Turkey threatens new invasion of Northern Syria

by Meghan Bodette - 12/12/2018 14:53

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said that preparations were underway for an invasion of SDF-held areas east of the Euphrates River in Northern Syria, in a speech given this morning at the Turkish Defense Industry Summit.

“We are determined to turn the east of the Euphrates into a peaceful and livable place for its true owners just like the other areas we have made secure in Syria," Erdogan said, alluding to Turkey-occupied areas in Afrin and Euphrates Shield zones— both of which face serious stability and security challenges.

Fighting between rival militia groups, looting, theft, and corruption, kidnappings and arbitrary detentions, and violence against women are endemic in areas controlled by the Turkish military and its various Syrian proxy forces. The invasion of Afrin alone displaced hundreds of thousands of people, destroyed the region's economic infrastructure, and terrorized the remaining population. Local sources claim that as many as 2,500 individuals have been kidnapped by militia members. The Kurdish
language and culture are prohibited in public life, and religious sites belonging to the city's Christian and Yazidi minorities have been destroyed.

The threats come as the SDF close in on the final ISIS pocket in Hajin. That operation had been paused in late October due to an earlier round of Turkish threats and cross-border shelling, but resumed in early November.

Erdogan denied the existence of the ISIS pocket in his speech, claiming that "there is no longer any such threat as Daesh in Syria. We know this pretext is a stalling tactic. We also know well by whom the Daesh elements in the region are fed, trained and kept ready to be used when necessary."

The United States Department of Defense reported that the invasion of Afrin, as well as general instability in Turkey-occupied areas, hindered the fight against ISIS and allowed the terror group to gain strength. Turkey's support for ISIS throughout the battle of Kobani in 2014 and 2015 was also well-documented, with the Turkish military taking no action against ISIS positions visible from Turkish territory.

Erdogan claimed that the operation would not target U.S. military personnel, nor Arab SDF—only what he termed "Kurdish terrorists." He also claimed that he would return areas of northeast Syria to their "true owners," the same statement made to justify large-scale ethnic cleansing in Afrin. The United States has observation posts along the Syrian border, and the Manbij Military Council, which Turkey has threatened repeatedly and which could be the target of a potential Turkish attack, is comprised mostly of local Arabs.

The existing U.S.-Turkey agreement on Manbij includes joint patrols around the city, which have already begun. Turkish authorities have demanded greater control of the area, claiming that Kurdish YPG forces—who withdrew earlier this year—are still present.

An attack on Manbij or other areas east of the Euphrates, were it to occur, would have to take place with U.S. approval. U.S. Syria envoy James Jeffrey, who recently visited Turkey, is seen as sympathetic to Turkish interests in the country, repeating Turkish rhetoric on links between Syria's Kurds and the PKK and characterizing U.S. support for the SDF as "temporary" and "tactical."