



Syria Transition Challenges Project

Discussion Paper (2)

Operation Peace Spring: Objectives, Current Situation and its Future
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The Geneva Centre for Security Policy (GCSP)

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Syria Transition Challenges Project

A multilateral dialogue and research project that aims to build bridges between the EU, Russia, Turkey, and the US on the three issues of Reform, Refugees Return, and Reconstruction. The project is run by the GCSP in collaboration with European University Institute (EUI), Syrian Centre for Policy Research (SCPR), and swisspeace.

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Published in April 2020

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Introduction¹

The Peace Spring Operation (PSO), launched on 9 October 2019, was Turkey's military/diplomatic/political offensive against the People's Defence Units (YPG) in Syria and beyond and was triggered by key dynamics in the country. The first was the redeployment of US troops in the northeast of Syria; second was the expansion of Russia's area of influence towards the east of the Euphrates; third was the launch of a new phase of the Assad government's operation in Idlib; fourth was a re-evaluation of YPG's patron-client relationship with the United States and the European Union. Turkey sought to prevent the formation of a Kurdish state and to address the Syrian refugee issue. While Turkey was able to achieve some strategic gains via the PSO, many challenges remain which prevent Ankara from achieving all its objectives. This paper argues that PSO should be analysed in the context of Turkey's two former operations in Syria, Euphrates Shield Operation (ESO) and Olive Branch Operation (OBO).

Turkey's objectives in launching the PSO

Beyond the political rhetoric and diplomatic arguments, Turkey had two main objectives to launch its PSO offensive. The first was to eliminate the possibility of the formation of a Kurdish state led by YPG. The second was to find a permanent solution to the security problems caused by the forced displacement of Syrians to Turkey.

Turkey has viewed the YPG's control inside Syrian territory for almost seven years as a substantial threat. The Turkish government alleges that YPG and the Democratic Union Party (PYD) are part of Kurdistan Communities Union (KCK) terrorist organisation, the umbrella structure of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) that encompasses many armed groups, "political units" and NGOs. Unlike the PKK, the Kurdistan Free Life Party (PJAK)² and Tavgari Azadi³, the PYD controls a vast connected territory in Syria where it could eventually establish a state. Its close relations with the US and the EU, and its role in the fight against ISIS, meant that the PYD/YPG was able to gain control of area northeast of the Euphrates where the Syrian government

¹ This analysis was provided for a dialogue on Syria that took place in December 2019. The change in circumstances ever since should be taken into consideration.

² PKK's sister organisation in Iran

³ PKK's sister organisation in Iraq

had lost power. Although US and EU support for PYD and YPG had initially been for the construction of military bases for Western countries as a part of their counter-terrorism efforts against ISIS, this support soon allowed for the establishment of an autonomous administration that could be used to project political power, particularly by the US, to counter other countries (i.e. Iran), especially after the defeat of ISIS. Changing YPG's name to SDF was not only tactical, but also strategic. Incorporating Arab tribes into SDF not only helped in the campaign to eradicate ISIS support among the local Sunni Arab population, but it was also a powerful mechanism to undermine Damascus's influence in this area and Iran's land corridor to the Mediterranean.

Thus, the link between Turkey's two former operations and PSO has been perceived as a threat as it strengthens the territorial advantage of the YPG. The Euphrates Shield Operation (ESO) started twenty days after YPG's capture of Manbij, one of the key cities that linked three YPG controlled areas. While, Turkey's capturing of al Bab from ISIS was related to its fight against the terrorist group and part of its long-term strategy, it also gave Ankara a strategic advantage as it ended the unity of the three YPG regions. The second part of Turkey's long-term strategy was to control Afrin, which pushed YPG to the east of Euphrates where Turkey could easily defeat ISIS. Essentially, Turkey's plan was to control the entire border from east of the Euphrates to the Iraqi border for 30 km, diminishing the YPG threat from the Turkish border and undermining its power in the region, while enforcing the territorial integrity of the Syrian state, which has been key for Turkey's security. Thus, the PSO could be perceived as the third factor that would prevent the possibility of the establishment of a YPG-led state in Syria.

The PSO is also closely connected to Turkey's refugee problem. Turkey has hosted more than 4 million Syrian refugees since the start of the crisis. In addition, more than 1.7 million Syrians live in Euphrates Shield Operation (ESO) and Olive Branch Operation (OBO) areas, where the security and the majority of humanitarian aid has been provided by the Turkish government. The cost of this humanitarian effort has been a burden to the Turkish economy, costing more than US\$40 billion in the first 8 years of the crisis. To further exasperate the situation, the October 2019 Turkish intervention in northern Syria caused the displacement of hundreds of thousands of Syrians from the area. In the operation launched by the Syrian government in May 2019, named Operation Idlib Dawn, almost 800,000 people escaped the conflict and sought refuge in the north of Idlib. The second phase of this operation was launched by the Syrian army on 19 December

2019. This December 2019 Russian backed Syrian offensive against Turkish-backed rebel forces in Idlib also resulted in the displacement of at least 300,000 civilians, with concerns about the deteriorating humanitarian situation in the area. By the beginning of January 2020, Ankara claimed that up to 250,000 people from Idlib had fled to areas near the Turkish border, putting increased pressure on Ankara.

The final outcome of this offensive against northern Syria could be a renewed wave of migration into Turkey, putting pressure on the government to find a solution. Although Turkish leaders have often stated that the safe zone created as a result of the PSO could become home to Syrian refugees who voluntarily repatriate, promoting more favourable conditions than inside Turkey would require billions of dollars of investment over many years. However, the PSO area could be viewed as a new safe zone for people who leave Idlib.

Success of the PSO

The Turkish government claimed over the course of the PSO operation that its main aim was to control the entire border. Yet, in fact, Ankara's main military objective was to capture the area between Tal Abyad and Ras Al Ayn.

Turkey was able to achieve some strategic advantages in its operation. First, it prevented the establishment of PYD-led state in the short and mid-term. The PYD still has control over its key strongholds such as Ayn Al Arab, Hasakah, Qamishli, and most of Raqqa and Deir ez Zor and also control key water resources, electricity, fertile soils and oil reserves. However, it is highly likely, as a result of the situation on the ground, that PYD would surrender these resources, allowing the Assad government to restate its control in this area. Second, although stability and security in POS area remain a problem, this is still valuable territory that Turkey sees as necessary to resettle IDPs coming from contested zones such as Idlib. Third, Turkey believes that it can find more common ground with Russia than the US to solve the PYD problem in Syria. As YPG/PYD loses its power, the influence of Russia (and indirectly Damascus) would increase.

However, despite these strategic gains, Turkey may not be able fulfil all of its aims. The key obstacle is that YPG still controls key territories and its militants are still within 10 and 30 km of

the border. Moreover, despite the joint patrols with Russia to secure the border, it is not clear how these patrols could provide security to Turkey or cause withdrawal of YPG from Turkish borders.

While a long and costly military operation could have provided Turkey favourable results, Ankara stopped its operation and accepted the agreement offered by Russia. This was because Ankara could not ignore Russian and American pressure to halt the operation. Yet, despite the limitations, Turkey believed that it could commence another operation if this agreement had failed. In fact, while the US-Turkish plan stopped the PSO, the Russian-Turkish agreement shaped it. The most important considerations for Turkey accepting this deal were the establishment of a safe zone which would have defensible borders that control main roads; the YPG's withdrawal from the 30 km border area; the triggering of the political/diplomatic process to end YPG's political presence in Syria and finding a durable solution through cooperation with Russia.

Dealing with the YPG

It is implausible to expect that the YPG fully withdraw its militants. While some have been sent to southern areas, many have simply changed their uniforms and are still present in 30 km border area. The key question is whether the Russia/Assad's army could fulfil their commitments in the context of the agreement. It is clear that Assad's army has no military superiority against YPG in the area. Damascus has deployed pro-government militia groups and some small army units to Ayn Al Arab, Qamishli, Tal Tamr, as well as some other key places in the agreement zone. However, the main actor that can "convince" YPG to withdraw is the Russian military. Russia has so far not deployed a significant number of troops to this area. However, crucial at this stage is not the number of Russian troops but its leverage against the actors on the ground. Russia could maintain leverage over YPG so that if the agreement fails, it could cooperate with Turkey directly or indirectly to facilitate the withdrawal of the YPG.

Three incentives for Russia to keep its promises to Turkey can be identified. First, Turkish-Russian relations are important beyond Syria. Having a negative experience in Syria might harm both countries' political and security relations in other regions. Second, in terms of geography, the Idlib area is a greater priority for both Damascus and Moscow than the area east of the Euphrates. The future success of the Syrian army's operation in Idlib may be closely related to the process

east of the Euphrates. Finally, Russia prefers a stronger Syrian army and weaker YPG, which still has very good relations with the US. Weakening YPG not only serves Turkey's and Russia's interests but also Damascus's. If Damascus wishes to regain authority in this area, this Turkish operation provides the best opportunity.

A sustainable solution to YPG's presence in this area is needed. Turkey does not support YPG's inclusion in the Syrian army as it could potentially be problematic for relations between Turkey and Syria. If YPG becomes a part of the Syrian army, it would solve the human resource/manpower problem of Syrian army, which lost many soldiers and military officers in Idlib. However, YPG's cooperation with the USA and other Western countries is fresh in Damascus's memory. Yet, the Syrian government is well aware that even if it provides protection to YPG for the time being, it may be unable to control it later.

US protection of YPG in the other areas is also evident. From Turkey's perspective, being surrounded by YPG militants from three sides (two of them protected by Syrian Army and one under the protection of the Americans), while being targeted by them, would be tactical suicide. Therefore, it is unlikely that Turkey would accept the YPG's presence in nearby areas. If YPG were to keep its militants in close proximity, conduct direct military attacks and send bombers to the PSO areas, Turkey would face a new challenge, and then a decision to continue this operation would ensue.

The Future of PSO

It is impossible to claim that the area east of Euphrates has become stable as a result of PSO. There are still many factors that could trigger long-term instability in the region. First, while organising joint patrols could theoretically guarantee Turkey's security against YPG's presence at the Turkish border, this mechanism does not in reality provide security or even a short-term solution to Turkey's concerns. On the contrary, the YPG uses these patrols for protesting and provoking Turkish troops in the area. This provides an unsatisfactory solution to both Turkey and Russia. Second, the YPG has continually organised attacks inside the PSO area, which has destabilised the region. If this were to continue, it would have a negative impact on Turkey's rebuilding efforts. If Turkey believes that the Sochi Agreement would no longer work, a new

conflict could begin. Third, the agreement between Turkey and Russia did not explicitly address who would provide security and control the 10 km area at the border. Work needs to be done to establish a mechanism to address Turkey's concerns. Yet, finding a solution for the 10 km border area is not sufficient, as it is not Turkey's only security concern. If terrorist attacks towards PSO continue, Turkey would not succeed in its objective of building a safer place for Syrian refugees. If this area is not stabilised, Turkey may have to organise another military operation to secure the region. If this happens, the balance of power inside Syria may again change. Finally, these military operations were conducted to find political solutions at the negotiation table. There should be equal representation of the opposition in the Constitutional Committee and the Assad government should be ready to compromise. Otherwise, the balance of power from Idlib to Malikiyah could change as a result of new tensions, conflicts and operations.