

Now that Raqqa has been taken from IS, US sees Afrin as a Russian problem

by Wladimir van Wilgenburg - 16/01/2018 22:46



ERBIL – The US-led coalition against IS sees the Turkish threat against Afrin as a Russian problem now that Raqqa is liberated from IS in October last year.

“Afrin is not located within the Coalition's area of operations”, a US Military spokesperson told The Region by email when asked if the US-led coalition was worried about a possible Turkish offensive against the Kurds in Afrin.

In June 2017, the US-coalition was still worried about a possible Turkish operation that could have undermined the Raqqa operation carried out last summer and finished in October.

“So we are concerned about anything that distracts or takes away from the focus that we are on right now, and that is Raqqa,” Coalition spokesperson Colonel Ryan Dillon Spokesman [said](#) in June last year.

At that period, the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) threatened to pull out

of the Raqqa operation, to defend Afrin.

However, this time the US only support SDF operations against IS in Deir ar-Zour.

Nicholas Heras, Middle East Security Fellow at the Center for a New American Security in Washington told the Region that the US sees Afrin as a Russian problem now.

“The U.S. military has entered a different stage of its mission in Syria. This stage is focused on building stability in Raqqa and along the Middle Euphrates River Valley,” he said.

“From the U.S. perspective, Afrin falls under the Northwest Syria De-Escalation Zone, and therefore is Russia, Turkey, and Iran's problem to solve. Put simply, Afrin does not register as a strategic priority for the U.S. in Syria, while Raqqa does,” he added.

“The US never worked with the Kurdish forces in Afrin, and they've been upset by clashes between those forces and US-backed rebels in the Turkey-held Euphrates Shield zone,” Aron Lund, a fellow with the Century Foundation told the Region.

“I don't think the US views Afrin as being their responsibility, and I don't think they mind much if Russia were to take charge of that situation. They know their allies in the SDF will be upset if Turkey attacks it, but they can't do much about it anyway, and it's not a reason for them to provoke Turkey. They have enough trouble with Erdogan as it is,” he concluded.

The People's Protection Units (YPG) commander Sipan Hemo warned that the Kurds would hold local and global powers responsible if Turkey attacks.

“Should Iran, Russia, Syria and even the U.S. not approve this in one way or another, Turkey cannot carry out such an attack because international law will not allow it as states have many laws that prevent this,” he told ANF English.

“Should the mentioned states fail to manifest a serious attitude in such a case, the Kurdish people will hold all of them responsible,” he added.

“Turkey needs the support of at least one of the two players. Either Russia or the United States,” Farhad Patiev, a representative of the Syrian Kurds in Moscow, told the Region. “If Russia says no, but USA says yes, it will be enough to start a war. It is impossible to belittle the role of the United States in this matter,” he said.

“The war is not going to stop in the Afrin border, in case Turkey gets the green light from Russia, Iran and Syrian Regime,” senior Syrian Kurdish official Abdulsalam Ahmed warned. “The fighting front will be extended from Derik to Afrin reaching inside Turkish border,” he added.

However, Timur Akhmetov, a Middle East analyst at the Russian International Affairs Council, says it's unlikely Russia will approve such an operation and that without Russian approval, Turkey could not use Syrian airspace as they did in August 2016 during the Euphrates Shield operation.

"I don't think so, because operation would create more instability and Kurds would perceive Russian approval as negative signal," he said. "I don't think Turkey will carry out operation without Russian approval," he said.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov on [Monday said](#) that he hopes a ceasefire will be observed in Afrin, in reaction to Turkish threats to attack Afrin in northern Syria.

"As for the situation in Afrin and Syria overall ... We are seeking full compliance with the ceasefire agreements," Lavrov said.