



RING — OF — FIRE

A short analysis and some reflections
on the Turkish Incursion To Syria (Operation Euphrates's Shield)

**Is there an exit strategy for Turkey
other than total failure?**



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Turkish Army along with Turkish Foreign Policy is stuck in Al-Bab, aptly meaning “The Gate”. El-Bab is historically defined as a gate towards Aleppo which, although not expressed publicly, seems to be one of the objectives of Operation Euphrates Shield. Erdogan’s Sunni sectarian/political ambitions started off this operation under calamitous circumstances. Operation was started hastily in the middle of the biggest purge Turkish Armed Forces had seen. Experienced cadre that had been resisting to adventurous ambitions of the regime was being replaced with new opportunists looking for glory. Intelligence, planning, preparations and execution so far, have been textbook example of how not to do a military operation. The operation that started on 24 August 2016 with just two mechanized and infantry battalions and 10 special forces totaling to approximately 600 personnel has grown to include armour units and 4000 personnel with constant demand for more.

During the first stage of the operation, Jerablus was captured without intense fighting and was presented as a great military success by mouth-piece media. Later on, a captured ISIS member would reveal that ISIS did not fight back at this first stage, but simply blended into the population by cutting their beards. The media glory did not last long, disaster struck at Al-Bab where Free Syrian Army had already been failing against ISIS stronghold. In fact FSA has been more of an impediment than support. Start of the operation for Al-Bab was postponed several times because the FSA was not ready. In previous occasions Turkish Special Forces captured villages and turned them over to FSA, who abandoned the villages by the next morning.

Yet, FSA incompetency does not explain the stall Turkish forces are experiencing in Al-Bab. The factors should be sought within. The first apparent factor seems to be lack of intelligence. The ongoing operation seems to be conducted without adequate intelligence on the operational area. The lack of targeting info could be the reason why artillery shelling was preferred. Needless to say, this non-precision approach brings the risk of fratricide and civilian casualties with it. Already, some sources have claimed that hundreds of civilians died because of TUR artillery shelling. Situation is worsened as the Air Force resorts to general purpose (dumb bombs) due to shortage of precision guided missiles (PGMs). Turkey is pursuing to buy PGM kits from South Korea as urgent operational requirement, however it wouldn’t be wise to expect those PGMs to make it to the battlefield in the near future.

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Planning domain performance resembles intelligence shortfalls. Planners failed to appreciate the weapons enemy holds and plan accordingly. Strategic planners (if many are left after the massive purge!) at Turkish General Staff should have known that, ISIS had access to sophisticated anti tank guided missiles (ATGM) weapons and had been using them in the field extensively, and should have planned accordingly. Terrain factor also seems to be ignored. Using the relatively permissive flat terrain, ISIS was able to move freely and quickly, which enabled them to hunt tanks and other armored carriers with ease. Just like terrain, timing of the operation is not in concert with the choice of Armor either. Armor needs large logistics support which can be a nightmare in winter.

The most shocking detail about planning which explains the failures mentioned thus far is that there is no Joint Strategic Operational Plan (OPLAN). Hence there is no joint understanding of the whole campaign. For an operation of this magnitude an OPLAN at joint level is a must, in order to determine the lines of operation, align the lines of effort, synchronize efforts and execute properly. However, sources state that the closest thing to a plan is just a few power point slides with arrows and rough timings. According to this so called CONOPS (Concept of Operations); 3 months were envisaged for control of Jarablus, likewise 3 months for Al-Bab, another 3 for Mumbic and just another 3 months for Rakka. Considering how many months US-led coalition forces spent in Kirkuk, it is obvious that the timing mentioned is unrealistic.

C2 (command and control) of the operation is a perplexing matter by itself. Official reports indicate that the 3 star head of Special Forces (LtGen. Aksakallı, a staunch supporter of Erdogan) is commanding at operational level from a small HQ in Silopi/Turkey. Considering the amount of armor units used, a Special Forces commander with no experience in armor warfare, is not a smart choice. Destroyed tanks in the battle testify to what should have been common sense. In a recent report sent to Turkish General Staff HQ, LtGen. Aksakallı did not refrain from blaming the armour and infantry units performance for the failures in an effort to clear up his name and shift the blame towards Land Forces Command for lack of training and preparation. The assertion that Joint Forces Commander is somehow not responsible for the component units under his command is unacceptable by any military doctrine, tradition or ethic, and shows that Aksakallı is more concerned about clearing his name rather than saving lives, or mission success.

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The disconcerted planning and execution of the operation has led to appalling results. Credible sources stated that, contrary to public statements by the Turkish General Staff, 54 tanks have been destroyed/damaged so far. Losses are great yet gains are tiny. Despite the overwhelming conventional superiority enjoyed, even the logistics lines of ISIS, used for reinforcements and evacuations, are not cut yet.

Rather than acknowledging the self-evident incompetence, Erdogan regime tried to save face by claiming "Lack of US help to Turkish troops". Prime minister went as far as claiming that "The others are not doing anything, we are the only ones fighting". So what was the help they were talking about? Forgetting the fact that US neither agreed with the plan nor promised any help regarding Al-Bab, why was Turkey asking for US help in the first place?

It is obvious that mentioned "help" from US would come from the air, whether being strike or intelligence. Turkish Air Force was used to be paraded as the largest in Europe. With more than 250 fighters, it should be easily able to provide any kind of air support needed. In fact, Turkish General Staff claim 1233 guided munitions strike on 1141 IS targets, yet fails to show any significant effect on enemy will or ability to fight. Either, Air force is operating extremely ineffectively, or these numbers are suspicious. So assuming those numbers are right, what is the source of inefficiency? Could it be that, majority of experienced planners, pilots and intel officers are in jail now? Even some who are not in jail are hard pressed, like Pilots in Diyarbakir who report to police everyday and go fly missions on the same day? Morale of whatever good personnel left is down the drain, as they see personnel getting arrested everyday and wondering when is their turn?

Erdogan has not been shy in expressing his desire to topple Assad or "Pray in Mosque of Amawi" in Damascus. After getting rid of the military elite that resisted involvement in Syria without Western allies, Turkish Armed Forces entered Syria with no clear objective or associated plan. "Town Hopping" approach has failed in the first real resistance.

Al-Bab operation carries all the marks of politically fueled greedy adventurism, carried out by a crippled force under incompetent leadership. Will the "desire for glory" continue in the wake of upcoming presidential referendum? A military victory or defeat could make all the difference. ■

