

Turkey's New Strategy in the Region

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Islamic Theology of Counter Terrorism

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Kudos are to be awarded to the Turkish Security Services for their Brilliant Operations undertaken since early November 2018.

We saw the reactions around the world regarding the horrific murder of the Saudi writer for the Washington Post Jamal Khashoggi in the Saudi Consulate in Istanbul. This event presented an opportunity for Turkey to achieve two key policy objectives. They are:

- 1.) Reducing the rising influence of Mohammed Bin Salman and inflict a strategic defeat upon the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia if unable to prevent his ascension to becoming King.
- 2.) Reducing the capabilities of the PKK activities within Turkey by targeting the YPG in Northeastern Syria with the potential of future operations.
- 3.) Encouraging a withdrawal of the United States from the region as a whole.

This plan was launched by selective leaks to the western media outlets showing the assailants of Mr. Khashoggi arriving in Istanbul to conduct this operation. Surveillance camera footage of Khashoggi was leaked as well. The manufactured outrage targeting the Saudis began. After outrage from various media outlets here in the U.S. led to the efforts gained its first major success when the United States Senate voted not to support the Saudi led Military Campaign that is still ongoing in Yemen. This was seen as a rebuke to both President Trump and Saudi Arabia.

One of the main criticisms levied against President Trump is that he curries favor to autocratic regimes. So, when he refused to jump on the bandwagon and levy criticism on the Kingdom, this presented an opportunity for the Turkish government to advance on to their second goal. After all, they are judging that President Trump is a weak President. The capture of the House of Representatives by the Democrats during the 2018 midterms can be read as another piece of evidence of the current weakness and unpopularity of the President.

So now the Saudis are in a weakened position within the region and among the International Community. One key piece of evidence to support this train of thought is the poor attendance to a conference to encourage investment in the Kingdom. With another potential adversary made impotent, the Erdogan regime realized that it's time to deal with the bane of the existence of President Erdogan...the Kurdish militants, while the media and others are distracted by other events.

One of the often used critiques by the Turkish government is that the PKK (Kurdistan Workers Party) has received high quality weapons from their Syrian cousins the YPG (People's Protection Units) which have formed the core of the SDF (Syrian Democratic Forces) units that not only govern most of Syria east of the Euphrates River but have been a key ally of the United States during Operations against ISIS and their affiliates not only in Syria but also in Iraq as well.

This gives the Turkish Security Forces a chance to eradicate what they feel are valid security threats that could present threats to the state or more importantly the current leadership in power in Ankara.

So now the President has decided to fulfill another campaign promise and withdraw US ground forces from Syria. The efforts to mop up ISIS will be left to Turkey according to the phone call between the Presidents that took place on December 14th. This phone call appears to be the catalyst for the next phase of this operation. In exchange for a promised purchase of the Patriot Anti-Missile System, a withdrawal of US forces from Syria would be undertaken.

There are several groups, among them the smaller groups like the Yezidis and the Syriac Christians, that comprise the SDF and feel that they are being thrown to the wolves yet again by the International Community. They do have a valid point. Indeed, how quickly the events around Mount Sinjar have been forgotten by the international community when the Yezidis were encircled by ISIS Militants back in 2014. They were rescued by a combination of militias that were protected by U.S. airpower.

What will happen after the Turkish Army launches its planned offensive that will most likely target the SDF? If the YPG and its allies are defeated by the Turks then the SAA (Syrian Arab Army) will move across the river and reassert its influence in that part of the country where it has not had a presence for years. The retribution against these communities will be brutal. Currently there is no timetable for when this new offensive against ISIS is scheduled to begin that being said the Turks have told President Trump that they will take up the battle against ISIS in lieu of the US pulling out of Syria.

This will not be the final move that will be made. Turkey has been one of the key supporters of Hamas faction in the Gaza Strip as well. An emboldened Turkey will most likely launch a new effort to support this ally with either financial aid or weapons. This means that there will be a new threat against the State of Israel as well. There have been several attempts in the recent past by Turkey to send supplies to the Gaza Strip by sea. One flotilla was even boarded and searched by the IDF in the open seas, an event that raised tensions between both countries. Could we see this scenario play out yet again?

This is a well thought out project by Ankara. It has promoted itself as a major geo-political force to be reckoned with. It appears to have created a regional balance in the Middle East that promotes its own strategic interests in concert with countries that have been in the past considered to be regional adversaries (Iran and Russia) instead of working with partners that have been considered to be key allies in regional stability (USA and Germany). It has been suggested that President Erdogan is keen on recreating the Ottoman Empire by any means necessary.

The withdrawal of U.S. forces also means that the long-feared Shia Land Bridge from Iran to Lebanon will be one step closer to completion. This will be seen as another threat to the Israeli State as well. Sadly, this project by Turkey has managed to create another vacuum. What element that nature chooses to fill it may not be seen. Or a former entity can be reformed to fill the void. Rest assured, this will not end well for the region.

Photo: SCMP