

US plan for Kurdish force in Syria pushes alliance with Turkey to breaking point

Thomas Seibert

Washington

Turkey's ties with the United States are strained to a breaking point over US plans to maintain a Kurdish force in northern Syria and amid preparations by Ankara to send its soldiers across the border into a Syrian-Kurdish area.

Ankara warned that damage to bilateral relations could be far-reaching. Turkey Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu told US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson that the developments could hurt Turkish-American ties "in an irreversible manner."

The row erupted over reported US plans to build a "border force" of up to 30,000 fighters dominated by Syrian Kurds to secure northern Syria. President Recep Tayyip Erdogan spoke of a US-led "terror army" that had to be crushed before it could do any harm.

At the same time, the Turkish Army shelled positions of Kurdish fighters near the north-western Syrian city of Afrin, close to the Turkish border. Reports in Turkey said the military sent tank units and troops to the border near Afrin, which has been under Kurdish control since 2012. An armed intervention by his country in Afrin could start "at any moment," Erdogan said.

A senior US State Department official said Washington did not believe "a military operation serves the cause of regional stability, Syrian stability or indeed Turkish concerns about the security of their border." The official called Turkey's moves "destabilising."

Tillerson tried to calm the issue by saying some US officials "mis-spoke" when talking about the Kurdish force. The unit was not a "border force" but was there to "ensure that local elements are pro-

viding security to liberated areas." That explanation failed to satisfy Turkey, however. Ankara sees any US-backed Kurdish fighting force of any significance as a national security threat.

Observers said the dispute demonstrates that US goals in Syria are incompatible with Turkey's priorities. "The problem for Turkey is that America has sided with Kurdish nationalism" in Syria, said Joshua Landis, director of the Centre for Middle East Studies at the University of Oklahoma. He added that Washington was unlikely to change course because the administration was determined to use its alliance with Syrian Kurds to block Iranian influence in Syria. "Turkey is collateral damage," Landis said.

Turkey and the United States, two NATO countries whose alliance goes back decades, have been at odds over Syria and other issues for years but have succeeded in preventing their differences from poisoning their overall relationship. That seems to be changing. The Erdogan government and the pro-government media increasingly describe the United States as an adversary determined to follow policies that harm Turkey.

● The escalating row over Syria could have long-term consequences for Turkish-American ties.

"A country – which we call our ally – is insisting on having an army of terror along our border despite our objections, warnings and well-meaning advice," Erdogan said.

The Turkish leader called on the United States not to position itself between Turkey and a "gang of murderers," a reference to the Syrian-Kurdish militia People's Protection Units (YPG). "Other-

wise we will not be responsible for any unwanted incidents that could emerge later," Erdogan said.

Washington sees the YPG as the most effective fighting force in northern Syria and as an indispensable partner in battling the Islamic State (ISIS). Turkey warns that the YPG is the Syrian affiliate of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), a group that has been fighting for Kurdish self-rule in Turkey since 1984 and is listed as a terrorist organisation by both Ankara and Washington.

The escalating row over Syria could have long-term consequences for Turkish-American ties. Howard Eissenstat, associate professor at St Lawrence University in New York and non-resident senior fellow at the Project on Middle East Democracy in Washington, said one group of policymakers in the United States was convinced that the relationship with Turkey was "worth protecting" but hawks in US political circles, especially in Congress, were determined to teach Ankara a lesson.

"They feel that Turkey has needlessly endangered the relationship and needs to be shown that this has costs," Eissenstat said in e-mailed remarks. The risk was "that miscalculation or miscommunication on either side risks throwing the whole relationship into a spiral that neither side really wants and could be costly for both."

Erdogan has been fanning the flames with belligerent rhetoric. Talking about what would be the third military intervention into Syria since 2016, the Turkish leader said Turkey would "get rid of terror nests one by one in Syria starting with Afrin and Manbij," a city east of Afrin. An intervention could lead to clashes between the Turkish Army, NATO's second largest fighting force after the US military, and America's YPG allies.

Turkey has accused the United States of sending thousands of lor-



In the cross hairs. A fighter from the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) monitors the area of Afrin along Syria's northern border with Turkey, last June. (AFP)

ries full of arms and ammunition to the YPG. Ankara had hoped for a long time that American support for the Kurds would end with the military defeat of ISIS but a speech by Tillerson on January 17, in which the secretary of state spoke of a continued US military presence and the existence of the Kurdish force in northern Syria, indicated that Kurdish fighters there will continue to be equipped and backed by the United States.

Erdogan's tough talk came despite the fact that any ground intervention into Afrin would require a nod by Russia, the most powerful actor in the Syrian drama. Approximately 100 Russian soldiers are deployed in Afrin, the state-run Turkish news agency Anadolu reported.

Moscow has been trying to portray itself as a peace broker in Syria

more than two years after it sent its air force to support President Bashar Assad. A new Turkish intervention into Syria would be a blow for Russia's efforts to paint a picture of a country where the war is coming to an end. It is unclear whether the Kremlin would agree to a limited Turkish operation that would not endanger Russian servicemen.

YPG chief Sipan Hemo told the Kurdish news agency ANF his forces were determined to defend Afrin and Manbij. "Our forces will be able to cleanse the area from Erdogan's scourges, just as we were able to cleanse it from Daesh," Hemo said, using the Arabic acronym for ISIS. Anadolu, in a reference to the YPG, put the number of "terrorists" in Afrin at 8,000-10,000.

Viewpoint

Dispute over border forces in Syria could lead to further deterioration of Turkish-US ties



Tom Regan

is a regular contributor to The Arab Weekly and a columnist at factsandopinion.com.

When Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan spoke to US President Donald

Trump about the Syrian crisis in November, reports indicated that he thought he and Trump were more or less on the same page. After all, a couple of months before at the UN General Assembly in New York, Trump had referred to Erdogan as a "friend."

It seems, however, that Erdogan is learning what many in the United States already know: Being a friend of Trump and expecting friendship in return is probably a mistake.

Ever since that phone call, relations between the United States and Turkey have been on a downward plunge. It was hard to see how they could get much worse after a recent trial in New York in which a former Turkish-Iranian banker accused Erdogan of secretly supporting a scheme that bypassed American sanctions on doing business with Iran.

That point may have been reached January 14 when the US-led coalition in Syria announced that it was establishing a 30,000-strong border security

force in Syria composed primarily of members from the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), a group that Turkey sees as a terrorist organisation.

The coalition said half of the force would be composed of Kurdish and Arab SDF fighters and the other half would be new recruits. Media in the region reported that training was under way for the first 230 members of the force.

This new outfit would primarily work along the Turkish and Iraqi borders and within Syria along the Euphrates River. The Euphrates is considered a barrier between most of the territory seized by the SDF from the Islamic State (ISIS) and land held by the Russia-backed Assad regime.

If Erdogan had been paying more attention in November, he might have picked up on Trump's comment to him about "pending adjustments to the military support provided to our partners on the ground in Syria, now that the battle of Raqqa is complete."

Erdogan reacted furiously to the coalition's announcement.

"A country we call an ally is insisting on forming a terror army on our borders," Erdogan said. "What can that terror army target but Turkey? Our mission is to strangle it before it's even born."

Syrian President Bashar Assad matched Erdogan's anger, if not his rhetoric, by calling the US plan a "blatant attack on Syrian sovereignty." Syria has promised to drive out all vestiges of any US-supported Kurdish forces. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov described the creation of the border force as a direct provocation.

Turkey is planning an attack on Afrin, a Kurdish-held town in Syria just on the other side of the Turkish border. Many see this as Erdogan's first move to remove what he sees as a Kurdish threat from the border area. This is also the place, however, where real problems could arise between Turkey and the United States.

There are 2,000 US troops serving in Syria, some stationed near Afrin, which the Trump administration has said will remain in the country until peace talks resolve the conflict. Most of the troops work with the SDF. If Turkey attacks Kurdish forces and kills American soldiers as part of any battle, it will surely escalate the already tension-filled relationship.

It seems the Turkish threat to attack Afrin had an effect. US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson back-pedalled on the idea of a "border security force," saying it was a mistake to call it that. After

meeting with Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu, Tillerson said: "It's unfortunate that entire situation has been mis-portrayed, misdescribed, some people misspoke," he said. "We are not creating a border security force at all."

Later the US military issued a statement saying: "These security forces are internally focused to prevent [ISIS] fighters from fleeing Syria. These forces will augment local security in liberated areas and protect local populations."

Basically, it's a semantic difference, a change in how the United States had previously described what it was doing. The question becomes is that semantic difference enough to placate the Turks?

After many decades of working together as allies, there is little chance of the Turkish-American relationship being repaired while Erdogan and Trump are in office. If relations deteriorate further, you could see the closure of the important US Air Force base in Adana and the United States would likely hit the Turkish banking system with crippling sanctions that would severely undermine the country's economy.

It's a scenario few want to see but one that may happen.

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