

# TURKEY AGAIN THREATENS OFFENSIVE INTO NORTHERN SYRIA



## Observed Indicators of an Upcoming Turkish Military Operation

2019

Operation Olive Branch (2018)

### Turkish Armed Forces (TSK) Deploys on Syrian-Turkish Border

The TSK began deploying troops, tanks, armored vehicles, and engineering vehicles to Akcakale and Ceylanpinar in Southern Turkey along the Syrian-Turkish Border starting on July 8.<sup>1</sup> These cities sit across from the towns of Tel Abyad and Ras al-Ayn in Northern Syria.

The Turkish Armed Forces (TSK) increased its deployments along the Syrian – Turkish Border near Afrin Canton in the month prior to the start of Operation Olive Branch.<sup>2</sup>

### Turkey Directly Threatens Cross-Border Escalation

Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu warned on July 22 that Turkey would launch an offensive in Northern Syria if it failed to reach a deal with the U.S. on a safe zone along the Syrian-Turkish Border.<sup>3</sup> Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan stated on July 14 that Turkey plans to intervene in Tel Abyad as well as Tal Rifaat in Northern Aleppo Province.<sup>4</sup>

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan warned that Turkey would “crush” the Syrian Kurdish YPG in Afrin Canton one week prior to the start of Operation Olive Branch.<sup>5</sup>

### Turkey Holds High-Level Meetings with Russia and Iran

Turkish Presidential Spokesperson Ibrahim Kalin met with Russian Special Envoy to Syria Alexander Lavrentiev on July 10. Turkish Defense Minister Hulusi Akar met with Iranian Ambassador to Turkey Mohammad Farazmand on July 17.<sup>6</sup> Turkey, Russia, and Iran are likely negotiating over military operations in either Greater Idlib Province or Northern Syria. Turkey, Russia, and Iran will hold the next set of Astana Talks on Syria on August 1.

Then-Turkish Chief of the General Staff Hulusi Akar travelled to Moscow to discuss operations in Afrin Canton two days prior to the start of Operation Olive Branch.<sup>7</sup>

## Turkey Tightens Control of Information Space

The Ankara Criminal Court banned access to LiveUAMap in Turkey on July 10.<sup>8</sup> LiveUAMap is a popular open-source mapping project used by observers of the conflict in Syria.

The Ankara Criminal Court banned access to LiveUAMap five days after the start of Operation Olive Branch.<sup>9</sup>

## Turkey Increases Readiness of Its Syrian Proxies

Turkey reportedly increased the alert status of its Syrian National Army (SNA) based in Al-Bab and Jarabulus in Northern Aleppo Province by July 11. Turkey also reportedly held meetings with opposition commanders hailing from Ras al-Ayn, Tel Abyad, Ayn Issa, and Manbij in Ankara. Opposition groups reportedly began a large buildup of forces near Manbij on July 20.<sup>10</sup>

Syrian opposition groups backed by Turkey coalesced into the Syrian National Army (SNA) one month prior to the start of Operation Olive Branch. One of the stated reasons for its formation was to create a single command for operations against the Syrian Kurdish YPG in Northern Syria.<sup>11</sup>

## Turkey Sets Conditions to Return Refugees to Syria

The Istanbul Governor's Office announced that Syrian refugees in Istanbul must return to their registered province in Turkey by August 20.<sup>12</sup> Turkey may be attempting to relocate refugees closer to the Syrian-Turkish Border before ultimately deporting them to Northern Syria.

Turkey's Hatay Province bordering Afrin Canton stopped registering new refugees from Syria in late October 2017.<sup>13</sup> Turkish Presidential Spokesperson Ibrahim Kalin stated that Turkey would continue its military operations until it could return all refugees to Syria three days after the start of Operation Olive Branch.<sup>14</sup>

## U.S. Intensifies De-Escalation Efforts in Northern Syria

The Pentagon stated that "unilateral military action" by any actor in Northern Syria would be "unacceptable" on July 13.<sup>15</sup> U.S. CENTCOM Commander Gen. Kenneth McKenzie and U.S. Deputy Special Envoy to the U.S. Anti-ISIS Coalition Amb. William Roebuck met with SDF Commander Gen. Mazloum Abdi in Northern Syria on July 22.<sup>16</sup> U.S. Special Representative for Syria and Special Envoy to the U.S. Anti-ISIS Coalition Amb. James Jeffrey held meetings in Turkey on July 22 - 23.

The Pentagon and the U.S. State Department released statements attempting to assuage Turkey's concerns about the SDF and urging it not to intervene in Afrin Canton in the three days prior to the start of Operation Olive Branch.<sup>17</sup>



## Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) Deploys on Syrian-Turkish Border

The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) (including the Syrian Kurdish YPG) reinforced positions in Tel Abyad and Ras al-Ayn on the Syrian-Turkish Border by July 20.<sup>18</sup>

The Syrian Kurdish YPG deployed reinforcements to Afrin Canton roughly three days before the start of Operation Olive Branch.<sup>19</sup>

## Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) Warns of Imminent Turkish Intervention

The SDF-led Self-Administration of North and East Syria and its affiliated Syriac Military Council issued statements urging international action in response to Turkey's threats of intervention in Northern Syria on July 17.<sup>20</sup>

The Syrian Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) released a statement urging international action to prevent a military incursion by Turkey in Afrin Canton three days before the start of Operation Olive Branch.<sup>21</sup>

## Unobserved Indicators in 2019

### Turkey and Russia Reach Deal on Cross-Border Military Intervention

Turkey and Russia have not yet reached a formal deal on Northern Syria. Indicators of such a deal would include high-level bilateral meetings on defense and intelligence as well as a ceasefire or similar deal to end ongoing clashes in Greater Idlib Province. The TSK maintains observation posts along the frontlines in opposition-held Greater Idlib Province. Russia does not control terrain or airspace in Northern Syria so the contours of any deal will likely be different from the negotiations over Operation Olive Branch.

Then-Turkish Chief of the General Staff Hulusi Akar travelled to Moscow to discuss operations in Afrin Canton two days prior to the start of Operation Olive Branch.<sup>22</sup> Russian Military Police withdrew the next day from Afrin Canton.<sup>23</sup>



## Turkey Removes Wall on Syrian-Turkish Border

The TSK has not yet removed major sections of the wall along the Syrian-Turkish Border.

The TSK began removing parts of the wall along the Syrian-Turkish Border in Afrin Canton three days prior to the start of Operation Olive Branch.<sup>24</sup>

## Turkish Armed Forces (TSK) Conducts Cross-Border Airstrikes

The Turkish Air Force has not yet conducted cross-border airstrikes in Northern Syria.

The Turkish Air Force began cross-border airstrikes targeting the Syrian Kurdish YPG near Afrin Canton in Northern Aleppo Province on the first day of Operation Olive Branch.<sup>25</sup>

## Turkish Armed Forces (TSK) Conducts Cross-Border Shelling

The TSK has not yet begun cross-border artillery shelling in Northern Syria despite reports of minor shelling near Ras al-Ayn.<sup>26</sup>

The TSK began heavy cross-border artillery shelling in Afrin Province one week before the start of Operation Olive Branch.<sup>27</sup>

## Turkish Armed Forces (TSK) Deploys Advanced Systems to Syrian-Turkish Border

The TSK has not yet deployed any advanced electronic warfare or air defense systems to the Syrian-Turkish Border.

The TSK deployed advanced electronic warfare systems (including radar jammers) to the Syrian-Turkish Border one day prior to the start of Operation Olive Branch.<sup>28</sup>

## Turkish Armed Forces (TSK) Leadership Conducts Battlefield Rotation

Turkish Defense Minister Hulusi Akar has not yet visited military command posts opposite Tel Abyad and Ras al-Ayn along the Turkish-Syrian Border. Akar did visit command posts in Hatay Province near Afrin Canton on July 18.<sup>29</sup>

Then-Turkish Chief of the General Staff Hulusi Akar led a senior military delegation to visit command posts in Hatay Province near Afrin Canton at the start of Operation Olive Branch.<sup>30</sup>



## Turkey Deploys Its Syrian Proxies on Syrian-Turkish Border

Turkey has not yet deployed its client Syrian opposition fighters to positions in Turkey along the Syrian-Turkish Border.

Turkey mobilized its client Syrian opposition forces and deployed them along the Syrian-Turkish Border near Afrin Canton one day before the start of Operation Olive Branch.<sup>31</sup>

## Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) Closes Key Ground Lines of Communication

The SDF has not yet closed the major civilian ground lines of communication in Northern Syria.

The Syrian Kurdish YPG closed civilian traffic on the Aleppo - Afrin Highway on the first day of Operation Olive Branch.<sup>32</sup>

