

As Washington Prepares to Withdraw from Syria, Turkey Is Set to Invade

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Brief Analysis

The combination of premature steps would further damage U.S. credibility while giving Iranian proxies and Islamic State remnants free rein in east Syria.

On December 19, multiple media sources reported that Washington is preparing for an imminent withdrawal of all U.S. forces in east Syria. The reports followed statements two days earlier by President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, who noted the White House's "positive response" to Turkey's planned cross-border military campaign in the area. First announced on December 12, the operation aims "to clear the east of the Euphrates from separatist terrorists in a few days"—Erdogan's epithet for the Democratic Union Party (PYD), the Syrian Kurdish group whose troops serve as the core of the U.S.-supported forces fighting the Islamic State (IS). During their December 14 phone call, Trump and Erdogan "agreed to continue coordinating to achieve our respective security objectives in Syria," even as various U.S. officials reportedly scrambled to head off the Turkish incursion.

Meanwhile, news of the planned U.S. departure has raised alarm bells across Washington, the Middle East, and Europe. Given the numerous strategic problems that would be raised by an accelerated withdrawal and the fact that the U.S. mission remains incomplete, the White House should rethink its decision and continue working toward its own previously stated objectives in Syria.

WHY NOW?

The PYD is an offshoot of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), a designated terrorist group that has been fighting the Turkish government for decades. Ankara's announcement of imminent operations against the PYD's militia, the People's Defense Units (YPG), followed recent comments by Joint Staff chairman Gen. Joseph Dunford, who stated on December 6 that the United States would be pursuing two major initiatives: training 40,000 local fighters to take over security in areas cleared of IS units, and constructing U.S. military observation posts along the Syria-Turkey frontier. Both developments were received poorly in Ankara, which saw them as evidence that Washington is not responsive to Turkey's security concerns.

Yet America's interests in continuing to back these local forces are considerable. Since IS took over half of Syria in 2014, the U.S. approach to degrading the group has centered on launching targeted airstrikes from the sky while the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) take care of fighting on the ground. YPG fighters make up the majority of the SDF and are the most capable U.S. military partners available in Syria. The U.S. decision to support, train, and equip the YPG has long incensed Turkey, especially once the group began to establish its own belt of control in border areas liberated from IS. When the PKK renewed its attacks in Turkey in 2015, Ankara invaded parts of Syria to break up YPG-controlled areas and block the perceived PKK safe haven there.

To protect its priority of fully defeating IS while assuaging Turkish security concerns, the United States has promoted the "Manbij model" in recent months. The model envisions transferring governance of YPG-ruled areas west of the Euphrates to other locals (mainly Arabs and non-YPG-aligned Kurds) while instituting joint U.S.-Turkish military patrols in the area. U.S. officials hoped that this approach would serve as a confidence-building mechanism to prevent Turkish operations east of the Euphrates, which would threaten U.S. troops, the SDF, and the momentum of the incomplete campaign against IS terrorist remnants. Thus far, however, the mechanism has failed to placate Ankara, spurring its latest warning of direct intervention in the east.

WHAT'S AT STAKE?

An accelerated U.S. withdrawal from Syria would be a mistake: IS has not been sustainably defeated, Iran and its proxies remain active in Syria, and a political process to end the war has not yet taken root. If the administration truly aims to fulfill its stated objectives there, it should immediately implement an alternative course of action. Otherwise, it risks not only jeopardizing the near-term U.S. interest of stabilizing a key part of the Middle East, but also damaging America's reputation for the long term. More specifically, the potential exit or entrance of U.S. and Turkish forces in east Syria affects the following key interests:

- **Protecting U.S. forces.** If Turkey begins its operation before the proposed American withdrawal, the 2,000 U.S. troops in the area would be directly in the line of fire—especially those embedded with the SDF or manning the handful of existing U.S. border observation posts. Ankara has signaled that it wants to coordinate its operations with Washington, but the risk would remain serious given the realities of combat. Pentagon officials have already warned that unilateral Turkish action would pose "unacceptable" risk to U.S. forces.
- **Defeating ISIS.** As the president and other administration officials have repeatedly stated, IS remains the foremost U.S. priority in Syria, but the mission is incomplete and could fail altogether if the newly announced plans are carried out. A Turkish incursion would force many YPG fighters to shift their efforts away from fighting IS, risking a reversal of recent progress. And if U.S. forces are not present to keep the SDF focused on finishing the fight, counterterrorism in east Syria would effectively be outsourced to Turkey and its local partners, or even to the Assad regime and its backers. The Assad option would ensure renewed Sunni Arab support for violent extremist groups, likely leading to "IS 2.0." Yet continued YPG control in the east is not sustainable either, since the group's leftist ideological antecedents and Kurdish nationalist identity are unacceptable to the conservative Sunni Arabs who comprise the majority population in the east. Hence, expanding the Manbij model of local control and U.S.-Turkish patrols may be

the only means of navigating between these two bad options.

- **Ending the war.** As Syria envoy James F. Jeffrey emphasized on December 17, the parties currently have a small window of opportunity to move forward with a political process that ends the war, breaks the Assad-Iran alliance, and halts the regime's brutality against the Syrian people. The **constitutional reform process** (<https://www.un.org/press/en/2018/sc13590.doc.htm>) endorsed by Jeffrey and the UN requires all outside stakeholders to focus on a singular diplomatic effort, but a Turkish incursion would derail movement toward the negotiating table and give Assad, Russia, and Iran excuses to reject talks intended to end Assad's authoritarian grasp over time.
- **Mending the U.S.-Turkey relationship.** Turkey's **October release of Pastor Andrew Brunson** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/why-the-release-of-pastor-andrew-brunson-is-a-good-sign-for-u.s.-turkey-tie>) gave the Trump administration another chance to ease tensions in the often-fraught bilateral relationship. Recent flashpoints include Ankara's purchase of Russian S-400 anti-aircraft systems, which if finalized would trigger U.S. sanctions and threaten the country's position in the F-35 program and perhaps even NATO. Turkey's ongoing detention of American and Turkish embassy staff has caused major friction as well. Potential Turkish operations in east Syria would likely exacerbate these tensions.

RAPID WITHDRAWAL SCENARIO

Rather than risk fratricide between NATO allies, Washington appears to be preparing for a full-scale, immediate withdrawal. In this scenario, the primary U.S. mission of rolling back IS would be undermined, as would the secondary benefit of blocking the movement of Iran and its proxies in east Syria.

In other words, the White House should understand that a key element of its Iran policy is at stake here: namely, the effort to keep Tehran from entrenching itself in Syria, establishing a land bridge to Lebanon, and directly threatening Israel. On the margins of the UN General Assembly meeting this September, National Security Advisor John Bolton stated that U.S. forces will remain in Syria until Iran and its proxies depart. Withdrawing now would directly contradict that pledge.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

U.S. officials should urgently implement a new plan of action for east Syria, avoiding a hasty withdrawal while using all elements of the national security toolbox to convince Turkey that there are other options besides unilateral invasion:

- **Keep supporting the Manbij model.** The U.S. military should speed up the transfer of responsibility in Manbij from the YPG to local inhabitants, then start joint planning with Turkey for implementing this same mechanism east of the Euphrates, taking into account lessons learned from joint patrols in west Syria. Such planning would slow the momentum toward unilateral Turkish action and rapid U.S. withdrawal. Turkish officials would likely welcome this approach, since Erdogan's Justice and Development Party faces stiff competition in nationwide local elections to be held March 31. The party is running in a de facto coalition with a hardline Turkish nationalist faction, so making visible near-term progress on the Kurdish issue is paramount. Even if exporting the Manbij model to the east does not result in immediate YPG withdrawals, it would likely be enough for Erdogan to spin the development as a victory against the PKK's Syrian ally, boosting his coalition's electoral chances.
- **Talk to Turkey about the future of the Syrian Kurds.** Ambassador Jeffrey has already stated that U.S. policy does not envision partnering with nonstate actors in the long term—a clear signal to Ankara that Washington's close partnership with the YPG is temporary. Now is the time for U.S. officials to start a structured and substantive dialogue with Turkey about an acceptable end state for Syria's Kurdish community within the Syrian state.
- **Buy time for the political process.** The Syrian constitutional reform process must be given a chance to succeed.

Washington should rapidly coordinate with other governments and organizations committed to ending the war, asking them to lean on Turkey and prevent complete derailment of the political process.

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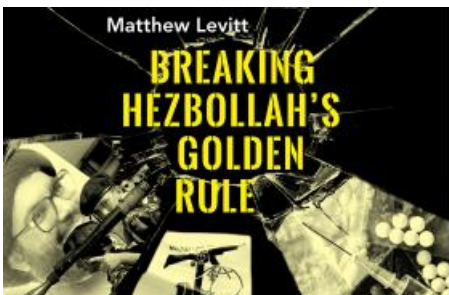
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