

Will 'We Won' Become 'Mission Accomplished'?

A US Withdrawal and the Scramble for Northeastern Syria

By John Holland-McCowan



Northeastern Syria is a battleground once again. The crisis began when President Donald Trump made the surprise announcement of the imminent withdrawal of the approximately 2,000 US forces from Syria in December 2018. Nevertheless, some 1,000 US soldiers remained there by the time President Trump decided to withdraw US troops from much of the Syrian-Turkish border on 6 October 2019, paving the way for the launch of Operation Peace Spring by Turkish-backed forces three days later. This latest Turkish-led offensive, the re-entry of the Assad regime into the region and the uncertain nature of future US involvement in the country triggered a scramble for northeastern Syria.

Turkish proposals for a Turkish-administered 'safe zone' claimed that it would simultaneously prevent IS from re-emerging and provide a safe haven to which millions of Syrian refugees could return. It was in actuality an idea principally geared to fatally weaken the SDF, led by People's Protection Units (YPG), thus critically endangering the US-led coalition's efforts against IS.

A full US withdrawal from Syria in the future would risk losing the SDF's and US-led coalition's military achievements against IS at the hands of Ankara and Damascus. As the SDF and their political partners had to make a deal with Assad in a desperate bid for protection from their Turkish adversaries, prospects that the SDF can cement many of their diplomatic and military gains are bleak. Neither state is willing or ready to reach a palatable political compromise with the Syrian Kurds.

There is a very significant chance that President Trump's 'We Have Won' announcement of December 2018 will be remembered similarly to President Bush's 'Mission Accomplished' speech in March 2003. If the administration does not want to mimic the mistakes of the past, it must seriously reassess its policy options in Syria.

Turkish national security interests fundamentally conflict with America's for the foreseeable future. The USA should seek to ameliorate Turkish security concerns where possible while at the same time exerting the utmost effort to rehabilitate their relationship with the SDF. The US government should apply further economic and diplomatic sanctions on Turkey in order to better constrain their behaviour in northern Syria going forward. Encouraging renewed peace talks between Ankara and the PKK may help alleviate tensions between Turkey and the SDF.

The SDF risks being irreparably dismantled due to Turkish aggression. They have called for Damascus's aid only out of necessity. While they are not the perfect partner, it is in the interests of the US administration to maintain this relationship. Leaving up to 600 troops in Deir ez-Zor governorate to fight alongside the SDF against IS for the indeterminate future is not sufficient. To further abandon these vital partners forfeits most of the leverage the US-led coalition has in the Syrian Civil War, exacerbates a deepening humanitarian crisis and damages America's national security interests.