

Turkish troops enter northern Syria

Patrick Martin
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A force of 600 Turkish troops entered northern Syria Saturday in the first-ever incursion by Turkey since the Syrian civil war began in 2011. The convoy of nearly 200 military vehicles, including 39 tanks and 57 armored cars, evacuated 40 Turkish soldiers guarding the tomb of Suleyman Shah, an ancestor of the Ottoman dynasty that ruled Turkey for 500 years.

Turkish Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu appeared at a press conference Sunday, flanked by military officials, to declare that the evacuation had been conducted successfully and the troops had returned with the loss of only a single soldier, under circumstances that were not explained.

The remains of Suleyman Shah were transported to a new location in Syria, just across the border from Turkey, which will be occupied by Turkish troops from now on. Instead of a group of 40 soldiers serving as semi-hostages deep in Syrian territory, the Turkish military now has a bridgehead on the border with Aleppo province, one of the key battlegrounds in the Syrian civil war.

The Syrian government of President Bashar al-Assad said it was informed of the Turkish incursion ahead of time but did not give its consent. A spokesman for Damascus, which no longer controls the area where the tomb was located, denounced Turkey's "flagrant aggression" on Syrian territory.

The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), which had surrounded the site of Suleyman's tomb, made no effort to resist or attack the withdrawal convoy, Turkish officials said. When ISIS forces first surrounded the tomb, the Turkish military reinforced the guards with special forces troops.

The Turkish incursion was made possible by the victory of US-backed Kurdish forces who retook the border city of Kobane earlier this month, after months of air strikes by the US, Saudi Arabia and other Gulf sheikhdoms that reportedly killed several thousand ISIS

fighters. The Turkish military convoy drove straight through Kobane on their way to the tomb, with the agreement of the Syrian Kurdish force, the YGP.

After removing every artifact from the tomb, located on the Euphrates River, the Turkish troops blew up the building, leaving only rubble behind. On their return to the Turkish-Syrian border, in what one news report called "a hugely symbolic move," Turkish troops raised the Turkish flag over a portion of the Syrian border district of Eshme chosen as the tomb's new location.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said, "Our flag will continue to fly in a new place to keep alive the memory of our ancestors."

The tomb of Suleyman Shah, whose death is dated 1236, was declared a Turkish enclave inside the French colony of Syria under the terms of the 1921 Treaty of Ankara, one of multiple agreements that finalized borders after World War I.

The incursion is of far more than historical or ceremonial significance. Not only did it represent the first military operation by Turkey inside Syria, it was coordinated with the Syrian Kurdish forces who up to now Turkey has treated with hostility because of their links with the outlawed Kurdish nationalist PKK inside Turkey.

In an action that coincided with the Turkish incursion—whose size and scope would certainly have distracted the attention of ISIS forces—the Syria YPG launched an offensive late Saturday night aimed at expanding its control of the northeastern province of Hassakeh, pushing back ISIS forces around the town of Tal Hamis.

Pro-Kurdish media sources claimed that the YPG "managed to advance and took over some 20 villages, farms and hamlets in the area." Warplanes from the US and its Arab allies carried out strikes against ISIS positions that were coordinated with the YPG offensive.

While Syrian Kurdish forces began pushing eastward, Iraqi Kurdish forces have pushed westward, gaining ground at the expense of ISIS and reportedly cutting the main highway between Mosul, the largest Iraqi city held by ISIS, and the Islamic fundamentalist group's headquarters at Raqqa, Syria.

In late January, Iraqi Kurdish peshmerga troops captured the town of Kiske, west of Mosul on the highway to Raqqa. They had first attempted to capture Sinjar, another town on the highway, but were stalled there and moved further west.

The Associated Press reported Friday that ISIS troops had been forced to withdraw from the town of al-Bab, in Aleppo province, and that there was heavy fighting between ISIS and Syrian army troops near the Deir el-Zour air base, the last major outpost of the Assad regime in eastern Syria.

The *Washington Post* reported Sunday that ISIS forces were also under pressure around the city of Tikrit, the birthplace of Saddam Hussein and a longtime stronghold of Sunni opposition to the US invasion and conquest of Iraq. Some 10,000 Iraqi Shiite militiamen, together with some regular Iraqi Army troops, assembled south and east of Tikrit on Saturday in preparation for a major offensive.

The *Post* reported that "Qassim Soleimani, the leader of Iran's elite Quds Force, was also in the city to oversee the operation, according to local officials." Iran has been providing military advice and limited air support to the Shiite militias that have done most of the recent fighting against ISIS in central Iraq, north and northeast of Baghdad.

Both the Turkish incursion and the actions of Kurdish, Shiite and Iraqi army troops suggest that major US-backed military operations may already be under way. The highly publicized official leak of plans for a coordinated onslaught on Mosul in April or May may well be deliberate disinformation, aimed at disguising offensive operations that would begin much sooner, including saturation bombing as well as ground assaults.



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