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Political
Assessments

24 JAN 2018

Post Afren, US-Turkey Ties .. Where to?

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Introduction

The Syrian crisis has placed a great burden on Turkish President Erdogan and his aspirations, as well as on Turkey's international relations, both at the regional and international levels. The US-Turkish relations have been negatively affected by political differences over Syria. The United States has intervened in the Syrian crisis by supporting the Kurdish armed groups stationed in northern Syria close to the Turkish border, without taking into account the official Turkish position of designating these Kurdish militias as terrorist groups - or even the threats these armed groups may pose to the Turkish national security and territorial integrity.

The Turkey-U.S. differences intensified after the latter announced the start of creation of a military force of 30,000 soldiers from Kurdish militias on Syrian territory to secure the Syrian-Turkish and Syrian-Iraqi borders. The Turkish response to this announcement came quickly, through a statement by Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan that "he will destroy this force before it is even formed," as it "targets the Turkish state", stressing that he is not responsible for any "undesirable consequences". This was accompanied by military reinforcements of Turkish units stationed at the border, including tanks and armored personnel vehicles, as well as a number of soldiers.

According to the previous data:

- Can we say that the Turkish-US relations have entered a "critical" stage that is likely to develop into direct or indirect military confrontations between the two countries, and to what extent? [i.e. "direct" confrontation with the US forces stationed in "Manbij", or "indirect" confrontation through clashes with US-backed Kurdish militias in northern Syria.] Or Is it just a "sharp" crisis between the two countries?

Turkish Estimates

It is clear that the Turkish state believes that there are changes on the ground in the Syrian arena; as well as international plans and movements that directly pose a threat to the state, including:



First: Field changes in Syrian arena

In 2017, the Syrian regime was able to make its best field achievements since 2012 – when it lost control of more than two-thirds of the Syrian territory in favor of the opposition – by increasing its control from 21.15% of the Syrian territory, at the beginning of the year, to 53.4% at the end of December. It is noteworthy that most of the areas that the regime forces were able to regain had been controlled by the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) known also as “Daesh”, as shown in the table below:

Month	Region
February	- The regime forces controlled the entire southern countryside of the city of Al-Bab
March	- The regime forces controlled the strategic town of Khafsa and Deir Hafer, in addition to the historic city of Palmyra.
May	- The regime forces controlled the military Jarrah airport, which is about 60 km from the city of Aleppo to the east.
June	- The regime forces took control of the town of Maskana, the last stronghold of Daesh in the countryside of eastern Aleppo, and the city of Rusafa in the southern Raqqa countryside.
July	- The regime forces controlled the whole of the south-eastern Aleppo countryside four years after being under Daesh control. - The regime forces controlled the entire road between Athria and Rusafa, and also took control of the town of Sabkha in the southern Raqqa countryside
August	The regime forces controlled the entire area under Daesh control in the western Qalamoun on the Syrian-Lebanese border.
September	The regime forces completely controlled the enclave between Sokhna and Sabakha, a desert area with a number of mountains, and also managed to reach its troops stationed in the city of Deir al-Zour and brigade 137, 3 years after blockade imposed by Daesh in the area.



October	The regime forces controlled the entire Okairbat area and took over the strategic city of Al-Mayadin in the eastern countryside of Deir al-Zour.
November	The regime forces took control of the city of Deir al-Zour completely, and controlled the Albukamal border city with Iraq completely.

In addition to the field achievements of the Syrian regime forces at the expense of the Daesh organization, which achieved the greatest change in the ratio of control on the ground, the regime forces also managed to regain other areas that were controlled by the factions of Syrian armed opposition. The following is a timeline showing the mechanism of progress at the expense of the latter:

Month	Region
January	- The regime forces controlled the area of Wadi Barada north of the capital Damascus.
May	- The regime forces controlled the Qaboun district, as well as the entire Tishreen district in the Syrian capital, Damascus.
July	- The regime forces controlled the entire Syrian-Lebanese border from the western Qalamoun north of Damascus.
October	- regime forces controlled the entire border with Jordan in the countryside, which stretches between the villages of Suwayda and Damascus, an area of 5,000 km.
December	- The regime forces took control of Beit Jann and the surrounding farmlands in Ghouta, western Damascus

The second party that benefited from the field changes in the Syrian arena after the regime forces, were the Kurdish militias of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which extended their control from 17.8% of Syrian territory at the beginning of 2017 to 26.3% at the end of 2017, most notably the city of Raqqa, the main stronghold of Daesh in Syria.

At the same time, factions of the armed opposition lost much of its military influence and areas of control in 2017. Although the lands that these factions lost less than those lost by ISIS, yet it clearly affected their position in front of other forces. The lands under

the control of opposition factions declined from 16.8% of Syrian territory at the beginning of 2017 to 13.3% at the end of the year.

Impact of these changes on Turkey

In fact, success of the Syrian regime, backed by a Russian-Iranian alliance, in achieving large field gains is not bad for Turkey, due to:

1- The strong Turkish-Russian and Turkish-Iranian relations can help keep the forces of the Syrian regime away from the areas controlled by the opposition factions close to Turkey.

2- Turkey hopes that Iran may motivate the regime forces to confront the threat of Kurdish forces.

However, these two points do not hide Turkey's fear of strengthening and legitimizing the status of the Syrian regime in a way that could threaten the armed forces of Syrian opposition, backed by Turkey.

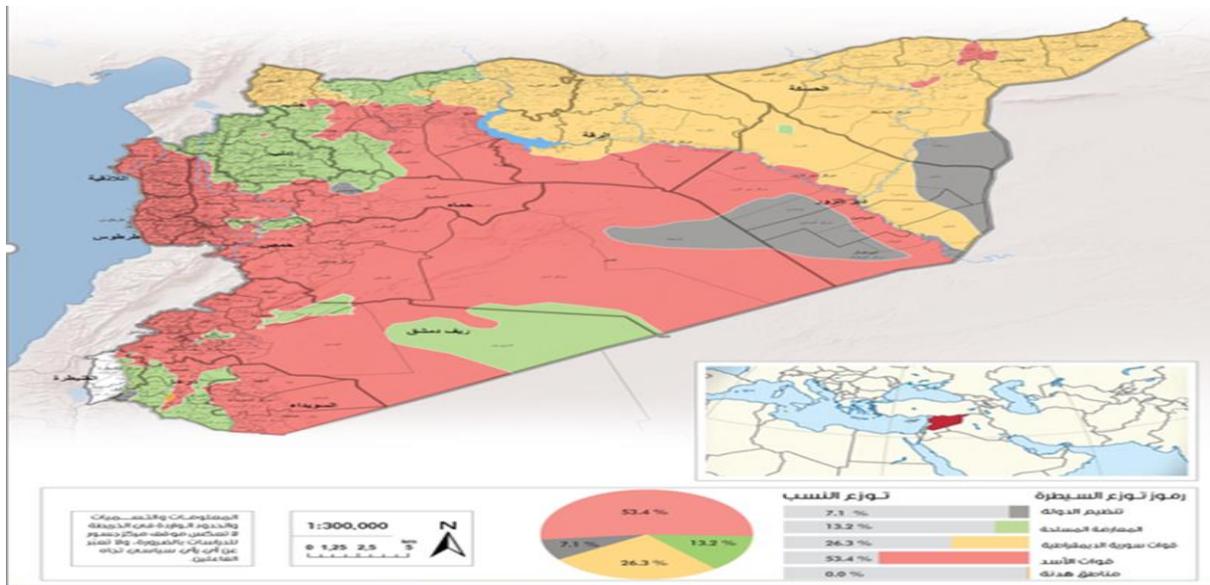
However, the U.S.-backed Kurdish militias in Syria have controlled about 90% of the Turkish-Syrian border, and 50% of the Iraqi-Syrian border, which is very dangerous according to the Turkish estimates. Turkey fears that a likely territorial contiguity between Kurdish armed groups in Syria and Turkey may expose the Turkish state to significant security risks. Also, the isolation of Turkey geographically from the Syrian territory, in the event of the Kurdish militias' imposition of full control over the Syrian-Turkish border, will affect negatively the role of Turkey in the Syrian crisis. Turkey also fears that its economic relations with Iraq could be badly affected by the "hampering" Kurdish role.

Second: Turkish concerns

Although Turkey's land borders are 2949 km and its maritime borders amount to 7816 km, the vast majority of them are disabled. About 90% of the Turkish-Syrian border – Turkey's longest land border amounting to 911 km – is controlled by the US-backed Kurdish forces. Though Turkey has land borders with Bulgaria, 269 km, Armenia, 328 km, and Greece, 203 km, however the country's political relations with the three neighbors are not good historically, if not bad. While the Turkish border with Iraq, 384 km, is under the control of the Kurdistan Regional Government on the Iraqi side, its border with Iran, 560 km, has witnessed large Iranian demonstrations recently. Though



Turkey's border with Azerbaijan amounts to only 18 km, Ankara has vast maritime borders including: the Mediterranean and the Aegean Sea (4763 km), the Black Sea (1778 km), and Marmara (1275 km).



(Map 1)



(Map 2)

Based on this reality, we conclude that the Turkish strategy in dealing with crises can be placed at three levels:



I- Putting an immediate end to the crisis

It appears that Turkey has benefited from a previous mistake it made in dealing with the Syrian question – i.e. delay in using the Turkish military power in securing its border with Syria, which allowed the Kurdish armed groups to expand and control a large part of the Turkish-Syrian border. Therefore, Turkey had to move immediately and confront the direct threats to its national security. Turkey's immediate move to end this crisis takes two tracks:

1- The diplomatic track: The Turkish state prefers to engage in diplomatic activity first for resolving its crises; but if the United States insisted on pursuing its goal of creating a Kurdish army at the Turkish-Syrian border, this track would be useless.

2- The “disciplined” power track: According to this track, Turkey would follow all possible means to face this move (U.S. creation of a Kurdish army at the Turkish-Syrian border) as an important national security issue. This is what Turkish government spokesman Bekir Bozdogan confirmed when he said (in January) that his country's patience has run out and that Turkey is determined to take the necessary steps in this regard (commenting on arming the terrorist PYD/PKK by Washington). In addition, the Turkish National Security Council convened under the chairmanship of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan on January 17 at the Presidential Complex in Ankara, and the Council later announced that Turkey will respond immediately to any threats that could harm the country or its citizens emanating from western Syria, adding it would not allow the formation of a "terrorist army" along its borders. "Necessary steps would be taken immediately and resolutely to defeat any threat against Turkey from western Syria in the first stage," Turkey's National Security Council said.

II- Breaking the siege

The year 2017 witnessed Turkish foreign activity towards neighboring countries, which may be aimed at improving relations with them as a step to overcome attempts to blockade Ankara. This was evident in the recent external moves of the Turkish policy, which came in more than one direction as follows:

A- Iraq: The year 2017 witnessed a remarkable improvement in the Iraqi-Turkish relations, following Turkey's rejection of the referendum of Iraqi Kurdistan Region Government (KRG), a step that was welcomed by the Iraqi government. Among indications of growing Turkish-Iraqi relations in 2017, there was an increase in Turkish



exports to Iraq, amounting to 7.6 billion dollars. Also, Iraqi Prime Minister Haidar Abadi visited Turkey on October 25, where the two countries agreed to develop all aspects of bilateral relations and to cooperate in combating the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK).

B- Bulgaria: The Turkish-Bulgarian relations were strained early 2017, when the Bulgarian government accused Turkey of intervention for influencing the results of the Bulgarian elections in March 2017. However, Turkey later invited Bulgarian Prime Minister Boyko Borissov to visit Istanbul (January 7) and attend the official ceremony for the presentation of the restored temple "St. Stefan" in Istanbul, which is of great historical importance to the Bulgarian Orthodox Christians, along with President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Prime Minister Benali Yildirim. "Soon with the Bulgarian Prime Minister we will officially open the Iron Church in Istanbul. We have revived this church. And we did not say "give the money to restore it", no, we gave it. So we give money for the restoration of all the cultural and historical sites in the Balkans," Erdogan said in his speech. The Bulgarian Prime Minister also expressed his readiness to exert efforts for the normalization and improvement of relations between Turkey and the European Union in 2018. In remarks at the unveiling Borissov said: "In 2018 we should restore relations between the European Union and Turkey back to normal, to the state they were in a few years ago. The significance of today is a message to Europe." The Bulgarian Prime Minister said that Bulgaria has always strived for perfect relations both with the Christian and the Muslim world. "Only together we can overcome terrorism and be efficient," Borissov underscored. He added that Turkey is EU's largest neighbour and has the largest army in Europe. Borissov said that Bulgaria will do whatever it can to help improve relations between the EU and Turkey as this is the only way ahead.

C- Georgia: Turkey is keen to strengthen the trilateral military alliance with Azerbaijan, and Georgia. The defense ministers of the three countries met in Batumi on May 23 to discuss means of activating the alliance. The three countries pledged to boost military ties as well as increase cooperation in the fields of military education and military medicine, counterterrorism (including the protection of pipelines and railways), and joint large-scale military exercises. Turkish Prime Minister Ben Ali Yildirim paid an official visit to Georgia on May 22, accompanied by a large delegation including foreign, justice, energy, and agriculture ministers. Georgia and Turkey closely cooperate on a wide range of areas from energy to trade and from economy to

education and culture. Also, the Turkish International Cooperation and Development Agency (TIKA) is one of the most important organizations operating in Georgia.

D- Iran: Turkey's Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu on January 3 singled out United States President Donald Trump and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu as the only leaders expressing support to the Iranian protesters. "There are only two [world] figures who support protesters: Trump and Netanyahu. We are against such foreign interventions," Cavusoglu told the Ankara bureau chiefs of media outlets at a meeting on Jan. 3. "I have not seen any other world leader making such supportive statements," he said.

Also, the visit of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan to Greece on December 7, the first official visit by a Turkish president to Greece in six decades, may have also been in this context. Although there are no tangible results for the visit at present, but it is undoubtedly an important step.

III- Reinstatement of confidence

U.S.-Turkish ties remain a strategic relationship for both sides; so the two countries may seek calming things down and reassuring each other. Perhaps this may explain the meeting between Turkish Chief of Staff Hulusi Akar and his U.S. counterpart Joseph Dunford, January 16, on the sidelines of the meeting of the NATO Military Committee in the Belgian capital of Brussels.

Finally

According to Robert North, an international crisis is a sharp escalation of action and reaction that raises the degree of threats and coercion. Although crises often precede wars, yet they do not necessarily lead to wars. Therefore, the fate of the current crisis between the United States and Turkey over their policies in Syria, especially the Afrin issue (Operation Olive Branch), is likely to be a "disciplined" Turkish military escalation in the Afrin area, albeit more than the previous Turkish military operations. Turkey's discipline (caution) is due to the delay of Turkish intervention in the Syrian crisis militarily, the mountainous terrain of Afrin, and Ankara's uncertainty about the positions of Moscow and Washington in the long term, as well as its fear of a scenario of confusion and attrition there. However, Turkey's foreign activity should be kept in full swing so that it could put an end to this crisis with the least possible losses.