

Syria conflict: Turkey says US plea on Kurds 'unacceptable'



YPG fighters have been battling IS militants, but are also being targeted by Turkey - Reuters

Turkey's president has strongly rejected US calls for his country to protect Kurdish fighters in Syria.

President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said such statements made by US National Security Adviser John Bolton at the weekend were "unacceptable".

Mr Bolton was in Ankara to seek guarantees that a Kurdish militia battling the Islamic State group would be safe after US troops pulled out.

Turkey regards the People's Protection Units (YPG) as a terrorist group.

Mr Erdogan told MPs from his governing Justice and Development Party on Tuesday that he could not "accept and swallow" Mr Bolton's message.



Image caption Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan struck a defiant note.
Image copyright EPA

The Americans did not know who the various Kurdish groups were, he said, adding: “If the US evaluates them as ‘Kurdish brothers’ then they are in a serious delusion.”

He considers the YPG an extension of the banned Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK), which has fought for Kurdish autonomy in Turkey for three decades. The YPG denies any direct organisational links to the PKK.

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- Trump rewrites US-Syria policy
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US officials were informed that Mr Erdogan was unable to meet Mr Bolton because of a local election campaign and a speech to parliament.

A senior US official said that Mr Bolton had subsequently complained to an aide of Mr Erdogan that the Turkish president’s recent opinion piece in the New York Times was “wrong and offensive”.

In the piece, Mr Erdogan wrote that US-backed forces had “relied heavily on air strikes that were carried out with little or no regard for civilian casualties” and that Turkey was “the only country with the power and commitment” to stabilize

Syria.

Why is the US withdrawing from Syria?

In 2014, militants overran 100,000 sq km (39,000 sq miles) of Syria and neighboring Iraq, and imposed their brutal rule on almost 8 million people. Now, they control only 1% of the territory they once had.

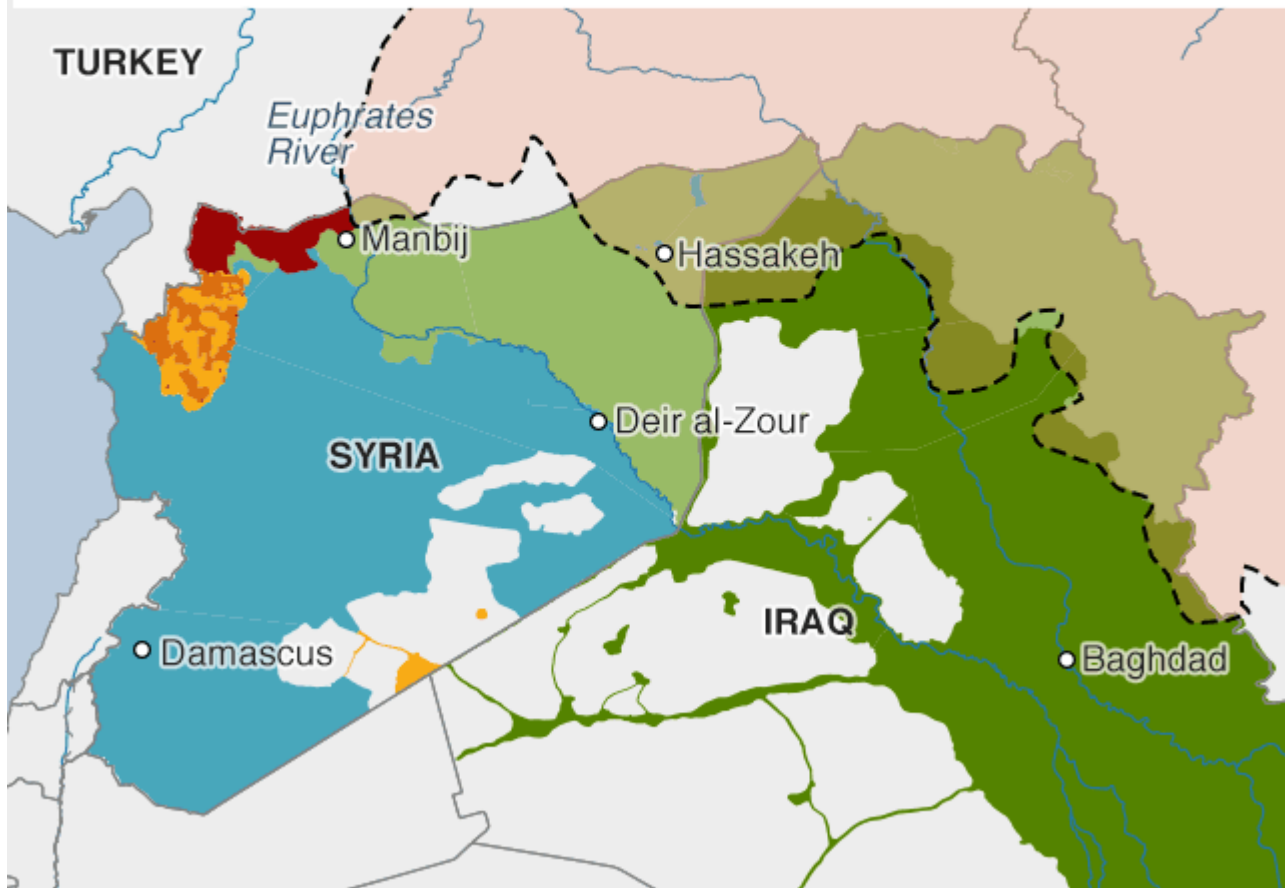
However, the defeat of IS is far from final. A US defense department report estimated in August that there might be as many as 14,000 jihadists left in Syria and 17,000 in Iraq.

President Donald Trump consequently shocked allies and faced strong criticism at home last month when he ordered US forces to immediately begin withdrawing from the approximately 30% of Syria controlled by the YPG-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) alliance.

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|---|------------------------|
| Kurdish forces | Jihadist forces |
| Turkish-backed Syrian rebels and Turkish military | Syrian rebels |
| Syrian government | Islamic State group |
| Iraqi government | Kurdish inhabited area |



Source: Conflict Monitor by IHS Markit, 7 Jan 2019/CIA

BBC

Over the weekend, Mr Bolton laid out several conditions for the withdrawal, which suggested that the four-month schedule agreed by Mr Trump could slip.

He told reporters in Israel that it would be done in a way that guaranteed IS “is defeated and is not able to revive itself”, and that the US would “take care of those who have fought with us against [IS] and other terrorist groups”.

Erdogan’s blunt message

Analysis by Selin Girit, BBC News, Istanbul

US-Turkish talks in Ankara over the withdrawal of US troops from Syria were expected to be tense after Mr Bolton’s comments about the YPG. But no-one

really contemplated that President Erdogan would speak in such blunt terms.

Mr Erdogan said it was impossible to swallow Mr Bolton's comments suggesting that Turkey should agree to protect YPG forces as a pre-condition to the withdrawal.

He said Turkey would do whatever it takes to kill terrorists, adding that an operation in the Kurdish-controlled area in northern Syria would take place soon.

Ankara sees the YPG as a national security threat. But Washington wants to reassure the Kurds over the Turkish threat, so they don't feel obliged to cosy up to Russia.

How did Mr Bolton's talks in Ankara go?

He met Mr Erdogan's aide, Ibrahim Kalin, to discuss how the US withdrawal could take place.

Later, Mr Kalin told a news conference that he had asked Mr Bolton about the heavy weapons and facilities that the US had handed over to the YPG.



Image caption John Bolton is in the region to discuss the consequences of a US withdrawal from Syria - Image copyright REUTERS

“We should not allow the withdrawal process to open new opportunity fields for terror organisations,” he said.

Mr Kalin also said that Turkey would not seek permission from anyone to carry out military operations in Syria, amid reports that it is preparing to attack the SDF-controlled town of Manbij.

What is the US presence in Syria?

Some 2,000 US military personnel are reported to be deployed in Syria.

Ground troops first arrived in autumn 2015 when then-President Barack Obama sent in a small number of special forces to train and advise YPG fighters.

The US did this after several attempts at training and arming Syrian Arab rebel groups to battle IS militants descended into chaos.

Over the intervening years the number of US troops in Syria has increased, and a network of bases and airfields has been established in an arc across the north-eastern part of the country.

Source: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-46792329>

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