The Elusive Quest for Stability in Syria
Brandon Friedman

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

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 Kobanê 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

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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).”  

Despite U.S. efforts to “walk-back” its border force announcement, 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.”

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”

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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 Asad 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.” 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. 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.

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. 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.”

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 Incirlik air base, which the U.S. uses

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13 “Turkish operations on Syrian border to extend as far as Iraq,” Reuters, January 26, 2018.
to launch air strikes into Syria. Secretary of State Tillerson acknowledged Turkey’s “legitimate security concerns,” and asked it to exercise “restraint.”  

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. 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.

Nevertheless, the U.S. firmly stated that it would not retreat from Manbij, 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. 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.

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. Second, an extended Turkish operation on Syrian territory fuels tension between Turkey and the Asad regime. 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. Bashar al-Asad won’t look favorably on this plan, as this population includes large numbers of jihadis and rebels openly

20 Arshad Mohammed and Idrees Ali, “As U.S. looks to rein in Turkish offensive, Manbij is key,” Reuters, January 22, 2018.
24 Ibid.
hostile to his regime. 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. 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. 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.

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. 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. 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, 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


27 Anton Mardasov, “Russia’s role in Turkey’s incursion into Syria is tricky,” al-Monitor, January 24, 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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