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# Snap Elections, Syria Incursions: Turkey's Challenges and Risks

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Brief Analysis

**A panel of experts and policymakers grapples with the weighty implications of Turkey's early elections at home and its military intervention in Syria's Afrin pocket.**

*On April 24, Gonul Tol, Aaron Stein, and Col. Rich Outzen addressed a Policy Forum at The Washington Institute. Tol is founding director of the Middle East Institute's Center for Turkish Studies. Stein is a resident senior fellow at the Atlantic Council's Rafik Hariri Center for the Middle East. Outzen is a senior U.S. Army advisor and a member of the State Department Policy Planning Staff. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.*

## GONUL TOL

**P**olls indicate that 80 percent of Turks support Operation Olive Branch, Ankara's military incursion in northwest Syria. Perhaps more surprising, 90 percent of respondents regard the United States as a national security threat. The latter sentiment stems from Washington's 2014 decision to airdrop weapons to the People's Defense Units (YPG), the Syrian Kurdish group allied with longtime Turkish nemesis the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK). America's refusal to extradite accused coup plotter Fethullah Gulen is a problem for many Turks as well.

Ankara's primary reason for the Afrin operation was to boost President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's reputation prior to early elections, now scheduled for June 24. Every step of his foreign policy is geared toward domestic politics, and Afrin was considered a success at home because he made Turkey a player in Syria.

In geopolitical terms, the Turkish government wanted to act because it found itself isolated and disillusioned in Syria amid the strengthening U.S.-YPG alliance. After Washington announced that it would back a 30,000-strong border force led by the YPG and its fellow militias in the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), Ankara concluded that America's relationship with the Kurds was no longer merely transactional. Russia seemed to feel the same way and soon gave Turkey the green light for Olive Branch.

As a result, however, Turkey has put all of its eggs in the Russian basket, and it remains the weaker partner in that bilateral relationship. Evidence of Turkish forces building post offices and teaching their native language in Syrian schools suggests that Erdogan wants to stay in Syria for the long haul, but Moscow still calls the key shots. Russia has already signaled that Turkey should withdraw from the area, and Iran has sent similar messages.

In response, Ankara has seemingly tried to rebalance relations with Washington by supporting the recent U.S.-led strike against Syria's chemical weapons assets, though it did not allow Incirlik Air Base to be used in that operation. More broadly, Erdogan will likely seek to capitalize on the nationalist sentiment that has peaked at home since the Afrin operation by pressing on with the intervention before Moscow pressures him to withdraw.

On the political front, the 2017 constitutional referendum to transform Turkey from a parliamentary to a presidential system was a narrow, difficult win for Erdogan. The initiative failed in major cities, and opposition parties are now hoping to ride that sentiment into electoral victories. If the opposition unites and declares former president Abdullah Gul as their candidate, they could siphon some votes away from Erdogan's Justice and Development Party.

Yet the playing field in June's elections will not be level. Many key opposition figures are in jail, almost 90 percent of the media is under government control, and new legislation has opened the door for significant voter fraud. These elections are the opposition's last chance, so Erdogan will do anything in his power to win.

## AARON STEIN

**T**urkey's actions in Syria have shown a certain strategic incoherence, as Ankara wavers between acting on its own and serving as an appendix to the Syria-Iran-Russia alliance. The factors driving its policy are mostly security-related. The PKK has picked up its activity in Turkey since July 2015, and Ankara is determined to deny the terrorist group a safe haven. Unlike European leaders, Erdogan sees the Islamic State (IS) as a law enforcement problem and the PKK as a military problem. Accordingly, Turkish forces have destroyed some PKK havens in Syria and are threatening to do the same in Sinjar, Iraq.

Both Olive Branch and Turkey's previous incursion into Syria, Operation Euphrates Shield, have advanced deep enough to divide and roll back the YPG. The United States is focused on defeating IS and has only one Syrian partner for that mission: the SDF. Yet Washington also has to balance the support it lends to this partner with its consideration for fellow NATO member Turkey. Ankara's incursions succeeded because the United States has been

incrementally shifting away from the SDF/YPG, with Washington apparently concluding that it cannot achieve all of its counter-IS goals in Syria without making concessions to Turkey. The SDF-controlled town of Manbij is now the centerpiece in U.S.-Turkish talks, and Ankara will once again try to wrest concessions from Washington.

Yet the pathway for bilateral cooperation is narrowing due to a number of festering problems, including Ankara's announced intent to acquire S-400 air defense systems from Russia and its decision to prosecute American pastor Andrew Brunson on terrorism and espionage charges. One of Washington's concerns with the S-400 sale is that the Russian system could eventually be plugged into the same military data network as U.S. F-35 jets transferred to Turkey, creating a security breach. Washington has repeatedly transmitted such concerns to the Turkish government, but Ankara is not listening—an indication that Russia's cooperation may come with political strings attached.

As for the June elections, Erdogan still has strong numbers despite negative trends in the economic and counterterrorism sectors. To maximize their chances, Turkish parties should field their own individual candidates in the first round of the vote before presenting a joint candidate in the second round—assuming Erdogan does not manage to win a 50 percent majority during the first round.

## **RICH OUTZEN**

**A**fter working with Turkish officials over time, one senses that their geopolitical thinking is shaped by the idea that territory confers legitimacy. This mindset fosters a hardheaded approach to surrounding waters and land—indeed, problems in the bilateral relationship sharpened when the United States became more active in neighboring areas. Many American officials still do not view the partnership with the YPG as a dangerous one, but that has been Turkey and Russia's perception ever since the group began gaining legitimacy.

Ultimately, Washington wants the Syrian government to re-extend its sovereignty across the country following a political transition away from the Assad regime, but drawing down the U.S. military presence is a central goal as well. The challenge lies in how to reconcile these contradictions.

Turkish forces have been active in northern Iraq since 1992, so they have the appetite to stay in Syria for as long as it takes to reach a political situation that satisfies their minimum security concerns. Foreign officials had several misconceptions about Ankara's posture and capabilities before the Afrin operation. First, many believed that Turkey would not take forceful action in Syria, but it was primed to do so after exhausting other options.

Second, they doubted that Turkey could pull off the Afrin operation because its military was in disarray following the failed coup and subsequent purges. Yet Ankara was well-prepared to conduct a successful mission because it had learned from its mistakes in Euphrates Shield. Third, many believed that Damascus and Russia would prohibit Ankara from using Syrian airspace, but Moscow assented after bilateral meetings with Turkish officials in December and January. Fourth, the massive humanitarian crises and major civilian casualties that some believed would occur in Afrin never materialized.

Currently, Manbij is a focal point in bilateral relations, with Ankara and Washington agreeing that the town should be governed by local residents instead of the YPG. Turkey is highly unlikely to expand its military operations there, but the larger issues on the table are potential cause for concern. U.S. officials are running out of patience with Ankara not because they dismiss its opinions, but rather because Congress is no longer willing to tolerate perceived provocations such as the S-400 purchase from Russia, the detention of employees at U.S. missions in Turkey, and the jailing of Pastor Brunson. The main issue with the S-400 is not the system's missiles, but its radar, which could allow Russia to monitor some of America's most advanced technologies. The United States is a great power and will not tolerate direct threats to its interests or continued detention of its citizens, so Turkey should not underestimate the potential impact of its actions.

Despite decades of U.S.-Turkish goodwill dating back to the Cold War, the current downturn presents unique dangers to the relationship. Officials on both sides are trying to limit the damage and work through these difficulties. Diplomatic history is littered with examples of averted disasters, but also missed opportunities for invaluable cooperation. The key to sidestepping both of these pitfalls is patient diplomacy, which offers hope for maintaining mutual understanding in the future.

*This summary was prepared by Egecan Alan Fay.* ❖



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