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Winners and Losers in the US-Turkey Agreement on North East Syria

Unit for Political Studies

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On 17 October, the United States and Turkey reached an agreement to suspend Turkey's "Operation Peace Spring," offensive, launched 8 days earlier in north east Syria for five days. This allows the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), the backbone of which is made up of the People's Protection Units (YPG), to withdraw from the safe zone that Ankara plans to establish 32 kilometers deep and 440 kilometers across the Turkish-Syrian border. The realistic goal of this operation is the removal of armed Kurdish forces from the Turkish border, while its other declared and far less realistic goal is the resettlement of most of the Syrian refugees there.

Reaching an Agreement

The agreement was reached after negotiations in Ankara by US Vice President Mike Pence with President Erdogan, to stop the Turkish operation that began after a phone call on 6 October between Erdogan and Trump, after which the latter decided to withdraw a 50 special forces officers working with the SDF, in two locations in northern Syria. Erdogan saw this as a green light from the US for Turkey to begin its military operation against the Kurds. The withdrawal of the initial 50 soldiers came as a precursor to withdrawing the entire 1,000-strong US force in Syria. The decision sparked a political storm in Washington. Members of the Republican and Democratic parties, former generals, think tanks and media outlets accused the president of betraying the Kurdish allies who fought alongside US forces against ISIL and forcing them to strike a deal with the Syrian regime. They called on him to redeploy in the border areas with Turkey, claiming the withdrawal was also a victory for Russia and the regime. To counter such criticism, the Trump administration was forced to send a high-level delegation to Ankara to negotiate an end to the Turkish operation. The president also faces serious threats of isolation by the US House of Representatives for his attempts to blackmail Ukraine into investigating issues related to the son of his potential Democratic rival, Joe Biden.

Terms of Agreement

The agreement included thirteen terms,⁽¹⁾ including Turkey's acceptance of an immediate "ceasefire", and a 120-hour suspension of its military operation to enable SDF forces to withdraw from the planned "safe zone", under US supervision. A permanent ceasefire will take effect once the SDF withdraws from the fully safe area. According to the Whitehouse briefing, "The two sides agreed on the continued importance and functionality of a safe zone in order to address the national security concerns of Turkey, to include the re-collection of YPG heavy weapons and the disablement of their fortifications and all other fighting positions." According to the agreement, "the safe zone will primarily be enforced by the Turkish Armed Forces and the two sides will increase their cooperation in all dimensions of its implementation."

The agreement also emphasizes that both Washington and Ankara are committed to "safeguard religious and ethnic minorities". The agreement underscores the commitment of the United

1 "The United States and Turkey Agree to Ceasefire in Northeast Syria," The White House, 17/10/2019, accessed on 21/10/2019, at: <https://bit.ly/33EXFQ9>



States and Turkey to “D-ISIS/DAESH activities in northeast Syria. This will include coordination on detention facilities and internally displaced persons from formerly ISIS/DAESH-controlled areas, as appropriate.” Turkey also pledged “to ensure safety and well-being of residents of all population centers in the safe zone controlled by the Turkish Forces (safe zone) and reiterated that maximum care will be exercised in order not to cause harm to civilians and civilian infrastructure.” The two sides declared “their commitment to the political unity and territorial integrity of Syria and UN-led political process, which aims at ending the Syrian conflict in accordance with UNSCR 2254.”

For its part, the United States has committed to abolishing all the sanctions recently imposed on Turkey once “Operation Peace Spring” has been called off. The Trump administration also pledged to “*work and consult with Congress, as appropriate, to underline the progress being undertaken to achieve peace and security in Syria.*” The agreement also promised that relations between the United States and Turkey, as NATO members, and their commitment to joint defense have been “bolstered”.

Challenges Facing the Agreement

Despite both parties’ insistence that they are keen to make the agreement a success, serious challenges threaten its implementation. The agreement provides for the withdrawal of SDF from the safe zone controlled by Turkey, without specifying the area, as the Turkish military operation is still in its first phase, which includes the border line between Ras al-Ayn and Tell Abiad (about 130 km long). The agreement was made before the area was completed according to Turkish plans to include the entire border strip east of the Euphrates (440 km). According to James Jeffrey, the US Special Envoy for Syria, “the agreement that pauses Turkey’s military operation will be focused on “those areas where the Turks had penetrated into northeast Syria.”” He added that “The Turks are now in private talks with the Russians and Syrians elsewhere in the northeast and in Manbij to the west of the Euphrates.”⁽²⁾ SDF commander, Mazlum Abdi, reinforced this issue when he “specified that “this ceasefire is for the region where fighting is ongoing at the moment,” meaning the area between the towns of Ras al-Ayn and Tell Abiad, and said that a “ceasefire about the other regions needs to be discussed.””⁽³⁾

This means that the Turkish-US agreement has become part of broader understandings that Turkey must also reach with the Russians about the regional situation. There are already indications that there are Turkish-Russian understandings that allow the regime to return to control of areas in the east of the Euphrates, to disarm the SDF, and to coordinate with Turkish security forces, as this issue is a priority for Turkey above all else. Russian and Syrian forces entered Manbij and Kobani, as well as other parts of northeastern Syria, in coordination with the Kurds after the US withdrawal. Erdogan is said to have claimed that Syrian regime forces entering Manbij does not bother Turkey. The Russians are clearly seeking to revive security coordination between Ankara and Damascus,

2 Veronica Rocha, Fernando Alfonso III, Mike Hayes and Meg Wagner, “US says Turkey agrees to a ceasefire in Syria,” CNN, 17/10/2019, last accessed 21/10/2019 at: <https://www.cnn.com/middleeast/live-news/syria-turkey-10-17-2019/index.html>

3 Jen Kirby, “The US and Turkey reached a Syrian ceasefire. But what does that mean?” VOX, 17/10/2019, at: <https://www.vox.com/2019/10/17/20919566/turkey-syria-us-ceasefire-erdogan-pence-kurds>.



under the 1998 Adana agreement, which establishes Turkey's right to access Syrian territory to fight terrorism in coordination with the Syrian government. Erdogan is expected to discuss this at his summit meeting with Putin in Sochi on Tuesday (22 October), as well as the status of Syrian regime forces now in parts of the safe zone that the Turks are seeking to establish. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov announced that his country supports the agreement between Damascus and the Kurds and encourages security cooperation between Syria and Turkey on the shared border.⁽⁴⁾ The Russian president's special envoy to Syria, Alexander Lavrentiev, revealed that "there is an ongoing dialogue between Syria and Turkey" to prevent a military clash between the two sides, adding that contacts are underway "through the channels of the ministries of defense, foreign affairs and intelligence."⁽⁵⁾

One of the challenges facing the agreement is also the position of the US Congress on the sanctions issue. There are many doubts about the ability of the Trump administration to fulfill its pledges to persuade Congress not to pass additional sanctions on Turkey, with the majority of both parties displaying resentment over the decision to withdraw from Syria and abandon the Kurds. This means that Trump has even lost the support of his own Republican Party on this issue. The majority of the House of Representatives, on October 16, voted by 354 votes to 60 votes, including two-thirds of Republicans, on a non-binding resolution expressing their opposition to Trump's decision to withdraw from Syria.⁽⁶⁾ The Republican majority also stand with the Democrats in the Senate against the resolution, including the majority leader, Mitch McConnell. With both parties' support, Congress plans to introduce a bill imposing sanctions on Turkey over Operation Peace Spring, which could enrage Ankara and reignite military action.

Winners and Losers

The SDF, and its self-determination aspirations, is by far the biggest loser in the agreement that resulted from the Turkish military operation. Its ambitions to achieve autonomy in the areas it controlled in northeastern Syria have been crushed after Trump abandoned it and left it an easy target for Turkey and its understandings with Russia. The Trump administration has gained nothing from the deal, which came as an attempt to save "face" after the strong criticism it faced internally and externally for abandoning the Kurds, causing chaos for the Trump administration. It reached the point of Trump sending an unusual letter to Erdogan warning him not to be "a tough guy" or "a fool", then praising and thanking him for signing an agreement with Pence.⁽⁷⁾

Turkey has emerged as the biggest winner of the agreement, gaining US approval to take control of a large swathe of land in northeastern Syria at a depth of more than 30 kilometers to create the safe

⁴ "Lavrov: Russia supports the recent agreement between Damascus and the Kurds," *Russia Today*, 16/10/2019, last accessed 21/10/2019 at: <http://bit.ly/2ppFTlo>

⁵ "Russia reveals 'ongoing dialogue' between Syria and Turkey," *Russia Today*, 15/10/2019, last accessed 21/10/2019, at: <http://bit.ly/2ppFTlo>.

⁶ Peter Baker and Catie Edmondson, "Trump Lashes Out on Syria as Republicans Rebuke Him in House Vote," *The New York Times*, 16/10/2019, at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/16/world/middleeast/trump-erdogan-turkey-syria-kurds.html>.

⁷ Dareh Gregorian and Peter Alexander, "Trump's extraordinary letter to Turkey's Erdogan: 'Don't be a tough guy'," *NBC News*, October 16, 2019, at: <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/2020-election/don-t-be-tough-guy-trump-s-extraordinary-letter-erdogan-n1067746>



zone it wanted, without fighting, and was able to drive the YPG from its southern border. Erdogan has also secured pledges to lift US sanctions resulting from Operation Peace Spring. Russia made significant gains, now that the US can no longer play the Kurdish card. Russia and Iran no longer have to worry about the US presence in the eastern Euphrates. The Americans and Europeans have removed themselves from the Syrian conflict entirely, leaving Russia, along with Iran and Turkey as smaller partners, to deal with it alone and proving the reliance on the US ally futile. Russia will try in the coming period to take control the natural resources in areas east of the Euphrates.

Conclusion

To the extent that the US military presence is an important factor in determining the fate of the conflict in Syria, its withdrawal is also an important factor, as it changes all the dynamics of the conflict, as evidenced by the Turkish military operation and the ensuing agreement. This can be seen in the understandings reached between the Kurds, Russia and the Syrian regime on the one hand, and between Turkey and Russia and through the regime on the other. Thus, the future of the Syrian political solution is left in the hands of the Astana triad (Russia, Turkey and Iran), following the diminished roles of all the other actors, Arabs Europeans, and finally the Americans, who have lost their ability to influence the conflict either in the field or at the negotiating table.