

American green light for the military operation. However, Trump claimed he had not supported the Turkish move and even imposed (ineffective) economic sanctions on Turkey. In any event, after the phone call the White House issued a statement to the effect that "The United States Armed Forces will not support or be involved in the operation, and United States forces, having defeated the Isis territorial 'Caliphate', will no longer be in the immediate area." After the Turkish invasion the American secretary of defense confirmed that **the United States was pulling 1,000 troops out of northern Syria to keep them from being trapped between the rival sides.** He said the troops **would be deployed west to Iraq**, where they would join the 5,000 American troops training Iraqi forces and supporting them in the campaign against ISIS (Reuters, October 20, 2019).

► During the first days of the invasion the Turkish army took control of **the center of the "safe zone," from Tel Abyad in the west to Ras al-Ayn in the east.** On October 17, 2019, after the American vice president met with the Turkish president, an agreement was reached for a five-day suspension of the operation to allow the Kurds to extract their forces from the "safe zone." Generally, despite sporadic clashes between the Kurds and the Turkish army, the suspension was preserved. It enabled the SDF to extract most of its forces from the "safe zone" but **clearly served Turkey's interests.** It made it easier for Turkey to attain its stated operative objective of **establishing a "safe zone" to the south of its Syrian border with a minimum of losses and within a short period of time.** However, the suspension is also **de facto American recognition of the "safe zone"** and of Turkey's interests in the area controlled by the Kurds.

► The dramatic developments **weaken the SDF and its ability to continue to play the central role in fighting ISIS** it has played so far – not only because of the blow to SDF morale, but because **the Kurds lost American political support against Turkey**, which had enabled it to turn most of its force and attention to fighting ISIS. In such circumstances **ISIS, which has already proved its ability to change its modus operandi and adapt itself to new situations on the ground, can be expected to increase its terrorist and guerrilla attacks in eastern and northern Syria.** However, in ITIC assessment, in the short term **ISIS will not exploit the new situation to reestablish the Islamic State** with territorial borders and control over the population.

► In ITIC assessment, **ISIS's first priority will be to increase the scope of its mass-casualty attacks in territories under Kurdish control east of the Euphrates and the Euphrates**

Valley. The area in question is mainly in the Deir al-Zor-al-Mayadeen-Albukamal region in the Euphrates Valley, the al-Raqqah region and deep in the region under Kurdish control (the al-Hasakeh area). A priority target of ISIS's attacks is expected to be the Kurdish-held internment facilities where more than 10,000 ISIS operatives are imprisoned (see below). Other targets **may be the Syrian army forces** in the Euphrates Valley, the desert regions west of the Euphrates and the area around Manbij, where Syrian forces entered after the Turkish invasion, apparently in coordination with the SDF forces and the Kurdish leadership.

► At this stage it is unclear if the United States will end or limit its aerial support for the SDF, which has made an important contribution to the campaign against ISIS. If the United States does end or limit its aerial support, ISIS will be able to operate its forces more easily in the Euphrates Valley and desert regions in eastern Syria. That may mean more attacks on the Syrian army and the forces supporting it in **the Palmyra-Sukhna area and the regions around Deir al-Zor and Albukamal**. ISIS operatives would also be able to carry out raids from the desert west of the Euphrates towards regions under Kurdish control and to cross the long Syria-Iraq border more easily, moving their attacks from country to country.

► The Turkish invasion raised the issue of ISIS operatives and their families held captive by the SDF. The United States estimates that there are **more than 10,000 operatives from dozens of countries, including the West, and more than 70,000 ISIS wives and children**. ISIS operatives are held in Kurdish internment facilities and their families are held in displaced persons (DP) camps, the most important of which is the **al-Houl camp**. Kurdish oversight of the camps is weak, living conditions are poor, and the camps are **breeding grounds for radical jihadist ideologies**. Keeping the ISIS operatives and their families in the facilities and camps causes **a wide variety of logistic, political and legal problems**. In addition the SDF forces have difficulty in guarding the captives and their families effectively, since the main part of their fighting force and attention are currently drawn to the north to the "safe zone" Turkey is establishing.

► In ITIC assessment so far no more than several score of ISIS operatives have escaped from the SDF internment facilities. According to (as yet unverified) reports from Kurdish sources, **hundreds of "ISIS wives" escaped from the Ayn Issa DP camp** (located about 21 miles south of the Syria-Turkey border). Some of them were recaptured by SDF forces. A few were freed by ISIS. **In ITIC assessment, the ISIS wives and operatives were not deliberately released by the Turkish army or the SDF, but rather escaped from locations near combat**

areas. However, in the future, because of the Turkish invasion and the turning of Kurdish resources to the north, guarding the internment facilities and DP camps **is liable to become weaker, prompting ISIS to initiate operations for the mass release of prisoners.**

In all probability, the longer the campaign continues and the weaker the Kurdish forces become, the more difficult it will be for the Kurds to continue holding such a large mass of ISIS operatives. **The release of a significant number of operatives will reinforce ISIS's forces in Syria and Iraq with thousands of skilled, experienced, motivated radical jihadist operatives, a genuine potential threat that will increase ISIS's strength.**

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Turkey's Invasion of Syria – The Situation on the Ground (Updated to October 22, 2019)

The Turkish invasion and its objectives

► On October 9, 2019, the Turkish army and the Syrian rebel organizations it supports (the National Syrian Army¹) began a broad military operation in northeastern Syria (called "Peace Spring" by the Turks). The stated objective of the operation is, according to Turkish President Erdogan, **to establish a "safe zone"** in Syrian territory at a depth of 18-22 miles **along Turkey's southern border from Manbij to the Syria-Iraq border.**² According to Erdogan, the Kurdish forces (the SDF, called PKK-YPG by the Turks) will be neutralized, as will ISIS, and the threat of terrorism against the Turks will be lifted. The operation will make it easier for 1.2 million Syrian refugees to return to their own country (Erdogan's Twitter account, October 16, 2019; announcement from the Turkish armed forces, tccb.gov.tr, October 9 2019).

Beyond the stated military-operative objective of establishing a "safe zone," the Turkish attack has **political-strategic objectives**. It is designed to **weaken both the self-ruling Kurdish administration in eastern Syria and the military strength of the Kurds**, who are organized as the SDF (represented by Turkish propaganda as a terrorist organization, despite the central role it played in fighting ISIS). The objective is to attack the separationist aspirations of the Kurds in eastern Turkey and make it possible for the Turkish regime to continue oppressing them.

¹ Formerly the Free Syrian Army

² The "safe zone" runs along the M4 road south of the Turkish border, which crosses the region under Kurdish control and leads from the Euphrates and to the Syria-Iraq border. The road marks the southern end of the "safe zone."



Right: Syrian National Army fighters wave Turkish and Syrian revolutionary flags during "Peace Spring" (Twitter account of Raed.sy affiliated with the rebels fighting under Syrian aegis, October 14, 2019). Left: Two Turkish army APCs en route to Syria upsidedownvision@bipolarpolitica Twitter account, October 15, 2019).

The Trump-Erdogan telephone conversation that preceded the invasion (October 6, 2019)

► The Turkish invasion of Syria was preceded by a telephone call between Presidents Trump and Erdogan (October 6, 2019). **The Turks apparently interpreted the call as a green light** for a Turkish military operation, although later Trump called the invasion a **"bad idea" unsupported by the United States** and imposed (ineffective) economic sanctions on Turkey. Mark Esper, the American secretary of defense, told CBS on October 13, 2019, that the Turks had decided to invade Syria **despite "opposition and repeated warnings from the United States."**

► Following the Trump-Erdogan phone call the White House announced that Turkey would begin a long-planned operation in northern Syria. The American army would not support the operation, would not be involved in it, and its forces would not remain in the area (whitehouse.gov, October 6, 2019). According to the statement from President Erdogan, it was necessary to establish a "safe zone" to create the conditions for the elimination of the "terrorist threat" posed by the PKK-YPG [i.e., the SDF] and for the return of the Syrian refugees to their country (announcement from the office of the Turkish president, tccb.gov.tr, October 6, 2019).



Right: The American version of the phone call (White House press secretary, October 6, 2019).

Left: The Turkish version of the phone call (office of the Turkish president, October 6, 2019).



Turkish President Erdoğan holds a map of the planned "safe zone" in northern Syria during a speech at the UN General Assembly, September 24, 2019 (al-Andalou News, October 9, 2019).

The removal of the American troops from Syria

► The Turkish invasion was accompanied by the removal of the American troops in northern Syria. On October 13, 2019, American Secretary of Defense Mark Esper confirmed to CBS that **1,000 American troops would be removed from northern Syria** out of concern that they would find themselves trapped between the two rival sides. On another occasion he said that the troops would be **redeployed to western Iraq** (Reuters, October 20, 2019). The American troops supported the SDF fighting against ISIS, while the SDF bore most of the burden of the ground fighting (and suffered the most losses). American soldiers also trained the Kurdish

forces, provided artillery support, and helped in marking targets, collecting intelligence and special ops, but **did not operate as an organic military force**.³

The Kurds regarded the removal of the American forces as a betrayal and saw themselves abandoned to the Turks. Beyond the negative influence on their morale they were forced to move most of their forces and turn their attention to the struggle against the Turkish army and its affiliated organizations at the expense of fighting against ISIS. Moreover, **at the strategic level, the American move may indicate once again that the United States is leaving the Middle East and abandoning its allies, a step which is expected to have regional repercussions beyond the Kurdish-Turkish issue.**⁴

The Turkish suspension of the operation following the American-Turkish agreement

► **On October 17, 2019**, the American vice president reported that an agreement had been reached whereby the Turkish army would suspend its operation for five days (120 hours) **to enable the Kurdish forces to evacuate the "safe zone."** According to the American vice president, when the Kurdish forces had evacuated the "safe zone" the Turks would agree to a permanent ceasefire. In return, he added, the American president would not impose additional economic sanctions on Turkey and would lift those put in place following the invasion. **With the exception of sporadic clashes the suspension of fighting has been maintained for five days, but is set to expire.**

³ The American secretary of defense also said that at this stage the American troops were being withdrawn from northern Syria, i.e., not from the al-Tanf region, where an important road runs from Iraq to Syria, whose control was important as a land bridge Iran sought to establish. According to "senior Americans," the force of 300 American troops stationed at the al-Tanf base will not be influenced by Trump's decision to withdraw 1,000 troops from Syria (NBC News, October 21, 2019).

⁴ It was not the first time the United States announced it was withdrawing its troops from Syria. On December 19, 2018, Trump and senior American officials announced that **ISIS had been defeated and that the United States had begun removing its forces from Syria [2,000 troops at the time]**. In reality ISIS had not been defeated, the fighting against ISIS (with American involvement) continued in the Euphrates Valley at full force and most of the American troops did not, in fact, leave Syria. **The current announcement is different from the previous one because it came at the same time as the Turkish attack, making it plain to the Kurds that they had lost their American political backing in the face of the Turkish threat.**

In ITIC assessment **the suspension of the operation serves Turkish interests**. However, while it enables the Kurds to extract most of their forces from the region of the Turkish invasion, ut at the same time makes **it easier for Turkey to achieve its stated intention of establishing a "safe zone" south of its border with Syria**. It enables Turkey to reduce its losses and finish a quick takeover of the "safe zone." **Moreover, the agreement may be interpreted as a de facto American recognition of the "safe zone" and Turkish interests in the area under Kurdish control**. It also prepares the ground for lifting the economic sanctions the United States imposed on Turkey, all without a significant Turkish quid pro quo to the United States.

The Influence of the Turkish Invasion and the Removal of the American Forces on ISIS's activity

Assessment of ISIS's modus operandi

► In ITIC assessment, the recent developments **will weaken the campaign against ISIS and enable its operatives in Syria to regroup and escalate their activities**. That is because most of the forces and attention of the SDF, which bore the main burden of the fighting, **will be turned northward toward the Turkish "safe zone."** With relatively limited forces **the SDF will find it difficult to maintain its previous effective level of fighting against ISIS**. In addition, the end or limiting of American support is liable to negatively impact the SDF's military fitness. **At this point it is unclear if the American troop removal will include its aerial support, an important American contribution to fighting ISIS. If it does, it will be another blow to the effectiveness of the campaign against ISIS** (see below).

In ITIC assessment, ISIS, which in the past proved its ability to change its modus operandi and adapt itself to new situations, will increase the intensity of its terrorist and guerrilla activities in eastern and northern Syria. **Its first priority will be to attack the SDF forces** and the institutions of the Kurdish self rule. **Its second priority will be the Syrian army** and the forces affiliated with it. However, in all probability at this point in time ISIS will not devote much attention to the invading Turkish army and the rebel organizations it supports. **The change in ISIS's activity will be in the broadening of the scope of its terrorist and guerrilla activities and in increasing their complexity and lethality** (for example, mass-casualty suicide bombing attacks or attempts to liberate ISIS operatives and their families). **However, it seems that in the short term ISIS will not return to its concept of a territorial Islamic State and control over the population.**

► In ITIC assessment, **ISIS will focus its activities on the region of Deir al-Zor-al-Mayadeen-Albukamal**, and will increase its attacks in the **al-Raqqa region and deep in the territory controlled by the Kurds (the al-Hasakeh area)**. A target for attacks may be **the Manbij area** west of the Euphrates River, where the Syrian army has been entering after the attack of Turkish army, apparently in coordination with SDF forces and the Kurdish leadership.

► **At this point it is unclear what American policy regarding the use of aerial power will be after the Turkish invasion.** Even if the aerial attacks continue they may be less effective in the absence of effective Kurdish boots on the ground. If the aerial attacks end or are reduced, **ISIS is liable to gain a great advantage.** In a scenario of fewer or no aerial attacks **ISIS will find it easier to operate in the Euphrates Valley and desert regions in eastern Syria.** Its forces will be able to turn the desert regions into launching ground from which to attack the Syrian army and the forces affiliated with it in eastern Syria (the Palmyra-Sukhna region), **possibly also in southern Syria**, and against the Syrian and Kurdish forces in the Euphrates Valley. In such a scenario **ISIS operatives may find it easier to cross the Syria-Iraq border and move their activities from country to country.**

The ISIS prisoners in the hands of the Kurdish forces

Estimated number of the captives and their families and the problems in holding them

According to the American media the Kurds have more than 10,000 captive operatives (Washington Post, October 11, 2019; CNN, October 14, 2019, New York Times, October 13, 2019). Among them are foreign fighters from dozens of countries, including Western countries. ISIS operatives and their wives and children are held in approximately twenty internment facilities and DP camps secured by the SDF and Kurdish internal security forces. The largest concentration of ISIS wives and children is **the al-Houl DP camp** (southeast of al-Hasakeh), where there are more than 70,000 displaced persons, many of them ISIS supporters and ISIS wives and children (Washington Post, October 11, 2019; al-Itihad, October 15, 2019). In addition to the al-Houl DP camp, the families of ISIS operatives are held in other, smaller camps in Kurdish-controlled areas.



The al-Houl DP camp (Anav Baladi, October 5, 2019).

- ▶ Holding ISIS operatives and their families in Kurdish internment facilities and DP camps creates a series of **logistic, political and legal problems**. The control of the Kurdish forces over the DP camps is weak and ineffective, **ISIS wives are the dominant factor and the humanitarian situation is poor**. Therefore **the camps serve as breeding grounds for radicalization and the spread of ISIS's jihadist ideology**.
- ▶ Most of the foreign fighters' countries of origin are unwilling or not enthusiastic about allowing them to return and stand trial, as proposed by Trump. **That is because of the (justified) concern that operatives who return to their countries of origin will join local jihadis and encourage subversion and terrorism**. The Kurds (justifiably) claim that they

don't have sufficient forces to continue securing the facilities and DP camps over time, **certainly not after most of their attention has turned towards their Turkish enemies.** In the absence of a fundamental solution, **eventually many ISIS operatives are liable to escape from the internment facilities in one way or another, join operatives in Syria and Iraq, and significantly expand ISIS's military capabilities.**

► The issue of the prisoners was mentioned by Trump during his phone call with Erdogan three days before the Turkish invasion. Trump said that the United States had pressed France, Germany and other European countries from which many of the captured foreign fighter came, to take them back, but they did not want them and refused. He added that the United States would not hold them, and in that case, according to Trump, Turkey would now be responsible for all the ISIS fighters in the area who had been captured during the past two years (White House press release, October 6, 2019). However, it can be assumed that the Turks will not agree to take responsibility for ISIS prisoners or refugee camps, as Trump proposes.

Propaganda war around ISIS prisoners following the Turkish invasion

► Following the Turkish invasion **a propaganda war began** over the sensitive issue of the ISIS prisoners, with the participation of the Kurds and Turkey, as well as the United States and Russia. **The Kurdish propaganda** claimed that Turkey had deliberately used planes and artillery to attack the internment and DP camps to allow the inmates to escape. **On the other hand, the Turkish propaganda** claimed the Kurds had deliberately freed the ISIS operatives in the internment facilities to cause chaos. In effect, **Trump** adopted the Turkish claim and tweeted on October 14, 2019, that the Kurds may have released several ISIS operatives to get the Americans to return to northern Syria. **The Russian foreign minister** claimed that 12 prisons in which ISIS operatives were being held had been left without guards (a claim denied by the Kurds).

► **In ITIC assessment the Turks did not deliberately attack the internment facilities, and the Kurds did not deliberately release ISIS operatives or their wives and children.** However, during the clashes there were several specific instances in which internment facilities and a DP camp in the battle zones were attacked, and as a result no more than several dozen ISIS operatives escaped (a number insignificant in view of the total number of ISIS prisoners). In addition, the Kurds reported that hundreds of ISIS wives had escaped from the DP camp in Ayn Issa (see below). American officials estimated that more than a hundred

operatives had escaped from the internment facilities, saying that the United States was monitoring the matter (al-Jazeera, October 18, 2019).

Escape of ISIS wives from the Ayn Issa displaced persons camp

► On October 13, 2019, Abd al-Qader Muwahad, a senior figure in the Kurdish autonomous administration in northern and eastern Syria, said that **the Ayn Issa refugee camp** (about 21 miles south of the Syria-Turkey border) **remained without guards**. That was because the guards, who were operatives of the Kurdish internal security forces, had withdrawn after **the families of ISIS operatives rioted when a Turkish army shell landed on the outskirts of the camp**. As a result, according to the report, **more than 750 ISIS families escaped** (Facebook page of the autonomous Kurdish administration in northern and eastern Syria, October 13, 2019). That number and other numbers of escapees, whose sources are Kurdish, **need verification**. On October 16, 2019, according to a report, rebels operating under Turkish aegis set fire to the Ayn Issa DP camp (ANHA, a Kurdish news agency operating in Belgium, October 16, 2019).



The Ayn Issa DP camp (SDF press, January 29, 2019)



The Ayn Issa DP camp goes up in flames after operatives from a rebel organization supported by the Turks, i.e., the Syrian National Army, set fire to it (ANHA, October 16, 2019).

ISIS's response on the ground and in the media

► Apparently **SDF operatives recaptured dozens of women and children** who had escaped from Ayn Issa. In one instance **15 ISIS wives were captured with their children**. They were citizens of Turkey and Kazakhstan who had escaped from Ayn Issa and were trying to reach Turkey. They were captured about 18 miles south of the Turkish border (Dar News, affiliated with the SDF, October 15, 2019). On another occasion **ISIS operatives attacked the local SDF headquarters**, about 30 miles southwest of Ayn Issa, where **several ISIS wives were being held**. ISIS reported that six SDF operatives were killed and the women were removed (Telegram, October 17, 2019). They may have been part of the large group of women who escaped from Ayn Issa.



Wives and children of ISIS operatives captured by SDF forces in northern Syria (SDF-affiliated Dar News, October 15, 2019).

► So far, ISIS activity at the media level regarding the release of women has focused on propaganda. ISIS's Syrian province issued a notice aimed at the tribal leaders, the dignitaries and all Muslims. **The notice called for shelter to be given to the wives of ISIS operatives who escaped from SDF DP camps**, and their locations not to be revealed. **The notice threatened that anyone who gave up ISIS wives would be quickly executed**. ISIS, according to the notice, knew the names and locations of those who fought against it and would attack anyone who gave up operatives' wives (Telegram, October 14, 2019).



Five ISIS rockets inscribed "Revenge [for the] modest [women]," before they were fired at a coalition air base west of al-Shaddadi on October 13, 2019 (Telegram, October 18, 2019).