

Afrin between the claws of the major powers

by Cihad Hammy - 31/01/2018 14:14



In an [article](#) I wrote a day before the Turkish state's invasion of Afrin, I intended to scrutinize the underlying ideological structures of the Turkish ruling party (AKP) and the driving force behind the invasion of Afrin. This article will focus more on the role of major powers, mainly US and Russia, in the recent invasion of Afrin and the stances held by the Assad regime and Iran.

In 2016, after the Turkish state invaded Syria and occupied Jarablus in order to prevent the linking of the Kobani and Afrin cantons, Mehmet Ocalan [visited his brother](#), Abdullah Ocalan, a political theorist and the ideological leader of PKK who is confined in Imrali prison, Turkey. There, Abdullah Ocalan reflected on the Turkish invasion of Syria and assessed the role of the US in the operation, saying:

“The US invited the Turkish state to Rojava through Jarablus a few weeks ago. They must have pursued such a strategy to weaken both the Kurds and Turks at this point. The Turks wouldn't have been able to enter Jarablus if the US hadn't wanted this to

happen. Their goal is to make both parties confront each other here.”

This statement is still strongly relevant as far as it concerns the Turkish state's invasion of Afrin. But this time, Russia directly invited the Turkish state to invade Afrin instead. The Turkish state would not dare to invade Afrin if both the major powers-- US and Russia-- did not give such an offensive the green light.

Russia

Russia's approval for the Turkish state's invasion of Afrin is not surprising. It is clear that Russia seeks to bolster the Assad regime in order to sustain and gain political and economic interests in Syria. Even more clear is that Russia sees Syria as a terrain from which to wrestle away control from its imperialist rival, the United States.

After the battle of Kobani, Kurdish forces entered into a coalition with other groups in the region under the banner of the Syrian Democratic Forces in order to liberate large swathes of territory and even cities from the Islamic State in Northern Syria. In their quest, they received moral and political support from a U.S.-led International coalition to the chagrin of Russia. When the SDF finally gained the capacity to control crucial water and oil resources that were previously under the control of IS in Raqaa and Deir-ezoz, tensions between the two world powers reached a new height.

These tensions manifested in a new rivalry between the SDF – backed by a US-led coalition – and the Syrian government, backed by both Russia and Iran. In order to weaken the leverage that the US has in Syria, Russia entered into a détente with Turkey.

At this point, the interests of both Russia and Turkey align. While Turkey wants to dismantle the Kurdish-led project in northern Syria, Russia seeks to reduce the influence of the US in Syria by trying to remove one of the United States' most important ally on the ground, the Syrian Democratic Forces.

Moreover, by allowing Turkey to invade Afrin, Russia aims to put the US in a quandary, knowing very well that the US has trouble sustaining its juggling act in Syria. On the one side, Washington has attempted to keep Turkey, a fellow NATO member, as a close strategic ally. At the same time, gains by the SDF give the US a foot in Syria that can aid in putting pressure on the Assad regime, and thereby shrink the influence of Iran in the region. Ankara, which is against the Kurdish project, is unhappy. The SDF which seeks to ensure, among other things, the safety of its population is perpetually unsafe. And whereas Ankara feels betrayed, and the SDF feels like it ought to prepare itself for betrayal, Moscow sees an opportunity.

The Turkish state's operation will not be limited to Afrin, but rather will extend to Manbij, where over 2000 U.S military personnel are stationed. This, at least, is what Erdogan has expressly said in a [speech](#) to provincial leaders in Ankara:

“With the Olive Branch operation, we have once again thwarted the game of those sneaky forces whose interests in the region are different” he continues, “Starting in Manbij, we will continue to thwart their game.”

If the Turkish state were to attack Manbij, in order to protect both its leverage and interests, the US could possibly fight back. This is what Russia hopes, for the US and Turkey to engage in combat, and risk having the former country kicked out of NATO. Russia wants, among other things, to have Turkey finally fall under its ambit of influence. This should at least partially explain why Russia would allow for the Turkish state to invade Afrin.

United States

Not much needs to be said about US foreign policy as far as it concerns the Kurds in Syria. It is a doctrine that can be summed up in two words: hypocrisy and duplicity. The US has already claimed to support the Turkish state's right to protect itself from "terrorist elements that may be launching attacks against Turkish citizens and Turkish soil from Syria". By doing so, the US has signed its seal of approval for the Turkish state to attack the Kurds of Syria.

Turkey is still a strategic NATO partner for the US. The latter does not want to lose Turkey and the U.S doesn't want that to change. The US simply sees Afrin as a place that is not its problem, especially considering that it doesn't fall under the territory of the International Coalition against the Islamic State. “No leverage, not my problem” is another manner, to sum up this doctrine.

The Assad regime

In Syria, there are two projects that the Assad regime feels threatened by, federalism in northern Syria and the Islamic opposition supported by Turkey. While the Assad regime strives to keep Syria as a centralized nation-state, the Kurdish-led project in northern Syria poses a big threat to the nation-state model, as it seeks to decentralize the country while empowering ethnic minorities and women. The other threat to the Assad regime is the Islamic opposition-- or the counterrevolution directly backed by Turkey -- that demands and fights to topple the regime.

To weaken both the Kurds and the Islamic opposition, the Assad regime finds the Turkish's state invasion of Afrin by The Turkish army with its jihadist proxies of the FSA as a golden opportunity to achieve the regime's ends. Thus, the Assad regime's

warning that it would shoot down any Turkish warplanes which violated Syrian airspace should be seen as what it is: a blatant lie. Nevertheless, even if this were to materialise, it would be a win-win situation for Russia. Moscow would love the opportunity to receive the excuse to “protect” the Syrian Government, and push Afrin under the control of the Assad regime.

The Assad regime and Russia are both preparing to launch a major offensive in Idlib, the only stronghold left for the armed Islamic opposition in Syria. Since many armed Islamic groups are directly backed by the Turkish state, Russia and the Assad regime seek to make a bargain with the Turkish state. The latter could aid the Assad regime to transfer the Ankara loyalists to fight the Kurds in Afrin, and Idlib would be left for the Assad regime in such an agreement. The vehicle for this bargain is Russia's Sochi congress. In short: Idlib for Afrin. That is why Erdogan says that he has a deal with Russia. The [seizing of the Abu al-Duhur military airport](#) with scores of villages by the Assad regime is already a first goodwill measure inscribed within this silent pact.

And finally, we need to shortly address how Iran benefits from the Afrin invasion. Insofar as Tehran falsely perceives that the Kurdish-led project is an expansion of the US, any threat towards it coincides with its interests in the region. And insofar as Turkish expansion is not mitigated by the Assad regime and Russia, Iran feels anxious about the expansion of sunni fundamentalism as well. But should a rapprochement occur, best evidenced by the joint “de-escalation zones” brokered in Idlib by Iran, Turkey and Russia, then Iran feels that it has more power to intervene in the Syrian conflict. Put simply, Iran benefits from the fight between the Turkish state and the Kurds in Syria.

So we can speak of rapprochement between Russia, the Assad regime, Iran and Turkey. It can also be said that it is the Kurdish-led project in the region which brings these unlikely foes together on the bargaining table. But this too is ephemeral. It does not erase the many contradictions, the differences between various political projects on the ground, and the seven years of conflict between these powers. This shaky rapprochement will break down as soon as interests and battles on the ground change in Syria.

Conclusion

I should make my position clear. The major and regional powers are guided in this war by their capacity to betray, their commitment to achieving their interests, their genocidal and fascist mentality. Kurdish fighters, however, are guided by the principles of self-organization, self-defense, resistance, and freedom.

So let's return to Imrali and the last words we received from Ocalan, after his brother

concluded his final meeting to the outside world: “I am a democrat and revolutionary. I will not surrender to the state or anyone else.” I believe he would say the same thing to the Kurdish Freedom Movement and the people of Afrin, “Be democrats and revolutionaries. Don't surrender to nation states or anyone else.”