

Turkey's Move into Syria: Massacre of the Kurds, Overthrowing Rojava

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Global Research, August 31, 2016
[Socialist Project](#) 20 August 2016

Region: [Middle East & North Africa](#)
Theme: [Militarization and WMD](#)
In-depth Report: [SYRIA](#)

Turkey's incursion into northern Syria on 24 August was flagged up as a move to drive the so-called Islamic State (ISIS) out of the border town of Jarabulus. But that is just a cover: Turkey's not very secret major objective is to crush the 50,000-strong Kurdish YPG (People's Protection Unit) militia, and overrun the three autonomous Kurdish dominated areas, collectively called "[Rojava](#)" by the Kurds.

Two days into the Turkish invasion, Prime Minister Binali Yildirim stated bluntly that this operation would not be ended until Islamic State "[and other militants](#)" had been crushed. Already there are reports of fighting between Turkish-led forces and the YPG south of Jarabulus and thousands of Turkish troops massing on the border.

Turkey struck first toward Jarabulus because the government of Islamist president Recep Erdoğan was concerned that the town should not follow the example of Manbic (Manbij), where ISIS was driven out by the Syrian Democratic Forces alliance, which has the Kurdish YPG (Peoples Protection Units) at its core. This was a stunning military and political coup for the YPG.

Within Sight of the Turkish Border

Jarabulus lies within sight of the Turkish border, just on the western side of the Euphrates. A brief glance at a map reveals its strategic significance.

Erdoğan wants to do two things.

First, prevent the Kurdish YPG fighters from linking up two of the areas they control – Afrin canton on the west side and Kobani canton the east side of the Euphrates river. If these were linked, the Kurdish dominated area would form a contiguous area – effectively a mini-state – running alongside the Turkish border. On the other side of that border is Turkish Kurdistan, which the Kurds call 'north Kurdistan'. The possibility of a political link-up between Rojava and Turkish Kurdistan would be immediately on the agenda.

The second Turkish objective is to keep open the corridor to the south which has been essential for Turkey's supplies to Islamic State and other Islamist fighters it backs (and for oil going in the other direction from the ISIS-controlled oilfields).

Erdogan's road to intervening was cleared by two diplomatic coups. First he went three weeks ago to see Russian president Vladimir Putin. Doubtless Putin, acting as the agent of Syrian president Assad, assured him that the Russian-Syrian-Iranian axis do not support the

creation of a Kurdish-dominated autonomous region and would not interfere with Turkish action against the YPG and SDF.

More important perhaps was getting the U.S. to back off from its support for the Kurdish fighters. U.S. warplanes have provided cover for SDF-YPG action against ISIS. There have been U.S. Special Forces on the ground fighting with YPG units. This was only ever a short-term tactical alliance, one that the Obama government would obviously ditch the moment U.S. long-term political interests demanded it.

Turkey's medium term goal is to crush the [Kurdish YPG](#), widely seen as the Syrian Kurdish co-thinkers of the PKK ([Kurdistan Workers Party](#)) in Turkey. Erdogan's government also wants to definitively crush the three established cantons of Rojava. But it's not only Turkey that doesn't want a self-governing Kurdish area in Syria – this is also opposed by the Syrian government and all the significant Syrian rebel groups. Indeed one of the allegedly 'moderate' Syrian opposition groups, the [Free Syrian Army](#), is providing the ground troops alongside Turkish tanks and planes.

However some reports say local people recognized some ISIS fighters coming into the town with the Kurdish tanks. It certainly seems likely that ISIS were tipped off by the Turkish government and moved out to avoid a fight.

According to a [statement by the Executive Council of the Kurdistan National Congress](#), "The Turkish state is operating in partnership with the El-Qaida affiliated Jabhat Fatah al-Sham (previously Al Nusra) and ISIS. Jarablus has been seized through an agreement between them. We believe that, the Turkish state and these terrorist groups will read their attacks across the region."

Marriage of Convenience for Some

Backing from the United States has been crucial on the ground for the YPG's military victories against ISIS, but Erdogan's regime has been campaigning fiercely to disrupt it. On 24 August, Turkey demanded that Kurdish forces fall back to the east of the Euphrates or face an all-out attack. This was [backed up by U.S. vice president Joe Biden](#), in the wake of his discussions with Erdogan in Ankara, who said that if the YPG did not fall "back across the river" then the U.S. would end its support for them.

Will the YPG pull back to the other side of the Euphrates or stand and fight? One YPG commander was quoted as saying that the Kurdish fighters would refuse to comply with the Turkish order to move east. [Other statements](#) said that the YPG-SDF were in fact moving east to make preparations for an attack on Raqqa – de facto headquarters of ISIS in Syria.

The American alliance with the YPG has always been a paradox. The U.S. backed the Kurdish fighters because it saw them as an effective fighting force against ISIS, in fact spectacularly *the* most effective force. However, the Kurdish controlled cantons of Rojava have been the site of a spectacular radical social experiment in both democratic self-organization and women's equality as well as ethnic inclusion, absolutely not the kind of thing the U.S. wants to support. So this was always a marriage of convenience, very time limited.

The U.S. says it will stop helping the YPG unless they accede to Turkey's demand and retreat east of the Euphrates, but the more that Turkey directly engages the YPG-SDF

forces, the more the U.S. will back off support for the YPG.

Erdogan had for two years demanded the creation of a 'buffer zone' along the Turkish border in which Syrian refugees from the fighting could be placed. This was always a euphemism for 'destroy Rojava' and drive out the Kurds. Now Turkey is trying to put this into action.

The situation is now extremely dangerous. After the failed coup, Turkish president Erdogan feels he is in an unchallengeable situation. The destruction and massacre of hundreds of thousands in Syria is a grim warning. The West will do little or nothing to prevent a massacre of the Kurdish people and Rojava being overrun if Erdogan unleashes the full weight of his military might against them. The need for solidarity with the Kurdish people has never been greater. •

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