

Trading territories - Russia's betrayal of Afrin

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Spirits were high, in February 2016, as the autonomous region of northern Syria best known as Rojava, opened its first foreign mission. “This is a historic event”, said Sinam Mohamad, one of Rojava’s top diplomats, as she cut the ceremonial ribbon to a small office in eastern Moscow. The establishment of this permanent representation, followed later that spring by analogues in other European capitals, was part of the democratic confederalist project’s concerted efforts to secure greater legitimacy on the international stage.

While no high-ranking Russian officials attended the opening ceremony, the fact that the Kremlin had greenlighted it, despite vigorous Turkish objections, suggested a Russian readiness to cooperate more closely with Rojava. With Turkey having recently downed a Russian fighter jet in Syrian airspace, and Russian-Turkish relations at an all-time low, Moscow’s friendly gesture towards Ankara’s main enemy

in the Syrian conflict, made political sense.

That the Syrian Kurds and their allies would chose Russia as the first country to establish a diplomatic mission in, however, raised a few eyebrows: Having thus far been primarily backed by Washington, Rojava was now publicly courting Moscow for support. Given that Rojava's position on the ground in Syria had always been ambiguous – neither loyal nor clearly in opposition to the Syrian regime – this flirt with Assad's main backer, signaling that Rojava wasn't in the Americans' pocket, was not inconsistent.

Yet, at the time it was not entirely clear in what geopolitical direction Rojava was headed. Was there a long-term, genuine Russian-Kurdish alliance in the making? The stationing of Russian military personal in the Rojavan enclave of Afrin, in March 2017, seemed to suggest that this was a realistic possibility.

Fast-forward to the present, and things have once again shifted significantly. Turkey's assault on Afrin, launched in late January, has not only meant the opening of a new chapter in the ever-complex Syrian war, but also revealed the limits of Russia's commitment to Rojava.

According to an envoy of the PYD (the Democratic Union Party, which dominates Rojava) in Russia, who spoke to The Region on the condition of anonymity, Russia was acting cynically. "At this point, the Russians' treatment of Rojava has been far more treacherous than that of the Americans" the party representative explained with frustration, over a serving of sweet kanafeh and black tea, at a Syrian restaurant in Moscow. "The Kremlin applies a total double standard. One the one hand the Russians constantly stress Syrian territorial integrity, but on the other hand they permit this Turkish invasion of Afrin," the envoy complained.

That Russia indeed gave its active consent to Turkey's offensive is beyond doubt. Since Russia controls Syrian airspace, its approval would have been required for Turkey's airstrikes against the YPG/YPJ forces defending Afrin. Furthermore, the fact that Russia withdrew its troops from Afrin on the eve of the Turkish attack shows that deal had been reached between Moscow and Ankara, handing the enclave to the Turks.

"They had implied as much", the PYD-representative in Moscow says, explaining what happened behind the scenes. "The Russians had us understand that unless we

ceded Afrin to Assad, they would let the Turks go ahead with their assault.” In his view, Russia’s reasoning behind this decision builds on several calculations. “To begin with, this new front obviously draws resources from both the YPG/YPJ and Turkey. This weakens both parties, and strengthens Assad’s position. At the same time, they are hoping to deepen the split between Turkey and its NATO allies.”

After a pause he adds: “And then there is Ghouta, which Assad and the Russians have been bombing relentlessly”. The rebel-held enclave east of Damascus has recently become a focal point in the Syrian regime’s efforts to regain control over the fractured country. The fact that the regime intensified its attacks on Ghouta at the same time as Turkey advanced on Afrin, is no coincidence to the PYD-envoy. “Russia and Turkey have agreed to refrain from criticizing the other’s actions, effectively trading territories.”

While the PYD-rep is clear-eyed about Russia’s calculated pragmatism toward Rojava, he assures that diplomatic relations are to continue. “We still have a fairly constructive dialogue, regularly discussing matters on a deputy-ministerial level”, he explains. “Russia’s current alliance with Turkey is tactical, rather than strategic,” he adds, hinting that we may not yet have seen the last shifting of loyalties in the quagmire that is the Syrian civil war.