

Crisis Brief: Turkey Kicks off Operation in Syria

Overwatch Podcast Transcript



Featuring John Dunford

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Crisis Brief is a special edition of the *Overwatch* podcast series intended to provide timely updates on unfolding national security crises. Turkey has initiated a military operation into a part of Northern Syria controlled by Syrian Kurdish-led forces. The operation follows a U.S. decision to withdraw from the immediate area controlled by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) – the primary Syria-based U.S. partner in the campaign against the Islamic State of Iraq and al Sham (ISIS). As Turkish forces move across the border and the SDF responds, ISW's Syria expert John Dunford explains the context, key dynamics shaping the battle, and the effects on the counter-ISIS campaign.

Maseh Zarif

This is *Overwatch*, a podcast brought to you by the Institute for the Study of War. My name is Maseh Zarif, and I'm your host for this episode.

It's 5:00 PM here in Washington, DC on October 9th, 2019. As we're recording, the Turkish military has announced the start of new ground operations into northern Syria. ISW Syria Analyst John Dunford, joins us to discuss this initial phase of operations, the dynamics in this part of Syria, and the effects he's watching for in the hours and days ahead.

John Dunford

This morning, local time in Washington DC, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan announced the start of operation Spring of Peace, an operation to establish a safe zone in Northern Syria that would allow Turkey to return Syrian refugees from Turkey back into northern Syria. Erdogan made that announcement following a phone call with Russian President Vladimir Putin, in which they discussed the potential Turkish operation and in which Putin warned Erdogan to exercise restraint to avoid de-stabilizing the current peace process in Syria. It was following that phone call that President Erdogan made his announcement through Twitter, that began a series of air strikes from the Turkish air force throughout the Northern Syria border regions, particularly targeting the Arab majority city of Tell Abyad, as well as the mixed city of Ras al-Ayn and several other cities, both south of Tell Abyad as well as to the east of Ras al-Ayn. Really covering the full border region under control of the US backed Syrian democratic forces. These airstrikes were further supported through Turkish artillery that targeted some of these same locations, mainly outlining the now former safe zone and security mechanism agreement that the United States and Turkey had reached and were conducting joint patrols through, which originally sat between Tel Abyad to the west and then Ras al-Ayn to the east. It was about an 80-kilometer zone in between those two cities, which the US and Turkey had established as the safe zone.

Moving forward into the afternoon, DC time, Turkey announced that it would be getting ground operations into Syria through Turkish ground forces supported by the Turkish-backed Syrian national army, one of Turkey's Syrian proxies. That Turkish-backed SNA will be a key component of the Turkish offensive. Again, this time in eastern Syria, under the banner of Operation Spring of Peace. What they're doing is choosing proxies that are originally from eastern Syria and bringing those proxies to lead the offensive, so that way those proxies can frame themselves as being legitimate groups to control this territory. They are also interestingly using proxies that the US used to provide support to through different programs. Those forces are currently engaged with the US backed Syrian Democratic Forces and Syrian Kurdish People's Protection Units or YPG, outside of Tel Abyad, as well as we are now receiving initial reports that they are also engaged near Ras al-Ayn.

We do have reports over the last 48 hours of elements of the US backed Syrian democratic forces, deploying from Deir ez-Zor province to the Syrian Turkish border. We don't have the exact composition of what those forces look like, but we do know that at some of the key positions in Deir ez-Zor that there are forces leaving in an attempt to go reinforce

border positions. One of the effects of this offensive that we are watching for is how will ISIS respond and how will ISIS take advantage of the chaos and instability that will be caused by the Turkish offensive. ISIS has threatened and is planning to liberate its fighters from SDF-held detention facilities in Syria and detention facilities in Iraq as well. ABC news reported today that members of the US backed Syrian democratic forces are leaving their post at some of the detention facilities that hold a majority of the detained ISIS population inside of northeastern Syria. This obviously will open up some of these detention facilities to a potential prison break, both internally by ISIS fighters that attempt to riot inside of the detention facilities as well as opening up to a coordinated ISIS attack from the outside that is intended to free some of those prisoners from the detention facilities.

US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces spokesperson Mustapha Bali announced on his Twitter account that the SDF had managed to repel the initial Turkish offensive outside of Tel Abyad. It's unclear how long SDF defenses will be able to hold. Fighting that will take place at night will also benefit the TSK in that they have likely received training to conduct night operations and likely have night equipment that is not available widespread within the SDF. This will likely force the SDF to fall back outside of Tel Abyad to regroup if they are not able to hold on. The current state of the Turkish offensive seems to be focused again on the area that the US and Turkey had originally agreed upon to establish a safe zone in. However, indicators from the Turkish air strike pattern from this afternoon points to the fact that Turkey might be actually planning to extend that operation to areas outside of the original safe zone agreement with the United States. As President Erdogan demonstrated when he held up a map of Syria during his speech at UNGA in September 2019, Turkey views the entire border region as a potential safe zone to return Syrian refugees and Erdogan has emphasized that he plans to extend this safe zone even further South into Deir ez-Zor and into more southern parts of Raqqa to allow the return over 3 million Syrian refugees in Turkey.

Both the US and the UN have expressed concerns about Turkey's plans to return refugees to the region and particularly highlighting the fact that they are worried that refugees will be forced to return to these areas. There is also a concern that these refugees will be returned and that there will not be infrastructure in place to receive them, which could create even more humanitarian issues if Turkey is unable to set up structures to take these refugees in. One of the main issues raised by the SDF as well during the security mechanism negotiations is that the SDF had no way of ensuring that they could take care of all these refugees, with the exception of refugees who are originally from eastern Syria.

Tel Abyad is an Arab majority city on the border. There is also a Turkmen population in the area surrounding city. Turkey likely chose that as one of its points of insertion because it likely believes that the population there would be more willing and more accepting of Turkish control as compared to more east towards Hasakah province, where there is a much larger Kurdish population, as well as west towards Kobani, where, again, there's a large Kurdish population. Turkey likely believes that by going in through Tel Abyad they will be able to return Arab refugees into an already Arab majority area. It should also be noted that, at this time, throughout the border regions that civilians are fleeing, they are moving south into SDF areas by Raqqa City as well as by southern parts of Hasakah and Deir ez-Zor Province and are also trying to flee towards the border to potentially the KRG, to the Zamalka border crossing in northeastern Syria.

In terms of the Kurdish population, it is a population with a large sense of different political beliefs as well as aligning with different political parties. Syrian Kurdish YPG is the most dominant military force in terms of the Kurdish militias as well as its political wing, the Democratic Union Party, the PYD, is the most dominant. There are opposition Kurdish parties that have been friendly with Turkey in the past. Turkey has yet to really play on those roots though and has really focused on in some of their rhetoric that they believe that they are returning Arab lands to Arabs that have been made Kurdish by the YPG. They are trying to fix what the YPG has done, essentially.

The trajectory of the current Turkish offensive is going to depend heavily on how the SDF responds to these first few days of fighting. The SDF is signaling to the Syrian regime that it would like a deal. However, the regime right now in the current negotiations with the SDF has the upper hand and is likely unwilling to provide concessions. The SDF is

going to defend its cities on the border. However, it remains unclear how long they will be able to hold out in some of these areas. They are significantly overpowered in terms of Turkish air support and artillery support. The SDF does not have significant anti-air capabilities or the ability to defend against these airstrikes, so it will be difficult for them to be able to move forces around in the region as Turkey tracks them and potentially conducts air strikes in order to stop convoys or takes different actions to generally disrupt the flow and the SDF's logistics lines.

The trajectory of this offensive therefore could change depending on how the SDF manages to hold out over the next few days and that is something that we will be watching. That trajectory could impact how reaction happens here in Washington. We have multiple senators threatening at this point in time to sanction Turkey for its actions today. That could potentially play a role in deterring Turkish actions in terms of how far south or east or even west Turkey intends to go with this offensive. Much of this and much of the trajectory of this will depend on how quickly Turkey can drive the SDF out of some of these border cities, including Tel Abyad and Ras al-Ayn.

Maseh Zarif

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 more about ISW's work and to sign up for a mailing list.

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