

# A NEW TURKISH- SYRIAN MILITARY OPERATION IN SYRIA: NAVIGATING OTHER STAKEHOLDERS

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## **Introduction**

Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan recently announced that Turkey will soon launch a new military operation in northern Syria.<sup>1</sup> The announcement followed the debates on Sweden and Finland's aim to join the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) alliance in the wake of the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the Turkish decision to block military and civilian flights to and from Syria, effectively forcing Russia to use Iranian airspace to reach Syria. While Syria has seen relative calm since Turkey protected over 3 million Syrians by blocking Russia and regime forces from taking Idlib in March 2020,<sup>2</sup> the area has continued to witness terrorist attacks,<sup>3</sup> sporadic clashes and bombardment. Nonetheless, a balance of power between Turkey, Russia, Iran, and the US was maintained and new offensives did not occur. This stalemate, however, may be broken due to the repercussions of the ongoing war in Ukraine. If the Turkish Armed Forces launch a new military operation alongside the Syrian National Army against the YPG, and potentially Iranian-backed militias given that they also exist in the area, the dynamics in Syria will change dramatically.

This article will look into the reasons for a possible new military operation and Turkey's interests in doing so. Moreover, this expert brief will elaborate on the nature and the limits of a possible new military operation and discuss how Turkey must navigate the interests of other stakeholders in Syria. Last but not least, this expert brief will examine the possible domestic repercussions of a new military operation in Syria for Turkey.

## **Reasons for a new military operation**

The potential of a new Turkish-Syrian military operation in Syria is based upon several different factors, meaning one single factor cannot be picked as the main driver behind the Turkish and Syrian calculus. While the interest of the legitimate Syrian opposition in such a military operation ranges from preserving Syria's territorial integrity to expanding its territorial control to enhance its position vis-à-vis the Assad regime in Damascus, this brief will focus on the Turkish perspective and thus not elaborate further on this aspect.

For Turkey, a new military operation in Syria is mainly needed for four reasons: (a) to combat terrorism and ensure its national security, (b) to create new opportunities for the return of refugees, (c) to enhance the power base of its Syrian partners, and (d) to preserve Syria's territorial integrity.

In the summer of 2015, peace negotiations between Turkey and the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) broke down, leading Turkish security forces to launch a campaign to clear cities in Southeastern Anatolia from the terrorist group. While the campaign was successful in mostly

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pushing the group out of its borders, it came at a heavy toll. The Turkish army suffered 793 losses and over 4,000 injuries. At least 314 Turkish citizens died and over 2,000 civilians were injured due to terror attacks.<sup>4</sup> After the failed coup attempt in 2016, Turkey changed its policy to combat terrorists at their source of origin rather than on Turkish soil.<sup>5</sup> Based on this strategy, the Turkish Armed Forces launched the “Claw” series of operations in Northern Iraq and conducted the Euphrates Shield, Olive Branch, and Peace Spring operations in Syria alongside the Syrian National Army.

The presence of the YPG, the Syrian branch of the Kurdistan Workers Party or PKK, on the southern border of Turkey is of great concern for Ankara. Turkey has incurred over 40 thousand casualties in decades-long fight against the PKK.<sup>6</sup> Prominent PKK veterans who were responsible for bomb and suicide attacks in Turkish metropolises are now commanders in the YPG. For example, the general commander of the YPG-dominated Syrian Democratic Forces, Mazloum Abdi, responsible for one of the deadliest PKK terror attacks in Turkey,<sup>7</sup> sat in the first row during alleged PKK congresses next to US-wanted terrorists.<sup>8</sup> Abdi is also said to be the adopted son of Abdullah Öcalan, the founder and leader of the PKK.<sup>9</sup>

The second motivation for the Turkish operation is domestic political considerations. Since 2014, Turkey has hosted the biggest refugee population in the world. Out of the four million refugees in Turkey, 3.6 million are Syrian.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, illegal immigrants from Afghanistan and Pakistan have increased the burden on Turkish society and served as fuel for Turkish opposition parties who have spread racist propaganda against immigrants and refugees.<sup>11</sup> In Turkey, Syrians are not assessed for refugee status. This is due to Turkey’s interpretation of the 1951 Geneva Convention as having a geographical limitation that means it only applies to citizens of member states of the Council of Europe. As such, Turkey legally labels its Syrian refugees as being under “temporary protection.”<sup>12</sup> Under this regime, the government must find ways to facilitate their voluntary return to Syria. If those willing to return do so, it would take some pressure off those who choose to remain in Turkey, allowing them to better integrate into Turkish society.

While Ankara has already settled thousands of Syrians, both from within the areas of its control in Syria and from Turkey itself, in housing projects in Northern Syria, Ankara

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believes that housing and infrastructure projects can help facilitate the return of one million Syrian refugees to Syria if the necessary funds can be allocated. This process could be broadened if the territory in Syria protected by Turkey could be expanded. As seen in the experience of Syrian refugees in Jordan and Lebanon, Syrians do not return to regime-held areas of Syria – even though the war in these regions ended in 2018.<sup>13</sup> To the contrary, Syrians return to the areas of the Syrian Interim Government and Idlib.

Thirdly, the Turkish-Syrian military operation in Syria provided the Syrian opposition with a sustainable basis for its political and military activities. Controlling territory enabled it to implement a limited self-governance model in the north of Syria. Most importantly, Turkish protection prevented a total military collapse of the Syrian opposition and thus blocked a military solution to the conflict. With regards to a possible future political settlement in Syria and the overall power dynamics, the more territory Turkey’s Syrian partners control, the more impact they will have to determine the future of Syria.

Last but not least, Turkey – like the Syrian opposition – views the YPG as a threat to Syria’s territorial integrity. Given that Ankara believes its territorial integrity to be endangered as well, Turkish decision-makers want to ensure that the borders of Syria remain unchanged. However, given that no other Syrian party possess the self-capacity to reverse the YPG’s territorial gains, Ankara is forced to take matters into its own hands. While Syria is incapable of preserving its territorial integrity, Turkey is filling the void until a political settlement in Syria can be reached. From this perspective, Turkish-Syrian operations have thus far effectively hindered the YPG from controlling a continuous corridor of land along the Turkish border.

**The nature and the limits of a new military operation**

The Turkish strategy in Syria has been based upon two fixed principles. The first is to not conduct military operations on its own. The Turkish Armed Forces have always taken it as a priority to conduct its military operations in Syria together with its Syrian partner forces. By doing so, Ankara tries to emphasize that these operations are in the interests of Syria and the Syrian people and that Turkey is not acting on its own but by the invitation of the Syrian opposition. Also, from a military point of view, its local roots make the

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Syrian National Army an essential partner. While Turkish military support is essential for operational success, the Syrian National Army is critical for sustainability. The second static principle of Turkish strategy is to not overstretch its military forces by concentrating on limited targets and pushing forward step by step. Since 2016, Turkey has conducted four military operations in Syria together with its Syrian partners, with each of these operations limited in territorial width and depth. Moreover, Ankara has a strong emphasis on not extending beyond the 32km depth. By not going further south – except for parts of Idlib – Turkey ensures geographical advantage and prioritizes its own national security needs. Turkey believes that a depth of 32km is required to eliminate threats to Turkey. A smaller depth as stated in the Adana protocol or suggested by the US in 2019 would not push the YPG out of attacking range of Turkey as non-state armed groups possess weapons with ranges more than 5-10km.

Thus, it can be assumed than any new military operation will be conducted alongside the Syrian National Army and will be limited in its territorial gains. A full-fledged military operation across the border is an unlikely scenario. Considering that the YPG controls territory within the 32km deep zone along the Turkish border that can be divided into at least four to five regions, it is likely that Ankara can conduct up to five more operations in Syria if a political deal is not reached. The currently discussed Turkish-Syrian military operation will likely only be one in a series of military operations in northern Syria. As Turkey will remain the neighbor of Syria, Ankara will take action whenever it feels necessary and thinks the international circumstances are suitable. This process can only be blocked if a serious political agreement is reached that addresses Turkish concerns. However, while taking action, Ankara will likely take into consideration the position of other stakeholders and its balance of power vis-à-vis them.

**Navigating other stakeholders**

From a Turkish perspective, the YPG-held areas within the 32km zone can be divided into three different blocks based on the position of other stakeholders. Going from east to the west, the first block is the region from the Iraqi border to Qamishli in the north and Tal Tamr in the south. Within this region, any military operation will have to consider the US. Currently, American soldiers are located in this region and also use it as a logistical line further south to Deir Ezzor where Syria's most important oil fields are located.



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The second block is the areas of Manbij, Ayn al Arab (Kobane), Ayn Issa, Tal Tamr, Amoudah, and Dirbasiyah. These areas have a Russian military presence that protects the YPG from any Turkish-Syrian military offensives. Iran and Iran-backed militias are not present here. However, the US, even though it has no presence in this block, considers these areas to be controlled by the YPG-dominated Syrian Democratic Forces. During his administration, Trump signed a presidential decree that automatically sanctions Turkey upon any future attacks on the YPG. This decree's duration was further extended by Biden.<sup>14</sup> Thus, any operation by the Turkish Armed Forces and Syrian National Army in this block will automatically result in US sanctions.

Despite this share of responsibility between the US, Russia, Iran and the Assad regime to protect the YPG, in 2021 Turkey and the Syrian Interim Government decided to nonetheless launch a new military operation. At the time, the TSK and SNA were theoretically capable of expanding their territorial presence to the area constituting the second block.<sup>15</sup> However, the operation was effectively blocked after US CENTCOM officers opened the airspace of eastern Syria for the first time to the Russian air force.<sup>16</sup> By doing so, the balance of power shifted and the Russian military blocked a possible military operation.

The third block is the Tal Rifaat pocket in the west. Here, the US is not politically or military engaged and does not recognize this pocket as being controlled by the YPG-dominated Syrian Democratic Forces. Therefore, any military operation in this pocket will not automatically re-activate American sanctions against Turkey. While Tal Rifaat is not within the operational spectrum of the US, Russia has a strong stake in this pocket. In 2015, Russia actively aided the YPG with air support to take the area from Syrian rebels who were simultaneously fighting against ISIS.<sup>17</sup> Since then, Russia has regarded this pocket as a natural buffer between the armed Syrian opposition and the city of Aleppo controlled by the Assad regime<sup>18</sup> and has deployed its forces to this region. When Turkey declared in May 2019 that it started a military operation to liberate Tal Rifaat, Russian opposition resulted in the operation's abrupt end.<sup>19</sup>

***DESPITE THIS SHARE OF RESPONSIBILITY BETWEEN THE US, RUSSIA, IRAN AND THE ASSAD REGIME TO PROTECT THE YPG, IN 2021 TURKEY AND THE SYRIAN INTERIM GOVERNMENT DECIDED TO NONETHELESS LAUNCH A NEW MILITARY OPERATION***

Alongside the Russian military, the Assad regime and Iran-backed militias also have a significant military presence in the Tal Rifaat pocket to protect and aid the YPG. Iran-backed Shia militias, as well as Iranian commanders, operate in Tal Rifaat which they regard as the main protection line for the Nubbl and Zahra enclaves in northern Aleppo, two Shiite towns of essential importance for Iran. When Iran ended the siege on these two towns, it was touted as a great victory in Iranian propaganda. Another reason why Russia, Iran, and the Assad regime are present in Tal Rifaat is that its location makes it useful to disrupt the security of the areas controlled by the Syrian Interim Government. For the regime and its backers, the failure of an alternative governance model in Syria is essential to present the Assad regime as the only option for the Syrian people and the international community.

While a possible military operation was prevented in 2021, the current dynamics created by the Ukraine war are more favorable. First of all, the tacit American-Russian agreement to block Turkey and the Syrian Interim Government seems unlikely to continue as relations have greatly worsened over Ukraine. Secondly, Turkey – in line with the Montreux Convention – closed the Bosphorus and Dardanelles Straits and deprived Russia of its capability to supply its military in Syria by sea.<sup>20</sup> This step has blocked Russia from sending additional and new equipment to Syria. Furthermore, Turkey also closed its airspace for flights to and out of Syria forcing Russia to fly all the way around over Iranian airspace.<sup>21</sup> These new difficulties and the ongoing war in Ukraine complicate Russian logistical supply lines. As is now well-known, Russia is already facing significant logistical problems in Ukraine, which is being heavily supported with foreign military supplies. Therefore, it is questionable whether Russia could maintain its logistical lines in an active escalation in Syria as it did in 2020 during its attack on Idlib.

These new factors make Tal Rifaat a relatively easy target. Russia is not likely to antagonize Turkey over a small pocket in Syria while it is occupied in Ukraine, and the US does not consider Tal Rifaat to be part of its operational area. Iranian-backed militias, as well as regime forces, are not of concern for Turkey and the Syrian Interim Government due to their limited military capability. The Turkish Armed Forces have a track record of successfully eliminating Iran-backed militias and regime forces in Syria. Moreover, when the YPG took Tal

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Rifaat with Russian air support in 2016, the inhabitants of this Arab area were pushed out and still live as internally-displaced persons (IDPs) at the Turkish border. A sizable number of these IDPs are among the ranks of the Syrian National Army and will consider the upcoming battle an opportunity to reclaim their homes.

The second most likely target could be Manbij. In comparison with Deir Ezzor and Raqqa, Manbij has been much more stable under the control of the Manbij Military Council and the Manbij Local Council of the YPG-dominated Syrian Democratic Forces. While a military operation in this area would automatically impose American sanctions, Turkey could convince the US to do otherwise. The Ukraine war is of utmost importance and the need for cohesion inside NATO is crucial at the moment. The US may not want to risk relations with Turkey over Manbij in Syria. Moreover, Turkey could help the US by providing a face-saving option and arguing that this operation aims to protect the Sulaiman Shah tomb. Under international treaties, the Sulaiman Shah tomb on the eastern side of the Euphrates River next to Manbij and the M4 highway is Turkish soil, which means Turkey has the right to defend it and reclaim control over it.<sup>22</sup> For Russia, the same principles would apply as they did in the scenario of Tal Rifaat.

What makes Manbij more important from the Turkish perspective is that the Obama administration promised Turkey that the YPG will not stay on the west side of the Euphrates River and reached a roadmap for Manbij to achieve this.<sup>23</sup> However, the roadmap was never implemented. Later on, Turkey and Russia signed a deal according to which the YPG had to withdraw from Tel Rifat, Manbij and the 32km deep strip in the east of the Euphrates River.<sup>24</sup> This also did not happen.

**Domestic repercussions of a new military operation**

Among the Turkish domestic audience, a new military operation in Syria is vastly supported. In contrast to the perception on the international stage, Turkish public opinion strongly supports operations against the YPG.<sup>25</sup> The Turkish public perceives the YPG as an essential threat and demands action. That being said, the direct effect of a military operation in Syria on the upcoming 2023 elections will be very limited. The two most important subjects of the coming elections will be the economy and immigration. A military operation in Syria will not affect Turkish voting behavior.



However, the indirect effects of the military operation could be of utmost importance. If an operation is conducted and thousands of Syrians begin returning to Syria, this would ease the pressure on the Turkish government and be of huge effect on the elections. The Turkish opposition has greatly invested in this topic to the point of spreading racist and xenophobic propaganda.<sup>26</sup>

On the other hand, possible economic sanctions imposed by the US could further devastate the Turkish economy. This, however, could create a double-edged sword. While a worsening economy may empower the Turkish opposition, the ruling party could argue that the bad economy is a cost it had to pay to secure Turkey's national security interests. If foreign actors are to be blamed for the bad economic situation, the Turkish opposition's ability to attack the government on the economy in Turkey would be limited. Criticism of the government's economic policies could be perceived as tacit support for the US sanctions by the voting base of the ruling party, without whom the opposition cannot win the upcoming elections.

## **Conclusion**

If a new Turkish-Syrian military operation occurs in Syria, it will be due to Turkish security concerns, the need for more territory for Syrian refugees to safely return to Syria, to strengthen Turkey's Syrian partners and as part of the Turkish policy to preserve Syria's territorial integrity. If these motivations do result in a new military operation, Turkish strategy dictates it will be conducted jointly with the Syrian National Army and that the extent of the military operation will be limited to one or two areas within a 32km depth along the Turkish border. However, in such a scenario, Turkey would also have to navigate the interest of other stakeholders as well. While the Assad regime and Iran are of relatively less concern for Turkey, the Russian military presence and the American threat of sanctions are of importance. In this regard, while the region of Tal Rifaat is not part of the American sanction threat given the US denies the presence of the YPG there, an operation on Manbij would result in American sanctions unless Turkey could convince the White House otherwise. As for the Russian factor, the Ukraine war has changed the balance of power in Syria as Russia is occupied with Ukraine and Turkey has cut off Russian supply lines to Syria. By closing the straits and its airspace, Turkey has narrowed the Russian logistical lines to a single air route over Iran, Iraq and almost all of Syria to reach the Hmeimin airbase. While the war in Ukraine may provide Turkey with an opportunity in Syria against Russia, on the domestic front such an operation is not likely to have a direct effect on voting behavior in the upcoming elections in 2023. That being said, the indirect effects of possible refugee returns and economic sanctions imposed against Turkey could have domestic resonations. Therefore, a new Turkish military operation in Syria could dramatically change both Turkey and Syria.

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