

Syrians Are Increasingly Recognizing Turkey's Disrupting Role in Syria

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Brief Analysis

Two weeks ago, Turkish authorities released the [Syrian brigadier general Ahmed Rahal](https://syrianobserver.com/EN/news/61488/defected-brigadier-general-ahmad-rahah-released.html) (<https://syrianobserver.com/EN/news/61488/defected-brigadier-general-ahmad-rahah-released.html>)—who had originally defected from the Syrian regime—after months of detention that observers claim is due to his strong and public critique of the Syrian National Army and the policies of Turkish-backed forces in the liberated areas. Rahal's detention represented the height of discontent in the Syrian military circles operating in the opposition-controlled northern region of Syria, due both to their own lack of support and the challenges of displacement faced by Syrian civilians, both facilitated in part by Turkey.

This is not the first time that Turkey has faced criticisms from Syrians that had previously aligned with it. Earlier this year, Turkish-backed Syrian forces dealt with the unexpected resignation of the dissident Commander Fadlallah Al-Hajji from his position in the leadership of the National Liberation Front and from the General Staff of the National Army in the Idlib sector. His resignation came as a particular shock since the commander-in-chief was considered to be supported by the Turkish government.

Nor has this been a phenomenon relegated to individual officers. [Approximately 2,000 soldiers of Homs origin withdrew from the Syrian National Army to establish an independent faction under the name of Khaled Ibn Al-Walid, though the troops were pressured into rejoining afterwards.](#) Officers and soldiers from the Syrian National Army—affiliated with the Ministry of Defense in the interim government, which was formed from a group of factions that still operate in the areas under the opposition—have also resigned in protest against direct Turkish interference in naming leaders and granting positions without observing established military hierarchy. The trend suggests a major rift between Turkish policy towards its ostensible allies on the ground and Turkey's claimed support for Syrians against Assad's suppression.

On the military front, Turkey has been accused of controlling supply shipments and their conditions, imposing subordination on troop formations, and not cooperating with Syrian leaders in directing the courses. What's more, some Syrian officers have become [increasingly concerned](https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2020/02/syrian-regime-offensive-turkey-army.html) (<https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2020/02/syrian-regime-offensive-turkey-army.html>) with the timing and management of the battles, especially when they notice how these battles have led to compromises between Russia

and Turkey that are designed along the two countries' interests without regard for what the Syrian fighters see as a benefit to Syria.

Though Turkey often points to its Syrian allies as a sign that their role in Syria is welcomed, many in the Turkish-backed Free Syrian Army believe that the cessation of support from other sources marked the beginning of a strengthening Turkish hegemony over them that has ultimately weakened them as a fighting force. They see Turkish backing as affecting the independence of their decision-making and transforming the Syrian National Army from a Syrian institution standing against the Assad regime to a Turkish army extending into Syria.

This impression has been solidified among Syrian officers through the quick and easy takeover of major and strategic cities such as Saraqib, Kafranbel, and Maarat al-Numan by the Russians and the regime. These cities were lost from the lack of agreed-upon Turkish supplies that would support the factions. This issue has played a fundamental role in the Turkish retreat from the vital M4 and M5 highways. Military personnel from the area said that the entry of Turkish forces to this area was not to support the strategic observation points controlled by the Syrian forces, nor to deter the regime from advancing, but to prepare for a **strategic ceasefire** (<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-security/russia-turkey-agree-ceasefire-deal-for-syrias-idlib-idUSKBN20S161>), reached between Russia and Turkey in March.

Russia and Turkey have since conducted **joint patrols** (<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/3/15/russia-turkey-begin-joint-patrols-along-syrias-m4-highway>) on these highways—though Russia has been absent from some—after emptying the surrounding area of the resident population and the military factions. This area goes from Turunbah, southeast of Idlib, to Ain al-Hour, north of Lattakia. Despite attempts to control this area, there are still bombings and violence that cause deaths and injuries among the ranks of the Russian and Turkish armies.

Previous military confrontations between the regime's militias and Turkish forces led to a large number of deaths in the ranks of the Turkish army for the first time in the years-long conflict, sparking popular anger within Turkey. The Turkish government was able to capitalize on this anger, using it as pretext to mobilize a larger military presence in Syria. In these cases, an influx of Turkish military did not bring rescue for Turkish-backed Syrian forces. They moved deliberately and strategically to achieve Turkish goals. The resulting Turkish pressure on Russia brought the two to paths of **previous bilateral** (<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/10/22/full-text-of-turkey-russia-agreement-on-northeast-syria>) understandings that took place in Sochi, Moscow, and elsewhere.

While Syrian military units chafe under Turkey, Syrian civilians have also suffered under Turkey's policies, as Turkey and Russia, among others, continue their interest-based conflict and pursue what policies best suit their interests. Though different on the surface, Turkey's response to the mass displacement of Syrian civilians has mirrored its attitude towards the Syrian military units it ostensibly supports.

Reading between the lines, it is clear that forced and violent displacement of the Syrian population has been an objective in and of itself for the Syrian regime since the beginning of the war. The call for a **'homogeneous Syria'** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/a-turn-towards-idlib-in-syria-and-the-homogenization-of-a-country>) has demanded racial liquidation and demographic change. Such trends appear in the **exchange agreements** (<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/07/18/syria-buses-arrive-to-evacuate-two-rebel-besieged-shia-towns/>) in the four cities—Zabadani, Daraya, Kafraya and Al Fu'ah—within an Iranian agreement with the Headquarters for the Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, before which it was agreed to empty Old Homs and the neighborhood of al-Waer after an Iranian-sponsored starvation of civilians.

Many of the inhabitants of the Syrian interior—fleeing this liquidation—ended up in Idlib. There, Turkey has mobilized them along with Idlib's inhabitants into what essentially constitutes a human border wall of the Sunni Arab component opposed to the Assad regime. These civilians have also been depleted, displaced and resettled in

the areas of the Kurdish-Turkish conflict of protection where they constitute a deterrent in the path of Kurdish separatist tendencies in that region. The Turkish government legitimizes this practice under the title of establishing a safe zone inhabited by the displaced, even if this is a new displacement of its original inhabitants as happened in Afrin.

Turkey has become blatant in its willingness to use the Syrian refugee population, along with the fact that it controls the corridor between Syria and Europe, as a means of pressuring the international community when needed, whether to request aid or to increase pressure to implement its "safe" border zone project. Turkey has relied on its threat to allow immigrants across its borders within the conditions of countries with conflicting interests in Syria. In this case, the preference of Turkey's preferred solution is inevitable, and this is what appears to be the unspecified reasoning of these terms.

Meanwhile, the Turkish-Russian understandings led to Russia's and the regime's acquisition of influence over both international trade routes on the M4 and M5 along with strategic cities in reciprocation for other areas of Turkish influence. This demonstrates the focus on Turkish strategic goals over those still fighting against Assad for Syria. Instead, Turkey appears to be working to build a population of displaced Syrians along the Turkish-Syrian border. The Ain al-Arab District is still under Russian control, and it is no secret that the city of Kobani is the connecting point for the realization of that human barrier between Turkey and the Kurdish forces, built at the expense of starving and homeless Syrians, left hoping for a solution to bring them back to their original cities and destroyed homes.

For years, Syrians have heard the international desire for a political solution in Syria. Yet this solution that the international community has marketed through the High Negotiations Committee and then the Syrian Constitutional Committee remains incomplete.

Syrians know that no solution will emerge without equalizing the forces between the parties to the conflict. Therefore, they believe that there should be U.S. support and empowerment of a Syrian national army project that includes the military competencies that have distanced themselves both from the regime and Turkish control. These now-frustrated forces could form the nucleus for an army that falls under a comprehensive Syrian political umbrella and holds the possibility of uniting into a single disciplined entity committed to the interests of a unified Syria supportive of its citizens. Such an organization would recognize international agreements and take into account the neighborhood and common interests.

Here, Syrian civilians need a military to fight for them; a Syrian national army fighting for the Syrian people would focus on strengthening security, thereby opening up safe corridors to return refugees from abroad and internally displaced people to their original cities, as stipulated by the Caesar Act. It is this type of force that neither Turkey nor any other force located in Syria have, and that will help drying up the sources of religious and ethnic extremism in the country while working towards a new beginning for a stable, safe and free Syria. ❖

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