

# Crisis Brief: Turkey's Syria Incursion

## Overwatch Podcast Transcript

Featuring Jennifer Cafarella, John Dunford, and Maseh Zarif



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*Crisis Brief* is a special edition of the *Overwatch* podcast series intended to provide timely updates on unfolding national security crises. Turkey is about to invade Northeastern Syria with U.S. permission despite previous American security guarantees to the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). The U.S. has not yet announced a full withdrawal from Syria but U.S. forces pulled back from the border. In this installment, ISW's Research Director Jennifer Cafarella and ISW's Syria expert John Dunford discuss what options the SDF has and how other actors, including ISIS and Iran, are prepared to exploit the possible chaos. Listen on our website [here](#).

### **Maseh Zarif**

This is *Overwatch*, a podcast brought to you by the Institute for the Study of War. It is 12:00 PM in Washington, D.C. on Monday, October 7. The White House has announced that U.S. forces are pulling back from Northern Syria as Turkey prepares to launch an operation into an area held by American-backed Kurdish forces. In this Crisis Brief Update, ISW Research Director Jennifer Cafarella and ISW Syria Analyst John Dunford will discuss the potential consequences of a further Turkish incursion into Syria.

### **Jennifer Cafarella**

A bit of background. The U.S. intervened in 2015 in order to halt ISIS's blitz offensive towards the Syrian-Turkish Border. In that intervention, the U.S. partnered with the available local forces on the ground, a Kurdish militia known as the YPG. This Kurdish militia is the Syrian branch of the PKK, which is a terrorist group that has waged a decades-long insurgency against Turkey.

The U.S. has attempted for multiple months now to de-escalate the situation with Turkey and prevent further Turkish military incursions into Northeast Syria and had entered into a tactical security mechanism agreement with Turkish forces. That included some noteworthy concessions from the YPG, including their withdrawal from border areas and the removal, therefore, of their defensive fortifications.

Some of the perceptions of an American betrayal in accepting an upcoming Turkish incursion are related to the fact that - on U.S. guarantees related to this security mechanism - the YPG had removed the defenses that would have been necessary to fight effectively to prevent Turkey's incursion into Northern Syria. The current crisis we face now is actually a consequence of that original decision by the U.S. to partner with the YPG in order to halt and then ultimately reverse ISIS's campaign in Syria.

The YPG became a very capable partner in the fight against ISIS and demonstrated a willingness repeatedly to welcome Arabs into a coalition in order to fight in Arab-majority areas and then to enter into a governance project that does have Arab support but implements the ideology of the PKK broadly, and therefore has triggered a violent response from Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. John, what actually has Turkey prepared to do and what is the US response thus far?

### **John Dunford**

Thank you, Jenny. So far, Turkey has been for the past week setting conditions to launch a military offensive into Northern Syria, particularly near the Syrian city of Tel Abyad in Northern Raqqqa Province. Tel Abyad is an Arab-majority city that is controlled by the U.S. partner on the ground, the Syrian Democratic Forces. The Syrian Kurdish YPG, one of the largest components of the U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces, has withdrawn

from the border areas as part of its agreement with the U.S. and Turkey to implement the security mechanism in Northern Syria.

Last night, the White House announced that the U.S. would withdraw from the border areas, essentially green-lighting a Turkish offensive into this area of Syria. The U.S. force presence was the largest deterrent for Turkey to launch an offensive, so the removal of those U.S. forces will allow Turkey to enter into this region without the threat of accidentally targeting U.S. forces.

### ***Jennifer Cafarella***

There are a variety of additional possible escalation paths due to the fact that multiple other American adversaries have already prepared to exploit the conditions of chaos created by Turkey's intervention in order to potentially attack U.S. forces but also to accelerate their own plans to expand into Eastern Syria at the expense of the United States and our local partner.

### ***John Dunford***

Yeah. With this, we've seen a number of actors both in Syria and in the region set conditions for what might follow. The most present threat is that this devolves very quickly into a hot conflict, not only across Northern Syria, but as well in the wider region. So, steps and implications that we could see would be that Turkey launches an offensive with its proxies and its armed forces. The YPG responds by fighting Turkey in the border cities and turning this really into very violent urban conflict across the Syrian-Turkish Border.

Some other implications and things that could unfold would be the Syrian regime taking advantage of the YPG's distraction along the border to launch an offensive into the SDF's southern flank, particularly in Deir ez-Zour Province, where the SDF is currently in control of large amounts of Syria's oil resources. This could involve a number of Iranian-backed proxy forces, including potentially Iraqi forces that Iran backs in Syria as well as with Russian support.

### ***Jennifer Cafarella***

Russia and Turkey have already discussed Turkey's upcoming operation. Russia supports it at least tacitly and may actually have entered into a general agreement with Turkey for the shape of what is to come in the north-east. The Russians have in the past brokered the negotiations between the YPG and the Assad regime and may step in now to broker an agreement for the outcome in Northeastern Syria.

### ***John Dunford***

Another implication of this is that this could actually turn into a wider regional war with Kurdish militant groups taking orders from the Kurdish Communities Union, including the Kurdistan Workers' Party, the PKK, launching attacks against Turkey both in Northern Iraq as well as in Southeast Turkey.

Another actor poised to sort of take advantage of this situation is ISIS, who's resurging in both Iraq and Syria. ISIS is preparing to launch attacks against detention facilities across Iraq and Syria and could use the chaos of a Turkish offensive to expedite that plan and to free some of its fighters who the SDF is currently detaining.

Now another track that this could go down would be a diplomatic track in which we could see in the U.S. attempt to salvage an agreement with Turkey to allow a limited Turkish offensive and a limited Turkish land grab in Northern Syria while reestablishing a security mechanism agreement at other areas along the border. In January 2018, Turkey intervened in the Kurdish-majority canton of Afrin in Northwestern Syria. What we saw after that intervention was actually a removal of the civilian Kurdish population and driving into refugee camps out-

side of Afrin and replacing that civilian population with the Syrian refugee population that was in Turkey as well as with Turkish proxies and their families into areas that up until that point had been predominantly Kurdish.

### *Jennifer Cafarella*

In the case of the imminent intervention, Turkey is openly discussing its intent to resettle refugees. If the offensive is limited to the border town of Tel Abyad, that would amount to a resettlement of Arab refugees, primarily Arab refugees, in a primarily Arab area. However, this carries the very clear threat of Turkey expanding that zone of control along the border into Kurdish villages. And Erdogan has directly expressed his intent to do exactly that and to replace them with additional primarily Arab Syrian refugees.

### *John Dunford*

So in this situation, what we could see is the YPG could deprioritize the defense of Tel Abyad, allow Turkey to take control, while sending its forces and prioritizing the other Kurdish-majority cities along the border area. Another possible diplomatic move that we could see would be the YPG actually reaching an agreement with the Syrian regime in which regime forces return to some of the YPG-held areas as a deterrent against the Turks moving further south into Northeastern Syria. This potentially could play out in an area like Manbij, where there are both Turkish forces and regime forces on the outside of the city. So what we could see is the YPG reach an agreement to allow the regime into the city to prevent a Turkish offensive in that area.

Now as all this is going on, there are massive cross-border implications for the crisis that is unfolding in Iraq. The regime returning to some of the SDF areas could actually trigger a refugee flow into Iraq, particularly when we think about areas like Deir ez-Zour, where civilians could try to go through the recently reopened Qa'im Border Crossing into Iraq, which could trigger further protests, particularly in areas where the protests in Iraq are currently expanding to.

Another area that is of concern is with the KRG in Northern Iraq and the border crossings there, particularly the Faysh Khabur Border Crossing. What we could see is, and what we're already seeing anecdotal evidence of, is refugees fleeing Northern Syria and trying to cross the border into Iraq. This could trigger another crisis in the KRG as they try to manage the inflow of refugees and potentially are forced to close the border crossing in Northern Iraq, creating a humanitarian crisis both on the Syrian and the Iraqi side.

The closing of that border would also have serious implications for the U.S. ability to move in the region. U.S. forces do use that border crossing to cross between Iraqi Kurdistan and Syria. So it could potentially limit U.S. ability to resupply its forces inside of Syria as well as bring support to the SDF.

Now while this is all happening in the Middle East, we are also seeing a U.S. response at home. The YPG does have bipartisan congressional support. And what we are starting to see is congressional leadership take public action against the White House's announcement, essentially rejecting the move and threatening U.S. sanctions. Senator Lindsey Graham is leading this charge and is trying to, from what we can tell through his Twitter account, gain support across the aisle. Now it will be very difficult for Congress to fully deter the White House's announcement. Congress could take action through sanctions, which had been delayed since Turkey bought the S-400 system from Russia in July.

And they could try to reenact those sanctions or introduce new sanctions against the Turkish economy. This could potentially deter Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan from expanding the offensive into further parts of Syria at the risk of damaging his own economy at home.

We've even in the last half an hour seen President Trump state, essentially threaten the Turkish economy if Turkey does anything President Trump deems as "off-limits." So while there is a lot going on inside Iraq and Syria, we are also monitoring what is happening at home and potential ways that Congress could deter what Turkey is planning.

### *Jennifer Cafarella*

President Trump's decision to allow Turkey's incursion into Syria does not at least yet amount to a decision to withdraw all U.S. forces from Eastern Syria. Therefore, it is possible and perhaps even likely that the YPG and the broader SDF coalition that it leads will show restraint in fighting against Turkey's incursion in the hope of retaining some U.S. support and potentially even enabling Congress and Senator Lindsey Graham to apply increased pressure for not only continued American support to the SDF, but potentially increased support to the SDF.

Now President Trump's comments regarding shifting the burden of responsibility for handling the situation in Syria, and especially the ISIS situation, reflect that the President is disengaging from this conflict. He may not have ordered a military withdrawal yet, but it is clear that he does not intend for the United States to play a central role. Therefore, it looks unlikely at this stage that even with congressional pressure, the U.S. will meaningfully increase our support to the SDF. However, I do think it likely in the coming days and perhaps weeks the SDF will nonetheless make a last-ditch effort to reaffirm and expand American support and potentially make a new attempt at some kind of diplomatic compromise with Turkey in order to prevent further military escalation in the north.

### *Maseh Zarif*

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