

The Fate of Tel Rifaat Hangs in the Balance

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Brief Analysis

On July 2, the Turkish army reportedly shelled Kurdish forces in the Northern Aleppo region of Tel Rifaat, following a similar incident in mid-June where the Turkish Defense Ministry reported killing ten Kurdish soldiers in retaliation for the death of a Turkish soldier. These recent intermittent skirmishes reflect how Tel Rifaat remains a potential flash-point in the hotly contested region of Northwest Syria, where Kurdish, Russian, Turkish, and Syrian armed forces are all in close proximity.

Close to the Turkish border and sandwiched between Syrian regime controlled Aleppo and pro-Turkish forces, Tel Rifaat is a particular focus for Turkey due to the fact that it is the final outpost of Kurdish forces in western Syria. The Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) initially entered Tel Rifaat, some nearby villages, and the adjacent Menagh Military Air Base in mid-February 2016 under Russian air cover. At the time, Tel Rifaat was the latest military success for Kurdish forces attempting to unite the predominantly Kurdish city of Afrin—captured by the YPG in 2012 after regime forces withdrew—and the autonomous Kurdish region of Rojava in Eastern Syria into an autonomous Syrian-Kurdish state.

While these areas were under the control of the YPG and unofficial Russian protection, the local population of the Tel Rifaat region was majority Arab; when the YPG entered into Tel Rifaat; hundreds of families living there were displaced. Turkey took this incident as an excuse to continuously harass the Kurdish-controlled areas along its southern border extending from the Tigris river in the east to Afrin in the west, though the eastern and western regions remained separated by pro-Turkish forces.

In response, the Kurdish leadership demanded on several occasions that the Syrian opposition sign an agreement reducing intervention in their areas in exchange for returning the area of Afrin to the opposition. Up to the last moment before the battle of Afrin, the Kurdish city now occupied by the Turkish army and a number of radical Sunni opposition militias, the Kurds kept trying to protect the area from the regime and its Iranian allies.

Tel Rifaat's status shifted dramatically in January 2018, when Turkish military operations against the YPG in Afrin led Russian military protection to unexpectedly evacuate from the city and relocate to the Tel Rifaat area. This allowed pro-Turkish forces to take Afrin. Whereas before the greater Afrin region was under Kurdish occupation

with both Arab majorities and Kurdish majorities, the situation reversed into a complete Turkish occupation of entirely Kurdish areas as well as the initially disputed Arab majority areas.

Meanwhile, Tel Rifaat and Menagh remained under YPG control with semi-official Russian protection. The Kurdish presence in these areas served as a major propaganda tool continued to serve for pro-Turkish forces in the region. Nevertheless, and in spite of repeated vows by the Turkish government to retake these areas, they remained protected from Turkish advances.

Clearly, none of the forces in the northern Aleppo region are standing on solid ground; they are essentially all outsiders relative to the civilian populations of the lands they control. On the one side, Turkey is occupying Kurdish Afrin and recruiting Sunni Syrian militants to carry out terrible missions there. On the other, Russia is maintaining the Kurdish militants in Arab-majority Tel Rifaat and preventing the original residents from returning. Nevertheless, these are not equivalent situations. Afrin is much larger than Tell Rifaat, and the militias from the YPG are Syrian citizens, whereas the Turkish forces are foreign occupying forces.

The situation is further complicated by the ambivalent relationship between Russia and Turkey when it comes to Syria. When Turkey shot down a Russian plane on November 24, 2015, the world waited for Russia's wrath. Instead, the Russians decided to increase their media pressure and rely on non-Russian forces to pressure Turkey to push it to follow Russia's lead in Syria. The Kremlin not only began to support Kurdish forces in Syria, but it also supplied elements of the Kurdish PKK—the Kurdish separatist group within Turkey that the state considers a terrorist group and a major driver of its policy towards Kurds—with Russian Igla man-portable surface-to-air missiles. The PKK subsequently used these missiles to bring down a Turkish helicopter on May 13, 2016 in Turkey's southeastern Hakkari province.

Many interpreted this support for the PKK as a message from Russia that if Turkey failed to yield to Russian interests in Syria, the war would come to Turkey. The Turks understood the message and bowed to Russia's lead in a number of cases, creating the current uneasy situation. In the same context, the Russians manipulated Turkish sentiment and stirred up feelings against the United States on the pretext that Washington intended to create a Kurdish state in northern Syria, despite Kurdish and American voices repeatedly denied such a plan.

The Kurdish battalions that remained in the Tel Rifaat area and guarded the camps of displaced Kurds from Afrin have lived in a tense environment, well within reach of the Turkish pincers. Yet Kurdish forces have no intention of surrendering to Turkey unless a deal is reached in which Turkey offered additional concessions in a land swap. There is talk of a deal in which Turkey would hand over North Hama and Southern Idlib regions to the Syrian regime in exchange for Tel Rifaat, in spite of the fact that the Russians are clearly trying to keep the region as a final link between them and the YPG.

As the Russians do not want the Kurds and their Arab allies to be strong U.S. allies, Russian forces, in addition to providing support, are promising a glorious return to Afrin. And although the Kurds do not fully trust Russia, this promise is the only hope available to liberate the third of Kurdish territory in Syria from Turkey.

In light of these complex circumstances and dangerous course of events, international actors in Syria have a number of responsibilities if they do not wish to see the situation at this pressure point deteriorate further. In particular, it is incumbent on the United States to pressure Turkey to avoid battles with the YPG and to negotiate with Kurdish parties in both Turkey and Syria in order to arrive at a roadmap for peaceful coexistence. Washington must likewise work side by side with Moscow to protect Tel Rifaat and the Kurds who guard it from upcoming battles. Ultimately, a deal must be reached whereby Turkey withdraws from Afrin in exchange for handing over Arab regions in north Aleppo to the Syrian opposition.

However, until progress is made on the diplomatic front, the current situation will only lead to further chaos. The

pressure of deteriorating circumstances makes it all the more important that Washington effectively intervene and help find a solution for an area that has long been a source of trouble both regionally and internationally. Finally, all parties must come to realize that precariously held territories cannot provide a foundation for lasting solutions for northwest Syria. ❖

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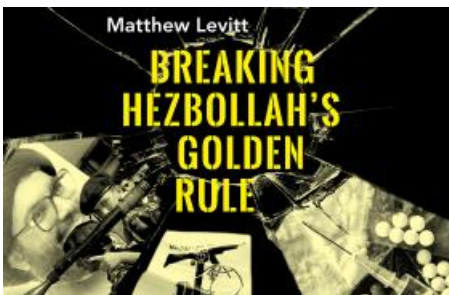
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