

Turkish invasion has left Ankara weak and on the verge of economic meltdown

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Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan in Istanbul.

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Ankara's attempt to carve out a so-called safe zone deep inside Kurdish-held territory in north-east Syria has left Turkey alone, strategically weak and on the precipice of an economic meltdown. Even last week's US-brokered truce was no victory for Turkey's firebrand president Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

Sure, under the terms of the ceasefire, the White House agreed to practically everything Ankara wanted. US President Donald Trump froze sanctions and accepted Ankara's demand for a safe zone and its calls for forces from the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) to retreat. More ominously, there was nothing said about the hundreds of thousands of Kurds who fled the area, nor of Turkey's odious intention to resettle millions of Arab Syrian refugees in the proposed safe zone – such a deliberate policy of demographic tampering being tantamount to ethnic cleansing. Instead, Mr Trump declared the Kurds were “no angels”. By yesterday, four days into the ceasefire, Kurdish troops had withdrawn entirely

from the key border town of Ras Al Ain in north-eastern Syria.

The so-called truce, agreed on Thursday, was the second time that Mr Trump sold out the Kurds. The first occasion was his announcement to pull out US forces from Syria in the first place, a de facto green light for the Turkish invasion that prompted the truce.

But all Mr Erdogan and his ministers got in reality was a memo hardly worth the paper it was printed on. For one, fighting still continues and the truce has no enforcement mechanism. Meanwhile, the YPG's deal with the Assad regime means that the future of Turkey's operation is dependent on the say-so of Moscow, not Washington.

Ankara might be loathe to admit it but its borders were a lot safer before the operation. The presence of US forces provided a buffer between Washington's two allies, Turkey and the YPG. It was for the most part a quiet border. Now Turkey has a fully equipped, Russian-backed Syrian military on its doorstep protecting the battle-hardened YPG and seething at Turkey's bombardments and the alleged abuses committed

by Turkey's ragtag band of militant Islamists, such as allegations Turkish-backed troops have been using white phosphorus to attack civilians, a possible war crime.

And even if Turkish forces manage to gain a little bit more territory with the YPG agreeing to withdraw, it would still fall far short of the 480-kilometre-long buffer zone Ankara intended. Turkey's only hope is that when Mr Erdogan meets Russian President Vladimir Putin in Sochi tomorrow, he might gain a few concessions on the size of the safe zone. But that would involve a quid pro quo, such as a Turkish withdrawal from Idlib, and the “safe zone” could prove to be more of a deathtrap for Turkish forces and its proxies, who might face hit-and-run attacks by the YPG as they did in Afrin. Either way, Turkey's Syria policy is worse off now than it was before.

Meanwhile, Turkey has little international support. Ankara's only friends in the Middle East are Iran and Qatar. Despite Mr Erdogan's threat to send millions of Syrian refugees to Europe, the European Union called Turkey's bluff. Brussels issued an unequivocal condemnation of Turkey's

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operation and called for the suspension of arms exports. Germany, France, Norway, Finland and Sweden have already done so. To make matters worse, European sanctions loom because of Turkey's drilling off the coast of Cyprus.

Another blow to Turkey is the position of the UK. Until now, Westminster was Turkey's best ally in the West. Trade was flowing, diplomatic visits were frequent and London was the first European country to show solidarity with Turkey after the 2016 coup attempt, even while

Mr Erdogan was purging his critics. However, in the wake of Turkey's onslaught on the Kurds, Westminster announced that it would review arms licences and freeze future exports. The utility of the involvement of BAE Systems and Rolls Royce in developing Turkey's domestic TF-X fighter jet might also soon come into question.

For now, at least, Turkey is in Mr Trump's good books. But the US president is highly unreliable. He is prone to meltdowns and has threatened to destroy the Turkish economy on more than one occasion. He also faces the very real possibility of impeachment. Mr Trump's betrayal of the Kurds and Turkey's invasion is resented by the Pentagon, the State Department, Congress and even Mr Trump's own Republican Party for diminishing US influence, empowering Iran and Russia, and risking the resurgence of ISIS. Mitch McConnell, the Republican majority leader in the Senate, even penned an op-ed for the Washington Post, publicly calling Mr Trump's Syria pullout a “strategic nightmare”.

Congress looks set to pass more sanctions against Turkey for the incursion. The US treas-

ury could soon dish out a hefty billion-dollar fine against the Turkish state-owned Halkbank for violating Iranian sanctions and heavy penalties still loom under the Countering America Adversaries Through Sanctions Act for Turkey's purchase of the Russian S-400 defence system. It is unlikely Mr Erdogan will understand that the US president's hands are effectively tied on such matters as sanctions cripple the Turkish economy.

Meanwhile, reports of human rights abuses and possible war crimes by Turkish forces and their merciless militias it backs are not helping Ankara's cause. Neither does the fact that Turkey's resettlement policy is really an attempt to ethnically cleanse the region of its Kurdish majority. An ally capable of committing such outrage is hardly an ally for Nato or the West at all.

Not only has this latest operation brought Turkey few strategic gains but it has highlighted the extent to which Ankara has burned its diplomatic bridges. In effect, Turkey has transformed itself from being a pivotal member of Nato to little more than a minor piece on Russia's strategic chessboard.

CIVILIAN'S

Efforts to end human trafficking

Bahrain has hosted the government forum to combat trafficking in persons in the Middle East, a major official event dedicated to stamping out human trafficking. The event was opened by Foreign Minister Shaikh Khalid bin Ahmed Al Khalifa, with a number of other senior officials in attendance from across the region.

The phenomenon has been recognised as a specific challenge for the GCC region, given the large size of the foreign workforce; and the GCC's central position between developing states in Africa and South Asia and Europe.

The exploitation of vulnerable people by ruthless criminal networks is responsible for the virtual enslavement of hundreds of thousands of individuals worldwide.

With human trafficking becoming the subject of growing attention, in 2018 Bahrain became the first state in the region to be upgraded to having “Tier 1” status in combatting human trafficking, according to the US State Department's 2018 Trafficking in Persons (TIP) report.

Since achieving Tier 1 status, Bahrain's approach to people trafficking has been a subject of interest from other regional gov-

ernments seeking to improve their record. There have been a number of fact-finding visits and Bahraini officials have travelled overseas to act as trainers and mentors for people trafficking personnel in other states.

Bahrain followed this up this year by announcing the establishment of a centre of excellence for capacity building, with the aim of increasing the readiness of state personnel to address this challenge. The centre will be based at the Labour Market Regulatory Authority's Expat Protection Centre in Northern Sehla.

Tier 1 status places Bahrain

on the same level as states like Britain, Germany and the US in having the highest standards of best practice in this area. Among the achievements which merited Bahrain's promotion to Tier 1 status were the Flexible Work Permit and “standardised tripartite labour contract system” which provide reinforced protections to vulnerable expatriate workers. The Flexible Work Permit is the first of its kind in the region and has been praised by the International Organisation for Migration and the UN Human Rights Council as a model example of responsible and effective labour market

reform.

Below are a number of the other mechanisms and initiatives which Bahrain has in place for addressing human trafficking:

NATIONAL REFERRAL MECHANISM

In 2017, the National Committee to Combat Trafficking in Persons (NCCTIP) launched its government-wide National Referral Mechanism (NRM) to “streamline the proactive identification of trafficking victims, ensure proper documentation of cases, effectively refer cases to

the Interior Ministry prosecutor's determinative case and protective provisions until case resolution, also distribute the NRM to industries and stakeholders; awareness and the obligation of the Labour Authority 2017-2018 referrals from 516 from a variety of cases, effectively refer cases to the NCCTIP