

Turkish Officials Vow to Launch a Ground Invasion into Northern Syria

Since the spring of 2022, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has hinted at the notion of attacking the Kurdish YPG, which is headquartered in northern Syria and the largest faction of U.S. ally, the Syrian Defense Forces (SDF). Turkey has warred with Kurds within Turkey for many years and has periodically taken the offensive. Now, it looks as though they plan to do so once again, following the recent Istanbul bombing that Ankara claims was conducted by the YPG and a subsequent slew of Turkish air strikes in retaliation. In the midst of the strikes, Erdogan swore that ground attacks were to follow. The SDF has since corroborated Turkish claims by saying that activity has increased along the border. Most analysts are suggesting that Erdogan is using the Istanbul attack as an excuse for finally executing his plan to invade Syria, and in doing so, mobilizing nationalists to vote for him in his 2023 bid for re-election. In the face of the threat, SDF commander Mazloum Abdi has called on the U.S. to use its influence to prevent a Turkish incursion. However, Washington will do no such thing, according to anonymous government insiders interviewed by *The Washington Post*. The U.S. has done its best to assure the SDF that they did not greenlight airstrikes and that Turkey will not invade, but is unlikely to do anything in the event that Turkey does follow through on its threats. The U.S. and others have become reliant on Turkey in handling the Ukraine-Russia conflict, as Turkey has taken responsibility for peace talks and the arrangement allowing safe passage of grain to address world food shortages. Thus, Erdogan has the U.S. over a barrel, and the SDF is in a vulnerable position. Meetings have been reported between Turkey and Syrian President Assad as well, who traditionally has helped the SDF keep Turkey out of Syria in spite of efforts to reclaim the country from rebel groups.

Still, there are factors at play that may convince the U.S. to take greater action. Most significant among these is the presence of U.S. soldiers that reside with the SDF forces, as they continue to battle ISIS together. Turkish airstrikes got within 130 meters of some U.S. soldiers. If any are harmed, or perhaps even put in harm's way, the U.S. may take direct action against Turkey. Also important is the SDF's decision to put a hold on efforts to combat ISIS until the situation with Turkey has been handled. Being that fighting ISIS is the reason put forth that U.S. soldiers are there, unchecked growth of ISIS during this time is certainly a chief concern. Aside from ISIS, the U.S. was one of the parties who oversaw a 2019 agreement between Turkey and Syrian Kurds that Turkey would not enter Syria in exchange for the removal of SDF forces from border areas. Clearly, a Turkish incursion into Syria would violate this agreement, but it can be argued that the SDF has not properly vacated the area as promised as well.

At the end of the day, it is likely that only an assault on U.S. soldiers will convince the United States to come to the SDF's aid. The U.S. has been wary of taking a side in the dispute between Turkey and the SDF for years, and is less likely to do so now given the leverage that Turkey has gained. Though the U.S. insists that it has spoken to Erdogan's government privately, it is likely that they will not make a public statement condemning what Turkey plans to do, instead choosing to monitor the situation from afar and hope that "all parties [will] de-escalate tensions."