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Turkey's Offensive in Ayn Issa, Syria: Analysis & U.S. Policy Implications

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On December 18, 2020, Turkish forces and proxies began attacking the Syrian city of Ayn Issa, currently held by the Syrian Democratic Forces. Although Ankara has not released any public statement about the nature or intent of their operations, this could mark the beginning of a coordinated offensive to retake other SDF-held towns, such as Manbij or Kobane. This policy memo from JINSA staff provides background, ongoing developments, analysis of possible Turkish objectives, and implications for U.S. policy.

Background on 2019 Northern Syria Ceasefire Agreement

- On October 9, 2019, Turkey launched a military offensive into northern Syria to oust the People's Protection Units (YPG), a Kurdish militia it views as a terrorist organization, and to establish a "safe zone" along the Turkish-Syrian border. The YPG leads the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which has worked closely with U.S. forces in the country against ISIS in northeast Syria.
- Days earlier, following a phone call with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, President Donald Trump withdrew U.S. troops from the Syria-Turkey border area, leading to accusations that Washington had greenlighted the Turkish incursion.¹
 - Amid criticism, Trump sent Erdoğan a letter on October 9 offering to "work out a good deal" and threatening to "[destroy] the Turkish economy,"² which Erdoğan rejected.³ Trump imposed economic sanctions on Ankara over the offensive, codenamed Operation Peace Spring, on October 14.⁴
- On October 22, Turkey and Russia agreed to preserve a Turkish-controlled buffer zone "covering Tel Abyad and Ras Al Ayn with a depth of 32 km [20 miles]," and to a YPG withdrawal from areas on the Turkish-Syrian border outside of that zone.⁵
 - After this withdrawal, Russian-Turkish patrols would "start in the west and the east of the area of Operation Peace Spring with a depth of 10 km [6 miles], except Qamishli city." Ankara and Moscow also committed to removing "all YPG elements and their weapons" from the Syrian towns of Manbij and Tal Rifat.

Ongoing Developments on Ayn Issa Front

- SDF-controlled Ayn Issa is the capital of the Kurdish “Autonomous Administration” in northeast Syria, and includes SDF command facilities and training camps. It is strategically located on the M4 highway, which separates regime- and SDF-controlled areas across northern Syria from Turkey’s “buffer zones” in Syria’s northwest and northeast, which are occupied by Turkish forces and proxy militias.
- October 2020: Erdoğan talks about a possible offensive in northeast Syria: “If all of the terrorists aren’t removed ... as it has been promised to us, I repeat once again that we have a legitimate reason to intervene at any moment we feel the need to.”⁶
- Beginning November 2020, Turkey initiates a force buildup, strengthening fortifications opposite Ayn Issa and resupplying its proxies there; in response, the SDF, Russia and Syrian regime establish three joint observation posts in Ayn Issa.⁷
 - As early as late November, Turkish forces and proxies began sporadic initial attacks around Ayn Issa outskirts, at the same time they conducted similar initial attacks on other key M4 towns of Manbij and al-Hasakah.⁸
 - Turkey would have to take all these towns to consolidate its security corridor.
 - Turkish forces also begin obstructing civilian travel on the highway, in violation of agreement with Russians on joint patrols along the M4.
- December 11: SDF refuses Russian request to hand over Ayn Issa to the Syrian regime, after which the SDF and Russia begin joint drills and technical meetings.⁹
 - After SDF refusal, Moscow reportedly tacitly greenlit Turkey’s operation.¹⁰
- December 18: Turkish artillery shells two SDF-controlled villages just north of the M4 around Ayn Issa, and the city itself;
 - Turkish proxies also begin attempting to push across the M4 highway, resulting in gun battles with the SDF, who reply with artillery fire on Turkish positions north of the highway.¹¹
 - Reports indicate Turkey is moving armored vehicles to the area potentially in preparation for a larger assault.¹² There appears to be no response from Russian forces, despite their presence in the three observation posts in Ayn Issa.¹³
- No official statements yet from Ankara, Damascus, Moscow or Washington.

Possible Turkish Objectives and Outcomes

- At a December 17 JINSA event, Amb. James Jeffrey warned that a potential “black swan scenario” would be “the Turks and the Russians come to a modus operandi at which the Turks would be allowed to go after the SDF in the northeast, which would cause a crisis between Ankara and Washington. [...] It would also probably force American troops out of the northeast.”¹⁴
 - The fighting in and around Ayn Issa could be an indication of this prediction coming to pass.
- Whether the current fighting will remain localized or escalate into a new Turkish offensive against the SDF (the fourth since 2016) depends on Ankara’s intent and objectives, which remain unclear at this point.
- Possible, but unlikely, motivations for the Turkish aggression include:
 - Retaliation for the December 14, 2020, U.S. imposition of sanctions on Turkey’s defense sector under the Countering American Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) for Turkey’s acquisition of advanced Russian S-400 air defenses.¹⁵ However, given that Erdoğan announced the possibility of this operation already in October and that U.S. operations and deployments are focused on countering ISIS further to the east, this seems unlikely.
 - Targeting a specific threat identified to be within Ayn Issa. Although Turkey has been active against the PKK and justifies its operations in northeast Syria as counterterrorism, this seems unlikely. Announcing operations six weeks in advance, taking surrounding villages and using artillery and armored vehicles, are hallmarks of operations to take territory, not eliminate individual terrorist threats.
- It is more likely that Turkey is seeking to control Ayn Issa, and more specifically the M4 highway.
- This could be an attempt to control the flow of goods, people, and possibly SDF troops to SDF-controlled areas further west; if so, it could mark the beginnings of a Turkish offensive to capture Manbij and/or Kobane.
 - Kobane lies on the Turkish border and is the last remaining SDF-controlled town between the Turkish security corridor in northeast Syria and Turkish-held Jarablus. It is symbolically significant as the site, almost exactly six years ago, of the first major Syrian Kurdish battle against and, with U.S. assistance, victory over ISIS.¹⁶
 - Manbij lies to the west of the Euphrates and directly abuts Turkish-held territory between Jarablus and Al-Bab. It has been a sore point for U.S.-Turkish relations as Washington had failed to keep its promise that the SDF would remain stay east of the river.

- Expanding its territorial holdings in eastern Syria could be attractive to Turkey as it simultaneously hopes to repatriate the over 3 million Syrian refugees it has hosted, seeks to prevent new refugees fleeing fighting in Idlib from entering Turkey, and cedes ground in Idlib.
- Despite the Turkish-Russian ceasefire, Moscow might be willing to acquiesce to Turkish operations and territorial gains in Manbij and Kobane as a means to extending the Assad regime's writ over SDF-controlled territory.
 - Expanding its territorial control would strengthen Assad's hand politically and, given economic hardships facing the regime, gaining control of oil production facilities in northeast Syria is likely critical to the regime's survival, and therefore a key interest for Moscow as well.
- Recent Turkish diplomacy with the Iraqi central government and the Kurdish Regional Government aimed at forming a united front against the PKK could also be part of a coordinated Turkish effort to isolate the SDF and cut off possible assistance from Iraqi Kurdish factions.
- Such an operation might be timed to exploit the U.S. transition between administrations, when a U.S. response might be expected to be unlikely or muted.

Implications and Options for U.S. Policy

- No U.S. troops or operations are directly impacted by the Turkish aggression in Ayn Issa, following the repositioning of U.S. forces further eastward in late 2019, away from the Turkish security corridor.
- However, sustained fighting or a larger Turkish offensive against the SDF could have significant negative effects on continued U.S. interests in the area, including:
 - **Countering ISIS:** Renewed fighting against Turkey would draw SDF fighters away from continued anti-ISIS operations in the Deir Ezzor region and along the Syrian-Iraqi border and/or guarding ISIS prisoners.
 - **Countering Iran and Russia:** Although Ayn Issa itself might not be strategically vital to U.S. regional strategy, a joint Turkish-Russian, and potentially Iranian, offensive to retake SDF-controlled territory with the objective of returning northeastern Syrian oilfields to Assad regime control could further Moscow and Tehran's ability to project power from Syria.
 - **Supporting political settlement of Syrian conflict:** The financial windfall from regaining oil production would reduce current pressure on Damascus to negotiate with Syrian opposition groups and further prolong the conflict.

- The United States should publicly denounce Turkish aggression and violation of the ceasefire, but diplomacy alone is unlikely to stop the fighting.
 - Turkey is clearly uninterested in allowing the SDF to control territory, especially near the Turkish border. There is likely nothing the United States would be willing to offer that Ankara would accept to suspend the fighting and maintain the status quo ante.
- Increased economic pressure on Ankara might forestall this round of fighting but is unlikely to change the unstable dynamics between Turkey and the SDF.
 - Threats, and imposition, of tough U.S. economic measures against Turkey worked previously to secure the release of Pastor Andrew Brunson. President Trump also made similar threats to urge Turkey to limit its advance into northeast Syria in October 2019.¹⁷ A similar warning of impending U.S. sanctions unless Turkey changes course might be effective again in the short-term, especially with the recent imposition of CAATSA sanctions lending credibility to U.S. threats.
- A U.S. military response could be effective in the short-term but presents challenges, especially given current political preferences for drawing down U.S. troop presence in the region.
 - Sending U.S. patrols to Ayn Issa, perhaps down the M4, might lead Turkey to suspend fighting so long as U.S. forces remain in the area.
 - Given the small U.S. footprint, priority given to ISIS mission, lack of basing around Ayn Issa and lack of legal authorities for any activity other than observation, it is unlikely that U.S. forces could serve as a permanent buffer—a fact that Turkey will recognize.
 - Also, traversing Russian-patrolled territory to arrive at Ayn Issa creates further potential for confrontations with Russian forces that might seek to block or delay arrival of U.S. troops.
- Preventing further fighting will require a long-term strategy to resolve Turkish-SDF tensions, which might include:
 - Sustained U.S. military presence in northeast Syria;
 - Pressure on SDF to credibly reject ties to the PKK;
 - Political engagement to negotiate reconciliation between the SDF, rival Syrian Kurdish political groupings, and the Kurdistan Regional Government in Iraq;
 - Diplomatic effort to formally include the Syrian Democratic Council in U.N.-sponsored negotiations between Assad regime and opposition toward ending Syrian conflict.



Sources: CRS using area of influence data from IHS Conflict Monitor, last revised May 25, 2020. All areas of influence approximate and subject to change. Other sources include U.N. OCHA, Esri, and social media reports.

Note: U.S. military officials have acknowledged publicly that U.S. forces are operating in select areas of eastern Syria to train, advise, assist, and equip partner forces.

Endnotes

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