

How the Autonomous Administration Leadership and Civilians Will View a Turkish Incursion into Northeast Syria

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Jul 18, 2022

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Brief Analysis

With the threat of a Turkish incursion into Northeast Syria, the SDF weighs their options while the area’s civilians express their frustrations and concerns about all parties involved.

For years, Turkey has viewed the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (Rojava) and its military forces as a threat lying just beyond its borders. Ties between Rojava’s leaders and the Kurdistan Workers’ Party in Qandil have led Turkey to draw upon the 1998 Adana Agreement with Hafez al-Assad to allow its forces to enter five kilometers into Syrian territory in case of a security threat.

Fears across the border are rising with Turkey’s announcement of a new operation to create a 30-kilometer-deep security corridor, and Erdogan’s claim that Turkish forces would “cleanse” Manbij and Tell Rifaat of terrorists and gradually do the same in other areas. These two locations in the eastern Aleppo countryside—currently under the control of the U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)—are 30 and 18 km respectively from the Turkish border. Both have a local Arab population, as well as thousands of Kurds forcibly displaced from Afrin during Turkey’s prior operation.

The SDF has responded to Turkey’s threats and mobilization by raising the regime’s flag, insinuating to Ankara that they will have to deal with Bashar al-Assad if they attack these areas. Farhad Shami, SDF's head of communications said in a statement that the SDF had been bracing for this battle with Turkey for some time, adding that if Turkey attacked, the forces would stop fighting ISIS in order to start military operations against the Turkish invasion.

Kurdish Leadership on a Shift Towards Russia and the Assad Regime

Turkey’s movements are playing into Russian pressure on the SDF to join with the Syrian regime’s forces, according to Russia’s special envoy to Syria, Alexander Lavrentiev. In response to the Russian request to incorporate the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) within the al-Assad regime, Ilham Ehmed, chair of the Syrian Democratic Council, stated in a meeting recently held in Raqqa that the SDF had “become a force to be reckoned with” and that would be best to

find a proper solution. This speech appeared to suggest that the SDF was weighing a political solution that would integrate the SDF and the Syrian army via certain mechanisms given the new Turkish threat.

Mohammed Musa, the secretary of the Kurdish Left Party in Syria, stated that the council has never been against dialogue with the Assad regime because it fully believes that an ultimate political solution must come from Syria. He noted, however, that while Russia was trying to impose settlements along the lines of what happened in Damascus and Daraa, the council would never accept this. Musa added that Russia wanted to compel the Syrian Democratic Forces and its political affiliates to surrender and hand the northern Syrian region on a silver platter, but that Russia and the Assad regime would need to accept the facts on the ground before an agreement could be made.

Yet the U.S.-backed SDF has recently lost some of their regional allies as a result of changing political dynamics; these allies have become less supportive in the wake of an obvious rapprochement between Ankara and the Gulf. The SDF must consequently depend more fully on the U.S. for support. But it is instead the Assad regime pushing back most forcefully against Turkey: Assad threatened that he could bomb Turkey and called the latter's presence in northern Syria a form of occupation. He simultaneously accused the Autonomous Administration (AA) and the Kurdish forces of conspiring with foreign powers, suggesting his opposition to SDF leader Mazloum Abdi's request for air support against the planned Turkish operations.

Riad Darar, co-leader of the Syrian Democratic Council, has stated that the response to any Turkish military operation in northern Syria must occur in coordination with the al-Assad regime in order to protect the country's borders. On the other hand, he notes that the regime-affiliated Syrian army had become weak and developed a poor reputation after depleting its forces in operations inside Syria instead of carrying out its duty to defend the country's borders. He likewise echoed the idea of an agreement being possible if restructuring occurred.

Views from the Ground

The residents of the area, who are mostly Arabs or Kurds, are nervously following the signs of cooperation between the Autonomous Administration (AA) and the Assad regime at the military level. There are border protection patrols from the Assad regime that have approval permits from SDF leadership to pass through the area that allow them to cross through checkpoints between Regime-held and AA-controlled territories. In the security sphere, those who are wanted by security branches of the Assad regime, and especially those who were involved in the uprising against it, are afraid that the AA might hand them over in a future deal. There has also been demonstrable growth in shell companies, which work in money laundering and are owned by people close to both the Autonomous Administration and the al-Assad regime.

On the other hand, local residents' views of a potential Turkish incursion are shaped by frustration with all involved parties. Relatively speaking, the Kurdish areas of northeastern Syria escaped much of the destruction the regime wrought on other parts of Syria. Nevertheless, the region's infrastructure is struggling, and there are areas without access to water or electricity. Residents are also concerned about the AA educational system, which remains unrecognized within Syria's established educational system. Many choose to send their children instead to regime-run or private schools to ensure that they will be able to apply to Syrian universities and have their education recognized.

The switch to regime schooling is one example of how regime institutions continue to operate in the Autonomous Administration areas, including even security institutions. Though the area did experience clashes with the Assad army, several residents pointed to its relative lack of destruction as a sign of how the AA had cooperated with the Assad regime.

One Kurdish resident explained: "The al-Assad regime ordered PKK fighters to come down from the Qandil Mountains at the beginning of the peaceful revolution in order to suppress it. The Autonomous Administration

protected a wide stretch of the northern border for the regime during the years after the revolution. But the people here never saw the money from oil and gas revenues, except some traders and businessmen who had close ties with the Autonomous Administration. Damascus and Qandil took a share too.”

Some Kurds do not feel that the Democratic Union Party, Autonomous Administration, or Syrian Democratic Forces represent them. They in fact express indifference to Turkish threats, stating that they are already defeated and are suffering from rising costs of living, corruption, and despair of any solution. These attitudes are shared by many non-Kurds as well.

Of a number of prominent Kurdish intellectuals in Qamishli interviewed for their views on the potential incursion, some suggested that the SDF are trying to act like their only choice is to fall into the arms of the regime—they have already been making overtures. This process began during the siege of the Sheikh Masoud neighborhood by the 4th Armored Division, when Aldar Khalil stated that they were not planning to remove the regime’s forces from al-Hasakah and Qamishli. The Democratic Union Party (PYD), others explain, naturally favors working with the regime because of the composition of its parent group, the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK), which has been pulled into the orbit of the Iran-Syria axis, which also includes the Popular Mobilization Forces.

Some interviewees suggested that the SDF and Democratic Union Party would choose to work together to form a democratic coalition governing body. This would involve holding a conference that includes all democratic forces, holding elections for a bicameral legislature (with one chamber operating on the quota system and the other via free elections), and establishing a unified national army that includes all of the factions with a democratic approach.

As one respondent put it: “Yes, some of the Democratic Unity Party members might want to turn to the regime, but the decision to dissolve the Autonomous Administration and join the regime is not really on the table for most people. The regime is a dead body that the Russians haven’t and won’t be able to breathe life into. It’s not an acceptable way forward for Rojava. Maybe we’re heading towards a power vacuum, and we’ve begun to see some signs of that. The SDF seems desperate; there’s no hope of U.S. support.”

A Kurdish lawyer from Ras al-Ayn, also believes that the SDF’s options are very limited. The only remaining option to prevent the AA’s institutional collapse, in his view, is to make a deal with the regime to hold onto its few remaining areas of control in the al-Hasakah governorate, the Deir ez-Zor countryside, and Raqqa. From his perspective, the United States sees Turkey as its ally, and this is not going to change despite conflicts that arise from time to time. The United States is not going to drop Turkey as an ally in favor of the SDF. In contrast, he added, “I don’t think that the U.S. will allow the regime to expand into areas that U.S. forces control. The SDF will maintain control of these areas in the same way it does now.”

The respondent emphasized that others likewise had little trust in the United States—especially the Kurds. He pinpointed a countervailing current in attitudes, with some feeling – after Turkey took control of Afrin, Sere Kaniye/Ras al-Ayn, and Tell Abyad – that it would have been better to hand over the area to the regime than to deal with Turkey and its Syrian National Army mercenaries. This was because of the demographic change and settlements that were established with the support of Islamist organizations or Arab countries in areas where Turkish forces had previously intervened. As a result, those residents who were interviewed preferred to be under Assad’s control than to come under Turkish influence.

The Turkish forces targeted the populations in these areas, especially since the brigades incorporated under the Syrian National Army acted completely lawlessly toward the Kurdish populations. For example, there are now only 29 Kurdish residents in Sere Kanive/Ras al-Ayn, out of the 40,000 who lived among Christian and Yazidi residents. Only 8 out of the 5000 Christian residents and no Assyrians are left in the area. In addition to that, none of the 17 Yazidi villages now remain. A resident of Ras al-Ayn also had a very negative impression of the Turkish-backed

Syrian National Army.*

And yet, with regard to the upcoming Turkish military operation, another resident from the Qamishli area stated that: “What I hear and see is that people are not concerned about a potential Turkish attack. The Turkish-backed Syrian National Army that would take control of the area isn’t popular among some internally-displaced Arabs in the area, and some would have preferred Jabhat al-Nusra [rebranded as Hayat Tahrir al-Sham].”

He added that while residents didn’t want the regime to come back, they were frustrated with the AA. With living conditions deteriorating, the general state of chaos has reduced opposition to Turkey. If the highly unpopular Syrian National Army attacked, no one would resist. The respondent stated: “They say [they] kidnap civilians in Afrin but here they kidnap and kill civilians too.”

On the other hand, some residents have benefitted from the Autonomous Administration; most of the major supermarkets and profitable operations in the area are owned by internally displaced persons from Ayn al-Arab/Kobani and from Ras al-Ayn, rather than local residents from the Qamishli area. In fact, the Qamishli respondent felt that the city’s original residents had been treated unjustly by both oppressive authorities, especially in Qamishli, and have resulted in rising prices and rents. This began when the U.S. announced it would reduce the sanctions imposed on the area under the Caesar Act.

One respondent stated that Qamishli had not felt the effects of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) operations near Afrin, or even realized what HTS was doing. He said that the PYD’s negative sentiments and mobilization against the Syrian National Army were not directed against HTS. He characterized the PYD’s pushback against the Syrian National Army as stronger even than ISIS—which decapitated people in Kobani.

In general, the respondent said that people did not pay much attention to military developments and that people were overwhelmed with the difficult conditions in their daily lives as shaped by the Assad regime, Autonomous Administration, and those special cadres within the area (i.e., the PKK trainees). As another respondent said, although it may seem like the decision was in the people’s hands, it was still really in the hands of the Assad regime and those forces taking orders from the Revolutionary Guard.

The Syrian Democratic Forces’ military council in Manbij (in the Aleppo countryside) did not allow the regime’s forces to enter the city several days ago. This was a strategic step that served two purposes. First, it got Turkey’s attention that the SDF’s withdrawal from the area would put it back on the map for Assad and that the SDF might hand over Manbij to Assad if Turkish pressures on the SDF continue to grow. The second purpose involves pressuring Russia and Assad to come to a deal that is palatable to the Syrian Democratic Council.

Turkey has clear ambitions to take control the border city of Ayn al-Arab/Kobani, which is one of the main bases for Kurdish leadership. This would allow it to link the areas captured during Operations Euphrates Shield and Olive Branch into a new area and expand its control along the Syrian border. Ankara is interested in carrying out an operation to bolster its border security, undermine Kurdish militias and their forces in Syria, which are hostile to Turkey, and stamp out the Kurdish state at its border.

*The number of inhabitants remaining in Ras al-Ayn has been updated. ❖

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