



Turkey at “the Gate” of Victory at Al-Bab: What’s Next?

By Mustafa Gurbuz

January 9, 2017

The New Year’s Eve attack in Istanbul represents a significant change in relations between Turkey and the Islamic State in Syria and the Levant (ISIL). Although ISIL earlier conducted several attacks on touristic places in Istanbul and Ankara, the group had never claimed responsibility until the recent nightclub attack on January 1, 2017. Days before, ISIL released a horrifying video of Turkish soldiers being burned alive in Syria—a claim that was rejected by the Turkish authorities. ISIL’s open declaration of war is primarily a response to Turkey’s policy changes in Syria and the Al-Bab offensive. As ISIL has already begun to retreat due to heavy losses, the Turkish military is preparing to declare its victory in capturing the Syrian town of Al-Bab.

Al-Bab’s Significance for Turkey and ISIL

Meaning “the gate” in Arabic, Al-Bab is a town strategically located 25 miles from northeastern Aleppo, 19 miles from Turkey’s southern border, and 88 miles from Raqqa—the de facto capital of ISIL. The town has been central to ISIL’s foreign operations unit. [According to European intelligence services](#), major attacks including those in Paris, Brussels, Nice, and Berlin were directed from Al-Bab. The group also perceived the town as highly valuable in reaching the outskirts of Aleppo as well as Idlib province.

Only a few months ago, in September 2016, Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) declared their goal to capture the town from ISIL’s hands, [adding that](#) they will prevent the Turkey-backed Free Syrian Army factions from taking part in the liberation of Al-Bab. Since then, Syrian opposition to the Asad regime experienced severe setbacks and the fall of Aleppo led to a recalculation of Turkey’s military strategy in Syria. By brokering a deal with Russia, Turkey launched a major military offensive on Al-Bab with the help of the Free Syrian Army. Such a move put the United States in a difficult position as Turkish and Kurdish forces were [involved in](#) a direct confrontation, which eventually led the US to express, grudgingly, an understanding of Turkey’s concerns. Yet, in the past few weeks, Turkey repeatedly blamed the United States for not providing support for the Al-Bab offensive, and [hinted to shutter](#) the Incirlik air base in southern Turkey to US air operations.

If Turkey's offensive results in victory, the Turkish government may have a better hand in negotiating with the United States on the issue of Kurdish cantons in northern Syria, which is seen as a national security threat. President Erdogan and his team equate the Al-Bab offensive with Turkish national liberation. "The defense line for Giresun should be set at al-Bab," [said](#) the Turkish deputy prime minister, whose hometown, Giresun, is located far north on Turkey's Black Sea coast. "The security of Ankara is synonymous with the security of al-Bab. If those areas cannot be controlled, one cannot defend Ankara, and cannot defend Giresun."

The offensive, however, came with a high price: an increasing number of Turkish casualties in Syria and relentless terror attacks in Turkish cities by both ISIL and the Kurdish TAK (Kurdistan Freedom Falcons, an urban offshoot of the Kurdistan Workers' Party [PKK]). The nightclub attack by ISIL was followed by a car bombing in Izmir by Kurdish rebels on January 5. Previously, on December 10, TAK claimed responsibility for two explosions in Istanbul, killing 46 people and injuring 166 others. It is important to note that initial ISIL attacks on Turkey often targeted the Kurdish political constituency—which led to a belief that Turkey tolerates ISIL in the logic of "the enemy of my enemy is a friend." After the Al-Bab operation, however, Turkey found two sworn enemies that were willing to conduct suicide missions on its own soil. Considering the widespread urban cells of ISIL and the PKK, the Turkish security apparatus now confronts an unprecedented challenge.

The Question of Idlib

Recent developments in the Idlib region make the Al-Bab offensive even more critical for Turkish interests. Adjacent to Turkey's border, Idlib is the main stronghold of the Syrian opposition after the fall of Aleppo. After several meetings in Qatar and Turkey, various groups now aspire for a merger while distancing themselves from Jabhat Fateh al-Sham (formerly the Al-Nusra Front, an affiliate of Al-Qaeda). The groups joining the "Leadership Council for Liberation of Syria" [include](#) Ahrar al-Sham, Faylaq al-Sham, Jaish al-Islam, Suqour al-Sham, Faylaq al-Rahman, Ajnad al-Sham, the Fastaqim Kama Umirt Union, and Jabhat Ahl al-Sham. The recent meetings bore substantial fruit, such as the designation of a military command and a political bureau, a joint constitution, and a promise to join the Astana peace talks, which will be held in Kazakhstan later in January under Russian, Turkish, and Iranian auspices. A Turkish victory in Al-Bab may embolden such a united Syrian opposition, especially the Ahrar al-Sham leadership, which developed better relations with Turkey though under heavy criticism within.

To be sure, the main obstacle to the aforementioned merger is Jabhat Fateh al-Sham (JFS). The group is still trying to persuade Ahrar al-Sham to support an alternate merger under its brand, a move vehemently opposed by Turkey and Qatar because of western concerns. After the fall of Aleppo, the United States intensified its drone operations in Idlib against Al-Qaeda figures and

killed Abu Khattab al-Qahtani (a former Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula [AQAP] commander) as well as Abu Omar al-Turkistani, a top military commander of JFS working on merger negotiations. More recently, a close aide of the JFS leader, Younes Shoeyb, and his son were killed in a drone strike in Idlib. Such rapid developments indicate not only JFS's ambition to become a vanguard of resistance after the fall of Aleppo, but also rising American concerns for Idlib's future. In case the Astana peace talks fail and the Turkey-Qatar merger of the opposition gets fractured, the JFS could attract disenchanted fighters. Moreover, if the Trump Administration accepts Putin's proposal to eradicate radicals in Idlib, a frustrated JFS may well plot transnational terror attacks and seek refuge on Turkish soil next to the border.

What's Next after the Al-Bab Victory?

Turkey's President Erdogan repeatedly mentioned his plan after successfully taking over Al-Bab: a military operation on Manbij, which is a town currently controlled by a Kurdish-Arab coalition under heavy influence of the People's Protection Units (YPG), an affiliate of the PKK. Over the past two years, the YPG has received tremendous support from the United States; it has captured both Kurdish and non-Kurdish areas in northern Syria with the help of US air strikes. The YPG feels so emboldened that the group [trains Arab fighters](#) (under the Syrian Democratic Forces umbrella) with PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan's Marxist ideology before their deployment to fight against ISIL in Raqqa. Ankara blames Washington for supporting "terrorism" because PKK affiliates now routinely target major Turkish cities. YPG-backed Arabs and Turkey-backed Arabs have already engaged in a direct battle in the Manbij countryside—and both are US allies. Such contradictory policies will cause a headache for the Trump Administration in the next few weeks.

In the context of the ongoing Raqqa operation, it is unlikely that the United States will halt military aid to the Kurdish YPG. The bulk of Syrian Democratic Forces is still made up of YPG fighters—constituting more than three-quarters of the coalition. Such a hard reality pushes Turkey to seek help from Russia; and yet, Trump-Putin relations on the Syrian war still remain a mystery. Putin may prefer to exploit the rift between Turkey and the United States, and thus, provide support for Turkey's bid for the Manbij region. For the first time in the Syrian civil war, Russian warplanes have [carried out](#) airstrikes for the benefit of Turkey, helping to capture Al-Bab. Whether such military cooperation will be observed in the Manbij region depends on the Trump team's policy priorities in Syria and its ability to maneuver in satisfying both Turks and Russians.

A military victory in Al-Bab would also encourage Turkey to establish a safe zone between the Azaz and Jarablus lines, two Turkish border cities in northern Syria where refugee resettlement can take place within an urban reconstruction. The recent ISIL suicide attack in Azaz which killed dozens of people, however, indicates that there are grave difficulties in the implementation of such a plan. Whatever conditions Syrian refugees may face within Turkish borders, they will be

reluctant to return to northern Syria in the near future. After the fall of Aleppo, Turkey's bid for a "safe zone" may be a welcome development for civilians escaping Assad's wrath.