

## **Update from Peter Ford, Former British Ambassador to Syria**

21 October 2019

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### **The Kurdish nexus**

Regular readers of these updates will not have been surprised by the withdrawal of US forces from northern Syria which seemed to catch everybody else unawares. As we said back in January when Trump appeared to row back on his initial decision to withdraw in the face of the caterwauling it provoked, the US presence and the Kurdish statelet it was engendering were never going to be sustainable for long.

And so it has proved. Turkey's implacable hostility to the emergence on its border of a Kurdish PKK-controlled entity armed to the teeth by its US protector, its spokesman starting to be described as the 'Kurdish Foreign Minister' by a cheerleading Western media, coupled with Trump's consistent opposition to open-ended US presences and 'endless wars' in the Middle East, proved superior to blinkered forces in the US (and UK) establishment stupendously ignorant of conditions in Syria.

Notwithstanding all the hysterical keening going on in Western political and media circles over the loss of America's Syrian province, our next predictions are that the current emergency will soon be over and that it will all turn out for the best, even for the Kurds. Over not because of the 'pause' ostensibly brokered by the US with Turkey. This sham agreement between one power which has absolutely no power to deliver, having abdicated all control over its erstwhile allies (the Kurds) and the situation on the ground, and another which has already achieved its key objectives and faces new insuperable obstacles (Russian and Syrian forces ) if it presses on, merely codifies a standstill on the battle lines (with some untidiness in the area of one town, Ras Al Ayn) and a Kurdish withdrawal from that limited area.

By the end of the five days pause Turkey can rest on its laurels, having achieved not just the pullback of Kurdish forces on a 100 kilometre front but more importantly the abortion of the nascent Kurdish state and the departure of the US which was protecting, sponsoring and arming it. For bargaining purposes, no doubt, Erdogan continues to make claim to hundreds of kilometres more border safe zone but he has little chance of securing it for Turkey. It may turn out that Syria itself will cooperate in the establishment of an extended safe zone, but that is for future negotiations. Syrian Arab Army forces alongside Russian military police are now deploying all along the border, and the last of the one thousand US forces will soon be gone, along with undeclared numbers of British and French special forces.

### **The ISIS bogey**

Concerns about a re-emerging threat from ISIS will turn out to be wildly exaggerated. With military operations set to end quickly, Kurdish jailers and security forces will soon resume their work, aided this time not by a sprinkling of US troops primarily concerned with their own force protection and keeping Assad out, even less by Turks whom Trump absurdly pretends will now be curbing ISIS, but by redoubtable Syrian and Russian security forces

amply experienced in crushing and containing ISIS in vast swathes of Syria, unacknowledged of course by a peevish West. Naturally there will be isolated incidents of ISIS car bombs and assassinations, as were already happening before the withdrawal, which will be touted as 'proof' that the US was wrong to leave, but readers of this analysis will know better.

In reality the real threat of ISIS re-emergence is now more likely to be seriously addressed, for it was heavy-handedness on the part of the Kurds which for over a year has been brewing resentment in predominantly Arab towns and villages, including Raqqa. Anger was rife over forced recruitment of Arab boys into the SDF, Kurdification of Arab place names and education syllabus, and favouritism towards Kurds in the administration. Given long latent Kurdish-Arab tensions it was no accident that ISIS sprouted first in Syria in the mainly Kurdish regions to begin with, or that its capital was Raqqa, now safely in Syrian government hands. The Western powers' favourite Syrian militia, the so-called Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), will thankfully now be reined in and Arab grievances addressed.

### **New challenges**

Not that the Syrian government do not now face challenges in the newly liberated territory. Negotiations with the Turks under Russian auspices over a border policing regime may be the least difficult issue, given that the Syrians have as much interest as the Turks in returning to something like the 1998 Adana agreement on controlling the operations of the PKK in Syria which paved the way for relations bordering on cordial before 2011. No, the main issue will be the future of the SDF and the local administration set up by the Kurds. The SDF, with perhaps 40,000 troops at its command, is still a formidable force, and the Syrian Arab Army (SAA), thinly spread and preoccupied with Idlib, will not be eager for conflict. It will be sensible for Damascus to play this long, subsume the SDF gradually into the SAA and whittle away at autonomy principally by taking control of sources of finance. Score-settling with collaborators with the US and Israel can be put in abeyance and if the collaborators perform well in the coming phases they can redeem themselves.

In the meanwhile Damascus can look forward to a windfall gain of hugely important recovered oil revenue and grain supply, the returning provinces being rich in both. This is likely to transform Syria's economic situation in due course, and make it even less likely that Western sanctions will have any effect on the policies of the government.

The economy will also benefit from the easing of transport across the Iraqi border at multiple points.

### **Al Tanf**

The US are nonsensically intending to maintain their outpost in the large Al Tanf enclave where Syria adjoins both Jordan and Iraq. Hitherto the US has claimed that the purpose of this presence is to combat ISIS. Even this flimsy pretext is now in shreds, and the purpose is nakedly to sit astraddle the 'Iranian land bridge' beloved by think tankers. That the freeing up of land routes further north makes Al Tanf irrelevant seems not to deter these 'experts', any more than the fact that Iran sends rocket equipment to Hizbollah by air rather than have it cross an Iraq pullulating with US forces and agents. Iranian military planners may

even be glad the Pentagon is foolishly leaving in place a 150-strong detachment which will be the first to be obliterated if the US ever does attack Iran and accordingly serve as an unintended deterrent.

## **Idlib**

The situation in Idlib is marking time. Neither the Syrian Arab Army nor the Russians are in any hurry to lance this boil, both hoping that Turkey, especially in the new conditions in the North East, will do the decent thing and disarm or otherwise massage away the forces of Hayat Tahrir Ash Sham (HTS), the Al Qaida affiliate which runs most of Idlib with something it calls the 'Salvation Government' fronting for it.

A slightly different situation applies in the far North where the dominant forces are Turkish-backed Arab militia masquerading as the 'Syrian National Army' (many were formerly members of the 'Free Syrian Army', alleged moderates openly backed by the West). These are the fighters which Turkey is using as its catspaw in the area of Manbij, now being accused of atrocities against the Kurds. Given the realignment under way it may not be long before these forces find themselves confronted not just by SDF but also the SAA, which will not be engaging with the Turks but will be under no similar inhibition with regard to Syrian jihadis in Turkey's pay.

## **Constitutional Committee**

September was marked by completion of long drawn out negotiations on the composition of a constitutional committee tasked with reform, paving the way to elections. While welcomed by the UN the Western powers have been less than enthusiastic about it given that its main patrons have been Russia, Turkey and Iran. Owing to Turkish opposition, unchallenged by the West, the Kurds were excluded from this Committee. Damascus was also less than keen on including elements seen as behoved to the US. Given the new situation we can expect more Kurdish demands for inclusion and more wrangling ahead, with Damascus not worrying too much if the Kurdish question bogs down talks on the constitutional issue, even if Moscow is keen to push ahead on them.

## **Propaganda war**

It can surely be no accident that the US having to swallow the bitter pill of withdrawal and the sight of jubilant Syrian crowds in the North East brandishing Assad posters has coincided with the launching of two propaganda initiatives. First was the New York Times claim to have proof that Russia was responsible for bombing hospitals, although the paper was unable to refute Russian assertions that the 'hospitals' were jihadi bunkers. Then it was the turn of the Syrian Network for Human Rights, a CIA construct, with rehashed lurid claims about atrocities in Syrian prisons. This generated some ghastly war porn in the Daily Mail but will otherwise soon be forgotten.

## **Western policy**

US withdrawal has knocked two crucial planks out of the US/EU policy of weakening Syria in order to force 'transition' away from Assad: partition and depriving Syria of oil and grain. Hopes are likely to be dashed, however, that this will force the reappraisal of policy which it obviously should. The other planks are still in place: sanctions, withholding of reconstruction assistance, pressure on Arab states not to normalise relations with Syria, lawfare ('accountability for war crimes'), information warfare (analogous to what Israel calls 'delegitimisation' and 'incitement') and continuing covert military support for jihadi groups in Idlib, some linked to Al Qaida. This latter was helpfully highlighted recently by US Democratic presidential candidate Tulsi Gabbard. While the UK government may now concede that territorially Assad has largely won, it is hard to foresee any change in either UK or US basic vindictive policy towards Syria.

Overall, it is likely that in the long run Trump's decision will be seen to have brought forward the end game of the Syrian conflict, bringing closer a return to the status quo ante bellum which, as has been argued consistently in these updates, has long been the likeliest and, realistically, the optimal outcome in the circumstances. The wishful thinking will go on, however, that somehow there can be a 'political solution' leading to a 'transition', notwithstanding the fact that Assad against heavy odds has succeeded with this latest US withdrawal in reuniting what now amounts to 90% of his country by force of arms and sheer resilience.