

Crisis Brief: Significance of the Turkey-Russia Meeting on 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. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Russian President Vladimir Putin met to coordinate military movements in Northern Syria. The two presidents reached an initial agreement intended to push Kurdish forces away from the Turkey-Syria border region over the coming days. ISW Syria analyst John Dunford discusses what is known about the new deal and how it will affect Turkish and Russian actions in Syria moving forward.

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 3:00 PM here in Washington, D.C., on Tuesday, October 22, 2019. The leaders of Turkey and Russia have announced a deal focused on the future of northern Syria. The announcement comes as the U.S. is carrying out a withdrawal from the area and deliberating over its future role in the country.

In this *Crisis Brief* episode, ISW Syria Analyst John Dunford breaks down what we know about this new agreement and what to watch for next.

John Dunford

Today, Russian President Vladimir Putin and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan met in Sochi, Russia, to discuss the future of Northern Syria and the ongoing Turkish offensive in Northern Syria. Their conversation focused on the previously existing U.S. and Turkish ceasefire agreement that had been reached between the U.S. and Turkey on October 17th.

The ceasefire agreement was reached following a meeting between U.S. Vice President Mike Pence and Turkish President Erdogan in Ankara, Turkey. The ceasefire called for a withdrawal of the Syrian Kurdish People's Protection Units, or YPG, from the Turkish border over a 120-hour period that ended today. The 120-hour period was intended to allow Turkey to establish a safe zone in the areas between Ras al-Ain in northern Hasakah province and Tel Abyad in northern Raqqah province. The ceasefire agreement was outlined in a document that was released that contained 13 individual points.

The YPG announced its withdrawal from the border areas in full today after having previously withdrawn from Ras al-Ain two days earlier, on October 20th. Turkey, throughout the 120-hour period, continued to threaten that it would resume its offensive if the U.S. did not hold up its end of the bargain and ensure that the YPG withdrew from the border area.

Despite the existence of the ceasefire agreement, clashes continued at a lower intensity, particularly in Raqqah province and Hasakah province. The ceasefire agreement covered a limited zone along the Syrian-Turkish border and did not represent Turkey's ideal safe zone area, which includes a stretch of land 30 kilometers deep that exists from Manbij in Aleppo province all the way to the Iraqi border.

That area, that was not included in the U.S. and Turkish ceasefire agreement, was the key point of discussion between Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Russian President Vladimir Putin today in Sochi. Putin and Erdogan met for over six hours. Following their meeting, they announced that they had reached an agreement that would call for the Syrian Kurdish YPG to withdraw from an area of 32 kilometers in depth from the Syrian-Turkish border starting tomorrow, October 23rd, and the withdrawals would take place over a 150-hour period, or roughly six-and-a-quarter days.

Russia, as part of the agreement, would ensure that the YPG withdrew from these areas. In order to ensure that the YPG does withdraw, Russia and Turkey agreed to conduct joint patrols at a depth of around 10 kilometers along the Syrian-Turkish border with the exception of in the border town of Qamishli in northern Hasakah province. The agreement also stipulated that the Syrian Kurdish YPG would withdraw from other areas, including Manbij and Tal Rifaat.

Both of these areas, particularly Tal Rifaat, are important nodes for the YPG and its continued insurgency in north-western Aleppo province. That insurgency targets both Turkish forces and infrastructure that Turkey has built up since its cross-border interventions in 2016 and later in 2018.

Turkey's gains between Tel Abyad and Ras al-Ain will be preserved under Turkey and Russia's agreement, and Russia and Turkey agreed to facilitate the implementation of the 1998 Adana Agreement. The Adana Agreement was an agreement between the Syrian government under Hafez Assad and the Turkish government that would allow Turkey to conduct cross-border raids within a five-kilometer depth in order to prevent the Kurdistan Workers' Party, or PKK, from using Syria as a launching pad for attacks against Turkey. The agreement also called for Turkey and Russia to establish a joint mechanism in order to verify that the YPG did not maintain a presence within the 30-kilometer zone.

The agreement between Turkey and Russia today did not stipulate the future of the Syrian Democratic Forces as a whole. The agreement does require the YPG to withdraw. However, it's unclear at this point if the Russian and Turkish agreement today includes the non-Kurdish militias that operate under the banner of the SDF, or the Syrian Democratic Forces. The agreement specifically mentioned that the YPG will withdraw. However, it's unclear if the agreement when referencing the YPG, is also in reference to these other non-Kurdish militias. The Assad regime in Russia may intend to keep some of these forces in the area to help bolster security to continue to maintain administrative affairs under the Syrian regime.

While Turkey has conducted its operation, Spring of Peace, against the Syrian Democratic Forces and the YPG in northeastern Syria, a separate front between the pro-regime coalition and a number of anti-Assad groups in greater Idlib province has largely remained paused since August 31st.

While President Erdogan and President Putin met today in Sochi, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad visited the other front line in southern Idlib province to conduct a battlefield inspection of the Syrian Arab Army, or SAA, forces on that front line. Those forces and their offensive have largely been paused since Russia declared a ceasefire on August 31st. However, pro-regime forces have continued to shell and conduct airstrikes targeting anti-Assad actors in greater Idlib while the August 31st ceasefire has been in place.

President Putin and President Erdogan did not directly mention Idlib province today after reaching the agreement on the northeast. However, it was likely one of the topics of the conversation during their six-hour meeting. Pro-regime forces likely intend to resume the offensive in greater Idlib, and the resumption of that offensive is likely part of a wider deal between Putin and Erdogan that was reached today, despite neither publicly acknowledging that they had discussed Idlib province.

It's unclear what the scale of this offensive will be. However, the presence of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad at the front lines today conducting an inspection of his forces as well as the presence of Russian-backed Tiger Forces, now known as the 25th Special Tasks Division, at the front line is a good indicator that the regime intends to prioritize Idlib once again in the near future.

The agreement between Russian President Vladimir Putin and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan occurs as U.S. forces withdraw from northern Syria. The implementation of this agreement on a timeline of roughly the next six to seven days will potentially limit the U.S.'s ability to use the M4 highway and other logistics routes that run through northeast Hasakah province and into Iraqi Kurdistan. The U.S. will maintain the ability to conduct air withdrawals from northern Syria. However, the presence of both Russian forces and the increasing regime force posture in northeastern Syria will potentially limit the U.S. or force the U.S. to speed up its withdrawal process.

Moving forward over the next 150 hours, as Russia attempts to ensure that the Syrian Kurdish YPG withdraws from the 30-kilometer area, we'll be watching to see how the Syrian Democratic Forces, or SDF, respond diplomatically as well as militarily. As of recording, the SDF had yet to respond to the agreement between Russia and Turkey that was reached today in Sochi. The SDF has yet to reach an agreement with the Assad regime on the return of the Assad regime to administrative control of all of northeast Syria.

The agreement reached today severely weakens the YPG as it is removed from its core terrain in northeast Hasakah province. The SDF political leadership and Syrian regime, with Russian facilitation, will likely continue to work on an agreement that returns SDF-controlled territory back to the administrative control of the Syrian regime.

As the stated withdrawal period begins tomorrow, we will continue to watch how these developments shift on the ground and how all the actors involved in Syria respond to this deal reached today in Sochi between Russian President Vladimir Putin and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

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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