



The US fatal mistake in northern Syria

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The moment the Turkish incursion into Syrian Territory began on August 24, the stage was set for a looming direct military confrontation between Ankara and Kurdish forces in northern Syria. The US attempt to play both sides of the fence in a volatile conflict is unravelling now and Washington once again has overestimated its ability to shape the Middle East's political dynamics.

The US and Turkey appear to have agreed on the general principle of having a “safe zone” over northern Syria, however the discord that prevented this move centers around actual control on the ground. The strained relation between the two countries following the July 15 military coup attempt in Turkey prompted Washington to concede on one of Ankara's major demands: preventing a Kurdish corridor on its border. Hence, the White House surprisingly decided to walk this tightrope in northern Syria, adding further confusion to an already faltering US policy.

As Vice President Joe Biden was visiting Ankara, Turkish and American warplanes were pounding the Syrian border allowing a coalition of Turkish troops, the Free Syrian Army and Turkmen fighters to reach Jarablus within 12 hours. “We have made it clear to Kurdish forces that they must move back across the (Euphrates) river. They cannot and will not get American support if they do not keep that commitment,” affirmed Biden while giving no indication at all that Washington has any reservation about this incursion. Indeed, the US not only carried out surveillance flights and targeted the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) militants, but also advised the Turkish military in planning the incursion. The US military was upbeat [talking](#) about how the fall of Jarablus will pave the way for the battle of Raqqa in a parallel universe where Washington believes all parties of the Syrian conflict will somehow work together to defeat ISIL.

The general sense last week was that the US has traded its ties to Syrian Kurds with improving its relations with Turkey. By early this week, a different tone began to emerge. The Pentagon described on August 29 the clashes in northern Syria as “unacceptable” and made it clear that Washington did not support expanding the Turkish offensive against Kurdish forces on Syrian soil. The Wall Street Journal [reported](#) on August 30 that Ankara unilaterally pulled the trigger on the incursion without giving US officials advance warning as the White House was still deliberating Ankara's suggestion to

have US special forces embedded in the mission. Apparently, US military commanders had to scramble to provide the Turks with limited air support instead of taking the lead.

It is unclear whether the US is purposefully giving that impression of not endorsing the August 24 Turkish incursion to appease Kurdish allies or Ankara actually succeeded in forcing the US hand in the Syrian conflict. On both accounts, it is either a failure of policy or intelligence. By August 17, Turkish authorities were clear about their intentions and already began transporting Syrian rebels to the border. Moving Turkish warplanes and tanks should have been detected by US intelligence and it is hard to believe that Ankara's proposed intervention did not make it to President Barack Obama's desk before August 24, as a senior US official told the Wall Street Journal. Regardless of the US intention, the Turkish incursion will have a lasting impact on the Syrian conflict and it will now be difficult for the US to manage Ankara's eagerness to project power in northern Syria.

When Manbij was liberated on August 12, not only a supply route was cut between the Turkish border and Raqqa, but also Kurdish groups became closer to linking areas across Jarablus to Afrin. For years now, Ankara preferred having ISIL on its border than dealing with emboldened Syrian Kurdish forces. Washington is now seeking to revisit the redline it has established to keep Kurdish forces east of the Euphrates with an additional rule of engagement that keeps Turkish troops west of the river.

It is also hard to understand the rationale of having the Free Syrian Army as the face of the Turkish fight against Syrian Kurds. After all Jarablus is not a strategic priority for the Syrian opposition's struggle against President Bashar Assad's regime nor is it wise to have direct confrontation with a group that will remain an integral part of any Syrian solution despite concerns about its behavior. The US was able until now to restrain the People's Protection Units (YPG)'s readiness to declare an open war against Turkish troops, however tension is already rising between Syrian Kurds and Arabs in Manbij and this might extend to other areas on the border.

Washington might now be in a watershed moment of losing the momentum in its priority fight against ISIL while risking to shift to a new mission of policing a fragile truce between two allies. Moving forward, the US has to contemplate how it can balance supporting Syrian Kurds and maintaining friendly relations with Ankara in any future political arrangement in Syria. The stakes are becoming too high for the American administration as well as other players in the conflict.