

In Syria, Who's On First?

by Hugh Fitzgerald



President Trump surprised and dismayed many when he announced in late December that he would be pulling out the last remaining American troops – 2,000 Special Forces – from Syria. He said at the time that ISIS in Syria had been defeated, and that it was time to bring the troops home. Many of his critics in Washington were most alarmed about what such a pullout would mean for the YPG, the Kurdish People's Protection Units that have been America's closest and most effective ally against ISIS. For with the Americans gone, who would protect the YPG forces against an attack by Erdogan's army? The Turkish army was massed at the border with Syria and, it seems, was ready to attack the Syrian Kurds of the YPG, which, Erdogan insists, is a "terrorist" group closely allied with the Kurdish PKK in Turkey. The PKK has been deemed a terrorist organization by many nations – though not by, among others, Russia, China, Switzerland, and Egypt – including fellow members of NATO, clearly under Turkish pressure to demonstrate solidarity. But there is no evidence

that the YPG itself has been responsible for any terrorist attacks.

What has happened since Trump's announcement is that the Kurds, feeling betrayed, have done the best they can to protect themselves. First, the Kurds have received the American military's permission to keep their American-supplied weaponry, including artillery and anti-tank missiles. The Kurds will remain well-armed; the Americans will see to that. Erdogan is said to be 'incensed' at that decision. But he has few friends in the Pentagon, and no one seems inclined to humor him further. Besides, it would be practically impossible to retrieve all that weaponry – some of which has been lost or destroyed in combat, some of which may have been hidden by the Kurds who quite rightly understand that those weapons may save their lives.

Having declared that ISIS was "defeated," and even that it has "been wiped out," President Trump has revised his claim, and now says that ISIS is confined to a very small pocket of territory in Syria. His visit to Iraq may have caused him to reconsider how swiftly to remove the troops from Syria. American officers whom he met in Iraq must have reminded him that ISIS remains a threat. Upon his return, he said that the American troops in Iraq – none are being removed – could, if necessary, be called upon to operate in Syria as well.

In the New Year, the American troops are still in Manbij, but preparing to leave. Soon to be deprived of their American support, and infuriated by that loss, the Kurds have made alternative arrangements. They have asked the Syrian army of Bashar al-Assad to enter Manbij to replace the Americans. It is still unclear if, once the Syrian army does take over Manbij, whether the YPG forces will leave entirely. Ideally, from the Kurds' point of view, the Syrian army, which is now poised on the outskirts of the city, will enter it, and serve as a buffer between the Turkish troops that threaten to invade, and any remaining Kurds.

Erdogan has said that “once the terrorist organizations [the Kurdish YPG] leave the area [of the city of Manbij], we will have nothing left to do.” He is nonetheless keeping Turkish troops massed at the border. Meanwhile, the Kurds have not left the city, even though the Syrian army claims to have entered it (a claim the Americans deny) – and it’s unclear what the Kurds intend to do, and when.

Meanwhile, the American pullout from Syria appears to have been put on pause – Trump having apparently reconsidered how rapidly to pull the 2,000 troops out, given the furor his out-of-the-blue announcement has caused, including the resignation of General Mattis, the dismay of the Pentagon, and the vocal criticism of Senator Lindsey Graham. Russian- and Iranian-backed Syrian opposition forces now in the south and southeast of Manbij also complicate the mix.

Will the Syrians finally enter Manbij? And if they do, will the Kurds remove themselves, or will they now feel safe enough to remain? Or will some leave, in the hope that that will satisfy Erdogan, and some remain to ensure the safety of Kurdish civilians? If the Kurds do not withdraw completely, Erdogan has said he would attack Manbij. But if the Syrian army is there, along with a remnant of the Kurdish YPG, wouldn’t Erdogan unavoidably also engage the Syrians? He is volatile, hyper-aggressive, given to eruptions of anger, and he might be sufficiently enraged by this unforeseen obstacle, the Syrian Army, as to want to push out both the Kurds and the Syrian forces meant to protect them.

Assad is much more calculating than the volcanic Erdogan. His army, now certain of its victory in the civil war, is eager to take control of the final territories that they have not repossessed – those under Kurdish control. The Syrian army need not conquer them; it’s enough if it holds itself out as the Kurds’ protector. It would not take kindly to threats from Erdogan. Turks are disliked by the Syrians for two reasons that long predate the civil war. First, the Syrians still rage

about the Turks incorporating the province of Alexandretta into Turkey in 1939; the Syrians regard Alexandretta as an integral part of Syria. Second, there is the historical memory of how badly the Ottoman overlords treated the Arabs, including those of Syria.

If the Turks were to attack, and defeat, the Syrian army, could Syria's greatest ally, Iran, afford to let Assad lose? Wouldn't a Turkish victory over Assad's army at this point re-energize the Syrian opposition forces to carry on the fight against Assad, just when all seemed lost? The Iranians cannot afford to let their Syrian ally be mauled by the more powerful Turks, and would feel compelled to intervene. Hezbollah fighters, too, that have already been fighting for years on Assad's side against the Syrian opposition forces, could join their Iranian backer, in supporting the Syrian army against the Turks.

To recapitulate these dizzying possibilities: A campaign by the Turks to empty Manbij of Kurds could become a wider war, with the Turks also fighting the Syrians in Manbij who arrived at the request of, and in order to protect, the Kurds. And that, in turn, could widen the war still further, if the Iranians (and Hezbollah) then feel compelled to help Assad's army avoid a near-certain defeat at the hands of the powerful Turkish army. A continuing series of Iranian-Turkish clashes could, ideally, use up men, money, materiel, and morale, on both sides – Erdogan's re-islamized Sunni Turkey, and Ayatollah Khamenei's Shi'a Iran.

Of course, none of this may happen. It may be that all the Kurdish YPG forces will leave Manbij without a hitch once the Syrian army enters the city. And that may indeed be enough to satisfy Erdogan. But the scenario of an ever-widening conflict, involving ever more players, is not far-fetched. Look at the Syrian Civil War itself. What started in March 2011 as a simple protest about some boys who had been detained and tortured for writing graffiti in support of the Arab

Spring then metamorphosed into an eight-year-old conflict causing one quarter – 5.5 million – of the population to flee, another quarter to become internally displaced, and also resulted in several hundred billion dollars in physical destruction. Though the war began as a purely Syrian affair, the conflict soon became one in which the forces of Turkey, Iran, Russia, America, ISIS, the Kurds, Hezbollah, and Israel were all involved.

The victors in a Turkey-Iran war inside Syria would not be any of the participants. The real victors would be the United States and the rest of the West, as the two militarily most powerful Muslim countries continued to pummel one another, with no foreseeable end in sight. It would be like the Iran-Iraq war, which was such a boon to the West, for eight years (1980-1988) using up the aggressive energies of both Saddam Hussein's Iraq and of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Would that such a war between Turkey and Iran, were it to come to pass, goes on for a similarly long time, and does such damage to their domestic economies as to erode the public support for, and stability of, both the Turkish and the Iranian regimes. A double comeuppance devoutly to be wished.

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