



THE ACTORS' REACTIONS IN THE SYRIAN CIVIL WAR TOWARDS TURKEY'S UPCOMING MILITARY OPERATION IN NORTHERN SYRIA

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INTRODUCTION

Although the civil war in Syria has created regional and international effects, its greatest impact is spreading out to neighboring countries. Being the longest land bordering neighbor with Syria, Turkey has been the country most affected by the turmoil in its southern neighbor. The ongoing war and instability since 2011 have

caused millions of people to flee the country. It has also resulted in millions of people migrating within the country. The fact is that, by being the most stable country in the region and having borders with European countries, caused the direction of migration towards Turkey and resulted in a great population movement on Turkey's southern borders. Due to this social mobility, very different dynamics began to emerge in northern

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Syria in terms of demography, security, economic and administrative structure compared to the pre-war period. Particularly, the activities of non-state actors such as ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) and YPG (People's Defense Forces) to gain dominance in the region by taking advantage of the power vacuum there have made northern Syria unsuitable for civilian life.

Turkey, desiring to eliminate the chaotic situation in northern Syria and remove the threats to its national security from this region at its source, has been carrying out limited military operations in northern Syria since 2016. Turkey's most basic priority in these operations was to form a safe zone of at least 30 km wide along its borders and to preclude the threats here. Although Turkey explained its policy in the field as derived from security concerns to its interlocutors, its demands were not met satisfactorily. Turkey, which showed its determination to this policy, especially with the Operation Peace Spring, signed a series of agreements with the USA and Russia, which provide the evacuation of terrorist formations at least 30 km to the south, preventing stability along its borders. However, despite the elapsed time, the terrorist organization YPG, acting

under the umbrella of the SDF (The Syrian Democratic Forces), did not recede from the region and continued to carry out activities to destabilize the safe zone created by Turkey, which was not in compliance with the commitments made after Operation Peace Spring. Although it continued to seek out diplomatic solutions to the situation, Turkey began preparations for a military operation after observing that diplomatic channels became ineffective. According to President Erdogan's statement on June 1, the first targets of the operation will be Tel Rifat and Manbij, but the operation will not be limited to these regions; it will continue along the Turkish border until the previously given commitments are fulfilled. Although Turkey had difficulties in finding diplomatic solutions to the instability in northern Syria, it took extra care to keep the diplomatic channels open with its regional and global counterparts in Syria after the military alternative became an option in order to minimize the negative impacts of the operation. The attitude of the actors involved in the Syrian crisis towards Turkey's possible military operation is important not only for the successful completion of the operation but also for the rapid establishment of stability in the region after the operation.



Meeting of foreign ministers of NATO countries

YELLOW LIGHT FROM THE USA

Ankara's ultimate goal of clearing northern Syria of terrorist elements is not a secret to any of the actors in Syria, including the United States, since the instability in the region poses a direct threat to Turkey's national security. It can be said that Turkey has made several diplomatic initiatives and followed a transparent policy on the issue in order to explain its sensitivity to this terrorist threat on its borders to its interlocutors in the field. Therefore, the statement made by President Erdogan on June 1 can be interpreted as stating the obvious. The announcement of one of the possible operation areas as Manbij has made the attitude of the USA towards this operation more important. Indeed, Manbij has been one of the issues at

the center of Ankara-Washington talks between 2018-2019. Despite high-level bilateral meetings and talks between delegations, the Washington administration did not take any steps to address Ankara's concerns. Turkey proposed several options to the USA to clear Manbij of terrorism. It is very important to see the progress of diplomatic relations, especially after the three-stage solution plan, which was expected to come into force as of June 2018. According to this plan, it was discussed that the YPG would leave Manbij within a month, Turkish and American soldiers would start to control the district after the organization's retreat, and finally, an administration consisting of local elements would be established in Manbij. At this point, some concrete steps have also been taken. In a post made on the social media account

ABD Dışışleri Bakanlıđı Müsteřar Yardımcısı Barbara Leaf ise Türkiye'yi muhtemel Suriye operasyonundan vazgeçirmek için ellerinden gelen çabayı gösterdiklerini ifade ederek, ABD istiyor diye Ankara'nın bu operasyondan vazgeçeceğini düşünmediđini belirtmiştir.

of the General Staff on June 18, 2018, the following information was given; "In line with the previously agreed Manbij road map and security principles, independent patrol activities started by the Turkish Armed Forces and the US Armed Forces on the line between the Euphrates Shield Operation area and Manbij". The first joint patrol between the parties took place in November 2018. However, in the medium and long term, the US followed a policy that allowed the YPG to maintain its presence in Manbij rather than taking into account Turkey's national security concerns, which is an ally of NATO. As a matter of fact, the USA, which withdrew its military bases from the region after the Operation Peace Spring once again displayed that it indirectly turned a blind eye to the YPG's presence in Manbij by leaving this region to Russia instead of Turkey.

After President Erdogan signaled a new operation against Syria as of May 2022, the first reactions from Washington were like a continuation of the US strategy on Manbij until the end of 2019. Although the US Department of State Spokesperson, Ned Price, stated on May 26 that they were in coor-

dination with Turkey regarding the operation, immediately after President Erdoğan's statements on June 1, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken urged Turkey to abide by the cease-fire lines determined in the agreement reached with the United States in 2019 and, regarding a possible operation; he said, "This is something we will oppose. Our concern is that any new military operation will weaken the stability in the region, creating an opportunity for malicious actors to take advantage of the instability". Other notable statements from the USA on the matter were the statements of the Senate's and the House of Representatives' Foreign Relations Committee chairs. In a written announcement, it was mentioned that they were concerned about Turkey's possible operation and by giving reference to Turkey's previous operations it was claimed that this operation would have detrimental effects on the stability of the region. In addition, it has also been alleged that the operation to be launched by Turkey will disrupt the operations against ISIS. Barbara Leaf, Deputy Undersecretary of the US Department of State, stated that they did their best to dissuade Turkey from a possible operation

¹ Turkey Says Syria Military Operation to Target Tal Rifaat, Manbij, *Aljazeera*, June 1, 2022.

in Syria but added that she did not think that Ankara would abandon this operation just because the US wanted it.

Although the discontent regarding Turkey's possible operation in Syria has been expressed in the statements made so far by Washington, no hostile language has been used against Turkey. Moreover, Ankara's committed attitude regarding the operation was emphasized. Although this situation cannot be interpreted as the USA giving a direct green light to the operation, it may be read as an indication that there would be no strong reaction from the USA.

MANDATORY CHOICE FROM MOSCOW

Although Turkey and Russia, which supported different local actors in the Syrian crisis, have approached the point of military and political confrontation many times so far, diplomatic channels between Ankara and Moscow have always been kept open. This situation brought the understanding of the preference of diplomatic solutions over military action in bilateral relations. Consequently, many potential crisis areas were prevented before they turned into hot conflicts. It can be said that the Turkish-Russian relations, which progressed within the framework of mutual understanding and dialogue, roughly continue their general outlines for the intended operation in northern Syria too.

After Turkey's open declaration that it would start an operation, there was a response from Russia as well as the USA. Maria Zakharova, Spokesperson of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, who made the first official statement on the issue, suggest-

ed Ankara refrain from conducting an operation and pointed out that an operation to be carried out without approval of the Damascus administration would increase the tension in Syria. Nevertheless, Zakharova added that they understand Turkey's concerns about its national security on its border region. Although there was a phone call between President Erdogan and Russian President Putin on May 30, the first official contact between the two countries on the matter was the visit by Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov to Ankara on June 8. Although this visit is considered as a search for a solution to the world's wheat crisis by the international community, it gained more importance for Turkey in terms of the Syria file to be discussed. In fact, Lavrov, who held a joint press conference with Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu on June 8, expressed that they understood Turkey's sensitivities regarding the threats in the region and said; "The USA is feeding an organization there illegally and we understand your sensitivities here". Another high-level statement from Russia on the Syria issue was made by Putin's Special Representative for Syria, Aleksandr Lavrentyev, during the 18th Astana meetings held in Nur Sultan, the capital of Kazakhstan, between June 14-16. Regarding Turkey's national security problem arising from Syria, Lavrentyev said, "This problem can only be set right if the Syrian government forces take full control of the regions close to the border, we have not seen that yet. There are still Kurdish elements" he said. Lavrentyev's remarks touched on the same point as Lavrov's statements on April 8. In other words, Russian diplomats insisted that the YPG, which is under the umbrella of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) that controls an important area along the Turkey-Syria



President Erdogan is in Sochi.

border and is illegitimately supported by the USA, should withdraw from the region. The most important underlying reason for this approach is that, after the withdrawal of the SDF to the south, the Russian-backed regime elements will fill the gap here. Therefore, while the influence of the US in Syria is decreasing, Russia's influence will increase. Although Russia's approach is a pragmatic approach in line with its own interests, it also had positive reflections on Turkey's new operation plan in Syria. Indeed, Russia's attitude can be regarded as a green light for a limited operation to be carried out by Turkey in Syria. Russia, which does not want Turkey

to add depth to its possible operation, has indirectly revealed its intention by sending reinforcements to some military points to the south of the Turkish border. Making a statement regarding these maneuvers by Russia, Syrian National Army (SNA) Spokesperson Yusuf Hammud stated that Russia has strengthened its positions in places 40 km south of the Turkish border, such as Tel Rifat, Manbij, and the southern regions of Ayn al-Arab and Ayn Isa². Turkey's 30 km-deep safe zone approach expressed in all its operations in Syria does not contradict Russia's stance. Apart from diplomatic expressions and balances on the field, another

² Syrian, Russian Forces Boosted After Turkey Signals Operation, Officials Says, *Reuters*, June 7, 2022.

indication that Russia will not attempt to prevent this operation is the cyclical situation in which Russia is currently involved. Russia, which has been exposed to large-scale sanctions by Western countries due to its invasion of Ukraine, does not want to confront Turkey because of the Syria file, which is probably its only door opening to the West. While the reflections of Russia's declaration as an unwanted country by Western countries materialize itself in many fields, from the economy to transportation, from technology to sports, the crisis³ on June 6 regarding the flight permit before Lavrov's visit to Belgrade is one of the most unambiguous examples of attempts to isolate Russia. The implementation of additional sanctions against Russia after the G7 Summit held on June 26-28 shows that Russia will become an even more isolated country. It can plainly be said that Russia will not oppose Turkey, which pursues a balanced policy regarding the Ukrainian crisis during the difficult period it is in. In other words, Russia's priorities in foreign policy produced a process in which it would make concession or concessions on Syria.

IRAN'S CHANGING STRATEGY AFTER ABDULLAHIYAN'S VISIT

Iran's reaction towards Turkey's possible Tel Rifat and Manbij operations has varied. A statement was made by the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs on May 29 just after the Turkish decision makers indicated that an operation would be launched in northern Syria. The Ministry Spokesperson said Hatibzade argued that launching such an operation by Turkey would violate Syria's territorial integrity and national sovereignty and claimed that Turkish military operation would increase the tensions in northern Syria. Hatibzade stated that Iran would clearly oppose a military operation by Turkey. Following this development, it was stated that Iranian Foreign Minister Hussein Emir Abdullahiyan's visit to Ankara on 7 June was postponed. Although it is argued that the reason for the postponement of this visit was the mismatch in the minister's agenda, it may also be interpreted that the tension in Syria had an effect on the postponement of this visit. Indeed, Abdullahiyan, who made a visit to Ankara 20 days after the postponed visit, gave the green light to Turkey's

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³ Turkey's Negotiation Strategy and Syria Operation Plans Before NATO Summit. BBC News Turkish, June 13, 2022.

operation by expressing almost the opposite of the previous remarks made by the Iranian Foreign Ministry Spokesperson, Hatibzade.

Speaking at a joint press conference with Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu on Turkey's security concerns regarding Syria on June 27, Abdullahiyan said, "We understand Turkey's security concerns on this issue very well. We also understand that it brings a special operation to the agenda. We also made detailed studies and conversations on this matter with my esteemed colleague Çavuşoğlu. We believe that the security concerns of the Turkish side and our Turkish friends should be resolved immediately and permanently".

Although Turkey's Tel Rifat operation will target the YPG, the Iranian-backed militias present in the region may also be affected by this operation. Especially the towns of Zehra and Nubul, located between Tel Rifat and Aleppo, are controlled by Iranian-backed militias. Considering that Iranian-backed militias are also involved in attacks on safe areas under Turkish control, it is possible that these militias may show resistance against Turkey during the operation. In such a case, Turkey may consider connecting the Afrin, Idlib, and Tel Rifat triangles to each other by creating a security corridor that will also include these two towns. Since the dangers in the Shiite towns of Zehra and Nubul, which are strategically important for Iran's presence in Aleppo, would compromise Iran's interests in Aleppo, the Tehran administration has begun to favor Ankara to conduct a limited operation. In addition, the regime elements may start to gain power again in northern Syria, as the operations to be carried out by Turkey will largely break the YPG's dominance and power in the area. In

this case, the Iranian-backed militias, which will act in unison with the regime, can take advantage of the YPG's loss of power and take new areas for control. Therefore, it may be said that the Tehran administration will not overlook such opportunities, even though Turkey's operations and Iran's interests are in general inversely related.

The fact that the USA and Russia started to incline toward Turkey's possible operation in Syria was also effective in Iran's change of discourse and making a diplomatic maneuver. Although Tehran finds Turkey's operation dangerous for its interests in the region, by taking into account the new circumstances, it tries to minimize the negative impacts of this operation on itself. In order not to lose its influence at the table, Iran, which appears to be a passive member during the Astana summits, has started to remain silent about the military operation and even supported it, to which Russia also gave the green light. Besides, Iran's presence in Syria has begun to be seen as one of the most important threats by regional and global actors. After Israel and the USA, which have been targeting Iranian elements in Syria for a long time, Russia's growing discomfort with Iran's presence has pushed the Tehran administration to get closer to Turkey. The fact that Iran's filling the vacuum left by Russia's withdrawal of its forces due to the Ukrainian crisis does not escape from Moscow's attention. The possibility of this situation turning into a Russia-Iran conflict of interest in the long run should not be ignored. Therefore, insisting on anti-Turkey policies amounts to Iran knowing that its dialogue channels in Syria are blocked to a large extent and the anti-Tehran front enlarges further. Iran, which wants to overcome this process with



Iranian Foreign Minister Abdullahiyani is in Ankara.

the least possible damage by making minor concessions for the sake of its macro interests in Syria, has accordingly updated its strategy regarding Turkey's possible operation.

DAMASCUS ADMINISTRATION'S AND SDF'S MUTUAL ATTITUDE

After the planned military operation to be carried out in northern Syria was shared with the public, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Damascus administration issued a statement on May 30, claim-

ing that Turkey's operations to form a safe zone were illegitimate. The clearest statements showing the regime's attitude to a new operation by Turkey came from Bashar Assad. In an interview published on June 10, Assad made a statement about Turkey's new operation, he reminded the Operation Spring Shield that took place in 2020, stated that they came face to face with the Turkish Army, and stated that they would adopt a similar position in the face of a new operation to the extent of the military capacity of the regime⁴. The Syrian Parliament convened

Insisting on anti-Turkey policies, Iran finds that its dialogue channels in Syria are blocked to a large extent and the anti-Tehran front enlarges further. Iran, which wants to overcome this process with the least damage by making minor concessions for the sake of its macro interests in Syria, has accordingly updated its strategy regarding Turkey's possible operation.

⁴ Assad Explains Why Syria is Sticking with Russia, *RT*, June 10, 2022.

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on June 13 regarding the possible operation by Turkey, which is the main agenda item of the Damascus administration, condemned Turkey's safe zone operation plan and accused it of disrupting regional peace and security⁵. Obviously, these statements are not surprising, considering the Regime's relations with the YPG. In fact, the regions in which Turkey requires operations are those that were directly left to the YPG shortly after the civil war ended, with no conflict. Following the emergence of new balances that arose after the Operation Peace Spring, the regime started to restore its presence in these regions that it had abandoned before. Although there was occasionally a conflict of interests between the regime and the YPG

regarding the dominance of the area, these disputes were largely resolved, especially with Russia's arbitration. However, the regime, which considers the YPG's demands for autonomy threatening, may want to turn the YPG's loss of power into an opportunity because of Turkey's operation. In the areas targeted by the operation, the YPG flags were lowered and regime flags were raised. Although this flag change is a tactical move, it also represents a process in which the regime is starting to establish psychological dominance over the YPG. After Turkey's operation plan, the regime started to pile up military reinforcements to the north of Syria. The purpose of these reinforcements may be to ensure Turkey will operate

⁵ Statement from the Syrian parliament on Turkey's Operation, Rudaw, June 13, 2022.

within a limited area and not go beyond that certain edge, rather than directly confronting Turkey. In fact, Russian forces accompany this regime's reinforcement forces.

According to the so-called commander of the SDF, if Turkey launches a military operation in northern Syria, the SDF will fight alongside regime troops against the Turkish Army. "Our priority is to defend Syrian lands, and no one should think of gaining ground by taking advantage of this situation," Abdi said and implicitly warned the regime not to rush benefiting from YPG's loss of power. Mazlum Abdi's most striking statement was the call made for the Damascus administration to deploy air defense systems against Turkish fighter jets in the event Turkey organizes an operation⁶. The SDF, which tends to be in coordination with the regime army and insists on an autonomous administrative and military structure, has started to make concessions to the regime after Turkey's possible operation announcement. Although the statements made by the Damascus administration verify this cooperation proposition by the SDF, new dynamics that might emerge in the field during the operation may also stir up long-term disputes between the two sides.

CONCLUSION

Turkey, aiming to create a safe corridor 30 km deep in northern Syria, has caught the most suitable conditions since the begin-

ning of the civil war. Although Turkey's determination to execute a military operation was initially met with disapproval from its counterparts in the field, it began to gain acceptance during the course of time. Turkey, after specifying Tel Rifat and Manbij as the area of operation, established close contact with Russia, which holds the de facto control of these regions, and assured the Kremlin that it would give positive signals for the operation to be launched by Ankara. The absence of any military control by the USA in Tel Rifat and Manbij, did not leave much choice for Washington about the military action to be implemented by Turkey. Turkey's constructive attitude towards NATO's enlargement process also generated the softening of the White House's rhetoric in the face of the operation in question. Iran, which might attempt some actions that could cast a shadow over Turkey's operation through its militias on the ground, gave up its initial negative position and gave the green light to Turkey's possible operation.

In summary, Turkey has achieved important results in finding a common path with all actors that may cause difficulties in the regional and international context. Ankara, which gained a significant advantage before the operation by using diplomatic channels effectively, was able to execute the operation without encountering any strong obstacles after completing its military preparations.

⁶ Syria Army Should Use Air Defences Against Turkish Invasion, U.S.-Backed Force Says, *Reuters*, June 5, 2022.

About the Author

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He graduated from Middle East Technical University (METU) History (major) and Sociology (minor) departments in 2015. He received Kuwaiti Government Scholarship and studied Arabic at the Philology Center of Kuwait University between 2015-2016. He completed his master's degree at METU Middle East Studies Department and continues his doctorate studies at the same university. Haşıl, who conducts research on state-building in the Middle East and the geopolitics of East Africa-Red Sea, is closely interested in the Syrian civil war after the 2011 uprisings. He has been working as a researcher at ORSAM Levant Studies Coordinator since June 2018. Haşıl is a commentator on TV channels in Turkey. He is proficient in English, knows intermediate level Arabic and beginner level Persian and French.



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