



Policy Brief

Turkey's incursion into northeast Syria: Why does it matter to the EU?

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Introduction

The European Union (EU) and its member states have expressed their concerns over Turkey's ongoing incursion into northeast Syria. With the military operation named Peace Spring¹, Turkey declared that it aims at eliminating the terrorist threat to Turkey's southern borders; creating a safe zone to ensure that Syrian refugees return to their home countries; and protecting the territorial integrity of Syria.

Both EU representatives² as well as European national governments³ are alarmed that the EU might become a victim of US President Donald Trump's decision to withdraw American troops from northern Syria, thus allowing Turkey to send its armed forces across the border to create a self-declared "safe zone"⁴.

However, it is very difficult to get the European concerns straight. On the one hand, the EU and its member states are in opinion that western military presence in northern Syria would be beneficial to EU's security. On the other hand, neither the EU capitals at large nor the EU itself seem very determined to deploy a European military mission on the ground.

Putting aside EU's externalization of its own security concerns to other regional and global actors in Syria, there is no doubt that the EU will suffer the consequences if violence in northern Syria intensifies again. Therefore, it is practically pointless for the EU to blame US President Donald Trump when he states⁵ that the Europeans must assume more responsibility.

1. What are the EU's Concerns over Turkey's Military Operation in Northern Syria?

Along with several last-minute statements⁶ released by various EU institutions, the EU High Representative Federica Mogherini presented a comprehensive EU position⁷ at the recent European Parliament plenary session on the situation in northern Syria. While addressing the assembly, the High Representative put forward loud and clear the EU's concerns over the ongoing military operation in northern Syria. In that respect, one can juxtapose those concerns as following:

- a) ***Undermining Local Partners of the Global Coalition to Fight Daesh:*** The Global Coalition Against Daesh⁸ was formed in September 2014 and has been unique in its membership, scope and commitment. The Coalition's 81 members agreed to tackle Daesh on all fronts, to dismantle its networks and counter its global ambitions. Beyond the military campaign in Iraq and Syria, the Coalition also agreed upon: tackling Daesh's financing and economic infrastructure; preventing the flow of foreign terrorist fighters across borders; supporting stabilization and the restoration of essential public services to areas liberated from Daesh; and countering the group's propaganda.

¹ <https://thedefensepost.com/2019/10/09/turkey-operation-peace-spring-syria-sdf/>

² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x5GbmLLedEU>

³ <https://www.politico.eu/article/eu-sanctions-against-turkey-on-the-table-france-syria/>

⁴ <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/energy/energy-security/turkey-us-launch-joint-work-on-safe-zone-in-n-syria/26146>

⁵ https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2018-01/Report_Trumps_Impact_on_European_Security.pdf

⁶ <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2019/10/09/declaration-by-the-high-representative-on-behalf-of-the-eu-on-recent-developments-in-north-east-syria/>

⁷ https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/68651/speech-high-representativevice-president-federica-mogherini-european-parliament-plenary_en

⁸ <https://theglobalcoalition.org/en/mission/>

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No doubt that one of the most effective local partners of the Global Coalition Against Daesh has been the Kurds as part of Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in northern Syria, which have sustained nearly 11,000 casualties⁹ in the fight against Daesh. More importantly, the EU is against any further intensification of the ongoing conflict between the two members of the Coalition, namely Turkey and the Kurds in northern Syria, because this will not only diminish the combat capabilities of Kurdish forces and Turkish military but it will also weaken the Coalition as a whole given its role in the fight against Daesh.

Moreover, together with the EU, many Americans¹⁰ are also concerned that the abrupt policy decision to seemingly “abandon the Kurds by the US President Donald Trump” threatens to undo five years' worth of fighting Daesh¹¹, which has been endorsed by the EU and its member states. The decision to abandon the Syrian Kurds as one of the most influential local partners of the Global Coalition Against Daesh will not only severely damage Kurdish coalition partners but it will also undermine US reliability and European credibility in any future crisis in the region where there will be a need for strong allies.

- b) ***Resurgence of Daesh:*** It is true that the United States played an essential role in dismantling the Islamic State (Daesh) and nullifying its territorial gains. However, since 2014, with the start of military action against Daesh, the SDF, a coalition of Kurdish and Arab soldiers backed by the US, British and French special forces, defeated Daesh and liberated eastern Syria. The SDF forces have completed the crucial task of clearing and holding the territory conquered by Daesh forces. Other than being the pioneering force of this war, the Kurdish forces in recent years have played an especially critical role by incarcerating thousands of captured Daesh fighters.

One of the linking points for Europe in this regard is that thousands of Daesh fighters who were captured during major battles against the terrorist group are being held by the SDF forces. As many Syrian Kurds are fighting the Turkish forces in the east of the Euphrates, thousands of terrorists and a number of facilities¹² containing displaced Daesh members and survivors could be left ungoverned. The EU is concerned that this might pose a serious risk as Daesh might have an opportunity to re-establish itself.

More concerning for Europe is that if this is the case, at least several hundreds of Daesh fighters, or in other words foreign fighters who are caught by the Kurdish forces, might be subjects of repatriation to Europe, if and when SDF forces can no longer govern the territory where they kept these foreign fighters.

- c) ***Further Displacement of Syrians:*** There are an estimated 1.7 million¹³ people living in northern Syria. Since the Syrian internal war began eight years ago, Syria has been the epicenter of one of the world's most complex humanitarian crises, with millions of people displaced both within and outside its borders.

Now, the Turkish incursion threatens to add a frightening new dimension to that. Accordingly, the UN Refugee Agency¹⁴ stated that since the beginning of Turkey's

⁹ <https://www.businessinsider.com/military-leaders-warn-trump-abandoning-ally-grave-mistake-2019-10?r=US&IR=T>

¹⁰ <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2019/10/danger-abandoning-our-partners/599632/>

¹¹ <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2019/10/danger-abandoning-our-partners/599632/>

¹² <https://edition.cnn.com/2019/10/07/middleeast/trump-kurdish-syria-turkey-intl/index.html>

¹³ <https://reliefweb.int/report/turkey/turkey-offensive-will-further-destabilise-syria>

¹⁴ <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2019/oct/10/turkish-offensive-triggers-exodus-of-aid-workers-from-syria>

military operations in the northeast of Syria, tens of thousands of civilians have fled from the region. More precisely, the UN has repeatedly warned¹⁵ that any military operation could seriously endanger the lives of 1.7 million people in the region, particularly as 700,000 of them already rely on aid. More concerning, multiple reliable human rights organizations claim that the fighting could spark the displacement of as many as 300,000 people, triggering a “humanitarian catastrophe”¹⁶.

- d) **Demographic Change in Northern Syria:** Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has proved to be genuinely determined¹⁷ to settle as many as 2 million Syrian refugees in the self-declared safe zone in northeast Syria, which is the declared rationale behind Turkey's military operation. In conjunction with it, many pundits¹⁸ claim that the Turkish President's real objective is “to change the demography and diminish the Kurds' presence with a big influx of Sunni Arabs”.

The EU has described it as an attempt of social engineering, which might trigger further tensions and conflicts in northern Syria not only in short-, but also in mid-, and long terms. For that reason, the EU High Representative Federica Mogherini underlined¹⁹ that the EU is fully against any attempt that is to change the demographic composition in the region through the establishment of a “safe zone”.

The EU, therefore, is pretty clear about its stance against mass resettlement on a scale suggested by Turkey, which it thinks that it would profoundly destabilize an already fragile area. Similarly, the Arab League released a communique²⁰ a day after Turkey's incursion into northern Syria started, and condemned the operation. The communique by the Arab League rejects Turkey's attempts to impose “demographic changes” in Syria with the a so-called “safe zone”.

2. Europe Lacks Leverage Over Turkey

Turkey's military operation against the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) has proven once again that the EU has almost no leverage over Turkey with respect to its foreign policy preferences in Syria, which might trigger further displacement of the local population. Hosting more than 3.6 million Syrian refugees in Turkey, which was agreed by Erdogan Administration and the EU through the Migration Deal that was signed in 2016 to stop migrants from going to Europe in exchange for €6 billion and visa-free travel for Turkish citizens, provides President Erdogan with the upper hand to threaten²¹ the EU with migration flows to Europe.

Accordingly, once the EU national governments and EU representatives started to refer to Turkey's military operation as an “invasion” and calling upon Turkey to stop its military incursion, the Turkish President revisited the migrants-card once again and threatened the EU with millions of Syrian refugees. Many experts argue that despite the regular calls and statements that the EU releases to

¹⁵ <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/turkey-syria-invasion-civillians-civil-war-refugees-a9149476.html>

¹⁶ <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/turkey-syria-invasion-civillians-civil-war-refugees-a9149476.html>

¹⁷ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-security-erdogan/erdogan-says-2-million-3-million-syrian-refugees-can-be-resettled-in-safe-zone-idUSKBN1W31A3>

¹⁸ <https://ahvalnews.com/syria-turkey/erdogans-demographic-engineering-plans-syria-mirror-those-assad-regime-ft>

¹⁹ https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/68651/speech-high-representativevice-president-federica-mogherini-european-parliament-plenary_en

²⁰ <https://www.voanews.com/middle-east/arab-league-condemns-turkeys-syria-incursion-calls-un-action>

²¹ <https://www.france24.com/en/20191010-europe-lacks-leverage-over-turkey-amid-erdogan-migrant-threat>

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express its concerns over Turkey's military operation, a concrete EU action is very unlikely to come into reality, since the potential wave of migrants and the resurgence of Deash might also become truly a European problem if Turkey fails in northern Syria.

In fact, this is not the first time President Erdogan has engaged in such diplomatic disputes with the EU and its member states. He accused German Chancellor Angela Merkel of using "Nazi measures"²² when Germany prevented a number of Turkish ministers from campaigning there on the occasion of the 2017 referendum. Likewise, President Erdogan barred the Dutch ambassador²³ from returning to the country after the Netherlands enacted similar measures the same year. Provided that Europeans did not take decisive actions against President Erdogan back then, one can argue that Turkish President perceived it as a strong sign of lack of EU's leverage over Turkey.

However, the relations between the EU and Turkey is antithetical to the one between Russia and Turkey. After Turkey downed a Russian jet flying by the border of Syria in 2015, President Erdogan had to officially apologize to the Russian President Vladimir Putin due to the heavy sanctions Russia imposed on Ankara.

That being said, one of the tools that EU capitals prefer to utilize against Erdogan Administration is larger bans²⁴ on arms export to Turkey. However, the EU needs to be very careful in banning its arms export to Turkey, since such steps might lead to an increasing in Turkey's dependency on Russian arms export.

3. Recommendations

Although several EU officials²⁵ and top diplomats from a number of larger EU member states²⁶ have already shared their concerns over the Turkish incursion in northern Syria, the EU's ability²⁷ to have a direct and decisive impact in curbing the ongoing war in northern Syria is very limited. In that respect, this paper suggests one long term and several short-term actions for the EU to carry out.

With regard to actions that can be pursued in the mid-and long term, the EU needs to be more and more responsible for its own security challenges particularly in its immediate neighbourhood in order not to rely on other regional and global actors in the security domain. Accordingly, the current situation confirms once again that the EU needs more "strategic autonomy" in its foreign policy actions²⁸. This is first and foremost to underline that the capacity to build-up military operations in the EU neighbourhood should rely predominantly, if not entirely, on European assets.

Clearly, the EU should not expect from other actors to defend Europe's interests in its stead. As a matter of fact, this has been the official objective of the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP)²⁹ since 1999. Thanks to the launch of several new instruments such as the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) and the Commission's European Defence Fund (EDF), the EU can

²² <https://www.thelocal.de/20170319/nazi-measures-erdogan-launches-scathing-attack-against-merkel>

²³ <https://www.france24.com/en/20191010-europe-lacks-leverage-over-turkey-amid-erdogan-migrant-threat>

²⁴ <https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-syria-security-turkey-eu/furious-with-turkey-eu-threatens-sanctions-arms-embargo-idUKKBN1WQ1Q3>

²⁵ https://www.irishtimes.com/topics/topics-7.1213540?article=true&tag_person=Jean+Claude+Juncker

²⁶ https://www.irishtimes.com/topics/topics-7.1213540?article=true&tag_person=Heiko+Maas

²⁷ https://ec.europa.eu/fpi/home_en

²⁸ http://www.egmontinstitute.be/turkey-and-syria-absent-a-european-strategy-blame-trump/?utm_source=the+Egmont+mailing+list&utm_campaign=842425d743-Publ-Sven-Europe_superpower-power-politics_COPY_01&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_6fda39e199-842425d743-219845397

²⁹ https://eeas.europa.eu/topics/common-security-and-defence-policy-csdp_en

have the chance to turn the long-standing objective of CSDP into reality at least twenty years after its launch.

To mention some of the potential short-term measures that the EU can take to preserve its interest with respect to the ongoing war in northern Syria, one can initially suggest that the EU needs to use all channels of communication not only with Erdogan Administration but also with regional and international actors, including the United States and China.

Moreover, a joint communique with Arab League calling upon Turkey to stop the incursion might empower EU's stance vis-à-vis Turkey. As there have been already multiple attempts, the EU national governments, which are also members of UN Security Council, can take up the matter to the UN and ensure that UN Security Council fulfils its global responsibility in bringing the ongoing incursion to an end. Last but not least, the European Union needs to re-ensure that the EU will not provide any financial assistance to Erdogan Administration for the self-declared safe-zone, in which Syrian refugees are planned to be relocated.

That being said it is not realistic and might be counter-productive to expect from the EU to go for economic sanctions against Turkey or take steps to limit the scope of the Customs Union with Turkey. Although it is believed that some of these ideas have been discussed during the latest EU council meeting in Luxembourg³⁰, it is very unlikely that the EU will hire any of the-mentioned measures.

4. Conclusion

The current military operation led by Turkey in northeast Syria has once again proven that the EU is not only divided over how to respond to Turkey's foreign policy preferences that are detrimental to that of the Union, but it also hesitates to hire decisive measures against Erdogan Administration, primarily due to its concerns over the migration issue. Giving the EU's dependency on Turkey for keeping Syrian refugees away from Europe and President Erdogan's appetite to utilize EU's dependency as a factor of pressure on Brussels, it seems that the EU will remain hostage for some more time to foreign policy actions of Erdogan Administration. If the EU would like to alter its dependency on Erdogan Administration to curb the migration flow to Europe, it needs to revise its engagement with Turkey over the Migrant Deal that was signed back in 2016.

That being said, the EU needs also more autonomy in its foreign policy actions and security field. For that reason, as long as the EU pursues a timid approach in building-up and relying more, if not only, on its own security assets in its neighbourhood, it is very likely that the Union will keep suffering consequences of such actions by other regional and global actors similar to Turkey's current incursion in northern Syria.

³⁰ <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2019/10/14/council-conclusions-on-north-east-syria/>

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