



Volume 12, Number 4

March 15, 2018

## The Wars within the War in Syria

Brandon Friedman

Turkey's war on Afrin, a predominantly Kurdish controlled district northwest of Aleppo, has lasted more than fifty days. Since January 20, the Turkish military, in partnership with Syrian rebel forces, have successfully carved out a 950 square kilometer security belt along the Syrian side of the Turkish border in the Afrin region, effectively isolating and laying siege to Afrin city, the heart of what the Kurds view as the Afrin canton of Western Kurdistan (Rojava).<sup>1</sup> Turkey's operation "Olive Branch" has displaced tens of thousands of Syrians and killed more than 359 Kurdish fighters (People's Protection Units; also known as the YPG, *Yekîneyên Parastina Gel*) and at least 70 Turkish soldiers.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, the Asad regime, with support from Russia, has unleashed a devastating offensive on the besieged rebel forces and trapped civilians of eastern Ghouta, a suburb of Damascus.<sup>3</sup> In the two week period between 18 February and 3 March, there were an average of 344 wounded and 71 people killed *per day* in eastern Ghouta.<sup>4</sup> Despite the relentless violence in Afrin, Idlib, and Ghouta in recent weeks, the fighting appears to be solidifying, rather than challenging, the de facto division and consolidation of the country into spheres of influence.<sup>5</sup> Unless

---

<sup>1</sup> For more on the start of Operation Olive Branch, see: Brandon Friedman, "[The Elusive Quest for Stability in Syria](#)," *Tel Aviv Notes* 12:2, January 31, 2018.

<sup>2</sup> [Syrian Observatory for Human Rights](#); Afrin is governed by the Kurdish Democratic Union Party/*Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat* (PYD) and declared itself an autonomous canton in January 2014. Turkey views the PYD as part of the Turkey-based Kurdistan Workers' Party/*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê* (PKK), which the U.S. and EU have designated a terrorist organization, and which has conducted an intermittent thirty-year guerilla war against the Turkish government. Turkey sees the PYD's military forces, the People's Protection Units/*Yekîneyên Parastina Gel* (YPG) and Women's Protection Units/*Yekîneyên Parastina Jin* (YPJ) as no different than the PKK.

<sup>3</sup> Kareem Shaheen, "[Syria aid deliveries halted amid reports of chemical attacks](#)," *The Guardian*, March 8, 2018; "[Syrian army splinters rebel army in Ghouta onslaught](#)," *Reuters*, March 11, 2018;

<sup>4</sup> "[Syria: An outrageous, relentless mass casualty disaster in East Ghouta](#)," *Medecins Sans Frontieres*, March 8, 2018.

<sup>5</sup> Liz Sly and Loveday Morris, "[Syria's war mutates into a regional conflict, risking a wider conflagration](#)," *Washington Post*, February 12, 2018.

Turkey's president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan intends to directly challenge the U.S.-Kurdish partnership east of Manbij<sup>6</sup> in northeastern Syria, the Asad regime and its partners – Russia, Iran, and Turkey – will divide the western and southern areas of Syria between them,<sup>7</sup> while the U.S. and its partners will control much of the oil producing northeastern area of Syria.

On March 9, Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu declared that Turkey and the U.S. had reached a “common understanding” for stabilizing Manbij in northwest Syria. Manbij is an Arab majority city that lies between the predominantly Kurdish districts of Afrin and Kobanî. The U.S.-Turkish “understanding” was also said to apply to cities “east of the Euphrates River.” However, it is unclear whether the agreement would include the Kurdish governed districts of Kobanî and Jazira that lie east of the Euphrates River. Çavuşoğlu's remarks followed March 8-9 meetings in Washington between Turkish and American officials charged with “normalizing bilateral relations” and “overcoming issues related to Syria.”<sup>8</sup>

The March 8-9 meetings were arranged during former U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson's meetings with Erdoğan on a February 15-16 trip to Ankara. Despite Turkey's operational gains on the ground in Afrin and the new channel for U.S.-Turkish coordination in Syria, Erdoğan has continued to denounce the U.S. support for YPG-linked Kurdish fighters in Syria.<sup>9</sup> Erdoğan would ultimately like to see the U.S. abandon the Kurds in northeastern Syria, whom Turkey views as an existential threat to its security.<sup>10</sup> The U.S., for its part, continues to seek an accommodation with Erdoğan that assuages Turkey's fears of the Kurds in Syria. However, the U.S. will have to find a compromise with Turkey that doesn't jeopardize its relationship with the Syrian Kurds and the successes of the YPG-commanded Syrian Defense Forces (SDF) in southeast Syria. This balancing act, now threatened by Turkey's incursion into Afrin, runs the risk of eroding some of the U.S. coalition's hard-earned gains against the Islamic State and leaving the U.S. with a smaller and less effective fighting force in eastern Syria.

---

<sup>6</sup> Afrin lies 97 kilometers west of Manbij.

<sup>7</sup> Ibrahim Hamidi, [“Russian letter to Damascus maps coexistence areas with the Turkish military,”](#) [Arabic] *aSharq al-Awsat*, March 11, 2018.

<sup>8</sup> [“Turkey, US agree to stabilization of Manbij, east of the Euphrates: Turkish FM,”](#) *Hurriyet Daily News*, March 10, 2018; Karen DeYoung and Kareem Fahim, [“U.S. moving to repair relations with Turkey, endangering ties with Kurdish allies,”](#) *Washington Post*, March 10, 2018.

<sup>9</sup> Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, [“Today, Turkey has a say in its region and the world with its foreign policy and economy,”](#) Presidency of the Republic of Turkey, March 9, 2018; Ayla Jean Ackley, [“Erdoğan lashes out at the US over support for Syrian Kurdish fighters,”](#) *al-Monitor*, March 7, 2018.

<sup>10</sup> Hassan Hassan, [“Turkey's Shifting Position in Syria,”](#) Center for Global Policy, February 27, 2018.

On March 6, some of the SDF's commanders in Raqqa held a press conference to announce that approximately 1,700 fighters would leave the anti-IS front in the Euphrates River Valley to travel to Afrin and fight the Turkish offensive there.<sup>11</sup> Erdoğan's spokesman, Ibrahim Kalin, promptly called on the U.S. to stop the SDF from doing so, albeit to no avail.<sup>12</sup> And despite the U.S. effort to downplay the departure of the Kurdish forces, it was clear that it led to an "operational pause" in the coalition's war against the Islamic State.<sup>13</sup> Further, the U.S., working through the SDF, had produced several local governing successes in liberated post-IS Syria. Many majority Arab communities had accepted the SDF's authority on the basis of the perception that it was the instrument of U.S. power. However, the U.S. decision not to come to the aid of the Kurds in Afrin has raised doubts as to the depth of the U.S. commitment to the Syrian Kurds, inviting challenges to the SDF's authority in liberated areas of eastern Syria where Kurdish leadership had previously been tolerated if not embraced by the local Arab population.

It is not yet clear how determined Turkey is to continue its offensive against the Kurds beyond Afrin. Erdoğan may seek to follow through on his rhetoric and attempt to completely reverse the territorial autonomy the YPG achieved during the war against the Islamic State between 2014 and 2017. He may believe that if he can cow the U.S. into remaining on the sidelines, Ankara can emulate Baghdad's reversal of the Kurdish Regional Government's territorial gains in Iraq in October 2017, which followed the KRG's referendum on independence.<sup>14</sup> In this respect, Turkey's behavior towards Manbij will be an important barometer of its future intentions in northeastern Syria.<sup>15</sup> Rather than push across the Euphrates towards Syria's eastern border with Iraq, it seems more likely that Turkey will use Operation Olive Branch to influence future U.S. behavior in northeastern Syria, hoping it will lead the U.S. to partner directly with Turkey and scale back and minimize direct support to Syria's Kurds.

After a brief interlude of what passed for post-Islamic State optimism,<sup>16</sup> the war in Afrin initiated a brutal new phase of conflict in Syria. The fighting is primarily

---

<sup>11</sup> Helbast Shekhani, "[Syrian Kurdish-led forces move from IS-fronts to Afrin. Turkey objects](#)," *Kurdistan24*, March 8, 2018; Eric Schmitt and Rod Nordlund, "[Amid Turkish Assault, Kurdish Forces Are Drawn Away From U.S. Fight With ISIS](#)," *The New York Times*, February 28, 2018.

<sup>12</sup> Anne Barnard, "[Turkey Asks U.S. to Stop Kurds from Shifting Fighters to Western Syria](#)," *The New York Times*, March 7, 2018.

<sup>13</sup> Amberin Zaman, "[Anti-IS coalition paralyzed as YPG faces Turkey](#)," *al-Monitor*, March 6, 2018.

<sup>14</sup> Erika Solomon and David Sheppard, "[Kurds' independence dreams shattered by Iraqi tanks in Kirkuk](#)," *Financial Times*, October 16, 2017; Michael Weiss, "[How America sided with Iran over Iraq's Kurds](#)," CNN.com, October 24, 2017.

<sup>15</sup> Ibrahim Kalin, "[Why the US should partner with Turkey in Syria](#)," CNN.com, February 1, 2018; Yasar Yakis, "[The Future of Manbij](#)," *Ahval News*, March 9, 2018.

<sup>16</sup> Angus McDowall and Sarah Dadouch, "[Syria declares victory over Islamic State](#)," *Reuters*, November 9, 2017; Brandon Friedman, "[Victory in Iraq and Syria?](#)," *Tel Aviv Notes* 11:19, December 13, 2017.

driven by competing visions of how to remake Syria after the fall of the Islamic State's caliphate.<sup>17</sup> Turkey's Afrin operation highlights the primary obstacle to reducing armed conflict and achieving stability: competing interests among the international, regional, and local parties to the conflict.<sup>18</sup>

In the effort to wind down the Syrian war, the U.S. and Russia appear to agree on maintaining the territorial unity of Syria. However, apart from preserving Syria's borders, there is still no agreed upon formula for shifting the conflict from the battlefield to the negotiating table.<sup>19</sup> The decisive regional actors, Turkey and Iran, are not yet satisfied with the facts on the ground in Syria and are concerned that a diplomatic process brokered by international powers would come at the expense of their interests.

Turkey feels threatened by what it perceives as U.S.-backed Kurdish autonomy along its southern border, while Iran wants to continue expanding its military presence in Syria so that it can link its Shi'i clients in Iraq to its allies in Syria and Lebanon.<sup>20</sup> Iran also supports the Asad regime's desire to eradicate the Sunni opposition, repopulate valuable Sunni areas with regime loyalists, and reclaim territory lost to the Islamic State in eastern Syria.<sup>21</sup> The Syrian Kurds, for their part, want to institutionalize their autonomy and consolidate their territorial control in northeastern Syria.

Russia and the U.S. have used decisive military power in support of their respective partners to carve out their spheres of influence in Syria. Yet the Turkish war in Afrin has demonstrated that both the U.S. and Russia are finding it difficult to manage their local allies in Syria, without committing greater resources or manpower to the effort.<sup>22</sup>

Turkey, for its part, appears to be successfully walking a tightrope in Afrin. Ankara cultivated and supported jihadi Sunni rebels in Idlib as a cat's paw

---

<sup>17</sup> Hemen Abdulla, "[Kurds must face-up to the bitter reality that Arabs don't want federalism](#)," *Rudaw*, March 10, 2018; Metin Gurcan, "[Stakes rise in Syria as Turkey clashes with pro-Assad militias](#)," *al-Monitor*, March 6, 2018.

<sup>18</sup> Fehim Tastekin, "[Turkey's march on Manbij stalled by a wall of reality](#)," *al-Monitor*, February 23, 2018.

<sup>19</sup> Metin Gurcan, "[Stakes rise in Syria as Turkey clashes with pro-Assad militias](#)," *al-Monitor*, March 6, 2018.

<sup>20</sup> Hanin Ghaddar and Phillip Smyth, "[Rolling Back Iran's Foreign Legion](#)," Policywatch 2926, Washington Institute for Near East Policy (WINEP), February 6, 2018.

<sup>21</sup> For an alternative view of Iran's plans for Syria, see: Aymenn J. al-Tamimi, "[Why the War in Syria May Not Be About Demographic Change](#)," *Syria Deeply*, March 15, 2017.

<sup>22</sup> Neil Macfarquhar, "[Russia's Greatest Problem in Syria: Its Ally, President Assad](#)," *The New York Times*, March 8, 2018. Maxim A. Suchkov, "[Russia considering course change after new challenges in Syria](#)," *al-Monitor*, March 9, 2018; Nancy A. Youssef, "[As Kurds Depart Islamic State Fight, U.S. Faces a Void in Syria](#)," *The Wall Street Journal*, March 7, 2018.

against both the Kurds in Syria and the Asad regime. Russia wants to harness Turkey's influence with the Sunni rebels to stabilize the Afrin and Idlib regions. By permitting Turkey's incursion into Afrin, Russia is hoping to use Turkey to implement its vision for remaking Syria. Russia has told the Asad regime that it supports a Turkish sphere of influence in northwest Syria that includes Afrin, extending from the Euphrates River in the east to Afrin in the west.<sup>23</sup>

To that end, Turkey's March 8-9 meetings in Washington were important. Turkey is unlikely to succeed in forcing the U.S. to choose between Ankara and Kobani, a choice the U.S. appears unwilling to make.<sup>24</sup> In early February, the U.S. Department of Defense published its proposed budget, which included \$550 million that appears to be earmarked for training and equipping the SDF in 2019.<sup>25</sup> Nevertheless, Turkey's war in Afrin does appear to have helped Turkey arrive at a favorable "understanding" with Washington on northeastern Syria, which is likely to come at the Kurds' expense. The conflict in Afrin has also eroded the YPG's trust in the U.S.<sup>26</sup> Therefore, it remains to be seen how this crisis of confidence will affect U.S. sphere of influence in eastern Syria, and in particular its effort to work with the SDF to stabilize the Euphrates River Valley amid challenges from remaining Islamic State insurgents, the Asad regime, and Iran.<sup>27</sup>

*Brandon Friedman is a Researcher at the [Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies \(MDC\)](#), [Tel Aviv University](#).*

**To republish an article in its entirety or as a derivative work, you must attribute it to the author and the Moshe Dayan Center at Tel Aviv University, and include a reference and hyperlink to the original article on the Moshe Dayan Center's website, <http://www.dayan.org>.**

Previous editions of TEL AVIV NOTES can be accessed at  
<http://www.dayan.org/tel-aviv-notes>.

---

<sup>23</sup> Ibrahim Hamidi, "[Russian letter to Damascus maps coexistence areas with the Turkish military](#), [Arabic]" *aSharq al-Awsat*, March 11, 2018.

<sup>24</sup> "[U.S. backs Kurdish general, prompting Turkish rebuke](#)," *Ahval News*, March 6, 2018; Gordon Lubold, Felicia Schwartz, and Nancy A. Youssef, "[U.S. Pares Back Use of Turkish Base Amid Strains with Ankara](#)," *The Wall Street Journal*, March 11, 2018.

<sup>25</sup> "[U.S. military requests \\$1.4 billion for Iraq, Syria train and equip in 2019](#)," *Rudaw*, February 12, 2018. See, also: "[Defense Budget Overview: United States Department of Defense Fiscal Year 2019 Budget Request](#)," Office of the Under Secretary of Defense (Comptroller) Chief Financial Officer, February 2018;

<sup>26</sup> Mahmoud Berkdan, "[America's Forgotten Allies](#)," Project-Syndicate.org, February 21, 2018; Rod Nordland, "[Syrian Kurds: U.S. Allies, but Followers of Leader Jailed as Terrorist](#)," *The New York Times*, March 10, 2018; Helbast Shekhani, "[Syrian Kurdish-led forces move from IS-fronts to Afrin, Turkey objects](#)," *Kurdistan24*, March 8, 2018.

<sup>27</sup> Amberin Zaman, "[Anti-IS coalition paralyzed as YPG faces Turkey](#)," *al-Monitor*, March 6, 2018.

You are subscribed to the Moshe Dayan Center Electronic Mailing List. Should you wish to unsubscribe, please send an email to [listserv@listserv.tau.ac.il](mailto:listserv@listserv.tau.ac.il), with the message "unsubscribe dayan-center."