

Crisis Brief: Russo-Turkish Agreement in Eastern Syria Breaks Down as US Forces Return



Overwatch Podcast Transcript

Featuring Jennifer Cafarella and 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. The deadline to implement the first phase of the Russo-Turkish deal for northeast Syria passed without significant progress after Kurdish forces refused to withdraw from the border. Meanwhile, a new contingent of US forces deployed to southeast Syria to secure oil fields. US forces also patrolled a Kurdish area, indicating a continued relationship with Kurdish forces. ISW Research Director Jennifer Cafarella and Syria expert John Dunford explain these details and discuss what to expect next.

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 3:15 PM here in Washington, DC on October 31st, 2019. Northern Syria is becoming a complex mosaic of diplomatic deals, multi-party force deployments, and geopolitical posturing. In this crisis brief update, ISW Research Director Jennifer Cafarella and Syria Expert John Dunford try to unpack where things stand and the questions ahead.

Jennifer Cafarella

Two separate international agreements were reached for the fate of northeast Syria after US President Donald Trump decided to withdraw all American forces from eastern Syria. First, the US and Turkey reached an agreement, described as a ceasefire agreement, in which Turkey agreed to halt offensive operations after a withdrawal of all Syrian-Kurdish YPG forces from a border zone north of Raqqa city stretching east to the border town of Ras al-Ayn and to a depth of 30 kilometers. In return for that agreement, the US lifted the threat of sanctions against Turkey. Second, Turkey reached a wider agreement with Russia for the fate of remaining territories in northeast Syria not covered by the US-Turkey deal. That agreement included that the Russians will guarantee a withdrawal of YPG fighters with support from the Syrian regime to a depth of 30 kilometers from the Syrian-Turkish border in the rest of northeast Syria. The Russo-Turkish deal also stated that the YPG will withdraw from two towns west of the Euphrates river that Turkey also desires to control. John, explain to us what has happened after these two separate agreements were signed in northeast Syria.

John Dunford

Thank you, Jenny. Following the agreement between Russia and Turkey, the Syrian Democratic Forces military leadership initially rejected the agreement on the grounds that they were not consulted and a part of the negotiations. Russia at that point, reached out to the SDF to conduct side negotiations to convince the SDF to accept the terms of the Russian-Turkish agreement. The SDF publicly announced after those negotiations that they would abide by the deal that Russia and Turkey had reached. The SDF then publicly released footage of their forces withdrawing from some of the border towns along the Syrian-Turkish border. That public footage, in which Russian military police officers, or MPs, escorted the SDF convoy to below the 30-kilometer withdrawal line, was likely intended to appease Turkey and to demonstrate that the SDF would abide by the Russian-Turkish agreement. In reality, the SDF has not withdrawn from the agreed-upon zones that Russia and Turkey reached in their associate agreement.

The SDF continues to engage with Turkish-backed Syrian national army forces south of Ras al-Ayn, north of the town of Tell Tamer. The SDF in these engagements are fighting alongside Syrian regime forces to prevent Turkish-backed

forces from expanding the scope of their original operation in northern Syria. Russia, as part of an effort to de-conflict and as part of the Russian and Turkish agreement, has conducted patrols along the Syrian-Turkish border with Kurdish security forces. These Kurdish security forces are likely a loophole to the agreement that Russia and Turkey reached, which called for the withdrawal of all Kurdish fighters below the 30 kilometer line. The Syrian guards are exploiting a loophole that allows Kurdish security forces to remain within the zone that the YPG was required to withdraw from.

The loophole comes down to the fact that there are multiple Kurdish military organizations in northern Syria. There is the Syrian-Kurdish YPG, which is the offensive military organization that under the Russian-Turkish agreement is required to withdraw. There is a separate internal security forces organization called the Asayish, or the Kurdish Internal Security Forces, that is technically not under the command of the YPG and is a separate entity. However, Turkey will likely view the YPG and the Kurdish Internal Security Forces as the same thing. Therefore, the presence of the Kurdish Internal Security Forces in areas that the YPG was supposed to withdraw from will likely upset Turkey and cause them to potentially reopen their offensive under claims that the YPG did not abide by the agreed-upon Russian-Turkish deal.

Jennifer Cafarella

Now you mentioned that both Kurdish YPG forces and Syrian regime military forces have been fighting back against the Turkish proxy force despite these two agreements, the US-Turkey agreement and the Russia-Turkey agreement, that called for the YPG to withdraw. What deal is Turkey violating by pushing forward?

John Dunford

First, I would say when the US and Turkey reached their agreement Turkey had not secured the entire area that was under that agreement. Most importantly, the main road running into Ras al-Ayn had not been secured by Turkish forces and YPG and SDF forces remained on that highway. Turkish forces then, after the US and Turkey reached the agreement, pushed south from Ras al-Ayn to drive the YPG and SDF away from that road. Where Turkey broke the agreement and expanded the zone was when Turkish forces started pushing east from that highway that leads into Ras al-Ayn and expanded their control to several villages that were east of the extent of the Turkish and US agreement.

Jennifer Cafarella

Now, technically, the Turkish violation of the US agreement should have more consequences for Turkey. The US threatened to impose sanctions if the Turks resumed their offensive military operations, which they have done not only in their initial zone covered by the ceasefire agreement, but they've also expanded beyond that zone in further offensive operations. So this should be raising a question for the US whether and how to impose sanctions on Turkey to attempt to stop this new advance. However, the Turks are not technically violating their deal with Russia, which essentially stated that if the YPG does not withdraw within 150 hours of the signing of the agreement, which expired on Tuesday, then the Turks were free to resume their military operations.

John Dunford

The Russian Ministry of Defense claimed that they have successfully removed the YPG from the areas set under the Russian-Turkish agreement. Turkey has questioned the validity of Russia's claim that the YPG withdrew from those areas so far. However, Turkey has stated that it will wait until Russian and Turkish forces conduct joint patrols of the Syrian-Turkish border to prove that the YPG remains, and that if Turkey does find YPG forces within the border regions then Turkey will continue its offensive.

Jennifer Cafarella

So that's interesting. What it means is that the Russians know full well that the YPG did not withdraw from the zone as do the Turks, and yet they both seem to have agreed to muddle through somewhat in the implementation of joint patrols.

John Dunford

I believe that Turkey is trying to buy time as it does not know yet what the best course of action is to proceed. Turkey is very aware that, at this stage, reopening a grand offensive in northern Syria will expose it to potential US sanctions as well as issues in its relationship with Russia that Turkey is trying to balance while at the same time counteracting Turkey's perceived security threat in northern Syria.

Jennifer Cafarella

Meanwhile, I think we've learned an important lesson about the leverage that the Kurdish Partner Force actually has on the ground given that both the US and Russia basically ordered them to withdraw to a depth the 30 kilometers, which they did not do. Has the situation or the options for that Kurdish force changed at all? Are any of these actors likely to compel the Kurds to withdraw?

John Dunford

The Kurdish military and political leadership has proven throughout the war in Syria to be extremely pragmatic and extremely adept at playing multiple sides of the conflict to secure their own interests. We should expect that they will continue to leverage the US and Russia and play the two sides off of each other while trying to play out the best way forward for their interests in northern Syria.

Jennifer Cafarella

Now, another option that has been publicly discussed often is for the YPG to cut a deal with the regime, which the Russians have attempted to facilitate in the past.

John Dunford

A potential regime, an SDF deal, is on the table but it is very important to note that the SDF is not going to reach that deal as long as they believe that a partnership with the US will continue. They will continue negotiations and they will continue to try to work with Russia to better themselves in those negotiations, but at this point in the war, Assad is unwilling to offer concessions that the SDF wants and the presence of the US guarantees at least some safety for the SDF and the continued protection in some areas of northern Syria. For example, the Syrian Ministry of Defense called on the SDF to join the Syrian Arab Army, or SAA. The SDF responded that they are unwilling to do this or accept any sort of deal that puts SDF units under SAA command until a political solution is reached between the Syrian regime and the SDF political leadership.

Two days after Russia and Turkey reached the agreement on northern Syria the US announced that US forces will deploy to maintain the infrastructure at oil fields in eastern Syria. This announcement occurred well before the expiration of the Russian-Turkish agreement therefore, that US announcement changed the YPGs calculus in terms of what relationships they would need to survive moving forward. Since then, what they have done has hedged themselves between Russia and the US in order to preserve their options. The US decision to remain in eastern Syria has been a lifeline to our partners. Today, October 31st, the US and Kurdish Internal Security Forces conducted a patrol along the Syrian-Turkish border near Qamishli in northern Hasakah province.

Jennifer Cafarella

This is a good example of how the Kurds are positioning themselves in a very sophisticated way where we have Kurdish Internal Security Forces, not technically the YPG, patrolling both with US forces east of Qamishli and with Russian Military Police west of Qamishli. I think that's a very good example of the complexities of this battlespace. Now, there's a final dynamic here that I think is worth unpacking, which is the question of the fate of regime forces and the Syrian regime more broadly in eastern Syria. Now, one of the terms of the Russo-Turkish agreement was that the Syrian regime would establish new border positions, as many as 15, along the Syrian-Turkish border, thereby reasserting the authority

of the central Syrian regime in the east.

John Dunford

Syrian regime forces deployed to the Syrian-Turkish border ostensibly to begin establishing these new border positions that were guaranteed under the Russian-Turkish agreement. However, on October 30th Syrian regime forces withdrew from two major positions along the Syrian-Turkish border south towards Tell Tamer. It's unclear exactly why they decided to withdraw from those positions after previously deploying to establish the observation posts. However, there are a few possibilities. One may be related to a Russian-Turkish deal surrounding the fate of Syrian regime fighters that Turkish backed forces captured near Ras al-Ayn. Turkish forces may have taken hostages in order to compel regime forces to withdraw from areas along the Syrian-Turkish border.

Jennifer Cafarella

In this case, the deployment of Syrian forces and Russian military police along the border prevents the Turks from invading Syria at those additional locations east of where the current invasion is happening. Since the Russians were unable to deliver the terms of the agreement in terms of a YPG withdraw, this potential Turkish attempt to keep their options open by at least preventing regime forces from consolidating along the border creates a new possibility that Turkey could get Russia to agree to allow a new Turkish incursion farther to the east by withdrawing those Russian military police.

Now finally today, on October 31st we have reports that a new contingent of American forces has deployed into Deir ez-Zor province in the southeast to secure oil fields as part of the new residual American force that will remain in eastern Syria, which is according to some reports, a force that will include up to 500 US military forces, including the new armored element that deployed today in addition to American special operations forces. The stated mission of those forces is to prevent ISIS from re-surg-ing and from regaining control over the oil fields which provided a huge source of cash for the ISIS organization. However, the fact that the US also conducted a joint patrol with a Kurdish force in the far north along the Syrian-Turkish border indicates that the actual reality on the ground may be a broader US presence and partnership with the Syrian Democratic Forces, including both the Arab elements that exist in proximity to and actually control the oil fields in the southeast as well as our Kurdish partners in the northeast. There is also a large oil field in the Kurdish areas of the northeast and it is possible that US forces will also secure that infrastructure in addition to the stated intent to secure the infrastructure in Deir ez-Zor.

John Dunford

The US decision to retain a residual force in northeast Syria has changed the calculus of all of the actors involved, including Russia, Turkey, the Assad regime, Iran, and the Syrian democratic forces. Moving forward, we will be watching how these actors respond to the US presence as they try to shape relationships and take advantage of the initial US withdrawal and ongoing Turkish offensive.

Jennifer Cafarella

Further evidence in this case of the effect that even a small contingent of American forces can have in this battlespace.

Maseh Zarif

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