

## WHAT IS TURKEYS PLAN IN SYRIA?

Yayın Adı : Hürriyet Daily News  
İli : İstanbul

Periyod : Haftada 6 Gün  
Sayfa : 1

Tarih : 28.12.2018  
Tiraj : 5.756

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BAYRAKTAR

## What is Ankara's plan in Syria as war enters 8th year?

As we approach the eighth year of the Syrian civil war, we are witnessing very fast and dramatic developments on the field. The U.S. decision to withdraw from Syria will change the current balance of power radically.

Now, the Turkish decision to launch an operation to the east of River Euphrates, which triggered the U.S. to decide to withdraw, is on hold. No doubt, Turkey is preparing for a much more extensive operation.

When we look at the map we can see that Turkey was preparing itself for a limited operation in northern Syria. During the Euphrates Shield Operation in 2016, Turkey was aiming to reach the M4 motorway in Syria, which is about 30 kilometers deep into Syria, running parallel from the Turkish border and extending from Aleppo to the Iraqi border.

As Turkey controlled al-Bab city, the mission was accomplished partly. Partly because the next town on the road, Manbij, remained in the hands of the YPG-PYD, under the name of Manbij Military Council, affiliated with the PKK terrorist organization.

It is not hard to guess that when President Recep Tayyip Erdogan signaled a new operation on Dec. 12, he implied Manbij first to close that chapter and control the M4 corridor at the west bank of the river. Therefore, we can say that Turkey's original plan was to clean the corridor until the M4 highway along the entire border.

It is clear that after suffering the worst and the most systematic wave of terrorist attacks in its history in 2016, Turkey cares about securing this corridor.

Turkey has both structural and conjectural problems about its Syrian border security. There is no need to mention the conjectural issues in detail.

The Baath regime lost its grip and the northern border cannot be controlled effectively. Armed groups and terrorists can operate along the border and infiltrate into Turkey.

The structural issue arises from the time the borders were drawn after World War I.

The border was drawn by the victors despite the facts on the ground. A railway was picked as a border, dividing not only towns or cities but also families and tribes between Turkey and Syria.

This loose structure has enabled all kind of smuggling possible, namely goods, arms, drugs and human trafficking. It is no surprise that for decades, people at the border made a living from smuggling.

Terrorist organizations have recently been using this infrastructure. Turkey seems determined to end this cycle and effectively control and close the border.

The wall at the border, electronic control systems, ditches, patrol way and other measures to tighten its grip at the border helped significantly during the last couple years. But the need to control the other side of the border is still there.

The days when people in Turkey's southern cities remained in fear in their homes because of ISIL missiles are not far. In the summer of 2016 scores of civilians lost their lives because of ISIL missiles sent from 14-15 km inside the Syrian border. This fear ended and their lives returned to normal after Turkey controlled a pocket with the Euphrates Shield operation. The same thing happened after Turkey took control of Afrin with Operation Olive Branch and stopped the YPG's deadly missiles into the

Turkish town of Reyhanli.

From this point of view, Manbij is a similar target of Turkey, to stop the YPG's exploitation of the city's human resources and its aim to make it a base for attacks against Turkey. So we can simply claim that Manbij is a priority in Turkey's original plans.

Similarly, it is clear that Turkey would want to control the corridor until the M4 motorway in the east of River Euphrates. Ayn al-Arab (Kobane), which is adjacent to Mürsitpinar, Tel Abyad, next to the Turkish town of Akcakale, and Ayn Isa, which is located just at the south of the M4 highway, will be targeted by the Turkish Armed Forces and the Free Syrian Army (FSA).

With the same logic, Turkey would like to clear two adjacent towns, Ras al-Ayn next to Ceylanpinar and Qamishlo near Nusaybin of terrorist organizations.

Controlling the Faysh Khabur (Fishabur) border gate is also a priority. Turkey would also target border passage points like Yaarobua and Umm Jaris to stop the traffic of militants and material from Telafer, Sinjar line.

All these are still important arguments for Turkey's possible operation. But after the deal between U.S. President Donald Trump and Erdogan, a broader window of risks and opportunities has opened.

The withdrawal of U.S. forces from Syria requires controlling beyond this corridor that I tried to define, the whole Jarablus-Cizre-Abu Kamal triangle. To do this there is a need of a much bigger plan and more resources than Turkey initially considered.

This planning actually may revive the promises to the Syrian opposition but has not materialized so far.

At the beginning of the civil war, the west formed the Friends of Syria platform in Tunisia and decided to support the opposition against Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, however, failed to fulfill promises in the field.

Later, Turkey moved to another path under the Astana Process with Russia and Iran for its own security. Now there is a chance to bring two initiatives together.

An opposition area, having territorial proximity to the east of Euphrates, supported by Turkey and the U.S. will strengthen the hand of the opposition at the negotiating table at a time when political talks top the agenda.

With right diplomatic moves, both the Geneva and Astana processes can be combined as a more promising platform. The major challenge here is to replace the YPG and PYD in the SDF with the FSA. The idea here is creating a politically strong opposition-controlled area to counterbalance Assad-controlled territory.

By supporting the Syrian opposition politically and militarily would not only meet Turkey's security needs but also will strengthen the political struggle of the long-time abandoned Syrian opposition groups in a meaningful territory.

By letting no political and military vacuum, Turkey and the U.S. can bring permanent peace and balance to Syria after years of bloody war.

This may sound like the Cold War to you, but yes, it can lay the foundation of maybe a federal Syria, composed of Russian supported pro-Assad Baathist West Syria and U.S.-supported opponent's Democratic East Syria.