



February 15, 2017

Turkey strives to create a "safe zone" along its border with Syria after the liberation of al-Bab, seeking support from President Donald Trump.

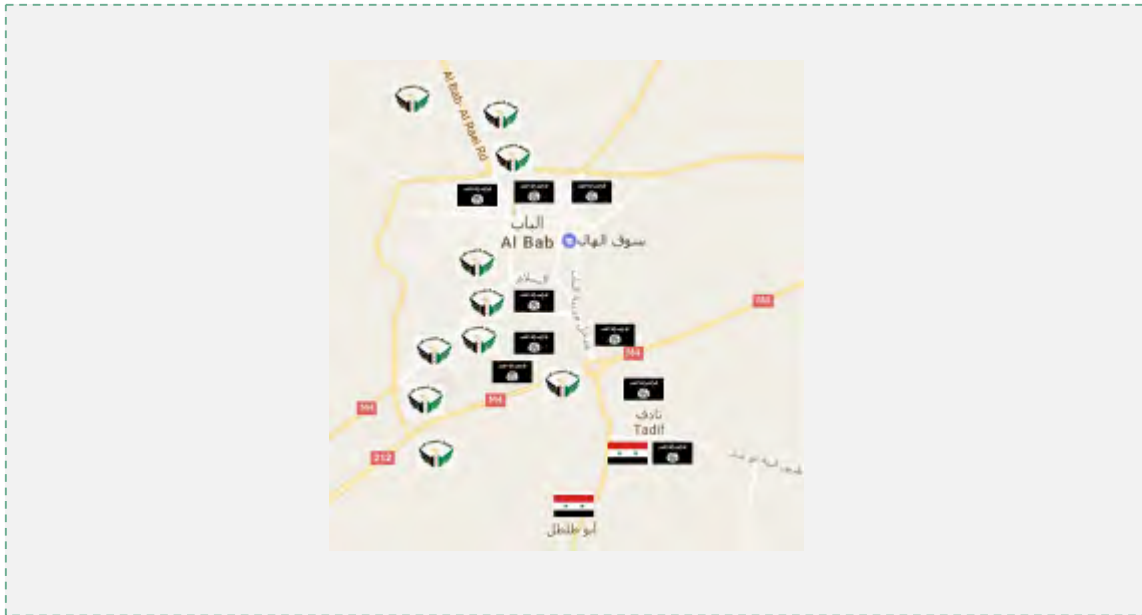


Turkish commando forces ("the Purple Berets") and Leopard tanks en route to the Syrian city of al-Bab (milliyet.com.tr, February 15, 2017).

Overview of the Situation on the Ground in al-Bab

1. After having liberated the rural area around al-Bab and encircled the city, on February 11, 2017, the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and the Turkish army initiated **an attack to take control of the city**. The attacking forces occupied the western part of the city (about 40% of its total area). They are removing mines and IEDs from the city streets and advancing towards the city center, which is still under ISIS control. ISIS is showing fierce resistance, but apparently **the fall of al-Bab is close**.

2. In the meantime, a **Syrian government army force reached the southern suburbs of al-Bab** but halted at the village of Tadif, to the southeast of al-Bab (possibly the result of earlier collaboration with Turkey brokered by Russia). The Turkish media reported that the Syrian army had "changed direction" and was currently advancing to the east (milliyet.com.tr, February 15, 2017). Thus it appears that **al-Bab will be liberated exclusively by the FSA and the Turkish army**, while the Syrian army will not participate.

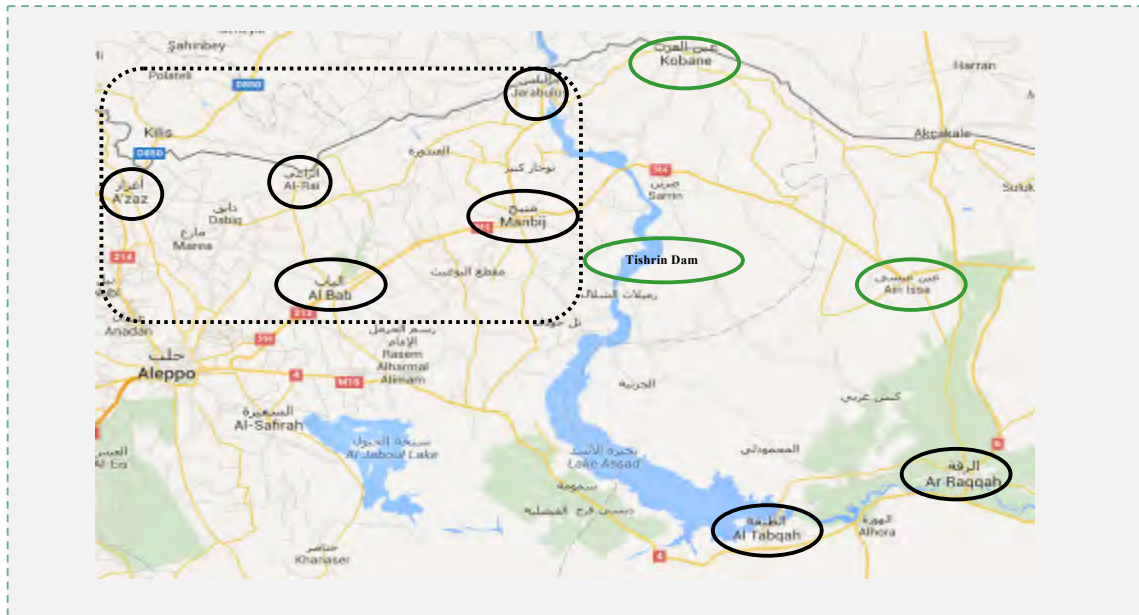


Map of the areas of control in al-Bab (as of February 14, 2017). The FSA and the Turkish army (to the west), the Syrian army (to the south), and ISIS to the east and north (Google Maps and news websites).

The Significance of the Fall of al-Bab for ISIS

3. The fall of al-Bab will mark **the end of the process** that began about six months ago, **during which ISIS lost its strongholds in the area west of the Euphrates**. It is another stage in **the shrinking of ISIS's areas of control in Syria and Iraq and another manifestation of the organization's strategic weakness**.

4. So far, the strongholds west of the Euphrates lost by ISIS include the cities of **Manbij**, liberated by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which are dominated by the Kurdish forces; **Jarabulus**, liberated by the Turkish army and rebel organizations operating under its aegis; **al-Ra'i**, liberated by the FSA in collaboration with the Turkish army; and **al-Bab**, expected to fall to FSA forces operating in collaboration with the Turkish army. According to a media report, Turkey ordered the rebels in the city of **A'zaz**, near the Turkish border, to leave within 15 days (Damascus al-A'an, February 14, 2017).



Loss of the cities formerly under ISIS control west of the Euphrates: Manbij, Jarabulus and al-Ra'i. Al-Bab is expected to fall to the FSA and the Turkish army. A'zaz is controlled by rebel organizations but the Turkish army strives to control it.

5. The fall of al-Bab will mark **the end of ISIS's freedom of action along the Syrian-Turkish border**. That will cause **significant difficulties for ISIS's logistic connection between the core of its power in al-Raqqa and the outside world**. It will become difficult for ISIS to send terrorist operatives abroad, export petroleum products to Turkey and move operatives, weapons and equipment to areas controlled by the Islamic State. The logistic difficulties ISIS is expected to face are liable to **cause further damage to the organization's economic and operational capabilities**, which already suffer from the campaign against it.

Turkey Plans to Create a Safe Zone West of the Euphrates

6. The collapse of ISIS strongholds west of the Euphrates created a **security and governance vacuum which Turkey intends to fill**. To that end Turkey is waging a military campaign (Operation Euphrates Shield) using the FSA, and is also conducting political activity seeking the support of the United States and Russia for the creation of a safe zone. From the Turkish perspective, its activities are intended to provide a response to the two main threats it has been exposed to by the Syrian civil war:

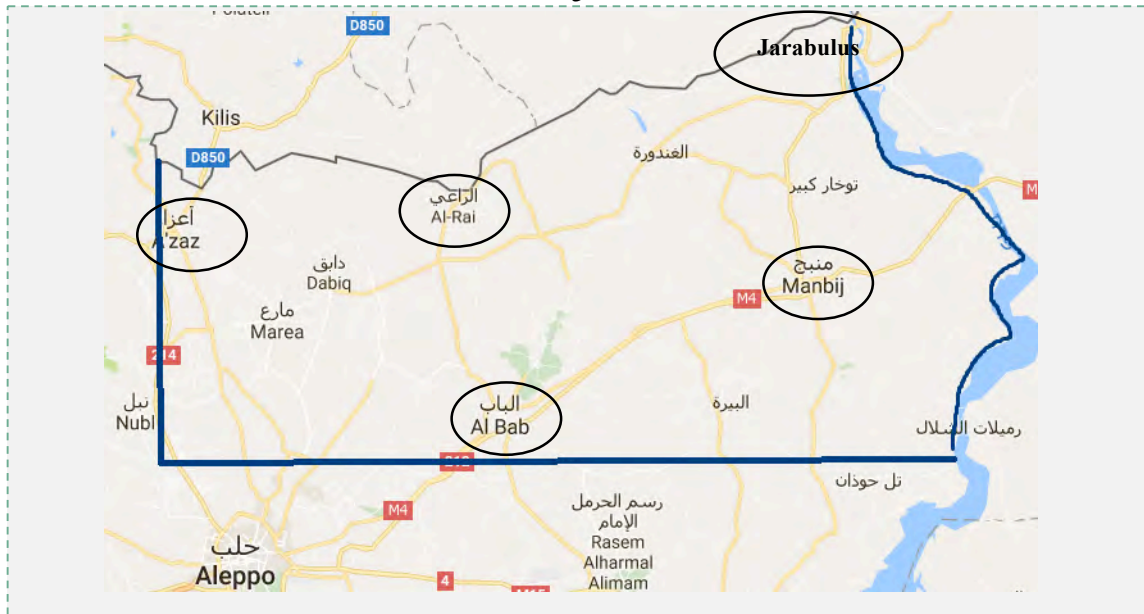
a. **The establishment of an autonomous Kurdish-controlled area in Syria south of the Turkish-Syrian border**. As far as Turkey is concerned, such an area might unite with the Kurdish enclave to the west (the region of Afrin) and

collaborate with the PPK and other separatist Kurdish organizations the Turkish regime is fighting against.

b. **The establishment of ISIS and other jihadist terrorist organizations south of the Turkish-Syrian border** increases the terrorist threat against Turkey. ISIS's terrorist campaign carried out in Turkey is supported by operatives and weapons from Syria.

7. **The campaign for al-Bab hastened Turkey's diplomatic activity to create a safe zone (or a "buffer zone")**. A spokesman for the Turkish president said Turkey was preparing to create **a safe zone extending from A'zaz to Jarabulus**. In addition, Islamist Turkish journalist Aldulkadir Selvi, who is close to the Turkish president, reported that **Erdogan did not intend to withdraw from Syria after the occupation of al-Bab. Erdogan, he reported, intended to propose to Trump the idea of creating a safe zone in the areas purged of ISIS and a joint campaign for the liberation al-Raqqa**. He added that the proposal to create a buffer zone was presented to President Obama two years ago. The Turkish media reported that in a recent telephone conversation, Erdogan presented the details of his plan. The plan was reportedly shown to newly-appointed CIA Director Mike Pompeo, who recently paid a visit to Turkey (timeturk.com, February 14, 2017).

8. Statements made by senior Turkish figures and articles in the Turkish media make it possible to evaluate **the general scheme of the proposed safe zone**. According to the Turkish plan, it will extend **along the Turkish-Syrian border from A'zaz in the east to Jarabulus in the west**, and will be longer than 90 kilometers (56 miles), the distance between the two cities. The zone will be 30 kilometers wide (almost 19 miles), the distance between al-Ra'i in the north and al-Bab in the south. The zone will **preserve Turkey's security (directly or through the rebel organizations operating under Turkish aegis) and fill governance and regional roles**, such as managing regional authorities, and constructing hospitals, schools and administrative institutions to replace those that were destroyed (milliyet.com.tr, February 14, 2017). **The safe zone will be off limits to both the Syrian government and the Kurds**.



Possible general scheme of the safe zone Turkey plans to create west of the Euphrates (Google Maps)

9. In ITIC assessment, **Turkey's plan will probably be met with strenuous objection from the Syrian regime** because for Syria it is a blatant violation of its sovereignty, and is liable to set a **precedent for further violations**. In all probability, **Syria's objections may be supported by Russia**. According to the Turkish media, Russia opposes the safe zone and the issue was raised in conversations held between Russia and Syria. So far no bilateral agreement has been reached (milliyet.com.tr, February 14, 2017).

Turkish Alternative for the Liberation of al-Raqqa

10. Apparently, as far as the Turks are concerned, al-Raqqa (the main ISIS stronghold) will not be part of the safe zone. However, its liberation by the SDF may, from a Turkish perspective, strengthen the status of the Kurds in northern Syria, increase their prestige and motivate the United States to reward them politically. Therefore, **Turkey strongly opposes allowing the Kurds to play a significant role in the liberation of al-Raqqa, although on the ground they are the only force conducting the campaign, with American support.**

11. Therefore, Turkey is striving to provide the United States with **an alternative option in which Turkey and the FSA, which operates under its aegis, plays an important role in the liberation of al-Raqqa**. That was noted in a statement made by a spokesman for the Turkish president on February 8, 2017, who said that the "opposition forces" [i.e., the rebel organizations supported by Turkey) had begun preparations for the campaign for al-Raqqa. He said **Turkey had "its own plan" to defeat ISIS in al-Raqqa, and the relevant parties were currently discussing it.**

Moreover, according to Turkish journalist Aldulkadir Selvi, Erdogan was now planning to conduct the campaign for al-Raqqa as **"a joint Turkish-American operation" without the SDF's playing a major role** (timeturk.com, February 14, 2017). According to Selvi, the "joint operation" would include **between 8,000 and 10,000 FSA fighters who would lead the campaign**, joined by the SDF (which, by implication, would play a secondary role).