

Turkish-American Relations and the Kurdish Thorn of Syria

Written by Michael Goodyear

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MICHAEL GOODYEAR, APR 17 2018

On March 22nd, in the “Subaltern States” blog herein, Polat Urundul announced the Turkish entry into Afrin, a small town in northwestern Syria. Turkey entered with the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and fights the Kurdish People’s Protection Units (YPG). In his piece, Urundul argued that the Turkish campaign against the YPG in northwestern Syria has been fundamentally about establishing a secure border between Turkey and Syria, as well as protecting Turkey’s sovereignty against what he called terrorist forces (e.g., Kurdish forces). The current piece will argue, to the contrary, that: (1) the capture of Afrin serves as a catalyst for the expansion of Turkish power in Syria; (2) it is actually a campaign against Syrian Kurds; and (3) it provides an important signal to the United States to negotiate to preserve its own objectives as the Turkish campaign continues to move forward.

When the Turkish military first entered Syria back in 2016, they were targeting the Islamic State (which Urundul correctly refers to as DAESH, Isis, and Isil). Given the number of terrorist attacks stretching from the Turkish border with Syria to downtown Istanbul, which were purportedly carried out by Islamic State operatives, it has been *acasus belli* in Turkey to launch an offensive against the Islamic State. However, with the Islamic State shrinking into the background after the fall of its de facto capital in Syria, Raqqa, Turkey has launched Operation Olive Branch to combat what it sees as the other prong of a security danger along the Syrian border: the Kurds.

Turkey has a substantial Kurdish minority living inside its own borders, and Turkish-Kurdish relations have been poor for decades. The Turkish government has consistently repressed public (and, especially, political) expression of Kurdish identity. The militant and separatist Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) has been a particular flashpoint of enmity between the two peoples: PKK campaigns in the 1980s and 1990s led to thousands of deaths. The People’s Protection Units (YPG) in Syria, which make up the largest component of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), is primarily a Kurdish militia with ties to the PKK. Given these ties, Turkish popular support for the offensive against the YPG is high, as Turkey fears the YPG could provide support to the PKK if allowed to secure its position in Syria. The argument that the YPG creates a security risk for Turkey is also the prevailing *casus belli* for Operation Olive Branch.

However, this piece contends that the Turkish campaign against the YPG is not merely about establishing a secure border, as Urundul argued. It is also about furthering Turkish power. The capture of Afrin has shown that Operation Olive Branch is not mere posturing to deter the Kurds or the United States, the main backer of the SDF. Instead, by having its own troops fight, effectively, in the Syrian Civil War, Turkey puts itself in a position of influence in Syria. It reflects much more *direct* involvement on the part of Turkey, and on a larger scale, than other major foreign powers in Syria, including: United States, Russia, and Iran. Operation Olive Branch could put Turkey in a prime position to develop Syria as a zone of influence when the dust of the civil war settles.

The seizure of Afrin also potentially puts the already poor Turkish-American relations at further risk. The United States and Turkey are long-time allies. However, they are diametrically opposed when it comes to the Kurds. The United States has supported Kurdish military groups both in Syria and Iraq to meet their regional objectives, including destroying the Islamic State. Turkey, however, fears that any semblance of Kurdish autonomy in Syria will lead to support for Kurdish autonomy inside Turkey. The United States is now stuck between supporting its YPG allies, who have been the major force on the ground pushing the Islamic State back, or risking even worse relations

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with Turkey.

Meanwhile, Turkey appears poised to move to its next strike, that is, against the SDF's greatest stronghold, Manbij. American support for Turkey risks harming the United States' international reputation for abandoning its Kurdish allies. American support for the Kurds risks war or at least abysmal relations with Turkey. If the United States wants to maintain a position in Syria and not have a foreign policy disaster, it can no longer wait on the sidelines but must try to reconcile Turkey and the SDF. This is likely an insurmountable task, but the most straightforward strategy is to have the YPG repudiate any agreements or relations with the PKK. At the very least this would undercut the Turkish *casus belli* and perhaps hurt support at home for direct involvement in Syria.

In addition, Turkish interests are not actually served by trying to destroy the YPG. Currently, the SDF controls the greatest amount of territory in Syria of any interested faction next to Assad. While the Turkish government claims to be opposed to Assad staying in power, defeating the YPG, and by extension, the SDF, only means that the likelihood of an Assad victory is increased many times over. Moreover, Operation Olive Branch is likely to increase the strength of Turkey's other enemies, all the while further entangling Turkey in Syrian affairs – even if the YPG is defeated.

The main contention here is that Afrin reflects a breaking point in American and Turkish policy in Syria. The United States needs to try to negotiate a peace between Turkey and the YPG in order to save its own interests. Turkey, for its part, should reevaluate its objectives to see that its campaign against the YPG, while increasing its local influence in the short run, does not serve its long-term interests in Syria.

About the author:

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