

Turkey's invasion of Afrin

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Acronyms

HTS	Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (coalition led by Jabhat Fatah al-Sham)
IRGC	Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps
KDP/PDK	Kurdistan Democratic Party (Iraq)
KRI	Kurdistan Region of Iraq
NDF	National Defence Force (Syrian militia, mainly operating as police)
PKK	Kurdistan Workers Party (Turkey)
PUK	Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (Iraq)
PYD	Democratic Union Party (Syria)
SDF	Syrian Democratic Forces
SOHR	Syrian Observatory of Human Rights
TSK	Turkish Armed Forces
YPG	Peoples' Protection Units (Syria)
YPJ	Women's Protection Units (Syria)

Note: 'Militia/s' refers to groups; 'militants' refers to individuals.



[Map](#) of who controls what territory in Syria and Iraq

In the end, we will remember not the words of our enemies, but the silence of our friends.

Dr. Martin Luther King, 1968.

Turkey's invasion of Afrin

Introduction

The Syrian Kurds and their allies control nearly 700 kilometres of the 911-kilometre border between Syria and Turkey. They have established multi-ethnic administrations serving Afrin, the Sheba area and Manbij in Aleppo province west of the Euphrates, and in northern and eastern Syria east of the Euphrates. By January 2018, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), led by Peoples Protection Units (YPG), had secured 30 percent of Syrian territory from ISIS, including oil and gas fields and major dams. Over much of this territory local councils are organised within a Democratic Federal System of Northern Syria. Turkey considers these military and political gains to be a threat to its national security, especially as its own large Kurdish population aspires to regional autonomy.

The wooded mountainous and agriculturally rich district of Afrin, roughly 40 kilometres by 30 kilometres, shares a 250-kilometre border with Turkey. The district has been free of ISIS since 2012, when YPG took over its security and the (Syrian Kurdish) Democratic Union Party (PYD) established a multi-ethnic local council. Local



officials claim that between 750,000 and 1.2 million people live in Afrin, including 400,000 local residents. Others are internally displaced people. The district has about 350 villages and seven major towns (Afrin city, Bulbul, Jinderes, Maabatli, Rajo, Shera and Sheikh Hadid) and produces most of Syria's olive oil, pomegranates and soap, but since the civil war, it has attracted industry from Aleppo city and elsewhere. For instance, 400 textile workshops employ 17,000 people and supply the rest of Syria with textiles. This is despite Afrin being surrounded by Turkey to the north and west and Turkey-backed militias to the east, Turkey having decided by 2015 that YPG/YPJ and PYD were 'terrorists'; the Assad regime to the south-east and Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) to the south.

YPG claims that Turkey used mortar and artillery fire to attack Afrin 920 times in 2017, killing at least 12 civilians and causing material damage. On September 6, Russia announced it was establishing a de-confliction zone, deploying 300 Russian military observers to checkpoints between Turkey-backed opposition forces, pro-regime forces and the SDF in the Tel Rifaat district to the east. On October 22, Russia attempted to negotiate a de-escalation zone with Turkey and the Afrin administration. Although the SDF allowed Russian military personnel into the SDF-controlled Menagh military airbase on October 28, Turkey rejected the proposal. Turkey accuses the 'terrorists' in Afrin of having attacked Turkey 700 times in 2017, although in February, the Second Army Commander of Turkey's offensive in Afrin, called Operation Olive Branch, [Lieutenant General Ismail Metin Temel](#), allegedly claimed not a single shot has been fired on Turkey from Afrin.

Nevertheless, Turkey justifies the offensive by invoking UN Charter Article 51, and its right to self-defence. The UN Security Council convened on January 22 to discuss Operation Olive Branch, but did not condemn it or demand it end. After February 24, when the UN Security Council passed Resolution 2401 calling for a one-month ceasefire throughout Syria, Turkey intensified the offensive.

In Turkey, a collective hysteria has been whipped up for Operation Olive Branch. Turkey's religious clerics read the Quran's *Al-Fath* (Conquest) chapter in Friday sermons and people celebrate by sharing gruesome photos of 'terrorist' (YPG) corpses over the internet. No media outlet or individual is allowed to speak against the offensive. By Day 3, Turkey had detained 66 HDP party officials, journalists and activists accused of using social media to spread 'terrorist propaganda' by speaking against the offensive. By February 12 Turkey had detained 666 people, including 11 senior members of the Turkish Medical Association, for objecting to the offensive. By February 26, Turkey had detained [845 people](#) for criticising the offensive. In contrast, Turkish media flood international media outlets with articles from the Turkish government's point of view. In early March, these sources reported that President Recep Tayyip Erdogan called for [army reserves](#) to prepare for mobilisation in Afrin. On March 16, a presidential spokesperson announced that [Turkey had no intention of handing Afrin](#) over to the Assad regime.



Operation Olive Branch

Throughout January there had been a build up of Turkish troops and armoured vehicles along the Turkey-Afrin border and in Azaz and Marea in Turkey-occupied northern Aleppo. Turkey's warplanes flew along the border and Turkish forces increased their mortar and Katyusha rocket attacks on Afrin. But for Turkey to use Syrian airspace in support of a ground invasion Afrin required permission from Russia. On January 18, Turkey's army chief, Hulusi Akar, and head of national intelligence (MIT), Hakan Fidan, met with Russian officials in Moscow. Afterwards, the Assad regime announced it would shoot down any Turkish aircraft flying over Syrian airspace, and that any Turkish attack on Syrian soil would be an act of aggression. On January 19, 20 buses of Turkey-linked militias crossed into Aleppo. Another convoy attempted to cross directly into Afrin but was repelled by the YPG.

On January 20, US Army spokesperson, Colonel Ryan Dillon, and Head of US Central Command, General Joseph Votel, claimed that Afrin and the YPG in Afrin were not part of US-led coalition operations. At the Menagh airbase, after the YPG rejected a Russian and Syrian proposal for the Assad regime to take over the administration and security of Afrin in return for stopping Turkey launch the offensive, Russia gave Turkey the green light. When Turkey attacked, Russia's Defence Ministry was quick to blame the US for causing the attack by announcing that the US was creating a border force made up of SDF and local fighters, and that the US intended to stay in northern and eastern Syria to fight ISIS remnants, influence a political transition and curb Iranian influence. According to Russian officials the US was derailing the peace process, 'which the Kurds should rightfully join.' Two days after the start of the offensive, US Secretary of Defence Mattis and later, US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson reiterated that Turkey had 'legitimate security concerns', apparently in regards to their allies east of the Euphrates – the YPG/SDF/PYD.

On January 20, after Russian military police moved to Kurdish-held Tel Rifaat, two kilometres from their former position at Menagh airbase (which Turkey bombed soon after), Turkey launched Operation Olive Branch. The offensive involved airstrikes from 72 F-16 fighter jets on the first day alone, as well as 6,400 Turkish Armed Forces (TSK) and up to [25,000 Turkey-backed militants](#), with another [15,000 to 20,000 TSK](#) deployed at the border. Against them were 10,000 YPG/YPJ fighters.

Turkey's intention was to take Afrin in three days. The hilly wooded terrain, fog, rain and mud and that YPG/YPJ/SDF forces were battle hardened, cohesive and highly motivated and had local support worked against this. Also Syria and Iran were allowing SDF reinforcements, weapons and other supplies to come through regime-controlled territory because Syria and Iran are against Turkey expanding its occupation of Syria. As the days progressed, Iran also became concerned that the withdrawal of SDF fighters from Deir Ezzor would lead ISIS to pose a threat to its militias on either side of the border, as born out by [ISIS attempting to cross the border](#) into Iraq on March 11. Turkey also accused Saudi Arabia, Egypt and the UAE of helping the Kurds. This meant 'hundreds' of foreign fighters, 2,000 members of the (Christian) Syriac Military Council, and an unknown number of Iranian-backed



Syrian Arab fighters armed with anti-tank guided missiles joined the YPG in defence of Afrin. All these factors have led to a drawn out bloody battle, in which Turkey stands accused of committing war crimes and crimes against humanity.

Turkey commits War Crimes and Crimes against Humanity in Afrin

During the two-month offensive, the SDF claims that TSK and Turkey-backed militias have:

- Conducted [mass executions](#) of civilians around Jinderes,
- Directly shot at civilians, for example, living in Rubar refugee camp, travelling by car and otherwise trying to escape;
- Tortured and [killed prisoners-of-war](#);
- [Mutilated the bodies of SDF fighters](#) (with the SDF presenting multiple images, including a video of a YPJ (woman) fighter in the process of being mutilated, to international bodies as evidence that Turkey is committing war crimes);
- [Threaten to behead](#) Yezidi, Christians and others who do not convert to their form of Islam;
- [Moved Arab and Turkmen families into deserted villages](#), offering them houses and olive farms, intent on a program of ethnic cleansing;
- Used cluster bombs on villages in the Jinderes area,
- Used napalm on 27 January;
- Used chlorine gas in artillery shells on February 6 and February 16. After the February 16 attack on [Sheikh Hadid](#), six men were taken to Afrin hospital with breathing difficulties and burns over their bodies. [Subsequent tests](#) confirmed that they were suffering from exposure to chlorine gas; and have
- Targeted the entrance of Afrin Hospital several times with artillery and rocket fire, an attack on February 13 killing one civilian and wounding four others.

On March 15, [Omar Alloush](#), a lawyer and lead negotiator between Kurds, Arabs and the US in Tal Abyad, Tabqa and Raqqa, and a key figure in setting up multi-ethnic local councils, was murdered in Tal Abyad, the second significant mediator to be murdered in one month. Kurdish sources suspect Turkey of foul play.

The international community is not condemning Turkey for these war crimes and crimes against humanity because of multiple intersecting and divergent interests.

Turkey, Russia and the US: Goals and Risks

In launching Operation Olive Branch President Erdogan wants to:

- **Eliminate the YPG/PYD from Afrin** and showcase Turkey's military capacity;
- **Replace the PYD-led Afrin administration** with one submissive to Turkey;
- Prevent the PYD and YPG from expanding to the Mediterranean Sea;



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- Divide Kurds who support the YPG/YPJ/PYD and those who do not;
- **Provide further proof of YPG/YPJ links with PKK** (Kurdistan Workers Party, classified as a terrorist organisation by the US and Australia, but not the UN or Russia) if PKK helps defend Afrin;
- **Hand over the Kurdish-majority district to its 'rightful owners'**, i.e. return Sunni Arab refugees from Turkey and provide settlement for Sunni Arab IDPs in Afrin. For example, since the end of Operation Euphrates Shield some 75,000 Syrian refugees in Turkey have been repatriated to Jarablus, Azaz, al-Rai and al-Bab, with the area being administered by the Turkey-backed Syrian 'Interim' Government;
- **Break the US-Kurd alliance**, demonstrating that the US will not protect Kurds against Turkey and forcing the US to choose between Turkey and Kurds, and if the US chooses the latter, send a message that this will come at a cost to NATO;
- Send a message to all stakeholders that Turkey will not tolerate the Syrian Kurds and their allies being part of political negotiations or gaining any form of autonomy;
- **Expand Turkish controlled territory** in Syria to the Mediterranean Sea and east to Menagh military base, Tel Rifaat, Manbij and ultimately to the Iraqi border and beyond, thereby allowing free movement of TSK and Turkey-backed militias and cutting all connections between the Kurds of Syria, Turkey and Iraq;
- Expand Turkish influence, if not control, to Sunni-majority areas in Raqqa and Deir Ezzor, now secured by the SDF and run by multi-ethnic local councils;
- **Increase its leverage over Syria's future** by:
 - Demonstrating that Turkey controls opposition militias and can use them in whichever way it prioritises;
 - Controlling northern Aleppo and Idlib to be in a better position to supply opposition militias further south;
 - Giving reasons for Arabs living under the Kurdish-led federal system to come under Turkish influence, with Turkey having allegedly promised Turkey-backed militias an independent Sunni state after Afrin, Idlib and the Azaz-Jarablus-Bab region are united; and
- Distract Turkey's civilian population from domestic crises and **win support for elections**, with municipal elections being scheduled for March 2019 and national elections being scheduled for November 2019, unless they are brought forward.

The risks are that Turkey could:

- **Become bogged down in an inconclusive war of attrition** that incurs TSK casualties beyond the 70 killed in Operation Euphrates Shield;
- Cause (pro) Assad forces to move into Afrin and militarily confront Turkey, as has occurred;
- Cause YPG to leave the fight against ISIS in Deir Ezzor to defend Afrin, as has occurred;
- **Become less secure:**



- By opening up new opportunities for ISIS, **prolong the war with ISIS**;
- If Turkey's actions lead jihadi militant extremists to attack Turkey as a result of:
 - Turkey empowering ex-ISIS, HTS and other jihadi extremists by deploying them in Afrin and promising them a Sunni Arab mini-state but failing to deliver;
 - Increased tensions between the militias that support Turkey (and who have temporarily given up their goal of defeating Assad to do Turkey's bidding, with Turkey paying their salaries, and taking in their families) and those who oppose Turkey's occupation of Syria increase; and/or
 - Turkey betraying those who are doing its bidding in Aleppo and Idlib;
- If PKK and other militants escalate attacks on the TSK and police in Turkey;
- If Turkey's Kurdish civilians radicalise;
- If Kurds radicalise across four countries;
- If Turkey expands operations and elicits a military response from Iran, the US, Russia and/or Iraq.
- **Lose leverage in Syria:**
 - If Turkey's actions go beyond the limits decreed by Russia, increases tensions with Iran (as has occurred) and causes a breakdown in the Astana process;
 - If Iran uses proxies to fight Turkey in Syria, as has occurred;
 - If the Opposition loses popular support because they come to be seen as Turkey's proxies;
 - If the Opposition loses interest in being Turkey's proxies; and
 - If Turkey is unable to hold hostile territory;
- **Prolong the Syrian civil war;**
- **Further destabilise the region;**
- **Further damage Turkey's reputation;**
- **Cause the international community to take strong measures against Turkey;**
- **See a decline in domestic support** for the offensive, which would impact elections in Turkey.

By allowing Turkey into Afrin Russia wants:

- Turkey to use its influence with the Opposition, for example, to attend the Sochi conference (which failed to eventuate) and in March, convince Faylaq al-Rahman and Ahrar al-Sham to let civilians evacuate from Eastern Ghouta (which has failed to eventuate to date);
- Turkey to expand its observer posts and dismantle HTS administrations in Idlib and agree to a regime advance in Idlib so a new de-escalation line is created between HTS and (pro) Assad forces;
- To weaken Turkey – US/NATO relations and increase Turkey's dependence on Russia;



- To reduce the threat of jihadi extremist militias through loss of life and morale;
- To benefit from competition and antagonism between Turkey and Iran;
- To destroy the US-Kurdish alliance by demonstrating the limits of US support;
- To force the YPG/YPJ/PYD to negotiate with the Assad regime and cede territory, security and administrative control;
- To have the capacity to appease the YPG, for instance, by stopping Turkey's access to Afrin's airspace;
- To discredit the US and send a message that a US presence in northern and eastern Syria is unsustainable and ineffectual;
- To undermine and block the US from consolidating the SDF and the PYD-led administrations east of the Euphrates, and negatively impact US leverage over a political transition;
- To protect Russia's interests in Syria;
- To ensure Russia is the principal arbiter of Syria's future.

By allowing Turkey into Afrin Russia may:

- Increase the likelihood of clashes between Turkey and (pro) Assad forces, as has occurred;
- Cause a breakdown in the Astana process;
- Not be able to limit Turkey's aspirations in Syria;
- Prolong the civil war;
- Weaken Russia's relations with Syrian Kurds, as born out by Syrian Kurds boycotting Sochi;
- Thrust the YPG/PYD more firmly into the US camp and make them less accommodating in transactional dealings with the Assad regime;
- Prolong the war with ISIS by SDF withdrawing from its fight with ISIS to defend Afrin;
- Discredit Russia's efforts in Syria, creating a quagmire from which there is no escape without recourse to the very stakeholders Russia is trying to sideline or otherwise manipulate.

By appeasing Turkey, the US wants to:

- Improve relations with its NATO ally;
- Weaken Turkey's alliance with Russia and Iran;
- Encourage Turkey to focus on ISIS;
- Continue using Incirlik air base, even if on a reduced basis;
- Work out a compromise between Turkey and the Syrian Kurds in Aleppo;
- Convince Turkey to allow the SDF/PYD at the negotiation table;
- Convince Turkey to support the US in the stabilisation and reconstruction process in eastern Syria;
- Use Turkey to curb Iranian expansion; and
- Discredit Russia by claiming Afrin is Russia's jurisdiction and highlighting Russia's unwillingness to defend Afrin and lack of control over Turkey.



But US appeasement of Turkey risks:

- Increasing the likelihood of an ISIS resurgence in Raqqa and Deir Ezzor, with the withdrawal of YPG/YPG/SDF and affiliated fighters to Afrin, as has occurred with US announcing an 'operational pause' in the fight against ISIS in early March;
- An increasingly belligerent Turkey (and the jihadi extremist militants Turkey backs) acting outside US interests, including threatening US forces in Syria;
- A loss of trust with the YPG/SDF/PYD, which could lead to:
 - The US losing its only reliable partner on-the-ground;
 - Syrian Kurds remaining outside negotiations and not being part of a political transition;
 - The Kurds being forced to negotiate with the Assad regime;
 - A power vacuum in northern and eastern Syria, which ISIS, Turkey, Turkey-backed militants, the Assad regime and/or Iran will exploit;
- A loss of credibility with all stakeholders, the US being seen as 'weak', having failed to resolve the contradictions in wanting both Turkey and Syrian Kurds' support, and in not providing enough resources to fulfil its stated goals;
- US forces having to leave Syria and the US losing leverage over Syria's future;
- The US having less leverage in the Middle East;
- Ongoing war and the potential for escalation of war, or is this what the US wants?

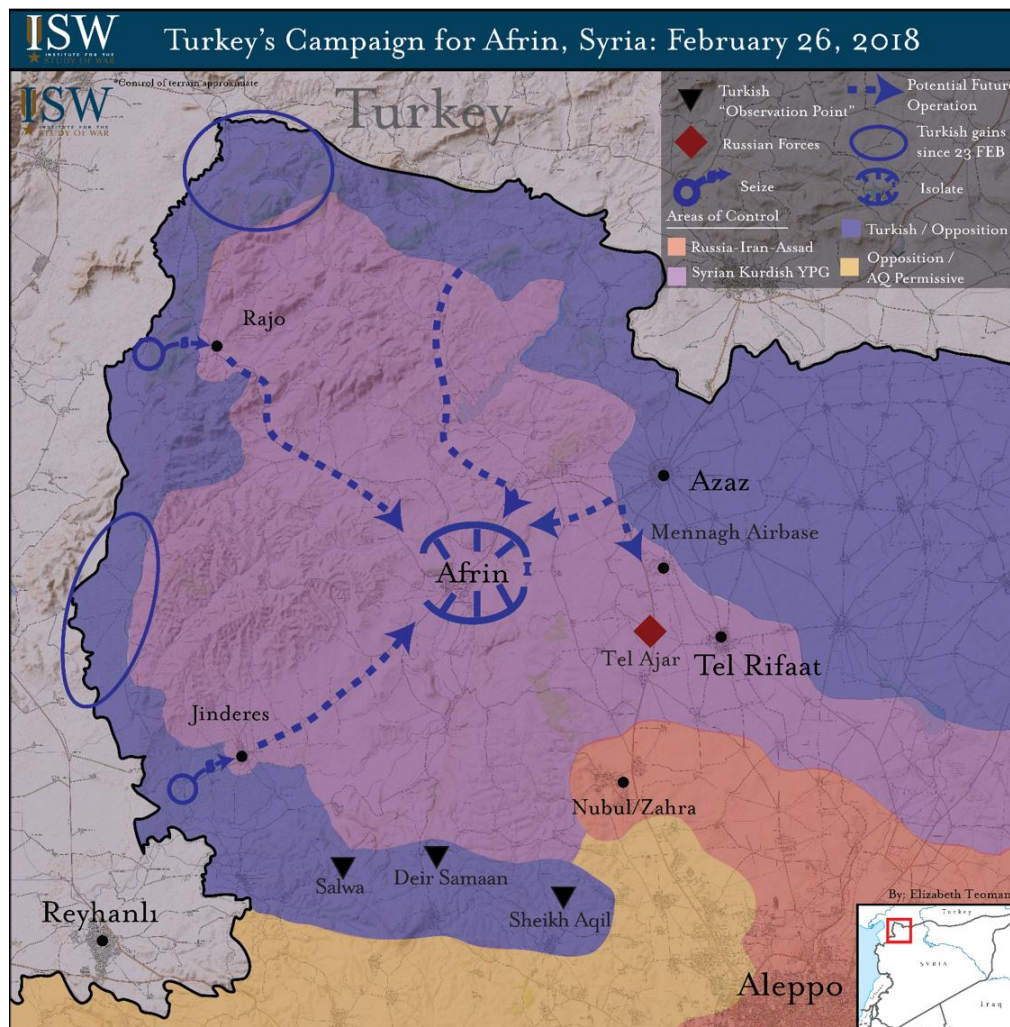
It appears the Kurds and their multi-ethnic, multi-religious allies, including Christians, Yazidis, Turkmen and Arabs, are victim to competing interests.

Phase One

Operation Olive Branch has progressed in two phases. The first phase between January 20 and the end of February involved Turkey opening five fronts to capture the 250-kilometre border and 22 percent of all villages in the Afrin district, supported by airstrikes from January 20 until February 4, and since February 9. That Russia has the power to allow or disallow Turkey's airstrikes on Afrin is indicated by Turkish airstrikes having halted after [Turkey-backed militants](#) shot down a Russian Su-25 in Idlib on February 3, and airstrikes resuming after the US-led coalition killed and injured about three hundred Russian mercenaries and pro-Assad militants that advanced on a SDF headquarters in Deir Ezzor on February 7.

Before and after this hiatus, Turkish warplanes and helicopters struck from the air, while on the ground M60T main battle tanks (MBTs), older variants such as M60A3s and Leopard 2 A4 tanks and artillery have relentlessly struck Afrin villages and towns since January 20. Turkey-backed militias included [ex-ISIS](#), [HTS](#), Ahrar al-Sham, the Sultan Murad Brigade, Faylaq al-Sham and Nour al-Din al-Zenki. All are committed to establishing a Sunni Arab state based on Sharia law. As [France 24](#) reports on February 11: 'Turkey has declined to provide details of its allies operating in Afrin and there are concerns ... that Ankara's links to radical jihadist groups could have

security consequences as Operation Olive Branch widens its combat operations ...' or, after fighting subsides, if Ankara loses 'control of jihadist fighters across Turkey's 900 kilometre border with Syria.' Turkey-backed militants claim they are liberating Afrin from the 'infidels'. Against the second largest military force in NATO, and these ideologically driven militias, YPG are armed mainly with Kalashnikovs, RPGs [rocket propelled grenade launchers] and light machine guns, although [Syria, Iran](#), and some [anonymous sources](#) claim Russia, have armed YPG with anti-tank guided missiles.



[Map](#) of Turkey's assault on Afrin in the Aleppo governorate of Syria

In the first days of the offensive, 6,000 people attempted to flee Afrin to the Kurdish-controlled Sheikh Maqsoud district in Aleppo city, 50 kilometres to the south, but government checkpoints prevented them from leaving. Fighting continues to prevent humanitarian aid coming in from Turkey. Turkey declares daily victories, but according to YPG/SDF sources, Turkey advances by day and YPG retakes territory by night, inflicting heavy casualties. For instance, a fourth YPG counter-offensive on January 28 led to YPG re-taking the strategic mountain of Bursayam and after Turkey claimed to have taken four villages, YPG retook two of them. On February 17, [Firat News](#) reported that Turkey controlled 37 villages on five fronts, all within five kilometres of the border, but fighting continued in and around each deserted village.



On January 24, and twice more by early February, Turkish airstrikes hit the edge of Nissan 17 Dam (also known as Maydanki Dam), 10 kilometres from Afrin city. The dam provides water and electricity to the district. Airstrikes also caused extensive damage to a 1300 BCE Aramean neo-Hittite temple in Ain Dara, known for its winged lions and sphinxes and giant footprints of the Hittite sun god, and also targeted the remains of a city built by one of Alexander the Great's generals in the Shera district, but Turkey denies it is targeting archaeological sites.

In the last days of January, Turkish warplanes targeted the surrounds of Rajo and Jinderes as well as the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI). Turkish government sources claim the airstrikes in the KRI killed 49 PKK 'terrorists'. Yet eleven days into the offensive, Turkey had only captured three percent of all villages and no towns. [On February 1](#), footage emerged showing Turkish militants stripping and mutilating the body of a YPJ (female) fighter, accompanied by shouts of 'Allah Akbar'. On February 2, Turkish Prime Minister Binali Yildirim accused the YPG of launching 82 rockets into Kilis and Hatay, claiming these killed [five civilians](#) and injured more than one hundred. The next day, two Turkish soldiers were killed and five injured in a mortar attack on a Turkish checkpoint in Hatay. The SDF denied it instigated these cross border attacks.

From February 9, Turkey [systematically](#) targeted infrastructure including drinking water pumping stations, water treatment facilities, schools (depriving 50,000 children of an education), mosques, dams, roads, food depots, health centres and [communication towers](#), having already banned journalists and aid workers from entering Afrin. After Turkey bombed a water treatment plant on February 10 – 11, even the UN called on Turkey to cease attacking Afrin. The YPG continued to fight back. [Fars News Agency](#) and [Firat News](#) reported that on the weekend of February 10 – 11, YPG struck the Turkish army's defence lines in Azaz destroying a main position, four tanks, a depot of arms and ammunition and killing five Turkish soldiers, in addition to repelling four attacks inside Afrin that involved killing 23 Turkish soldiers and Turkey-backed militants. On February 16, YPG destroyed [nine tanks](#) and armoured vehicles. By this time 60,000 people had been displaced, Turkey controlled one town (Bulbul) and 23 villages, or seven percent of all villages, and had advanced within three kilometres of Jinderes.

On February 6, [Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu](#) claimed there had been no contact between the US and Turkey about US cutting ties with the YPG or evacuating YPG from Afrin or Manbij. On February 15, US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson met with President Erdogan in Ankara. In the [three hour meeting](#) in which the Turkish foreign minister acted as translator, Erdogan demanded the US expel YPG/YPJ from Manbij and the SDF east of the Euphrates. In return, Turkey and the US could conduct joint patrols around Manbij. Tillerson did not respond to this proposal but allegedly offered to 'weaken' ties with the YPG. At the [press conference](#) afterwards, Rex Tillerson announced, 'We're not going to act alone any longer. ... We're going to lock arms, we're going to work through the issues that are causing



difficulties.’ The outcome of meetings was the establishment of [joint working groups](#). The first was held on March 8 – 9, in which the US allegedly asked Turkey to stop its offensive on Afrin and Turkey demanded the US clear Manbij of all YPG/YPJ fighters and PYD representatives.

The Afrin authorities have criticised the silence and inaction of the international community in the face of Turkish aggression. Having repeatedly refused Russia’s offer for the regime to take over the administration and security of Afrin, the authorities issued a statement on January 26, ‘We call on the Syrian state to carry out its sovereign obligations towards Afrin ... and deploy [border guards] to secure the borders of the Afrin area’, insisting that, ‘The Kurdish defence, police and security forces would be maintained.’ Following this call, the Syrian Opposition called Kurds ‘traitors’. From mid-February, YPG and the Assad regime entered indirect negotiations to deploy guards and police to Afrin’s border with Turkey. [Basnews](#) reported that the talks involved US, Russian, French and Iranian delegations. Negotiations [stalled](#) when the YPG refused to lay down weapons, but on February 19 [an agreement](#) was reached whereby non-military regime forces would enter Afrin to defend the border without impacting the local administration. During the days of negotiations, Turkey accelerated its assault on Afrin, gaining control of 10 percent of all villages by February 21. That day [Erdogan warned Putin](#), ‘If the Syrian regime takes this path, there will be consequences.’ Erdogan announced Turkey’s intention to lay [siege](#) on Afrin city. [Turkish media](#) claimed that 20 remote-controlled vehicles mounted with sophisticated weaponry, 1,200 Special Operations soldiers and volunteer ‘village guards’ from eastern Turkey would implement the siege.

On February 21 the first convoy of pro-Assad forces entered Afrin. Immediately these [National Defence Force \(NDF\) personnel](#) came under fire from Turkish artillery, killing two. Another two NDF convoys followed, the last on February 23. Some [commentators](#) allege that the [500-member deployment](#) had not received Russian approval. Instead, Russia was pushing for Turkey and Syria to engage in a direct dialogue. This has not occurred. In March, the [Assad regime](#) sent more reinforcements.

The regime’s belated help for the people of Afrin (despite Assad et al. having called YPG/SDF ‘terrorists’ and ‘traitors’ two months earlier) is thought to be about choosing the Kurds as the lesser of two evils, gaining leverage over the Kurds for future negotiations, and saving face after the regime claimed it would shoot down Turkey’s warplanes flying in Syrian airspace. That the regime sent a token force indicates that either the YPG rejected all other offers, or that the regime and no one else for that matter (other than the Kurds and their allies), want to militarily confront Turkey. This has emboldened Turkey.

By February 24, the SOHR estimated that Turkey ‘controlled’ one town, 21 percent of all Afrin’s villages and 132 kilometres of the 250-kilometre border. By February 26, Day 38 of the offensive, Turkey had ‘taken’ the entire [250-kilometre border](#), and had advanced to the outskirts of Jinderes, Shero and Rajo. Nor is Turkey limiting the offensive to Afrin. On February 22, the [Turkish army in Azaz fired ‘tens’ of missiles](#)

[into a civilian convoy](#) bringing food and medicine to Afrin through regime-controlled territory, killing one and injuring twelve. The Turkish army claimed it was a convoy of 30 to 40 YPG vehicles transporting weapons and ammunition. In response, Syrian regime artillery shelled Turkish forces' positions.

Inside Afrin's towns and villages, shops are closed and streets are empty as people evacuate or hide in overcrowded dark, damp basements, caves and tunnels. Sources vary on the death toll, but all indicate a trend that airstrikes, shelling and fighting are increasing in intensity, as indicated in the table below, which shows cumulative figures. Turkey continues to deny killing civilians, claiming YPG fighters dress as civilians, while the term 'neutralised' refers to 'terrorists' killed or captured. The table does not indicate the thousands who have been injured.

Table of cumulative death tolls as reported by the Syrian Observatory of Human Rights, YPG/SDF, Afrin Health Centre and Turkey

Date	YPG/SOHR/ Afrin Health Centre claims of civilians killed	YPG/SOHR claims of YPG et al, killed	SOHR claims of pro-regime personnel killed	YPG/SOHR Claims of Turkey- backed militants killed	YPG/SOHR claims of Turkish soldiers killed	Turkish military claims of 'terrorists neutralised'
Jan. 23	25				53	265
Jan. 25	33+	53+		58+	7	303
Jan. 26	59	43		308		343
Jan. 31	67	81		85	18 / 7	790
Feb. 5		106		134		950
Feb. 9	160/395 ¹	98		862		1,140
Feb. 12	74	159		171	31	
Feb. 14		163		177	34	1,485
Feb. 18		197²		194	37	1,614
Feb. 23		177	2 ³	1,219		1,829
Feb. 24		248		222	40	1,931
Feb. 26	192/574	255		231	44	
Feb. 27						2,083
March 2		272	18	248	59	2,295
March 3		281		252	59	2,612
March 5	171 212/621	316	54	301	68	2,777
March 7		283		1,588		
March 9	204	359	81	338	71	3,171
March 14	225		91			3,444

¹ The second figure for Afrin Health Centre indicates number injured.

² This figure may or may not include three foreign fighters who were killed.

³ Killed on February 21.



Back on January 24, 42 political parties from greater Kurdistan met in Erbil and condemned Operation Olive Branch. Two days later, former KRI president Masoud Barzani said that sending peshmerga to help defend Afrin would not solve the problem, the best KDP could do was try to convince Turkey to stop the operation. On January 30, the [KRI Parliament](#) condemned the Turkish military operation, urged Turkey to adhere to international laws, and called on the UN and international community to stop Turkey's aggression. A cross party five-member delegation from the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) delegation arrived Afrin on February 9, bringing medical supplies.

In contrast to the inaction of world leaders, since the first days of Operation Olive Branch, across the world, there have been hundreds of demonstrations protesting Turkey's aggression. Demonstrations continue in Australia (Sydney, Melbourne, Adelaide and Canberra), Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Netherlands, Norway, Russia, Sweden, Switzerland, United Kingdom, Lebanon, Turkey, and the Kurdistan regions of Iraq and Iran, and in Raqqa and northern Syria. On February 4, 100,000 people in Afrin took to the streets to protest. Hundreds of Afrin citizens have joined the YPG/YPJ, or taken up arms for the first time, or have volunteered in other capacities to defend Afrin.

Phase Two

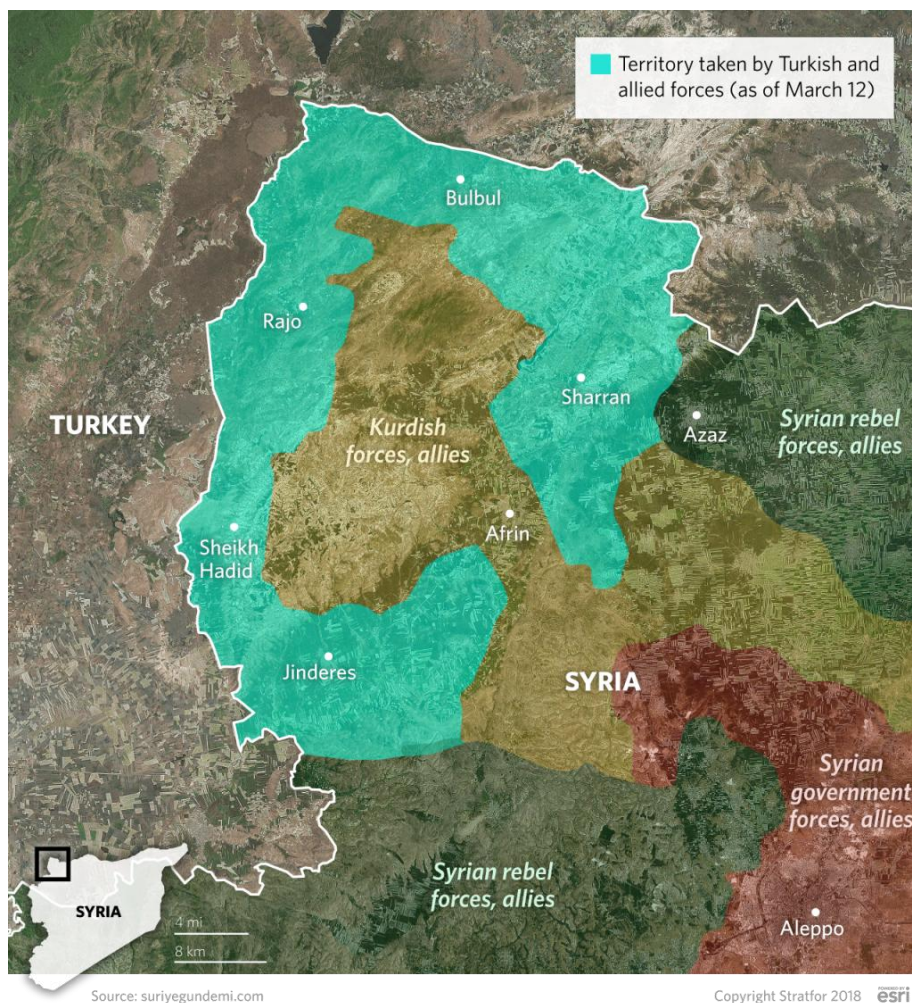
In the second phase of Operation Olive Branch Turkey wants to take control of Afrin's towns, despite Turkey's opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) leader, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, advocating that Turkish forces should not enter towns, particularly Afrin city, as it would be a bloodbath. But from early February, Turkey was preparing for urban warfare. Drones flew over Afrin city and 3,000 TSK personnel including commando battalions, gendarmerie and police special units, blooded by the civil war in eastern Turkey, were deployed to the border. Back on February 1, Turkey had taken the town of Bulbul, 30 kilometres north of Afrin city. On March 1, [80 – 100 YPG fighters](#) used tunnels to attack Turkish forces west of Rajo, killing eight gendarmerie non-commissioned officers and two militants, and wounding 13 Turkish soldiers, but on March 2, Turkish forces entered the town of Rajo. On March 3, when [Turkish warplanes targeted pro-regime forces](#) a third time in 48 hours, a four-hour barrage killed at least 36 NDF personnel, and Turkey claimed it had taken 'control' of Rajo, 26 kilometres from Afrin city.

From March 5, [Turkey pounded Jinderes](#) from the air. The city is key to YPG supply lines. By this time the SOHR claimed Turkey had taken 28 percent of all villages and had entered the towns of Shera and Sheikh Hadid. The same day, a [Pentagon spokesperson](#) reported there had been an operational pause on the fight with ISIS in Deir Ezzor province with [700 SDF fighters](#) from Raqqa and 1,700 from Deir Ezzor, including commanders, and fighters from an allied Arab force having left to defend Afrin. Turkey demanded the US stop these redeployments. In Afrin, a local official claimed more than [200,000 people had been displaced](#), mainly into Afrin city. Turkey announced it would establish [nine refugee camps in Idlib](#) for Afrin's IDPs. By March 9



Turkey had taken 'control' of Maydanki Dam. From this date Afrin city has had no water or electricity. Also on March 9, Turkey announced it had taken the towns of Jinderes, Shera and Sheikh Hadid i.e. a five of seven major towns. Turkey was taking over deserted towns, civilians having evacuated and YPG making tactical withdrawals. Then YPG returns to fight. For instance, on March 13 alone, YPG killed [25 TSK soldiers and 46 Turkey-backed militants](#).

Turkey has [bombed the road to Aleppo city](#), and regularly uses artillery fire to target this road, which is used by people trying to escape. To get through a regime checkpoint people are being charged up to \$2200. On March 10, [Erdogan claimed Afrin city was surrounded](#) and an advance into the city was imminent. As Turkey carried out continual air and artillery attacks on the city, 200 or more civilians fled. Other civilians from Syria and Turkey are converging on Afrin, [offering themselves as human shields](#) to prevent Turkey entering the city. On March 14, Turkish airstrikes again hit NDF personnel, [killing ten](#). In response, [regime militia shelled Turkish forces](#) in Marea (outside Afrin district).



[Map](#) of Afrin showing territory taken by Turkey



The YPG must decide whether to hand Afrin over, even if partially, to the Assad regime, stay and fight in the hope that the international community intervenes, or withdraw east of the Euphrates. Yet withdrawing will not reduce Turkey's angst, as Erdogan repeatedly threatens that after Afrin, Turkey will [clear all 'terrorists' from Manbij](#) and east of the Euphrates to the Iraqi border and beyond.

Manbij and beyond

US Special Operations Forces are based in the strategic town of Manbij and east of the Euphrates. Since the YPG-led SDF liberated Manbij from ISIS in August 2016, subsequently establishing the multi-ethnic Manbij Military Council to administer and secure the town, Turkey has been encouraging Arab tribes to oppose the administration, which led to large-scale protests against the YPG and a car bomb targeting senior SDF figures in January. On January 28, Colonel Ryan Dillon, a spokesperson for the US-led coalition, told Kurdish media that 'Turkey knows where our forces are in Manbij, and ... why they are there – to prevent any kind of escalation.' The Pentagon emphasised that the US was working with the Manbij Military Council, not the YPG.

Back on January 23, Mattis acknowledged that Turkey's operation was damaging what was a 'relatively stable' area of Syria and on January 24, President Donald Trump allegedly told President Erdogan to limit the offensive, that it risked undercutting their common goal of fighting ISIS and warned him not to put US personnel at risk. Turkey denied that Trump expressed these concerns. On January 25, Turkish Deputy Prime Minister Bekir Bozdag said, 'Those who support the terrorist organization (i.e. YPG/PYD) will become a target in this battle.' On the same day, President Trump's homeland security adviser, Tom Bossert, warned that there could be 'grave consequences to any miscalculation and escalation' if Turkish forces clashed with 'the proxy forces that we have all been relying on to defeat ISIS, especially if there are US advisers in the region'. On the night of January 24/25 Turkey conducted airstrikes around the town of Manbij. Sputnik's Arabic Service quoted media outlets saying that two US military advisors were killed by the airstrikes. Other reports claimed the advisors were killed in airstrikes over Afrin, which the US vehemently denied. In the second week of February Lt. Gen. Paul E. [Funk](#), commander of the US-led Coalition, visited Manbij. In response to Turkey's repeated threats he said, 'You hit us, we will respond aggressively.'

To date, the US appears determined to stay in Manbij because Manbij is key to stopping ISIS travelling between Turkey and Syria and therefore integral to securing and stabilising Raqqa and Deir Ezzor. Another possible consideration is that the Manbij Military Council is one of the most active, bloodied Arab-majority groups mobilized under the SDF banner. It fought in Raqqa and continues to fight in Deir Ezzor. A US withdrawal from Manbij would betray its Arab and Kurdish allies, and could allow Turkey-backed extremist jihadi militants to take control. After US -Turkey talks on March 8 – 9, Turkey claimed that the US had agreed to pull YPG/YPJ out of Manbij, and for a joint Turkish-US force to secure the city, but the [US State](#)



[Department](#) claimed that discussions were on-going. Meanwhile, the Manbij Military Council claims that only residents of Manbij provide security and services.

Ways forward

The Syrian Kurds and their allies are fighting for survival; for human, cultural, economic and political rights; and to keep trust with Arabs in Arab-majority areas, which the SDF promised to defend. Syrian Kurds and their allies do not wish to follow the path of the KRI, which is enduring a collective punishment from the Government of Iraq following the referendum on independence, and Iraqi Kurdish Peshmerga withdrawing from Kirkuk and other disputed territories. If the Syrian Kurds and their multi-ethnic and multi-religious allies, including Christians, lose this fight, their genuine attempt to establish a multi-ethnic democratic federation will be put in jeopardy. One scenario is that Turkey takes northern Syria, and secures it using jihadi extremist militias. In mid-December, US National Security Advisor, H.R. McMaster, warned that Turkey was one of two leading state sponsors of 'radical Islamist ideology'. Another scenario is that the Assad regime resumes control of all of Syria, leading to Kurds and their multi-ethnic and multi-religious allies to once again become non-citizens, persecuted at every checkpoint, blocked from educational and employment opportunities, and imprisoned on the whim of security forces.

The [international community's acquiescence to Turkey's actions in Afrin](#), even after the UN Security Council Resolution 2401 demanded a country-wide ceasefire, makes it complicit in Turkey's aggression, which targets the very people who fought ISIS. It is not enough that [President Emmanuel Macron, Germany, the US, EU and UN](#) tell Erdogan that the ceasefire applies to all of Syria, or that Russia, Iran and Syria voice their objections to Operation Olive Branch. Erdogan's response was to intensify the offensive. Even the PKK has been silent, but for different reasons. While [Turkish media reports](#) PKK have entered Afrin to help defend it, it is thought that the PKK's silence is an attempt to maintain a distance so that Syrian Kurds can preserve the gains they have made, and so the international community takes responsible steps to stop the aggression and finally address the Kurdish question.

The US and Turkey arguably share some long-term interests in Syria that include fighting ISIS, containing Iran, stabilising Syria and achieving a political transition. However they significantly differ on means and outcomes. That Turkey supports jihadi extremist militias, wants a compliant Syrian government based on Sharia law, and repeatedly threatens to eliminate any presence of YPG/PYD, indicates that proposals by the [Institute of War](#) and [The Cipher Brief](#) discount any interest in preserving the rights of Syrian minorities. These proposals include Turkey and its proxies being allowed to run Afrin, that the US form a border security force of American-backed and Turkish-backed forces, and that the US provide guarantees that 'acceptable' Turkish-backed opposition parties have a role in Raqqa.



Instead, all Syrians would benefit from the immediate establishment of **enforced no-fly zones** and the **deployment of international peacekeeping forces that train local forces**. Along the border with Turkey, local forces could include YPG/YPJ, Rojava Peshmerga, Turkmen, Syriac (Christian) and Arab forces, the last chosen from those who do not advocate jihadi militant extremism. To further address Turkey's security concerns, pressure could be put on the PKK to initiate an immediate ceasefire in exchange for the Turkish government returning to an internationally monitored peace process in Turkey and accepting a Democratic Federal System in Northern Syria, which the Kurds and their allies would like implemented throughout Syria, made difficult by being excluded from all negotiations because of Turkey's objections.

Diplomatic condemnation of the Afrin offensive **must come with material consequences**. The US and [Germany](#) are the top suppliers of military hardware to Turkey. For instance, the US sells Turkey F-4s, F-16s and Cobra helicopters and Germany sells Turkey Leopard-2 tanks. This hardware is being used in Afrin. On January 25, Germany's foreign minister, Sigmar Gabriel, [said](#) that the German government would freeze the decision about whether to grant Turkey's request for more modernized tanks and the US Congress is debating sanctions on Turkey. Yet both countries continue to supply Turkey with military equipment, as does the UK. **Until Turkish troops withdraw from Syria and until Turkey stops supporting extremist jihadi militants, all weapons sales and intelligence sharing with Turkey should be halted**. On February 5, the Dutch Foreign Ministry formally [withdrew its ambassador](#) to Turkey and will not accept the appointment of a new Turkish ambassador. Other countries, such as Australia, should do the same.

If the aforementioned measures fail to have an impact on Turkey's defiance of UN Security Council resolutions and international law, the international community must **implement targeted sanctions**, including the freezing of overseas assets of Turkish officials responsible for the planning and execution of the Afrin operation, and on Turkish businesses that profit from it, including weapons manufacturers.

On 14 Feb, [Gulf News](#) reminded readers that Donald Trump told the *New York Times* in July 2016 that he was a 'fan of Kurds' and if elected president he would work to fix relations between Turks and Kurds. The paper asked him how. 'Meetings,' was his reply. The international community is not prioritising a **comprehensive solution for Turkey's fear of Kurds**, despite the Kurdish issue being at the heart of Turkey's lurch towards an Islamic-fascist state and its aggressive foreign policies. If Turkey fails to change course, it is time for the US-led coalition and NATO to consider more extreme measures, in parallel with offering incentives for Turkey to change course. Letting Turkey empower jihadi extremist militias and bully every one endangers the people of Syria, Turkey and Iraq, as well as Europe and beyond. **With Turkey's actions in Aleppo and Idlib having relevance to international security, it is the responsibility of international organisations and nation-state governments to take immediate action.**



Implications for Syria

How the US-led coalition responds to Turkey's invasion of Afrin will influence the capacity for the US to maintain a presence in Syria and influence Syria's future. [Many](#) commentators claim the only way to stop the suffering of the Syrian people is to let Assad have control over at least 70 percent of Syrian territory, despite this strategy not addressing the incompatible interests of multiple stakeholders and that the [regime has lost](#) the economic and political capacity to service the country. Instead, it is heavily reliant on non-state actors and foreign patrons. This assessment either calls for [a US withdrawal from Syria](#) or excludes 30 percent of Syrian territory currently secured by the SDF and US-led coalition and which contains significant water, oil and gas resources.

The Syrian regime, Russia and Iran claim that the US military presence is illegal. The US justifies its presence by saying ISIS remains a threat. To maintain a presence, the US would like to work with both Turkey and the YPG/SDF/PYD. Given Turkey's political leaders have staked their reputations on eliminating the YPG/PYD, the US may have to choose whether or not, or to what degree, it complies with Turkey's demands and/or supports the US-SDF/PYD alliance. Each path has inherent risks. The risks associated with co-ordinating with or even partially acquiescing to Turkey have been outlined. The risks of relying on the US-SDF/PYD alliance include worsening relations with Turkey, Turkey and/or its extremist militants acting outside anyone's interests, pushing Turkey towards Russia, and Syrian Kurds being unwilling and unable to curb Iranian expansion. For instance, Syrian Kurds will not benefit from making an enemy of Iran. Nor do they have the resources to confront the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and Iran's proxies. Yet if the US leaves Syria before a political transition, the Syrian people will suffer. Russia, Iran and Turkey have different visions and lack the resources for reconciliation and reconstruction, which could lead to an ISIS (like) resurgence and more civil conflict.

With so many competing interests, Syria's future is dependent on negotiations between different combinations of stakeholders. The US and Russia must come to a common understanding. Both countries are federations. Russia has been pushing for a federal constitution. Neither country wants conflict between the regime and the Kurds. Ideally Russia could force individuals like President Bashar al-Assad into an early retirement if this did not involve a complete dismantling of the regime and there were suitable replacements willing to join other Syrians to develop a new constitution and effect a political transition. Even if Assad does not step down, the US-led coalition and Russia must oversee direct or indirect negotiations between Syrian government representatives, Turkey, the Opposition and Syrian Kurds, and between Israel and Iran. Each party needs to outline their minimum requirements for peace. If a party refuses to negotiate they must suffer consequences. Where parties are unable to reach a compromise, the international community must supply peacekeepers and enforce no-fly zones. Iran's expanding military influence in Syria may be difficult to resolve. The UN, Russia, the US-led coalition, Israel, Turkey and Iran need to reach an agreement relying on enforceable measures whereby Turkey



and Iran militarily withdraw their forces and foreign proxies, and disarm their Syrian proxies, in return for having their security concerns met by international guarantees. Another agreement will be required to outlaw IRGC-affiliated companies from operating outside Iran, given their wish to profit from reconstruction.

A critical lever will be the threat of being tried in a court or clemency for all those who have overseen war crimes and crimes against humanity, including the Assad regime, opposition militias, proxy militias, Russia and Turkey. Others who have allowed these war crimes to continue must also be held to account. This would implicate the US, Gulf States and all countries within the US-led coalition, including Australia. One way of holding these countries to account is insisting they spend the equivalent of their military expenditure in Syria on reconstruction at the community and regional level, linked to the development of interim justice mechanisms, an independent judiciary and inclusive decentralised governance. This would reduce the threat of war and international terrorism, and be money and expertise well spent.

Sources

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