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# The Turkish Military Operation in North Syria:

## Scope, Aims and Reactions

Unit for Political Studies

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Series: **Situation Assessment**

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## Unit for Political Studies

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Only three days after the phone call in which Donald Trump agreed to withdraw US troops the border areas in the north of Syria, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has launched the first phase of a broad military operation covering an area 130km wide and 32km deep between the cities of Tel Aybad and Ras Al Ayn. “Operation Spring of Peace”, which aims to set up a safe area to repatriate the majority of the Syrian refugees in Turkey, will be conducted by units of the Turkish army alongside Syrian opposition factions. Ankara has described it as a continuation of Operations Euphrates Shield and Olive Branch in northwestern Syria, which targeted what it considers a separatist project led by the Kurdish-dominated Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF).

## Operational Goals

During Euphrates Shield and Olive Branch, the main rallying-cry was the defeat of ISIS and coordination with Russia in northwestern Syria. Spring of Peace, however, is different. This time, the main aim is to confront the SDF in coordination with the USA, whose forces are still on the ground in northwestern Syria as part of the international anti-ISIS coalition.<sup>(1)</sup>

The Turkish army has announced two major goals for the operation. The first is protecting the border “after pushing terrorist elements back to a safe distance.” The second is establishing a safe zone of 460km by 30-40km along the Syrian-Turkish border east of the Euphrates within which Turkey can resettle approximately one million Syrian refugees, transforming it into a “source of security in the region and Syria more generally.”<sup>(2)</sup> But these goals conceal several other implicit aims, the most important of which are:

- Reducing internal pressure on the Turkish government regarding Syrian refugees resident in the country.
- Establishing a demographic map friendly to Turkey in northern Syria, since the majority of inhabitants will be former Turkish residents.
- Creating a demographic and geographic barrier between Turkey and Kurdish militias.
- Increasing Turkey’s influence in the conflict within Syria and its role in the political solution.
- Expanding the geographical area under the control of the Turkey-backed Syrian opposition to encompass other areas of resource-rich north Syria.
- Reducing the effectiveness of the “Kurdish card” used by Turkey’s opponents and solve one of the fundamental sources of disagreement with Washington.
- Putting a definitive end to the Kurdish separatist project in north Syria.

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1 “Infographic: Map of US Military Bases in Syria, *Afaq*, 20/12/2018 (accessed on 12/10/2019 at: <https://bit.ly/2Mzm82B>).

2 “It Begins... What Are The Goals Of Operation “Spring of Peace” In North Syria?” *Al Jazeera Net*, 09/10/2019 (accessed on 12/10/2019 at: <https://bit.ly/3264QRa>).



- Increasing the popularity of both President Erdogan and the government, who have long suffered from a revival in nationalist feeling. This is particularly important given the economic crisis and the imminent announcement of splits from the AKP.(3)

## Obstacles and challenges

There are various factors suggesting an implicit understanding between Trump and Erdogan regarding Operation Spring of Peace. After US forces were redeployed away from several points on the Syria-Turkey border,<sup>(4)</sup> the US president reiterated his country's desire to withdraw its troops from the country and published a series of tweets suggesting that he was withdrawing his support from the SDF. On 9 October Turkish forces began preliminary airstrikes and shelling, followed by a ground offensive by both Turkish and Syrian opposition forces. This indicates that Turkey is keen to quickly achieve its operational goals and that it is finding it relatively easy to advance. Nonetheless, the operation faces major challenges. The most important are:

- Operational challenges: The geographic space east of the Euphrates covers approximately one third of the area of Syria and is inhabited by approximately two million people of various ethnicities, most of whom are Arabs. It is garrisoned by a significant SDF force estimated at 60,000 fighters,<sup>(5)</sup> equipped with modern US-made weaponry. These forces have years of experience fighting ISIS, and the area is of great economic importance to them: as well as its natural and water wealth, it is the location of about 90% of Syria's oil resources and 45% of its gas production.<sup>(6)</sup> There are various US and Coalition bases, positions and patrols operating in the area, which may result in unintended confrontations as happened in Ayn al-Arab/Kobane when Turkish forces targeted a US observation post (without casualties). Turkish bombers will also face additional problems now that the Coalition has halted aerial and intelligence coordination.<sup>(7)</sup>
- International and regional challenges: Since the very beginning, Spring of Peace has faced a wave of condemnation from both international and regional organisations, first among them the European Union<sup>(8)</sup> and the Arab League.<sup>(9)</sup> Germany, the Netherlands and France have imposed sanctions on Turkey.<sup>(10)</sup> Only a small number of states have supported the

3 Saeed Al Haj, "Tillerson Resignation And US-Turkey Relations", Egyptian Institute for Political and Strategic Studies, 23/03/2018 (accessed on 12/10/2019 at: <https://bit.ly/32bs3ln>).

4 "Trump: Time To Get Out Of Ridiculous Wars - Kurds: A Stab In The Back," *Al Mudun*, 07/10/2019 (accessed on 12/10/2019 at: <https://bit.ly/2MbaLid>).

5 Adnan Ahmad, "Ongoing US Support For PYD To Face Future Challenges", *Alaraby Aljadeed*, 06/04/2019 (accessed on 12/10/2019 at: <https://bit.ly/32eft4k>).

6 "Resources Of Kurdish-Controlled Eastern Syria," 07/10/2019 (accessed on 12/10/2019 at: <https://bbc.in/2nENbkw>).

7 "Pentagon Announces Exclusion Of Turkey From Airstrike Coordination," Anadolu Agency, 07/10/2019 (accessed on 12/10/2019 at: <https://bit.ly/31bZIK6>).

8 "Hungary Blocks EU Statement Calling For Turkey Spring Of Peace Ceasefire," Turk Press, 11/10/2019 (accessed on 12/10/2019 at: <https://bit.ly/2MbTiX0>).

9 "Arab League: Turkish "Invasion" Condemned, Syrian Return Demanded," *Deutsche Welle*, 12/10/2019 (accessed on 12/10/2019 at: <https://bit.ly/2M95GXG>).

10 "France Joins Countries Halting Turkey Arms Sales," Al Hurra, 12/10/2019 (accessed on 12/10/2019 at: <https://arbne.ws/35riLDq>).

operation, most importantly Qatar, Pakistan and Azerbaijan.<sup>(11)</sup> The pressure on Turkey centres on concerns that there will be negative repercussions for the fight against ISIS and the containment of its detained members in Syria, the possibility of civilian casualties and fears of long-term demographic shifts in the region. These pressures are likely to persist and increase with time as Turkish penetration deepens.

- The US position: The US and to a lesser degree the Russian position is probably the most important for Turkey because of Washington's influence and military presence as well as its role as the SDF's main baker. True, the USA and Turkey came to an understanding leading to US forces being withdrawn from Tel Abyad and Ras al-Ayn, allowing Turkish forces to enter, which has been understood as an implicit green light for the operation. The USA and Russia have also prevented the clear condemnation of the operation adopted by European countries from being passed by the UN Security Council. But Ankara is still concerned that Trump's position may change given the great pressure he is facing both domestically and from his allies in Europe, the Gulf and Israel. The Pentagon continues to express its opposition,<sup>(12)</sup> while Congress has threatened to impose sanctions on Turkey.<sup>(13)</sup>
- The Russian and Iranian position: It seems fairly clear from Russian and Iranian statements expressing sympathy with "Turkey's security concerns" that there is some form of Turkish coordination with both countries. This represents a reversal of their previous positions, which rejected any Turkish military operation in northern Syria along with any safe area established there. The change may be attributable to both countries' desire to secure US withdrawal from the area first in order to deal with Turkey later. These positions also suggest a rejection of Kurdish separatism, with the hope being that the Turkish operation will punish the Kurds for their alliance with the USA and show them that they cannot be relied upon to provide protection to their allies. This may change if the USA withdraws decisively from the areas east of the Euphrates, particularly given both countries' insistence that these areas be returned to the Syrian regime and the revival of the Adana Agreement regulating Syrian-Turkish relations in issues relating to the border and to security.
- The cost of the operation: Given the complications and challenges already noted, the operation is expected to cause the Turkish military unprecedented civilian and military casualties, particularly if it is not resolved quickly. It is also likely to have repercussions on the Turkish economy if international pressure continues and produces sanctions, which is less likely.
- The Safe Zone: The Safe Zone that Turkey intends to set up in northern Syria requires the agreement of various important parties such as the USA, Russia, the EU and the UN and their cooperation in planning, execution, funding and logistical support. Under current circumstances this seems unfeasible.

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11 "Countries Supporting And Opposing Operation Spring Of Peace" (TURKISH), Haber 7, 11/10/2019, accessed on 12/10/2019, at: <https://bit.ly/31aoEI9>

12 "Pentagon Warns Of Serious Consequences For Spring Of Peace," Arabi 21, 11/10/2019 (accessed on 12/10/2019 at: <https://bit.ly/2M8eBZv>).

13 "Congress Draft Erdogan And Turkish Ministers Sanctions Bill For Syria Military Operation," Russia Today, 09/10/2019 (accessed on 12/10/2019 at: <https://bit.ly/2oFAJBs>).



## Future

In spite of the challenges and pressures it faces, Turkey seems intent on completing the first stage of Operation Spring of Peace: establishing control over the 4160km<sup>2</sup> border area between Tel Abyad and Ras al Ayn.<sup>(14)</sup> As things are this is unlikely to change, given that the reservations of the major players have not yet transformed into actual consequences on the ground. US forces have withdrawn to a distance of 30km, outside the operational area. Russia and Iran have taken no steps to introduce actual operational complications or to escalate in Idlib or other areas that might be understood as an attempt to confront Turkish efforts.

As of today, Turkish forces are advancing rapidly and relatively easily compared to previous operations. After only four days the Ministry of Defense announced that Turkish forces had seized control of Ras al-Ayn and reached the M4 international expressway connecting Manbij and Qamishli.<sup>(15)</sup> Turkey seems to be in a hurry to achieve its operational goals before pressure to bring the operation to an end increases or in order to pre-empt any operational complications that might slow its advance. Erdogan also seems eager to cleanse the area of Kurdish militias and establish Turkish control before his 13 November meeting with Trump.

However, it is still too early to be sure that Ankara is capable of accomplishing all of its first-stage goals without major complications, never mind extending its control over the whole of the region if a full US withdrawal does take place. In any case, Turkey will have to provide convincing reassurances to all parties that its real aim is to confront separatism in northern Syria and protect its borders and national security – and that it is not planning to stay on Syrian soil for long or bring about major demographic changes that will breed future insecurity for Syria and for the region as a whole.

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<sup>14</sup> "Turkey Announces The Area It Wants To Take Control Of In Syria," *Al Alam*, 10/10/2019 (accessed on 12/10/2019 at: <https://bit.ly/35uDhTL>).

<sup>15</sup> "After Ras Al Ayn: Opposition Factions Seize New Villages Around Tel Abyad," *Orient News*, 12/10/2019 (accessed on 12/10/2019 at: <https://bit.ly/2VMajuh>).