

How Will the SDF React to Turkey's Invasion?

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Brief Analysis

On Wednesday, Turkey launched its 'Fountain of Peace operation' in northeastern Syria after receiving a de-facto green light from the White House to launch a unilateral operation in the area between Tal Abyad and Serê Kaniyê (Ras al-'Ain in Arabic). This operation began immediately after the United States quickly pulled out fifty troops from this area, located at the [Tel Arqam base \(https://www.hawarnews.com/en/haber/coalition-evacuates-its-base-in-ser-kaniy-h11841.html\)](https://www.hawarnews.com/en/haber/coalition-evacuates-its-base-in-ser-kaniy-h11841.html) and [one unidentified Tal Abyad base \(https://www.hawarnews.com/en/haber/coalition-forces-withdraw-from-border-areas-with-turkey-h11835.html\)](https://www.hawarnews.com/en/haber/coalition-forces-withdraw-from-border-areas-with-turkey-h11835.html). The 'Fountain of Peace' operation has been launched despite the earlier Turkish-U.S. [security mechanism agreement \(https://www.centcom.mil/MEDIA/PRESS-RELEASES/Press-Release-View/Article/1945646/us-and-partner-forces-implement-security-mechanism-in-northeast-syria/\)](https://www.centcom.mil/MEDIA/PRESS-RELEASES/Press-Release-View/Article/1945646/us-and-partner-forces-implement-security-mechanism-in-northeast-syria/) dating back to August, which would have in theory prevented such an attack. Serê Kaniyê itself was [captured \(https://www.hrw.org/report/2014/06/19/under-kurdish-rule/abuses-pyd-run-enclaves-syria\)](https://www.hrw.org/report/2014/06/19/under-kurdish-rule/abuses-pyd-run-enclaves-syria) by the Kurdish forces in a battle with Al Qaida and Free Syrian Army (FSA) rebels in July 2013, but the battle has now returned to the city.

Turkey's newest operation follows earlier efforts such as operation Olive Branch (Jan-March 2018) and operation Euphrates Shield (August 2016-March 2017), which both had similar goals to prevent the establishment of a Kurdish-led entity on the Turkish border. Just as with previous operations, this operation also has a de-facto green light from Russia, which hopes to force the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) to surrender to Damascus. The current goal of Turkey's 'Fountain of Peace operation' seems to be control much of this [125-kilometer \(78-mile\) zone \(https://www.apnews.com/456d16ba55284c0f8ab73b0467e02e53\)](https://www.apnews.com/456d16ba55284c0f8ab73b0467e02e53) where the SDF had removed fortifications earlier. Turkey possesses [surveillance video and information \(https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/09/world/middleeast/turkey-attacks-syria.html\)](https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/09/world/middleeast/turkey-attacks-syria.html) of this area from reconnaissance aircraft from earlier joint aerial and ground patrols, which is helping to facilitate the operation.

Ultimately, Turkey actually benefited from the security mechanism agreement, including from SDF-linked forces removing their fortifications from the area in September. It is likely that Turkey was never planning on committing

to the agreement and intended to use the security mechanism in order to gain information about the locations of troops in the Tal Abyad and Serê Kaniyê zone before the operation. This was also demonstrated by Turkey's **uniting** (<https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/free-syrian-army-transforms-into-syrian-national-army/1607384>) Syrian rebel groups, which are now being called the National Army, from different territories under the interim government's Defense Ministry on October 4.

Turkey had also publicly voiced its intentions to begin this most recent operation for months. In January, the Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan **said** (<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-turkey/erdogan-says-kurdish-rebels-will-not-shelter-in-syrian-safe-zone-idUSKCN1PF16F>) that "we will never allow a safe zone that will turn into a new swamp for Turkey like the one in Northern Iraq." The goal of the current efforts can be understood as preventing the Kurdish Peoples Protection Units (YPG) in Syria, a principle component of the SDF, from gaining autonomy in the way that Iraqi Kurds were able to achieve after Saddam's forces withdrew from northern Iraq in 1991.

Ankara is motivated by its belief that the YPG is indistinguishable from the Turkish-Kurdish organization of the PKK, which is a terror-designated entity by both Turkey and other NATO members, including the United States. Thus, Turkey sees any Kurdish entity controlled by the YPG as a threat to Turkey's territorial integrity.

American Attitudes and Response

While Turkey's motives for the attack are clear, the role of the United States in facilitating the attack is less expected. Even so, a senior U.S. diplomat **confirmed** (<https://www.state.gov/senior-state-department-officials-on-the-situation-in-syria/>) on Thursday that the United States had been briefed on Turkey's military incursion, stating "We think they're all a bad idea. But we have no indication—but they have not given us any indication that they plan on any escalation further than what they've told us." Therefore, it is likely that the United States would oppose Turkish escalation of the conflict outside this former 'security mechanism' zone.

This unspoken red line helps explain the warnings from the U.S. president Donald Trump on Twitter that the United States could 'destroy' the Turkish economy if Turkey does something "off-limits," while later praising Turkey as a trade and NATO partner. Trump's messages indicate that there appears to be a de-facto agreement between Turkey and the United States on the limits of this operation, and that the U.S. President wants Turkey to finish this operation quickly and without civilian casualties.

Given Mr. Erdogan's scheduled meeting with president Donald Trump on November 13, it is likely that the former hopes to establish Turkish control of at least Tal Abyad and Serê Kaniyê on the ground before this meeting. Yet if Turkey succeeds in taking these two towns, it may also try to push for the town of Ain al Issa to control the M4 road, which would open up the way to encircle Kobani and open the road to Raqqa—effectively cutting SDF-held territory in two. This strategic town was initially captured by the Kurds during their taking of Tal Abyad in June 2015 from ISIS. However, on Sunday the situation changed when the White House ordered its troops to withdraw, fearing they would get caught between two opposing armies.

Turkish Tactics and SDF Response

Tactically, Turkey was carrying out a slow campaign with artillery and air support with little direct engagement. Movements on the map showed that the Turks were trying to surround both Tal Abyad and Serê Kaniyê from the east and west. In response, the SDF was likely to try to stop this encirclement by attacking in the rear. "In such a scenario, we have to relieve the pressure on a specific force which has been cornered," one former SDF fighter told the author last summer. "If one of the cities is attacked, forces from all other cities have to intervene." Meanwhile, Turkey is carrying out arbitrary airstrikes all over the border to cause confusion among the SDF forces.

The SDF was also working to open fronts on all sides of the Turkish border. For instance, they have engaged the

Turkish army and its proxies near Derik, west of Kobani, and from Arima. One local media outlet, *Rojava TV*, has even **claimed (<https://twitter.com/RojavaNetwork/status/1182198250897575936>)** that the SDF opened eight fronts, while Turkey has only planned one.

Although the flat border area of this terrain is difficult to defend—in contrast to the mountainous Afrin captured earlier by Turkish and Turkish-backed forces—one former SDF fighter stated that the east of the Euphrates is more prepared in regards to ammunition, manpower, and weapons. After Afrin fell, SDF leaders subsequently took Turkish threats more seriously and no longer completely trusted foreign countries to stop a Turkish attack.

As the former fighter stated, “If one bullet is fired [in the northeast], all of the border [from Derik to Kobane] will be undermined’—it will be a fight for life or death.” In this campaign, the SDF have weapons, ammunition, trenches, and enough fighters. “The lines behind the frontline are wide enough for the movements of the logistics; it is more than 300 kilometers from the north to the Euphrates.” In contrast, Afrin was surrounded by Turkish territory and the Syrian regime, and in consequence had difficulties with logistical supply lines.

However, the different terrain also suggests that Turkish ambitions are likely not limited to Tal Abyad and Serê Kaniyê. Were Ankara to remain in the two cities without expanding, they would be surrounded by the SDF from all sides. In this case, it would be more logical to control the M4 road and eventually take Manbij to connect to the Euphrates Shield areas. This would also **split (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/tal-abyad-achilles-heel-of-the-syrian-kurdish-belt>)** the SDF-controlled areas in two. President Erdogan **himself said (<https://www.iletisim.gov.tr/english/haberler/detay/turkey-embraces-all-the-world-and-humanity-and-strives-to-find-just-solutions-to-problems>)** during his UNGA speech that Ankara wants a 30 kilometers deep peace, which could be extended to Raqqa and Deir ez Zor. These words suggest that Erdogan’s final goal is to completely eliminate the SDF. However, this potential outcome depends on the stance of the international community.

In response, Ilham Ahmed, the co-president of the Syrian Democratic Council—the political wing of the SDF—said to the author that “Turkey’s Erdogan has an eye on all Syria, especially the northeast of the country where the land is rich, to confiscate the energy and resources there.”

After Turkey started to bomb Ain al Issa and threatened to cut the SDF-held area in two by planning to capture the strategic town, U.S. troops moved out of Kobani and Ain al Issa. As a result, the SDF took the bitter decision to invite the Syrian government to come to the border territories of northern Syria to stop further Turkish attacks and extension into Syrian territory. However, an SDF source says that so far, Syrian forces have only been deployed in Manbij and Kobani. Therefore, it remains to be seen in the coming months if Turkey will continue its operations, and if Damascus and Russia allow Turkey to further expand. ❖

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