

Trump Confounded by Turkey's Invasion of Syria: Fight ISIS or Back NATO Ally?

Turkish offensive against Syrian-Kurdish forces in Afrin leaves U.S. in a bind: "They were 'our guys' in Syria, and now they are under attack and the U.S. doesn't seem to have any real solutions"

✖ Turkish troops advance near the Syria border at Hassa, Hatay province, on January 22, 2018, as part of the operation "Olive Branch", launched two days ago. BULENT KILIC/AFP

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- **Trump to speak with Erdogan, raise concerns about Turkish offensive in Syria**

WASHINGTON - Ever since Turkey launched its attack on the Syrian-Kurdish forces in Afrin province this weekend, the Trump administration's reaction to the new crisis has confused observers in Washington and in the Middle East. The conflict taking place in the northwestern corner of Syria involves an American ally country who is a member of NATO, and a militia group that the United States has partnered with as part of its war against ISIS.

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On Tuesday, the U.S. State Department spokeswoman, Heather Nauert, tried to explain the administration's reaction to the events during her daily press briefing. She said that Secretary of State Rex Tillerson has spoken a number of times in recent days with his Turkish counterpart about the crisis in Afrin. Nauert

described those conversations as “serious and frank.”

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“We have very real concerns”, Nauert stated. “This area that we’re talking about, Afrin, was relatively stable given that it was Syria, but it was relatively stable, and now we’re seeing it not in that situation. So we’re tremendously concerned about the situation.”



Syrians hold up a banner with the word “Killer” in Turkish and the Arabic phrase “Trump is a killer of children” during a demonstration in northern Syria on January 19, 2018, NAZEER AL-KHATIB/AFP

She added that “we call on all parties to remain focused. The reason that the United States is in Syria is to focus on the fight against ISIS. And when you take your eye off ISIS, when you take your eye off that and potentially divert other resources, troops, and all of that to fighting the Kurds, that is a huge problem.”

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This was a clear criticism of Turkey. Minutes later, however, Nauert added that the administration also understands Turkey’s point of view: “As much as we are concerned about destabilizing activities in northwestern Syria, I want to make this clear as well, that Turkey is an important NATO ally,” she said. “And as an important NATO ally, we understand – fully understand – Turkey’s concerns about different terrorist organizations. We understand their concerns about the PKK. So we’re having conversations with the Turkish government about addressing those concerns, but also trying to bring stability and encourage them to de-escalate tensions.”

After being asked pressed by reporters trying to understand what exactly, then, is the administration’s position on the recent events in Afrin, Nauert concluded that “we are calling on the Turks to de-escalate the situation. We are calling for not an increase in violence; we’re calling for a decrease in violence and that’s something that is extremely important to us.” She also said that this issue was “at the top of the secretary’s radar right now.”

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Kurdish demonstrators holding flags and a picture of the Turkish president protest against the operation by Turkish army in Afrin, Syria. Jan. 22, 2018. Hussein Malla/AP

The administration, in other words, is hoping to end the fighting in Afrin, but is not yet willing to seriously pressure Turkey on the subject. “I don’t think they have much of a choice,” said Steven Cook, an expert on Turkey and a senior fellow at the Washington-based Council on Foreign Relations. “The Turks are determined to ensure that Syrian Kurds don’t have this territory. They recognize that the United States is unhappy about it, but they won’t challenge them too much, for now.”

Cook told Haaretz that statements coming out of Washington “encouraging all sides to focus on fighting ISIS,” are in fact “a sign that the United States has very little leverage and no cards to play with.” Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, he added, “knew there would be a response of this kind coming from the United States,” a clear sign that he is not concerned about the Trump administration’s expressions of discomfort with his aggressive policy.

The Kurdish fighters in the Afrin area belong to the YPG, a Syrian-Kurdish militia that played an important role in the fight against ISIS in northern Syria, and did so in close coordination with the United States.

“The Kurds are angry – they feel betrayed,” Cook said. “And they have reason to. They were ‘our guys’ in Syria, and now they are under attack and the United States doesn’t seem to have any real solutions to offer them.”

The real test for the Trump administration, Cook added, would be whether or not it can stop Erdogan from expanding his attack on the Syrian Kurds to other parts of the border. If the fighting remains only in Afrin, the U.S. could perhaps stick to its current line of requesting both sides to show restraint. If, however, the Turkish attack moves to the east, towards areas of Syria where the YPG defeated ISIS in recent years, that would become “a major problem” for the administration, Cook warned.



"You can understand the Turkish concern for security along the border," he explained. "But I think there needs to be a strong statement from the U.S. that if this moves further east, we will not accept it. The Turks are using extremist groups in Syria as the tip of their swords in this attack, and we could definitely warn them that we will protect our YPG allies from those extremists if that's what it takes to keep ISIS at bay in eastern Syria."

The Syrian Kurdish YPG has been a sticking point between Turkey and the U.S. Washington backs the fighters against Islamic State in Syria. Turkey sees the YPG as an extension of the outlawed Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), which has carried out a three-decade violent insurgency in its Kurdish southeast.

Such an American message, Cook said, could be summed up as "we understand your concerns about Afrin, even though we don't like what you're doing there, but if you start moving too much to the east - the Syrian forces you're relying on will pay a price."

Such a message, however, would likely have to come directly from U.S. President Donald Trump, who so far has not commented on the crisis in Afrin, leaving it to the hands of Tillerson and Secretary of Defense James Mattis.

"I think this issue hasn't yet surfaced to the top of the president's tweet pile," said Aaron David Miller, a former Middle East negotiator in the Bush and Clinton administrations, who is currently vice president of the Woodrow Wilson Center in Washington. "It's not a top priority for him right now. He is pre-occupied with domestic politics, which is what drives his view of the world," Miller said, noting that the crisis broke out at the same time that the government was shut-down in Washington.



A Turkish-backed Syrian rebel fighter uses a drone at a monitoring point near the Syrian village of Qilah, in the southwestern edge of the Afrin region close to the border with Turkey, on January 22, OMAR HAJ KADOUR/AFP

"The Turks have already acted and they're going to continue to act. As long as you don't have a situation where American forces are involved in conflict with Free Syria Army forces or, even worse, with Turkish forces, it's not clear that Trump has to be involved," Miller said.

“It makes some sense to save the ‘presidential resource’ for an event where you might actually need it, like the Turks going east and crossing the Euphrates. But right now, this is below the level of the president, and up to Mattis and Tillerson to manage.”

Miller said that one possible reason for the administration’s cautious response thus far, could be that Tillerson or Mattis have “already communicated” to the Turks what are America’s “red lines” with regards to their current attack. “If such messages were already conveyed privately, that could explain a lot of what is going on right now, including Russia’s acquiescence and Washington’s restrained responses. Of course, that comes with assuming that the administration is on top of this.”



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