

Turkey's Euphrates Shield Military Intervention. Towards the Division of Northern Syria?

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On February 23, the Turkish Army and a coalition of pro-Turkish militant groups known as the Free Syrian Army (FSA) seized control of the key Syrian town of al-Bab. Al-Bab is located in the northern part of the Aleppo Province [about 36km northeast of Aleppo, about 26km south of border with Turkey], and had been remaining under ISIS control for over 2 years.

At the same day, Chief of the Turkish General Staff Hulusi Akar announced the goals set at the beginning of the Euphrates Shield operation in Syria were achieved. On February 27, Ilnur Cevik, adviser to Turkish President Recep Erdogan made a contrary statement, announcing that Turkey will end its military operation in Syria after the town of Manbij is captured. While there are serious doubts that the Turkish involvement into the Syrian crisis would be limited, the capture of al-Bab became an important victory for Ankara.

Al-Bab's strategic importance increased after the Syrian Democratic Forces, predominantly the Kurdish YPG, took Manbij which had served as an important ISIS logistical node for 2.5 years, helping transfer jihadists from Turkey to Syria and back, and also facilitating oil and arms shipments.

The Kurds also wanted to take Al-Bab to reassemble the fragmented Shahba canton (with a administrative center of Tal Rifaat and Manbij), consolidate the areas they control, and proclaim a Syrian Kurdistan as an independent country or a broad autonomy nominally within Syria.

In response, Turkey implemented Operation Euphrates Shield, with Turkish Army regular units and the FSA (Ahrar al-Sham, Sultan Murad Division, Jaysh al-Tahrir, al-Mu'tasim Brigade, Nour al-Din al-Zenki Movement, Descendants of Saladin Brigade, Hamza Division) are advancing on the city from the North with artillery and air support provided by Turkey. The Operation Euphrates Shield was launched on August 24, 2016 and since then Turkey-led forces seized control of the key towns of Jarabulus, Al-Rai and al-Bab, securing the Al-Bab-Azaz-Jarabulus triangle. According to estimates in open sources, the operation involved over 4,000 Turkish troops and some 7,000 members of pro-Turkish militant groups. 71 member of the Turkish Armed Forces and 515 pro-Turkish militants have been killed since the start of the operation. In turn, about 2,300 ISIS militants were killed by Ankara-led forces according to pro-Turkish sources.

From the Turkish perspective, preventing a Kurdish autonomy or an independent state runs to national interest. Any such Kurdish entity at the Syrian-Turkish border would heighten ethnic tensions in Turkey and escalate Turkish Kurds' armed campaign. Some experts

believe that several possible agreement frameworks between Turkey and Syria have already been drafted that would divide northern part of Aleppo province into Turkish and Syrian spheres of influence, while preserving the de jure status quo. Moreover, in spite of its significant military potential and position, Turkey is either ready or forced to negotiate with Damascus as an equal partner. The so-called “Astana Talks” involving Turkey, Iran, Russia, Syria and a pro-Turkish part of the so-called “Syrian opposition” are a clear example of this situation.

The US strategy in the conflict is one of the reasons of the current Ankara attitude. While the US-led coalition clearly supports Kurdish YPG units in Syria, Washington can't give Turkey ironclad guarantees that the Kurds won't proclaim a Syrian Kurdistan since it doesn't fully control the Kurds. The Supreme Kurdish Council (DBK) is split between the Kurdish National Council, which looks to Iraqi Kurds who are pro-US, and the Democratic Union (PYD) which is for broad autonomy within the Syrian state, but against a complete separation. However, the US cannot withdraw its support from the Syrian Kurds because in this case Washington will have no force to rely on the ground in Syria. Especially amid Trump's promises to deliver a devastating blow to ISIS in Syria which mean the intensification of the campaign in Raqqah.

The most important battle right now is ongoing on the diplomatic level where Turkey, Iran, Syria, the US and Russia are struggling to find a common ground which should allow to defeat ISIS and to solve the crisis. At the first look, it seems that Syrian-Russian-Iranian alliance prevails. One must, however, remember Erdogan's inconstancy, his expansionism, and the general style of Turkey's foreign policy. Nobody can guarantee that now when Al Bab and much of Aleppo province is taken, the Turkish government will not step up its support of militants in other parts of the province, using the FSA and “moderates” as cover. On February 26 and February 27, clashes between Turkish-backed militants and the Syrian army already took place near al-Bab. However, the full-scale escalation has not taken place yet. The military situation at the demarcation line between pro-Turkish and Syrian government forces will be a clear indication of the ongoing competition on the diplomatic level.

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