



## OYTUN ORHAN: TURKEY DOES NOT WANT TO ESTABLISH A PERMANENT FOOTHOLD IN SYRIA

Oytun ORHAN



Oytun Orhan has been working as a researcher at ORSAM since 2009. Conducting research basically on Syria and Lebanon, Orhan has also carried out studies about Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Iraq and Turkey's Middle East policy. Having graduated from the department of International Relations, Gazi University, Orhan completed his master's degree at the department of International Relations, Hacettepe University with thesis titled "Impact of Identity on Syria's Regional Policies (1946- 2000)". Orhan continues his PhD in International Relations at the Institute of Social Sciences, Bolu Abant İzzet Baysal University.

As Turkey continues its Euphrates Shield operation against the DAESH and People's Protection Units (YPG) terrorist organizations along its borders for more than 10 days now, Turkey's political and military goals for this operation - the limits of the operation - have become a major topic of discussion in the international arena. Daily Sabah spoke with Syria expert Oytun Orhan from the Center for Middle Eastern Strategic Studies (ORSAM) to get answers related to the Euphrates Shield operations and afterward.

According to Orhan, Turkey hopes that this operation will serve its long-term interests, such as clearing its borders of DAESH, stopping the influx of refugees, preventing the PKK/YPG from having a unified territory in northern Syria and guaranteeing Turkey's connection with the Middle East. To reach these goals, Orhan believes Turkey must continue the operation to cover a-Bab and Manbij, while extending toward the south, underlining that the remaining phases of Operation Euphrates Shield will not be as easy as the first part.

**Daily Sabah: The Jarablus operation has been going on for two weeks. What is your take on comments that suggest that this operation was unexpected?**

Since the beginning of the Syrian civil war, Turkey has been voicing its propositions, such as a no-fly zone, safe zone and buffer zone. However, these were not realized as Turkey's allies did not support any of the said propositions, while Turkey also did not want to take the initiative by itself.

As time passed, the characteristics of the Syrian civil war started to change, which diversified the threats to Turkey. As DAESH and the YPG gained control of territories near the Turkish border, it caused a shift in Turkey's view of Syria. Turkey continued to argue for a safe zone; however, its expectations changed. At first, Turkey wanted the safe zone to prevent the immigrant influx and to have the upper hand against the al-Assad regime. Later however, with the rise of the YPG, it became a utility to fight against terrorist organizations. Actually, Turkey and the U.S. had agreed to establish a de facto safe zone that would include territory between Azaz and Jarablus, while the terms for the use of Incirlik Air Base against DAESH were being negotiated in 2015. The parties called this territory the "no-DAESH zone." It was agreed that the 100-kilometer long territory between Azaz and Jarablus would be included in this zone to prevent foreign fighters from joining DAESH, halt DAESH mortar strikes

against Turkey and minimize the risk of terrorist attacks on Turkey. Unfortunately, the crisis with Russia obstructed realization of the agreements.

Normalization between Turkey and Russia became the basis for realizing the said agreement. Therefore, the timing of Euphrates Shield may have come as a surprise to almost everyone; however, Turkey has been preparing a long time for this operation. For some time, Turkey was being prevented from launching operations in northern Syria. Normalization with Russia allowed Turkey to launch the Euphrates Shield Operation, while the YPG's possible advance toward al-Bab and Jarablus after taking Manbij and DAESH's increased terrorist attacks targeting Turkey urged Turkey to take a step.

**Daily Sabah: How do you define Turkey's political and military goals for this operation?**

**Oytun Orhan:** Contrary to the expectations of the international public, Turkey and the Syrian moderate opposition forces succeeded in a quick fashion. Jarablus, which was important to DAESH, was captured in a short period of time. DAESH did not show any resistance, most probably due to Turkey's disasative force. After Jarablus,

we see that Turkey is moving towards Manbij and to the western part of the border simultaneously. In this sense, Turkey has made tremendous progress in cleansing the Syrian-Turkish border of DAESH elements with the Euphrates Shield Operation. As of early September, DAESH is constrained to only a 15 kilometer-long borderline. It is expected that the remaining part will also be retaken.

Of course, Turkey hopes that this operation will serve its long-term interests. The most prominent is to prevent the PKK/YPG from having a unified territory in northern Syria. Turkey is trying to eliminate the existence of the YPG on the western bank of the Euphrates to prevent a state-like organization controlled by the PKK to be established between Afrin and Kobani near Turkey's southern border. This is vital for Turkey's political and territorial integrity. Another important long-term interest is to guarantee Turkey's connection with Aleppo and the Middle East. Lastly, Turkey wants to stop the immigrant influx and provide conditions that allow Syrians to be relocated to territories cleansed of the YPG and DAESH. In this regard, we are currently at the very beginning of the operation. The control of a territory that is 10-20 kilometers in depth

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by the Syrian opposition can only be effective against foreign fighters and keeping DAESH far from the Turkish border. To achieve these crucial aims, I believe this zone has to cover al-Bab and Manbij, while extending towards the south as well. Because, in theory, the YPG can still access Afrin via al-Bab, and DAESH may re-take Manbij.

**Considering the balances of power and international conjuncture, do you believe Turkey's aims are realistic?**

The territory must be extended 40 or 50 kilometers southward. However, the rest of the operation will not be as easy as the first part. Therefore, the operation might take a while. Al-Bab is one of the strongholds of DAESH, and they have fortified it with

the forces that retreated from Manbij. They are currently building up defenses around the city. Al-Bab is the place that will determine the fate of DAESH's existence in Aleppo. If they lose al-Bab, DAESH will be constrained to the eastern part of Syria. On the other hand, Manbij is crucial for the YPG; thus, they will resist. Moreover, U.S. support for the YPG makes taking Manbij a lot more complicated. However, Turkey sees the YPG existence in Manbij as a vital threat and may go for it. The geography of the region along with the conditions in the field gives the advantage to Turkey. For instance, the local Arab and Turkmen populations do not want the PKK. I have to stress that the people of this region do not refer to the organization as the Democratic Union Party (PYD) or the YPG, but as the PKK.

The Turkey-supported FSA consists of people originating from this region; therefore, they will probably want to take Manbij back.

Some suggest that if the operations go on for too long, Turkey will become mired in Syria. What is your opinion of this suggestion?

Before the operation, Turkey had to face many threats originating in Syria. The wave of terror caused by DAESH and the PKK last year originated in Syria. Therefore, no matter how hard you fight against terrorist organizations without going into Syria, the wave of terror will continue. Turkey has probably calculated the costs and risks of taking an active part in the Syrian civil war; however, it can be seen that the non-interference policy might cost more in the long run.

As I have said, the following parts of the operation will be more challenging. Perceiving Turkey as a threat, DAESH and the YPG will try to mire Turkey as much as they can. Moreover, as the operation becomes full-fledged, some actors that were initially neutral or supported the operation may start to oppose. Another issue is the motivation and capacity of the Free Syrian Army (FSA). However, the greatest advantage for Turkey is that it does not want to establish a permanent foothold in the re-

gion, as it fights alongside the people of the region. This might be Turkey's exit strategy.

**The operation was received differently by Iran, Russia and the U.S. How do you evaluate their reactions? Moreover, would their stance change as the operation proceeds?**

For Turkey to succeed in this operation, the stances of other countries are as important as the conditions on the field. As I have said, the normalization of Turkish-Russian relations allowed this operation to commence. Russia probably knew about the operation, and it was done in coordination. Russia is one of the leading political actors in Syria. Russia may allow the Syrian moderate opposition forces to proceed to al-Bab and Manbij; however, it will not allow them to proceed any further. South of al-Bab is the regime's territory. Russia may also allow the YPG to be constrained to some extent. Still, Russia would be against tipping the balance for either the YPG or the opposition forces in northern Syria. On the other hand, it can be seen that Iran did not react in an extreme way. This indicates that the foreign relations component of the operation was handled well, minimizing the risks. The YPG surmounting its expected influence may

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have affected Russia and Iran's stances. There is a U.S.-controlled region in northern Syria, and it is possible that multiple bases will be established in the said region. These situations allow Turkey to act as a counterbalance to the YPG, as it is perceived by Russia and Iran. Before the Jarablus operation, the regime forces fought against the YPG in al-Hasakah, and for the first time, the official regime media referred to them as the PKK, instead of the YPG or the PYD. These are significant implications that relations between the regime and the YPG have changed. The Iranian foreign minister, during his visit to Ankara, said that the PYD is the same as the PKK and the Kurdistan Free Life Party (PJAK), stating that they recognize them as terrorist organizations. However,

as I have said, there are limits for the advance of Turkey and opposition forces and I believe that they might have some concerns that Turkey may ignore these boundaries.

**Do you believe that Turkey might go further south in Syria, disregarding these limits?**

Turkey now perceives the Syrian issue as a fight against terrorism. An emergency resolution for the Syrian policy is also needed. Therefore, the aim of this operation is not to fight against the regime. In this sense, the operation will not expand southwards due to the field's realities and external factors. Moreover, I believe Turkey does not intend to do so. If it were the case, Russia and Iran's stances would be very different.



DAESH and the YPG are the targets. If Turkey had tried to establish this de facto safe zone a year or two ago, it would have been perceived very differently. Therefore, the 100 kilometer-long-area between Azaz and Jarablus, along with a depth of 50 kilometer controlled by local armed forces are the natural boundaries of this operation. This is a more realistic aim.

### **Does Turkey have an exit strategy in Syria?**

We see that Turkey is in Syria to protect the opposition forces, conduct sweeping operations via local forces and leave control of the claimed territories to the said forces. These are factors that decrease the risk. If these territories become a safe, and a successful model with a sound political, economic and administrative system is established, this may also contribute to the resolution of the Syrian conflict. The exit strategy of Turkey is to resolve the Syrian issue as quickly as possible, and it seems the operation aims to achieve this. It can be observed that countries neighboring Syria are trying to minimize their risks, instead of trying to expand their influence within Syria.

### **Did the operation have an effect on the ongoing Syrian civil war?**

The Euphrates Shield will not affect the civil war significantly; however, it is an important operation regarding the power balance in northern Syria, border shift and the essence of relations.

### **What is the likelihood of an active conflict between Turkey and the U.S.-backed YPG?**

One of the main aims of the operation is to fight against the YPG. Therefore, as long as the YPG does not retreat from Manbij, there is this possibility. At first, Turkey tried to press the U.S. on the YPG's retreat. However, while U.S. officials say that the YPG has retreated, the PKK states that they will not allow Manbij to fall. If the YPG does not retreat, Turkey may force them out. This can be done despite U.S. support. Turkey has a couple of advantages. Firstly, the U.S. has promised that the YPG would retreat to east of the Euphrates. Secondly, the geography is favorable for Turkey. Thirdly, this issue is of vital importance to Turkey; therefore, Turkey is ready to do what it takes. Lastly, the demographics of the region are also favorable for Turkey. Turkey's appearance as a prominent actor might also sway the stance of some local actors that position themselves according to the balance. It should not be forgotten that

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Manbij is a town consisting mainly of Arabs. Moreover, most of the opposition forces hail from Manbij, and they will want to retake it.

**Last week, there was a meeting between the foreign ministers of the U.S. and Russia regarding the future of Syria. In regards to this, what is the possibility of a political resolution in Syria?**

The improved cooperation between Turkey, Iran and Russia gives more hope for a political resolution in Syria. The Syrian civil war is becoming more affected by the decisions of foreign powers. Russia and Iran are the most prominent supporters of the regime in Syria. It is to such an extent, that if you want a ceasefire, you have to negotiate with I-

ran. Similarly, if you want to launch a land or air operation in Syria, you have to talk with Russia. On the other hand, opposition forces were always dependent on foreign support. The U.S. is also a prominent actor, and it seems that they have a consensus on certain topics with Russia. The existing foreign influence and the implications of reconciliation between the actors make it more possible to have a resolution. Every actor involved in the Syrian DAESH became weary; thus, all of them want to minimize the risks and protect their interests. All are becoming exhausted.

**It seems that Turkey is going to approve a political transition with Bashar Assad. However, considering the war and hundreds**

**of thousands of deaths, is it realistic to expect Assad to be a part of the resolution?**

I believe that Turkey is not obsessed with Assad's deposition; the statements had a rational undertone. Syria's stability is favored by all actors, and this is not possible as long as al-Assad continues to rule. Even if Turkey is persuaded, it will not be possible to persuade the opposition, majority of the Syrian people and refugees.

However, Turkey, perceiving the shift in the civil war, became

more flexible in certain policies. Turkey's approval for a political transition is an important step. Prime Minister Binali Yıldırım's statement, "Even if we do not want to acknowledge it, Assad is still an actor in Syria," implies that Turkey will consent to a new order in Syria, which will have the segment of society that Assad represents as a part of the government. As there aren't any clear winners in the Syrian civil war, every actor has to be flexible in certain aspects.

**\*This interview was first published by Daily Sabah.**

ORSAM is an independent think-tank specializing on Middle Eastern affairs. ORSAM seeks to diversify sources of knowledge on the region and establish a channel of communication between the local experts and Turkish academic and policy circles. Toward that end, ORSAM facilitates the exchanges of officials, academics, strategists, journalists, businesspeople and members of civil society from the region with their Turkish counterparts. ORSAM conducts studies on the regional developments and disseminates their results to the policy and academic circles as well as the wider public through various publication outlets. ORSAM publications include books, reports, bulletins, newsletters, policy briefs, conference minutes and two journals *Ortadoğu Analiz* and *Ortadoğu Etütleri*.

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