

# Yesterday Kobane, Today Afrin

by Meghan Bodette - 20/01/2018 13:27



Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan has escalated his threats against the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria, [promising](#) to “drown” and “cleanse” Afrin Canton—a small region home to many refugees and internally displaced people, cut off from Kobane and Cizire Cantons by a rebel enclave stretching from Azaz to Jarablus. Turkish troops, amassed near the border, have been shelling civilian areas and military positions alike for the past several days. On Friday, Turkish defense minister Nurettin Canikli [confirmed](#) that there would be a military operation, and that Northern Syria’s so-called “terrorists”— the YPG and YPJ—must be “removed from existence.” According to the YPG, Turkish forces [attempted](#) to enter Afrin Friday morning, but were expelled.

In the face of these threats, the people of Afrin took up [arms](#) and [marched](#) in protest, promising to defend their land until the end. All states, international organizations and other actors that support democracy in Syria and a peaceful resolution to the country’s civil war must stand with this resistance against any Turkish aggression.

International and regional powers have not yet clarified their positions. Russian

forces have operated in Afrin since 2017, and Moscow has grown closer to Northern Syria in recent months, supporting operations in Deir Ezzor and promising Kurdish participation in diplomatic talks. Turkish media [reported](#) that Russia will withdraw from the canton to enable the attack, but local sources deny this, saying that Russian troops only altered their positions. On Friday, Russian foreign minister Sergey Lavrov confirmed that there is still a Russian presence in Afrin. Despite this, Kurdish officials understand that any Turkish attacks will be undertaken with at least tacit Russian support, and that Turkey will exploit any ambiguity in Russia's policy toward the region.

U.S. State Department spokeswoman Heather Nauert condemned Erdogan's threats, saying that "we would call on the Turks to not take any actions of that sort...we want them to keep focused on ISIS." Yet there is no U.S. military presence in Afrin to serve as a credible deterrent, and such a statement ignores that Turkey has never focused on fighting ISIS—rather, it sees Northern Syria as the greater security threat, and jihadist groups as a way to counter it. In another briefing, a senior State Department official [said](#) that the US "understands" the Turkish position on the PKK and that the administration "very much hope[s] that Turkey works with us and the international community in ways that we think advance Turkish interests." By dividing Kurdish into "allies" in Syria and "terrorists" in Turkey, the U.S. capitulates in part to the Turkish narrative—wherein any Kurdish resistance is terrorism. This does not do enough to deter Erdogan from conducting what he sees as "counterterrorism" efforts in Afrin.

It is clear that both Russia and the United States do not yet want to take sides in this conflict. But as Erdogan's threats continue and more Turkish bombs fall on Syrian Kurdish cities, international equivocation only enables violence.

Local authorities, representing all of Northern Syria's communities and organizations, have stressed that international support must be swift and clear. The Syrian Democratic Council [said](#) that "we condemn the interventions on Syrian land and call on the international community to stop Turkey's intervention against the life of Syrian people. Kurdish people are a part of Syrian people, and attacks on Kurdish regions mean an aggression on all of Syria." A PYD statement [called](#) for the U.N. Security Council—of which both Russia and the U.S. are members—to create "secure zones" to protect against Turkish invasion. Afrin's Yezidi community [said](#) that "we beg Russia, the EU and US to stop this Turkish aggression against our community and against Afrin. Please do not allow an innocent community to become the collateral damage of Turkish violence. Do not sacrifice us in another genocide for your relation with Turkey!" – aware that if the state that enabled ISIS and al-Qaeda throughout the war were to attack, it would bring a new wave of atrocities against the diverse

peoples of Northern Syria with it.

These statements come from an understanding of the international community's tendency to abandon Kurdish resistance as soon as geopolitical interest changed. From the Nixon and Ford administrations' deals with Iraq and Iran in the 1970s to the U.S. abandonment of Kirkuk after the Kurdistan Regional Government's independence referendum, outside powers have chosen their alliances with the region's existing states over alignment with Kurdish forces. Kurdish officials know this, with the PKK's Murat Karayilan [warning](#) that states like the U.S. and Russia equivocate not because of fear or morality, but because "Turkey offers a lot of benefits to them and they know that there will be no more benefits after they say [enough is enough]," and calling on states not to "take side with fascism or become a partner with fascism against Kurds" in the name of temporary interests.

By threatening Afrin, Turkey is betting that the pattern of betrayal will repeat itself—that the United States, Russia, and international institutions, no longer needing a force that challenges the region's balance of power, will decide that their alliance with Turkey is too important to lose over a small corner of Syria.

Yet while hoping for an international betrayal like Kirkuk, Turkey forgets a more relevant example—the resistance of Kobane. Senior officials in Northern Syria have drawn parallels between Kobane in 2014 and Afrin today. Former PYD co-chair Saleh Moslem [said](#) that "[like] example of Kobane, Afrin is also ready. An attack on Afrin means an attack on Kurds. During the time of the Battle of Kobane, youth from Northern Kurdistan had taken to the streets and showed an immense resistance. This will be even greater for Afrin." YPG spokesman Nuri Mehmud [warned](#) any state that might condone a Turkish invasion that "Afrin is a continuation of Kobane," and said that "it's not a far-fetched possibility that states who assume they can protect their interests through the Afrin and Idlib negotiation take on the same character as ISIS."

If Turkey is allowed to "protect its interests" by invading Afrin, its approach towards Northern Syria will inarguably take on such a character: empowering jihadists, impeding efforts towards a political settlement, and setting back the transformative experiment in self-determination that the autonomous region has fought for since the beginning of the conflict. Erdogan expects the world to condone this—just as he expected Kobane to fall, and just as he [condoned](#) ISIS attacking Northern Syria from the Turkish side of the border.

Yet like Kobane in 2014, Afrin will fight back. Its military forces are far more prepared and better armed than Kobane's were then. Its people are organized for self-defense and aware of what they fight for. Its enemy, Turkey, fears the Kurdish freedom movement and the democracy, autonomy, and justice it offers the Middle East just as

much as ISIS feared it, and so threatens the same total destruction. Its struggle will again echo across borders through all four parts of Kurdistan—something Turkish authorities should be mindful of as they press forward with invasion plans. The world knows how the Kobane resistance came to be and how it transformed the war and the region. It should then know which side to take in Afrin.