

## US Withdrawal From Syria and Turkey's Border Security

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President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's messages on military operations in East-Euphrates once again demonstrated the determination of Turkey in fight with terrorism. Indeed, following the announcement of President Erdogan, United States (US) Defense Ministry spokesman Robertson said in a statement "Possible operation that Turkey would conducting East-Euphrates is worrying, that would also put our soldiers in danger". On December 14, an important telephone conversation is held between President Erdogan and US President Trump. Only five days after the conversation, on December 19, Trump declared: "We defeated the terrorist organization ISIS and will withdraw our troops from Syria." When we look at the withdrawal calendar announced by Trump, it is shown that diplomacy staff in 24 hours and American troops within Syria will be withdrawn in 60 to 100 days. In this context, it is necessary to draw attention to two questions; "Will the US withdraw from Syria in the given timeframe and if ISIS resumes its actions?" and "Will Trump be able to withdraw US troops?". It is impossible not to feel confused in regard to such questions. To answer both of the questions; Trump stated that America would be his priority as rallying about what kind of a foreign policy he would pursue; both during the presidential



campaign and after he won the presidential race.

So when we look at what Trump plans on America and then the global cards, strategies and allies, we can now state that Washington with Trump does not want to enter into a costly war or protect its allies. Trump seeks a vision of a United States becoming a kind of a security company to protect the America's interests. In other words, Trump is trying to create an American strategy that cannot afford losing its vision of being the "Super-Power America". The confusion of the politicians and allies around the 45th President of the United States with regard to the steps taken by him should be reacted normally, since he acts as an important businessman. Therefore, it is necessary to look at the timing, cost and reflection of Trump's decisions on the American interests. As a result, the US seems to has given up on the super-power/hard-power strategy that George W. Bush had once implemented.

As a matter of fact, the steps taken by the United States in the Middle East since September 11, 2001 have led to the emergence of different powers adversary to Washington. For example, the invasion of Iraq strengthened Iran. In December 2010, the United States, which supported the popular uprisings and changes in the Arab countries, confronted the return of Russia as a strong and reliable actor in the Middle East. As an American president elected as a result of the reflection of these developments in the polls, Trump aims to get rid of old revenges and heavy bills. For this reason, Trump thinks that the US is not the only one to fight against the terrorist organization ISIS and tries to leave the struggle to the global and regional actors. In fact, the US has lost considerable confidence and prestige in the international arena. In this context, when we look at Trump's fundamental philosophy, we can argue that he tried to implement a doctrine of "Let us govern the world without losing America". The withdrawal of Trump from Syria can also be taken as an indication of that vision. At this point, it is necessary to attract attention to the fact that, although Trump wants to withdraw from Syria in 100 days, he can be left alone by the decision-makers around him. In such a case, the time will tell whether he can stand behind his decisions.

### **Main goals of the US in Syria**

The US has three basic strategies in the Middle East. These are to dominate energy lines, to balance Iran-Israel and the Arab world and to protect the security of Gulf countries. If we look at the Syrian strategy by reducing the US's general policy in the Middle East to a special case, we can argue that Washington has these goals:

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1. To combat the terrorist organization ISIS and to terminate the existence of the organization in Syria and Iraq,
2. To establish an autonomous buffer zone by opening an area in the north and north-east of the country to the PYD/YPG that is the Syrian extension of the PKK terrorist organization fighting with ISIS,
3. To cut down the corridor where through Iran sends military aid to the Shiite militias and Syrians in Lebanon supporting the Assad regime in Syria,
4. Balancing Russia in the Middle East through Syria,
5. To ensure the transition of Syria to a federative political system in the future.

When the above mentioned developments are evaluated, the US did not just open space for PKK/YPG in East-Euphrates. At the same time, it has established its hegemony on East-Euphrates controlled by the terrorist organization YPG along with the US. El Tank, El Verd, El Tim, El Cafre and Konko oil fields along with the largest El Omeer oil deposit in Deir ez-Zor are controlled by the US and YPG. Another important aspect of East-Euphrates is that Iraq and Syria are close to the 600 km borderline and Iran can not provide aid to Hezbollah through this area. The fact that Deir ez-Zor, located in the East-Euphrates, is 30 km away from the Iraqi border shows

that it is a strategic and sensitive region for the US and YPG terrorist organization. Therefore, Hajin, Shiife, Lower and Upper Bagoz, Süse, Buhasan along with Albuhatır villages of East-Euphrates and some villages around them have not been fully recovered from the ISIS terrorist organization.

### **Why is East-Euphrates Under Threat?**

A proxy war within Syrian War and between global and regional powers emerged critical areas in the territorial context of the eight year of period. As the geopolitical importance of strategic regions such as Eastern Guta, Idlib and Euphrates east of Syria is understood, actors of the proxy war directly or indirectly pitch against each other. Therefore, Eastern Guta, Aleppo-Idlib (where Turkey was in the search for a solution through negotiations between Russia and Iran) and Menbic along with East-Euphrates (in Ankara-Washington relations) has become a major crisis zones. Through bilateral and tripartite summits in Eastern Guta, Aleppo and Idlib, Astana, Sochi, Ankara and Tehran defused the situation in consultation with Russia and Iran or led to a truce.

In fact, the United Nations (UN) Syria Representative De Mistora met with three guarantor actors in Moscow, Ankara and Tehran as a result of the summits and carried out a work within the constitutional committee. On the other hand, East-Euphrates is critical, not only for the border security of Turkey, but for the territorial integrity of Syria as well. Almost 70 percent of the Syrian economy is under the control of the YPG terrorist organization. The region is considered to be the most fertile Syrian territory due to the

presence of oil and natural gas deposits, arable land and water dams.

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Also, in addition to opening a military space for the PKK/YPG terrorist organization in East-Euphrates, it is possible for the US to turn its moves in this region into a diplomatic and political maneuver. If Washington takes such a step, a federative structure in northern Syria is likely to occur in the medium term. In other words, East-Euphrates will play a key role in the future of Syria's territorial integrity. The US has established a boutique US Land-Forces by providing weapons, military ammunition, military training and consultancy to the PKK/YPG terrorist organization in Syria. It is clear that the United States first provided military support to the YPG terrorist organization and then diplomatic support. In particular, American soldiers at Tanef Base in East-Euphrates provide military training to the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), the majority of which is YPG members. The United States has five military bases in East-Euphrates along with 2,000 serving US soldiers. On the other hand, it should be kept in mind that after the US State Department appointed the former US Ambassador of Ankara and Baghdad, James Jeffrey, as Special Delegate to Syria, a diplomatic support to the PKK/YPG has also been provided.

After the US assigned Jeffrey to Syria as Special Delegate, he made serious efforts to join the PKK/YPG terrorist organization in the Geneva talks under the umbrella of SDF.

### Changing Balances in Syria and Israel

While Trump announced that he would withdraw his troops, there were controversies over who would be in control of the regions vacated by the US in Syria; in fact, it is necessary to keep the agenda of the withdrawal of American soldiers. It should be emphasized that the 60 to 100 days period that Trump has given to withdraw the troops from Syria is a long time for a region where complex balances of the Middle East can change at any time. Therefore, it is necessary to foresee that, after Trump's withdrawal decision, he will hand over the power gap of the region to the actors that he is able to control. After the invasion of Iraq in 2003, the US created a new element of disintegration by taking steps that had fueled the Shiite-Sunni sectarian conflict to weaken Pan-Arabism or Arab nationalism that led to the three major Arab-Israeli wars in 1948-1967-1973 threatening the security of Israel.

But as Washington divided the Arabs over the Shiite-Sunni tension; Iran, which threatened Israel's security, has been strengthened in the Middle East and Hezbollah in Lebanon, supported by the Tehran regime, has become influential in the Beirut Government. From this point of view, it is possible to say that the only way for the US to balance Russia, Iran and Shiite militias, especially Hezbollah in the Middle East and Syria, is to revive the Arab nationalism. It is important to note that the United States aims to build a more controlled Arab nationalism led by Saudi Arabia and will not target Israel.

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it is not clear yet whether Trump will withdraw his troops in the light of the aforementioned assessments. In such an environment, it would not be the right approach to say that “America is leaving Syria”. Trump's new strategy is to share the costs of the problems in the Middle East, particularly the ISIS terrorist organization, with the actors in the region. Trump's basic doctrine is to look for ways to become a low-cost superpower just like its regional and global partners, without removing money from the US treasury.

### US PKK / YPG Card, Israel and Turkey's Fight Against Terrorism

While Israel is expected to react to Washington after Trump's decision to withdraw its troops from Syria, Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu accused President Erdogan of organizing a massacre of Kurds. As a matter of fact, considering the Syrian policy of Israel since 2011, it can be said that Israel wants the Assad regime to continue as well as the Syrian Civil War. The most important issue that worries Israel in the context of the the Civil War is that Iran and the Shiite militias are becoming active in the Syrian territory. In this context, it is possible to say that Israel is not very troubled by Trump's decision

to withdraw. Because Israel can take over the PKK / YPG card from the United States and try to push the mentioned organization into conflict with the military forces and Hezbollah close to Iran. In other words, it would not be surprising that after the withdrawal of American troops, the PKK/YPG would be trained by MOSSAD and start a “strike and run” strategy. Leaving the card of PKK/YPG to Israel, US plans to build an autonomous structure to be established in the Northern Syria and East-Euphrates through the card of politicized-Kurds accepted by everyone as well as Turkey. As a matter of fact, Trump’s decision to withdraw has not left the power to Syria; however, it is just the tactics and strategies are altered.

In his speech at the US base, Aynul Asad in the Enbar province of Iraq, where Trump made a surprise visit on December 27, he gave the signs that the US had changed his strategy in Syria. Trump has given three important messages from Iraq. These messages can be listed as follows:

a) Trump has indicated that he had no plans to withdraw his troops in Iraq.

This message means that Trump will not withdraw from Iraq until Iran is stabilized and all military and logistical support that Tehran sends to Syria and Hezbollah over Iraq is prevented. As mentioned above, the US will continue to make efforts to weaken Iran’s power in Iraq. Israel will try to restrain Iran through the YPG/SDF in the Syrian territory.

b) Trump said “We can use Iraq as a base to do something in Syria when we need it”. Therefore, Trump’s withdrawal of his troops from Syria will increase the number of American soldiers

and American bases in Iraq. It can be foreseen that the US military bases in Iraq will be set up in strategic regions that can control the aid corridor where Iran sends aid to Syria and Hezbollah using Iraqi territory. New American bases may be established in Enbar, which is geographically and strategically close to the Iranian and Syrian borders of Iraq, Sincar and Harir region of Erbil.

c) Trump’s statement of “We have defeated ISIS in Syria and President Erdogan too wants to defeat ISIS and he will.” is attention grabbing. In fact, Trump’s most confusing message here is “We defeated ISIS”. It is clear that Trump’s “defeated” message is entirely directed towards the American public. Here, the question of “If the US defeated the ISIS terrorist organization, why does Trump want Turkey to continue fighting with ISIS” comes to mind. Questions on the issue like “Why would Turkey fight with the aforementioned terrorist organization rather than the International Coalition Forces established in September 2014 to combat ISIS with US leadership?” and “Is it ISIS or PKK/YPG, which Turkey fought for 35 years, is a primary threat in terms of the national security of Turkey?” might be added as well. There is only one answer to all of these questions: the US does not want the only focus of Turkey’s fight against terrorism in Syria to be YPG/PKK, in fact it wants the forces of Turkey to be divided whilst fighting with ISIS as well.

However, Turkey does not have such an obligation to terminate the ISIS terrorist organization. Turkey is able to fight in areas close to its border with ISIS; however, combat with ISIS in areas crossing its borders should be done by international coalition forces. The regime of al-Sham,

Russia, Iran, France, Germany along with all the countries in the coalition forces is supposed to fight with ISIS in Syria, the entire responsibility on Turkey's disposal would not be right. Turkey must not undertake such a cost. However, it would be accepted as an important tactical strategy that Turkey declares that it is fighting with ISIS in Syria while removing PKK/YPG terrorist organizations from the East-Euphrates and Menbic. It should be emphasized in the light of the developments discussed above; Turkey's commitment to the fight against the terrorist organization PKK/PYD is not a condition attached to the withdrawal of American troops from Syria. Therefore, Trump's decision to withdraw her troops does not mean that Turkey would ignore the formation of YPG in the north of Syria. Considering the fact that the US has established a de facto structure and cantons for PKK/YPG in the north and northeast of Syria, Trump's withdrawal decision changes nothing in terms of the threat-on-borders perception of Turkey. So, as long as PKK/YPG terrorist groups remaining East-Euphrates, that is essential that Turkey continues its cross-border operations to eliminate the threat posed under Turkey's fight against terrorism.

### Conclusion

Considering the changes in Syria in 2018, it can be said that some contacts have started between the Assad regime and the Syrian opposition, and the period of organizing such meetings as Geneva, Astana and Sochi has passed. It can even be stated that the debates on the transition process with or without Esed have been passed and it moves towards the construction of a new Syria. In the new Syrian equation, the balance of forces

consisting of two or more blocks has emerged. The tripartite alliance established amongst Turkey, Russia and Iran after the Astana Process, in order to cooperate in certain areas within Syria, balances the Western actors in the country including the US. However, with Trump's decision to withdraw his troops, he is trying to save Syria from Russia and Iran's influence and aims to restore the country within the Arab world. In this context, it is quite meaningful that the United Arab Emirates attempts to reopen its embassy in al-Sham after seven years, and that Bahrain, Jordan and Egypt try to normalize their relations with the Assad regime. These developments may be a sign of a new era of Arab nationalism in Syria.

In particular, the invitation of the Assad regime to the Arab League summit in Tunisia in March 2019 brings on the road map for the Arab countries to follow in Syria. However, even if the Assad regime is returned to the Arab community again, the position of Russia and Iran in Syria will not change. However both Washington and Moscow may take steps indirectly through Arab countries towards the developments in line with the position taken by Turkey concerning Syria.

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On the other hand, due to the conjunctural structure within Syria, it is seen that there is an unnamed cooperation kept secret between Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Egypt and Israel. It is important to keep in mind that these

countries have a common threat perceptions regarding Iran. It should not be forgotten that in the East-Euphrates, apart from the US, the PKK/YPG can be financed by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates as well.

Furthermore, it can be stated that the United Arab Emirates' haste in activating his embassy in al-Sham, after the Trump's withdrawal decision, is to facilitate direct contact with YPG in the Syrian territories. Considering this framework, It is essential for Turkey to start the cross-border operation to the East-Euphrates without extending it over a long period of time, especially before new equations and settlements gain clarity are emerging in Syria. Because as Trump announced that he would withdraw the troops; the ground is emerged for new actors to take place within the region, such as Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Israel. It can be stated that as Iran, upsetting the balance in Syria, heads towards to tighten cooperation with Turkey; Russia is likely to carefully implement its strategies for balancing local, regional and global powers. In this context, it should be stressed that Turkey should act very carefully in Syria. If Turkey waits for a longer period of time to conduct military operations in East-Euphrates, the UN Security Council (UNSC) may declare the area a safe and no-fly zone to prevent the Turkish Armed Forces (TSK) from entering the region.

On the other hand, as the US announces its withdrawal decision, It is trying to implement the plan B with regard to the de-facto situation in the northern and northern parts of the country along with the countries it is cooperating with. In fact for Turkey, rather than the withdrawal decision, that is more crucial to know how the he-

avy artillery that is given to PKK/YPG/SDG is going to be used. It is also known that along with 23.000 trucks load of military weapons, ammunition and logistical support provided by the US for PKK/YPG/SDG, military training given to approximately 30 thousand terrorists in the field for almost 3 years. Therefore, the statements from Washington with regard to the withdrawal of American troops from Syria is not satisfactory for Turkey.

When all the developments mentioned above are taken into consideration; it is noteworthy that Trump stated: "We defeated ISIS in Syria" instead of saying that ISIS is "over" In fact, ISIS lost only the cities they controlled in both Iraq and Syria; but it is not completely eradicated. In fact, according to estimates, in Iraq 15-17 thousand and in Syria up to 14 thousand terrorists are drawn into hidden cells. It should be emphasized that ISIS is an organization composed of domestic and foreign fighters. Therefore, it is very difficult to completely eradicate the local actors within ISIS, even if foreign fighters in ISIS are prevented. For instance, it is known today that the control of the center of Havice of Iraq's Kirkuk Province belongs to the Iraqi forces during day whilst controlled by ISIS itself during the night.

To summarize; ISIS has not been completely eradicated in Iraq and Syria. Moreover, the withdrawal of the United States from Syria and the fact that it left the region to the Iranian-Russian duo is a development that would contradict Washington's Middle East policy. That is why Trump's decision on Syria and ISIS is quite contradictory and questionable. As a matter of fact, there are serious indications that significant

changes will be experienced in the Middle East within geopolitical, geo-strategic and geo-economic context. In this regard, Turkey's priority should be its border security and fight against the PKK terrorist organization. Moreover, it is useful for Turkey to cooperate with powers that would help protecting its national interests and border-security. Because Syria today is not even Syria that was a year ago.

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### ***About BILGESAM***

Established in 2008, the Wise Men Center for Strategic Studies (BILGESAM) is one of the leading think tanks in Turkey. As a non-profit, non-partisan organization BILGESAM operates under the guidance of a group of well-respected academics from different disciplines, retired military generals and diplomats; and aims to contribute regional and global peace and prosperity. Closely following the domestic and international developments, BILGESAM conducts research on Turkey's domestic problems, foreign policy and security strategies, and the developments in the neighbouring regions to provide the Turkish decision-makers with practical policy recommendations and policy options.

### ***About Author***

Ali Semin received his bachelor's and master's degrees from the Department of International Relations of Gazi University.

Semin worked at various organizations in Iraq during the period between 1998 and 2001. During his undergraduate study, he had worked at Middle East Studies of Political Strategic Research Center (POLSTAR). Between the years 2009 and 2010, he had worked as an analyst at Middle East-African Studies within the Institute of Strategic Thinking. He also worked at foreign trade units of different organizations. Ali Semin has been working as a specialist on Middle Eastern Studies in the Wise Men Center for Strategic Studies (BILGESAM) since 2011. His main research areas are Middle Eastern policy, Turkey's Middle East policy, ethnical and sectarian conflicts, energy policies in the Middle East, armed forces and terrorism, Turkey-Iraq relations, Iraq's internal and external politics, Northern Iraq's political structure, Turkmens, Iraqi Kurds' relations with regional and global powers, Gulf countries, Iran, Syria and Egypt. Many of his analyses and articles on the Middle East have been published at various journals, new papers and websites both at national and international level. He has also participated in lots of national and international conferences and panels on Turkey and the Middle East which were held at universities in Turkey. Additionally, interviews made with him have been published at various newspapers, journals and websites.

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