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The Elusive Quest for Stability in Syria

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On January 20, Turkey launched a full-scale military operation into the Kurdish enclave of Afrin in the farthest reaches of Syria's northwest. Operation "Olive Branch" included air strikes, artillery bombardment, and a cross-border land incursion from six different points. It is intended to drive independent Kurdish military forces out of the district, which protrudes like a thumb into Turkish territory. Days before the start of the operation, senior Turkish officials – Hulusi Akar, Turkey's Chief of Staff, and Hakan Fidan, Turkey's Head of National Intelligence – traveled to Moscow to meet with Russian Chief of Staff, Valery Gerasimov, ostensibly to ask for permission to use Syrian airspace, which Russia controls, and to allow for the withdrawal of Russian forces from the Afrin district.¹

Russia assumed responsibility for security in Afrin in August 2017, although Afrin was not part of the broader diplomacy that created Syria's four "de-escalation" zones last summer.² Initiated in advance of the Russia sponsored Congress for Syrian National Dialogue in Sochi (January 29-30),³ Turkey's offensive against the Kurds of Afrin begins a new phase of the Syrian war. While Turkey's incursion into Afrin may have complicated Syrian diplomacy in Sochi, ultimately it works in favor of Russia's broader global interests and underscores

¹ Gulsen Solaker and Tuvan Gumrukcu, "[Turkey seeks Russian approval for air campaign in Afrin.](#)" *Reuters*, January 18, 2018; "[Turkey seeks Russian cooperation for Afrin operation.](#)" *Hurriyet Daily News*, January 18, 2018; Amberin Zaman, "[Russian jury still out on Turkey's Afrin offensive.](#)" *al-Monitor*, January 18, 2018; Metin Gurcan, "[Ankara might be awaiting Russian OK for Afrin operation.](#)" *al-Monitor*, January 19, 2018.

² "[Russia to maintain security in Afrin in deal with Kurdish force: YPG.](#)" *Rudaw*, August 29, 2017; Paul Iddon, "The power plays behind Russia's deconfliction in Afrin," *Rudaw*, September 10, 2017; Anton Mardasov, "[Latest Syria peace talks solidify final de-escalation zones.](#)" *al-Monitor*, September 22, 2017.

³ Maxim Suchkov, "[Russia's role in Afrin depends on Turkey's true intentions.](#)" *al-Monitor*, January 29, 2018.

the grim reality that Syria's future continues to be shaped more by global and regional powers than by Syrians.

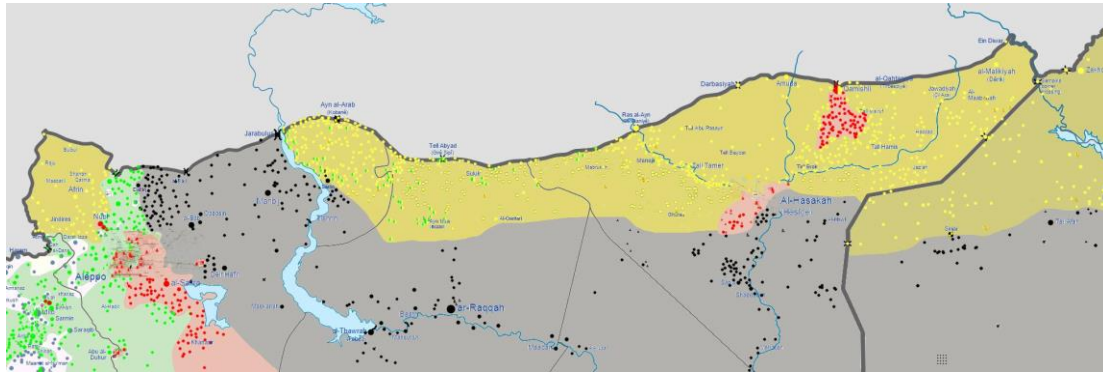
Afrin is governed by the Kurdish Democratic Union Party/*Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat* (PYD) and declared itself an autonomous canton in January 2014. Turkey views the PYD as part of the Turkey-based Kurdistan Workers' Party/*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê* (PKK), which the U.S. and EU have designated a terrorist organization, and which has conducted an intermittent thirty-year long 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.

Turkey fears that the Kurds of Syria, backed by their partnership with the U.S. military, will turn the entire strip of northern Syrian territory along the Turkish border, into an autonomous proto-state, which the PYD refers to as Democratic Federation of Northern Syria (DFNS), or western Kurdistan (*Rojava*). Afrin is the western-most district of Rojava, and is territorially isolated from the Kurdish-controlled Kobanî and Jazira regions, which lie east of the Euphrates River, and host several U.S. military bases.⁴ The YPG, supported by the U.S. military, formed the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which brought Arab, Kurdish, Turkmen, and Assyrian fighters together as the principal ground force during the U.S.-led coalition's operation to defeat the Islamic State in Raqqa and Deir al-Zour.⁵ On January 11, at a U.S. Senate hearing, David Satterfield, the Acting U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs, emphasized that "the SDF stepped forward as partners in this fight [against the Islamic State]. They were the only ones to do so. No other state, no other party, despite our offers and importunings, were willing to take up this battle."⁶

⁴ [US speeds up military aid to PKK/PYD](#)," AA.com, July 18, 2018; Pinar Tremblay, "[The motives behind Turkey's decision to reveal U.S. military intel](#)," *al-Monitor*, July 24, 2017.

⁵ "Senate Foreign Relations Full committee hearing on U.S. policy in Syria after ISIS," *Federal News Service*, January 11, 2018; "[2017 balance sheet of battle by Syrian Democratic Forces](#)," *ANFNews*, January 3, 2018; Aron Lund, "[Origins of the Syrian Democratic Forces: A Primer](#)," *Syria Deeply*, January 22, 2016; Tom Perry and Suleiman Al-Khalidi, "[New Syrian rebel alliance formed, says weapons on the way](#)," *Reuters*, October 12, 2015.

⁶ Senate Foreign Relations Full committee hearing on U.S. policy in Syria after ISIS," *Federal News Service*, January 11, 2018.



Northern Syria: Rojava appears in yellow

Source: Haghaj Jagul (File:Syria and Iraq 2014-onward War map.png) [CC0], via [Wikimedia Commons](#)

The catalyst that set Turkey's offensive in motion was the U.S. announcement that it was training and restructuring 15,000 members of the SDF to ultimately constitute a 30,000 strong "Syrian Border Security Force (BSF)."⁷ Turkey's president, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, reaction was to declare that Turkey would "strangle" the "terror army," as he referred to the BSF, before it was born.⁸ Despite U.S. efforts to "walk-back" its border force announcement,⁹ Turkey began preparing for war.

Turkey also launched Operation Olive Branch at the end of a week during which U.S. Secretary of Defense James Mattis and Secretary of State Rex Tillerson each issued broad policy statements on U.S. strategy. Mattis stressed the importance of allies in his remarks, stating that "working by, with and through allies who carry their equitable share allows us to amass the greatest possible strength." Tillerson's more detailed remarks explicitly recognized and honored "the great sacrifices the Syrian Democratic Forces have made in liberating Syrians from ISIS."¹⁰

Tillerson also enumerated five U.S. goals for Syria. First, the "enduring defeat" of the Islamic State and *al-Qa'ida*; supporting a political process leading to a unified, post-Asad Syria; diminished Iranian influence in Syria; creating conditions in which refugees and internally displaced persons can safely and voluntarily return home; and, ensuring Syria would be free of weapons of mass destruction. Indeed, Tillerson committed the U.S. to an open-ended "conditions-based"

⁷ Joanne Stocker, "[Coalition retraining 15,000 veteran SDF fighters to serve as Syrian border force](#)," *The Defense Post*, January 13, 2018; Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, "[Dispatch: The Syrian Democratic Forces' Border Guards](#)," January 20, 2018.

⁸ Patrick Wintour, "[Erdoğan accuses US of planning to form a terror army in Syria](#)," *The Guardian*, January 15, 2018.

⁹ Liz Sly, "[US backpedals on new Kurdish force as Turkey prepares for war](#)," *Washington Post*, January 18, 2018.

¹⁰ Rex W. Tillerson, "[Remarks on the Way Forward for the United States Regarding Syria](#)," U.S. Department of State, January 17, 2018.

engagement in Syria. In other words, the U.S. would remain in Syria until it achieved its goals.

The overarching theme of Tillerson's remarks was the U.S. intention, "along with its allies and partners," to bring stability to Syria. Tillerson argued that the Islamic State was not yet fully defeated; the Assad regime only controlled half of Syria's territory and population; and, Iran remained a threat. In order to address those ongoing challenges, the U.S. needs the YPG and the SDF.

And yet just as Tillerson was outlining U.S. policy to bring stability to Syria on January 19, one U.S. ally, Turkey, a NATO member, was preparing to go to war with another U.S. partner, the YPG, in Afrin, which had been an island of stability during the Syrian war. Under Kurdish leadership, Afrin had been a refuge for displaced Syrians in recent years. Now, with the start of the Turkish offensive, Afrin's stability has been destroyed.

Turkey's foreign minister, Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu recently declared that "Turkey will continue the mission until terrorists are wiped out."¹¹ Çavuşoğlu, also demanded that the U.S. and SDF forces withdraw from Manbij, a northern Syrian city, outside of the Afrin district, that the SDF forces seized during the summer.¹² And Turkey's president Erdoğan, speaking to his party supporters, announced Turkey's readiness to sweep across the entire length of Turkey's southern border from Afrin to Iraq.¹³

The intensity of Turkey's rhetoric in recent days suggests that Turkey is trying to force the United States to choose between Turkey and its Kurdish partners in Syria. Metin Gürcan, a Turkish military analyst, described Turkey's offensive into Afrin as a "effect-based operation" designed to influence the strategic goals of the U.S. and Russia.¹⁴ In a *New York Times* op-ed, Foreign Minister Çavuşoğlu, wrote that "a NATO ally arming a terrorist organization that is attacking another NATO ally is a fundamental breach of everything that NATO stands for." He called for the U.S. to correct its policy "by putting its allies and long-term interests first again."¹⁵

The U.S., for its part, has tried to downplay the Turkish incursion into Afrin. It does not want to risk its access to Turkey's İncirlik air base, which the U.S. uses

¹¹ Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, "[America Has Chosen the Wrong Partner](#)," *The New York Times*, January 29, 2018.

¹² Kubra Chohan, "[Turkish FM: US must cut ties with PYD/PKK](#)," *Anadolu Agency*, January 27, 2018.

¹³ "[Turkish operations on Syrian border to extend as far as Iraq](#)," *Reuters*, January 26, 2018.

¹⁴ Metin Gurcan, "[4 factors affecting Turkey's new operation in Syria](#)" *al-Monitor*, January 25, 2018.

¹⁵ Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, "[America Has Chosen the Wrong Partner](#)," *The New York Times*, January 29, 2018.

to launch air strikes into Syria. Secretary of State Tillerson acknowledged Turkey's "legitimate security concerns," and asked it to exercise "restraint."¹⁶ Prior to the start of the Turkish operation, the Pentagon had stated that the Kurdish forces based in Afrin were not part of the U.S. anti-IS coalition.¹⁷ The U.S. has tried to distance itself from responsibility for Afrin, claiming it falls within Russia's sphere of influence based on previous diplomatic agreements, and therefore the U.S. does not have jurisdiction over Turkey's military operation.¹⁸

Nevertheless, the U.S. firmly stated that it would not retreat from Manbij,¹⁹ which lies 100 kilometers east of the Afrin district, suggesting that if Turkey intended to extend its operation into Manbij and across the Euphrates River, and clear the YPG from the entire stretch of northern Syria to Iraq, it might find itself in the awkward position of facing down the U.S. military.²⁰ In a January 24 phone call, U.S. President Donald Trump urged Erdoğan to avoid actions that would risk conflict between Turkish and American forces.²¹

Russia is profiting from this unfolding crisis between the U.S. and Turkey. Russia has aided and abetted a conflict that is placing immense pressure on the NATO alliance, something which has global implications for both Russia and NATO.²² Second, an extended Turkish operation on Syrian territory fuels tension between Turkey and the Asad regime.²³ Erdoğan recently stated that after the Kurds are defeated in Afrin, he intends to resettle Turkey's 3.5 million Syrian refugees in Afrin, along with the ten thousand or so Free Syrian Army rebels that are supporting the Turkish operation.²⁴ Bashar al-Asad won't look favorably on this plan, as this population includes large numbers of jihadis and rebels openly

¹⁶ Felicia Schwartz, "[Turkey's President Dismisses U.S. Call for Restraint Along Syria Border](#)," *The Wall Street Journal*, January 22, 2018; Tracy Wilkinson, "Tillerson urges Turkey to stop attacks on U.S.-backed Kurdish militias in Syria," *Los Angeles Times*, January 22, 2018.

¹⁷ Safvan Allahverdin, "[Afrin not part of Syria coalition mission: US spokesman](#)," *Anadolu Agency*, January 16, 2018.

¹⁸ Amberin Zaman, "[Russian jury still out on Turkey's Afrin offensive](#)," *al-Monitor*, January 18, 2018; Safvan Allahverdin, "[Afrin is not an operational area for coalition: CENTCOM](#)," *Anadolu Agency*, January 21, 2018.

¹⁹ Kevin Baron, "[US General to Turkey: We're not pulling back](#)," *DefenseOne*, January 29, 2018; Euan McKirdy, "[US General: US troops won't withdraw from Syrian city of Manbij](#)," *CNN.com*, January 29, 2018.

²⁰ Arshad Mohammed and Idrees Ali, "[As U.S. looks to rein in Turkish offensive, Manbij is key](#)," *Reuters*, January 22, 2018.

²¹ "[Readout of President Donald J. Trump's Call with President Recep Tayyip Erdogan of Turkey](#)," The White House, January 24, 2018; Ayla Jean Ackley, "[Turkey says US account of Trump-Erdogan call not 'accurate'](#)," *al-Monitor*, January 25, 2018.

²² Cengiz Candar, "[Turkey, Russia wage proxy war against Washington in Syria](#)," *al-Monitor*, January 25, 2018; Gareth Stansfield, "[Turkey's attack on Syrian Kurds could overturn the entire region](#)," *The Guardian*, January 28, 2018.

²³ Fehim Tastekin, "[Erdoğan's plans for Afrin might not sit well with Syria](#)," *al-Monitor*, January 26, 2018.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

hostile to his regime.²⁵ This dynamic works in Russia's favor, because it means that Russia will be the arbiter in resolving tension between the Asad regime and Turkey over developments in Afrin and Idlib.²⁶ It has even been suggested that Russia's "green-light" to Turkey in Afrin was secured with a *quid pro quo*: on the same day that Turkey initiated its operation, Asad's forces regained control over Abu al-Duhur air base in Idlib, without firing a shot.²⁷ This means that Turkey, by virtue of its fraying relationship with the U.S., has lost some of its flexibility in the Syrian political process, and it will have less room for maneuver between the U.S. and Russian camps as the diplomatic track advances in Sochi and Geneva.²⁸

Third, the media's focus on the Turkish offensive is also allowing Russia and Asad's Syrian Arab Army to finish consolidating its control over the last jihadi-rebel strongholds in Idlib in the shadows of the media spotlight on Afrin.²⁹ Russia's control over Syrian air space means that Turkey is dependent on Russia's permission for how, when, and where Turkey's air force operates in Syria. Therefore, by withholding open access to Syrian air space, Russia can set the pace for Turkey's ground operations in northern Syria, using them as cover for the Asad regime's or Iran's efforts to finish eliminating the remaining rebel opposition and extending their territorial control into Idlib.³⁰ Fourth, Russia also stands to improve its reputation in the Middle East as valuable and loyal ally. While both Turkey and the PYD feel betrayed by the U.S. posture in northern Syria,³¹ Russia is perceived as being a ruthless yet steadfast partner.

Turkey's incursion into Afrin is the beginning of a new phase in the Syrian war. Each of the key regional and international actors in Syria — Russia, U.S., Iran, Turkey, and Israel — are taking the initiative to advance with their particular

²⁵ Kareem Shaheen, "[Syrian rebels gamble on Turkish alliance to fight Kurds and Assad](#)," *The Guardian*, January 27, 2018.

²⁶ Jenan Moussa, [Twitter Post](#), January 29, 2018, 12:22pm; John Irish, "[Tillerson to present US strategy on Syria to European, Arab allies](#)," *Reuters*, January 23, 2018; "[Syria's UN envoy deems Western initiative on Syria as 'totally unacceptable'](#)," *TASS*, January 26, 2018.

²⁷ Anton Mardasov, "[Russia's role in Turkey's incursion into Syria is tricky](#)," *al-Monitor*, January 24, 2018.

²⁸ Umut Uras and Tamila Varshalomidze, "[What is Russia's end game in Afrin?.](#)" *Al Jazeera*, January 23, 2018; Fehim Tastekin, "[Erdogan's plans for Afrin might not sit well with Syria](#)," *al-Monitor*, January 26, 2018; Semih Idiz, "[Will Erdogan defy Russia, US over Afrin?](#)," *al-Monitor*, January 17, 2018; Colum Lynch, "[Dancing to Russia's Tune in Syria](#)," *ForeignPolicy.com*, January 8, 2018; Sam Heller, "[America in Search of an Un-Geneva for Syria](#)," *Warontherocks.com*, January 8, 2018.

²⁹ Caroline Akoum, "[Syria: Escalation on Eve of 'Sochi', Intense Shelling in Ghouta and Idlib](#)," *aSharq al-Awsat*, January 29, 2018; Kareem Shaheen, "70,000 Syrians flee as regime advances on last rebel-held province," *The Guardian*, January 9, 2018.

³⁰ Metin Gurcan, "[4 factors affecting Turkey's new operation in Syria](#)" *al-Monitor*, January 25, 2018; Jenan Moussa, [Twitter Post](#), January 29, 2018, 12:22pm.

³¹ Nujin Derik, "[We Fought for Our Democracy. Now Turkey Wants to Destroy It](#)," *The New York Times*, January 29, 2018; Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, "[America Has Chosen the Wrong Partner](#)," *The New York Times*, January 29, 2018.

state interests. Tragically, the Syrian people themselves remain largely marginal and powerless to affect the outcomes of the conflict.³²

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³² Hassan Hassan, "[The Syrian conflict is entering a delicate and dangerous phase](#)," *The National*, January 24, 2018; Kareem Shaheen, "[The Syrian rebels put their own aims aside to fight Turkey's battles](#)," *The Guardian*, January 26, 2018.