

Turkey's Military Offensive in Afrin

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*In late January, Turkey launched a ground incursion named **Operation Olive Branch** in the Afrin canton of northern Syria. The offensive is directed against the Kurdish-led Democratic Union Party in Syria (PYD), particularly its armed wing named People's Protection Units (YPG), which Ankara considers as a terrorist group since 1985 and the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) positions surrounding the city of Afrin. Turkish **President Recep Tayyip Erdogan** stated that the aim of the operation was to give Afrin back to its rightful owners, a statement that has since been used by Kurdish group to claim that he intends to engineer a demographic shift. However, by March, Turkish troops took control of Syria's Afrin region, deploying "police force" to oversee 115 "strategic forces" and more than 80 villages under its control, the state-run Anadolu news agency reported.*

The most interesting part of the offensive is the timing and unspoken goals of Turkey to break US-YPG alliance. Attacking Afrin didn't become an urgent Turkish priority until the US announced that it was going to create a border security force, consisting of 30,000 personnel along with YPG fighters. The existence of autonomous Kurdish region in northern Syria trips Turkey's paranoia about its own Kurdish problem with Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) with whom they are warring for decades. In addition, the conclusion Turkey drew was that the US-YPG alliance, which Pentagon ensured not to last beyond the demise of ISIS in eastern Syrian, was going to continue indefinitely as part of Trump's administration's ways to counter Iranian influence.



Turkey Afrin operation Olive Branch

According to Kurdish Health Council, a local PYD-affiliated body, more than hundreds have been killed and injured. The deputy Middle East director at the [Human Rights Watch](#) says that the Turkish border guards have been indiscriminately shooting at refugees attempting to flee the conflict zone into Turkey. Moreover, the United Nations says that that the area, which is under the control of the Democratic Union Party (PYD) - a Syrian Kurdish political party - has a civilian population of approximately [323,000](#), including 125,000 people displaced, remaining are hiding in caves and basements, trapped in Kurdish enclave. There were also news reports from the YPG and the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights that the Turks [used a prohibited chemical weapon](#), called napalm, against civilian population.

Amnesty international condemned Turkish Armed Force stating that "the [use of artillery](#) and other imprecise explosive weapons in civilian areas is prohibited by international humanitarian law and all parties should cease such attacks immediately". Previously, UN called for a new ceasefire to begin immediately. But Ankara notoriously stated that the ceasefire talk does not apply to its Afrin operation. In addition, [Al Jazeera](#) has also reported

that civilians from the Gaziantep area in Turkey are trying to make their way to Afrin to serve as human shields for the towns, standing in the way of the Turkish forces and daring them to attack anyway. In fact, the Turkish government has already [detained more than 300 of its civilian](#) for condemning military offensive in Afrin.

However, a delegation from the Kurdish Regional Government which is co-run by Barzani-led Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) arrived Afrin to bring [humanitarian assistance](#) to those trying to survive Turkey's operation. It appears that the latest development in Afrin has illustrated Kurds that US is not a reliable partner in the region. This led to the rapprochement between YPG- Damascus, deploying 1700 Syrian Democratic Forces from eastern Syrian to aid the YPG against Turkey and its rebel proxies, an unwelcomed development for the US, Russia and Turkey.

Beforehand US has [signed a deal](#) with YPG to fight Turks together. Turkey's deputy prime minister has dismissed as "false" media reports that Syrian government forces were poised to enter a Kurdish enclave in Afrin, adding such a move will be a '[major disaster](#)'. Meanwhile, Russia was functioning to keep the Syrian force for itself from entering Afrin to create a zero-sum game situation. It appears that Russia is hoping that the conflict between YPG and Turks-FSA will create a situation where Moscow will win without fighting a war. In fact, Kurdish politician **Fawza Youssef** believes that "the [Russians](#) are the ones who decided this game." Prior to the operation, Ankara reportedly [dispatched](#) its military chief to Moscow to seek approval for its intense aerial bombardment in Afrin region, thus ushering in a new phase of its involvement in the multisided war across the border.



The territories held by the Kurds and the pro-Turkish Free Syrian Army fighters as well as the site of Turkish offensives against Kurdish militias, with positions as of January 26, 2018

It appears that the renewed conflict led to all actors involved to switch their sides to pursue their mutual interest which includes the new U.S -Turkey and its FSA, Assad-YPG alliance in Syrian civil war. However, this led Turkey to seek support from US to prevent the Syrian Democratic forces to aid YPG force in Afrin. [Ibrahim Kalin](#), a spokesperson for President Erdogan, said his country had taken "necessary steps" through official channels and "expected from the US that it should absolutely step in" to prevent the movement of the Kurdish forces from Manbij to Afrin." Shortly, Turkish **Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu** told reporters that Turkey and the US have reached an understanding over the rest of Kurdish -held northern Syria. It is still unclear what possible "[understanding](#)" they might have, since Turkey wants YPG gone from all those areas and the US does not.

Previously, the Turkish government warned the U.S and its forces embedded with the Kurd around Manbji that if they don't skedaddle they might go for a war. The growing tension in Afrin obliged U.S **Secretary of State Rex Tillerson**, to visit Turkey after his week-long trip to Europe where he expressed his concern over Ankara's security dilemma. At the end of the meeting, U.S - Turkey produced a ceasefire of [coordination to alleviate Ankara's angst](#). This could mean a [Joint U.S -Turkish](#) coalition force in Manbji which would replace YPG/SDF presence there. It also appears like some kind compromise that sees the Kurds pull back to the eastern side of Euphrates while the Arab remnants of SDF remain in Manbji or are replaced by Turkey's Free Syrian Army proxies.

Meanwhile, in Afrin the rebels who fought on Turkey's behalf seems very pleased with their

victory over the YPG and said that they are ready for bigger challenge. In other words, they are willing to fight against Hayat Tahrir al-Sham in Idlib, eventually, to help the Democratic Syrian army to secure the country, if Assad is out of the picture. Yet, there seems to be a whole bunch of Syrian who regard Free Syrian Army as Turkish mercenaries so that they don't really get much of political base anymore. On the other hand, Turkey is satisfied with its victory in Afrin for now and is [planning](#) a move against the YPG and Manbij. However, the question here to ask is that how deep into Syria they are going to be able to push before the Syrian government and Russia decided enough is enough.

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