

Northwest Syria: The Fall of Afrîn

Friday 23 March 2018, by [IŞIKARA Güney](#), [KAYSERILIOĞLU Alp](#) (Date first published: 22 March 2018).

Turkey has toppled the Kurdish-held city of Afrîn. But Erdoğan's drive to crush the Kurdish liberation movement could backfire.

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On January 20, the Turkish military launched its invasion of the Syrian-Kurdish canton of Afrîn in northwest Syria. On March 18, after intense battle in which the heavily armed Turkish army was supported by air attacks and forces associated with the Free Syrian Army, it seized control of the Afrîn city center.

It has long been Turkey's policy to encircle Afrîn and separate it from the other two cantons of Rojava (Kobanê and Jazira), where the Kurds — long stateless and long oppressed — had carved out a space of political autonomy. Turkey's 2016 "Operation Euphrates Shield" [[1](#)] aimed at (and mostly succeeded in) clearing the area between Kobanê and Afrîn and blocking unification and logistic lines. "Operation Olive Branch," the cynical name of the latest operation, seeks to further frustrate the Kurds' hopes for independence.

Whether the offensive will mark a turning point is uncertain. But what's clear is that the recent developments will have significant implications, both for Turkish leader Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's despotic aspirations and for Kurdish dreams of national liberation.

Ramping Up the Battle

The main reason Afrîn is in Erdoğan's crosshairs is simple [[2](#)]: Rojava [[3](#)] has proven that the Kurdish liberation movement's aims are perfectly viable and realistic — that it's feasible to build a democratic federation which solves the issue of national oppression, founded upon principles of gender equality [[4](#)] and socialism.

The establishment of political autonomy in Rojava in 2012 gave both a political-moral and a military boost to the Kurdish movement in Turkey. The pro-Kurdish, leftist party HDP surged [[5](#)], and after the Turkish state opted for a more overtly authoritarian form of repression, Kurdish forces declared autonomy in over a dozen cities in Turkey. The Turkish state responded by launching a long-planned military crusade in 2015-16 against the autonomous entities — which left cities in rubbles [[6](#)] and took the lives of hundreds of civilians — in order to crush the military wing of the uprising. The focus then turned to Rojava itself.

Over the past several years, Turkey has witnessed mounting authoritarianism and even fascization [7]. Spearheaded from the top by Erdoğan, this process aims not only to suppress any opposition, but to found a new national narrative that (re)unites the disillusioned parts of society and the organized right-wing behind the leadership of the president's party, the AKP.

Crushing the Kurdish liberation movement and Rojava fit squarely into this project in two ways: first, the colonization and forced assimilation of Kurdish regions and peoples is one of the Turkish Republic's founding principles and, as such, has become a cornerstone of Turkish nationalism. The one who leads the fight against the Kurds in the fiercest and most effective way is thus seen as the one who can best lead the nationalist right-wing camp. (This explains why the MHP, a nationalist-fascist party and traditionally an archenemy of the AKP, has become an important ally of Erdoğan's party.) Second, once legitimation by power politics and brute dictatorship becomes dominant — as it has in Erdoğan's Turkey — all that is in the way must be crushed. A fascist that cannot dominate state and society is just a wannabe-fascist and will swiftly be challenged by other fascists that see themselves as more qualified to lead.

This is the situation Erdoğan and the AKP find themselves in: they must successfully ramp up the battle against the Kurdish liberation movement, or the crisis tendencies within their fragile coalition will deepen and endanger the existing order.

The Offensive

In the early days of the Afrîn offensive, the invasion was generally expected to develop along the following lines: Russia and the US would allow Turkey to proceed into Afrîn up to a certain point — the US to appease its NATO ally, Russia to show the stick to the Kurds and tell them: either you bow in front of Syrian leader Bashar al-Assad, or we will let Turkey crush you. The Kurds, meanwhile, would put everything they had into the fight for maximum autonomy. Somewhere along the line, there would be an agreement, and Assad's Syrian Arab Army units would march in.

Things have turned out rather differently. After a massive push, the Turkish army and allied forces moved rapidly towards the city center, closing in from multiple sides with the help of air raids. Civilian casualties rose by the hour. With the Turkish state talking about resettling non-Kurdish Syrian refugees in Afrîn, while driving out mostly Kurdish civilians by force, the specter of ethnic cleansing appeared on the horizon. Human rights organizations warned that disaster was approaching fast and called for international action.

None of this stopped the Turkish army and its allies. On March 18, they seized the city center, raising the Turkish flag (along with the Free Syrian Army flag) and toppling a statue of Kawa (Kaveh) the Blacksmith, a mythical Kurdish and Persian figure who led an uprising against the tyrant Zahhak. These acts, though symbolic, laid bare the underlying motivations of the Turkish invasion: expansionism and anti-Kurd enmity.

After holding on for almost sixty days, Kurdish forces chose to retreat from the city in order to avoid even greater civilian casualties. They've declared that the war has entered a new stage, where Kurdish forces will favor hit-and-run tactics over direct confrontation [8].

The first signs of this new tactic appeared on Monday: as Turkish army allies were looting civilian residences and shops in Afrîn, a bomb exploded, leaving many of the offenders dead. Kurdish leader Saleh Muslim has also given credence to this new approach, tweeting that withdrawing from one battle doesn't mean losing the war.

Other Actors

Turkey couldn't be doing what's doing in Afrin without the approval, tacit or otherwise, of foreign actors. Russia and the US in particular stand out.

The Russians have publicly defended the Turkish campaign, blaming the US for their ties with Kurdish forces and thus "provoking" Turkey. Russia also controls the airspace over northern Syria — without its approval Turkish planes could not have flown over Afrin and the campaign would have been impossible. Russia's interest is in widening the fissure between Turkey and the US, thereby scoring a point against NATO.

The US, on the other hand, has not done much to defend its purported ally, emphasizing that its ties with the Kurds is limited to fighting ISIS. Part of this reticence undoubtedly has to do with Turkey's NATO membership. Allowing Turkey to march into Afrin is a relatively easy way to patch up recently strained relations with a fellow NATO country.

No matter their various motivations, one thing is clear about Russia and the US: neither has any desire in deepening the democratic and social aspects of the Rojava revolution. The US has admitted as much: in 2014, a US State Department spokeswoman declared that Kobanê, which was then under heavy attack from ISIS, was not a priority for the US.

What Russia and the US want is for Rojava to develop according to their own interests — they have no strategic or ideological commitment to the Rojava revolution's egalitarian principles. Their direct or indirect approval of the military campaign in Afrin therefore cannot be called a betrayal, but rather plain imperialist politics. Both prefer the Kurds to be under their thumb — democratic aspirations be damned.

Turkey the Colonizer

The conquest of large areas of Afrin, including the city center, has expanded Turkey's sphere of influence in Syria. And Erdoğan isn't content with what he's gained [9]: he's repeatedly emphasized that the operation will proceed to the whole of northern Syria — that is, to the other cantons. Turkey may even open up a military front in Iraq to broaden the fight against the Kurds (though such a move seems unrealistic at this point).

Assisting Turkey in Operation Olive Branch is a Free Syrian Army force known as the TFSA, comprised of ex-al-Qaeda forces, Salafi jihadists, more moderate Islamists, and others (a far cry from the progressive elements that existed at the beginning of the Syrian Revolution). Erdoğan points to the TFSA — as well as Syrian refugees residing in Turkey — as proof that the operation is being undertaken with Syrians, for Syrians — not because Turkey "has [its] eyes on Syrian land."

Such rhetoric barely conceals the brutality of the assault and the real motivations of Erdoğan. Too many pictures and videos have appeared documenting the viciousness of the offensive (often taken and shared by TFSA militias themselves). Indiscriminate targeting of civilians is the order of the day.

Turkey has already become more or less a colonial power in parts of north Syria: Ankara-appointed provincial and district governors, with the help of Turkey-controlled police and gendarmerie forces, control the reins of state power, and Turkey is already building universities and manufacturing areas under its own auspices. It will hardly be less colonial in Afrin should its military operation succeed. In fact, Devlet Bahçeli, leader of the MHP, took the — still not comprehensive — agreement between Assad and Kurdish forces as a pretext to declare that they "will have the right to keep the lands that

we gave away one hundred years ago at least until stability, peace and tranquility returns.” A presidential spokesperson followed up with similarly unequivocal words: “We have no intention nor do we think of giving it [Afrîn] back to the [Assad] regime.”

This is a puzzling, myopic posture on Erdoğan’s part. How will appearing as an overt colonizer win hearts and minds outside the narrow cliques and groups that benefit from overt colonization? How does the Turkish state think it can win the support of Arabs and Kurds after again colonizing their lands and homes in overtly brutal ways?

There is a huge potential for blowback. The Kurds could enlarge the war theater by opening new fronts outside or within Turkey. Duran Kalkan, a executive committee member of the militant Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK), [\[10\]](#) has stated that the guerrilla war in Afrîn will be accompanied by new and greater actions by the PKK.

On the other hand, militarized jihadi groups will certainly complicate things as the Syrian Army moves to the north in order to reestablish its control over the country. With the withdrawal of Kurdish forces, the Syrian Army and Turkey and its associated jihadis are set to clash. And then, where will the jihadis go if not to Turkey?

One final development that might affect the course of events in Afrîn is President Donald Trump’s firing of Rex Tillerson as secretary of state and his replacement by former CIA director Mike Pompeo. Tillerson was a relative moderate in Trump’s cabinet; Pompeo is more hawkish, with a strong anti-Islamist streak.

No Stability in Sight

There is an additional reason for Turkey’s invasion of Afrîn. In the face of alarming economic and social indicators, Erdoğan needs to shore up public support ahead of the presidential election, which is scheduled for next year.

The government is taking precautions to avoid any surprise results. Ballots without the official stamp of the High Election Committee (YSK) used to be voided as invalid. Under the new voting law, these ballots will count, no questions asked. The YSK has also been granted the authority to merge electoral districts and move ballot boxes to other districts.

On a related front, the ties between Erdoğan’s AKP and the MHP have been turned into an official electoral formation named the People’s Alliance (Cumhur İttifakı), a previously prohibited tactic. The pact will save MHP from remaining below the 10 percent electoral threshold (an inevitability after many left the party to form the split-off İYİ Parti). In general, People’s Alliance seeks to unite the entire right-wing camp under the AKP’s leadership.

Alongside electoral shenanigans, an unprecedented campaign of manipulation and ideological mobilization has been launched post-invasion. It is de facto illegal to question (let alone oppose) the military offensive. Hundreds of people have been detained and arrested because of critical social media posts, while government officials — including Erdoğan — have repeatedly labeled opponents as terrorists (or supporters thereof). The mainstream media celebrates “how the region is being cleansed of terrorists” and agitates for the operation’s success. Artists and celebrities who did not explicitly support the invasion have been exposed and targeted on television shows. Soccer teams and school classes take and share photos of themselves in military uniform to telegraph their approval. And people attending AKP meetings shout slogans along the lines of “take us to Afrîn too.”

Still, the AKP's dominance is not secure. While the Afrîn offensive has garnered support from all major parties save for the HDP, not all right-wing parties have joined the People's Alliance. The Saadet Partisi — a right-wing party which the AKP originally split from — and Akşener's İYİ Parti declined to become a member of the coalition. And while surveys show 70 to 80 percent support for the Afrîn invasion, they indicate public discontent on other important issues. According to one poll, only 39 percent support Turkey's stance on Syria, 66 percent think the state of emergency Erdoğan imposed is damaging the economy, just 20 percent trust the judiciary, and only 17 percent have confidence in the media.

The general director of the somewhat left-leaning poll company KONDA claims that while around 60 percent of the Turkish electorate remains heavily polarized along party lines (i.e., pro- or anti-AKP), 40 percent remain rather indifferent toward party affiliation and care more about making ends meet in daily life. This slice of the electorate increasingly believes that none of the parties can solve the country's problems.

Another poll company, MAK, reports that pro-AKP entrepreneurs and intelligentsia are showing signs of "resentment" even if they "remain silent." They are apparently especially irritated that there is going to be a coalition despite the fact that the presidential system was introduced to do away with such pacts. They also remain skeptical of the "one-man regime."

Despite Erdoğan's best efforts to establish an all-powerful role, discontent still persists in at least half of the society. The military invasion of Afrîn has the potential to improve his positions. Or it could simply aggravate the instability.

What Next?

A couple days before Turkey initiated Operation Olive Branch, HDP parliamentarian Ayhan Bilgen made a prediction: "If there is an attack on Afrîn . . . then it will generate a civil war if successful, or a military coup if it fails."

That has not yet come to pass, but the stakes remain high. Turkey has won the first round, weakening the morale and political-military position of the Kurds. But the story is far from over.

Kurdish forces will be more prepared and more determined to defend the remaining cantons of Kobanê and Jazira. The offensive could spark greater destabilization, especially if Turkey keeps pushing east. Regional and international sentiment could be inflamed. And for Turkey, there are the mid- and long-term costs of colonization that it will have to pay.

Erdoğan might seem to be riding high after last weekend's victory. But the ongoing offensive has all the potential to set off more serious eruptions.

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P.S.

* Jacobin. 03.22.2018:

<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2018/03/afrin-invasion-turkey-kurds-erdogan>

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Footnotes

[1] <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/03/turkey-ends-euphrates-shield-operation-syria-170329211428970.html>

[2] <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2018/02/afirin-kurdistan-syria-turkey-erdogan-is-war>

[3] <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2015/01/the-battle-for-kobane>

[4] <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2017/11/turkey-womens-rights-feminism-erdogan-akp-hdp>

[5] <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2017/11/hdp-turkey-erdogan-repression>

[6] <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2016/03/turkey-erdogan-pkk-kurdish-diyarbakir>

[7] ESSF (article 43716), [Turkey: Erdoğan and His Opponents](#).

[8] ESSF (article 43627), [Northern Syria: Turkey-backed FSA militia swept into Afrin town on Sunday, YPG vows to expel Turkey through guerrilla warfare](#).

[9] https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/syria-monitors-turkish-allied-militiamen-losing-in-afirin/2018/03/19/fedc65c8-2b45-11e8-8dc9-3b51e028b845_story.html?utm_term=.15f89ed832c5

[10] ESSF (article 37467), [The New-Old PKK - “democratic confederalism”, “women’s liberation ideology”, “Kurdish freedom”, “paradigm-shift”](#).