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APF Analysis – Syria

The Security Implications of the Turkish Offensive in North-Eastern Syria

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Executive Summary

On 6 October, 2019, during a phone call with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, U.S. President Donald Trump agreed to move American troops out of the Kurdish autonomous region of Rojava in north-eastern Syria. This cleared the way for a Turkish military operation. The U.S. presence in Rojava had been seen by Kurds as a buffer between them and Turkey.

Within three days, anticipating a backlash from the West, on 9 October, Turkey began a military operation against the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in Rojava, ironically named ‘Operation Peace Spring’ designed to create their own buffer zone. Erdogan has long claimed that the Syrian Kurdish political grouping the PYD (Democratic Union Party) is influenced by the PKK (Kurdistan Workers Party) which is a proscribed terrorist organisation.

There is no doubt that there are cultural connections with the two entities but the PYD’s ethos has been democratic cohabitation and the ethnic inclusivity of Kurds, Arabs and Christians, where women can veto proposed legislation and fully participate in all institutional positions. The Kurds in Syria are not pursuing outright independence. They simply wanted to be allowed to continue their indigenous democratic project. However, that is now entirely in jeopardy.

At the start of October 2019, Kurdish authorities in Rojava were anticipating the deepening of their security collaboration with the West. Their sense of sudden abandonment is profound and understandable. It is important to remember that it was the SDF who acted as the ground troops

for the U.S. air strikes, ousting ISIS from north-eastern Syria. It would not have been possible without them. The consequences were around 11,000 casualties, both men and women.

Turkey's Rojava Offensive identifies Tel Abyad and Ras al-Ayn as areas in which Syrian Arabs currently displaced in Turkey could be moved to, at the expense of the Kurds. However, these people also fled Syria to escape the Assad regime and it appears would be forcefully repatriated. Ras al-Ayn's capture means Turkey will try to divide the eastern Kurdish city Qamishli, the de facto capital of Rojava, to all the other Kurdish positions west along the border.

The Kurds were looking for a rescuer from the West but the odds are against that happening. Complicating matters is the support to the Kurds from Syrian President Bashar Assad. Russia has opportunistically stepped in, declaring that the Kurds' only way out is to strike a deal with the Assad regime. Moscow could potentially now be the sole foreign power influencing events in Syria. It raises questions on what that means in terms of ISIS, the prisoners, and what new terrorist entities that may be spawned. An acute and muddling crisis is emerging.

There are around 12,000 ISIS prisoners, and 100,000 women and children who are members of the ISIS fighters' families, being held by the overstretched Kurds whose attention is now focussed on the Turkish invasion. These prisons and camps have become highly dangerous places where ISIS fighters are regrouping. Those that have already escaped pose a significant and existential threat not just to Syria and Iraq, but to the West as well.

With the Kurds having to refocus their attention towards the Turkish incursion, ISIS will exploit the security vacuum and work towards freeing more incarcerated ISIS prisoners. If these prisons were to fall into the hands of Turkey, it could also result in security and intelligence gaps which would result in potential blowback for the West.

Western military forces, as well as law enforcement and intelligence agencies, have been left scrambling to process the consequences and fallout of the Turkish offensive. Turkey's impulsive actions, whilst fully aware of the consequences, will once again change the course of the region, and not for the better. What it means for ethnic cohesion in the region and demographic realignment is now also a major concern. Turkey is already pushing further into north-eastern Syria than they previously had claimed they would.

Equally disconcerting is that the Turkish ground assault contains an assortment of Turkish-backed rebels of various agendas some of whom can be described as Islamist militias and hired mercenaries. Many of the same entities were involved in the 2018 Turkish offensive in Afrin, where half the predominately Kurdish population was displaced amidst serious concerns of human rights violations. Already, there are accusations that Secretary-General of the pro-Kurdish Future Syria Party, Hevrin Khalaf, was murdered by these Turkish-backed forces.

On 11 October 2019, Turkish artillery fire landed near a U.S. military observation post located on the outskirts of Kobane. The U.S. had intended to keep a number of troops there. Turkish forces have cut off the main road between the east and west of Syrian Kurdish territory effectively cutting off Kobane. With the haphazard nature of the Turkish operations, it is possible there could be further incidents putting at risk U.S. forces which is why the Trump administration has now sanctioned the total withdrawal of its forces.

For the West, supporting an autonomous Kurdish region in north-eastern Syria could have enhanced its influence inside a Syrian federal state, and provide stability in the Middle East. Also, it could have served as a platform for halting terrorist migration from neighbouring countries. However, with the Turkish military operations, that prospect looks quite bleak.

A Kurdish Syrian History Lesson

The history of the Kurds in Syria is important to understand in terms of what they have had to endure, long before the Syrian civil war. There were several incidents in the 1960s that symbolised their repression. The infamous fire in a cinema in Amude in 1960 that killed 200 children left a massive psychological scar on their collective conscience because of the lack of apathy from the Syrian state.

Furthermore, as part of the Arabisation policy of Syria in the 1960s, citizenship of around 120,000 Kurds was rescinded, on grounds that they were not indigenous to Syria. This meant that nearly 20% of the Kurdish population in Syria was left disenfranchised and identified as either *ajanib* (foreigners) or *maktumiin* (unregistered people). In 2011, before the Syrian Civil War began, the population of stateless Kurds in Syria was estimated to be 300,000.

Other Arabisation policies that various Syrian government pursued during the 1960s and 1970s included taking away agricultural land from Kurds and redistributing it to Arabs in the Jazira region of north-eastern Syria. The purpose was to create an ‘Arab belt’ along the Turkey-Syria border as a protection against potential Kurdish desire for greater autonomy. Ironically, this is what Erdogan has been trying to construct with the Rojava Offensive.

Under the Assad dynasty, the Kurdish political parties in Syria were illegal and conducted their activities clandestinely. The Kurdish political parties framed their demands around ending the discrimination the Kurds faced and securing political, cultural and social rights for Kurds and the democratic reform of the Syrian state. This was seen as very unlikely before the Arab Spring.

The Kurds and Syrian Civil War

The Kurdish regions became the site of significant security and political developments since the Syrian civil war began in 2011. The withdrawal of Assad regime forces in July 2012 left the Kurds in control of much of the majority Kurdish regions of Syria for the first time and created the conditions for the development of Kurdish political and military institutions.

Since 2011, the PYD has been the dominant political force in the Kurdish majority regions of north-eastern Syria. One of the main factors behind the PYD’s success is due to its military wing, the People’s Protection Units (YPG) whose effectiveness in defending the Kurdish communities against the onslaught from ISIS caught world-wide attention. They were also ably assisted by the Women’s Protection Units (YPJ), many of whom fought on the frontlines.

ISIS’s rhetoric increasingly targeted the secularism of the Kurds and their views on gender equality. With Western support, the Kurds were able to prevent ISIS from spreading its tentacles. The Kurds were also able to provide key intelligence to the West on the activities of ISIS as well as detain tens of thousands of captured ISIS fighters, their wives and children.

The Kurds established the districts of Rojava in January 2014 as an administrative structure to manage their autonomy. In October 2015, the YPG with some of the other opposition groups, including the Arab opposition militia, the Jaysh al-Thuwar (Army of Revolutionaries), founded the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). They controlled around 25 percent of Syrian territory and were at the forefront of the fight against ISIS.

In March 2016, the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria (DFNS) was established and the objective of this Kurdish-led entity was to be a territorially multicultural self-governing region. The DFNS ended the marginalisation of the Kurds and other minorities breaking the Assad regime's dominance and hegemony.

The town of Kobane on the Turkey-Syria border became the centre stage in the struggle between the YPG and ISIS during 2014 and 2015. In the end of January 2015, ISIS was totally driven out of Kobane and in June 2015, the Kurdish forces captured the strategic town of Tell Abyad, which was an ISIS entry point for Foreign Terrorist Fighters (FTFs) to enter Syria from Turkey.

The U.S. Operation Inherent Resolve to 'degrade and destroy' ISIS's infrastructure and assault capabilities worked in tandem with the Kurdish ground assaults. The military support that the Kurdish forces got from the US-led anti-ISIS coalition proved crucial in tipping the balance in favour of the Kurds, but with significant casualties.

Subsequently, the YPG continued to capture more ISIS held territory. The strategically important Tishrin Dam in the Raqqa governorate was liberated by the SDF in the end of December 2015. Further gains were made in the eastern part of Hasakah governorate and the SDF captured the El-Shaddadi town on 20 February 2016.

The United States increased its engagement with the Kurdish forces during 2015 and in 2016 and they started to provide weapons and munitions to the SDF. The close cooperation continued in 2017 and 2018 resulting in some 2,000 U.S. special forces in SDF areas mostly east of the Euphrates River.

In 2017, the SDF focused its attention on driving ISIS from its self-proclaimed capital, Raqqa and the Euphrates River valley in the Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor governorates. With the fall of Raqqa to the SDF in October 2017, the last remaining ISIS enclave was Baghuz which finally fell in February 2019. Virtually all of the territories ISIS used to control in north-eastern Syria were freed by the SDF.

As the Kurdish-ISIS conflict accelerated, many Kurds in Turkey joined the YPG and YPJ. In recent years, Western volunteers began to join the Kurdish forces with as many as 500 at its peak. It should be noted that if a humanitarian crisis emerges following the Rojava Offensive, it is very possible that Western volunteers, both male and female and secular in their beliefs, may choose to support the Kurds in their battle with Turkish forces. That could raise a whole new headache in terms of dealing with people travelling to fight in foreign battles.

The Kurdish Democratic & Gender Equality Construct

It is imperative to comprehend that the Kurdish political parties in Syria do not advocate the creation of their own independent Kurdish state but instead an autonomous pluralist democracy, and recognition of the rights of all the ethnic and religious minorities in Syria. The Kurds' autonomous administration took a more organised form in January 2014 when the districts of Rojava, were established.

The term 'Rojava' means 'west' in the Kurdish language which is locally referred to as Western Kurdistan. Initially three districts were established in Jazira, Kobane and Afrin in the north-east, north and north-west of the country, respectively. On March 17, 2016, the districts of Rojava were brought together under the umbrella federal administration of the Democratic Federal System of Rojava –Northern Syria.

However, at an organising council meeting held on 28 December 2016, the term ‘Rojava’ was removed from the federal administration’s name and currently it is formally known as the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria (DFNS) because it represented the historically Arab populated areas of Tell Abyad, Manbij and Raqqa. Although the Kurds are the main force behind the DFNS, its goals are recognition of diversity and coexistence of the different ethnic groups. The DFNS’s highest officials are Hediya Yousef, who is a Kurd and Mansur Selum, who is an Arab from Tell Abyad.

What is often not commonly known is that there are a number of other organisations that work with the Kurds such as the Syrian Democratic Council (SDC). They were established in December 2015 and comprised of representatives of different ethnic and political groups.

The promotion of women’s rights is an important part of Kurdish politics in Syria and this is carried out through the principle of the co-chair system with elected positions for a man and a woman. The elected positions at the local, district and regional level are all shared by a man and a woman.

In addition to the YPJ, there is also a local female police force, known as the Asayish, which is estimated to number 15,000. Women are part of the political representative institutions at all levels. The system is developed to promote gender equality in political representation.

Through this system, child marriage, forced marriage, dowry and polygamy were banned; honour killings, violence and discrimination against women were criminalized. It is the only part of Syria where sharia councils have been abolished and religion has been consigned to the private sphere.

Turkish Operations in Northern Syria

Despite their importance, Kurdish representatives have not been included in the international attempts to find a solution to the conflict, such as the UN-sponsored Geneva talks, due to the opposition of Turkey and the Syrian opposition groups. Although the West supported the YPG and SDF in their fight against ISIS, it did not press for the inclusion of the Kurdish representatives in the UN-sponsored Geneva conferences for ending the civil war in order to avoid antagonising the Arab opposition or Turkey.

The military and diplomatic support the DFNS had been getting from the West did not deter Turkey’s stance and end its determination to exclude the main Kurdish groups from being represented in the peace negotiations. In addition, the Astana Process led by Russia, Iran and Turkey has the potential to side-line the Kurds altogether.

For Turkey, Kurdish autonomy is seen as a development that will empower the PKK, Erdogan’s primary obsession. Turkey frames its policy towards Syria’s Kurds within its overall policy on management of its Kurdish conflict.

Back in 2013, the Turkish government was in negotiations with the PKK to settle their decades-long conflict. At the time, the leaders of the PYD met with Turkish officials in Ankara twice. However, following the collapse of the negotiations in 2015, relations between the two deteriorated principally because of the politicisation of the negotiations by Erdogan for electoral gains. Subsequently, Ankara made it clear that they will not allow the creation of a Kurdish autonomous region in Syria and will carry out military attacks to prevent it.

In April 2016, the Turkish Air Force carried out attacks against several YPG positions and in November 2016, the Turkish army, supported by the Free Syria Army (FSA) and Islamist militias, started an operation in al-Bab in northern Aleppo to prevent the SDF capturing more territory and establishing a land connection to the Kurdish territory of Afrin. Turkey's antagonistic attitude to the DFNS continued throughout 2017 and it increased its diplomatic efforts to persuade the new Trump administration to end the United States military support to the Kurdish-led forces.

On 8 October 2017, the Turkish army began its deployment of troops in Syria's Idlib governorate as part of the de-escalation plan that Turkey, Russia and Iran agreed on in Astana in September 2017. On 19 January 2018, the Turkish army began shelling Afrin and on the following day carried out an intensive air bombardment with the aim of clearing the YPG presence in Afrin. Turkey's oddly named 'Olive Branch' offensive in Afrin was completed in mid-March 2018. According to the UN, an estimated 183,500 Kurds in Afrin were displaced and sought refuge in Tal Refaat.

With all of Turkey's military operations in Syria against the Kurds, it is pertinent to ask that since the Syrian civil war began, why the Erdogan government did not launch a significant operation to degrade the operational capabilities of ISIS inside Syria? It would imply that ISIS is deemed a lesser concern for Ankara. Therefore, the potential evolving problems are that if ISIS 2.0 successfully re-emerges, will Turkey disrupt their return? and will Erdogan stop a potential new wave of FTFs that intend to travel through Turkey to reach Syria?