

# Whose Free Syrian Army? The Arab opposition resisting Turkey's Afrin attacks

by Mohammed Elnaiem - 07/02/2018 11:51



A peculiar sight indeed, two enemies on the battlefield waving the same flag, but such is the case in Syria.

On the one side Turkish backed rebels (TFSA) drawn from an assortment of Islamist rebel groups, simultaneously wave the Free Syrian flag while escorted by Turkish Armed vehicles. The soldiers, barely coordinated, are happy to alternate between waving their own flags and that of Turkey. For to these young jihadists, Erdogan is a possible contender to the throne of their neo-caliphate fantasy. One battalion within TFSA, the Levant Front famously tortured a formerly allied Kurdish battalion commander for his insistence that an invasion of Afrin would be a red-line that his faction wouldn't cross. His group was subsequently expelled from the coalition.



Then there is the other side, exemplified by the Northern Democratic Brigade. Their

emblem consists of the very same Free Syrian flag held aloft by the Levant Front, only they fall under the Syrian Democratic Forces and have had a strong alliance, both militarily and ideologically, with the Kurdish YPG since 2014. Composed entirely of Arab fighters, many of whom come from Idlib, Aleppo, and various cities in Northern Syria, the North Democratic Brigade is one component of a larger alliance of Arab fighters who have joined forces with the Kurdish led Democratic Federation of Northern Syria. At times, supporters of the brigade can also be found to wave the flag of Abdullah Ocalan, a co-founder of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), who is hated by officials of the Turkish State but adored by many Syrian Kurds.



Both call themselves the "Free Syrian Army", but their vision of what a Free Syria would look like couldn't be so different. One side supports the aspirations of the Turkish State, while the other supports the vision of the very Kurdish movement that was nurtured in its battles against the Turkish State. It is here, where a conflict which began in Turkey, a conflict of two different visions for West Asia, gets transplanted into the Syrian theatre of war. Two groups, with the same flag, stand opposed to each other in Afrin. Where they both agree is in the fact that a post-war Syria ought not to be led by Assad.

Who are the Northern Democratic Brigade?

Formerly known as the al-Qa'qa Brigade from Idlib, the Northern Democratic Brigade were expelled by an alliance that was formed among some FSA groups and the Al-Qaeda linked al-Nusra Front. The al-Nusra Front -- SRF/Hazzm Movement, as the alliance was called, tried in 2014 to establish a caliphate to rival that of the Islamic State. Whereas the al-Qa'qa Brigade was formed with only one purpose, to fight the Assad Regime, groups brandishing the same flag expelled them from their homelands. They retreated to Afrin, with a deep-seated discontent with what they felt was a revolution betrayed. They felt that Turkey and the Gulf States who supported their opponents chose their own geopolitical ambitions over the fate of Syria.

Upon arriving at Afrin, a relatively safe-haven in Syria, they were welcomed by the YPG. An ideological and political friendship, which began out of military circumstance, soon developed between the two forces. In 2015, when they joined the Syrian Democratic Forces, they were branded as apostates by the rebel groups that

expelled them. The very same rebel groups, (like Ahrar al-Sham) who are being supported by Turkey today to attack Afrin.



The Northern Democratic Brigade is extremely critical of Turkish intervention in the Syrian civil war. During the "Euphrates Shield" operation which sought to prevent a corridor between Afrin and other Kurdish held territories, Alexander Alaa', one of the leaders of the brigade, condemned and promised to expel Turkey from Jarablus, explicitly denouncing its "Neo-Ottoman" ambitions. Being opposed to both Turkey and Assad has left them in a unique position in the Syrian Civil War. They are a voice that often gets muffled as they try to reconcile the Kurdish project with dreams of a Syria without the Assad dynasty.

An Arab-Kurdish alliance against the attacks on Afrin

Today, many of the leading figures in the Northern Democratic Brigade have dedicated themselves to the newly formed Syrian National Democratic Alliance (TWDS) in Afrin. A left-wing, multi-ethnic political party, TWDS was formed to build bridges between Arab groups and other minorities, as well as to propose an alternative to the increasingly Islamist outlook held by most opposition groups in Syria.

Speaking to The Region, a representative of the Syrian National Democratic Alliance named Ahmed Shawa condemned what he called a "Turkish invasion" of Afrin.

"As a member of both the Northern Democratic Brigade [composed entirely of Arabs], and the Syrian National Democratic Alliance, we stand hand in hand with all of the peoples' of Afrin and condemn that attacks by Turkey and its allied proxies against the people of Afrin".



Shawa began by insisting that the people of Afrin would be able to resist what he called a "Turkish assault", particularly because of morale and geography. "Afrin is surrounded by high mountainous plains and narrow valleys," he told the Region, "Turkey will not be able to defeat the resistance of Afrin".

But he nevertheless took the opportunity to express his interpretation on how the

battle of Afrin is a battle between two visions of Syria.

"Much like many of these groups, our battalion was formed in response to the barbarism with which Assad responded to peaceful protests. Now look at the historical moment we are in" he told The Region. "These Turkish backed so-called FSA groups are an occupation army, they wave the Turkish flag, they work under the command of Turkey's army, and no matter what they say, they are not a Syrian battalion. They are a Turkish militia."

With 5 representatives in the Democratic Federation of northern Syria, the TWDS proposes a multi-ethnic federation of Syria, built along the lines of political decentralization. Leading members include the Northern Democratic Brigade, the Syrian Alliance for Freedom and Human Rights, and the Syrian Revolutionary Left Current. All groups are explicitly against the administration located in Damascus but believe that the Kurdish-led project of Northern Syria proposes the best path forward for a post-war federal Syria.

"Unlike those Turkish backed forces, we want to construct a state for democratic rights, where all of the peoples of Syria live in harmony, and where all foreign powers including Russia, Turkey and even the United States are excluded from leading the future direction of this country," Shawa told The Region.

Wither the Syrian revolution?

Shawa believes that the Syrian revolution was a legitimate revolution when it started. "It was a national revolution for all Syrians, but then Turkey intervened and pitted Arabs against Kurds," he told The Region.

"Riad al-Assad, Hussein Harmoush, all of these individuals sold themselves to foreign States. The "Free Syrian Army" began to be trained, and funded by Turkey. At this point, many of the rebels who carry the banner of the Free Syrian Army might as well call themselves the "Free Turkish Army", he reluctantly said, "I'm sorry to say this, but at this point it is true."

Turkey, Shawa believes, has imperial ambitions "Just like they annexed Alexandria in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Turkey wants to take the land that has long been a place of coexistence between Arabs and Kurds."

"And just as Assad tried to pit Alevi's against Arabs, so Erdogan would like to take the anti-Kurdish doctrines of Turkey and pit the Kurds of Syria against the Arabs of Syria. But we will get in his way" Shawa smirked.

When asked if there was a comparison to be made between the Turkish attacks on Afrin, and the attacks by Assad on Eastern Ghouta, Shawa held a firm position that we should be wary to compare the two. "Turkey, with its neo-Ottomanist ambitions, its support for extremist groups, its threats to Afrin is committing atrocities. But I am reluctant to compare the two" he said. "The atrocities committed by the Assad Regime, in my view, cannot be compared with any leader that exists today. Not even with the dictator Erdogan. Assad has committed unspeakable crimes", he told The Region.



In many of the images posted on Point Media, an organization allied with the Northern Democratic Brigade, members of the group can be seen carrying flags of the YPG and Abdullah Ocalan flags. On the one side, this has endeared them to many of the Kurds they work with, on the other hand, this has also raised the suspicion by other opposition groups across Syria.

The Northern Democratic Brigade has also received its criticism from opposition members allied to Turkey, precisely because of their alliance with the Autonomous Administration in Afrin, which critics allege is insufficiently anti-Assad.

When asked about these contentions, Shawa provided a brief sigh.

"It is true that there are those who don't believe there can be a common cause among the Kurdish-led project for federalism and democracy and the broader revolutionary dreams of the Syrian people. We, unlike many of our opponents which include the regime and so-called FSA groups, call for a democratic and free Syria, not an Arab Syria. We call for a Syria that is inclusive to all of its components. The Syrian Kurds agree with us on this. Both the opposition and the regime, however, maintain their demand to continue using the name 'Syrian Arab Republic.'"

"What is the alternative that is being proposed by other resistance groups in the south? Except for some groups in Darra, there is no national revolution to speak of today." he said. "Most promising political projects descended into religious extremism".

"Do our critics have a political project, like that in Afrin, which unites all of the peoples' of Syria, and which condemns extremism? We are ready to work with all groups in Southern Syria, and to propose our democratic system to them if they are willing to listen." he said

"We move slowly, we've had difficulties, but we believe that if what we've been able to construct in Afrin gets replicated across Syria, then we have a path forward for the rest of the country. And that's what we want, a pluralist and democratic Syria".

\*All images received from [point media](#).