

Ankara Calculates the Risks of an Offensive in Northeastern Syria



With the United States on the cusp of a significant withdrawal from northern Syria and Turkey continuing to court better relations with Russia, Ankara is gearing up to cross its southern border to pursue its cherished goal of taking on the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). But even as Turkey might soon enjoy clear sailing into northeastern Syria to seek to drive the SDF away from key positions, particularly around the Euphrates, pitfalls remain. From remaining U.S. forces to possible Russian resistance, Ankara's likely offensive into the area could even drag it into a dangerous conflict with the numerous other countries involved in Syria [1].

NATO Allies in the Way

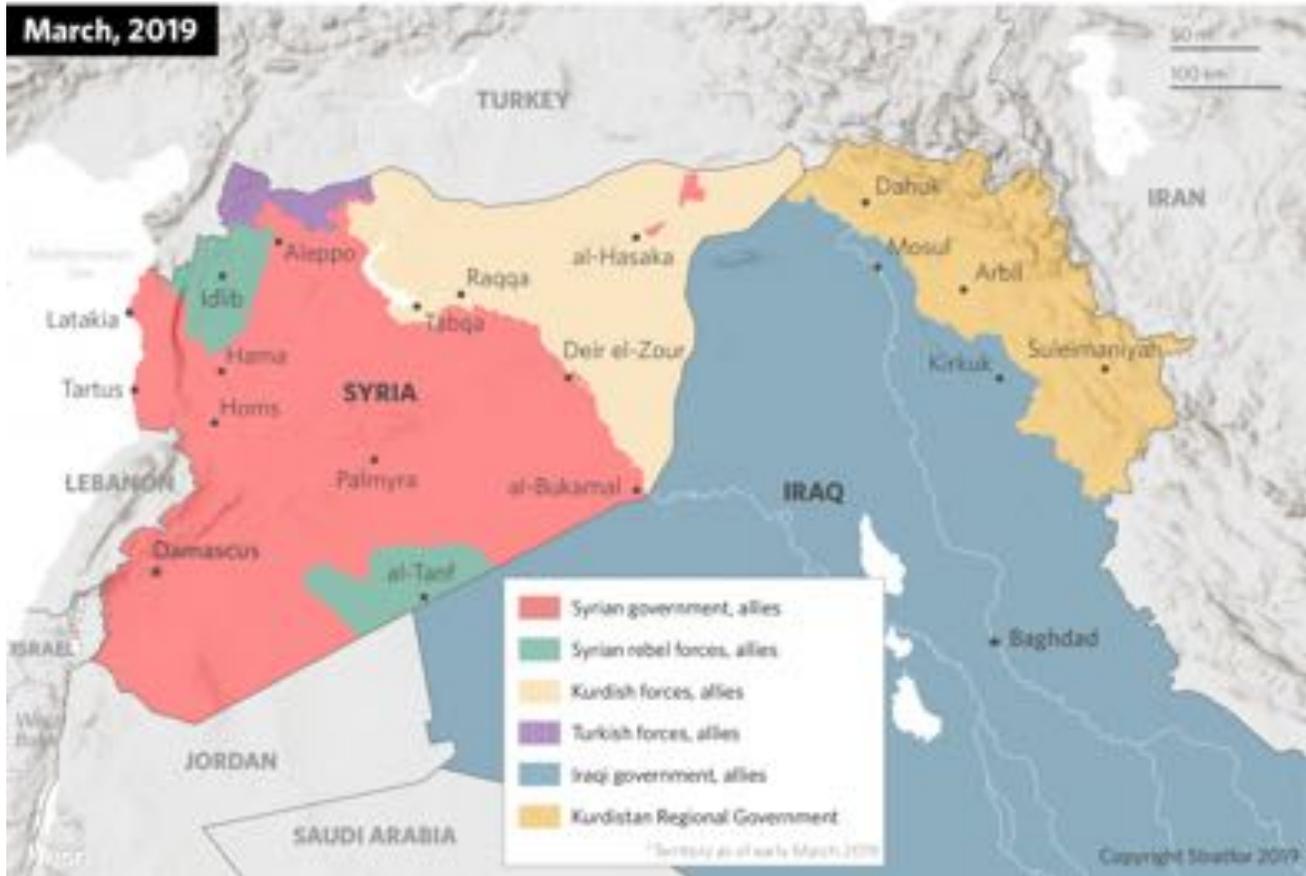
Ever since the People's Protection Units (YPG), a mostly Kurdish militia, emerged as a significant force in Syria [3], the Turks have been focused on ensuring their ultimate defeat. Fearing the YPG's ties with Ankara's archenemy, the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) – particularly the prospect that the latter could use northeastern Syria as a platform to launch potential attacks into Turkey – Ankara has prioritized its efforts to eradicate the YPG above all others in Syria, even over the removal of its main ostensible foe in the country, President Bashar al Assad. Turkey's August 2016 Operation Euphrates Shield to capture parts of northern Syria like Azaz and al-Bab, for instance, came at the cost of supporting the Syrian rebel battle for Aleppo, as Turkey drew a number of rebel forces away from that fight and limited its assistance to the insurgents in the city in exchange for a Russian green light for the operation. Last year, Turkey's Operation Olive Branch dealt a further blow to the YPG by seizing the group's longtime stronghold in Afrin [3]. With the announcement that the United States is drawing down its forces, Turkey's goal of staging another military operation, this time a decisive one east of the Euphrates River to extend Turkey's buffer in Syria, finally appears to be on the cards.

Still, the picture is not entirely rosy for the Turks. Aware of the U.S. penchant for abrupt strategy changes in Syria, Ankara has remained cautious following U.S. President Donald Trump's sudden announcement that he was initiating a full withdrawal of troops from the country [4] pending imminent victory over the Islamic State. As it is, Trump gave Turkey more cause for caution after threatening to "devastate Turkey economically [5]" if it attacked the YPG after the U.S. withdrawal. Indeed, the United States has once again retracted its decision to withdraw all of its forces from the area; instead, it now plans to keep a residual force of 400 personnel in Syria, 200 of whom will remain in SDF areas in the northeast.

Other U.S. allies like France and the United Kingdom could bolster these U.S. forces with their own troops, even if these countries could be wary about deploying significant forces in the absence of a larger U.S. presence on the ground. A few hundred American and allied troops are unlikely to deter Turkish military operations against the SDF in such a large area, but their presence could still throw a wrench into Turkey's plans, as Ankara will strive to avoid moving into specific areas where they are present. More important, the presence of such troops in the vicinity of Turkish military operations raises the risk of miscalculations or accidental clashes that could lead to a rapid escalation in tensions between Turkey and the United States and other NATO members.

An Unstable Frontier

The gradual U.S. withdrawal from northeastern Syria will give Turkey a chance to prevent another Kurdish-dominated region from emerging on its borders.



Russian Resistance

But other NATO members are not the only countries Ankara will have to worry about. Although Turkish-Russian relations have undergone a remarkable improvement in the last few years, the two nations do not entirely see eye to eye in Syria. Russia remains wary of Turkey's further expansion in the country, especially if it impinges on the Syrian government, which Moscow is attempting to prop up. While Russia is unlikely to block all Turkish operations in the northeast, it will seek to discourage Turkey from pushing too deep into Syrian territory. And because the SDF is likely to turn to Damascus for assistance in the face of a Turkish assault, Ankara will also have to factor in the potential that it will end up battling Syrian government forces and associated militias – many of which also enjoy Iranian or Russian backing.

Yet another potential Russian stumbling block to Turkey's operations in the northeast lies far in Syria's west. In line with the Astana process, in which Russia, Turkey and Iran have sought to manage aspects of Syria's war, Ankara and Moscow have succeeded in handling the rebel-controlled western province of Idlib, but the countries remain deeply divided on policy in the area – something that could obstruct future cooperation.

Previous agreements between Turkey and Russia facilitated the creation of a so-called de-escalation zone in Idlib [6], as well as the establishment of a dozen observation posts manned by Turkish forces. Turkey agreed to the arrangement to forestall further Russian-backed Syrian government offensives that would have further weakened Turkish-backed rebel groups in the province, driven further waves of refugees into Turkey and eroded Ankara's attempts to establish an expansive buffer zone in northern Syria. For its part, Russia was happy to avoid additional military commitments in Syria, both because it wished to draw down its forces in the country [7] and because it did not want to endanger its relations with Turkey. Moscow, however, always intended for the Idlib arrangement to be temporary [8]; what's more, the agreement stipulated that Turkey would move to dismantle the more extreme rebel groups in the province, such as Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, the latest incarnation of Jabhat al-Nusra.

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But Russian patience has been wearing thin over the last six months as Turkey has not just failed to crack down on Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, but failed to contain it to the extent that it has driven other rebel groups, including Turkish-backed groups, from key positions in the province. Hayat Tahrir al-Sham and its allies have also continued to conduct attacks on Syrian government forces along the provincial border in response to cease-fire violations by Damascus, which has never been particularly enthused by the Russian-Turkish arrangement.

Distracted as it is by its primary focus on northeastern Syria, Turkey is now unlikely to stage a significant crackdown on Hayat Tahrir al-Sham. And as the extremist group further entrenches itself in the province, Russia, Iran and the Syrian government might give the go-ahead for an offensive. Naturally, such an assault could have far-reaching consequences. Lodged between the rebels and Syrian government forces, Turkish troops could find themselves under fire. And because Turkey has shown no inclination to abandon its rebel allies in Idlib, it could well choose to reinforce them if they came under heavy attack. Accordingly, the situation in the province is a potential flashpoint that could seriously test and undermine not just Turkey's position in Syria, but also its wider relationship with Russia.

The U.S. decision to draw down its forces in Syria (even if pared down from the initially declared full withdrawal) will likely pave the way for more Turkish incursions into northern Syria. But as Turkey gears up for military operations against the SDF, it will run the risk of a confrontation with residual U.S. and other NATO forces in the area, along with Russian- and Iranian-backed [9] Syrian government forces that will likely seek to forestall Turkish gains by coming to the YPG's defense. An attack on Turkey's rebel allies far to the west could also divert Turkey's attention from any offensive on Kurdish areas in the northeast. In such a situation, Ankara's road south may be open, but it will have more than a few bumps.

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- [2] [syria-kurds-turkey-aftrin-syrian-civil-war-kurdish-struggle-russia-united-states](#)
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