

Who is Erdogan Fighting in Syria?

by Jerry Gordon (September 2016)



Turkish Tanks and US-backed Syrian rebels crossing into Syria, August 24, 2016,
AFP/Getty Images

At 4 AM local time on Wednesday August 24, 2016, a small task force of Turkish tanks and 500 Syrian Turkmen and Free Syrian Army (FSA) allies crossed the border at Karkamis into Jarablus, Syria ostensibly to close off the last ISIS held crossing. The rebel fighters came from small US special forces supported formations, the Hamza Division, the Sultan Murad Brigade and the Levante Front in Aleppo and the Idlib province in Syria. A *Der Spiegel* [report](#) on the Turkish invasion suggested that the move reflected shifting alliances in the six year civil war in Syria. A second wave of armored vehicles entered the Jarablus 'pocket' the following day along with Turkish special forces and a larger complement of Turkmen and FSA forces. The incursion had limited US Air support which made 8 sorties against fleeing ISIS fighters. The official statements from President Erdogan and his Interior Minister lent the impression that the main objective of Operation Euphrates Shield was only to clean out the remaining ISIS fighters. However, a second objective became apparent which was to demand the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Force (SDF) leave the city of Manbij, a city they had liberated in a hard fought two month campaign. Erdogan's major move in Syria in late August 2016 stands in stark contrast to Turkish tanks in the border town of Suruc silently overlooking the destroyed city of Kobani that Kurdish YPG fighters had [freed](#) at high cost from ISIS on January 26, 2015.

Contrast these [warning statements](#) from Syrian Kurdish leader Saleh Muslim with those of President Erdogan and Interior Minister Efkane Ala:

Saleh Muslim, the co-president of the Kurdish Democratic Union Party or PYD, who tweeted that "Turkey is in Syrian Quagmire. Will be defeated as Daesh will be," using the Arabic language acronym for Islamic State.

Turkish President Erdogan said the operation was directed against terror organizations like Islamic State and the PYD, the largest Syrian Kurdish group.

Turkish Interior Minister Efkan Ala said the Jarablus operation meant to safeguard Turkey's security and that Ankara "cannot sit and watch. It is Turkey's legal right, it is within its authority "to take action."

Erdogan has made it abundantly clear that he lumps the YPG/PYD-led SDF in with the terrorist network of the Turkish Workers Party (PKK). He views the rising Kurdish autonomy as a threat to security inside Turkey. He had reignited the conflict with the Socialist Marxist PKK on July 20, 2015, with a staged [suicide bombing](#) by a Turkish student with alleged ISIS connections in Suruc, killing 32 young Kurdish activists and ending the 2013 cease fire struck with its jailed leader Abdullah Ocalan. The Kurdish-led Peoples Democratic Party (HDP) along with secular minority parties in the Ankara Parliament denied his AKP a super-majority to pass a referendum granting him executive Presidential powers. A reset September 2015 election returned his ruling AKP party to absolute control whereby he assumed near dictatorial authority. After the July 15, 2016 alleged coup was foiled, Erdogan initiated a veritable purge of the military, judiciary, educators and university academics. In mid-August, Erdogan's government issued an [indictment](#) of the head of the Kurdish-led HDP, Selahattin Demirtas. The indictment accused Demirtas and other HDP leaders of spreading "terrorist propaganda," a coded message inferring their unproven ties to the PKK.



Vice President Biden with Turkish President Erdogan Ankara, August 24, 2016,
Kayhan Ozul Photo

Enter Vice President Biden on the Day of Turkey's Incursion into Syria

Late Wednesday morning, as if on cue, US Vice President Joe Biden arrived in Ankara. He was there ostensibly to repair relations with Erdogan following the July 15, 2016 failed coup. He also tried to mollify Erdogan on his demand to immediately extradite his 75-year-old former Islamist ally, Sheik Fethullah Gulen, now ensconced in a fortified Poconos Mountain compound in Saylorville, Pennsylvania. Turkey filed a formal extradition request just prior to Biden's arrival.

Biden proceeded to condition US support for Erdogan's incursion with a demand that the SDF force immediately abandon Manbij, threatening that the US would abandon its support. A patent affront to the Kurdish-led force that many, including Brett McGurk, US Special Envoy for the Global Coalition Countering ISIL (ISIS), considered the best boots on the ground in the conflict. That immediately created a conflict between the two allies. *The Washington Post* [cited](#) the Vice President saying:

Biden said the Kurds, who Turkey claims intend to establish a separate state along a border corridor in conjunction with Turkey's own Kurdish population, "cannot, will not, and under no circumstances will get American support if they do not keep" what he said was a commitment to return to the east [across the Euphrates River].

Biden went out of his way to apologize to a stony faced President Erdogan, explaining that the US could not immediately extradite Gulen. He endeavored to explain that under US Constitutional law a process had to ensure that the charges against Gulen were proven. Biden was [cited](#) saying:

The United States government is committed to do everything we can to help your government, Mr. Prime Minister. To bring those to justice who are responsible for the coup attempt.

Our legal experts are working right now with their Turkish counterparts on the production of and the evaluation of material and evidence that needs to be supplied to an American court to meet the requirements under our law in

the Extradition Treaty to extradite Gulen. And we're going to continue to do so as you continue to bring forward additional information. We have no interest whatsoever in protecting anyone who has done harm to an ally. None. But we need to meet the legal standard requirement under our law."

Biden's declaration against YPG advances against ISIS west of the Euphrates appeared to contradict an Administration [announcement](#) on July 29, 2016 by McGurk. That we were sending an additional 3,000 Special Operators to assist Kurdish forces to retake Raqqa, the self-declared Caliphate capital.

Further, Biden "abjectly apologized" for our "insensitivity" following the coup and "how some of your countrymen feel the world didn't respond . . . rapidly enough or ? ?with the appropriate amount of solidarity and empathy." We had no participation in the coup, although some in Erdogan's government had insinuated that. [Watch](#) this C-Span Video of Vice President Biden's press conference in Ankara, Turkey.

The fix was in with the Turkish incursion into the remaining ISIS-held town of Jarablus in Syria. It is a blatant attempt by Erdogan to block advancing Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces who with US special ops and air support had cut off ISIS in Raqqa from the Turkish frontier. This limited incursion into Syria by Turkey may also have been to demonstrate that its military hasn't suffered with the failed coup.

Operation Euphrates Shield also involved Turkish special ops. The Kurdish news agency, ARA, [alleged](#) that they might have taken down a top SDF officer, Abdulsettar Al-Cadiri, commander of the newly established Jarablus military council, in a sniper attack on Tuesday, August 23, 2016 in advance of the incursion. Ankara also justified the incursion as retaliation for the alleged ISIS suicide bombing by a teenager at a Kurdish wedding party the prior weekend in Gaziantep. Among those attending the wedding were members of the Kurdish People's Democratic Party or HDP. The attack resulted in over 54 killed, 30 of them minors and 70 injured, 13 critically. ISIS has not claimed responsibility for the dastardly bombing. Could this have been another false flag operation by Turkey's Intelligence group MIT?



Turkish Armored vehicles move into Jabalus, Syria pocket, August 25, 2016,
AFP/Getty Images

Erdogan's Game Plan in Syria

The more that Turkey reinforces the Jarablus 'pocket' the less this is about a push against the Islamic State and more about creating a wedge between the two Kurdish-held enclaves to force a retreat across the Euphrates. Thursday, following his Ankara visit, Biden [said](#), "I think the Turks are prepared to stay in the effort to take out [the Islamic State] for as long as it takes." We took his statement as diplomatic cover.

Erdogan's game plan is to use this wedge and create a Turkish held security or safe zone to assist in the repatriation of Syrian refugees. The so-called security zone had previously been objected to by the Administration as it would be the slippery slope of increasing US involvement in Syria. Witness these comments [cited](#) by the *Wall Street Journal* from a spokesman for President Erdogan, a Syrian ally and a Turkmen Alliance leader:

"The operation creates an opening for Turkey to fulfill a long-held desire to carve out a buffer zone in northwest Syria that could become a sanctuary for Syrians fleeing the fighting—and a staging ground for its rebel allies battling Islamic State, also known as Daesh." Ibrahim Kalin, spokesman for

Turkey's President Erdogan, said the military and its rebel allies were proving that it is possible to create such a safe zone.

"The battle won't stop here, it isn't about Jarablus or the west bank of Euphrates," said one Syrian activist with links to the militias that took the town. "Today, the first two objectives are done: getting the YPG to the eastern side of the river and securing a stronghold by liberating Jarablus." The activist said more fighters are prepared to join the fight. "There are other brigades inside Syria waiting to join the second phase of the operation," he said. "There will also be a third phase."

Emin Bozoglan, president of the Syrian Turkmen Assembly, said he expected Turkey to try to create the so-called safe zone. "Operations are most likely to continue southward; our main aim is to defeat Daesh and repel it from around Aleppo, especially the northern part, and to set up a safe zone there."

There were reports that Turkish air strike and artillery were targeting Kurdish units south of Manbij, The main SDF force in Manbij defied Turkish demands by leaving their Arab allies in place, perhaps setting the stage for a conflict. But the Turks may not have an easy time of it. The SDF force that occupied Manbij found an unwelcome gift from the departing ISIS fighters, an estimated 13,000 land mines. The PKK may have added their presence to the Turkish incursion. On Friday, August 2016, *Reuters* [reported](#) a suicide truck bombing in the Turkish border town of Cizre in the predominately Kurdish province of Simak, took the lives of 11 Turkish police with 78 injured, three of them civilians. The PKK only attacks Turkish security police, underlined by Premier Yildirim's attribution of who may have perpetrated it.

Sunday, August 28, 2016, *AFP* [reported](#) significant civilian and Kurdish fighter resulting from Turkish air strikes and shelling: 75 dead.

Kurdish Media reveals a different picture of Operation Euphrates

When news first came of Erodgan's Operation Euphrates Shield we posted a comment on FB. It was speculation that it was really a disguised attempt to keep the frontier open as a conduit to ISIS, and that the alleged Syrian rebels were simply Erdogan exchanging one group of Islamists for the ISI force. That was corroborated in part by an English Syrian Kurdish weekly TonahiTV news program,

“Inside Rojava” (the name for liberated Kurdish homeland in Syria). The report was released on Saturday, August 27, 2016. It provided a completely different perspective. It told of SDF forces who had occupied portions of Jarablus, and the Turkish task force was ejecting them. The report maintained there was evidence of cooperation with ISIS fighters to provide access to the Turkish frontier by forcing the withdrawal of YPG forces. The TonahiTV report noted that SDF forces who, with US coalition air support and special operators, had liberated large swaths along the 250 mile northern frontier with Turkey and intended to establish regional autonomy for all communities in the Kurdish administered enclaves. It noted that the SDF was prepared to cooperate with the US coalition in the looming fight to retake Raqqa from the Islamic State. Other commentators on the TonahiTV program, beamed from both Belgium and France, questioned the intent of the Obama Administration in supporting Erdogan’s Operation Euphrates Shield. [Watch](#) this You Tube Video of the TonahiTV “Inside Rojava” program.

Erdogan advisor connections to ISIS

Some hint of this close cooperation between Erdogan and ISIS was reflected in a *Gatestone Institute* article, “[Turkey’s Official ‘Cocktail Terror’](#)” by Berak Bekdil. It was in the context of the Gaziantep bombing of the Kurdish wedding party the weekend prior to the launch of Operation Euphrates Shield. Bekdil noted that opposition parties had requested five times that the Erdogan regime investigate ISIS connections in Turkey only to be rebuffed by votes of the AKP super majority in the Ankara parliament. The Ankara Parliament opposition noted in its charges activities of a private Turkish firm, SADAT International Defense Consultancy, founded by ex-servicemen dismissed for Islamist activities. The opposition alleged SADAT was engaged in training ISIS operatives in “intelligence, psychological warfare, sabotage, raiding, ambushing and assassination.” Bekdil noted that SADAT principal, retired Turkish Brig. Gen. Adnan Tanriverdi, “as [Erdogan’s] chief presidential advisor.”



US Special Operators with Syrian Democratic Forces in Syria

The Hasakah Bombing Incident

Prior to the Turkish incursion in Jarablus, there was an incident that occurred in Hasakah in the Syrian Kurdish homeland. That included a near US air tangle with Syrian Sukhoi fighters who were targeting five Kurdish positions and threatening US special operators assigned to the Kurdish forces. On August 18, 2016 just after fighting had broken out between Kurdish and Assad regime forces, *The Wall Street Journal* [reported](#):

[Syrian] regime warplanes bombed an area of Hasakah near American special operations forces and fighters from the U.S.-backed and Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces, who have been fighting Islamic State. The airstrikes prompted the [U.S. to scramble jets and issue an unusual warning to the regime](#).

This may have been an event staged with the assistance of the Russians, who heretofore have defended the Syrian Kurds. The twist is that Russia ended up brokering a cease fire with the Assad forces on August 22, 2016 who were about to be overwhelmed by the SDF.

Stephen and Shoshana Bryen in a *Defense News* analysis of the episode, "Hasakah

Bombed,” noted:

The Syrian attack on Hasakah wasn't an independent effort. It needed Russian backing because five separate Kurdish positions were targeted. Surveillance of sites so far north in the country would have needed airborne assets and satellites; the Syrian air force has neither, but Russia does. Notably, although U.S. forces were in the area, they were not directly targeted. As far back as February the U.S. had provided Russia with information about [the location of American forces](#).

Furthermore, the attack on Hasakah had almost no military significance for the Assad regime. Syrian forces were located far from the targets and there is no tactical military benefit to Syria from flying a mission against a town that is firmly in Kurdish control. Other motives for the bombings, which killed a large number of civilians, might have been an overture by Russia to Turkey. Or a warning from Russia to the United States. Or a mistake by Russia.

So Washington quickly (temporarily?) pulled the Special Forces out of Hasakah. It should be noted, however, that the Obama Administration's special envoy, Brett McGurk, announced the reinforcement of the U.S. mission in Syria by [3,000 additional Special Forces soldiers](#) – nearly ten times the number originally sent to “train and advise” Kurdish forces.

As August closes, Russian bombers were flying out of an Iranian air base near Hamadan, shortening the time to attack opposition targets in Syria. The Iranians objected to the Russian disclosures. Erdogan is now espousing a political deal that might leave Assad in power. Further, the Turkish Foreign Minister has dropped hints that perhaps they might share with Russia the NATO airbase at Incirlik located 70 miles from Syria. That may have prompted [reports](#) out of Brussels that the USAF made an as yet unconfirmed emergency move of 60 to 70 overage B-61 nuclear weapons to Romania. The US Secretary of the Air Force, Deborah Jones [signaled](#) via the Kurdish news agency, *Rudaw*, that such a move by Turkey would not be “OK.”

The Bryens reported the chilling demands of a Turkish newspaper regarding Russian sharing of Incirlik and Turkey keeping those nukes:

After denying the possibility, Turkey's Prime Minister [said this week](#) that

Incirlik is open to other countries fighting ISIS – specifically including Russia. In a shot at the U.S., the pro-Erdogan newspaper *Yeni Safa* said Turkey should “take control” of the American nuclear weapons on the base. “The nukes must be handed over to Turkey, or Turkey should take control of them.” On the other hand, closer Russian ties to Turkey that come at the expense of alienating the Kurds may prove a long-term miscalculation for Putin.

They concluded, “for now, it appears Syria and Russia buried the hatchet with Turkey – in the back of the Kurds – and dared Washington to object.”

Conclusion

All of this demonstrates that the Kurdish SDF strategy, concocted by US Special Envoy Brett McGurk and the cadres of US special operators assisting them, is having its wings clipped. This is [reflected](#) in the Geneva meetings between Secretary of State Kerry and Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov seeking a political settlement in war torn Syria and denying Kurdish autonomy.

The Turkish *Daily Hurriyet* [reported](#) Kerry saying at a press conference following the meeting:

We are for a united Syria. We do not support an independent Kurd initiative.

There has been some limited engagement, as everybody knows, with a component of Kurdish fighters on a limited basis, and we cooperated very closely with Turkey specifically to make sure that there was a clearer understanding of the rules by which that engagement would take place. They understand that. Now that Manbij city has been liberated, I think there are other expectations of what will take place, but we understand the sensitivities of our friends in Turkey with respect to this.

Lavrov [said](#):

I’m convinced the Kurds should have a full-fledged representation in that process, should remain an integral part of the Syrian state and be part of a solution to the problem, rather than a factor that someone will be using to split Syria, as the latter will trigger a chain reaction throughout the region while no one is interested in it.

As for various aspects of Turkish presence on the Syrian territory, including the Kurdish factor which is so much written about these days, our U.S. counterparts and we confirmed the importance of an emergency resumption and start of a political process where all the Syrian parties should participate.

The two world parties [approved](#) a deal in late July in Moscow, which is opposed by both the Pentagon and CIA, that involves the US and Russia joining forces for air strikes at the Syrian Al Qaeda affiliate, the al Nusra front. Russia in turn would hold off attacks on US-backed opposition and restrain Syrian air attacks. Looks to us like both the Pentagon and CIA were right. The White House and State Department were wrong. It didn't work in Hasakah.

Assad scored a small victory in the six-year civil war. His forces [negotiated](#) the withdrawal on August 26, 2016 with the long-held rebel opposition in a Damascus suburb, Darayya. In a deal struck between the rebels and Assad forces, the former will surrender heavy weapons and 700 fighters will be bused up to Idlib province. The remaining 8,000 civilians, now homeless, were left to fend for themselves seeking sanctuary elsewhere. The irony is Darayya was where the opposition to Assad erupted nearly six years ago, sparking the now stalemated civil war.

However, Assad may not have support for long, given the reshuffling of interests in the conflict area. It also may mean that the Syrian Kurdish quest for autonomy could be stifled, once again. This despite the YPG – led Syrian Defense Force and their Iraqi Kurdish Peshmerga brethren having demonstrated they are the best boots on the ground combating the Islamic State. The Kurds are resolute and determined in their quest for autonomy and independence in both West (Syria) and South (Iraq) Kurdistan. Now it appears the two world powers, the US and Russia, have dashed that hope.

On August 29, 2016, the White House announced that President Obama and Turkish President Erdogan will [meet](#) on the sidelines in China September 4th at the G 20 Summit. The issue on the table is Turkey's incursion into Syria directed at pushing back the Kurdish led Syrian Democratic Force. Deputy National Security Advisor Ben Rhodes said that action blocks a unified front endeavoring to defeat ISIS. Let's see how this develops.

For more informed discussion on this issue [Listen](#) to this Lisa Benson Show podcast, August 28, 2016: "U.S. Russia Syria-Iran-Turkey-Israel: The Tectonic Policy Shift"

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