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## Turkey's Operation Euphrates Shield: An Exemplar of Joint Combined Arms Maneuver

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#### Introduction

On 24 August 2016, Turkey invaded Islamic State-controlled northern Syria, deploying land, air, and special operations forces alongside Free Syrian Army (FSA) elements across the Turkish-Syria border in a broad, unilateral offensive operation against the Islamic State and Kurdish rebel groups. Named Operation Euphrates Shield (OES), this ongoing Turkish military operation demonstrates the continued relevance of land power for achieving strategic objectives. In just over seven weeks of combat operations, Turkey has seized control of a 1,100 square kilometer area and achieved numerous strategic ends. OES is occurring in the type of environment envisioned by the U.S. Army Operating Concept (AOC), provides contemporary examples of multi-domain battle and joint combined arms maneuver concepts, and offers tactical and operational lessons-learned for consideration by the land forces of NATO Allies and partners.

#### The OES Operational Environment

Turkey is conducting OES in an operational environment that largely adheres to that described for the 2020-2040 timeframe by the AOC. The AOC asserted at its publication in 2014 that the future operational environment likely would include five characteristics with significant impact on land operations: increased velocity and momentum of human interaction and events; potential for overmatch; proliferation of weapons of mass destruction; spread of advanced cyberspace and counter-space operations; and demographics and operations among populations.[1] The AOC, as a future concept, aimed to describe operations in the environment of the 2020-2040 timeframe. Regardless, in 2016, many of the "complex world"[2] characteristics envisioned by the AOC have already obtained and are evident in OES. In Turkish operations in northern Syria, the "compression of events in time"[3] required Turkey to deploy sufficiently scaled forces capable of rapidly responding to seize the initiative, control the narrative, and consolidate order, as envisioned by the AOC.[4] Overmatch—the application of capabilities or tactics that render an adversary unable to respond effectively[5]—in the OES environment is demonstrated by Turkish use of large armor formations against a less capable adversary. The AOC envisioned future adversaries operating among the people in urban areas and other complex terrain, with armed groups exploiting popular disaffection and weak governance[6] and assessed that joint operations would require land forces capable of operating in such terrain.[7] The AOC also described what it called "harbingers of future conflict,"[8] noting that current challenges, including the Islamic State, would exist into the future. [9] Specifically, the AOC asserted that "ISIL demonstrates the need for land forces to defeat determined

enemies that operate among and control civilian populations.”<sup>[10]</sup> Four years before the AOC’s 2020-2040 window, OES provides evidence for the accuracy of the AOC’s predictions.

The AOC’s title is “Win in a Complex World,” and it defines complex as “an environment that is not only unknown, but unknowable and constantly changing.”<sup>[11]</sup> This definition reflects the fact that the AOC was published as a concept for the future, acknowledging that the future is unknown and unknowable. While OES is occurring in a known and knowable environment, it provides an example of the complexity and constantly changing nature of the type of operational environment the AOC describes. Briefly consider the situation in which OES is being conducted: in northern Syria, multiple countries with multiple objectives conducting air strikes and other military operations, often without close coordination; a surfeit of adversaries (ISIL, the al-Nusra Front, other rebel groups, Russia, Iran, the Syrian regime, Syrian Kurdish groups); confusing alliances (for example the U.S. supporting Syrian Kurdish groups who Turkey, a formal U.S. ally, considers to be part of the PKK, which the U.S. declares to be a terrorist organization); the refugee crisis; the breakdown of post-World War I national boundaries; a post-coup attempt environment in Turkey. This is the type of complex world the AOC envisioned.

### **Effective Use of Military Power, with a Focus on Land Power, to Achieve Strategic Objectives**

An ends-ways-means analysis of Turkish strategy suggests that OES exists as a clear example of the effective use of land power to achieve limited, well-defined strategic objectives. In an era where land power has rarely been used effectively to accomplish national-level strategic objectives (with, perhaps, French operations in Mali and Russian operations in Ukraine offering examples of comparatively successful operations in the last half-decade), Turkey has demonstrated a national strategic mindset capable of determining limited strategic ends, employing appropriate methods, and leveraging the resources required for success.

#### ***Ends***

In OES, Turkish strategic ends include, but perhaps are not limited to: 1) the territorial integrity and sovereignty of the Republic of Turkey; 2) the safety and security of the Turkish citizenry; 3) public support for the Turkish Armed Forces; and 4) international dialogue and media coverage favorable to Turkey.

Turkey’s primary national strategic objective remains securing the territorial integrity and sovereignty of the Republic of Turkey. Turkey’s “Sèvres Syndrome,” born out of the end of the First World War and the envisioned dismemberment of the Ottoman Empire by the Allies in the Treaty of Sèvres, creates a special sense of paranoia in Turkey regarding threats to its territorial integrity, especially from foreign interest and/or involvement in Turkey.<sup>[12]</sup> Since the early 1980s, the Kurdistan Worker’s Party (PKK), whose initial objective was the establishment of a Kurdish state from the territory of southeast Turkey, has presented the greatest consistent threat to Turkish territory and sovereignty. Although the PKK now aims for greater autonomy versus a state of its own, renewed intense fighting since the summer of 2015 in southeast Turkey has peaked Turkish fear of PKK intentions. Turkey perceives the Syrian Kurdish groups (the PYD and YPG) as part of the PKK, regardless of the opposing U.S. view on the matter (the *New York Times* calls the U.S. view “nonsensical,” and demonstrates evident direct links between the PKK and PYD/YPG).<sup>[13]</sup> Director of National Intelligence James R. Clapper’s statement of 9 February 2016 on the *Worldwide Threat Assessment* outlines this Turkish view: “Turkey is extremely concerned about the increasing influence of the PYD and the YPG along its borders, seeing them as a threat to its territorial security and its efforts to control Kurdish separatism within its borders.”<sup>[14]</sup> With assistance from the U.S., the PYD and YPG made substantial gains against ISIL in northern Syria, both east and west of the Euphrates River, in the summer of 2016. As Turkish President Erdoğan explained to President Obama in

their bilateral meeting at the G-20 Summit on 4 September 2016, Turkey will never allow the creation of a Kurdish “corridor of terrorism”<sup>[15]</sup> on its southern border. The gains made by these Syrian Kurds along the southern Turkish border crossed one of Turkey’s redlines.<sup>[16]</sup> It is no coincidence that OES was initiated following these substantial PYD and YPG gains, nor is the name “Operation Euphrates Shield” coincidental—OES is and was primarily aimed at countering Kurdish gains west of the Euphrates River, with counter-ISIL operations being a secondary priority. And OES has been successful: the PYD and YPG currently only control limited territory west of the Euphrates River. As such, OES achieved this strategic objective by preventing the establishment of a “terror corridor” on Turkey’s southern border.

The second Turkish strategic objective that OES achieves is contributing to the safety and security of the Turkish citizenry, which in July 2015 started suffering immensely from Islamic State attacks in Turkey, with hundreds killed and many more wounded in a series of horrific suicide bombings. English-language media has covered the more devastating of these attacks (20 July 2015 in Suruç, 10 October 2015 in Ankara, 12 January 2016 in Istanbul, 19 March 2016 in Istanbul, and 29 June 2016 in Istanbul, for example) but has given much less attention to seemingly routine ISIL attacks across Turkey, especially in the southeast.<sup>[17]</sup> By clearing the Islamic State from the area immediately to the south of its border with Syria, Turkey has substantially limited ISIL’s ability to infiltrate across the Turkish border to conduct attacks, although ISIL continues to target K?l’s, a Turkish city border city, with rockets.<sup>[18]</sup> Suggesting early OES success, the last reported ISIL attack inside of Turkey occurred on 22 August,<sup>[19]</sup> two days before OES began.

OES also provides the opportunity for the Turkish Armed Forces to bolster its public image. Historically a highly respected institution in Turkish society, the Turkish military lost an enormous amount of prestige following the failed coup attempt on 15 July 2016, and its aftermath. The coup attempt was led by a faction of senior officers (but not the Chief of Defense or Service Chiefs) allegedly associated with a shadowy religious group led by a cleric, Fethullah Gülen, who is on self-imposed exile in Pennsylvania and awaiting the U.S. response to Turkey’s request for his extradition. Turkey considers Gülen to be the lead coup-plotter and chief terrorist in what it has dubbed the “Fethullah Follower’s Terrorist Organization.” Since 15 July 2016, the Turkish Government has aggressively removed, dismissed, detained, and/or arrested—some say purged—more than 150 generals and admirals and thousands of lower ranking military members suspected of involvement in the coup attempt or links to Gülen. Many analysts<sup>[20]</sup> have argued that in the post-coup attempt and on-going purge environment, the Turkish military will lack the capability and capacity—and leadership—necessary to respond to the plethora of security challenges Turkey faces. OES serves as a counter-argument to these perspectives; the deluge of Turkish media reporting on the success of OES, with photos and videos of Turkish tank formations maneuvering in Syria and daily updates from senior civilian and military leaders, demonstrates that the Turkish military remains a competent and capable force. This very much serves to help the Turkish military regain some of the prestige it lost in the failed coup attempt.

Finally, OES has provided Turkey the opportunity to change national and international dialogue and media coverage regarding Turkish counter-ISIL activities. Prior to OES, Turkey’s international partners—including the U.S.—publically questioned the seeming lack of effort Turkey devoted to fighting the Islamic State,<sup>[21]</sup> with national and international media coverage largely focusing on the same theme. With OES, Turkey became the only Coalition member conducting counter-ISIL operations with conventional combined arms forces led by tanks and other armored vehicles and the only Coalition member to seize and hold large swaths of territory in Syria previously held by the Islamic State. Since 24 August 2016, OES has dominated media coverage of Turkish affairs, perhaps even displacing critical media stories about Turkey’s on-going counter-coup operations. A substantial difference exists between the pre-OES narrative of allegations of Turkish support to ISIL or Turkey not fully committing to counter-

ISIL operations and the post-OES focus on Turkey fighting what by many accounts appears to be a conventional land war against the Islamic State. Following the coup attempt, NATO partners—including the U.S.—publically questioned Turkey’s NATO membership.[22] Compare these negative perspectives to the NATO Secretary General’s statement during his visit to Ankara on 9 September 2016 that “Turkey is a strong and valued member of our Alliance.”[23] The dialogue has changed, to Turkey’s advantage. OES may not be the causative factor in this change of dialogue, but this change does correlate to the start of OES.

### **Ways**

Turkish ways (in strategy, the methods or techniques used to accomplish the ends) are based on joint combined arms maneuver in multi-domain battle. The U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command explains that:

*“Multi-Domain Battle: Combined Arms for the 21st Century calls for ready ground combat forces capable of outmaneuvering adversaries physically and cognitively through extension of combined arms across all domains. Through credible forward presence and resilient battle formations, future ground forces integrate and synchronize joint, inter-organizational, and multinational capabilities to create temporary windows of superiority across multiple domains and throughout the depth of the battlefield to seize, retain, and exploit the initiative and achieve military objectives.”[24]*

General David Perkins, Commander of the U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command, explained multi-domain battle as operating across all domains (land, air, sea, cyber, and space) simultaneously to present multiple dilemmas for the enemy[25] in pursuit of better enabling the services to fight together effectively against a common, complex adversary.[26] As exemplified in the 4 October 2016 Multi-Domain Battle panel at the annual Association of the United States Army conference in Washington,[27] the concept of multi-domain battle is an effort to overcome the limitations of previous concepts (AirLand Battle and AirSea Battle, primarily) through the conduct of military operations across the five domains. While the U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command considers multi-domain battle to be a future concept, the AUSU panel on the topic suggests that senior Joint Force leaders view the concept as valid for the here and now. On this AUSA panel, Chief of Staff of the Air Force General David Goldfein explained, and Commandant of the Marine Corps General Robert Neller echoed, that “we already know how to do”[28] multi-domain battle, because in many locations around the globe, the U.S. is already conducting fully synchronized and integrated military operations with all elements of combat power in all domains. As OES demonstrates, Turkey also already knows how to do multi-domain battle.

In OES, open-source reporting shows that Turkey is extremely active in the air (including now-routine bombing runs against Islamic State targets) and on land (conventional and special operations forces of the Turkish Land Forces, in partnership with the FSA) in combating the Islamic State in Syria. With Anonymous conducting cyber-attacks against Turkey for alleged support to ISIL,[29] Syrian Electronic Army attacks against Turkish government and military networks,[30] and the creation of a Turkish Cyber Command,[31] it is evident that Turkey has been defensively active in the cyber domain, and likely may be conducting offensive cyber operations as part of OES. In space, the Turkish Air Force has responsibility for Turkey’s military space program, including advanced reconnaissance satellites;[32] as an unprecedented, major national operation, OES is highly likely to be supported by Turkish operations in space. At the very minimum, Turkey is conducting operations in two domains (land and air) in OES, and

is very likely to be active in four (land, air, cyber, and space). These operations present multiple dilemmas to the Islamic State: the shock and awe of armor-led combined arms maneuver providing conventional tactical overmatch; F-16 and F-4 strikes, likely based on target acquisition by Turkish or Coalition Special Operations Forces or Turkish reconnaissance satellites; and potential offensive cyber operations, for example. This analysis looks only at OES. Considering OES as a part of broader counter-ISIL efforts by all Coalition partners, which are being conducted by assets in all five domains, demonstrates the presentation of multiple dilemmas to the enemy that General Perkins described.

OES provides an operational example of several of the tenets and core competencies of land force operations that the AOC asserted would be utilized by force commanders to achieve operational overmatch and seize, retain, and exploit the initiative.[33] Tenets that OES demonstrates include: initiative, simultaneity, endurance, lethality, and mobility. Core competencies that OES demonstrates include: project national power, combined arms maneuver, wide area security, and special operations. Regarding tenets, briefly, in OES Turkey has: dictated the terms of the operation; conducted mutually supporting tasks across multiple domains and locations; operated successfully in the austere environment of territory previously held by the Islamic State; leveraged the combat power essential to quickly winning tactical victories; and maneuvered to gain a position of relative advantage, all of which adhere to AOC definitions of initiative, simultaneity, endurance, lethality, and mobility,[34] respectively. Regarding core competencies, in OES: the Turkish Land Forces are the lead integrator of Turkish national power and the only force capable of conducting such a sustained, campaign-quality land operation; Turkey is conducting combined arms maneuver in multiple domains; protecting the Syrian villages seized, populations freed, and key infrastructure liberated from ISIL; and leveraging special operations to assist with coordination with international partners and the FSA, all of which adhere to AOC core competencies.[35]

The AOC defines joint combined arms maneuver as “the synchronized application of capabilities critical to accomplish the mission”[36] in operations conducted by combined arms teams integrated with other services and mission partners.[37] Most evidently, OES demonstrates Turkey’s mastery of joint combined arms maneuver: Turkish Land Forces, in the form of Turkish armor and mechanized infantry, with indirect fire support from Turkish artillery (the most prestigious branch of the Turkish Land Forces, truly the “king of battle” in Turkey), conducting offensive operations, supported from the start by FSA elements and as of late by small numbers of U.S. Special Operations Forces and High Mobility Artillery Rocket System (HIMARS),[38] with Turkish F-16s and F-4s providing close air support.

### ***Means***

Turkish means—the resources used in the ways to achieve the ends—for OES include the soldiers and airmen of the Turkish Land Forces, Turkish Air Forces, and Turkish Special Operations Forces, their equipment (primarily tanks, mechanized infantry, artillery, F-16s, and F-4s), and elements of the FSA, plus late-arriving but continuing support of various types (close air support and diplomatic support, for example) from the U.S. and other Coalition Allies and partners.

Seven weeks after initiating OES, Turkey has accomplished at least these four well-defined strategic objectives. In an era where military power is utilized to pursue unknown and undefined or poorly defined and constantly shifting strategic objectives,[39] Turkey has demonstrated a rare ability to accomplish numerous strategic objectives through ways and means associated with joint combined arms maneuver in multi-domain battle.

### **Lessons Learned**

The initial weeks of OES offer several lessons learned for the conduct of multi-domain battle and joint combined arms maneuver. Three areas stand out: 1) tactical employment of tanks; 2) use of indigenous

rebel groups; and 3) the advantages of employing asymmetric overmatch capabilities.

### ***Tactical Employment of Tanks***

Turkey's OES provides a compelling example of how armor can spearhead strategic land operations. At the same time, the number of tanks Turkey has lost to anti-tank guided missiles (ATGM) reinforces the need for mastery of armor small unit tactics and the imperative to upgrade armor platforms as threats evolve.

Since the beginning of OES on 24 August 2016, Turkey has lost at least nine tanks to enemy ATGMs, either to Russian-made AT-17 Kornets used by ISIL or to U.S.-made TOWs used by Kurdish rebels.[40] ATGMs remain an effective weapon against tanks, especially if the targeted tanks are older models with insufficient applique armor and/or if they lack organic or add-on explosive reactive armor. In OES, Turkey is mostly using M60A3s, which unfortunately exemplify both of these weaknesses. While Turkey fields a range of tanks, including various versions of the M48, M60, Leopard 1, and Leopard 2, the M60A3—which is protected by generations-old armor—has been Turkey's tank of choice so far in OES.

It is notable that Turkey, in the pre-OES era, appears to have already taken account of the lessons learned driving the need to upgrade armor, which is largely derived from Israeli and U.S. experience in the Middle East in the last fifteen years. In 2018, Turkey will begin serial production of its new main battle tank, the Altay, which has been in development for several years and sports composite armor and a range of top line armaments and technologies.[41] However, in the current fight, Turkey has not availed itself of the opportunity to improve protection for its existing tanks. As demonstrated by U.S. forces in Iraq, reactive armor for tanks and other armored vehicles[42] can help mitigate the risk from ATGMs, RPGs, and IEDs. As demonstrated by the loss of Turkish M-60A3s in Syria, tanks—especially old ones without armor upgrades—are extremely vulnerable to ATGMs.[43]

On the other hand, Turkey's use of M60-variant tanks in OES may suggest that advanced, modern equipment is not necessary in order to achieve strategic objectives. Development of the M60 began in 1957, with production commencing in 1960:[44] In OES, Turkey is achieving strategic objectives with a platform developed fifty-nine years ago. These Turkish M60s are the M60A3 variant, which were initially fielded in 1978.[45] While they have likely been upgraded since then, the fact remains that Turkey is relying heavily on six-decades-old technology to achieve strategic objectives in OES in 2016. This may reflect a Rumsfeldian “you go to war with the Army you have, not the army you might want” [46] paradigm, or it may have broader implications for the need for the development and acquisition of future capabilities, such as the “Big 6 +1” capabilities concept proposed by U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command.[47] Finally, Turkish use of its M60A3s in OES, versus the employment of its newer, more capable, better protected, and more expensive Leopard 2s, may simply indicate a cost-benefit analysis where risking cheaper M60A3s to ATGMs emerged as a more desirable alternative.

Turkish armor vulnerability to ATGMs in northern Syria is compounded by the apparent use of poor small unit tactics. As Sebastian Roblin at *War is Boring* explains,[48] and as photos and videos posted online clearly show, most of the tanks Turkey has lost in OES have been in fully exposed positions when struck by ATGMs. This is in contrast to positions of defilade, which provide cover and concealment and are sought instinctively by well-trained tank crews. This apparent lack of tactical proficiency is perhaps derived from other recent Turkish armor operations, which have focused almost exclusively on battling PKK terrorists, which until recently lacked ATGMs, in the cities of southeast Turkey and mountains of northern Iraq. Mountain terrain and urban environments in southeast Turkey vary distinctively from that of the open plains, rolling hills, and small villages of northern Syria; Turkish armor forces may not be well-prepared to make the necessary terrain-based tactical adjustments. At the same time, in fighting in its

southeast, Turkey routinely deployed armor and dismounted infantry together, with infantry forces clearing potential anti-tank teams and providing the tactical space for armor to operate. In Syria, however, the Turkish Government has ruled out the use of dismounted infantry,[49] thus potentially increasing the risk to its tanks from ATGMs.

### ***The Free Syrian Army***

The Turkish Government's reluctance to deploy dismounted infantry may be somewhat mitigated by the partnership between Turkish forces and company or battalion-sized dismounted infantry elements of the FSA fighting alongside Turkish formations. In contrast to the *modus operandi* of U.S. and other Coalition partners who have opted to embed small special operations teams with larger formations of the Iraqi Army or rebel groups hostile to ISIL (and/or the Syrian regime), Turkey has surrounded the FSA elements it is supporting with larger, conventional Turkish forces. The technique employed by the U.S. and other Coalition special operations forces has led to some success against the Islamic State over the last five years, although progress has been slow, choppy, and delayed. While Turkish special operations forces clearly continue to be involved in the overall efforts of OES, the level of support, coordination, and control of FSA elements offered by Turkish armor battalions and brigades is substantially different from how other countries have approached the issue. In OES, Turkey has demonstrated an alternative, successful method of partnering with indigenous rebel groups and opposition forces that has led to strategically decisive results. This may challenge the paradigm of conventional wisdom that small teams of special operations forces, supported by a range of reach-back combat multipliers including fires and intelligence and partnered with local militias or opposition groups, provide an adequate method for the conduct of operations like those in Iraq and Syria. While this combination of forces may be necessary, it may not be sufficient to accomplish desired strategic objectives.

“Consolidate gains” is a key concept of both multi-domain battle[50] and the AOC.[51] The AOC posits that land forces consolidate gains by supporting the efforts of multiple partners and by providing military support to non-military activities, such as governance, rule of law, and law enforcement, to ensure enduring favorable outcomes.[52] At the seven-week point in OES, assessing Turkey's gains consolidation presents challenges, mainly that at such an early stage in any operation, sufficient time has not passed to indicate how successfully Turkey has consolidate initial gains. However, several factors suggest Turkey has focused on consolidating gains. Firstly, Turkey Land Force units and their FSA counterparts remain engaged and present in Syria. Rather than attacking and defeating ISIL and/or Syrian Kurdish entities and then withdrawing back to Turkey, the Turkish military and FSA elements have seized territory previously held by ISIL and then remained present in the area to provide security. Additionally, Turkey has provided humanitarian aid[53] to the villages and cities liberated from ISIL, suggesting a holistic longer-term approach aimed at influencing the Syrian population and indicative of a “consolidate gains” mindset. Revisiting this topic in the weeks and months (years?) ahead will likely be helpful in assessing this AOC and multi-domain battle key concept vis-à-vis OES. In any future analysis, the role the FSA plays in consolidating gains is likely to be decisive.

### ***Use of Asymmetric Overmatch Capabilities***

General Douglas MacArthur famously is supposed to have warned that “anyone who commits the American Army in the Asian mainland should have his head examined,”[54] although the more popular version may be “never get involved in a land war in Asia,” sage advice from Vizzini in *The Princess Bride*. Somewhat in contrast, T.R. Fehrenbach in *This Kind of War* argued that “you may fly over a land forever; you may bomb it, atomize it, and wipe it clean of life - but if you desire to defend it, protect it, and keep it for civilization, you must do this on the ground, the way the Roman Legions did - by putting your soldiers in the mud.” The U.S. Administration has consistently argued that the U.S. does not have

“boots on the ground”<sup>[55]</sup> in Syria and Iraq, despite the ever-growing presence of U.S. forces in both locations, but has somehow managed to simultaneously violate both Fehrenbach’s call for fighting a land war and the MacArthur/Vizzini axiom to avoid doing so in Asia. The experiences of continued military operations in Afghanistan and the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 clearly inform U.S. hesitance to once again deploy large land forces to Iraq (although with an invasion in 1990 and another in 2003, another invasion may be due, timing-wise, in 2016). Turkey’s OES, though, demonstrates the effectiveness of the use of asymmetric overmatch capability (in this case, joint combined arms maneuver led by Turkish armor) against an enemy lacking comparable capacity and capability. While other recent military operations—France in Mali, Coalition Operations in Iraq and Syria, Coalition operations in Afghanistan—offer comparable examples of NATO-members conducting joint combined arms maneuver in the last half-decade, the major difference with OES is Turkish use of large formations of main battle tanks.<sup>[56]</sup>

Simply stated, the U.S. possesses extensive, decisive ground combat capacity that it is not using against the Islamic State. Even with the U.S. Army’s regionally-aligned force concept, more than 99%<sup>[57]</sup> of the U.S. Army remains unengaged in counter-ISIL operations. Not a single U.S. Army combat brigade is fully deployed in counter-ISIL operations.<sup>[58]</sup> Given the quagmire that the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 became, and in the midst of another U.S. presidential election cycle, nary a serious political candidate, elected official, or military leader is likely to advocate for the deployment of conventional U.S. ground forces in Iraq and Syria to counter the Islamic State. However, attacking the Islamic State’s center of gravity—its self-declared caliphate<sup>[59]</sup>—with overwhelming joint combined arms maneuver led by armor, as Turkey has done with OES, might quickly topple the terrorist organization. Such an approach is full of potential unintended consequences—another quagmire in the Middle East; fulfilling the Islamic State’s desire for a decisive battle;<sup>[60]</sup> Syrian, Russian, and/or Iranian opposition; and dozens of other issues and problems. With OES, Turkey has risked these potential consequences, and for that deserves at least style points for using the means it has available to achieve its desired end states.

Air power aficionados, and those responsible for planning and conducting U.S. counter-ISIL operations in Syria, will likely assert that without the multi-year air campaign against the Islamic State, conditions would not have allowed Turkey to conduct a land operation. They may very well be correct. Unfortunately, this is an unprovable and untestable argument, as it is not possible to reset the clock, reverse the impact of air operations, and test Turkey’s capabilities. In thinking about this point of view, two important factors exist. First, despite the years-long Coalition air campaign against ISIL, ISIL maintained freedom of maneuver in and control of the 1,100 square kilometer area of northern Syria that Turkey has seized during OES. This suggests, as Fehrenbach would argue, that achieving such success may be dependent on the use of land forces. It very well may be possible that OES would have found the early success it has without the substantial, multi-year Coalition air campaign (this, too, is an unprovable and untestable argument, however). Second, and perhaps slightly in contrast to the first point above, this essay argues that Turkey’s success in OES derives from its use of joint combined arms maneuver in multi-domain battle, and fully acknowledges the substantial role played by the Turkish Air Force in supporting land force operations. Extending this appreciation for air power to the impact of pre-OES Coalition air operations on degrading ISIL capacity and capability logically supports the overall conceptualization of Turkey’s employment of joint combined arms maneuver. It is abundantly clear that the Coalition air campaign has inflicted heavy losses on ISIL, with the destruction of or damage to 164 tanks, 388 HMMWVs, 7,948 buildings, 8,638 fighting positions, and more than 14,000 other targets.<sup>[61]</sup> Another possible framing of this discussion could be that OES capitalized on the effects of the Coalition air campaign. As U.S. Air Force doctrine explains, “air power should be employed with appropriate consideration of land and maritime power...Much of what airpower can accomplish...is done to critically

affect events in the land and maritime domains—this is the heart of joint domain integration, a fundamental aspect of air power’s contribution.”[62] This framing of the integration of operations in the air and land domains is central to understanding OES as a Turkish example of joint combined arms maneuver.

Turkey’s OES provides insights into the U.S. Army’s new multi-domain battle concept in two ways discussed by panelists at the AUSA Multi-Domain Battle panel. Firstly, General Robert Brown, Commander of U.S. Army Pacific, argued that interoperability will play a decisive role in future battle, and that to be successful, the U.S. must “advance the...capabilities that Allies and Partners can employ in theater.”[63] While the U.S. is unable or unwilling to deploy large conventional combat arms formations against the Islamic State in Syria, Turkey clearly has demonstrated with OES the will, determination, capacity, and capability to do so. Considering OES as part of broader Coalition counter-ISIL efforts—and acknowledging direct U.S. military support for OES[64]—provides a useful example of how the U.S. can head General Brown’s advice. Secondly, OES exemplifies what General Neller described as a “mindset about defeating the cohesion of the adversary”[65] by targeting the enemy’s gaps and vulnerabilities. OES shows that Islamic State forces are vulnerable to, and have gaps in their capability to defend against, tank-led joint combined arms maneuver forces.

### **It Could End Badly**

On 1 May 2003, President George Bush infamously declared “mission accomplished”[66] for the U.S. invasion of Iraq that began forty-two days early on 20 March 2003. Turkey’s OES began on 24 August 2016; as of this writing, on 16 October 2016, OES is in its fifty-third day, about the same stage as Operation Iraqi Freedom was at on 1 May 2003. From the perspective of the history of U.S. involvement in Iraq after 1 May 2003, plenty of time remains for Turkey’s initial success in OES to spiral into a disaster similar to U.S. experience in Iraq from the spring of 2003 to withdrawal in 2011. Signs that OES’ early successes are beginning such a downward spiral likely include mission creep, reports of clashes between Turkish and Kurdish forces in Syria, and reports of substantial Turkish military equipment losses and casualties.

Mission creep is a real danger for Turkish operations in Syria, as demonstrated by the danger of mission creep exemplified by Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) and Operation Inherent Resolve (OIR). In contrast to OIF, which in eight years of execution had declared strategic objectives from, at the beginning, toppling Saddam Hussein to, in the middle, countering insurgency (despite this being a tactic and not a strategy) to nation-building and democracy-building at the end, Operation Desert Storm from 1990 to 1991 sought a limited strategic objective: reverse the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. OIR—with its now sixty-seven member counter-ISIL coalition[67] and thousands of troops in Iraq and Syria—began when then-Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Martin Dempsey convinced President Obama, during a spur-of-the-moment limo ride from the State Department to the White House on 6 August 2014,[68] to intervene to prevent the genocide of the Yazidis on Mount Sinjar.[69] Strategic objectives for OIR have changed substantially since late summer 2014.[70] Turkey’s OES, which after just seven weeks accomplished the limited strategic ends for which it was initiated, continues, opening up the unfortunate potential for mission creep. Signs of mission creep could include Turkey announcing additional military objectives in northern Syria, such as OES expansion south against ISIL or east and west against the PYD and YPG.

Substantial reports of clashes between Kurdish groups and Turkish forces in northern Syria may both signal mission creep and suggest that Turkey’s counter-terrorism efforts against the PKK in southeast Turkey have spread to northern Syria. To this point in OES, only limited contact between the PYD/YPG and Turkish and FSA elements in northern Syria has occurred. Reports of such clashes in the future could potentially inflame ethnic tensions, as many parts of northern Syria are Kurdish strongholds likely

inhospitable to FSA presence or potential resettlement of Syrian Arab refugees from Turkey. Such clashes could complicate already tense U.S-Turkish relations, as Turkey remains steadfastly opposed to U.S. support for the PYD/YPG.

Finally, reports of substantial Turkish military equipment losses and casualties could signal trouble for Turkey in northern Syria. As with OES, the first few weeks and months of OIF showcased the asymmetric overmatch capabilities of joint combined arms maneuver against a weaker enemy. This overmatch advantage lasted until the enemy adapted its tactics and transitioned to the use of improvised explosive devices (IEDs) to defeat U.S. maneuver elements. Turkey has already taken losses in OES, largely from ATGM attacks against outdated Turkish tanks. The advent of effective and widespread ISIL tactics prioritizing IED attacks against Turkish forces in OES that result in substantial Turkish losses and casualties could provide a warning sign. As the PKK has demonstrated since June 2015, mostly in southeast Turkey, the Turkish military is extremely vulnerable to IED attacks. Successful ISIL use of IEDs—or other asymmetric tactics—against Turkish forces could quickly transform OES from a striking success to a quagmire, or worse.

Time might not be on Turkey's side.

*The views and opinions expressed are those of the author and not necessarily the positions of the U.S. Army, Department of Defense, or the U.S. Government.*

#### **End Notes**

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Major Jeff Jager is a U.S. Army Foreign Area Officer with an area of concentration in Europe and Turkish as a control language. He commissioned as an infantry officer from the United States Military Academy in 2000; commanded two infantry companies during “the Surge” in Baghdad in 2007-2008; and was selected as a FAO in 2008. He holds an Associate’s of Arts degree in Turkish from the Defense Language Institute; a certification as an Army Intermediate Linguist in Turkish; a Bachelor’s of Science Degree from West Point; a Master’s Degree in Security Studies from the Turkish Army War College; a Master’s Degree in German and European Studies and a Graduate Certificate in Eurasian, Russian, and East European Studies from Georgetown University; and certification as a Defense Strategist from the U.S. Army War College. As a FAO, he served as the Assistant Army Attaché in Cyprus from 2012-2015 (with six months of service as the acting SDO/DATT) and has served as the Training and Doctrine Command Liaison Officer to Turkey since June 2015. He has served overseas for nearly ten of his sixteen years of service, with assignments in Germany, Turkey (twice), and Cyprus and deployments to Kosovo and Iraq (twice). He speaks excellent Turkish and has basic French and Greek language skills.

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