



STRIFE IN NORTHERN SYRIA

Timothy Compston considers the security ramifications of the recent Turkish military campaign in Northern Syria

Given the geopolitical and extremist forces at play in and around Syria after nine years of conflict, the situation remains in a state of flux and, as recent Turkish actions demonstrate, is apt to flare up at any time. Such volatility continues to have major security implications not just for those directly in the firing line across the region, but also further afield. The rapid rise and fall of ISIS in Syria illustrates all too clearly the risks posed by a power vacuum with thousands of foreign fighters attracted to the cause – some of whom also committed acts of terrorism in their home countries and whose future now remains unclear.

The potential for disruption of Operation Peace Spring that was launched last October by Turkey and its allies – the Syrian National Army, formerly the Free Syrian Army – to create a ‘safe zone’ as a buffer against Kurdish groups in Northern Syria (who the Turks label as terrorists) caused concerns to be raised in the US and Europe. After all, the Kurdish-dominated YPG fighters were a key element of the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) who battled against ISIS alongside Arab and Assyrian/Syriac militias.

At the start of Operation Peace Spring the Kurds were reckoned to be holding as many as 12,000 suspected IS

The rapid rise and fall of ISIS in Syria illustrates the risks posed by a power vacuum

fighters – of which 4,000 were foreign nationals – across nine prisons as well as thousands of their relatives in other camps. Worryingly, some of these sites were impacted during the early stages of the Turkish offensive as guards were called away to defend territory. In one incident the Kurds reported that 800 family members of ISIS fighters had managed to escape from the Ain Issa holding camp due to attacks nearby. At the time senior Kurdish official Redur Xelil stressed that these Turkish actions were opening the way for ISIS to regroup: “Whoever cares about the secure detention of the prisoners, they are welcome to come and find a solution.”

TURKEY’S OUTLOOK

Looking at things from a Turkish viewpoint, leading up to the invasion of Northern Syria they made it be known that they were keen to repatriate millions of Syrian refugees into a secure buffer zone and crucially had also expressed concerns about the expansion of Kurdish influence on their Southern border, in the guise of the self-proclaimed Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria. In Turkish eyes the YPG – the armed wing of the Syrian Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) – and the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK), which has fought for Kurdish autonomy in Turkey, are essentially one and the same. While the PKK is designated as a Foreign Terrorist Organisation by the US State Department and has been responsible for bombings and shootings in Turkey since the early eighties, punctuated by two ceasefires (1999-2004 and 2013-2015), the YPG is not necessarily viewed in the same light by all of Turkey’s NATO allies.

With so many competing interests, and historical tensions at play here, stabilising the situation in Northern Syria post-ISIS was never going to be easy. For a while last summer it seemed that joint patrols with the Americans and their NATO ally Turkey, initiate as part of a Northern Syria Buffer Zone, alongside limits to where the Kurds could go and the dismantling of some of their border positions, had deterred any precipitous steps. Certainly, from an American perspective the joint US-Turkey patrols to placate the Turks also meant that, hopefully, they could continue to work hand in hand with the Kurds as part of the SDF (Syrian Democratic Forces) to keep a lid on any potential ISIS revival.

Few would argue that the Kurds proved themselves to be an effective force on the ground and were instrumental, alongside coalition airpower and special forces, in dismantling ISIS as a geographic entity, which, at its height was inhabited by eight to 12-million people across Syria and Iraq. By October 2017 SDF fighters had captured the de-facto ISIS capital of Raqqa with the last significant stronghold in Syria, Baghuz, falling in March 2019.

The importance of the SDF to the fight against ISIS, was underlined last February by Robert J Palladino, deputy spokesperson at the US State Department, who said: “The United States appreciates the contributions the Syrian Democratic Forces have made on behalf of the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS. As they liberated territory from ISIS with courage and resolve, the SDF took into custody hundreds of foreign terrorist fighters from dozens of countries around the world. Through their efforts, ISIS is now weakened and on the run, and the world is a safer place.” For the US sustaining Kurdish controlled areas in Northern Syria also had the added benefit of curtailling the influence of the Syrian Government, Russia and Iran in that part of the world.

Drilling down into the detail of the Turkish military’s dramatic cross-border move into Northern Syria back in October, alongside the Turkish supported Syria National Army – which is made up mostly of Arabs and Turks it was certainly an unexpected development given US objections to earlier such plans. As mentioned, the rationale for Operation Peace Spring was to push back the SDF, of which the Kurdish YPG is a key element, from the border region and to create a 20-mile (30km) deep ‘safe zone’ in Northern Syria and, subsequently, to re-settle millions of refugees.

Of course, last October was not the first time Turkish forces – or their allies – had crossed the border a case in point being Euphrates Shield, which began on 24 August 2016 with the Turkish military acting against the ISIS-held town of Jarabulus. A key difference here compared with Operation Peace Spring was that the US gave its support to this effort, including from the air. Even this time there were complications in the lead up to the operation for instance the Turks shelled Kurdish areas to stop them taking advantage of any vacuum left by ISIS. Comments from President Erdogan on the first day of the operation underlined the fact that Turkey viewed the threat from the Kurdish YPG to be just as great as that from ISIS, saying that both “terror groups threaten our country in Northern Syria,” a stance that continues to this day. Fast forwarding to January 2018 and Operation Olive Branch saw the Turkish forces and the Free Syrian Army once again crossing the border, this time with the majority-Kurdish Afrin District in North-Western Syria in their sights – leading to tens of thousands of Kurds being displaced.

THE KURDS CONTINUE TO WARN OF THEIR CONCERN IF THE ISIS PRISONER ISSUE ISN’T PROPERLY RESOLVED

Considering how recent events unfolded, a pivotal moment was undoubtedly the much-reported 6 October phone call between US President Trump and President Erdogan of Turkey. While some commentators say this conversation effectively gave Erdogan the green light for his planned actions, others believe that the US President had no choice but to ensure US forces were out of harm’s way when Erdogan was determined to press ahead with his plan. A readout by the White House press secretary released on the same day referring to the call noted that: “Turkey will soon be moving forward with its long-planned operation into Northern Syria. The United States Armed Forces will not support or be involved in the operation and United States forces, having defeated the ISIS territorial ‘Caliphate’, will no longer be in the immediate area.” On the subject of ISIS fighters, the press secretary’s statement went on to say that: “Turkey will now be responsible for all ISIS fighters in the area captured over the past two years in the wake of the defeat of the territorial Caliphate by the United States.” President Trump subsequently tweeted about the choices the US faced with regards to events unfolding in Northern Syria, noting: “We have one of three choices: send in thousands of troops and win militarily, hit Turkey very hard financially and with sanctions; or mediate a deal between Turkey and the Kurds.”

In the days that followed, the Turkish operation threw up a number of flashpoints which nearly resulted in direct confrontation between the NATO members including: Turkish shelling close to US special forces positions in Kobani on 11 October and, four days later, US F15 jets and Apache helicopters being deployed to warn-off Turkish-backed fighters who had come too close to US troops at Ain Issa. The moving of US forces out of some areas controlled by the Kurds and a failure to stop the Turks resulted in a feeling that the US had let down their allies after all the efforts the SDF (and YPG) had put in to frontline fighting with coalition forces against ISIS.

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On 17 October, the US vice-president Mike Pence did manage to create some breathing space for the Kurds by brokering a temporary deal with President Erdogan for a 120-hour pause in hostilities to allow the SDF to withdraw to safe zones. Ultimately, however, as events unfolded for their own protection the Kurds reckoned that they had no choice but to turn elsewhere for support including, most notably, from Syrian Government forces and the Russians who moved up towards the frontline. At the time the SDF commander-in-chief, Mazloum Abdi, said pointedly that allying with the Syrian Government was the only option to save the Kurdish population in Northern Syria from genocide.

At the same time the whole question of what to do about the ISIS fighters that the Kurds have been

holding in Syria has been brought into sharp relief. There is mounting pressure on their countries of origin to repatriate these fighters, and bring them to justice, before further turmoil in the region can result in them slipping through the net. Interestingly, the Assad regime in Syria has even offered to put these individuals on trial. For their part the Kurds continue to warn of the consequences if the ISIS prisoner issue is not dealt with. This is an ongoing dilemma and threats by Turkey's President Erdogan to release the ISIS fighters the Turks already hold, and those taken during the Syria operation, are also serving to concentrate.

CHANGING THE DYNAMIC

Considering the situation in Northern Syria, 11 days after Operation Peace Spring was launched the involvement of the Russians and Syrian Government forces served to change the dynamic. Presidents Putin and Erdogan met in Sochi to seal an agreement on Syria resulting in joint patrols to the West and East of the Operation Peace Spring area, with Russia bringing the Syria Government onboard with what had been agreed. The cooperation between Russia and Turkey has now extended to a ceasefire in Idlib province. On the 27 October the SDF released a statement after meetings in Moscow saying it was redeploying to new positions away from the Turkish-Syrian border across North-East Syria in order to stop the bloodshed and to protect the inhabitants of the region from Turkish attacks.

As for the US, although their presence on the ground in Syria may have reduced, they have shown that they are still willing to take decisive action against ISIS elements away from the distraction of Turkey's recent campaign. This was underlined at the end of October when US forces, authorised by President Trump, managed to take out the group's leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi following a dramatic night-time raid in the village of Barisha in Idlib province, close to the Turkish border ●

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ISIS weapons seized by the US-backed Syrian Democratic Force

