

How Turkey's Invasion of Syria Backfired on Erdogan

by Patrick Cockburn via stella - CounterPunch *Wednesday, Oct 16 2019, 7:00pm*

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Turkey's Syrian venture is rapidly turning sour from President Erdogan's point of view. The Turkish advance into northeast Syria is moving slowly, but Turkey's military options are becoming increasingly limited as the Syrian Army, backed by Russia, moves into Kurdish-held cities and towns that might have been targeted by Turkish forces.



Would be Sultan, Erdogan

It is unlikely that Mr Erdogan will risk taking on Syrian government troops, even if they are thin on the ground, if this involves quarrelling with Russia. In the seven days since he launched Operation Peace Spring, Turkey has become more diplomatically isolated than Ankara might have envisaged when President Trump appeared to greenlight its attack.

A week later after that implicit okay of Turkey's offensive, Mr Trump is imposing [economic sanctions](#) on Ankara after a wild zig-zag in US policy - bizarre even by Trumpian standards.

Almost the entire world is condemning the Turkish invasion and, having achieved the objective of eliminating the Kurdish statelet of Rojava, Turkey will have great difficulty in making any more gains.

"Now that the [Kurds](#) and Damascus have come to an agreement, I do not think that Ankara will dare to open a new front against Assad forces," writes the highly informed Turkish military commentator Metin Gurcan.

Even token numbers of Syrian troops in cities like Manbij and Kobani close to the Euphrates, and Qamishli and Hasakah close to the Iraqi border, will leave Turkish soldiers and allied Arab militiamen confined to a rectangle of territory between the towns of Ras al-Ayn and Tal-Abyad, possibly extending 20 miles south to the M4 highway - which is the strategic spine of Rojava. The Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) have avoided costly engagements, but could become more of a threat if backed by Syrian army artillery and tanks.

This is all very different from 18 months ago when the Turkish army and Arab militiamen invaded the Kurdish-populated zone of Afrin north of Aleppo and ethnically cleansed its population.

None of this was particularly secret and bands of al-Qaeda and Isis-linked Arab gunmen, which were under Turkish control, posted videos of themselves persecuting Kurds and looting their houses and shops. Human rights groups confirmed and publicized the abuses of the Turkish-led occupation forces, but this appeared to have little impact on the wider world.

The international media was largely focused on similar atrocities being carried out by the Syrian government in besieged Eastern Ghouta in Damascus and had no time for what was happening in Afrin.

This time round the international media treatment of the present Turkish invasion of northern Syria is very different from the disinterest it showed during Operation Olive Branch in Afrin.

Focus now is on the 160,000 Kurdish refugees fleeing the Turkish advance, publicity is given to the murder of prisoners by the pro-Turkish Arab militiamen, and mention is made of their Isis and al-Qaeda backgrounds.

President Erdogan and Turkey are, for the moment at least, replacing President Bashar al-Assad and his regime as the leading international pariahs.

Mr Trump's betrayal of the Kurds was so blatant and public that it provoked a wave of sympathy for the Syrian Kurds that they had never enjoyed before.

They were portrayed - with good reason - as the heroic conquerors of ISIS who had been thrown to Turkish and al-Qaeda-linked wolves by Mr Trump. In addition, there is an understandable fear that Mr Trump has given [Isis a new lease of life](#) just when it was on the verge of expiring.

Suddenly, there are pictures everywhere of ISIS captives fleeing their prisons as their Kurdish guards go to try to stem the Turkish advance. Mr Trump's suggestion that Turkey, which only a few years ago had tolerated the great influx of foreign ISIS fighters across its borders into the caliphate, would replace the Kurds in suppressing ISIS, provoked general derision and dismay.

In terms of domestic Turkish public opinion, the emphasis is still on Turkish military success, but, from now on, this will bring no political benefits to Mr Erdogan. He must try to operate without allies and is being squeezed by the US and Russia. Turkish troops and their Arab allies are still pushing forward, but Turkey has lost the diplomatic and propaganda wars. In the end, it will have no option but to declare a famous victory and retreat.

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