

Crisis Brief: Continued Chaos as the Turkish Offensive Advances into Syria



Overwatch Podcast Transcript

Featuring Jennifer Cafarella, John Dunford, and Brandon Wallace

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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 has initiated a military operation into a part of Northern Syria controlled by Syrian Kurdish-led forces. The operation follows a U.S. decision to withdraw from the immediate area controlled by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) – the primary Syria-based U.S. partner in the campaign against the Islamic State of Iraq and al Sham (ISIS). As Turkish forces move across the border and the SDF responds, ISW’s Syria expert John Dunford explains the context, key dynamics shaping the battle, and the effects on the counter-ISIS campaign.

Maseh Zarif

This is *Overwatch*, a podcast brought to you by the Institute for the Study of War. My name is Maseh Zarif, and I’m your host for this episode.

It’s 4:00 P.M. here in Washington, DC on Tuesday, October 15th. This update features Jennifer Cafarella, ISW’s research director, John Dunford, ISW’s Syria analyst, and Brandon Wallace, ISW’s counterterrorism analyst. They go through the latest updates on the ground in Syria as the Turkish invasion advances, the status of ISIS fighters and supporters in detention facilities and IDP camps, and what to look for in the days ahead.

Jennifer Cafarella

The situation on the ground in Eastern Syria is continuing to evolve rapidly after Turkish-backed opposition forces crossed the border in Northeast Syria in an invasion to fight the then U.S.-partnered force the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces. A few days later on October 13th, U.S. Secretary of Defense Esper, announced a U.S. withdrawal from Syria, effectively seceding Northeastern Syria to a new round of fighting between Turkey and the now former U.S.-partnered force.

President Trump reaffirmed his intent to withdraw all U.S. forces from northeastern Syria on Monday, October 14th after some speculation that the United States may in fact retain some force posture in the northeast and attempt to blunt the extent of the chaos unfolding and preserve some capability to ensure that ISIS does not manage to exploit these conditions of violence to resurge. However, it is now clear that the U.S. will, in fact, withdraw and emerging reports on the ground from Syria do indicate that U.S. forces have begun to deconstruct their bases and relocate towards Iraqi Kurdistan, in at least one case seceding that base for Russian-backed forces to move in. Certainly a dangerous environment for U.S. forces to be conducting a hasty retreat.

Joining me today are ISW Syria expert John Dunford and ISIS expert Brandon Wallace to discuss the changes on the ground and the likely trajectory of this conflict as the U.S. forces withdraw. John, what changes have we seen in the military posture of all sides on the ground in northeastern Syria since the Turks began their invasion?

John Dunford

Thank you, Jenny. So, first to look at where Turkey and its proxy forces are currently conducting operations, Turkey is currently fighting on two main axes, one near Tell Abyad in northern Raqqqa province, and the other near Ras al-Ayn in northern Hasakah province. Turkey, since the start of fighting, has taken control of Tell Abyad in Northern Raqqqa province and is beginning to push South from that area down towards [inaudible 00:02:46] and the M4. On the Ras al-Ayn axis, Turkey has met stiff SDF resistance in the city. The SDF still holds some of the neighborhoods inside of Ras

al-Ayn, and fighting continues as we speak now.

Turkey has also pushed south and made contact with the M4 highway. The M4 is the major logistics route throughout northern Syria, the area controlled by the SDF. Turkish access to the M4 will allow Turkey to move its forces between its axis of advance, as well as cutoff SDF and regime movements throughout the northeast. Since Turkey started its offensive, the SDF and Syrian regime reached an agreement to deploy Syrian regime forces North along the border to prevent Turkey from expanding its offensive. These regime forces have entered at multiple points following the withdrawal of U.S. forces. Probably most importantly have entered into Tell Tamer. Tell Tamer is a junction south of Ras al-Ayn on the M4 highway. The presence of regime forces there could prevent Turkey from pushing more westward to some of the core Kurdish territory in northeastern Hasakah province.

Jennifer Cafarella

In reaction to the U.S. decision to withdraw entirely from Northeast Syria, the Kurdish-led Syrian democratic forces has reached out to Russia to broker a deal with the Assad regime in an attempt to gain its military support to continue to fight to defend northeast Syria against Turkey's incursion. What does the YPG hope to gain by reaching out to the Assad regime?

John Dunford

The YPG hopes that the deployment of Syrian regime forces to key border positions on the Syrian Turkish border and to key frontline areas in both Hasakah province and Aleppo province will deter Turkey from pushing further south and expanding the scale of the Turkish offensive outside of the previously agreed upon area between Ras al-Ayn and Tell Abyad.

The YPG hopes that regime forces, as a deterrent, will prevent that expansion, and that it will allow the YPG to regroup outside those areas and reach some sort of later deal or a wider deal that will allow for some form of YPG autonomy in northeastern Syria. The YPG has framed the deal with the Assad regime and with Russia as its chance of survival against Turkey. The SCF's general commander framed the deal in an op-ed as a choice between genocide by Turkey or making compromises with the Assad regime.

There are reports of minor clashes in some of these positions. However, that fighting has not escalated. For example, in Aleppo province, when there were reports of clashes, it followed with the deployment of Russian MPs in between the frontline positions of the Turkish-backed forces and the Syrian Democratic Forces.

Jennifer Cafarella

MPs are a Russian military police, which Russia uses inside of Syria to conduct border patrols, essentially along front lines between opposing forces, as well as to act as a sort of stabilization force in areas that the Assad regime has recaptured, where the Russians seek to position their own forces to engage in outreach to the local community and attempt to ensure that further insurgency against the Assad regime does not emerge. In this case, we've seen the deployment of those military police to one key frontline in northeast Syria, and in a sign that the Russians may in fact step in now to broker a new round of negotiations with Turkey in an attempt to prevent a major round of fighting between the Assad regime and Turkey's proxies.

John Dunford

The U.S. and Turkey had reached an agreement in June, 2018 that essentially intended to provide Turkey a wider role in the governing and security of Manbij, Aleppo province and the removal of Kurdish forces from that area. Those negotiations between the U.S. and Turkey produced a deal in which Turkey was allowed to choose members of the security and local administrative councils to remove them, as well as to allow joint U.S. and Turkish patrols of that area. That town has remained a point of contention between the U.S. and Turkey. Turkey believed that the U.S. did not hold up its

end of the bargain, but has continued to call for a wider Turkish role in handling the internal matters of the town.

Turkey has highlighted it through rhetoric that one of its key goals of this offensive would be to take control of Manbij. The deployment of Russian forces to that town is symbolic in that they are directly replacing the U.S. forces that were deployed in that area that were intended to keep the peace between Turkish proxies on one side and the Syrian Democratic Forces on the other.

Jennifer Cafarella

Manbij, then certainly a continued flash point and a key cornerstone issue for Erdogan in his incursion in the north-east. It is unlikely he's going to give up Manbij willingly. The YPG has asked Russia to close down Syrian airspace in the northeast to Turkey which, if implemented, would eliminate Turkey's ability to support the ground forces with air power, which could, in turn, level the playing field for the YPG in order to enable the YPG to conduct a more capable counter-offensive. Something we're watching for moving forward.

The U.S. does retain the right to conduct air strikes in defense of U.S. forces as they withdraw, which means the U.S. will continue to use the airspace in the northeast and therefore will not permit the Russians to close down, so to speak, the airspace while U.S. forces are still in theater. But that is a step that Russia may consider taking after U.S. forces complete their withdrawal in the coming days or weeks.

After rising pressure in Washington against the U.S. withdrawal from Syria, President Trump has decided to dispatch U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and other senior officials to Turkey in an attempt to broker some sort of ceasefire between Turkish forces and the Syrian Democratic Forces using the leverage of new U.S. sanctions that will hit Turkey in coming days, in retaliation for Turkey's intervention in northeast Syria. As we've indicated, the Russians are stepping in themselves to broker a separate set of negotiations with Turkey, which may be more likely to succeed than the American attempt to broker a ceasefire on the way out without the willingness, actually, to be involved on the ground and to implement any agreement with U.S. forces.

President Trump has also received criticism for taking an unacceptable risk regarding the escape of ISIS detainees in facilities across northern Syria. Wallace, what is the threat that ISIS will break out, so to speak, from confinement as U.S. forces retreat?

Brandon Wallace

Thank you, Jenny. ISIS was already preparing operations to free imprisoned fighters and liberate its supporters and relatives held in ostensibly secure displacement camps and annex facilities. In fact, ISIS's leader, Abu Bakr al Baghdadi, literally commanded his supporters and soldiers to take action to "break the gates" in a speech released on September 16th, 2019. ISIS has very publicly telegraphed this objective. And we should know this ISIS play.

Before ISIS was known as the Islamic state, Al Qaeda in Iraq previously conducted a series of prison breaks across Iraq in 2012 and 2013 that enabled it reconstitution, freeing hundreds of fighters. ISIS has an even larger opportunity today, with more than 10,000 fighters detained across Northern Syria. In fact, in the area that Turkey is moving into, at least 15 percent of that total are held in detention facilities falling within that geographic zone.

What's more troubling is that the SDF guards thousands of pop-up prisons. That is to say more accurately, ISIS members held in high schools, old buildings, and in some cases houses across the northeast of the country. These facilities are the least secure. So far, ISIS has actually tried to escape from two detention facilities in northeastern Syria, one in the northern border town of Qamishli, and the other in the northern town of Hasakah. ISIS family members and supporters have escaped from a displacement camp, a secured facility within the displacement camp, as many as 800 individuals north of Raqqa, an area called Ain Issa.

ISIS is opportunistically taking advantage of the U.S. withdrawal from northeastern Syria and the Turkish offensive. But it's important to remember that these plans were already underway. And so, ISIS is simply accelerating a timeline that it already put forward.

Jennifer Cafarella

How would you characterize the risk that ISIS makes a comeback in eastern Syria?

Brandon Wallace

The ISIS insurgency in Eastern Syria is not simply a collection of sleeper cells. Rather, it is an organized insurgency pursuing objectives that is already on the path to resurgence.

Jennifer Cafarella

Looking forward, ISW is watching five key developments. First, where ISIS will attack next. ISIS certainly will make a more concerted effort to break its detained members out of prison, but perhaps views time on its side. As the security environment continues to worsen, ISIS may actually simply wait to exploit targets of opportunity, rather than allocate priority resources to attempting to break out of prisons from which they may simply be able to walk out. Instead, we should look for ISIS attacks on the SDF in rear areas to try to exploit lower defenses or potentially even attacks on U.S. forces. Thus far, ISIS has claimed one rocket attack on an American base and may attempt to at least create the appearance of attacking U.S. forces on the way out.

Second, Russia's attempt to make a deal. The Turkish and Russian defense ministers have been in contact. And the Kremlin has released statements indicating that they intend to deescalate the situation in the east, which is an indicator for us that they are stepping in diplomatically as Putin completes his visit to Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, where he is this week.

Third, whether the Syrian regime forces that have deployed to eastern Syria will actually support the YPG encounter of offensive operations against the Turkish backed proxy forces. Thus far, the regime has engaged in limited clashes, as John mentioned, but has not launched a counter offensive against Turkey. Whether the regime will do so may depend on how Russia decides to engage moving forward. Regime forces on the ground are dependent on Russian air power, often, to advance on the battlefield. In this case, we have very crowded skies in the northeast, with Turkish war planes continuing to fly and the U.S. continuing to provide air support to defend U.S. forces withdrawing. It's unlikely that the Russians will try to conduct an air campaign in the East under these conditions. And therefore, perhaps unlikely that the Syrian regime will launch a major offensive on the ground. However, it's still something to watch for moving forward.

Fourth, whether Kurdish forces will counter attack against Turkish forces and their proxies elsewhere in Syria. Turkish backed forces also operate in the far Northwest where the YPG has supported an insurgency for over a year now. The YPG has asked the regime for help, not just defending the East, but also expelling Turkish forces from everywhere they're operating in northern Syria. We haven't yet seen them widen the front of this campaign to the West, but we could see YPG attacks in those areas moving forward.

Fifth, the U.S. withdrawal. The Defense Department has not put a timeline publicly on the withdrawal for obvious concerns for the security of those forces as they retreat. However, it is clear from reports on the ground that U.S. forces are in fact in the process of completing the withdrawal. Force protection may become an increasing challenge, and we'll continue to watch for signs that a variety of actors on the ground may attempt to threaten those forces as they retreated.

Maseh Zarif

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