

Turkey's Strategic Reasoning behind Operation Olive Branch

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- **What is the strategic reasoning behind Turkey's military operation against the PKK in the Afrin region?**
 - **What does Turkey's game plan mean for the region?**
- **What are the implications of Turkey's military operation for the future of the Turkey-U.S.-Russia triangle?**

Following Operation Euphrates Shield (OES), Turkey added a new dimension to its ongoing military activity in Syria in order to curb the PKK's influence in northern Syria and to "de-territorialize" it in the medium term in the rest of the Syrian territory. With the advent of the Afrin operation, Turkey's military activity has spread to a wider geographical area in the western bank of the Euphrates. The operation, which had been in the preparation phase for a long time, started on October 20 with the offensive phase, shortly after President Erdoğan's statement with strong references to the UNSC's decisions with regards to war on terror and the 'self-defense' element in Article 51 of the UN Charter.

It is known that Turkey has been eager to carry out a large-scale military operation against the PKK/YPG terror elements in northern Syria in order to prevent their territorial control along its Syrian border. The strategic reasoning behind Turkey's military operation against the PKK presence in Afrin is to prevent terrorist attacks against Turkish territory, to protect border security, and to secure Syrian territorial integrity. As an offshoot organization of the PKK, which

has been designated as a terrorist organization by NATO, the EU and the U.S., the YPG controls 65% of the Turkey-Syria border and uses its position to attack Turkey. More importantly, the YPG is playing a vital role in the PKK's ongoing terrorist attacks inside Turkey.¹ It is also well-known that the YPG is tactically used by the PKK as an integral part of its irregular warfare strategy both in terms of manpower and military equipment in the fight against the Turkish Armed Forces in the southeastern part of Turkey.² Therefore, first and foremost, Operation Olive Branch (OOB) is an integral part of Turkey's counter-terrorism strategy, which Turkish security forces have adopted against the PKK since 2015.

Since 2015, Turkey's fight against PKK terrorism has taken multiple dimensions due to the nexus between the PKK's and YPG's ideological, organizational, operational, and logistical compartments.³ The

1 Kyle W. Orton, "The Error of Arming the Syrian Kurds", *The New York Times*, June 6, 2017.

2 Murat Yeşiltaş and Necdet Özçelik, "Turkey, US and PYD: Strategic Ally or Local Partner?", *Daily Sabah*, February 17, 2016.

3 Can Acun and Bünyamin Keskin, *PKK's Branch in Northern Syrian: PYD and YPG*, (SETA Report, Istanbul: 2017).

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PKK's resumption of violence in 2015 is in part linked with its political and military capacity which was developed with U.S. political and military support. There have been clear indications that the U.S. military personnel trained, equipped and directed the PKK and YDG-H (PKK's violent youth branch) together with YPG militants in Syria under the policy of the fight against DAESH.⁴ Since then, Turkish cities and border bases have become exposed to intensive terror attacks. In addition, captured PKK and YPG terrorists have confessed to the direct and indirect U.S. support of these two related organizations.⁵

The Turkish security forces primarily focused on the PKK elements within Turkish territory in reactive operations, dominated the security environment, and expanded their internal security operations along the border with Syria, Iraq, and Iran. Firmly securing the borders from terrorists' infiltration through preventive military operations, police and intelligence operations helped Turkey eliminate many terror networks within the country.⁶ However, counterterror operations make sense only and if they are applied to the terrorist sources at their safe havens. Thus, Turkey still continues with C/T operations in its own territory and aims to attach all efforts to its activities in Syria and Iraq. As of now, Turkish C/T activities are at the cross-border military intervention stage.

There are many driving factors shaping Turkey's military operation against the PKK's presence in northern Syria. However, for the moment, Turkey will try to actualize the strategy differently in two geographical zones. Turkey's first and foremost strategic aim is to eliminate the PKK's presence and military capacity in the western part of Euphrates River and to cleanse entire PKK-control areas, including Manbij, where the U.S. and PKK are operating together. In this context, the Afrin region symbolizes

the first crucial threshold for the Turkish military and political strategy to maintain its game plan of deterring the increasing and changing nature of the PKK threat across the region.

PREVENTING PKK TERRORISM

Afrin was handed down to the PKK directly after the 2011 Syrian uprising following an agreement with the Syrian regime. Since the declaration of Afrin as part of the three cantons in the Syrian north, senior PKK executives have managed Afrin. In an interview, Talal Silo stated that Hacı Ahmet Hudro, Halil Tefdem and Mahmut Berhudan ruled Afrin from the Kandil Mountain where the PKK's main headquarter is located.⁷ As the Syrian civil war intensified, the PKK extended its military capacity with the assistance of the U.S. in northern Syria in the fight against DAESH and forced the anti-PKK and Arab population to leave Afrin and move to Turkey or other regions in Syria.⁸ In this context, residents of 42 villages and towns (such as Tel Rifat, Menagh, and Sheikh Issa) in northern Syria, who are estimated to amount to 350,000 people, were deported by YPG militants in 2016. Following Turkey's downing of a Russian jet, the PKK captured the Tel Rifat-Menagh axis, east of Afrin, from the FSA with Russian air support and consolidated its power in these regions. The territorial control of this region provided greater military maneuver capacity for the PKK in the region against Turkey.

The PKK has been using Afrin as a base for its attacks inside Turkey. The region's Afrin-Amanos connection was important in regards to the PKK's attacks against Turkey's Mediterranean region. In this sense, the PKK, making use of the mountainous terrain, transferred its forces from the Afrin countryside to the Amanos region via Hassa county. Furthermore, to this day, Afrin has been one of the strategic centers of PKK's ideological and armed training. Members of

4 Michael R. Gordon and Eric Schmitt, "Trump to Arm Syrian Kurds, Even as Turkey Strongly Objects", *The New York Times*, May 9, 2017.

5 "Ex-SDF Man Tells of US Support for PKK/PYD", Anadolu Agency, December 3, 2017.

6 Necdet Özçelik, Rifat Öncel and Sibel Düz, "One Year after July 15 Turkey's Fight against Terrorism", *SETA Analysis*, No: 36, July 2017.

7 Ufuk Ulutaş, "Afrin-Amanos Hattı", SETA Foundation, January 21, 2018, <http://www.setav.org/afrin-amos-hatti>.

8 "Syria: US Ally's Razing of Villages Amounts to War Crimes", *Amnesty International*, October 13, 2015, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/press-releases/2015/10/syria-us-allys-razing-of-villages-amounts-to-war-crimes/>.

the PKK, who received training in weapons and explosives in the camps based in this region, have carried out attacks in Turkey. Afrin had also become a harbor for the radical leftist organizations in Turkey, which have been acting in tandem with the PKK. More importantly, PKK terrorists in Afrin, which is located across the border from Hatay, have been responsible for dozens of attacks in southern Turkey. By militarily mobilizing itself in the Taurus Mountains, the PKK sought to expand its violent attacks into Turkey's Mediterranean coast. For instance, a terrorist attack from Afrin hit the areas of the Turkish border on September 10, 2015, killing a Turkish soldier. On September 18, 2016, a group of terrorists coming from Afrin attacked the Erol Çavuş Border Police Station in southern Turkey. On March 22, 2017, YPG terrorists targeted the Bükülmez Border Police Station, killing another soldier.⁹

PROTECTING TURKEY'S BORDER SECURITY

As far as Turkey's national security is concerned, in terms of preventing the PKK's terrorist campaigns, Operation Olive Branch shows Turkey's commitment to protecting its border security along its Syrian border. The PKK's efforts to create an autonomous territorial region across the Turkish-Syrian border and a recent statement by the U.S. about plans to transform the SDF into a Border Security Force¹⁰ are considered a direct security threat to Turkey's territorial integrity and border security, and are perceived to undermine the diplomatic attempts to create long-term stability in Syria.

Protecting Turkey's border security is not only limited to eliminating the PKK presence in the Afrin region. More importantly, the PKK's presence in Manbij is also threatening Turkey's military activities against DAESH along the Jarablus-Azaz line. After eliminating the PKK's territorial control in the Afrin

region, Turkey's next target will likely be Manbij in order to secure its presence in this region. The PKK-controlled regions in the eastern part of the Euphrates River pose additional security risks for Turkey's border security. In terms of the region's landscape, PKK militias attempted many times to infiltrate Turkey's borders and relocate their military equipment, which have been provided to them by the U.S. Therefore, protecting border security on Turkey's border alongside the eastern part of the Euphrates River is also vital.¹¹

SECURING SYRIAN TERRITORIAL INTEGRITY

By eliminating the threat of the PKK-YPG, which has been oppressing local communities, Turkey plans to create a safe zone for local populations. More importantly, Turkey wants to repair Afrin region's social cohesion and rebuilt societal and political stability. Turkey's stabilization efforts will be continued to create a safe zone for the Syrian refugee community who were forcefully displaced from the region by the PKK. The Afrin operation is also vital to protect Syrian territorial integrity in the near future. The PKK's territorial logic is designed according to its long-term geopolitical project in the region. The strategic logic behind this geopolitical project is to establish a full-scale PKK-controlled region alongside Turkey's Syrian border. With the contribution of the U.S., the project is putting Syrian territorial integrity at risk. In that context, OOB aims to prevent the territorial claims and expansion of the PKK in northern Syria and will help to secure Syrian territorial integrity.

TURKEY'S GAME PLAN

The operation's goal was declared as bringing peace and stability to the region. It is safe to say that Turkey will have to face formidable military and political challenges such as the scope and duration of the operation and balancing potential diplomatic pressure

9 Yahya Bostan, "Is Operation Olive Branch's Goal to Invade Syrian Lands?", *Daily Sabah*, January 21, 2018.

10 Tomy Perry and Orhan Coşkun, "U.S.-Led Coalition Helps to Build New Syrian Force, Angering Turkey", Reuters, January 14, 2018.

11 Burhanettin Duran, "Repeating the Same Mistakes of Iraq Invasion in Syria", *SETA Foundation*, January 19, 2018, <http://www.setav.org/en/repeating-the-same-mistakes-of-iraq-invasion-in-syria>.

emanating from regional and international players. Thus, along with difficulties on the military-technical and operational levels, Ankara's stated middle- and long-term strategic goals will likely be to face the geopolitical challenges emanating from the PKK's changing territorial presence in the east of Euphrates and the challenges deriving from the U.S.-Russian geopolitical confrontation in the region. In military terms, although Turkey has drawn some lessons from OES on tactical, operative and strategic levels,¹² there are certain differences in the nature of the target in the case of Afrin. The PKK's military capacity in terms of the number of militias and the amount of military equipment is the critical determining factor in maintaining its defense maneuver against the Turkish military and the Free Syrian Army.

In the early stages of the operation, the TAF are carrying out airstrikes against PKK fortifications in rural areas. At this stage, the PKK plans to stop the TAF and FSA elements by making use of the topographical conditions in parts of the Afrin region. However, taking into account the joint nature of the operation and the imbalance of power between the parties this plan is very unlikely to materialize. In this respect, it will not be possible for the PKK to keep rural areas under its control. Hence, the PKK is expected to move its main defense to residential areas and fight an urban warfare. Taking PKK's capacity into consideration, clashes in urban areas are likely to be more intense.

With the Olive Branch Operation, Ankara will also pressure the U.S. for the elimination of the PKK presence along the Turkish border on the eastern bank of the Euphrates. In other words, the Turkish military presence and fortification on the western bank of the Euphrates will function as an element of pressure on both the military and political levels against the PKK and the U.S. on the eastern bank of the Euphrates. As long as Turkey's military determination goes smoothly on the tactical and operative

levels, the U.S. may revise its critical position towards Turkey's stance against the PKK.

The Russian position is estimated to affect Turkey's military success on the western bank of the Euphrates. The execution of the Afrin operation indicates the presence of some sort of an agreement between Turkey and Russia. At this stage, Turkey's strategic game plan aims to minimize the PKK presence in the Afrin region and eliminate its political and military power on the western bank of the Euphrates. It seems that the Russian perspective is shaped by three dynamics. The first is Turkey's crucial contributions to the ongoing de-escalation zone agreement particularly in the Idlib region. Russia can see Turkey is playing a vital role in maintaining the political negotiation process on the trilateral level. Secondly, Russia is trying to use the political disagreement between Turkey and the U.S. in order to maximize its strategic priority over Ankara's medium-term strategic plan especially against the PKK. Thirdly, Russia wants to make a show of its priority regarding the protection of Syrian territorial integrity. Turkey's military presence may prevent the U.S.'s strategic plan with regards to Syria. These three dimensions may provide more strategic maneuver capacity for Turkey to deter the U.S. actions in the east part of the Euphrates. This will not be easy as the U.S. has perceived Turkey's military move as a distraction, yet Turkey's military decisiveness and the Russian options may limit the U.S.'s strategic course of actions on the issue of consolidating the PKK's military capacity.

Turkish policymakers declared that the operation's political objective is to maintain Syrian territorial unity while eliminating terror groups in northern Syria. This strategic narrative completely overlaps with the military objectives. Thus, there is no conflicting political and military stance regarding the operation. Moreover, all the opposition political parties in Turkey (except the HPD) have given appropriate input in support of the operations, emphasizing that the PKK and its affiliated groups in Syria are national threats to Turkey. The public opinion in Turkey takes a united stance. Meanwhile, the regional reactions to Turkey's

¹² To more information see, Murat Yeşiltaş, Merve Seren and Necdet Özçelik, *Operation Euphrates Shield: Implementation and Lessons Learned*, (SETA Report, Istanbul: 2017).

Operation Olive Branch seemed to be welcoming thanks to Turkey's stability model in the OES area in the triangle between Jarabulus-al Bab-Azaz.

The OOB forces target the PKK/YPG positions with great precision in order to avoid collateral damage and civilian casualties during the interventions. This also helps OOB forces in retaining public support. As the operation approaches the urban centers, the OOB forces are expected to face urban terror tactics and civilians may be used as human shields. The Turkish government has already taken initiatives to build tents and prefabricated cities for the civilians who will flee Afrin. It seems to have been taken into consideration that the PKK/YPG elements in the east-

ern part of the Euphrates that are affiliated to the U.S. military forces and the radical regime elements in northern Aleppo might respond and try to undermine the development of the operation. However, the U.S. statement about the YPG's military involvement from the eastern part of the Euphrates in the conflict will certainly prevent the YPG from taking a comprehensive military mobilization against Turkey.

Operation Olive Branch will likely bring about the first major defeat of the PKK terrorist organization beyond the Turkish border in Syria. This defeat will certainly change the power dynamics in northern Syria and the Turkey-U.S. relations, and recalibrate the Turkish military strategy in the Syrian civil war.



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