

Turkey's Erdogan Pivots to Target U.S.-Backed Force in Syria

By Elizabeth Teoman and Jennifer Cafarella with Bradley Hanlon

Key Takeaway: *Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan is preparing to attack America's local partner in northern Syria on two fronts along the Turkish border. Russia and the Bashar al Assad regime support his planned operation, which could constrain the U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) to the eastern bank of the Euphrates River and possibly neutralize American plans to build an SDF-linked "border security force." Erdogan's escalation is consistent with the Institute for the Study of War's September 2017 [forecast](#) that Turkey will conduct new military operations against U.S.-backed forces.*

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan pivoted from blocking Russia in northern Syria's Idlib Province to preparing an attack against the U.S. partner force. Erdogan [announced](#) his intent to attack the U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) at a political event in Turkey on January 13. He stated Turkish forces will attack two SDF-held areas along the Turkish border within one week unless Syrian Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG), which dominate the SDF, withdraw. The areas Erdogan intends to attack are a zone of YPG control northwest of Aleppo City called the "Afrin canton" and the town of Manbij, northeast of Aleppo City. Erdogan deployed reinforcements to the front line between Turkish troops and the YPG in Afrin and began a [military buildup](#) across the Turkish border on January 14. Turkish forces and Turkish-backed Syrian opposition groups renewed [shelling](#) YPG-held areas on January 13, provoking [return fire](#). Erdogan does not face internal obstacles to launching offensive operations against the SDF and [claimed](#) the operation can "start at any time" on January 15. Erdogan will likely seek the formality of the Turkish National Security Council's (MGK) approval during the next meeting on January 17, however.

Erdogan has been preparing to attack the YPG for nearly one year. Erdogan regards the YPG as a Syrian branch of the Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK), which is waging an insurgency in Turkey. Erdogan has consistently reiterated his [intent](#) to remove what he refers to as the YPG's "terror corridor" along Turkey's southern border. He [intervened militarily](#) in mid-2016 to block further YPG gains and prepare future options. He began preparing for renewed military operations against Afrin in March 2017, when Prime Minister Binali Yildirim [announced](#) the conclusion Turkey's Operation Euphrates Shield in Syria and suggested Turkey would launch future operations. Turkish troops [deployed](#) into northwestern Syria to secure the front line between the YPG and Turkish-backed opposition groups west of Aleppo City in October 2017 in order to prepare for future operations against YPG forces in Afrin. Erdogan meanwhile [built up](#) his opposition proxy force north of Aleppo City in order to prepare for future operations against Manbij.

Turkey is now taking pre-emptive action to block the U.S. from further solidifying the SDF in power. Turkey is prepared to seize SDF territory to mitigate the effect of U.S. policy in Syria, or, in Erdogan's ideal scenario, to reverse it. U.S. officials announced plans to build a "[Border Security Force](#)" from the SDF [in late 2017](#) and stated that the U.S. [intends](#) to make the SDF into a "[model for a future Syria.](#)" Erdogan views the conversion of the SDF into a stabilization force as a fundamental threat to Turkish national security and Turkey's interests in Syria. Turkey [condemned](#) the U.S. policy as "absolutely impossible" for Turkey to accept. Erdogan plans to take pre-emptive action to prevent the U.S. from transitioning the SDF into a durable stabilization force. He will also use the operation to gain domestic support among the Turkish nationalist electorate ahead of Turkey's presidential election in 2019. The Institute for the Study of War [warned](#) on November 21, 2017 that Erdogan would become even more aggressively anti-U.S. as he campaigns for re-election.

Russia and the Assad regime are backing Erdogan's play out of a shared desire to thwart U.S. policy. Russian Foreign Minister Sergey [Lavrov](#) and other Russian officials [condemned](#) the U.S. for "provocations" against Turkey on January 14 and 15. Russian state-controlled media has [framed](#) the U.S. plan to build the "Border Security Force" as an instigator of Turkish aggression. Russia's rhetoric is consistent with [Turkish messaging](#) and helps legitimize Erdogan's operations. Russian forces are deployed along front lines in both Afrin and Manbij, and will likely withdraw. The Assad regime has also [condemned](#) the U.S. policy as an attack on Syrian sovereignty and appeared to [condone](#) a Turkish operation. Russia will attempt to exploit Turkey's operation for its own gain and to further strengthen the Assad regime. Russia may draw back to and reinforce its positions in the Menagh Airbase and Tel Rifaat, north of Aleppo City, which provide leverage it can use to attempt to thwart possible future Turkish-backed efforts to contest pro-regime control of Aleppo City. Russia will likely seek to create a new security arrangement with Turkey that protects its interests in Aleppo City and the surrounding countryside after the operation, if it occurs. Lavrov [called](#) on Turkish forces to establish up to twenty observation points on January 15 as part of the '[de-escalation](#)' agreement between Russia, Iran, and Turkey. Lavrov's statement indicates that Russia will continue to drive Turkey to become a security guarantor in northern Syria in order to enable Russia to leverage great-power negotiations to solve local problems in Syria.

Erdogan's previous intervention in Idlib Province, south of Afrin, set conditions for his pivot against the U.S. Erdogan [applied constraints](#) on the scale of a current pro-regime push in Idlib Province by raising pro-regime military costs and proposing that Turkey and pro-regime forces refocus on their common interest against the U.S. in Syria. Erdogan [provided](#) armored vehicles and advanced [weapons systems](#) to

Syrian opposition forces [fighting alongside](#) Hay'at Tahrir al Sham (HTS), the successor of al Qaeda's affiliate in Syria. Turkish support enabled these forces to [reverse](#) some pro-regime gains from January 11-15 and inflict higher [casualties](#) on pro-regime forces. Russia pivoted away from escalation with Turkey and [back towards](#) escalation with the U.S. after [Putin spoke](#) with Erdogan via phone on January 11. Russian media had [shifted](#) blame for a January 6 drone attack on Russia's airbase in Hmeimim on the Syrian coast from the U.S. to Turkey on January 11 as Russia and Turkey escalated in Idlib. Putin later [absolved](#) Erdogan of responsibility, and Russian media resumed its campaign to implicate the U.S. Erdogan and Putin's deal appears limited to northwestern Syria despite Erdogan's effort to include the Syrian capital, however. Putin has not conceded to [Erdogan's demand](#) for a halt to pro-regime operations in Damascus.

The YPG is unlikely to accept the loss of Afrin and Manbij. The YPG was on track to deepen its relations with the U.S. after the U.S. [decided](#) in late 2017 to remain in Syria and [increase](#) U.S. support to the YPG-dominated SDF. The YPG views Manbij and Afrin as critical components of its statelet in northern Syria. The YPG rebuked Russia's effort to coopt it by inviting its political wing to participate in international negotiations. Such negotiations have excluded YPG-linked groups to date. A YPG-linked political leader in the SDF, Aldar Khalil, publicly [rejected](#) Russia's offer to participate in upcoming negotiations, accusing Russia of holding them for "show." The YPG may recalculate its alignment with the U.S. if the U.S. does not take action to prevent a Turkish attack, however. The YPG is posturing as if it will retaliate against a Turkish strike. Kurdish leaders in Afrin [affirmed](#) that YPG forces are "not responsible" for the outcome if they are forced to exercise their right to self-defense. The YPG has also reportedly [reasserted](#) military control over Manbij and [accused](#) Turkey of provoking anti-YPG demonstrations on January 14. The YPG has a range of options for how to respond to an outright ground attack. YPG forces could try to strike a deal with Russia that contains the scale of the Turkish operations. The YPG could also simply choose to fight back. Possible most dangerous escalation paths include YPG support to the PKK insurgency in Turkey.

A change in U.S. policy is required to achieve a viable "post-ISIS" political-security structure in northern Syria. The U.S. shares long-term interests with Turkey in Syria that include containing and reducing Iran's proxy buildup and reaching a negotiated settlement of the war in accordance with the [2012 Geneva Communiqué](#). Near-term U.S. policies remain out of alignment with these long-term goals, however. The result is a perpetual showdown with Turkey reflected in increasingly incompatible American- and Turkish-backed structures. The U.S. should reconsider plans to develop the border security force and offer to restart a diplomatic engagement with Turkey over a "post-ISIS" stabilization strategy that re-aligns the U.S. and Turkey. The U.S. must redline the involvement of al Qaeda and affiliated groups, which Turkey has been willing to enable

and, in some cases, support. The U.S. can still find common ground with Turkey, however. The U.S. should pursue technical talks on the ultimate merger of American-backed and Turkish-backed structures. The U.S. should consider committing to the following in order to incentive Turkey to choose engagement over escalation: negotiations on the composition of a future border security force that leverages both American-backed and acceptable Turkish-backed forces, providing guarantees that acceptable Turkish-backed opposition parties can participate politically in Raqqa, and U.S. or international action to hold the SDF accountable for upholding human rights and inclusive governance.

POC: Jennifer Cafarella, Senior Intelligence Planner

Jcafarella@understandingwar.org

(202) 293-5550 (ext. 217)



JennyCafarella