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Turkey's two-front war has hard times ahead

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Only a few days after the outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) killed 14 riot police in a suicide car bomb attack on Dec. 17, the Turkish Armed Forces (TSK) announced there were 16 martyrs on Dec. 21 in Turkey's ongoing Euphrates Shield Operation that is aiming to clear al-Bab, a strategic town in northern Syria, from Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) jihadists. The latter was the highest casualty the Turkish army had given in one day as part of the operation that was launched on Aug. 24.

Turkey's two-front war strategy began late July 2015 after the PKK resumed its violent attacks after the peace process between the government and the pro-Kurdish group collapsed and when ISIL carried out its first massive suicide attack in the southeastern province of Şanlıurfa.

In the first phase of this strategy, the Turkish Air Forces actively joined the anti-ISIL international coalition aerial campaign in northern Syria while a very large operation against PKK elements inside Turkey and in northern Iraq accompanied the former. It took Turkey months to defeat PKK terrorists who launched an urban warfare in around a dozen provinces.

After this process, the military intensified its efforts to hit PKK positions in various strategic

points in the southeast to prevent terrorists from finding safe places to shelter to overcome harsh winter conditions.

The damage given to the PKK pushed terrorists to concentrate on more suicide attacks in the entire country with concerns that they will likely continue their violent campaigns in the coming period.

As a matter of fact, Turkey's two-front war was suspended in late 2015 after it downed a Russian warplane.

With concerns that Russia or Syria could retaliate, the TSK suspended its flights over Syrian airspace until mid-2016 when Ankara and Moscow could possibly break the ice and reconcile. This move allowed Turkey to press the button for a postponed cross border operation into Syria to clear of its border from ISIL.

On Aug. 24, the Free Syria Army (FSA) and Turkish troops launched the offensive to push ISIL jihadists of the border and eventually captured Syria's Jarabulus. The operation is also eyeing to avoid the Syrian Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) from creating a corridor to link its Kobane and Afrin cantons, Ankara set clearing al-Bab, located right in between the two Kurdish cantons, from jihadists and giving its control to the FSA as an ultimate objective.

However, given current conditions, there are important obstacles to take into account before Turkey and the TSK completes the offensive. First one is the fact that the U.S.-led international coalition does not lend any support to this action. Hinting its discomfort on Turkey's further advance to the south, the coalition underlined that the TSK's ongoing campaign was a unilateral military move.

Second, it has become more obvious that FSA's military skills and capability is not sufficient to carry out such a big operation in al-Bab. There are reports that many of the FSA elements left their positions and withdrew from the conflict zone as clashes with ISIL intensified near al-Bab. It's no secret that ISIL has long been fortifying its positions around the city and taking all preventive measures to stop the advance of the Turkey-backed FSA toward the city. Just like in Mosul, ISIL has been using civilians as human shields in various ways. Under these conditions, it has become clear that FSA rebels have become useless in the fighting, leaving Turkish troops face-to-face with jihadists.

Third important point to consider is the fact that as clashes intensify near al-Bab, Turkey has to deploy more of its Special Forces to the region from different military units. It will be hard to motivate these troops that have already been actively fighting against terror in Turkey. This will surely obligate Turkey to revise military plans and change strategy, if necessary, as the government made clear that the operation in al-Bab will continue.

Another important issue is that the increase in the number of martyred soldiers in northern Syria would provoke more public reaction and questioning on why Turkish troops are so deep in the neighboring country, although the borders have been secured from jihadists. ISIL's threats of possible suicide attacks targeting civilians in Turkey are adding additional concerns to this end.

This picture shows that Turkey came to a point where it has to revise its two-front war strategy.