

Yet Another Turkish Operation in Syria:

Ankara's Wishful Thinking or a Real Possibility?

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Abstract

This policy paper aims to analyze the potential Turkish military operation in northern Syria. The prospective operation, which would be the third Turkish military intervention in Syria possibly in the Tal Rifaat and Manbij areas, is already facing objections from the US, Russia, and Iran. All these powers have a military presence in northern Syria. In the past, the military interventions against Kurdish-led forces have affected the election results in Turkey. Turkish presidential and parliamentary elections are scheduled for June 2023. The public attitude towards Syrian refugees is also increasingly becoming hostile. Consequently, the possibility of conducting another operation in Syria is also becoming more likely.

Introduction

The people of northern Syria are preparing for a new conflict. As the world's attention is turned to the war in Ukraine, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has announced that Turkey is planning another major military operation against Kurdish-led forces in northern Syria. Although Turkey openly declares its willingness to create a buffer zone of 30 km in the border area, Erdoğan also emphasizes the possibility of an operation in certain towns (Manbij and Tal Rifaat) that are beyond the 30 km border area. In the recent period when tensions have increased, clashes continue between the Syrian Kurdish fighters supported by the US and the armed Syrian opposition backed by Turkey.

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We could argue that president Erdoğan took advantage of the ongoing war in Ukraine and even Turkey's right to veto Finland and Sweden's membership applications as a NATO member to further his own ambitions in Syria.ⁱ However, the operation envisioned by Ankara comes with considerable complications. One of the risks is damaging Turkey's ties with the US, Iran, and Russia. There is also a risk of creating a new refugee influx to Turkey from a war-torn area where the Islamic State (IS) still persists.

In the past, Turkey launched three cross-border operations in Syria: Euphrates Shield in August 2016, Olive Branch in January 2018, and Peace Spring in October 2019.ⁱⁱ After the Peace Spring operation, Turkey made two separate agreements with the US and Russia. The US promised to ensure the Syrian Democratic Forces' (SDF) withdrawal 32 kilometers south of the Turkish border. Russia committed to drive the Kurdish-led forces out of Tal Rifaat and Manbij. However, none of these promises were fully implemented.

It is obvious that Turkey aims to clear the entire border vicinity from Kurdish-led forces. Ankara views the SDF and other Syrian Kurdish groups as Syrian extensions of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) with which it wages insurgency for almost forty years. Erdoğan's new operation plans can be seen as a part of this strategy that has been carried out at least since 2016. Briefly explained, Turkey aims at having a foothold in Syria with a direct military and administrative presence, keeping the borders under exclusive Turkish control, and most importantly, keeping Kurdish territorial and administrative ambitions in check.

The two main factors that narrow Turkey's freedom of action in the region are Russian and American objections. Russia argues that safe zones in Syria should be established in cooperation with Damascus seeing it also as a way to return Syrian regime's influence in



particular east of Euphrates. The US argues that Turkey's military actions threaten the fight against IS in which the SDF is key ally US ally on the ground.

What Does Ankara Want?

In July 2022, President Erdoğan reinvigorated Turkey's efforts to create a 30-kilometer buffer zone inside Syria. Turkish army desired to create this buffer zone in September 2019, but the military operation at that time failed to achieve this goal. Since 2016, Turkey has carried out three major operations in Syria targeting the Kurdish force People's Defense Units (YPG), which it considers a terrorist organization and an extension of the PKK. However, the YPG (which dominates the SDF) forms the backbone of the US-led coalition forces fighting IS militants.

Due to the previous operations carried out, Turkey controls a large area within Syria, including cities such as Afrin, Tel Abyad, and Jarablus. Turkey also aims to build thousands of housing units in territory under its and its local proxies control. This ensures that over 1 million out of approximately 3.7 million Syrian refugees living in Turkey will "voluntarily" return to their country.ⁱⁱⁱ There is a significantly increased negative perception of the Syrian refugees in Turkey and this situation creates pressure from the public on the government. The issue of Syrian refugees has already been one of the main topics in the political parties' agendas. A public opinion survey indicates that over 81 percent of the population in Turkey is in favor of the return of the refugees back to Syria, and over 72 percent believe that the Syrian refugees pose a security problem.^{iv}

As President Erdoğan stated, now Ankara aims to take control of Tal Rifaat and Manbij, which is located on the main highway M4 in Syria's west-east axis.^v Turkey argues Syrian Kurdish fighters are using Tal Rifaat as a base to attack areas held by Turkey-backed Syrian opposition fighters.

Turkish military may also enter the strategically important border town of Kobani as well. The US military and Kurdish fighters first acted together in Kobani in September 2015 to defeat IS. Kobani has a strong symbolic significance for the Syrian Kurds and their aim to establish their own administration in this part of Syria.

The following sections examine three different scenarios for a Turkish military incursion. An operation in Tal Rifaat or Manbij, attack on the symbolic city of Kobani and a scenario of no further Turkish military operation at all.

1. Operation in Tal Rifaat and Manbij

Turkey's main target in a potential operation in Syria, as Erdoğan himself declared several times, is Tal Rifaat and Manbij areas. Tel Rifaat and Manbij are located west of the Euphrates River. It also borders areas under the control of groups that Turkey supports. However, while there are these armed groups in the rural areas of Manbij, the SDF is predominantly in control in the inner parts of Manbij city and its vicinity. Russia and Syrian regime also maintain a presence there. Manbij is a commercial hub that provides the connection between the east and west of the Euphrates. With a bridge, half of which is still usable, from Manbij, it is possible to cross into the areas under the control of the SDF. Tal Rifaat, on the other hand, is in the rural areas of Aleppo, in which some of the areas are controlled by groups supported by Turkey, and some are areas by the YPG, Syrian military and Russian and Iran-linked forces.

As Turkey threatened an operation in Manbij and Tal Rifaat, the Syrian army and Russian forces deployed upon agreement with the YPG and the SDF in both areas. In fact, according to these agreements, it was envisaged that the administrative and security control in these regions would be fully handed over to Damascus. However, this was never fully



implemented and in particular in Manbij area the SDF (or its local offshoot Manbij Military Council) remains in charge. Also, in Manbij and Tel Rifaat, the majority of population is Sunni Arab, and the Kurds represent around 15% of the population.^{vi}

Tal Rifaat appears to be an apple ripe for picking for Ankara. Firstly, Tal Rifaat is a convenient position to keep Aleppo under pressure from the north. Consequently, Turkey would be able to keep Syrian forces under pressure in northern Aleppo and pave the way for bridging Idlib and the countryside of Idlib and Aleppo. Who controls Tal Rifaat can control Aleppo and thus it is unlikely that the Syrian regime, Russia, or Iran would give up this area.

In addition, Tal Rifaat cuts off the connection between Idlib and the Turkey-backed opposition forces in the north of Aleppo. If Turkey captures Tal Rifaat, it will completely cut off the YPG's access to Afrin. However, it is important to mention that the SDF, unlike in Manbij, is not officially present in Tal Rifaat. It is the YPG that controls the area.

Also, in case Tal Rifaat is under Turkish control, several Shiite towns around Afrin will be surrounded again. This is a scenario that would alarm Iran. Hezbollah and local Shiite militias protect the towns of Zahra and Nubul, which were besieged by Turkey-backed groups between 2012 and 2016.^{vii}

2. Operation in Kobani

The border town of Kobani has symbolic significance. The YPG managed to score a major victory against IS making Kobani a symbol for Kurdish struggle against radical Islamists. Moreover, the US began to support YPG against IS during the siege of Kobani in September 2015. Even this alone can be a major reason for Turkey to target Kobani. Turkey experiences the most severe economic crisis in decades before the presidential election slated for June 2023. Thus, president Erdoğan might try to distract the public attention with such taking over the symbol of Kurdish resistance in Syria. Such a victory

would earn Erdoğan and his party a significant boost of support among Turkish nationalist voters.

Nonetheless, the operation in Kobani may provoke international reaction due to the population density of the city, and its identification with the resistance against IS. Majority of the inhabitants of Kobani are Kurds, with minority of Arab, Turkmen, and Armenians. The SDF and Kurdish-led administration in the northeast would almost certainly defend the city at all costs. If Kobani would fall it would be a major blow-back for SDF's legitimacy and stability.

The situation in Kobani has been relatively calm since the SDF pushed back the IS by late 2015. However, on August 16, 2022, there has been an exchange of heavy shelling in the border town of Kobani with the Turkish army.^{viii}

However, another hurdle for Ankara is that both Russian and Syrian government forces are stationed in the area. The presence of the Syrian regime forces as well as Russians in the towns of Kobani and Manbij is well known. In July 2022, it was reported that the regime has deployed heavy reinforcements to several cities in the eastern Euphrates including Kobani.^{ix} At the same time, Syrian commanders and SDF leaders meet regularly to discuss military coordination and defense plans in case Turkey and its allies launch military operations in the Kobani region.^x

3. No Operation Amid Objections from Moscow, Tehran, and Washington

There is also a scenario that despite Ankara's threats, no operation will be conducted at all. Persistent vetoes on Turkish incursion from Russia, the US, and Iran seem to be putting Turkey in a difficult position. Russian president Putin also tries to convince Erdoğan to cooperate with Damascus which may in the future bring normalization between Turkey and Syria. Putin and Erdoğan held a meeting twice in late July and early August of 2022 in Tehran and Sochi. Putin repeatedly emphasized the need for



cooperation between Turkey and Assad.^{xi} Importantly, during the Turkey-Russia-Iran summit in Tehran, Turkey found itself on the opposing side to Russia and Iran, where the leaders refused Erdoğan's plans for another incursion to Syria.^{xii}

A high-risk, large-scale military operation would disturb the US and Russia, which both have military presence in northern Syria. While Russia supported the Syrian regime, Ankara has been backing Syrian opposition. Putin will likely continue blocking any further Turkish gains in northern Syria. The US has also openly expressed its opposition to Turkish military operation anywhere east of Euphrates arguing it would jeopardize hard-won gains against IS.^{xiii} The US officials often cite concerns that new operations would further undermine regional stability and security. When it comes to Iran, which also support the Syrian regime, Tehran also strongly objects any further Turkish gains in Syria particularly in the Tal Rifaat and Manbij area.

It is obvious that any further operation will not be easy because of the Syrian regime and Russian presence in Kobani, Manbij and Tal Rifaat alike. Therefore, where the operation will be performed is also very important. If it takes place in Kobani, the US in particular might react strongly as it seriously undermined the SDF east of Euphrates. In Tal Rifaat and Manbij, both Russia and Iran (in particular in case of Tal Rifaat) may strongly object. The Russians, on the other hand, may want the US-Turkey relations to become tense, possibly giving a green light for Kobani. Yet, Erdoğan often emphasizes the importance of a potential operation in Tal Rifaat and Manbij.

The question is also how deep Turkey is prepared to go within Syrian territory, especially in Kobani and its environs, and whether Moscow or Washington will budge to Turkish demands. Both the previous operations in Syria and the political/economic context in

Turkey indicate that Erdoğan is willing to take risky steps. Neither Russia nor the US is willing to put its relations with Turkey at risk.

If Russia agrees on Turkish operation, it would also affect power-balance in Syria. When Russia gave the green light for operations to Turkey in the previous times, it aimed to bring the Kurds closer to Damascus.^{xiv} This was partially successful as the SDF agreed with the regime to cooperate militarily. The current state of the SDF–Damascus talks could also gain momentum as a result of a new attack. Second, it aimed to deepen the rift between Turkey and the US. Turkey also signaled that it could delay the NATO memberships of Finland and Sweden to placate Russia.

The Peculiarity of Timing

Erdoğan might be thinking that there are some favorable conditions both at home and abroad and that it is a good time to launch an operation in Syria. While Russia is preoccupied with the war in Ukraine, the US needs Turkey to drop objections for Finland and Sweden to join NATO. Consequently, the government might feel that there is an opportunity to gain concessions from the West.

In the upcoming elections in Turkey, president Erdoğan and his Justice and Development Party (AKP) can use military operation in Syria to garner nationalist votes at a time when the inflation rate continues to hike, and the economy deteriorates. In the past elections, carrying out a military operation in Syria to repel the YPG increased support for Erdoğan and the AKP.^{xv}

There is currently no indication that military action is imminent, although the Turkish army could be mobilized in relatively short span of time for a limited operation. Recently, there have already been transfers of military equipment to the border. More importantly, it was observed from the Turkish side that the Turkey-backed opposition group Syrian National Army



(SNA) has been preparing the heavy weapons and other military supplies.^{xvi}

Syrian Kurdish fighters report that they take Turkey's latest threat seriously and are preparing for a possible attack.^{xvii} The SDF, the US, and the EU believe that the military operation will negatively impact the ongoing war against IS and undermine their capacity to protect prisons in northern Syria, where thousands of IS member are held. Turkey also repeatedly targets the SDF commanders and important figures within the YPG thanks to the 'green light' from the US. For example, on July 22, Salwa Yusuf, a female commander of the SDF's counter-terrorism force was killed by a Turkish drone strike.^{xviii}

The fact that the operation in Syria will not be as easy as the operations on the territory of Iraqi Kurdistan, which have been taking place more frequently, it can face more strict reactions from the international community. At the same time, it will lead to new discussions and new tensions between Syria, Russia, Iran, the US, and even the EU. For this reason and due to the importance of timing, it is debatable whether Turkey should really implement another military operation in Syria.

Enter Elections

There is one political aspect that could intervene in the process of the potential military operation: the attitude of the opposition parties in Turkey. The main opposition parties, which are significantly critical towards the ruling bloc and the policies of the AKP, often support the government in its foreign military interventions. It is crucial to underline that all the opposition parties in the parliament, except the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), have supported the government not only during the previous operations in Syria but also during the military operations in Iraqi Kurdistan and Iraq in general against the PKK.^{xix}

Operation in Syria could harness more votes for the AKP and thus the opposition parties are strongly against such an operation.

The opposition parties are also afraid of losing the nationalist votes in case of an objection to the military operation. Therefore, how far will the main opposition bloc of the Nation Alliance support the potential operation is a key aspect. National Alliance consists mainly of the Republican Peoples' Party (CHP) and the IYI Party. If these parties conclude that a military operation in Syria is a politically directed operation to engineer the elections in favor of the AKP, the entire opposition landscape can change. For instance, the leftist bloc that also includes the pro-Kurdish HDP believes that the operation in Syria is the most important trump card of the government, if not the last. The operation can open a window for the HDP and the National Alliance to collaborate.

The leftist bloc also believes that the operation has something to do with domestic policy. In case the operation takes pace, the pressure on the HDP would inevitably increase. Because the HDP will be openly against the operation, as it happened during the previous times, and this will increase the hostility towards the HDP from nationalists. Military interventions in Syria and Iraqi Kurdistan often lead to a rise in the securitization of the Kurdish issue, which then leads to an emergence of a political atmosphere that gives the AKP a position to criminalize and suppress the HDP.^{xx} This move can be related to Erdoğan's vote engineering before the election.

Conclusion

This policy paper examined scenarios and consequences of the next possible Turkish military operation in the northern Syria. The Turkish intervention carries significant risks. Turkey is already aiming to have stable relations with both the US/NATO and Russia particularly due to its role in



the Russia-Ukraine war. These relations might get damaged in case of operation. One of the key motivations for military action is tied to domestic politics and desire for president Erdoğan and his AKP to boost support ahead of June 2023 elections.

Currently, the possible scenarios include an attack on Tal Rifaat and Manbij areas. The area is important for Turkey in order to push the SDF forces from the western side of the Euphrates completely and gain control over strategic commercial hub (the case of Manbij) and Aleppo vicinity (the case of Tal Rifaat). Another potential target is the town of Kobani. Kobani has significant symbolic importance for the Kurds of Syria due to the fight against IS. Nevertheless, an operation towards Kobani and the western Euphrates does not seem to be Turkey's priority at the moment.

We may not see a new operation by Turkey at all in Syria. This is related to the persisting 'red light' by the US, Russia, and Iran. The US refuses more Turkish incursions east of Euphrates destabilizing the SDF's domain. Russians and Iranians in particular frown upon any operation in Tal Rifaat which would endanger their sway over Aleppo. Manbij is also an important hub for the Syrian regime and Russia. In general, Tehran and Russia are simply not interested in Turkey grabbing more land anywhere in Syria. It appears that due to these constraints the scenario of no significant operation at all is most likely as none of these actors' signal changing their position vis-à-vis Turkish ambitions.

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