

For Syrian Kurds, Western Sympathy Isn't Enough

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Jan 8, 2018

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Brief Analysis

January 8, 2018

Hardly any event attended by Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and other Turkish officials passes without mention of the threat the People's Protection Unit (YPG) poses to Turkey's national security followed by threats that a military campaign to destroy the YPG is only a matter of time.

Turkey's threats against the YPG seemed to escalate in November when signs of a potential attack on Aleppo's Afrin district began to emerge after reinforcements were sent to the Turkish army on the Syrian border, as well as to Syrian territories controlled by the Euphrates Shield factions. However, it seems that Ankara is still searching for partners to form an alliance against the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), led by Kurds in northern Syria. Perhaps Erdogan hopes to find a way to target Syria's Kurds by attempting to form alliances with Russia and Iran.

The Turkish president will also continue his efforts to convince the Russians, who have so far opposed the targeting of Afrin, to end this protection. The statement made by Turkish Foreign Minister Mouloud Jawish Oglu a day after Russian president Vladimir Putin's recent visit to Ankara showed that Turkey is yet to receive Russia's approval to attack Afrin.

"We will coordinate with Moscow for a military operation in Afrin if needed," Oglu said. But the Turkish President will not stop trying, and perhaps this explains the frequent meetings and calls between Erdogan and Putin.

It is likely that the conspicuous Turkish silence over Russia's recent announcement that it provided air support to the SDF during the battle against the Islamic State group (IS) in Deir al-Zor is because Ankara preferred not to escalate with the Russians, as the price for this confrontation could be too high. Despite Moscow's insistence on the unity of Syrian territories, it still prefers Kurdish autonomy. The Russians are likely to prevent Turkish action against Afrin, and once again, this could affect Turkey's ties to Russia over Syria, although a total rupture of relations is unlikely.

So far, out of all the active forces in Syria, whether allied or opposed to the Syrian president, the U.S. position seems to be closest to the Russian stance. Both parties support a serious political transition, giving the Kurds a future role, reducing the influence of Iran and Turkey, and keeping the threat of war away from Israel's borders. Russia and the United States already succeeded in preventing Turkey from targeting the SDF in the city of Manbij. Some believe that Washington and Moscow have an interest in preventing Turkey's intervention in Syria in any way other than to fight

IS. Perhaps Ankara fears the worst case scenario in Syria: a U.S.-Russian agreement to give Damascus internationally recognised Kurdish autonomy. However, the United States seems to prefer that all this takes place based on some understanding with Turkey. Washington may attempt to push Ankara again to resume the internal peace process with the Kurds, which would boost relations between Turkey and Syria's Kurds.

Some regional powers may join Russia and the United States in supporting the forces controlling northern Syria. There is a joint Saudi-Emirati initiative to support the SDF, which may ensure a halt to the Iranian-Turkish expansion and prevent the Muslim Brotherhood from playing any key role in Syria. Meanwhile, the Egyptian stance on this issue remains unclear. In Israel, some believe in the importance of an alliance with the Kurds as a trusted party in a future Syria. If Israel, along with Washington, hopes to prevent Tehran from establishing a land corridor, it will need to strengthen its influence in the Kurdish area in Syria to thwart Iranian ambitions.

But Turkey, which is working to ensure its national security, rebuild its army, and strengthen its economy, seeks to expand its influence in the region. After the failed coup attempt, Erdogan purged and restructured the army to serve his political needs. He rushed to purge those supposedly loyal to Fathullah Gulen, along with stifling political— and especially Kurdish— opposition. This helped him win over the nationalists, whom he had sought to divide. Politicians in Ankara believe that the current chaos is around rather than inside Turkey, and that the country must benefit from this chaos and let the neighbouring belligerents weaken each other. Despite Erdogan's belief that the worst of the coup attempt has passed, as stability returns to Turkey with the decline of IS operations and the gradual return of tourism, he still faces many challenges, namely the upcoming presidential elections in 2019.

Along with Russia and Iran, Turkey is well positioned to influence the future of Syria. But a settlement over the future of the country is currently a point of difference between Ankara and Tehran on one side and Moscow on the other. Iran and Turkey do not support Russia's efforts to establish a federal Syria, which would allow the emergence of a new threat to the two regional powers that completely reject the establishment of any Kurdish entity in Syria. What happened recently in Iraq's Kurdistan Region was a prominent example of Turkish-Iranian cooperation despite their differences. However, despite the logical Turkish-Iranian convergence over the Kurdish issue, both Russia and Iran are well aware of Ankara's motives to bring them together on Syria. In addition to Washington's continued cooperation with Syria's Kurds, the military reality has shifted in favor of the Assad regime as the influence of Turkey's Sunni Arab allies in Syria and the region recedes.

Since his defeat in Aleppo, Erdogan began to focus all his attention on enforcing his red line: no Kurdish state in Syria. Ankara expected to benefit from the Astana talks and win a Russian and Iranian compromise over Syria's Kurds. The three Astana parties tried to resort to tactical methods to achieve some gains, but these are not long-term alliances. Despite the view that Turkey's convergence with its historic rivals, Iran and Russia, is a major shift in the country's foreign policy, and a sign that Ankara has given up on Washington, Turkey is betting on its convergence with Tehran and Moscow to be one of the reasons for Washington to withdraw its support for the Kurds.

Even though the United States won favor with Turkey by rejecting the Kurdistan referendum in Iraq, Ankara will continue to view Washington's support to Syria's Kurds as a threat to its national security, and will keep urging Washington to change its policy, otherwise threatening to adopt policies against U.S. interests. Erdogan wants to take advantage of Turkey's "spoiler value" in the region. For example, Western powers concerned with restoring stability in Syria are well aware that Turkey would make it difficult to ensure permanent stability in the country by openly opposing the Kurds.

Erdogan still relies on the hope that when the time comes, Western powers will not choose the Kurds, a limited political, economic, and military power in the region, at the expense of Turkey, their powerful NATO ally. He believes that Turkey's needs are a better match to the U.S. vision for the region. U.S. officials have previously described the relations with the YPG as "temporary, transitional, and tactical," whereas relations with Turkey are "strategic and

solid.” Despite a lack of total trust between Ankara on one hand and Washington and active European countries on the other hand, both sides cannot afford to keep a distance, as they have major diplomatic, security, and economic ties. The West will try as much as possible to avoid increasing tensions with Turkey. Western sympathy for the Kurds in the region is no secret, but it is unlikely to be enough for the Kurds against Turkey. ❖

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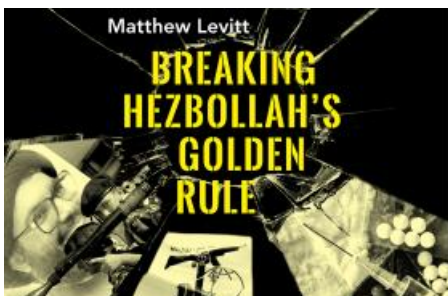
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