



Turkey's Syrian Battleground

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has been the main beneficiary of a newfound feeling of glory among Turkey's increasingly nationalistic masses. The main loser is the YGP, which has sought to consolidate control over Kurdish areas of Syria in the hopes of forging an autonomous state. But in the Syrian war theater, alliances are fragile and complex. Russia has given Turkey a limited free hand in its engagement in northern Syria, mainly in order to deepen Turkish-US and Turkish-NATO divisions. But Russia is not Turkey's strategic ally.

In a rather theatrical show, the fall of the city of Afrin – a Kurdish enclave in northwestern Syria – after two months of battle between Turkish and Turkey-backed troops and Kurdish militia coincided with the 103rd anniversary of the Turkish victory in Gallipoli. Victory speeches were delivered one after another. Turks cheered in collective euphoria. Front pages were splashed with nationalistic headlines and stories of “our heroic soldiers.”

Among the scenes was footage, posted by the military, of a soldier holding a Turkish flag over a local government building. Another image showed a soldier raising and saluting a Turkish flag over the city.

Even footballers who scored on the pitch, both Turkish and foreign, gave audiences a “soldier’s salute.” The opposition rushed to congratulate the “heroic Turkish army.” Some of that sentiment is real and some fake, especially considering the certainty of arrest if one expresses the slightest objection to Operation Olive Branch.

Erdoğan made contradictory speeches during the campaign. One day he promised that “conquest was near”; on another he said Turkish troops would come to Afrin to clear the city of its terrorist population and return it to its

rightful owners. But he has been the main beneficiary of a newfound feeling of glory among Turkey's increasingly nationalistic masses.

There is already speculation in political circles in Ankara that the Syrian offensive has boosted Erdoğan's popularity by eight to nine percentage points. According to the BBC's Mark Lowen, "President Erdoğan has achieved his twin objectives: to remove a key area under (the Kurdish People's Protection Units) YPG control and to rally the vast majority of Turks behind their commander-in-chief. The jingoism here has been breathtaking. Targeting Turkey's age-old enemy of the Kurdish militants is a rare uniting force in a polarized country."

The Syrian war theater has also provided the Turkish military with the opportunity to test some of the indigenous weapons systems local defense companies have developed in recent years. In addition, the "real" military exercises in the Afrin enclave allowed Turkish commanders and defense procurement authorities to better spot technological and operational weaknesses and supremacy.

For instance, Turkish drones, armed and unarmed, were intensively used and proved to be very successful assets. But Turkey's aging US-made and German-made tanks were vulnerable to enemy fire, even when that fire did not come from a modern, regular army.

During the two-month military campaign, Turkey tested some of its new weaponry, and not only in Syria. State-controlled missile maker Roketsan tested a ballistic missile over the Black Sea. Military electronics specialist Aselsan, another state-controlled entity and Turkey's biggest defense firm, tested its Akkor Pulat active protection system, which will be added to Turkish tanks with priority for the fleet used in Syria. Turkey also wants to add other additional defensive measures to its tanks including explosive reactive armor. Also tested recently and probably heading soon for Syria is Alkar, a 360-degree 120-mm gun system developed by Aselsan.

But then there is the political side of the military campaign in Syria.

No doubt, the fall of Afrin dealt a blow to Kurdish aspirations for self-rule in northern Syria and further boosted Turkey's growing military/political clout in the country. The main loser is the YGP, which has sought to consolidate control over Kurdish areas of Syria in the hopes of forging an autonomous state. (The YPG, which Turkey views as a terrorist organization and an affiliate of the Kurdistan Workers' Party, or PKK, had controlled Afrin since 2012 in addition to other swaths of territory in northern and eastern Syria.)

Alliances in the area are fragile and complex. Some Syrian Kurds welcomed the Turkish army; some fled to wage guerrilla warfare south and east of Afrin. The Kurds are not monolithic: some feel sympathy for PKK/YPG, but some campaign to break free of the two militant entities.

Some Syrian fighters originally took up arms to fight President Bashar al-Assad's regime but are now fighting the Syrian Kurds. One such fighter complained that Turkey has shifted its focus from regime change in Syria to preventing the emergence of a Kurdish belt in northern Syria. Another says the revolution had gone off course.

Erdoğan, meanwhile, has vowed that the army will not leave Afrin "before the job is done." He says Turkey will broaden the offensive into northeastern Syria and go to Manbij, where Kurdish forces remain allied with US troops, then go east of the Euphrates and all the way up to the Syrian-Iraqi border. According to the Turkish game plan, the military offensive will not end there. Erdoğan has vowed to fight the PKK in its northern Iraqi stronghold. Press reports said on March 19 that Turkish troops, backed by air cover, had been deployed in northern Iraq amid violent clashes with PKK fighters. Kurdish local officials said Turkish forces were now stationed in the sub-district of Sidakan and had already set up fixed barracks in the border triangle between Iraq, Syria, and Turkey.

All the same, there seems to be a missing link between the military operation and its political goal. In its official language, Turkey says its army is fighting in Syria and Iraq to quash terrorists. It is, however, an open secret that the operation aims to quash Kurdish aspirations for self-rule, which Turkey fears could inspire its own Kurdish minority to demand greater autonomy.

The PKK officially launched its violent campaign in 1984. Since then, more than 40,000 people have been killed in the armed dispute, despite the arrest in 1999 of Abdullah Ocalan, PKK's jailed leader. Some of Turkey's Kurds aspired to take up arms long before the Iraqi Kurds consolidated power and set up an autonomous region in the country's north after the US invasion in 2003, and before the Syrian Kurds built their own enclaves in northern Syria after the Syrian civil war in 2011. Experience shows there might not be a strong linkage between the emergence of Kurdish entities in neighboring countries and Turkish Kurds' aspirations for self-determination.

Turkey claims to have neutralized more than 3,500 Kurdish fighters in the first two months of Operation Olive Branch while Kurdish sources put the number at 1,500. Even if the Turkish number is accurate, it represents only 0.01% of the entire stateless Kurdish population in the region.

True, Russia has given Turkey a limited free hand in its engagement in northern Syria, mostly in order to deepen Turkish-US and Turkish-NATO divisions. But Russia is not Turkey's strategic ally. Shifting Russian calculations over Syria's future could significantly change the map of the battleground in Syria – and not necessarily to Turkey's advantage.

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