

Why Does Iran Fear Turkey's Military Operation in Afrin?

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Brief Analysis

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The latest Iranian reaction to the Turkish military operation against the Kurds in Syria's northwest province of Afrin highlights the political complexity of the Syrian case. Though Turkey and Iran have previously demonstrated a high level of political agreement regarding the Kurdish issue in northern Syria, including at the recent Sochi Summit, they both disagree on the current armed conflict in Afrin.

Surprisingly, Iran views the ongoing military operations in Afrin as a challenge to its policy as far afield as Iraq. Since, right after Turkey crossed the border into Afrin, a large number of militias belonging to the pro-Iran Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) withdrew from inside the city of Mosul to its outskirts. The forces that had been stationed on the outskirts were sent to secure the Iraqi-Syrian border against possible Islamic State attacks, and to fill the vacuum left by the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which might redeploy westward toward Afrin. As a result, in the run-up to the May 2018 Iraqi parliamentary elections, the Turkish campaign has allowed Iraqi political parties to operate more freely, away from the pressure of the PMF.

Inside Syria, although Iran has already achieved its most basic need by keeping the Assad regime in power until now, it still views as necessary both the full defeat of the Islamic State (IS) and the continuous attacks by Assad regime forces against remaining opposition outposts in Idlib and Eastern Ghouta. A comeback by IS or a failure in Idlib or Eastern Ghouta has the potential to jeopardize the Assad regime.

At the same time, Iran also opposes the Turkish presence in Afrin as a long-term threat to Assad's future, especially if Turkey and its anti-regime Arab proxies succeed in opening a new front in Aleppo or Manbij, or even on the eastern bank of the Euphrates River. In that case, though for the moment it remains bogged down in Afrin, Turkey could pose a threat to the northern coastal strongholds of the regime, and could even impede Iran's unbridled advance towards the Mediterranean Sea.

Furthermore, Iran fears the possibility of the SDF withdrawing most of their forces stationed in the eastern areas of the Euphrates River and sending them to Afrin to support Kurdish forces. The results could expose the pro-Iran

Afghan Shiite militias stationed on the Iraqi-Syria border and PMF militias concentrated nearby in southern Sinjar and Rabia to IS attacks Estimates indicate the presence of more than 1500 IS-affiliated factions in those areas.

Moreover, if Turkish forces and allied Free Syrian Army remnants do capture Afrin, this would cut off the westernmost end of the “land bridge” created by Iran towards the Mediterranean Sea. Worse yet, from Tehran’s standpoint, the capture of Afrin would lead to the Free Syrian Army carrying out new military operations against the city of Aleppo on the one hand and alleviating pressure on Idlib on the other.

For all these reasons, Iran has attempted to exert pressure on Russia to prevent Turkey from carrying out its military operation. Iran’s Deputy Foreign Minister traveled to Moscow precisely when the military operations were beginning in Afrin, and urged Russia to try to convince Turkey not to proceed with the operation. Iran’s problem is it has no influence whatsoever on Turkey when it comes to Afrin, since there are no Iranian soldiers stationed there.

Beyond official statements of reproach, the Iranian fear of the Turkish military operation is evident in other, semi-official statements. One example is an article by Sadiq Malaki, a former diplomat in the Iranian Foreign Ministry published by an Iranian research center: Iran, he writes, is the only loser in Syria now. The establishment of a Kurdish state in Syria would pose a danger to both Turkey and Iran. But, he added, there is no guarantee that Turkey is not more dangerous than the Kurds to Iranian interests, and therefore Iran must take all appropriate actions to counter the repercussions of Turkish military operations.

Iran has even begun to fear the possibility of being excluded from certain political calculations there. Iran’s need to keep the Assad regime alive means that it still depends on Russian support of that regime So Iran will have to align itself with the Russian decision not to resist Turkish operations in Afrin – notwithstanding Tehran’s great unease with this new situation. Nevertheless, one thing that Iran and Turkey agree about is opposition to current U.S. military policy in Syria. For this reason, even in the midst of the strategic disputes between them, Ankara and Tehran have remained steadfast in their criticism of the United States. Turkey views the continuation of American support of the SDF as tantamount to supporting internal Kurdish separatists Iran, too, views the American presence on the ground in Syria as posing a serious threat to its interests – not just in Syria but also in the entire region. In addition to the American presence, Iran is well aware of the magnitude of other major challenges it is facing in Syria. These include the threats from the remnants the Islamic State, the free army, the Turkish military operations in Afrin. Moreover, there are some signs of a new Saudi role, in addition to the latest Israeli attacks against Assad regime-allied forces and installations. All of these things Iran views as threats which may deny it any future benefits in Syria. Therefore, Iran will do everything it can to preserve its political and military presence, since its defeat in Syria would be considered a historic defeat for its project in the region as a whole. In so doing, Tehran will need to balance its opposition to Turkey’s adventure in Afrin against other, even more, urgent priorities involving Russian, Israeli, and American policies in this complex, war-torn, and tragic conflict arena. ❖

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