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THE EUPHRATES SHIELD MILITARY OPERATION IN NORTHERN SYRIA (2016–2017): CAUSES, COURSE, AND GEOPOLITICAL RESULTS

Teub A. Akhmedov

Technical Institute – branch of the North-Eastern Federal University named after M.K. Ammosov,
Neryungri, Russian Federation

Abstract. *Introduction.* The paper examines the background, reasons, beginning, and course of Operation Euphrates Shield, which Turkey conducted in northern Syria in 2016–2017. The immediate reason for the operation was the terrorist threat in the territories bordering Turkey. *Methods and materials.* Due to the relative recency of the events, their historiography is in its infancy. The main source base for this study is news and analytical materials from American, British, Turkish, Arab, and Kurdish media, mainly published on the Internet. *Analysis.* The paper reconstructs the chronology of events and actions of the opposing sides and their allies during Operation Euphrates Shield. It also pays attention to the participation of Syrian rebel groups and the complex relationships between all parties to the conflict, including the US-led coalition and Russia. *Results.* The civil war in Syria and the rapid growth of the influence of terrorist groups gave Turkey the opportunity to extend its influence to the territory of a neighboring state by military means. Operation Euphrates Shield not only struck a blow at ISIS * but also cut through the territory of the Kurdish enclave, but Turkey failed to completely resolve the problem of the presence of Kurdish armed groups in the region.

Key words: Euphrates Shield, Turkey, Syria, Western Kurdistan, ISIS, Free Syrian Army, People's Defense Units, Syrian Democratic Forces.

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ВОЕННАЯ ОПЕРАЦИЯ «ЩИТ ЕВФРАТА» НА СЕВЕРЕ СИРИИ (2016–2017 гг.): ПРИЧИНЫ, ХОД И ГЕОПОЛИТИЧЕСКИЕ ИТОГИ

Теюб Ахмедович Ахмедов

Технический институт – филиал Северо-Восточного федерального университета
им. М.К. Аммосова, г. Нерюнгри, Российская Федерация

Аннотация. *Введение.* В работе рассматриваются предпосылки, причины, начало и ход операции «Щит Евфрата», которую Турция вела на территории северной Сирии в 2016–2017 годы. Непосредственным поводом для этого стала террористическая угроза на пограничных с Турцией территориях. *Методы и материалы.* Ввиду относительной недавности событий основной источниковой базой данного исследования являются новостные и аналитические материалы американских, британских, турецких, арабских и курдских средств массовой информации, главным образом опубликованные в сети Интернет. *Анализ.* В работе реконструируется хронология событий и действий противоборствующих сторон и их союзников в ходе операции «Щит Евфрата». Рассмотрено участие сирийских повстанческих групп и сложные взаимоотношения между всеми участниками конфликта, включая коалицию во главе с США и Россию. *Результаты.* Гражданская война в Сирии и стремительный рост влияния террористических группировок

* A terrorist organization, whose activities are prohibited in the Russian Federation.

дали Турции возможность распространить военным путем свое влияние на территорию соседнего государства. Операция «Щит Евфрата» позволила не только нанести удар по ИГИЛ*, но расцезь территорию курдского анклава, однако полностью решить проблему присутствия курдских вооруженных отрядов в регионе Турции не удалось.

Ключевые слова: Щит Евфрата, Турция, Сирия, Западный Курдистан, ИГИЛ, Свободная сирийская армия, Отряды народной самообороны, Сирийские демократические силы.

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Introduction. The paper examines the background, causes, commencement, and progress of Operation Euphrates Shield, conducted by Turkey in northern Syria in 2016–2017. The military intervention was prompted by a terrorist threat: portions of the Syrian border territories had been seized by the terrorist organization ISIS, while more than half of the areas along the Turkish-Syrian border were controlled by the Kurdish paramilitary People's Protection Units (YPG), which Turkey considered an affiliate of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), recognized as a terrorist organization by the Turkish state.

The article also examines the role of the Free Syrian Army and other Syrian rebel groups in Operation Euphrates Shield, the relationships between the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) during the operation, and the impact of the operation on relations between Turkey and the international coalition against ISIS led by the United States, as well as with Russia.

Methods and materials. Since the events under study belong, in historical terms, to contemporary history, this imposes certain limitations both on the range of sources that can be used for research and on research methods.

The main source base of this study consists of news and analytical materials from mass media, primarily published on the Internet. These materials include reports from Russian, American, British, Turkish, Arab, and Kurdish media. These reports contain both official materials (excerpts from press releases, official statements by statesmen, and public officials) and journalistic work, as well as publications and interpretations of social media

content, videos, and other materials. Many media reports are currently unavailable via direct links, but their copies are preserved on internet archiving portals. Additionally, the paper utilizes a number of previously published studies, including works by A.I. Aliyeva, A.N. Rybalkin, et al.

The study is based on the principles of objectivity, a systemic approach, and historicism. Due to the specific nature of the sources, the primary research method used is the historical-chronological method, which allows for the reconstruction of the timeline of events and the actions of the opposing sides and their allies during Operation Euphrates Shield.

Analysis. In the second half of the twentieth century, relations between Turkey and Syria were tense. After the expulsion of PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan from Syria, relations between the two countries began to gradually improve until the outbreak of the civil war in Syria in 2011. Initially, Turkey, having accepted a large number of Syrian refugees, exerted diplomatic pressure on Bashar al-Assad to force concessions from the opposition but eventually joined the coalition of Assad regime opponents. In 2012, Turkey began proposing the creation of a no-fly zone in northern Syria, and the Grand National Assembly of Turkey authorized military operations on Syrian territory [3, pp. 793–795].

Turkey considered Kurdish autonomy in northern Syria to be the primary threat to its security. In 2011, B. al-Assad granted citizenship to Syrian Kurds, and in 2012, he withdrew government troops from Kurdish regions, enabling the Kurds to organize self-governance [2, p. 45]. The Democratic Union Party (PYD), linked to the PKK, and its armed wing, the People's Protection

* Террористическая организация, деятельность которой запрещена на территории РФ.

Units (YPG), became the dominant political force in the Kurdish areas. On November 12, 2013, the creation of an autonomous Kurdish administration in northeastern Syria was announced [42], covering three isolated enclaves centered around the cities of Afrin, Kobani, and Qamishli.

The war and instability in the region led to a rapid increase in the influence of radical extremist groups, the strongest of which, the Islamic State, quickly took control over significant territories in Iraq and Syria. In response to the terrorist threat, U.S. President Barack Obama in September 2014 announced the goal of destroying ISIS [47]. By that time, it was already widely recognized that the Kurdish YPG were among the most effective forces fighting the Islamic State [11], and thus their aerial support became a priority for the coalition against ISIS.

In 2015, the YPG's offensive in northern Syria caused strong concern in Ankara. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan stated that his country would not allow the creation of a state uniting northern Syria and southern Turkey and accused Kurdish formations of expelling local populations from occupied territories [15]. A month later, a terrorist attack in the Turkish city of Suruç triggered a chain of events that ended a two-year ceasefire between Turkey and the PKK.

Simultaneously, relations between Turkey and the United States were deteriorating. From Ankara's perspective, the U.S. was arming and training a terrorist organization [67] that threatened the territorial integrity of both Syria and Turkey itself. In October 2015, with U.S. support, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) military alliance was formed, with the YPG as its primary fighting force. In the same month, Barack Obama announced the deployment of U.S. troops to Syria [46], whose main task was to train and support the SDF units. On April 28, 2016, during congressional hearings, U.S. Secretary of Defense A. Carter confirmed «substantial ties» between the YPG and the PKK, adding that the PKK is designated as a terrorist organization not only by Turkey but also by the United States [40].

On March 16, 2016, the creation of the Democratic Federation of Rojava was announced. This Kurdish political project aimed to unite the entire north of Syria, including the lands between Afrin and the Euphrates River occupied by ISIS. Despite their mutual hostility, both Damascus and

Ankara condemned the declaration of autonomy as an infringement on Syria's territorial integrity [48].

The U.S. administration's focus in the region, besides fighting ISIS, was directed toward signing the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action on Iran's nuclear program. B. Obama was intent on building a broad coalition to fight the Islamic State, including Iran and Russia, Damascus's closest allies [61], while yielding to pressure from Iran, which demanded the preservation of Assad's regime [17]. Turkey suspected the Obama administration of intentions to eliminate the Syrian opposition: the government newspaper Daily Sabah in early 2016 described how the upcoming YPG advance along the Turkish border, with the support of Russian and American air forces, would cut opposition forces off from Turkey, leaving them without support in a circle of enemies [23].

Consequently, Turkey was categorically opposed to the presence of Kurdish forces on the west bank of the Euphrates, in lands predominantly inhabited by Arabs and Turkmens, and, citing the presence of the YPG, refused to support the SDF offensive on Manbij [43]. After its liberation from ISIS, Turkey demanded the withdrawal of Kurdish armed units to the east bank of the Euphrates.

The terrorist threat, repeatedly mentioned by Turkish leadership, was not merely rhetorical. In the first half of 2016 alone, the country suffered more than ten terrorist attacks, with a total death toll exceeding one hundred. For instance, on 19 August, in the city of Elazığ, a car loaded with explosives detonated near a police station, killing six people; the PKK claimed responsibility [36]. On August 20, in the city of Gaziantep, an ISIS suicide bomber detonated an explosive device at a street wedding, killing 57 people, 34 of whom were children [14].

In early August 2016, the Turkish leadership began preparations for a military operation code-named Euphrates Shield. The legal basis for its implementation was Article 51 of the UN Charter, which grants states the right to self-defense. On August 25, after the operation had already commenced, Turkish Defense Minister F. İşık outlined its two primary objectives: to clear the territory of ISIS and to prevent the unification of Rojava's western and eastern cantons [52].

To conduct the operation, the General Staff of the Turkish Armed Forces deployed the 2nd Field

Army under the command of Lieutenant General İ.M. Temel – specifically, the 5th Armored Brigade, which had been relocated closer to the conflict zone in 2012, the 20th Mechanized Brigade, and the Hakkari Mountain and Commando Brigade of the 7th Army Corps, stationed in Turkey's Kurdish regions near the Syrian border [30]. Lieutenant General Z. Aksakallı was appointed to command Operation Euphrates Shield on Syrian territory. The operation was preceded by extensive diplomatic preparation, including negotiations with Iran and Russia. R. Erdoğan issued an apology for the 2015 downing of a Russian aircraft and personally met with V. Putin in Saint Petersburg on August 9 [34]. This was also a demonstrative gesture toward Washington, signaling that Ankara could also reach agreements with Iran and Russia regardless of the interests of its NATO allies.

Operation Euphrates Shield commenced on August 24, 2016. Its first phase involved the capture of the border town of Jarabulus, toward which Turkey suspected YPG forces were advancing from Manbij. Before launching the offensive, the Turkish military shelled ISIS positions with artillery, while the Turkish Air Force struck at least 11 targets [22]. Subsequently, Turkish armor crossed the Turkish-Syrian border and linked up with FSA units. Within a few hours, Jarabulus was captured. The following day, the General Staff of the Turkish Armed Forces deployed over 20 additional tanks into Syria to reinforce its positions.

At that time, the number of ISIS militants in the area from Azaz to Jarabulus was approximately 15,000–20,000. Furthermore, Abu Ali al-Anbari, an ISIS representative in Syria, deployed 500 militants from the so-called al-Quds special unit in the region [25], hoping to stall the Turkish advance until reinforcements could arrive, if at all possible to redeploy them to the conflict zone.

The Russian Foreign Ministry stated that “Moscow is seriously concerned by the developments on the Syrian-Turkish border” [27]. Syrian authorities condemned the invasion by Turkish troops as a violation of the country's sovereignty. Turkish officials, in turn, claimed they had notified Syria of the operation's start through Russian mediation [57]. U.S. Vice President J. Biden, who arrived in Ankara for a pre-scheduled visit, expressed support for the

operation and stated that Kurdish units must withdraw to the east bank of the Euphrates if they wished to retain U.S. support [9]. On August 25, U.S. Secretary of State J. Kerry informed Turkish Foreign Minister M. Çavuşoğlu that the Kurdish YPG had begun withdrawing east of the Euphrates River. Representatives of Operation Inherent Resolve also announced that Kurdish forces had retreated to the eastern bank of the Euphrates.

However, earlier on August 24, YPG spokesperson R. Xelîl had stated that Kurdish forces would not leave the west bank: “No one can order us to withdraw from our own lands” [68]. The Jarabulus Military Council (JMC), part of the SDF, announced its intention to retake the city from the FSA. One JMC member declared, “We will not allow some mercenaries to take over our city. We will liberate Jarabulus” [12]. On the evening of August 25, Turkish troops used self-propelled howitzers to shell an SDF unit advancing north from Manbij toward Jarabulus [55].

Following the capture of Jarabulus, Arab rebel groups allied with Turkey, specifically the Levant Front, a partner of the FSA in the fight against ISIS, announced that, in alliance with other opposition forces such as the al-Mutasim Brigade and the Turkmen Sultan Murad Division, they would attempt to launch an offensive westward against ISIS toward al-Bab [50]. Instead, however, pro-Turkish forces moved south toward Manbij, targeting SDF positions.

The SDF leadership, represented by General M. Abdî, decided to suspend the northward advance of its forces in Syria to avoid civilian casualties. Nevertheless, the Syrian armed opposition, supported by Turkey, began seizing villages previously under Kurdish control. During the offensive, the FSA and its allies occupied the villages of Mazaalah and Yousif Bayk [19], then made an unsuccessful attempt to take the strategically important hilltop of Amarna. In response, Arab units within the SDF, specifically the Northern Sun Battalion, stated they would send assistance to the Jarabulus Military Council. Later, one Turkish soldier was killed after a Turkish tank was struck by an anti-tank missile fired from the direction of the SDF Arab units.

On August 28, the FSA, supported by the Turkish military, launched a massive attack on SDF positions south of Jarabulus and, on the

second attempt, captured Amarna Hill and the village of Ayn al-Bayda. Subsequently, FSA forces seized the villages of Balaban, Dabisa, Jeb el-Koussa, Umm Routha, Qusa, Qiratah, and Maghayer, continuing their movement further south [6]. During the offensive, according to the Kurdish Firat News Agency, two Turkish army tanks were lost after being struck by anti-tank guided missiles.

According to SOHR and Aleppo24, at least 20 civilians were killed and 50 others sustained varying degrees of injury during the shelling and bombing of Jeb el-Koussa. Another 28 civilians were killed and approximately 30 injured when Turkish aircraft bombed the village of Saressat and the small town of al-Amarnah [13]. According to the SDF, their casualties during this period amounted to four fighters killed and 15 wounded. At the same time, Syrian monitoring groups reported that the total death toll for August 27 and 28, including civilians, reached at least 70 people [13]. The Turkish Anadolu Agency reported the elimination of 25 PKK and YPG militants [66].

On August 29, 2016, the Turkish Armed Forces, under the command of Lieutenant General Z. Aksakallı, reached the tributaries of the Euphrates north of Manbij. I. Ibrahim, chairman of the Rojava News Agency, stated that Kurdish forces in the Jarabulus and Manbij areas [60, p. 7] were receiving the necessary reinforcements to successfully resist both ISIS militants and Turkish aggression.

On the same day, B. Rhodes, an advisor to U.S. President B. Obama, stated that the U.S. government did not support the movement of Turkish troops deeper into Syrian territory [45] and opposed the actions taken by the Turkish military against the SDF, Washington's allies. U.S. Defense Secretary A. Carter, in turn, reported that representatives from the Pentagon and the presidential administration had repeatedly communicated on this issue with Turkish Defense Minister F. Işık and Chief of the General Staff H. Akar, urging the Turkish military to concentrate its forces against ISIS militants [20]. U.S. envoy to the anti-ISIS coalition, B. McGurk, emphasized during a briefing that the military confrontation between the Syrian Democratic Forces and Turkey, supported by FSA forces, was a source of deep concern for Washington [45]. Furthermore, he warned that clashes between the

SDF and FSA allowed ISIS to find new safe havens and prepare for future attacks.

In response, Turkish Minister for European Union Affairs Ö. Çelik declared that no one has the right to tell his country which terrorist organization to fight and which one to ignore [32].

Meanwhile, during new attacks, FSA units captured the remaining SDF positions north of the Sajur River [64] and, after crossing it, took several more settlements. As a result, more than twenty villages in the Jarabulus area came under FSA control.

On August 30, J. Thomas, a representative of U.S. Central Command in the region, reported that the SDF and Turkey had agreed to cease hostilities. That same day, the Jarabulus Military Council stated that, with U.S. mediation, they had also reached a temporary ceasefire agreement with Ankara [58]. The U.S. welcomed this pause in fighting. U.S. Army General J. Votel announced that Kurdish forces had moved east of the Euphrates in accordance with their obligations. However, according to Syrian opposition reports, the ceasefire agreement did not take effect, although there was a temporary lull as the parties regrouped their forces for new engagements. By the end of the day, the Turkish military reported that one of its tanks near the Sajur River had been hit by a missile fired by a missile fired by terrorists whose identity remained unknown [56].

On August 31, the Chief of the General Staff of the Turkish Armed Forces, Army General H. Akar, rejected the ceasefire announcement made by the United States, stating that Ankara would accept no compromises regarding those it considers terrorists. In addition, Prime Minister B. Yıldırım confirmed that the operation would continue until all terrorists and separatists were eliminated and the threats to Turkey's borders and citizens were completely removed [49].

Meanwhile, ISIS militants launched a counter-offensive southwest of Jarabulus, capturing four previously liberated villages: al-Muhsinli, al-Bulduq, Arab Hassan Saghir, and Kiliyeh [24].

In early September 2016, Turkish explosive ordnance disposal specialists continued to clear mines and improvised explosive devices from territories retaken from ISIS. At the same time, Turkish authorities provided humanitarian aid

to local Arab and Turkmen tribes; however, the Kurdish civilian population, seeing no difference between the FSA and ISIS, fled the towns and villages entered by the Turks and their Syrian group allies [39].

The spokesperson for the ruling Justice and Development Party, Y. Aktay, speaking on behalf of the government, told reporters that Ankara regards all Western volunteers fighting within the ranks of Kurdish units as terrorists, regardless of their nationality, and stated they would be neutralized at any given opportunity [60, p. 9].

On September 2, the Turkish military published the weekly results of the military operation in neighboring Syria. Turkey and the FSA had conducted approximately 1,200 strikes against 271 targets of ISIS and Kurdish separatists, whereas the U.S.-led coalition struck only a few targets in the combat zone [54]. On the same day, the leader of the Liberation Brigade, a part of the Syrian Democratic Forces, A.K. al-Obedi, defected to the Turkish armed forces. He was accompanied by approximately 50 fighters [51], as well as significant financial resources and military intelligence, specifically regarding the leading political and military role of the Kurds within the SDF.

On September 3, Turkey launched the second phase of Operation Euphrates Shield in the vicinity of al-Rai in the Aleppo Governorate, an area that had previously been the site of prolonged engagements between the FSA and ISIS. Turkish forces entered Syrian territory from the adjacent Kilis Province, which had frequently come under ISIS shelling. The reinforcement included 3,000 soldiers, 5 armored personnel carriers, 20 Leopard tanks, and around twenty trucks, with air support [33]. Simultaneously, the Hamza Division, a Turkish ally commanded by S. Balud, reported the capture of several villages, Kino, Lilawa, Najmat, and Fursan, located south of Arab Ezza in the Aleppo Province. During this period, the U.S.-led coalition utilized HIMARS systems to inflict significant damage on ISIS military objectives within the combat zone.

By the following day, Turkish forces advancing toward each other from Jarabulus and al-Rai linked up, securing all settlements along the Turkish border. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights confirmed that ISIS terrorists no longer controlled the Turkish-Syrian border. On

September 5, FSA forces, with Turkish assistance, occupied nine additional villages [31].

On September 7, Turkish Deputy Prime Minister N. Canikli informed the press that, despite U.S. assurances, Kurdish military units had not fully withdrawn to the eastern bank of the Euphrates River. That same day, at the initiative of the Turkish authorities, approximately 300 Syrian refugees returned to Jarabulus and the surrounding settlements.

Prior to the commencement of a new offensive, Turkish combat aircraft struck four terrorist targets in northern Syria. On the same day, Turkish Foreign Minister M. Çavuşoğlu urged the United States to declare a no-fly zone over northern Syria [10], arguing it would facilitate the return of refugees and allow local forces to undergo combat training for the fight against ISIS. Washington, however, rejected the proposal once again, maintaining that it would not resolve the issues on the ground and would ultimately benefit militants controlling northern Syria.

On September 9, Turkish artillery struck 15 ISIS targets in the locality of Kafr Ghan, whose positions had been used to shell settlements in the Kilis Province. A representative of the General Staff of the Turkish Armed Forces also reported an aerial operation in the areas south of Wuquf, Tal Ali, and Tell al-Hawa, resulting in the destruction of enemy command posts. Furthermore, the Turkish military released a casualty report: after a week of fighting, Turkey had lost three soldiers killed and several severely wounded [1]. ISIS manpower losses for September 9 and 10 amounted to at least 20 militants, and three buildings in Tell al-Hawa used by field commanders as control centers were destroyed.

During the September battles of 2016, a scandal erupted between Turkey and the United States. The controversy arose because the Turkish military had integrated militants from the Ahrar al-Sharqiya Brigade into the FSA; these fighters were previously known as an-Nusra [44, p. 8] and had fought in alliance with ISIS against coalition forces. Under pressure from its NATO ally, the United States, Ankara had no choice but to withdraw this brigade from participation in Operation Euphrates Shield. Tensions between pro-Turkish rebel groups persisted throughout the second half of September 2016, as some groups

openly sympathized with ISIS and were willing to provide assistance if necessary. Consequently, one such group, the Mountain Hawks Brigade, was removed from the Jarabulus front and redeployed to less critical sectors in the Hama and Latakia provinces.

In mid-September 2016, the third phase of Operation Euphrates Shield commenced with the offensive against the city of al-Bab. In late September, FSA units liberated at least 20 villages; however, due to frequent militant counter-attacks, these settlements often changed hands, and casualties among pro-Turkish detachments were heavy. As a result, the advance on al-Bab was temporarily halted.

On October 1, 2016, the Grand National Assembly of Turkey extended for another year the mandate that authorized the use of the military abroad and granted the coalition the right to utilize Turkish airfields and infrastructure against terrorists.

After a week-long lull, hostilities resumed with the offensive of Turkish troops and the FSA against the salient centered around the town of Dabiq, which held symbolic importance for ISIS. Within a few days, the villages of Tallat al-Baydah, Turkman Bareh, and Hurdanah were liberated.

On October 5, FSA units captured several more villages and entered the small but strategically significant town of Akhtarin, severing the supply route between al-Bab and Dabiq [64]. Subsequently, the territory between Akhtarin, Mare, and Kafr Ghan was cleared. On October 16, FSA forces captured Dabiq, as well as the town of Sawran and several surrounding villages.

During this time, ISIS militants were hastily reinforcing al-Bab. Strategically, the city was nearly surrounded, yet the encircling forces were hostile to each other. Syrian government troops were the closest to the city at 10 km to the south, yet their main forces were preoccupied with the siege of Aleppo. From the north, the FSA, supported by Turkey, prepared an advance. Meanwhile, the SDF still had hope of uniting Rojava cantons by advancing on al-Bab from Afrin and Manbij areas simultaneously.

As a result, the second half of October witnessed a unique three-way battle in world history near the city of al-Bab, involving the

Turkish army and its FSA satellites, Kurdish insurgents, and militants of the ISIS terrorist organization. These opposing forces spent several weeks engaged in mutual attrition. Approximately three thousand people were killed in this battle, including at least 400 civilians [60, p. 7].

On October 18, the Northern Thunder Brigade, part of the Hamza Division led by S. Balud, issued an ultimatum to the “PKK” and the “Army of Revolutionaries” within the SDF, demanding they vacate the Tell Rifaat area within 48 hours [8] or face an attack. The following day, before the ultimatum expired, Syrian rebels recaptured villages from ISIS that had separated them from the SDF and, with Turkish air support, began advancing on the defensive line held by Kurdish units in the Tell Rifaat and Shahba regions.

During the clashes between the SDF and the FSA, both sides suffered significant losses without achieving substantial results. On October 20, the Turkish military reported the elimination of approximately 200 Kurdish YPG fighters. According to SDF spokesperson T. Silo, only 11 YPG fighters were killed in the battles, though there were numerous civilian casualties [60, pp. 9-10]. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights reported the deaths of 20 Kurdish fighters in the conflict with the Syrian rebels.

On October 22, 2016, FSA forces managed to surround the small town of Shaykh Issa, east of Tell Rifaat, while Turkish aircraft and artillery bombarded Kurdish positions. However, SDF units successfully repelled all FSA attacks over the following days. The pro-Turkish units were so demoralized that by late October they not only ceded several villages to the SDF but also began surrendering territory to Islamic State militants; this led the Kurdish side to allege coordination between pro-Turkish forces and ISIS [28].

Meanwhile, the SDF, in conjunction with Syrian government troops, launched an offensive on al-Bab from the west, starting October 28, from the area north of Aleppo. An advance toward al-Bab also commenced from Manbij.

Assessing the situation, the command of Operation Euphrates Shield resumed the offensive on al-Bab on November 6. Following heavy fighting on November 14, Syrian rebels entered the northern outskirts of the city but were unable to establish a foothold. However, they managed

to bypass the city from the west, thereby blocking the SDF advance.

On November 24, a strike on Turkish forces resulted in three Turkish soldiers killed and ten wounded [59]. The Turkish military stated that the attack was carried out by the Syrian Air Force. Turkish Prime Minister B. Yıldırım issued a stern statement addressed to the Syrian leadership, indicating that Damascus's actions would not go unpunished [5]. Syrian officials denied that their air force had bombed Turkish positions, while the Islamic State announced that the strike was carried out by its suicide bomber.

Throughout December 2016, positional battles for the city of al-Bab and its surrounding territories continued between ISIS and pro-Turkish forces. By the end of the year, the Turkish army had failed to capture the city, having sustained serious losses in personnel and equipment, and needed rest. Nevertheless, FSA detachments managed to bypass the city from both sides, severing the highway leading to Manbij. Although the SDF continued to advance toward al-Bab from both the west and the east, where the town of Arima was liberated from ISIS militants, the unification of Rojava was now becoming problematic.

On December 29, a ceasefire agreement between the Syrian government and the armed opposition, brokered by Russia in coordination with Turkey, was signed. Syrian Kurdish units were not included in the list of participants in the truce [35]. On January 2, 2017, Ankara reported that Russian aircraft were conducting strikes on ISIS positions in the al-Bab area. According to The New York Times, the agreement between Turkey and Russia for joint action against the Islamic State was a result of the lack of air support from the United States. The American side explained this by stating that Turkey had launched the offensive on al-Bab without coordination with its allies [21].

Heavy fighting for al-Bab continued throughout January. In the second half of the month, the Syrian government army launched an offensive on al-Bab from the southwest. Turkish and Russian aircraft, as well as the coalition air force, which had finally joined them, struck ISIS positions simultaneously. On February 9, Russian aircraft targeted ISIS positions but accidentally struck Turkish forces, killing three soldiers and

wounding eleven others [37]. Russian authorities issued a formal apology to Turkey, and the incident was considered resolved.

By this time, the Syrian government army was already within three kilometers south of al-Bab. Turkey announced that it had not agreed to hand over the city to the Assad regime, after which Turkish troops and their allies launched a decisive assault. Following heavy fighting on February 12, they managed to reach the city center [18] and capture a key objective, the ISIS hospital. According to the Turkish military, the full liberation of al-Bab was only a matter of time. Over the course of the week, Turkish sources repeatedly reported military successes in liberating the city, though reports from independent sources remained contradictory.

Meanwhile, Turkish President R. Erdoğan announced that the next objectives of Operation Euphrates Shield would be Manbij and Raqqa [16]. These plans were tied to hopes that the U.S. administration's policy would change following the inauguration of President D. Trump. Turkey continued to demand the removal of the YPG from the west bank of the Euphrates and proposed a joint offensive on Raqqa involving the FSA and the SDF, provided the latter consisted solely of Arab formations.

On February 20, during urban combat in al-Bab, Syrian rebels captured an ISIS field commander, A.I. al-Fransi [7], who was implicated in terrorist attacks across Europe. A powerful new assault followed on February 23, after which the city was finally fully secured. On the same day, the towns of Bizaah and Qabasin were also liberated.

The capture of al-Bab came at a high cost for the Turkish military; according to official data, at least 60 personnel were killed, several times more than in all previous phases of Operation Euphrates Shield combined, and over 10 tanks were lost, while the original force grouping had to be tripled during the course of the siege. Casualties among FSA fighters numbered in the hundreds.

On February 25, FSA forces reached the demarcation line south of al-Bab, which was already occupied by government troops advancing rapidly to the east. On February 27, the Syrian army linked up with SDF positions east of al-Bab, effectively blocking pro-Turkish forces from further advancement deeper into Syrian territory.

Despite Turkey's demands and its own assurances, the United States not only failed to withdraw Kurdish units from Manbij but also continued to train and equip them with hardware [62]. On March 1, in accordance with the operation's further objectives, FSA units began advancing from al-Bab toward Manbij; supported by Turkish artillery, they engaged in clashes with the SDF over villages in the Arima district, ending without result. On March 2, Turkish President R. Erdoğan reaffirmed: "Turkey's new target in Syria is Manbij. Manbij is a city which belongs to Arabs" [29].

However, on the same day, the Manbij Military Council announced that, through Russian mediation, an agreement had been reached to transfer settlements west of Manbij to Syrian government troops, who would serve as a buffer between Kurdish and pro-Turkish forces. The following day, General S.F. Rudskoy of the Russian General Staff and U.S. Secretary of Defense General J.N. Mattis confirmed the transfer of territory under Syrian army control [65]. Starting March 4, U.S. operational forces were deployed in Manbij, and a Russian humanitarian convoy entered the city [38]. By March 6, the Syrian government army began occupying positions west of Manbij, replacing SDF units along the line of contact [41]. Henceforth, both the SDF and Turkish forces with their Syrian allies complained of enemy shelling, yet no open hostilities occurred in the Manbij area.

On March 7, 2017, a meeting was held between Pentagon representative J. Dunford, Russian Chief of General Staff V.V. Gerasimov, and Turkish Chief of General Staff H. Akar to resolve the situation around Manbij [63]. On March 16, 2017, Turkish Defense Minister F. Işık stated that seeking a diplomatic solution to the Manbij problem involving the U.S. and Russia was a necessity, and a military approach would only be considered if diplomacy reached an impasse [53].

On March 29, Turkish Prime Minister B. Yıldırım announced the successful conclusion of Operation Euphrates Shield. He added: "If something threatening our security happens in the future... then this will be a new operation" [4].

Results. According to official data, during the operation, the Turkish army liberated at least 2,000 square kilometers of territory and

eliminated over 3,000 ISIS and YPG militants. Combat losses for the Turkish army amounted to 71 killed, while the allied Free Syrian Army suffered at least 500 fatalities, according to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights [26].

In terms of the objectives stated at the onset of the operation, it was a success for Turkey: Syrian border regions were cleared of ISIS, and the possibility of creating a unified Kurdish autonomy stretching from Iraq to the Mediterranean Sea was practically eliminated. Furthermore, a safe zone was established for Syrian allies and for the return of some refugees, who represent a factor of social instability within Turkey. Turkey also positioned itself as a protector of Sunni Arabs and Turkmen.

However, the underlying problems that prompted the operation were not fully resolved. The terrorist threat was not completely eradicated. The threat of Kurdish separatism did not diminish, as the United States not only continued to support the YPG but also demonstrated a readiness to protect them regardless of the interests of its NATO ally. On the other hand, growing alienation from the U.S. created an opportunity for Turkey to act in its own interests, deciding the fate of its neighbor on equal terms with key players – the U.S., Russia, and Iran – and seeking advantages through various diplomatic configurations. Overall, the results of the operation for Turkey were ambiguous, creating the prerequisites for similar operations in the future.

The Kurdish Democratic Union Party and its armed units once again proved their combat effectiveness. The YPG retained Manbij and became the primary force of the coalition in the future Raqqa operation, from which Turkey's participation was now excluded, providing an opportunity to increase their influence in eastern Syria. However, their main political goal, a unified Syrian Kurdistan, became unattainable for the foreseeable future.

The primary losing party as a result of Operation Euphrates Shield was the United States, which squandered its political capital in an attempt to oppose Turkey, its traditional regional ally. The main winning party was Russia, which no longer faced a unified Western coalition but rather separate powers with distinct interests that could be negotiated with individually.

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Information About the Author

Teub A. Akhmedov, Candidate of Sciences (History), Associate Professor, Head of the Department of Economics, Social and Humanitarian and General Educational Sciences, Technical Institute – branch of the North-Eastern Federal University named after M.K. Ammosov, Juzhno-Jakutskaja St, 25, 678960 Neryungri, Russian Federation, RSevoi@yandex.ru, <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8651-9123>

Информация об авторе

Теуб Ахмедович Ахмедов, кандидат исторических наук, доцент, заведующий кафедрой экономических, гуманитарных и общеобразовательных дисциплин, Технический институт – филиал Северо-Восточного федерального университета им. М.К. Аммосова, ул. Южно-Якутская, 25, 678960 г. Нерюнгри, Российская Федерация, RSevoi@yandex.ru, <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8651-9123>