

Kurdish Lobby Australia calls on the Australian Government and international community to strongly condemn and appropriately respond to Turkey's invasion of Afrin and its threat to eliminate all Kurdish 'terrorists' in Syria.

- HTS:** Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham
- PYD:** Democratic Union Party
- SDF:** Syrian Democratic Forces
- TSK:** Turkish Security Forces
- YPG:** People's Protection Units
- YPJ:** Women's People's Protection Units



Source: https://cdn0.trtworld.com/w960/q75/26019_TUR-2018-01-21-Syria-Map-TRT-World_1516485466705.png

Operation Olive Branch

Since 13 January, Turkey has heavily shelled and tried to advance into Afrin, a district in Aleppo of 800,000 people, half of whom are internally displaced. The population is served by a multi-ethnic administration that is part of the Kurdish-led Democratic Federation of Northern Syria and an estimated 8,000 to 10,000 fighters in the People's Protection Units (YPG/YPJ) provide security.

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On 20 January, 72 Turkish F-16 fighter planes hit 153 targets in and outside Afrin, including Afrin city, the towns of Shirwa, Shra, Raju and Jendires, the surrounding countryside and the Kurdish-controlled Menagh Military Airbase. The airstrikes caused material damage and killed 10 people, including seven civilians, wounding another 15 civilians. The YPG claimed the airstrikes and artillery strikes were being used to scare civilians into fleeing the area.

Four hours before the airstrikes Russia relocated some of its 300 strong military police observer force stationed in Afrin since March 2017 to limit conflict between Turkey, Syria and the YPG/YPJ. On 20 January, clashes on the ground killed four Turkish soldiers, seven Turkish-backed militants and four YPG/YPJ fighters. On 21 January, Turkish media claimed that TSK soldiers and tanks and Turkey-backed militants had crossed into Afrin from the north and east with the aim of creating a 'secure zone'. The YPG claimed they had repulsed the advances, and in doing so had killed 10 Turkish soldiers and destroyed three tanks, while Turkish shelling killed eight civilians. The YPG denied Turkish media reports that they had shelled Kilis. When protests broke out in Turkey, Erdogan vowed to crush all local opposition to the operation.

Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu claimed that Turkey had informed Russia, the US and UK, Iran, France and China of its intention to rid Afrin of 'terrorist elements', including ISIS, although there is no ISIS presence in Afrin. Russia and the US allegedly opposed Operation Olive Branch, but given that Russia is responsible for monitoring the airspace over Aleppo, Turkey and Russia must have come to some understanding. Russia's immediate response was to accuse the US of triggering the operation by continuing to arm Syrian Kurds and by announcing that the US would stay in Syria east of the Euphrates until there was a political transition, and that the US was training a 30,000 strong force to prevent an ISIS resurgence, curb Iranian expansion and secure the area to allow IDPs to return home. The territory covers approximately 27 percent of Syria. It has been defended or liberated by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) led by YPG/YPJ with US-led coalition support, which enabled the SDF and the Democratic Union Party (PYD) to establish multi-ethnic administrations, most of which come under the Democratic Federation.

A week before Operation Olive Branch, President Erdogan claimed that Turkey would wipe out all Kurdish 'terrorists' south of the border, including those in Manbij and east of the Euphrates, and squash any US-established 'terror army'. During the week, Turkey conducted a massive build up of forces along the border and inside the Turkey occupied Azaz – Jarablus – al-Bab triangle, where it has mobilised in excess of 10,000 militants to advance on Afrin; Syria vowed to strike down any Turkish warplane flying over Syria; and the US issued statements that called for both sides to avoid escalation and focus on ISIS (which could make use of a new front). The US stated that it recognised Turkey's security concerns regarding the PKK and that the SDF in Afrin were not part of the US-led coalition forces, but it urged Turkey not to take military action against Syrian Kurds. After the operation commenced, Iran and Egypt called on Turkey to halt the operation and France called an emergency UN Security Council meeting. Russia claims it will use the meeting to call on Turkey to halt the operation.



Connections to what is happening in other parts of Syria

What is happening in Afrin is connected to what is happening in Idlib and east of the Euphrates. Idlib is home to two million people. Half are IDPs. Since July 2017, Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham (HTS), considered a terrorist organisation by the US and Russia, has dominated Idlib. In October 2017, under an Astana agreement, Turkey deployed TSK forces to northern Idlib ostensibly to establish 14 observation posts to secure a ceasefire, push HTS away from key positions, ensure the delivery of humanitarian aid and enable IDPs to return home. Instead, Turkey co-ordinated with HTS to set up four observation posts overlooking Afrin. Also during this period, but intensifying in December, (pro) Syrian forces advanced into southern Idlib, backed by Russian air power. In January, Turkey objected to these advances, saying they would endanger the Sochi negotiations at the end of January. There is evidence that Turkey is behind an opposition counteroffensive, while Russia accuses Turkey-backed militias (but not Turkey) of being responsible for attacks on Russia's bases at Khmeimim and Tartus on 31 December, 4 and 5/6 January. Hence, Russia might have agreed to a limited Turkish offensive so it could leverage four stakeholders: Turkey in Idlib; an intransigent Assad regime; the YPG/YPJ so they allow Syrian regime forces into Afrin; and the US-allied SDF east of the Euphrates so they hand over to the regime key water, oil and gas resources they captured from ISIS in Deir Ezzor province.

Consequences of Operation Olive Branch

If the YPG/YPJ defend Afrin by attacking the TSK and if PKK comes to help YPG/YPJ defend Afrin, and Manbij (Turkey's next self-proclaimed target), and/or if PKK increases its attacks on the TSK and police inside Turkey, Turkey will say it has gained further proof that the YPG/YPJ and the Democratic Union Party (PYD) are a national security threat to Turkey, which can then be used to justify an expansion of Turkey's occupation of northern Syria. Yet the risks are high. Operation Olive Branch could jeopardise Turkey's relationship with its Astana allies, particularly Russia, which is keen to move towards a political transition. The operation will heighten tensions with the US, although it may serve US interests to discredit Russia's achievements in Syria, while Turkey may find itself bogged down in a costly war, far worse than Operation Euphrates Shield (August 2016 – March 2017). This could further polarise Turkey's already divided population. Of far greater importance than all these machinations is that an invasion of Afrin prolongs the suffering of the Syrian people. Afrin could become another humanitarian catastrophe. Already, shops are closed and people are too afraid to leave their homes, when until now, Afrin has been a safe haven with a thriving economy despite Turkey placing it under siege. Meanwhile, where do the 213,000 people fleeing from the Syrian regime's offensive in southern Idlib go?

Turkey is a very geopolitically important country, but Turkey's disregard for other nations and people, particularly Kurdish people, in its aggressive destabilisation of the region must be opposed in the strongest diplomatic, humanitarian and economic terms, if not militarily. Hence: **Kurdish Lobby Australia calls on the Australian Government and international community to strongly condemn and appropriately respond to Turkey's invasion of Afrin and its threat to eliminate all Kurdish 'terrorists' in Syria.**