
Turkish threats to invade Northern Syria

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Summary : When Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, had met in Ankara on Wednesday, 8 June, the fiery statements issued by senior Turkish officials and President Erdoğan, regarding an imminent Turkish military operation in areas in the north and northeast Syria, have decreased.

Introduction

When Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, had met in Ankara on Wednesday, 8 June, the fiery statements issued by senior Turkish officials and President Erdoğan, regarding an imminent Turkish military operation in areas in the north and northeast Syria, have decreased. Before this meeting, the area targeted by the planned Turkish operation had shrunk. After the meeting, the Turkish foreign minister announced that the targeted areas were shrunken from the entire border to Tal Rifaat, Manbij, and Tal Tamr. Then another statement by Turkish President Erdoğan followed, explaining that military operations will take place in Tal Rifaat and Manbij only.

Unstightly, the fading of Turkish statements and the reduction of targeted areas are not related to Turkey's desires and intentions, but rather to the political and military equations that govern northern Syria and the positions of the countries that have a presence in the Syrian Land.

The US Position

With the Turkish President's announcement of his country's intention to launch a new operation in northern Syria, The US has expressed its concerns about any military operation and its effects on the efforts to combat Daesh, and also informed Turkey of its rejection reach to areas where the international coalition forces are present, and its sensitivity to any operation against areas liberated by the Syrian Democratic Forces and the international coalition together such as Kobani, Ain Issa, and Manbij. After that, on Monday, 6 June a US delegation visited Manbij and the delegation met with the Military and Civil Councils there, which might be a message to express the United States' commitment to the area liberated by the joint forces after difficult and costly operations.

Other than these areas, the United States is disturbed by the Turkish exploitation of the Russian and Ukrainian war and its attempts to negotiate with Russia and America on Sweden and Finland's membership in NATO in exchange for allowing it to conduct military operations in Syria and to include other requests as well. However, this exploitation will not work because of the importance of the membership of Sweden and Finland in terms of the role and location of NATO, which is no less important than Turkey. This Turkish exploitation may reflect on the internal situation of Turkey and perhaps on the economic situation inside the country as well.

The Russian position

The meeting of the foreign ministers of Turkey and Russia in Ankara did not meet Turkey's ambitions, and through it, Turkey was not able to obtain what it aspired to regard Syria and its military operation, which is because Russia has a strong pressure card on the Turkish side on the matter of Jabal al-Zawiya and its surroundings which shows that Turkey has not fulfilled its commitments regarding the expulsion of terrorist organizations from it and the securing of the international road between Aleppo and Latakia.

In addition, any Syrian or Iranian military operation with or without Russia's approval will cause the Syrian opposition forces to lose their mountainous defensive lines, opening the plain area to the Syrian forces and their allies in the Idlib governorate and its outskirts. This represents a threat to create a mass migration in an area inhabited by nearly four million people, with more than a thousand and two hundred camps, towards Turkish territory. This will have repercussions inside Turkey, which is witnessing intense controversy and tension regarding Syrian refugees, and will thwart Erdoğan's project to return Syrian refugees.

Tel Rifaat

To clarify first, the city of Tel Rifaat and some of its countryside and other surrounding villages, including 12 villages in Sherawa located in the Afrin region are not controlled by the Kurdish forces. The rumors that say that Kurdish forces control this area are not correct at all. The leadership of the Syrian Democratic Forces stated that their forces do not have any presence in these areas. The Kurdish fighters, who withdrew from Afrin after being occupied by the Turkish forces and their proxies in Syria have merged with the Syrian government forces. In addition, the area, in terms of administrative and service terms, is under the control of the Syrian government. In addition, Syrian municipal, service, and administrative departments operate in the region. The Syrian security forces, including police and intelligence, operate in the area too. Over more, the Russian forces have a presence in bases at Meng, Al-Washiyah, Kashtaar, and others. The city of Tal Rifaat and its countryside was recaptured from the Syrian opposition in 2016, through the Russian warplanes, and with the effective contribution of the Syrian forces on the ground, in coordination with the Syrian Democratic Forces at the time. The Kurdish forces did not recover it alone.

Iranian Presence and Position

The Iranian presence, through the Lebanese Hezbollah, in northern Aleppo, especially in the towns of Nubl and Zahraa, dates back to before the Syrian war. However, this presence expanded and was strengthened by forces from Hezbollah, in addition to the militias "Al-Fatimiyoun", "Al-Zainabiyoun" and other groups in the region. Northern Aleppo has become for Iran as important as southern Lebanon. Any Turkish military operation, accompanied by the sectarian extremist armed groups of the Syrian opposition that leads to the control of Tal Rifaat and the rest of the al-Shahba area will place the towns of Nubl and al-Zahra, as strongholds of the Iranian forces and their militias, in the range of the armed opposition, and even effectively besieging them. This allows access to the northern and northwestern gates of Aleppo, which Russia, Iran, and the Syrian government have made great efforts to clear of opposition militants. This would also result in opposition groups taking control of the roads leading to Aleppo, the country's second-largest city, and its economic capital, and consequently, posing a serious threat to them again after they were purged of the armed opposition in late 2016. Therefore, it is expected that there will be a position Iran is unequivocal in its rejection of any progress by the Turkish forces and the armed groups loyal to them from the Syrian opposition in northern Aleppo, in addition to a similar position on the part of the Syrian government. It may be true that the Syrian leadership prefers a Turkish occupation over an internationally supported Kurdish reality, but Tal Rifaat is not part of this reality. Indeed, sources familiar with what is happening in the al-Shahba region confirm that there is a broad military alliance forming on the ground between the armed forces opposing the Turkish operation, in parallel with the inclusion of more military reinforcements by the Syrian army and militias affiliated with Iran.

By these facts, even if Russia promised Turkey to withdraw its forces from the areas that Turkey intends to attack, it will be difficult for it to force Iranians to accept that. Also, Israel is putting a lot of pressure on the presence of the Iranians in southern Syria and the around Damascus. This opens the way for a Turkish-Iranian confrontation that may be through their proxies in the region.

East Euphrates

In the areas east of the Euphrates, the situation is more complex, in front of the possibility of Turkey launching a military operation there. On the one hand, there is a presence of the international coalition in those areas, and America cannot agree to any Turkish military operation there.

While there are the areas covered by the October 22, 2019, agreement, following the latter's invasion of the Serêkaniyê/Ras al-Ain and Girê Spî/Tal Abyad regions, after the US withdrawal from it, which was concluded between Russia and Turkey.

Under this agreement, Russia was able, for the first time, to have a military presence in the areas east of the Euphrates. It was also able to introduce Syrian government forces to areas that were not allowed to enter before the American withdrawal and the Turkish invasion. It is difficult for Russia to give up this gain, especially as it fears that America and some of its European allies, will take advantage of any Russian withdrawal from those areas and try to fill the void there. Here, we can refer to the re-sending of US forces, in late April 2022, to locations from which they withdrew in October 2019, such as the Tabqa military airport, 50 km from the city of Raqqa, and the division headquarters (17), 7 km from Raqqa. Perhaps these Russian fears explain Russia's doubling of its military movements in the region by intensifying patrols and sending reinforcements to areas near the lines of contact. It also intensified its meetings with the Syrian Democratic Forces and tried to reconcile them with the Syrian government, thus strengthening the latter's positions at the expense of SDF to please Turkey by deploying more Syrian forces in SDF locations.

All these complications may be discussed during the Nur-Sultan talks, which started today (Wednesday, June 15), to clarify the picture more clearly.

The Economic Dimension of The Turkish Threats

The American decision to exclude the Autonomous Administration areas, as well as some areas under opposition control, from economic sanctions was the reason for strong Turkish resentment for fear of the possibility of improving the economic and service conditions in the Autonomous Administration areas. Also, out of fear of the implications of this American decision for granting privacy and care to these areas. Therefore, Turkish threats intensified in the wake of this decision, in conjunction with international and regional developments, which Turkey felt would be in favor of strengthening its role in Syria at the expense of Russia. I think Turkey will be in a situation that may not receive the radical objections of America and Russia to its plans for a new military operation in Syria. There is no doubt that Turkey wants to block the effects of this economic privilege of the Autonomous Administration areas, and it will strive to obtain Russian support in this endeavor because Russia is also opposed to this American position toward the Autonomous Administration. Turkish and Russian fears of this exemption reinforce talk about development projects in the region; especially talk about the possibility of restarting the Lafarge cement factory, located southeast of Kobani on the M4 international road, which was recently visited by an American expert committee to study its status. The opportunities available to Turkey, here, maybe a request for cooperation from Russia to exert pressure to obstruct such projects, and any attempt to subject the border crossings, especially the Simalka crossing, to the control of Russia and the Syrian government forces, to block the way for investments and economically stifle the Autonomous Administration.