United States from Syria might create new dynamics among the countries involved in the Syrian conflict such as a quick rapprochement between the Assad regime and the YPG/PKK. However, Trump's decisiveness is one of the criteria that will affect the implementation process of the withdrawal decision. In fact several follow-up tweets by President Trump are strong indicators of his decisiveness. U.S. Senator Lindsey Graham¹⁷ and the U.S. media put forth harsh criticism against the White House. Furthermore, a U.S. official stated that the U.S. will also end airstrikes against DAESH in Syria.¹⁸ This may be indicative of the seriousness of Trump's radical decision.

Firstly, this decision will reshape intra- and inter-group dynamics of local forces in Syria. The U.S. withdrawal will open the way for the Syrian opposition and Turkey to launch a military operation against the YPG/PKK. During such an operation, the demography and geography of the region will be against the latter. The YPG/PKK will find itself without the political and military protection of a state power. This, in turn, might lead to the repositioning of Arabs in the ranks of the Syrian Democratic Forces, as it seems unlikely that the SDF alliances will remain after the U.S.

¹⁷ Kate Sullivan, "Graham: Trump's Syria Withdrawal a 'Stain on the Honor of the United States'", CNN, December 20, 2018, <https://edition.cnn.com/2018/12/19/politics/lindsey-graham-trump-syria-withdrawal-stain-honor/index.html>

¹⁸ Phil Steward, Ellen Francis, "US Will Also End Airstrikes against Daesh in Syria: Officials", *Reuters*, December 20, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-usa/u-s-to-end-air-war-against-islamic-state-in-syria-idUSKCN1OJ1F5>

withdrawal. Especially the tribes in Manbij¹⁹ and the Arab tribes in Raqqa²⁰ have declared their disappointment with the YPG/PKK before, and with the withdrawal of the U.S., it can be expected that tribes in northeast Syria might rise up against the YPG/PKK. The non-YPG elements of the Syrian Democratic Forces might seek to be integrated into the National Army which is linked to the Syrian Interim Government. Also the role of the Syrian Peshmerga might be reshaped as their main reason for not entering the Kurdish areas in Syria will diminish with the elimination of the YPG/PKK. The political wing of the Syrian Peshmerga, the Syrian Kurdish Council, is part of the Syrian opposition which may help the faction to facilitate an agreement with the armed opposition.

Another internal dynamic among the local actors in Syria might be a YPG-Assad rapprochement against Turkey and the Syrian opposition. Previous negotiations between the two sides included demands by the YPG for autonomy,²¹ and failed as the Assad regime rejected any kind of local governance. On December 18, 2018, Walid Muallim, the regime's foreign minister, declared that they believe deeply in Arabism and will not accept any talk of independent or federal entities.²² The remark indicates that the Assad regime will make further demands of the YPG in the recommenced negotiations, as the regime refused

to accept the YPG/PKK demands even when they enjoyed the protection of the U.S. in Syria. Some claims suggest that the regime demanded the full handover of all oil fields in exchange for the deployment of regime forces on the Syrian-Turkish border.²³ It remains to be seen whether the two sides reach an agreement, but, even if they do, the role of Russia and Iran may be crucial. On December 20, Turkish President Erdogan and his Iranian counterpart met each other in Ankara. The Iranian President stated that they will work closer to end the fighting in Syria.²⁴ It also remains to be seen how Russia would react to a quick rapprochement between its ally in Syria and the U.S. partners of the YPG/PKK.

Secondly, the weapon supplies to the YPG/PKK remains a main source of concern for Turkey and the region. The United States officially supplied the YPG through the 'Overseas Contingency Operations (OCO) Counter-Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) Train and Equip Fund (CTEF)' program.²⁵ Meanwhile, militants also gathered weapons from Syria's black market, as spoils, and from other sources. Weapon systems in the hands of the YPG will become uncontrolled with the withdrawal of U.S. troops. Therefore, the U.S. needs to provide a plan for the collection of such weapons. The YPG may not only use its weapons against Turkey inside Syria, but also inside Turkish territories as the YPG has smuggled weapons from Syria into Turkey before.²⁶ Also the danger of U.S.-supplied weapons be-

19 Ömer Özkitilcik, #Arap tribes of #Manbij have coordinated and discussed their stance towards #YPG militants and their view regarding #Turkey. Now, tribes of Manbij have published statement calling for a Turkish intervention in Manbij to get liberated from the YPG oppression:”, Twitter, November 26, 2018, <https://twitter.com/OmerOzkizilcik/status/1067105901507739648>

20 Ömer Özkitilcik, Arab tribes leaders at the funeral of assassinated Sheikh Bashir Faisal al-Huwaidi in Raqqa protested against YPG/SDF oppression & labelled all who cooperate with SDF/YPG as traitors. Also a team of SDF representatives who wanted to attend were kicked out of the ceremony.” Twitter, November 3, 2018, <https://twitter.com/OmerOzkizilcik/status/1058715894036250624>

21 “US-backed YPG, Assad Regime Agree on Decentralized Syria, Transferring Key Cities”, *Daily Sabah*, July 19, 2018, <https://www.dailysabah.com/war-on-terror/2018/07/30/us-backed-ypg-assad-regime-agree-on-decentralized-syria-transferring-key-cities>

22 “Muallem: Syria Will Not Accept Independent or Federal Entities”, *The Syrian Observer*, December 18, 2018, <https://syrianobserver.com/EN/news/47560/muallem-syria-will-not-accept-independent-or-federal-entities.html>

23 Civil War Map, “Ongoing negotiations between the Syrian Government and the Syrian Democratic Forces in Qamishlo. Information so far indicates that the oil fields will be handed over to the government and troops of the SAA will be transferred to the Syrian-Turkish border”, Twitter, December 20, 2018, <https://twitter.com/CivilWarMap/status/105772568060063744>

24 “Turkey, Iran Vow to Work Closer on Syria after US Announcement”, *Al Jazeera*, December 20, 2018, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/12/turkey-iran-vow-work-closer-syria-announcement-181220142855691.html>

25 “DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE BUDGET FISCAL YEAR (FY) 2018”, U.S. Secretary of Defense, May 2017, https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/170601_Iraq_Syria_train_assist.pdf?5zvupDtqtLvj_6Wvoh0NxhfOyGYNRdtu

26 “ABD’nin silahlari Türkiye'ye yöneliyor.”, *Takvim*, December 12, 2017, <https://www.takvim.com.tr/guncel/2017/12/12/abdnin-silahlari-turkiye-yoneliyor-1513093963>

ing handed over to rogue elements by the YPG has to be addressed.

Thirdly, the method and timeline of the implementation of the U.S. decision to withdraw will shape the planned Turkish military operation against the YPG/PKK militants in northeast Syria. If the U.S. withdraws step by step starting at the Turkish-Syrian border, this will open the way for Turkey to start its operation against militants. If not, it has to be seen if Turkey will wait 60 to 100 days for the U.S. to pull out of Syria, and how the entire process will be coordinated between the two NATO partners. Cooperation could help to align the goals of both countries in Syria as terrorist organizations of all kinds will be recognized as such by both. Despite the announcement, it remains to be seen to what extent the U.S. will withdraw from Syria. A smaller operative U.S. force than the current deployment in Syria could enable a direct cooperation between the NATO partners on Syrian ground. Also the role of other states like the United Kingdom and France may be decisive. The U.K. government officially stated, “We remain committed to the Global Coalition and the campaign to deny DAESH territory and ensure its enduring defeat, working alongside our critical regional partners in Syria and beyond.”²⁷ This statement may indicate that the U.K. will continue its cooperation with the YPG-led SDF; however, a combined approach with Turkey offers the prospect of a new era for NATO states in Syria. The vacuum left by the U.S. may be filled by those in cooperation with Turkey as neither the U.K. nor France has the necessary means to achieve the aforementioned objective without Turkey.

After Turkey’s security concerns in Syria regarding the YPG/PKK terrorist threat are addressed by the U.S., Turkey will cease to consider the U.S. a protecting force of terrorists. If one sees these at-

tempts together with the recent cash rewards for three senior PKK figures added to the Reward for Justice Program,²⁸ a new rapprochement between the two nations might have begun. An increasing Turkish-American cooperation may empower the Syrian opposition and help to achieve progress in Syria’s political transition process.

For this purpose, the role of the constitutional committee and the Astana process’s future might decide the dynamics in Syria. Turkey, Russia, and Iran have to continue the political process to avoid a direct military confrontation between the opposition and the regime and to ensure relative peace inside Syria in order to enable the return of refugees. On December 18, Russia, Turkey, and Iran reached an agreement on the 150-strong Syrian constitutional committee which should start work in 2019.²⁹ In this regard, the role of European states and the U.S. might become decisive. A new Turkish-American cooperation could help to ensure a political process in line with UN Resolution 2254. In addition, the European reconstruction aid will be an important tool to advocate the political transition process and the constitutional committee as seen by the Istanbul summit.³⁰ The commitment of all states to the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Syria will work as the basis for diplomatic and political efforts to solve the Syrian case.

Another major issue may be the situation in Idlib. In line with the Sochi agreement, Russia and Turkey have to maintain the ceasefire in the region. The new rapprochement between Turkey and the United States over Syrian affairs may strengthen Turkey’s efforts to find a solution for the presence of radical groups inside Idlib.

²⁸ Sibel Koru, “The U.S. Rewards Offer for Three Top Leaders of the PKK: A Well-Thought-Out Plan?”, November 26, 2018, <https://setav.org/en/assets/uploads/2018/11/48-perspective.pdf>

²⁹ Patrick Wintour, “Russia, Turkey and Iran Reach Agreement on Syria Committee”, *The Guardian*, December 18, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/dec/18/russia-turkey-and-iran-reach-agreement-on-syria-committee>

³⁰ “Istanbul Summit Calls for Syrian Constitutional Committee by Year-End”, *Daily Sabah*, October 27, 2018, <https://www.dailysabah.com/diplomacy/2018/10/27/istanbul-summit-calls-for-syrian-constitutional-committee-by-year-end>

²⁷ “UK Government Response to US President’s Declaration of Victory over Daesh”, UK GOV, December 19, 2018, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-government-response-to-us-presidents-declaration-of-victory-over-daesh>

CONCLUSION

After the U.S. withdrawal decision, two scenarios appeared with regard to Turkey's planned military operation. President Erdogan told in a conference on 21 December: "After our discussions with US President Donald Trump, we have decided to wait for a while before conducting the operation. But this doesn't mean we will wait forever," two different scenarios occur. Firstly, it is likely that Turkey might conduct a limited military operation against the YPG/PKK

threat in northeast Syria. Secondly, Turkey might conduct a comprehensive military operation. If the YPG and the Assad regime can't agree on a quick rapprochement, and if the U.S. withdrawal from Syria takes place with significant coordination with Turkey, a comprehensive military operation seems to be the most likely scenario. Beyond the Syrian context, the decision by the Trump administration to pull American troops out of Syria has the potential to open a new era in Turkish-American relations.