

Containing the Afrin Crisis: Turkey's Goals and Military Challenges

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Brief Analysis

Given the continued Islamic State threat in Syria, Washington cannot afford what is shaping up to be a bloody conflagration between allies it needs to eradicate the group.

On January 20, Turkey began an operation to clear Kurdish forces from the northwest Syrian border pocket of Afrin. Despite Ankara's justifications, the operation risks triggering an open-ended war between allies, neutralizing gains made against the Islamic State (IS), and emboldening America's adversaries in Tehran, Moscow, and Damascus. Washington should move quickly to contain the fallout while offering its allies a soft landing; otherwise it may find itself sidelined in Syria.

ERDOGAN'S LINE IS DRAWN AND CROSSED

In July 2012, the Assad regime ceded the Afrin pocket and other border regions to the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD). Nudged by the United States, the Kurds later joined forces with several small Arab rebel brigades to create the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in October 2015. With the help of American airstrikes, weapons, and Special Forces training, the SDF was the major catalyst for the IS collapse in Syria.

The Afrin pocket comprises approximately 1,556 square miles. In February 2016, under the cover of Russian airstrikes, PYD forces captured an additional panhandle of territory stretching up to 10.7 miles long and 27.5 miles wide.

Ankara is suspicious of the PYD, an affiliate of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), which has been fighting the Turkish government since 1984. In July 2012, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan warned that intervening against the PYD in Syria "would be our most natural right." Since then, he has unequivocally declared that he will never accept a

permanent PYD presence to the south, and Turkish forces began shelling the group's positions in 2014. Initially limited to the border towns of Kobane and Tal Abyad east of the Euphrates River, these barrages have become more widespread and frequent over the years.

Then, in June 2015, the Turkish National Security Council concluded that any PYD move west of the Euphrates would constitute a redline necessitating a more robust response. After the Kurds crossed the river to take Manbij, Turkey finally acted on this threat by launching Operation Euphrates Shield in August 2016. Although the Turks publicly stated that their goal was to dislodge IS from the border, their real aim was to prevent the PYD from linking its eastern territory with the Afrin pocket.

Euphrates Shield officially ended in 2017, but the issues that spurred the campaign lingered. Earlier this month, a U.S. military spokesman stated that Washington was planning to transform the SDF into a border force. Shortly afterward, Turkey began intensifying its shelling of Afrin and beating the war drums while directing vitriol at the United States. Washington quickly backtracked, but the rhetorical Rubicon had been crossed.

TURKEY'S MILITARY CHALLENGES

On January 20, Turkey launched Operation Olive Branch, which began with airstrikes and expanded to a ground offensive the next day. It has focused fire on six sectors: the Bursaya Mountains in the east, Bulbul and Shinkal in the north, Raju and Sheikh Hadid in the west, and Jandeiris in the south. Ankara aims to capture towns that hug the border. With elevations reaching 2,000 feet, these towns overlook the valley in which Afrin city is located, so capturing them would cut the pocket in two while giving Turkey control over the entire western border. In addition, capturing Jandeiris would put a stop to the shelling of Reyhanli, an embattled frontier town in Turkey. Seizing the Afrin-Raju road is a key objective as well.

On December 30, around thirty rebel units from the Free Syrian Army (FSA) joined forces to create a new group called the National Army, which is now fighting alongside Turkish forces in Olive Branch. Among the umbrella group's largest contingents are the Levant Corps, the Elite Army, and the Levantine Front. A Levant Corps official claimed that 25,000 rebels were part of the operation, while an Elite Army official put the number at 13,000 and the SOHR estimated 10,000. The true number may be closer to the 7,000 Syrians who participated in Euphrates Shield. The Turks have not divulged how many troops they have committed to Olive Branch, but 4,000 were used in Euphrates Shield. According to Prime Minister Binali Yildirim, Turkish forces are now facing 8,000-10,000 PYD fighters.

In military terms, the Afrin pocket is low-hanging fruit—it has been cut off from other PYD-controlled areas since July 2012 and is surrounded on all sides by Turkey and its allies. This has facilitated a multipronged attack that is unfeasible in areas such as Manbij further east, where the only contact between the two sides is on the border. It also makes resupply extremely difficult for Kurds in Afrin, who are wholly dependent on the Assad regime's largesse. Currently, Damascus aims to bleed Turkey, so it has given the Kurds great leeway in the fight. The equally fickle Russians can close Afrin's airspace to Turkish jets at their discretion.

Turkey might also face some of the same difficulties it experienced in fighting an asymmetrical conflict during Euphrates Shield, where its reliance on heavy armor left it vulnerable to light mobile units with antitank missiles. Its aging tank arsenal also lacks sufficient armor to protect against improvised explosive devices, which the PYD possesses. When facing IS, Turkish troops were hard pressed to perform combined arms operations between armored and infantry units, while close air support for field troops was lacking—one of the reasons why the battle for al-Bab took three months. Units failed to cover their flank against lingering IS fighters after advancing and were forced to rely on the FSA to alleviate the resultant pressure. The PYD's guerrilla origins and hybrid capabilities may well expose the same vulnerabilities. And because Kurdish forces are hemmed in, they are unlikely to flee towns like

IS did in Dabiq and Jarabulus once Turkey rolled in.

Geography and weather are creating obstacles as well. Inclement conditions slowed Turkey's advance on January 26, turning the earth to mud and grounding jets with fog. Large parts of the Afrin pocket are also hilly, making the use of armored vehicles difficult. In short, Olive Branch will prove more challenging than Euphrates Shield, for all of the above reasons.

ANKARA'S REAL GOALS

Turkish leaders have made conflicting statements about the current operation's goals and timeframe. Erdogan stated that he wants to return refugees to Syria, end PYD shelling into Turkey, and continue fighting until the group is "neutralized." On January 21 he said that the operation will end "in a very short time," but he then declared that it would advance up to the Iraqi border far to the east.

Prime Minister Yildirim has been more specific, stating that Olive Branch will create a thirty-kilometer safe zone in four phases. According to a tweet issued by his office, the operation aims to help the FSA seize a 10,000-square kilometer area, even though the Afrin pocket is only around a third of that size. The office further noted the need to prevent the PKK from reaching the Mediterranean Sea by seizing the Amanos Mountains in Turkey, which the group has attacked in the past.

Yet Ankara's real military aim is to end American support for the PYD, collect the weapons the group has received, and force the Kurds to withdraw to the eastern bank of the Euphrates. And in political terms, Erdogan hopes to boost his support before elections that may get moved up (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/will-turkey-call-early-elections>) from their scheduled 2019 date; indeed, most of his comments on the operation have come at campaign-style events.

THREAT TO U.S.-TURKISH RELATIONS

Ankara's relationship with Washington has reached a nadir, and Erdogan's increasing authoritarianism and xenophobic comments are often cited as reasons for the rift. In fairness to him, however, American leaders have repeatedly failed to keep their promises about the PYD and brushed off his concerns about the group's expansion. The two governments are now at loggerheads, unable to even agree on the contents of presidential conversations. In the current atmosphere, it is doubtful that Washington can do anything to reduce tensions short of abandoning the Kurds.

Yet even that dramatic option is unfeasible because IS still poses a threat in Syria, and the PYD/SDF remain Washington's principal partners in countering it. On January 19, for example, a senior State Department noted the ongoing "brutal fight" against the group on both sides of the Euphrates. A week later, IS forces captured territory in al-Hajar al-Aswad south of Damascus.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Washington should seek to placate Turkey without losing its Kurdish-held foothold in Syria, which it needs to fight IS remnants and exert leverage against Iranian and Russian machinations. To this end, it should persuade the PYD to withdraw from Manbij. At the same time, it should enhance the U.S. troop contingent in the city to serve as a buffer between the two adversaries, as it did in March 2017 when it deployed elements of the Army's 75th Ranger Regiment under a "reassure and deter" mission. It should also move soldiers into strategic border regions as a signal to Turkey that it will not allow a full-scale war along the entire frontier. Finally, U.S. officials should consider offering enhanced qualitative intelligence on the PKK, including information on its nerve center in Qandil, Iraq.

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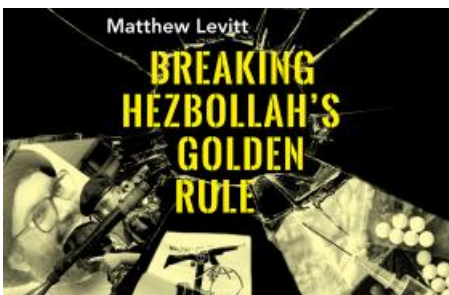
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