

# Turkey's Operation in Syria and the Future of the Syrian Civil War

Written by Burak Cop

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BURAK COP, SEP 26 2016

A bloody attempt to topple Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's 14-years rule failed in the mid-July after leaving more than 250 dead behind. It has rapidly become obvious that the main body of perpetrators consisted of the followers of the Islamic cleric Fethullah Gülen who has been in the USA since 1999. Gülen is a former ally of Erdoğan's AKP government and his allies are known to be Western-friendly. The Gülen Movement has always emphasized dialogue between religions and has built an enormous network of schools and universities in more than 100 countries. The relations between the AKP and Gulenists began to sour in 2012 and an open conflict broke out in December 2013. Following the failed coup, a number of AKP officials and pro-government Turkish media pointed to the American government as the backer of the attempt. Additionally the fact that the American officials seem unwilling to extradite Gülen strained Turkish-American relations.

However, no sound evidence has been presented by the Erdoğan regime about the American complicity in the 15 July military coup attempt. The Turkish military intervention in Syria known as "Euphrates Shield" by the loyalist remnants of the Turkish Armed Forces' (TAF's) which began on 24 August with the Obama Administration's approval and support showed that the Turkish government's anti-American rhetoric's only aims domestic public opinion.

The peculiar coup attempt has been followed by the cross-border operation of the TAF. Although Erdoğan's AKP government is one of the prominent actors which destabilized Syria by fuelling jihadist groups which were expected to topple the Baath regime in favour of an Islamist rule, it has never been keen to occupy Syrian soil. Five months ago President Obama was reported to express his disappointment regarding Erdoğan in this respect:

Obama acknowledged that he initially viewed Erdogan, mistakenly, as the sort of moderate Muslim leader who would bridge the divide between East and West — but Obama now considers him a failure and an authoritarian, one who refuses to use his enormous army to bring stability to Syria.

The Erdoğan regime refrained from sending troops across Turkey's southern border in the first five years of the Syrian civil war, but changed its mind right after the failed coup.

The American share in the Euphrates Shield (Vice President Biden backed the operation and declared that the US provided aerial support) that facilitated Turkey's military manoeuvre is so visible that the presence of the US troops on the ground caused a crisis between the American and Turkish officials on the one hand, and some components of the Free Syrian Army (FSA), Turkey's ally, on the other. The FSA is actually a cover name that gathers a number of –mostly "moderate" jihadist– armed groups under Turkey's sponsorship. Some of these factions objected to side with the American soldiers during the operation. Two meetings between the FSA chiefs, Turkish and American officers, and Turkish intelligence agents held on 16 and 17 September proved fruitless. As a result, six factions of the FSA accepted to proceed with the operation whereas 4 other factions withdrew.

Does the split within this rather artificial organization (the FSA has actually lost ground to the jihadist groups originated from or linked to Al Qaeda and has been outnumbered by them since 2013, therefore its central command

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has already dispersed) imply an early failure for the Turkish government? It's hard to say. Compared to the Islamic State's (IS) and Kurdish-dominated Syrian Democratic Forces' (SDF) military strengths, the FSA is an organization suffering from incompetence. "[T]hose groups can hardly advance on the battlefield without close support from Turkish armored units", notes Gürsel, and adds:

The Sept. 2 reports that IS recaptured four villages from the FSA at al-Rai were followed by Turkish armored units entering Syria from the same area and opening a second front the very next day. This timing was hardly a coincidence.

Here arise two factors that may drag Turkey into quagmire and make the Syrian civil war more complicated than ever: First, the likelihood of a confrontation with Kurdish troops and even with Syrian forces and their allies. Second, the possible outcomes of a prospective American-Russian friction over Syria which may make Turkish troops on Syrian soil more unwelcome than the present times.

The first one is already on the table as a risk factor since the very first day of the Operation Euphrates Shield. The USA's support and Russia's silent approval for the operation is conditional to TAF's offensive against the IS only. However, Turkish officials, including Erdoğan himself, stated many times that preventing the SDF (or the YPG, the Kurdish main component of the SDF) from taking control of the entire Turkish-Syrian border is a major objective of the operation.

Erdoğan announced that the objective of the operation is to take control of a strip stretching to a 40 to 45 kilometres depth. This means the Turkish government plans to occupy the strategic towns of Al Bab and Manbij. The latter is under the SDF's control and trying to take over these two towns will inevitably intensify TAF's warfare against the IS and instigate a bitter combat with the SDF. In addition to the human cost Turkey will face in this case, many scenarios will come to the table: Confronting the Syrian regime's and its allies' forces over and above the IS and SDF as Turkish army moves deeper in Syria and/or being forced to advance to Raqqa, the IS stronghold, due to strategic necessities and USA's "encouragement".

Turkey's willingness to confront the SDF that has been mentioned above is the first factor that may mess things up. The second factor is the fragility of the American-Russian cooperation efforts over Syria and its prospective outcomes that may undermine the diplomatic strength of the Operation Euphrates Shield. The recent truce in Syria, sponsored by both superpowers, could not last long. The bombing of the Syrian troops by US aircrafts "by mistake" which resulted in the death of nearly 100 soldiers rose the tension once again. The more the distance between the USA and Russia increases, the more Turkey's manoeuvre in Syria is likely to lack diplomatic support.

The Turkish government seeks to avoid the formation of a "Kurdish belt", i.e. the connection of the two Kurdish-administrated geographical entities to each other with the occupation of the disputed area in between by Kurdish fighters, that will cut its contact with the Arab Middle East (because the Turkish-Syrian border will then become Turkish-Kurdish border) and encourage the Kurdish national movement (and its armed wing PKK) which is an effective political force in Turkey. However, Erdoğan and his allies need to come to terms with the reality that the only way to foster Syrian national unity is to have cordial relations with Syrian Arab Republic, the sole legitimate authority on Syrian soil.

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