

The Aftermath of the Syria Decision, Part I:

Analysis of Events to Date

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The following is the first part of a two-part series on the aftermath of the recent decisions in the Syrian conflict. There were two decisions, Turkish President Erdogan's decision to commit to a military invasion of northeastern Syria, and United States President Trump's decision to withdraw before it rather than to have US forces slaughtered by a North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) ally. To a large degree President Trump's decision was forced by an earlier decision by United States government officials not to reinforce American positions in Syria. What follows is an analysis of how these events occurred and what their consequences are regionally, at both the tactical and strategic levels.

The second part of the two-part series will propose strategic options for America and her remaining allies, in the context of the administration's determination to avoid future large-scale deployments of US forces into conflicts such as these.

Tactical Analysis: Defeat in Detail

There has been a very great deal of commentary in the American press, and from US think tanks, that has treated President Trump's decision as a failure of will. That is to say that this set of arguments treats the conflict as one in which the Americans on the ground could have deterred the Turkish invasion if only President Trump had the guts to leave them in place. This understanding of war as a clash of wills is well-grounded, as for example in The United States Marine Corps' Doctrinal Publication #1, *Warfighting*.

War is a violent clash of interests between or among organized groups characterized by the use of military force.... The essence of war is a violent struggle between two hostile, independent, and irreconcilable wills, each trying to impose itself on the other.¹

¹ MCDP1, *Warfighting*, (Department of the Navy, 1997), 3.

My analysis is that this is inaccurate: at the particular moment in which the decision was made, the question was no longer of will but of power. Turkish forces had been allowed to accumulate locally a vast superiority of military power, the bulk of which had to be deployed or it would dissipate. The largest part of their infantry component were Syrian irregulars massed for the purpose of the invasion. The use of such irregulars as front-line fighters has become typical of the war in Syria as regular forces have been reduced by attrition, or fragmented politically into units too small and dissipate for regular discipline. Such irregulars assemble under promise of action and victory, but being neither loyal citizens of Turkey nor disciplined regular military forces, they will dissipate if the promised action is not forthcoming, or if the conflict turns against you.²

The Turkish will was thus constrained by the form of its power: it had to act if it was going to act, and if it did not act its will would be frustrated. Even understanding war a conflict of wills, then, we have to recognize that the American will alone could not have decided the Turkish will. In the particular moment, given the particular forces deployed, the Turkish invasion was definitely coming. The choice before the American government was how to deal with the invasion, i.e., whether to accede to a *causus belli* between NATO nations by forcing Turkey to kill American soldiers in place.

Some analysts suggest that the United States could have destroyed Turkish forces using air and fire support, in a similar manner to the destruction of Russian mercenary forces two years earlier. The Security Studies Group (SSG) warned, after the Russian event but nevertheless 19 months ago, that this assumption was invalid.³ Turkish regulars are combined arms forces with NATO-standard equipment, and could (as they did) commit artillery and air power along much shorter supply lines. The Turks also

² This is not unique to this situation; T.E. Lawrence writes about the dissipation of his irregulars as a frustrating feature of his own war in the desert.

³ See "On the Syrian Decision," *Security Studies Group* (7 October 2019), and its internal links to earlier pieces.

committed armor units.⁴ The overall Turkish commitment was larger than a division; US forces in eastern Syria were special operations forces and support units that were widely dispersed at the front, and numbering only hundreds rather than tens of thousands. Though brave and disciplined they were too few to stop such a large force, which was able to advance very rapidly given the commitment of combined arms regulars to break points of resistance for the Syrian irregulars fighting in Turkey's vanguard.

The strongest evidence that Turkey was prepared to use force against American Special Operators in Syria is that they did in fact do so. Russian forces partnering with the Turks rapidly captured American-held positions, posting videos of themselves in bases that Americans had abandoned so rapidly that food was left on the tables.⁵ These Russians would doubtless have loved to have had video, instead, of American Special Forces as captives – officially under the protection of Russia, but in practice hostages. Either in spite of or *because* the United States provided Turkey with locations of American forces yet to withdraw, American soldiers were shelled by the Turkish advance,⁶ and American supply lines were cut by Turkish forces.⁷ Turkey and its allies came hard at us, and there is every reason to think that capturing or killing Americans was intended as part of the operation. Indeed, it seems to have been the major focus of the Russian component of the operation.

The military-science concept at work here is known as “defeat in detail,” the same tactic used more impressively by Ulysses S. Grant during his Vicksburg campaign.⁸ Facing a much more powerful

⁴ Pentagon planners have recognized the absence of a combined arms unit with armor as a consideration for future planning. See “Russia Wants U.S. to Leave Syria,” CBS Evening News, 24 October 2019.

⁵ Trent Murray, “Out with the US and in with Russia: Troops take over America’s abandoned Syria bases,” *EuroNews*, 16 October 2019.

⁶ Barbara Starr and Ryan Browne, “Pentagon says US forces came under Turkish artillery fire in Syria,” *CNN* (12 October 2019).

⁷ “The Latest on Turkey’s Offensive in Syria,” *Associated Press* (October 14, 2019).

⁸ See e.g. LTC Henry W. Suchying III, “Ulysses S. Grant: A Strategic Leader,” US Army War College (Defense Technical Information Center, 1996).

Confederate force, Grant was nevertheless able to attain a complete victory by intercepting and defeating elements of the Confederate force separately. Similarly here, while it is true that the United States military vastly outclasses the Turkish military, President Erdogan found himself in a localized situation in which he was able to defeat all American forces either present or capable of rapid deployment.⁹

It is not an implied criticism that SSG analysis had warned the American position needed to be reinforced if it was not to be abandoned in the face of a Turkish invasion. SSG is not a policymaking organization, nor privy to the discussions that led to policymaking decisions. Further, SSG did not warn about the danger of irregular forces' instability driving a rapid Turkish decision. This was because of a flawed assumption that Turkey would prefer to use regulars, which have substantial advantages over irregular forces in a conventional maneuver conflict of this sort. President Erdogan elected to use the Syrian irregulars as his main force presumably in order to preserve his regular infantry intact. Unfortunately, this decision led to a large and predictable number of war crimes against captured Kurds and civilians alike; another well-known feature of irregulars in warfare is that the relative indiscipline makes them susceptible to rape, plunder, and revenge murder.

Strategic Analysis: The War is Ending, and a New Stability Looms

The rapidity and ease with which the Turkish and Russian governments came to terms that formally respect Syrian territorial integrity underlines how close we are to the end of this war. While

⁹ American regular forces capable of rapid deployment are also fewer currently due to the constant pressures of other global events; for example, one brigade of the 82nd Airborne, which is supposed to be deployable under ordinary conditions within 18 hours, is tied down in Afghanistan. The other two are committed to a mass military exercise in the Baltic states meant to deter Russian expansionism, which has been on display in Crimea and Georgia as well as eastern Ukraine. The fourth brigade was dissolved in order to reinforce the other three after years of constant conflict.

insurgencies by unhappy minor players are likely to continue, the major players are broadly satisfied with the outcome at this point. These major players include Russia and Turkey, Iraq and Iran, Assad himself, but also crucially China. Analysis that suggests that Russia is acting as kingmaker miss the role that China is playing in crafting a new stability that will bind the major players together in common interest.

Since the Chinese role is not widely discussed, here are two points to show the degree of its involvement. First, China's "Belt and Road" program was already supposed to feature heavy investment in Iran, with whom China has a major oil deal pending that will allow China to purchase oil in its own Renminbi currency rather than petrodollars. Just last month, however, Baghdad announced that it was also joining the Belt and Road project. That suggests a redirection of the "Iron Silk Road" railway project from the proposed route (through lightly populated northwestern Iran into Armenia, thence to Turkey) to an easier and more profitable development of the existing major train lines between Tehran and Baghdad. From there the railway could go to Kirkuk, and into Turkey along the same route as the Kirkuk-Ceyhan Oil Pipeline, securing the need to defend only a single corridor of infrastructure against insurgent attacks.

Second, Phillip Smyth of the Washington Institute's project on Shi'a militias in the Middle East reports that the Chinese government has been meeting with officials of the Badr Organization from the top all the way down to local neighborhood bosses. The Chinese government is being well-advised by its Iranian partners here, developing an influence network with broad and deep connections across some of Iraq's most important terrain. This also suggests that China is engaging Iran's patiently-developed network of proxy militias towards its own ends. China's end in West Asia is the stable and cheap extraction of oil. Unlike the American or Russian economies, which are net exporters of oil and energy respectively, China is the world's largest buyer of oil. Any interruption of its oil supply could badly damage its economy. Conversely, the success of the Renminbi oil market with Iran could allow that

market to expand to other nations, creating the Renminbi as a competitor to the US Dollar as a reserve currency. It could, in time, replace the dollar.

China is also deeply tied into the Turkish economy at this point. The Turkish economy has been in great difficulties due to sanctions imposed upon it by the West. In order to ameliorate the effect of those sanctions, the Turkish government has leased major infrastructure to China at historically low rates. China's massive "Belt and Road" infrastructure development program is designed to link Europe to Asia via a route through Turkey, as well as another through Russia. The stability of Turkey, and access to the infrastructure it has leased, is thus another Chinese interest.

The stable disposition of Syria is thus:

- in Iran's interest, as they support Assad, and insofar as it allows them a route to the Mediterranean Sea along ancient highways now secured by their proxy Shia militias from Tehran to the Levant;
- in Russia's, as they wish to continue to have access to the naval port facilities Assad has lent them;
- in Turkey's, insofar as Assad will assent to their security corridor to protect oil and rail infrastructure;
- in China's, to protect investments on a massive scale and the potential of a new oil market in its own currency;
- and in Iraq's, where China has come to be the largest single investor in its oil infrastructure.

This common interest in formalizing and accepting the existing status quo thus unites all the major players, making an end to the war along those lines highly likely and probably stable.

Minor players include the Gulf Arab states, Israel, the Kurds and Sunni Arab tribes in the south (and certain other minority ethnic groups who are similarly oppressed), and at this point the United States.

The Gulf States are likely not to object to the new stability, thanks to China's investments in the 'Maritime Silk Road,' which entails major investments from Oman to Saudi Arabia. Indeed, insofar as China can exert pressure on Iran to end the instabilities arising from Iranian provocations, they may find a new stability entirely acceptable.

Israel will have the greatest degree of concern with this new stability arising from the end of the war. Iran's continued threats to Israel's very survival means that the stability of the Iranian route to the sea – often called "the Shia Crescent" -- may prove intolerable to them. SSG will propose some considerations around that, and options for addressing Israeli concerns, in the second part of this series.

The Sunni tribes and the Kurds are in the positions of greatest difficulty. The new stability will not work to their advantages at all. Indeed, the overarching influence of China could hardly be of greater concern to ethnic minority groups trapped under this new umbrella. The Chinese have not only been engaged in at least cultural genocide against the Uighur population in what China refers to as its "New Frontier" (a literal translation of *Xinjiang*, the name they give the western province where the Uighur live), the Chinese have also already proven that their wealth enables them to get Muslim nations from Turkey to Saudi Arabia to bless the oppression in the name of 'fighting terrorism.' This is true even though the Uighur are Turkmen, and might be thought to have a claim on Turkish loyalties.

The US transition to a minor player is not necessary, but it is a necessary concomitant to the President's decision to withdraw American forces from conflicts in the Middle East of the Syrian type. Indeed, the currently proposed strategy of "securing the oil fields" is likely to be accepted by the major players because it advances their own interests, especially China's.

America's future efforts in Syria will need to establish new ground lines of communication to the south through Israel and/or Jordan, via a route that can be guarded by the base at Al Tanf. This will shorten the shipping distance versus resupply via Iraq, and remove the ability of Iran, China, and others to cut off American access by pressuring the weak regime in Iraq to refuse us territorial access. Al Tanf can also serve as a basing point for ISR missions targeting Shia militias in Syria insofar as Iran is not successfully pressured to give up its provocative proxy attacks on American allies in the Gulf or on Israel.

This concludes the first part of this series. Part two will consider options on ways forward for US policymakers.