

Turkish Troop Movements on Syrian Border Indicate Possible Incursion against US Partner Forces

Featuring Ezgi Yazici



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Turkish President Erdogan may launch a new incursion into Syria that could target the Syrian Defense Forces, the US partner in the counter-ISIS fight. Turkish troops assembled in border areas near SDF positions and Turkish-occupied parts of northern Syria in late October, though deployments appear to have slowed since then. On this episode of Overwatch, Matt McInnis and Ezgi Yazici discuss what a new Turkish incursion could look like and the effects that such a development would have on the broader region.

Matt McInnis:

This is Overwatch, a podcast brought to you by the Institute for the Study of War.

Hello, welcome to the Institute for the Study of War's Overwatch podcast. My name is Matt McInnis, and I'm the director of research here at the Institute. We're very pleased to be joined today by Ezgi Yazici, who is our Evans Hansen fellow and Turkey research lead here at ISW. Over the past few weeks, we've been watching with concern Turkish troop movements on several locations along the Syrian border. We're worried that President Erdogan may launch a new incursion into Syria, which could target Syrian Defense Forces (or the SDF), who are our partners in the counter-ISIS fight. As with all things Syria-related, the situation is very complicated. Luckily, with Ezgi, we have an expert here to walk us through the situation. We'll also be posting a map on the ISW website that will help our listeners follow along the discussion. Ezgi, we can't go through the entire Syria situation today, but could you give us some basics about the Turkish presence in Syria and how President Erdogan sees the current threat?

Ezgi Yazici:

Absolutely, Matt. You're right that the Turkish calculus, even in Syria, could make multiple podcast episode contents here. But the short answer is Turkey has launched three military operations into Syria since 2016, most of which have been against the Syrian Kurdish YPG or People's Protection Units. Erdogan has actually been one of the most fundamental external players in Syria that shaped the country since its 2011 protests even. Right now, a decade into the Turkish involvement in the country, I'd say one of the main Turkish objectives in the long term for Syria is to prevent an autonomous Syrian Kurdish zone in northeastern Syria, which Turkey inherently sees as a national security threat to itself. Due to its own Kurdish population and its own Kurdish militia, a US-designated terrorist organization, the PKK, that shares ties with their Syrian counterparts in proximity, in history, in organizational structures, and background. In this effort, Turkey seeks to remove the Syrian Kurdish YPG and also the US-led coalition partner forces, the SDF that the YPG form a significant chunk of, from parts of northern Syria that are near the Turkish border.

This also supports the additional Turkish objective of preventing further refugee flows and to return the refugees in Turkey to areas that Turkey controls in Syria over the course of the next decade, potentially more. To give context to that, Turkey is actually the country that hosts the highest number of Syrian refugees in the world by far, making the line between Turkey's domestic and Syria foreign policy really, really blurry when it comes to this country. Erdogan faces challenges about Syria, about how many refugees Turkey hosts, within economic lines, with unemployment. Erdogan lost a significant chunk of his electoral support due to his refugee policies and the Turkish nationalist space not agreeing to these policies. So Turkey wants to use these areas that it captures to populate and sort of de-Kurdify these areas with Syrian refugees and bring in the refugees that live in Turkey into northern Syria. Obviously, many problems come with the application and the reality of this, but the ability to secure and hold the parts of northern Syria and then, in the long term, locate Syrian refugees to these areas is how Ankara frames the larger objective.

Matt McInnis:

Great, thanks. And I think we're going to come back later to some of those domestic considerations that you mentioned about Erdogan's calculus right now. But coming back to the current situation. So what changed earlier this month to trigger this potential crisis?

Ezgi Yazici:

So on October 10, the Syrian Kurdish YPG killed two Turkish special police forces with a rocket attack on a Turkish convoy near Tal Rifat. The Tal Rifat area is across the Turkish-controlled area in northwestern Syria and is also only 20 kilometers away from Turkey itself. Russian and Syrian forces are also present in this area. The Turkish-controlled Syria has faced similar attacks from the Tal Rifat pocket that kill Turkish or Turkish-backed Syrian forces. But it—also on their minds, Turkey's bid to stabilize the Turkish-controlled parts of Syria that it has practically been running for the past five years. So, the day after that, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said that Turkey has run out of patience on attacks, and that it would eliminate the threats from these areas. Tal Rifat is, of course, just one piece of a very intricate and fragile northern Syria balance between Turkey and Russia and for Turkey's larger objectives.

And Russia has been able to shape or prevent the SDF's access to different parts of Syria that Turkey is complaining about. So, what started with the Tal Rifat attack evolved into a larger Turkish pro-government media call for a Turkish operation and new, possibly the fourth, Turkish operation into multiple cities in northern Syria with SDF presence throughout these areas near the Turkish-Syrian border. Most recently, in the past week, so since October 26th, we've actually seen Turkish deployments on the ground near the Syrian border.

The Turkish armed forces sent at least ten military convoys from what we could see in the open source, possibly more, to reinforce its military positions across the Turkish-Syrian border. A major bulk of these deployments reached the city Tal Abyad in Raqqa as well as southern Idlib. We've also seen smaller, but additional reinforcements to the Ras al Ayn area. I also recommend the audience to refer to the map on the understandingwar.org webpage right now, to keep track of all these cities we're discussing. But, additionally, we've also seen Turkish and Turkish-backed forces clash with the Syrian Kurdish fighters near Tal Rifat, Tal Tamr, and Ayn Issa. So, a lot of movement across a wide range of areas that Turkey is eyeing in northern Syria.

Matt McInnis:

Yeah, and again, for our listeners, the map is going to be very important to follow along here, given some of the complicated movements. But, thank you very much for that description Ezgi. So, can you give us a little bit more of the scale of these troop movements. How big is this right now?

Ezgi Yazici:

Absolutely. So, Turkey has approximately 10,000 troops in Syria, most of them located in Idlib. We've seen Turkish armed forces send further reinforcements to the border ahead of the past incursions. Additionally, we have what we call the Syrian National Army fighting force that reaches up to, according to very different estimations, up to 70,000 fighters in northern Syria, at least half of which are significantly closer to Turkey, that work with Turkish armed forces in past Turkish incursions into this area.

They're part of a larger Turkish effort to build governance and military institutions in this area and are again nominally unified under the Syrian National Army, the SNA. So, we could see anything up to 20 to 30,000 fighters looking at the numbers, the estimations we got from the past Turkish incursions into northern Syria. What's interesting here is that the reporting we've seen from Turkish pro-government media, as well as the statements that came out of the Syria National Army spokespeople, high level officials, or social media accounts affiliated with the SNA, the public language is really focused on five different cities.

We have Tal Rifat and Manbij in the northwest. Ayn Issa, Tal Tamr, and Kobani (also known as Ayn al Arab) in the north. The fact that Turkey is still keeping its options and not committing to a specific location as a target is unusual compared to what we've seen, the more targeted approach in Turkey's past incursions. So, what that means is if Turkey really seeks to pursue a simultaneous or consecutive round of campaigns into multiple locations in Syria, that would have different supply lines, and would require different forces, planning, that would inherently show an increase in Turkish military capabilities in Syria. It could also mean that Turkey is still trying to nail down the details of a potential agreement with Russia, which we can discuss a little later, to set conditions for a successful campaign.

Matt McNnis:

So, if we're thinking about so many different potential lines of effort, or avenues for potential incursion, it raises the question whether—is this posturing? Or is this Erdogan debating about what he wants to do here? So, are there any other indicators that you're looking for to help you refine your understanding or your prediction of what may happen?

Ezgi Yazici:

In terms of deployments I'd say the majority of what we have observed so far has been the military deployments to the border, the statements from the Syrian National Army indicating that they already have completed their trainings for—directly referring to a potential upcoming incursion. But, we also have not seen events that have occurred in the past ahead of the past Turkish military preparations for an incursion, for example, we normally see the Turkish defense minister and the Turkish military leadership, the general staff do a battlefield rotation, meaning they visit the Turkish troops in southeastern Turkey and meet them, and inspect them before the official launch of such a campaign.

We're used to seeing small local announcements from Turkish border towns calling for two week lockdowns to ease troop movements across the city, similar announcements from Syrian towns. We have not seen items like that. We're also watching the effects of the Biden–Erdogan meeting that we can touch upon later, and how much of an effect the discussions behind the doors can have on Erdogan's calculus.

Matt McNnis:

And, going back to the high politics here, we've heard rumors that Erdogan and Russian President Vladimir Putin may be looking at some type of land swap deal in Syria, perhaps exchanging territory around the Kobani area, vice Idlib. What are you hearing and what do you think is actually the truth there?

Ezgi Yazici:

So, first off, looking at previous patterns and how Turkey dealt with Russia in its different Syria ambitions, we would likely see Ankara launching an operation only if and after it finds some sort of a mutual ground. Maybe an agreement, maybe a territorial swap as you mentioned with Russia. This is, of course, part of a larger complex Turkish–Russian dynamic that crosses many different countries, conflicts, issues. And Syria is the one where Turkey inherently faces higher risks than Russia due to proximity to its own territories and the significant Turkish force presence on the ground. Russia also has significant air capabilities in areas that Turkey is eyeing, therefore the ability to slow down or spoil any Turkish ambitions. So Turkey will want to de-conflict before acting now or in the future. The Turkish President Erdogan will also want an achievable mission that is likely to succeed rapidly and without significant casualties, to deliver a victory to his support base at home as well.

And there are, as you said, some reports in the past few days on how Russia could give areas surrounding Kobani or Ayn al Arab near the Turkey–Syrian boarder in exchange for Turkey to perhaps withdraw from its spaces in southern Idlib, Kobani, or somewhere else. The idea of a territorial swap and gaining assurances on the table

before, or even instead of, military action, is how Turkey has been and will likely continue to approach its future plans in Syria. It really also opens up a potential window of negotiation between Turkey and Russia and strengthens Russia's hand in its growing outreach to the US coalition partner forces, the SDF as well.

Matt McInnis:

So, I can imagine Erdogan really wants to avoid anything that becomes a prolonged attrition fight that he'd really want to know what he's getting into and I assume he'd want to have some agreement with Putin or other key players before making a big move.

Ezgi Yazici:

Exactly. This is an ambitious campaign for Turkey at all times, and what Erdogan seeks and honestly needs at home, is a rapid victory that he can capitalize upon for his domestic and often nationalist support base. So, he will want to have his plans straight and his actions very likely to succeed before actually giving a green light, if at all, especially ahead of an upcoming winter in the region.

Matt McInnis:

Okay. So Ezgi, given this entire complex situation, what do you think is the most likely move here by Erdogan? Does he actually do an incursion? Does he hold off? What's in his head right now?

Ezgi Yazici:

So as I mentioned, Erdogan needs minimal risk, rapid victory in Syria and at home. Given the amount of talks happening between Turkish and US officials on different subjects. And so after the Biden Aberdonian meeting actually, we have seen a relatively quiet front in northern Syria and that has led many people to think whether Turkey is recalculating, whether the discussion between Erdogan and President Biden had any impact in potentially modifying, deterring, or delaying the Turkish incursion.

But in the case that Turkey seeks to go into northern Syria, we can potentially see an incursion that target Kobani and Ayn Issa following where the main bulk of Turkish military convoys reached Tal Abyad. That could be an expansion of the Turkish armed forces and Turkish-backed Syrian forces toward the west and south of Tal Abyad into the areas Kobani and Ayn Issa. This, particularly an advance into Kobani, could link two separated Turkish control zones in northern Syria and deliver Turkey, a larger part of the Turkish-Syrian border. Linking these separate areas that Turkey controls would certainly make the most sense logistically if Turkey is keen to go.

Ayn Issa is also the de facto capital of the Syrian Kurds and is located on an important highway. The M4 highway way that Kurdish groups often use to travel, move supplies, communicate within Syria and into Iraq. Ayn Issa's capture could disrupt those abilities and could move the SDF away from the autonomous administration, the Syrian Kurdish capital. Of course, Russian ground forces are present in Ayn Issa and across the Turkish control strips, so Erdogan would again seek Russian withdrawals or an agreement with Russia to de-conflict before moving forward.

Kobani, again, is a very important location for the Syrian Kurdish political memory, especially with the memory of ISIS's siege of Kobani in 2014. Therefore, targeting Kobani or its surrounding area will likely be one of the most inflammatory options that the YPG and even the PKK for Turkey's own issues would perceive. But even surrounding areas of Kobani can pressure the SDF and can provide important access between Turkey's two separate zones.

Matt McInnis:

Thank you, Ezgi. And for our listeners, if you look at the map, this makes a lot more sense of connecting those

two border strips, those buffer zones that Turkey has created in Northern Syria. So that makes sense to me, Ezgi. So, what are some of the other alternative directions that Erdogan could go?

Ezgi Yazici:

Alternatively or additionally even, we are looking at Manbij and Tal Rifat. We haven't necessarily seen recent deployments in the past week to these two areas, but Manbij and Tal Rifat are actually long-term Turkish objectives and they are near Turkish-controlled areas within significant Turkish armed forces and the Syrian National Army presence around. Here Turkey could potentially go for a negotiation path with very limited military support. Turkey actually attempted to sign a deal or pursue a deal with the US even to remove the YPG from Manbij in early 2018. And later even actually signed a deal with Russia in late 2019 where Russia stated that it would remove the YPG forces from these two towns, Tal Rifat and Manbij. With that said, Russia has been allowing YPG activity and attacks that Turkey and Turkish-backed forces are facing on the ground. And Tal Rifat is particularly important for Russian and regime deployments, movements, communications in the area.

So it doesn't necessarily want Turkey to go in militarily and control these areas, but Turkey and Russia may be able to agree on a certain, again, I'm coming back to the territorial swap point, where Turkey gives specific concessions in Idlib and then receives further assurances from Russia to limit the YPG presence, the Syrian Kurdish fighters' presence on the ground.

There is also the smaller alternative where Turkey expands eastward from the Peace Spring zone, the Turkish controlled area, and the north toward northeast in Syria. But we have observed Russian and the Syrian regime joint military exercises in this area. We've also seen US patrols near Tal Tamr and Qamishli, so where these locations are. So Turkey will likely perceive those as effective deterrents and will likely prioritize connecting its two separated strips further in the west than pursuing something further northeast where the US personnel are located.

Matt McInnis:

Yeah, and going back to the US angle here, obviously we're still waiting to hear what actually happened in the Erdogan-Biden meeting. But of course, for Americans, we're obviously concerned for our soldiers and our partners there in the counter-ISIS coalition that operate in northeastern Syria with the SDF forces. So theoretically, US forces could be in the firing line here if Erdogan proceeds with a very aggressive incursion. My assumption, he's probably not going to risk that type of direct escalation with the US. But obviously, US watchers in Syria are very concerned that this could escalate in a direction that makes it very difficult for us to continue our counter-ISIS mission there in northeastern Syria. So in context of that, what is your greatest concern for this potential escalation, what are you most worried about overall?

Ezgi Yazici:

I think I mentioned this earlier in the podcast, how the domestic calculus in the government's head and President Erdogan's priorities ahead of an upcoming election potentially next year, or 2023, really plays into the government calculus on military efforts, military campaigns and President Erdogan really seeks to deliver a victory home and also maintain Turkey's strategic interests, military interests, in Syria for a long term. This blurriness between domestic and foreign policy in Syria, blurry line between these two efforts have the inherent risk of destabilizing and forcing Turkey to escalate further in the long term, particularly when Erdogan assesses that his party needs a victory and a domestic support boost ahead of an election, whether it's now or next year, or just before an upcoming election. Obviously something that's domestically motivated, but impactful in Syria will have drastic consequences for civilians on the ground. Primarily those who live in Syria, but also Kurds across many communities. Past Turkish incursions we've seen displaced thousands, if not more, on the ground.

It's also important to note that the Turkish-Russian relationship in Syria and elsewhere is inherently intertwined

with different conflicts, different issues ranging from Libya to Ukraine, to arms sales, potentially even as far as Afghanistan. Turkey and Russia tend to escalate in one theater for example, in response to developments in other countries and other conflicts, or occasionally even discuss multiple conflicts and how to resolve them, how to compete with each other in them, when they're on the opposing sides together.

So another Russian-approved and Turkish-led campaign can further deepen that partnership where Russia also has an already unequal and stronger position over Turkey on many fronts. This partnership that honestly expands into many different theaters and also gets stronger in areas like Syria, where Turkey is really depending on the pace that Russia sets, the military conditions that Russia sets. This will likely have at least an impact in many conflicts that the US policymakers are interested in that Turkey and Russia are present from Libya to the Caucasus and potentially elsewhere in the coming years.

Matt McInnis:

You're absolutely right to bring that up, because we pay close attention to this competition as well as cooperation that Turkey and Russia have across from the eastern Mediterranean all the way through central Asia. And what happens here in Syria is really some of the hottest territory where they butt heads, or potentially cooperate together, so a lot at risk here. Well, thank you so much Ezgi. This has been a great conversation and very informative, and as I'm sure you know, it will probably change in the coming days and weeks, and so we will keep our listeners and readers here at ISW informed as things develop. But otherwise thank you so much for joining us today and thank you for joining Overwatch.

Ezgi Yazici:

Thanks for having me Matt.

Kimberly Kagan:

Thank you for listening to this episode of Overwatch. We look forward to your feedback on this episode and previous ones. Visit www.understandingwar.org to learn about ISW's work and to sign up for our mailing list.

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