

The Impending Turkish Invasion: Repercussions for the SDF-Washington Relationship

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Brief Analysis

A Turkish attack on northern Syria would bring new waves of internal displacement and increased humanitarian suffering, weaken the SDF and the Autonomous Administration, and erode these institutions' the trust of the United States.

After Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan once again threatened to invade northeastern Syria, local leaders, political parties, and civil society activists have become increasingly concerned that he will follow through on this plan and occupy Manbij and Tell Rifaat (<https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/erdogan-says-turkey-rid-syrias-tal-rifaat-manbij-terrorists-2022-06-01/>) under the pretense of fighting terrorism. These fears are unlikely to be assuaged by flimsy statements from U.S. officials (<https://www.state.gov/briefings/department-press-briefing-may-31-2022/>) against the imminent Turkish operations. In fact, the U.S. response to this threat is likely to further erode the trust of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria and the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in the U.S.-led international coalition forces.

There are growing indications the Turkish attack on north Aleppo could happen at any time. According to Erdogan's statement, the areas that will be targeted are Tell Rifaat (already effectively under siege) and Manbij, which is connected with the eastern Euphrates via the M4 motorway. These two areas, which have been controlled by the SDF for years, are home to a large number of internally displaced persons who fled (<https://www.rudaw.net/english/middleeast/20102021>) the previous two Turkish invasions during Operations Euphrates Shield and Olive Branch. The first group came from either al-Bab or Jarabulus and the second wave from Afrin.

The new invasion will lead to a second displacement of these already precarious populations in addition to those original populations of the two areas targeted. Residents fear human rights violation, remembering how Turkish-backed Sunni militants ransacked Kurdish homes in Afrin, Ras al-Ayn, and Tell Abyad. The specter of that devastation and displacement has sowed further distrust between Kurds and Sunni Arabs in the eastern Euphrates. A major new wave of displacement

towards the eastern Euphrates will place a significant burden on the local administration, which is already working beyond capacity and suffers from poor service provision, limited capabilities, corruption, and a widening gap between the administration and its societal base.

As such, the Turkish attack could result in growing tensions and rifts in a diverse social milieu that has thus far seen lessening confrontation and unrest between different sectors of society. The fear is that this distrust could prompt many Sunni Arab areas, **especially in the semicircle from southern al-Hasakah to western Raqqa, and along the Euphrates river up to the Iraqi border (<https://syria.liveuamap.com/>)**, to start thinking about their own future separate from the current collaborative situation under the Autonomous Administration. Such a scenario would weaken the administration and undermine the cohesiveness of the SDF, which now includes these Arab groups. Targeted Kurdish populations may also turn towards armed extremism against Turkey. Christians, Yazidis, and Circassians may disappear almost entirely from this currently diverse area. Without credible assurances about the region's future, the SDF has warned that it will become a homogenous zone under the control of armed Sunni factions, which would not protect human rights and would serve Turkish interests at Syrians' expense.

Such an outcome would prove catastrophic for Washington's position in the Middle East as a whole, sending yet another message to its allies that working with the United States is an uncertain business, and spur the SDF and opposition forces in the al-Tanf base to think about alternatives to depending upon Washington. A feeble U.S. response towards Turkey is likely to solidify the negative stance that some extremist groups within the SDF and the People's Defense Units have adopted against Washington.

Many now argue that the United States no longer holds the key to resolving the Middle East's crises and that Washington will sacrifice its less powerful allies to win favor with its more favored, key allies. This narrative also lends credence to those arguing that the Middle East needs to develop ties with Moscow and Beijing as Washington's star fades in the international political arena. This was in fact reflected in the failure of the United States to protect the zones located outside the borders of the Somali capital Mogadishu, in addition to its inability to positively resolve the conflict in the Donbas basin in favor of the Zelensky's government.

Local populations would also not allow the Autonomous Administration and SDF to maintain ties with Washington if they feel the latter has abandoned them again

(<https://www.alquds.co.uk/%D8%A3%D9%83%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%AF-%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A%D9%88%D9%86-%D9%8A%D9%82%D8%B0%D9%81%D9%88%D9%86-%D9%82%D9%88%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AC%D9%8A%D8%B4-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D9%85%D8%B1%D9%8A/>) during this invasion. Such sentiments would expand the influence of currents within the Kurdish movement and Autonomous Administration that distrust Washington. These calls for cutting back ties with Washington have grown louder in light of the **talk of another betrayal** **(<https://anfarabic.com/akhr-1-khbr/aldar-khlyl-almatw-aty-aldw-alahdr-llqyam-bhjmatahtlalyt-jdydt-80669>)** of Washington's allies **in Syria** **(<https://aawsat.com/home/article/3738676/%C2%AB%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A5%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B0%D8%A7%D8%AA%D9%8A%D8%A9%C2%BB-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%83%D8%B1%D8%AF%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%AA%D8%B7%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A8-%D8%A8%D8%AD%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%A3%D9%85%D9%85%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%85%D9%86-%D8%AA%D8%B1%D9%83%D9%8A%D8%A7>)**.

By virtue of the attack, the SDF is also likely to have less clout in the Syrian political sphere overall, while there would also be significant repercussions with regard to **increased Iranian infiltration of the SDF's ranks**

(<https://www.syria.tv/%D9%85%D8%B3%D8%A7%D8%B9-%D8%A5%D9%8A%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%84%D9%84%D8%AA%D9%85%D8%AF%D8%AF-%D9%88%D8%AD%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%83-%D8%B4%D8%B9%D8%A8%D9%8A-%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%81%D8%B6-%D9%85%D8%A7%D8%B0%D8%A7>)

<https://english.aawsat.com/home/article/3672121/russia-deploys-jets-us-held-regions-syrias-east>), ostensibly to better protect the area, which would accelerate the area's shift away from the U.S.-backed international coalition. This would in turn provide a boost to terrorist cells, which are mainly linked to remnants of ISIS or al-Qaeda, and contribute to their partial resurgence.

Iranian and Russian propaganda would focus on the need for the al-Assad regime to regain control over all of northeastern Syria in order to protect the population from the new Turkish menace and Washington's betrayal of its partners on the ground. Russian propaganda that the United States does not care about its allies will find another example to highlight. This propaganda could erode the SDF's trust in the future of the SDF, and may motivate it to seek for a lifeline with Damascus through Russia, or even approach Iran directly through the Arab elements SDF.

Indeed, the impact of this attack will not be limited to Syria. Like Washington's initial withdrawal from Syria, another failure to engage with the conflict will bolster Iranian influence in parts of Iraq while undermining the power of Washington's allies there. Kurdish leadership in Iraq has also accused Washington of abandoning them despite their long-standing alliance and of allowing Iranian-aligned militias to take Kirkuk, an area which is important to them.

Far-left currents -with radical tendencies- in the northeastern Syrian political arena are now growing to see the United States as an adversary. Their stance, along any human rights violations that Turkey commits during its invasion, will have dramatically negative ramifications for Washington's relations with other Kurds in the region, including in the Kurdistan Region, Turkey, and Iran. Anger at Turkey is also deepening with the Turkish attacks in the Kurdish Region of Iraq, including the July 20 strike on a tourist site have killed at least eight and wounded dozens of visiting tourists.

Turkey's potential attack on northeastern Syria has been long in the making and is hardly an unexpected turn of events, as an [article \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/fate-tel-rifaat-hangs-balance\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/fate-tel-rifaat-hangs-balance) on the topic by the author from years prior shows. If Washington stays silent and fails to act to prevent this attack, it cannot claim surprise at the outcomes. Without significant involvement in the issue, Turkey will see the U.S. response as the green light to go ahead.

It is not enough for Washington to denounce the impending attack or for some of its politicians, [such as Lindsey Graham, to visit the area \(https://www.alaraby.co.uk/politics/%D9%88%D9%81%D8%AF-%D8%A3%D9%85%D9%8A%D8%B1%D9%83%D9%8A-%D9%8A%D8%B2%D9%88%D8%B1-%D8%B4%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%84-%D8%B4%D8%B1%D9%82-%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%AA%D8%B2%D8%A7%D9%85%D9%86%D8%A7%D9%8B-%D9%85%D8%B9-%D8%AA%D8%B5%D8%B9%D9%8A%D8%AF-%D8%B9%D8%B3%D9%83%D8%B1%D9%8A\)](https://www.alaraby.co.uk/politics/%D9%88%D9%81%D8%AF-%D8%A3%D9%85%D9%8A%D8%B1%D9%83%D9%8A-%D9%8A%D8%B2%D9%88%D8%B1-%D8%B4%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%84-%D8%B4%D8%B1%D9%82-%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%AA%D8%B2%D8%A7%D9%85%D9%86%D8%A7%D9%8B-%D9%85%D8%B9-%D8%AA%D8%B5%D8%B9%D9%8A%D8%AF-%D8%B9%D8%B3%D9%83%D8%B1%D9%8A) in an effort to alleviate frustrations among the local population regarding the international coalition's stance on Ankara's aggression. The Autonomous Administration is looking to Washington to work diligently to mitigate hostilities, build bridges between the parties to the conflict, and intervene to prevent another humanitarian disaster and rift between the residents of the actual buffer zone (rather than the buffer zone Erdogan is talking about).

Alternative options remain on the table: working towards establishment of genuine political and economic ties between northeastern Syria and Turkey could dispel some of Turkey's hostility towards this area. Alternatively, leaders from the eastern Euphrates might be allowed to become politically involved in the constitutional talks in Geneva. Or the Autonomous Administration could engage in direct dialogue with Damascus to agree on a final version of the constitution to protect the area from external meddling and preserve its regional identity. What links these alternatives is that the Autonomous Administration cannot accomplish them alone. If Washington hopes to support its ally, it must endeavor to promote and pressure for alternatives to an invasion, while continuing to provide military and economy support for this precarious region. ❖

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