

Trump reconsiders Syria withdrawal, strongly warns Turkey against military adventures



A handout photo made available by the US Army shows a US soldier overseeing members of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) as they demolish a YPG (People's Protection Units, a mainly-Kurdish militia in Syria) fortification and raise a Tal Abyad Military Council flag over the outpost as part of the security mechanism zone agreement, Syria, 21 September 2019. [Handout photo/EPA/EFE]

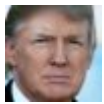
US President Donald Trump warned Turkey Monday (6 October) against going too far in Syria, one day after giving Ankara a green light to invade its southern neighbor, sparking panic among Washington's Kurdish allies.

The Pentagon pulled back only about two dozen of its forces from Syria's northern frontier, where they serve as a buffer between the Turkish military and the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces, after Trump's surprise announcement late Sunday that US forces "will no longer be in the immediate area."

At the news of US withdrawal, on Saturday Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan said a military incursion of Turkish troops into northeastern Syria was imminent.

But amid an outcry from the region and strong opposition at home from both Democratic and Republican lawmakers, the US leader appeared to reverse himself, though without drawing any specific red lines that might protect Kurdish allies.

“If Turkey does anything that I, in my great and unmatched wisdom, consider to be off-limits, I will totally destroy and obliterate the Economy of Turkey (I’ve done before!),” Trump tweeted.



Donald J. Trump@realDonaldTrump

As I have stated strongly before, and just to reiterate, if Turkey does anything that I, in my great and unmatched wisdom, consider to be off limits, I will totally destroy and obliterate the Economy of Turkey (I’ve done before!). They must, with Europe and others, watch over...

Other US officials, apparently surprised by Trump’s Sunday announcement, stressed that Washington will not actively support the long-threatened Turkish action, warning of destabilizing blowback to the region.

“The Department of Defense made clear to Turkey — as did the president — that we do not endorse a Turkish operation in Northern Syria,” said Pentagon spokesperson Jonathan Hoffman.

A senior State Department official said the United States would not “act militarily” to stop the Turks.

However, the official added, “We think this operation is a very bad idea. We do not think this operation will provide more security.”

Invasion could ‘come any night’

The region has been on edge for weeks over expected Turkish military operations across the border, which Erdoğan warned Monday could “come any night without

warning.”

It would threaten the Kurds who dominate the SDF militia, a crucial partner in the US-led coalition that defeated the Islamic State and currently controls much of northeastern Syria.

Turkey regards the SDF as a terror threat because it maintains ties to Kurdish militants inside Turkey, and it has vowed to crush them.

Ankara says it wants to establish a “safe zone” on the Syrian side of the border where it could send back some of the 3.6 million refugees from the eight-year civil war.

Kurds argue that Ankara’s goal is to dilute its dominance in the region with an influx of mostly Sunni Arab refugees.

IS fighters could be freed

Trump said via Twitter Monday that he wanted to extricate the United States from “endless and ridiculous wars.”

But a Turkish attack could force the SDF to free some 10,000 Islamic State fighters captured in battle over the past two years, potentially allowing them to reconstitute the violent jihadist group.

Trump declared that it would be the responsibility of Turkey and other countries to deal with the ISIS prisoners.

“Turkey, Europe, Syria, Iran, Iraq, Russia, and the Kurds will now have to figure the situation out, and what they want to do with the captured ISIS fighters in their ‘neighborhood.’”

Fearing yet another chapter of bloodshed and mass displacement, the United Nations said it was “preparing for the worst”.

EU position

The European Union warned that civilians would once again bear the brunt of a military assault.

“We call on Turkey to avoid any initiative that would run counter to the interests

of the global coalition” fighting IS in Syria, the French foreign ministry said in a statement.

Commission spokesperson Maja Kocijancic said that while recognizing Turkey’s legitimate security concerns, the EU has from the very beginning said that any sustainable solution to the Syria conflict will not be reached through military means, but requires a genuine political transition, in line with UN Security Council resolution 2254 and the 2012 Geneva communiqué negotiated by the Syrian parties within the UN-led Geneva process.

Renewed armed hostilities in the north-east will not only exacerbate civilian suffering and lead to massive displacement, but risk severely undermining current political efforts, she said.

“We continue to urge the Astana guarantors, which include Turkey, to ensure a cessation of hostilities, the protection of civilians and unhindered safe and sustainable humanitarian access through all of Syria”, she said.

The so-called Astana process, parallel to the UN-led Geneva process, is led by three “guarantor” countries, Turkey, Russia, and Iran.

Minimal US pullback

Washington officials minimized the pullback of troops that Trump had announced late Sunday.

The State Department official indicated that the number pulled back – out of as many as a thousand estimated in place along the border — was “two very small detachments” numbering about 25 people, who would move only a “very short distance.”

“We don’t want those troops to be there and thus send a signal that they are supporting the operation,” the officials said.

“Beyond that, there’s no change to our military posture in the northeast.”

Trenches and tunnels

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights war monitor confirmed Monday that US forces had departed key positions in Ras al-Ain and Tal Abyad, where Kurdish

forces have dug trenches and tunnels to defend against attack.

A US base in Ras al-Ain was empty of personnel on Monday, said an AFP photographer, who had seen troops there the night before.

SDF spokesman Mustefa Bali said Washington's decision "is about to ruin the trust and cooperation between the SDF and US."

The group noted it had already lost some 11,000 fighters in the fight against Islamic State.

"As the Syrian Democratic Forces, we are determined to defend our land at all costs," the group said.

'Prepare for war'

In Ras al-Ain on Sunday, local armed forces allied with the Kurdish administration stood behind dirt berms, monitoring the frontier.

They had covered streets in the town with large metal canopies to block the view of Turkish drones, sources there told AFP.

"The prudent should prepare for war," said Mustefa Bozan, a 79-year-old shopkeeper.

"The fate of the region will be the same as that of Afrin," 38-year-old Issam Daoud said, referring to a former Kurdish enclave captured by Turkish troops and Syrian rebels last year.

Source:

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