

# U.S. Military Options In Syria

Turkish forces continue to attack Kurdish fighters in northwest Syria. Former FBI counter-terrorism agent Ali Soufan talks with NPR's Michel Martin about how to preserve the U.S.'s relationship with both sides.

MICHEL MARTIN, HOST:

We're going to start the program today with a look at a number of important international stories. In a few minutes, we'll find out why more peacekeepers are being killed as they try to carry out their missions. But we're going to start in Syria, where two of the United States' biggest allies are on the opposite sides of an increasingly dangerous standoff. The United States has long relied on Turkey as a key ally in the Middle East and in Europe – it borders both. The U.S. has also relied on the help of ethnic Kurdish fighters in campaigns in Iraq and Syria. But now, Turkey is launching an assault against Syrian Kurds along their border and are demanding the U.S. stay out of the way. Just today, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said that 484 Kurds had been, quote, “neutralized” as part of Turkey's, quote, “Operation Olive Branch.”

To find out more about what all this means from an American perspective, we're joined now by Ali Soufan. He's a former FBI supervisory special agent who focused on issues surrounding international conflict. He's now the CEO of The Soufan Group. Welcome. Thank you so much for speaking with us.

ALI SOUFAN: Thank you, Michel.

MARTIN: So first of all, why is Turkey going after the Syrian Kurds along the Turkish southern border?

SOUFAN: Well, their support of the Kurdish militias on the border of Turkey has been problematic from the very beginning. And now after the so-called Islamic State has been defeated and the physical caliphate is no more, there is nothing – basically, there's no common denominator between Turkey's strategy in Syria and in the region and the United States' strategy in Syria and the region. And now, what we have is a Turkish policy that focuses on protecting what they fear – a threat that's going to come from the Kurdish militias on their borders versus the United States, where we were focusing specifically on the defeat of ISIS.

What we see today, Michel, is the theater, the conflict, the war in Syria is getting smaller and smaller. And with that, there are so many different goals and aims of all the members of the coalition. And this is just a manifestation - what's happening - the conflict between the United States and Turkey.

MARTIN: Remembering that the U.S. was allied closely with both groups in fighting ISIS, do I take it to be that that fight is largely finished and as a consequence of that - or is fighting ISIS still a concern in Syria?

SOUFAN: Well, I think fighting ISIS should still be a concern in Syria. You know, defeating the physical caliphate is only half of the battle. You know, we have to be sure that we have a strategy that prevent ISIS from coming back.

MARTIN: So Turkey is claiming that the U.S. is cutting off support for the Syrian Kurds, which in English, we - are known as the YPG. We have not been able to confirm that with the Pentagon or the White House or the State Department. No one has to our knowledge. And I'd like to ask you what you make of that claim.

SOUFAN: First of all, that airspace is controlled by the Russians, frankly. So Russia is allowing Turkey to bomb the Kurds. And then at the same time, they are promoting this idea that the United States, as an ally, cannot be trusted, and they are promoting the narrative that the United States - that we're giving up on the Kurds. I think Russia is playing a game where it's a win-win situation for them. You know, the Turkish supporting the Turkish campaign against the Kurds create a tension between two NATO allies, and that's good for Russia. Bombing the Kurds also create that narrative that Russia has been pushing for a while that the United States is not a trusted ally. And you know, if you wanted to bet diplomatically in the Middle East region on a force to help you, bet on the Russians, not on the Americans.

MARTIN: So President Trump has been in office for a year now. Needless to say, the facts on the ground are different. They have shifted over the course of the year. But broadly speaking, do you see a different strategy in Syria now than we saw under the Obama administration?

SOUFAN: No, I think - and this is part of the problem - I think what we witnessed under President Trump is just the evolution of the strategy that put in place under President Obama. But now with the defeat of the physical caliphate, with the destruction of ISIS and the liberation of Syrian territory to the most part from the

group, I think that strategy does not make any sense anymore. And now, we start seeing a diplomatic conflict and other – a military even conflict between the different allies because, you know, we need leadership.

Where are we going with Syria? Are we pushing diplomatically for a political solution? What's going to happen to the Kurds? What's going to happen to Assad? And unfortunately, I think we're a little bit behind the eight ball when it comes to this because our strategy has been and continued to be defeating ISIS and preventing ISIS from coming back. And that's fine and dandy. We need to do that. But also, we need to look at the bigger picture. We need to look at the geopolitical map. We need to look at, what's Iran doing? What's Turkey doing? What's Russia doing in the region? But I think, diplomatically, we're not there yet.

MARTIN: That's Ali Soufan. He's CEO of The Soufan Group. He's a former counterterrorism agent at the FBI, and we reached him in Washington, D.C. Ali Soufan, thank you so much for speaking with us today.

SOUFAN: Thank you, Michel.

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Source: <https://www.npr.org/2018/01/28/581460832/u-s-military-options-in-syria>

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