

Northern Syria: Turkey-backed FSA militia swept into Afrin town on Sunday, YPG vows to expel Turkey through guerrilla warfare

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Turkey-backed FSA militia swept into Afrin town on Sunday, raising their and Turkish flags in the town centre and declaring full control after an eight-week campaign to drive out Kurdish YPG fighters. More than 200,000 people fled the town. YPG plans hit-and-run attacks on Turkish and Syrian rebel forces after pulling out of besieged city and vows to expel Turkey through guerrilla warfare.

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Syria's new exiles: Kurds flee Afrin after Turkish assault

Once a haven for refugees from the war in Syria, Afrin has found itself a flashpoint.

On a muddy trail in northern Syria, the war's newest exiles are leaving. Most are Kurds, fleeing Afrin for the regime-held city of Aleppo, just over a grey horizon. Behind them, Turkish troops and Arab forces they sponsor have encircled their home city except for the squeeze point they used to flee. Ahead, Shia militants allied to the Syrian army man checkpoints deciding who can pass.

With Syria's war ticking over into its eighth gruelling year, the north of the country is once more on the move. The Kurds are bearing the brunt of the latest upheaval, fleeing their enclave near the Turkish border as a promised storming of Afrin draws near. At least 250 civilians have been killed in the bombardment of Afrin as the Turks and their proxies have advanced. Many abandoning the majority-Kurdish enclave fear they may not be allowed to return when – and if – the dust finally settles on this war without restraint. On Sunday morning, the Turkish backed Free Syrian Army rebels said they had entered the town after Kurdish forces pulled out. Everything appears up for grabs now: their homes, futures and even the Kurdish cause.

"We sat this out for the past seven years," said Hero, a Kurdish resident of Afrin who had made it to Aleppo. "We bothered no one and watched the storm pass all around us. Then the Turks came for us."

A safe haven in the tempest of Syria, Afrin had avoided the war in the rest of the north until a

Turkish-led incursion into its surrounding hills seven weeks ago. Idlib and Aleppo, not far away, had been ravaged by jets and insurgency. Afrin, meanwhile, had been a haven for refugees from elsewhere. Arabs, Kurds, Turkmen, Christians, Muslims, even Yazidis from Iraq, had hunkered down as war raged all around.

Even as Afrin's civilian leaders showcased the city as a model of coexistence amid the chaos, it became a microcosm of the potent geopolitics that subsumed local allegiances. Arab-Kurdish tensions simmered in the north. But more importantly a once workable relationship between Washington and Ankara broke down – with the postwar future of Syria's Kurds central to the schism.

Afrin's transformation into a focal point of the Syrian conflict began on 20 January, shortly after the Pentagon announced it would raise a border militia from a Kurdish-led force it had formed in north-eastern Syria to fight the Islamic State (Isis) terror group. Washington's alliance with the Kurds had never sat well with Ankara, which regarded their leaders as being ideological allies of the militant Kurdistan Workers' party (PKK), whose insurgency in south-eastern Turkey it continues to fight.

Faced with American assurances that the alliance would be temporary, Turkey had stood by as Isis was swept from the towns and cities of north-eastern Syria, culminating in the extremists' ousting from Raqqa late last year.

But the mooted border force was a step too far for wary officials, a sign that the Kurds – aided by their backers – would make strategic gains which could weaken Turkey's hold on its 500-mile frontier with Syria. And so, on 20 January, Turkey's leaders, angered by Washington but not willing to confront the Kurds where they fought alongside the Americans, instead turned their guns on Afrin, a small pocket of north-western Syria, far from the fight with Isis and with no presence of US troops.

A gap of around 60 miles separates Afrin from the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces' presence to the east, roughly demarcated by the Euphrates river. Turkey has carved out a sphere of influence between the Kurdish populations, building its stocks with local Arab communities, intervening in the Syrian war when it wants to – but most importantly, keeping the Kurds apart.

"They say that the fighting groups in Afrin and Rojava (north-eastern Syria) are the same, and that is basically true," said a western diplomat based in the region. "Equally true is that the militants in Afrin had not pointed a gun their way until the Turks sent their air force after them."

The Kurds fleeing Afrin and those who have stayed behind – up to 200,000 people are thought to remain in the city – say they fear that Turkey aims to change the demography of the town, and by extension the border. The Arab force it is using comprises members of the Free Syria Army and allied militias and was raised to fight the Assad regime. Now, though, the spectre of Arabs being sent to fight Kurds in a majority-Kurdish city adds a troubling dimension to a conflict that continues to lurch far from the original battlelines of a nationalistic push to oust the Syrian leadership.

Inside Afrin, a group of Arab students praised the Turkish incursion last week, insisting that civilians were not indiscriminately targeted as they repeatedly have been in Ghouta, near Damascus, over the past month of airstrikes by Syrian and Russian jets. "They have not been perfect," said Dawood Mahmoud, who fled to Afrin from a nearby town more than a year ago. "But their mistakes are just that – mistakes."

A Kurdish resident of the city, who has not been given permission to leave by Kurdish militant groups, said the opposite. "Last night they bombed the hospital, and last week they blew up the waterworks. There have been up to 500 civilians killed. This is barbaric.

"They have been dropping leaflets telling us to trust them and surrender. They think we're fools. Neither they nor their Arabs can take Afrin. They wouldn't dare. This will be a blockade like Aleppo."

As the siege closes in, and as Syrians of all sects and ethnicities crisscross the battered north, the war is drifting further from resolution than ever before. The plaintive cries of the global aid community remain mostly ignored, as do the demands of United Nations leaders. "Basically, anything goes," said the western official. "There is no right or wrong any more. The international order is dying in the ruins of Syria."

Martin Chulov

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<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/mar/18/syrias-new-exiles-kurds-flee-afrin-after-turkish-assault>

Kurdish militia vows to make Afrin 'an ongoing nightmare' for Turks

YPG plans hit-and-run attacks on Turkish and Syrian rebel forces after pulling out of besieged city

Kurdish militants have vowed to wage a guerrilla war against the Turkish military and their Syrian rebel proxies after the latter swept into the northern Syrian city of Afrin, seizing control from Kurdish forces.

The Kurdish militia, the YPG, withdrew from Afrin before dawn on Sunday, members blending in with an exodus of up to 150,000 civilians who had been fleeing the city since Friday.

The Turks and their predominantly Arab allies moved quickly into the centre of Afrin and then its surrounds after more than seven weeks of clashes, which are thought to have claimed up to 250 civilian lives.

The rapid fall of Afrin – less than 48 hours after it was surrounded by the advancing Turks and Syrian rebels – belied expectations of a long, gruelling blockade, like the ongoing siege of eastern Ghouta by the Syrian military and its allies.

The withdrawing Kurdish forces framed their exit as a move to prevent more civilian suffering. However, up against a foe with heavier firepower and a modern airforce, and with no foreign backer of their own, the Kurds faced a formidable battle to defend Afrin from advancing forces.

Their departure has opened up a new front in the Syrian war, giving Turkey leverage deep inside the north of the country and raising concerns that the intervention may spark a demographic shift in surrounding areas. Northern Syria is already an epicentre of the war and is teeming with displaced people from elsewhere in the country as well as foreign-backed rebel groups, Islamists, regional powers, and allies of the Syrian president, Bashar al-Assad – all pushing disparate agendas.

The mass exodus of Afrin residents and militants is being absorbed by already overstretched communities in the countryside north and west of Aleppo. Aid agencies are struggling to cater for

the latest influx. The World Food Programme said it had distributed supplies to 25,000 people in the north over the weekend.

YPG officials among the exodus said some of the group's members had remained in Afrin to mount guerrilla attacks against the Turks and their allies. "We wish to announce that our war against the Turkish occupation and the ... forces known as the Free [Syrian] Army has entered a new phase, moving from a war of direct confrontation to hit-and-run tactics, to avoid larger numbers of civilian deaths and to hurt the enemy.

"The victory announcement by [the Turkish president Recep Tayyip] Erdoğan and his apparatchiks will only be sand in the eyes of the Turkish and international public opinion. Our forces everywhere in Afrin will be an ongoing nightmare for them."

Earlier on Sunday, Erdoğan had said: "Most of the terrorists have already fled with tails between their legs. Our special forces and members of the Free Syrian Army are cleaning the remains and the traps they left behind."

Afrin had been a relative safe haven throughout the war in contrast to the rest of Syria's combustible north; not far from the Turkish border in the country's north-west it had been a majority Kurdish enclave over recent years.

Ankara had grown increasingly irritated by the presence of the YPG in the city, which is ideologically aligned to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), with whom it has fought a deadly, decades-long, insurgency in Turkey's south-east. The YPG's second and larger stronghold covers an almost 300-mile stretch of the border from the Euphrates river to Iraq.

In between is a 60-mile-wide area of Syria in which Ankara has developed a deep presence over the last 18 months - primarily to keep the Kurds from closing the gap. Kurdish groups had moved into one town in the area - Tel Rifaat - under Russian cover nearly two years ago.

The YPG had called on Russia to defend them in Afrin. However, Moscow had refused, allowing Turkish jets into the airspace it controls over northern Syria to carry out attacks. Russia and the US had previously backed the YPG - for different reasons - but both sat out the clashes in a bid to protect their ties with Ankara.

While Russia and Turkey have found an accommodation over Syria, Ankara and Washington remain at odds over the former's support for Kurdish groups in the north-east, which the US military has used as a proxy to fight Islamic State (Isis).

Regional officials said Turkey was likely to try to replicate in Afrin its role in towns such as Manbij and al-Bab, in which it has helped to rebuild war damage and boost the town's services, all the while consolidating a foothold of its own.

Turkey has flagged plans to advance towards Manbij, where the US military maintains a base alongside its Kurdish allies. Such a move, which would potentially pitch two Nato allies against each other, has been repeatedly talked down by Washington.

Martin Chulov, Middle East correspondent

* The Guardian. Mon 19 Mar 2018 05.00 GMT

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/mar/19/kurdish-ypg-militia-vows-make-afrin-ongoing-nightmare-turkish-syrian-rebel-forces>

YPG says war in Afrin has reached new stage, vows to expel Turkey through guerrilla warfare

In a joint statement from the YPG and the Autonomous Administration in Afrin, it was promised that 'the resistance in Afrin will continue until every inch of Afrin is liberated, and the people of Afrin will return their villages'. The Kurdish led administration also claimed that they have asked civilians to leave in order to avoid atrocities now that the conflict has reached a new stage.

"We would like to declare that our war against the Turkish occupation and the Takfiri forces calling themselves the Free Army has entered a new stage, the transition from direct confrontation war to hit-and-run tactics is necessary to avoid the deaths of more civilians and to strike at the enemy. Our forces are everywhere in Afrin" they said.

The YPG and the Afrin administration, furthermore, condemned Russia and Turkey directly for the occupation, and blamed international silence for the current situation of the city.

"Break your silence, if Erdogan is not stopped today, he will threaten the whole world," a YPG spokesperson said in a press conference.

On Sunday, unconfirmed statements made by the Turkish Armed Forces, and President Tayyip Erdogan of Turkey claimed that the Turkish military and its FSA affiliates had captured the city of Afrin. The operation, which began eight weeks ago, targeted the city of Afrin, a relatively peaceful enclave in Syria with a stable socio-political sphere. Afrin is home to over 100,000 Internally displaced persons in Syria.

According to Turkey, however, Operation Olive Branch which has already brought about over 300 civilian deaths, was launched in order to rid 'PKK terrorist elements' from its borders. The operation has been aided by the Turkish air-force, whereas ground military activities are conducted by militants that have been described as Jihadists operating under the FSA banner. Turkish backed FSA forces work alongside the Turkish military. Thus far, militants working with Turkey have been implicated in extra-judicial executions, the mutilation of dead female fighters, property theft, and the deaths of innocent civilians.

"We have been receiving deeply alarming reports from Afrin in Syria about civilian deaths and injuries due to airstrikes and ground-based strikes" - a spokesperson for the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner said on Friday.

On the eighth week of the operation, Sunday the 18th of March, Erdogan claimed that Afrin was under the control of Turkey. "Afrin city centre is under control as of 8:30 this morning" He said. The attacks coincided both with the 103rd anniversary of the World War One Gallipoli campaign and within the week of the Kurdish new year festival of Newroz. Images on social media showed FSA rebels pulling down the Kurdish legendary protagonist of Newroz, Kawa the blacksmith.

"In the centre of Afrin, symbols of trust and stability are waving instead of rags of terrorists," Erdogan said in a speech on Sunday.

On Sunday, former PYD co-chair, Saleh Muslim tweeted that "Withdrawal from one battle doesn't

mean the loss of the war. Kurdish people will keep defending themselves from the planned genocide”

Nevertheless, other sources claimed that the YPG and the forces of Operation Olive Branch were still engaging in clashes on Sunday morning.

Speaking to The Region, Ersin Caksu, a journalist on the ground told The Region that clashes continued in different parts. Turkey only seized Mahmudiyah, Ashrafiyah, Kawa square and districts around the Afrin Local Council building, he said.

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<http://theregion.org/article/13056-ypg-says-war-in-afrin-has-reached-new-stage-vows-to-expel-turkey-through-guerrilla-warfare>
