



Turkey's Syria offensive likely limited in scope, but will have big consequences

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Turkey's looming cross-border operation into northeast Syria is likely to be limited in scope and aimed at setting up observation posts to keep Kurdish forces away from the frontier.

But even a limited Turkish military incursion could still undermine the Kurds' ability to keep the remnants of Islamic State (ISIS) at bay and guard the thousands of jihadist fighters they currently hold.

"The Turkish invasion will be relatively small, but still consequential. They want to set up permanent observation posts and military bases in Syria," Aaron Stein, director of the Middle East Program at the Foreign Policy Research Institute, told Ahval.

U.S. forces in Syria are a part of a global coalition to counter ISIS. Congressional Republicans and Democrats alike fiercely criticised President Donald Trump's decision, citing concerns that it would produce a resurgence of the extreme jihadist group. To address such concerns, the White House emphasised in a statement on Sunday that "Turkey will now be responsible for all ISIS fighters" captured in northern Syria.

But ISIS is not a priority for Turkey, Stein said. "What matters first for Turkey is breaking U.S. relations with the [Syrian Democratic Forces] and second is to gain a physical presence in the area," he said.

Even if Turkey were willing and prepared to take responsibility for containing ISIS in Syria, it is unclear how this could happen. Turkey's primary opponent in Syria, the U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), manages the detention of as many as 11,000 captured jihadists, including some 2,000 foreign fighters, with coalition support.

The most recent report by the Lead Inspector General for Operation Inherent Resolve, the U.S. counter-ISIS mission, highlighted that "the SDF does not have the capability to indefinitely detain thousands of ISIS fighters."

Forced to redirect scarce resources towards a fight with Turkish forces, the SDF will be even less capable of continuing to secure detained ISIS fighters. They have already begun redeploying forces guarding ISIS prisoners to focus on defending the border from a Turkish incursion.

Turkey and the United States are NATO treaty allies, but they diverge in their assessments of the SDF and its core military arm, the Kurdish-led People's Protection Units (YPG). Ankara

considers the YPG to be an extension of the insurgent Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in Turkey, which the U.S. Department of State also designates as a terrorist organisation.

According to the United States, the YPG has been instrumental in the fight against ISIS, prompting U.S. officials and politicians to routinely label it and the broader SDF as key allies in the region, but it is not a formal treaty ally.

In contrast, "the general consensus in the U.S. is Turkey is a bad ally. We can't count on them for force planning," Stein said. The U.S. military must therefore develop contingency plans that go around Turkey.

Although the United States may be frustrated that Turkey is not acting like an ally on a number of critical issues, the two countries remain formally bound by NATO's principle of collective defence under Article 5.

"If, under the NATO treaty, Ankara declared those SDF forces on their border to be a mortal threat, it would be reasonable for them to expect the United States to back them to the hilt," said Christopher Preble, vice president for defence and foreign policy studies at the Cato Institute.

Among Trump's bipartisan critics on the issue, Senator Mitt Romney (R-UT) and Senator Chris Murphy (D-CT) released a joint statement Monday saying the president's decision, "severely undercuts America's credibility as a reliable partner and creates a power vacuum in the region that benefits ISIS".

The security situation in Syria remains precarious, but concerns about the damage to perceptions of U.S. reliability as a partner may be overstated.

"A failure to defend a nominal ally (the SDF) against a formal treaty ally (Turkey) would not necessarily signal to a very different formal treaty ally (e.g. Poland) that the U.S. would not honour its commitments," Preble said.

The Combined Air Operations Center (CAOC) in Qatar, which provides command and control for airpower in the U.S. Central Command region, removed Turkey from its air tasking order (ATO) and cut off its access to the coalition intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) feed. The state-run Anadolu Agency reported that this effectively cuts Turkey out of Syrian airspace, making it harder for Turkey to launch an offensive.

However, according to Stein, removing Turkey from the ATO and cutting off access to the ISR feed does little to deter a Turkish incursion. "They can fly into Syria any time they want. The U.S. will not shoot down Turkish air forces," he said. "They don't need our ISR feeds to conduct operations in the border region."

The cutting off all support to Turkey serves a more political rather than practical function. The Pentagon "is signalling it will not be complicit in a Turkish operation," Stein said.

Jonathan Hoffman, the Pentagon's chief spokesman, said in a statement on Monday that "The Department of Defense made clear to Turkey - as did the president - that we do not endorse a Turkish operation in Northern Syria."

To address the uncertain situation in Syria, Erdoğan will visit Washington on Nov. 13 at Trump's invitation.

