

TURKISH INTERVENTION IN SYRIA AND GEOSTRATEGIC IMPLICATIONS ON THE EUROPEAN UNION

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Abstract: *Operation "Peace Spring" is an event of major importance in understanding the relationship between Turkey and Syria, the future relations between the two states and the European and international community. Turkey's design of a security zone has created stability for the state in question and destabilized the entire region at the societal level. Thus, the instability generated is a vulnerability for European and international security, and can be exploited by countries that oppose the democratization process or countries that have political and financial interests in that area. In today's society, disinformation is a real risk, being a measure implemented by many state and non-state actors in order to achieve security objectives. The phenomenon is also present in the current case study, playing an important role in the evolution of regional instability. The implications for the European Union security stem from soft-power influences in the collective minds of imperialist states that threaten the continent, the continued disinformation of policymakers, and the influence of decision-making in democratic states. The Operation set a precedent for the current military conflicts in the vicinity of Romania, being visible the intention of the Russian Federation to create a "safety zone", following the recent expansion of democratic and societal values.*

Keywords: *operation "Peace Spring"; Turkey; regional instability; security zone; democratization process; European Union.*

Introduction

More than two years have passed since Turkey began Operation "Peace Spring" in northern Syria to clear Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), People's Defense Units (YPG) and Daesh terrorists from its southern border. Ankara launched the Operation with the Syrian National Army to open up a corridor in Syria's north and form a 30-kilometers wide safety zone to resettle millions of Syrian refugees. The operation was in line with the right of self-defense under international law and targeted the terror groups which threatened Turkey's security, territorial integrity and the Syrian people. The governmental forces, besides clearing out 5000 square kilometers from neighboring zones, have also allocated funds for repairing schools, hospitals and distributing aid, to help local Syrians resume a normal life.

Since the operation ended, thousands of Syrians have returned home to the North of Syria. Most of the civilians, though, chose to return to Tell Abyad, a town in northern Syria, because they felt they could not abandon their country and families. These suburbs regions include the Augen village, which now serves as a temporary Daesh headquarters. Nevertheless, that did not stop Syrians from coming back, as the fear of losing their families to the Daesh terrorist organization is a shared feeling amongst them. In the last 3 years, the People's Defense Units (YPG), now financially supported by Daesh, have been carrying out car bomb terrorist attacks, to regain the lost Kurdish territory.

This scientific research used a qualitative approach (case study) to identify present and future consequences for the European security residing from the early on the evolution of anti-democratic actions led by non-state actors, such as the creation of insurgent groups, even though they are fighting for societal security goals regarding their representatives' well-being.

The objective of the paper is to maximize awareness on this issue, especially at the macro and European level, as in the civil society indicators regarding increasingly high levels

of panic have been in-sourced from unverified and propagandistic sources, mainly through the mass-media.

Structurally, the current article is organized in 3 chapters, *Historical analysis of the conflict*, *Current outlook*, and *Geostrategic implications on the European Union*, being concluded by presenting the vulnerabilities caused by the conflict in the region to European and international security. The strategy by which the European Union protects democratic values in Europe is also presented.

1. Historical analysis of the conflict

Both Turkey and Syria have national interests in the stability of the Middle East, the fight against terrorism and extremism, the provision of energy flows, and the maintenance of fruitful relations with Europe. However, relations between Turkey and Syria have been strained due to historic territorial disputes, including Turkey's annexation of Hatay province in 1939, the conflict over control of the Tigris and Euphrates watersheds, Turkey's close relations with the West in general, and with Israel in particular and Syria's support for the PKK in the 1980s and 1990s. Both countries were also on the opposite side in the Cold War. Turkey was a founding member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, and Syria was the hidden ally of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), as evidenced by Russia's intervention in favor of Syria in Operation "Peace Spring" (Peerzada 2015, 202-224).

In 1990, Turkish policy towards Syria was defined by the threat to the national security of Syrian support for the PKK. However, the 1998 expulsion of Abdullah Ocalan from Syria was a turning point in bilateral relations. Since then, the bilateral relationship has shown some improvement. Turkey has developed broad relations with Syria over the past decade. The new relationship was based on Turkey's self-declared "zero neighbor problems" policy (Stansfield and Shareef 2017, 325).

Prior to the development of the more recent "Peace Spring" Operation, alongside the Turkish-Syrian border another took place between August 2016 and March 2017, called "Euphrates Shield".

The start of it constituted the SDF movements, led by Kurdish groups, more specifically the liberation of the Manbij region from Daesh control. Left with two major advancing points to go, Al-Bab and Al-Rai, Daesh proceeded to take control Al-Bab. Moreover, the military council of Jarabulus began cooperating with SDF commanders, planning a liberation. The Turkish forces were not pleased with having the terrorist organization's influence extending towards the West of the Euphrates, so they began to move at the river line.

In response, Daesh, which had announced its intention to capture that same region, fired mortar shells into the Khamis city border, at the time that point being the resupply route of the Turkish artillery and armored support. The city was evacuated of civilians and a major FSD-Turkish military rally began, in preparation for the "Euphrates Shield" military operation. Its objective was to clear Jarabulus of Daesh forces and deter the *Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat / Democratic Union Party (PYD)*¹, which operated via their military wing, the *People's Protection Units (YPG)*. In the assault, Ankara fired artillery near the El Rey province to help the partner groups. Among these main actors involved in the operation, Iran also offered their support towards Turkey by bombing the temporary headquarters of Daesh.

Ever since then, a solution arose – the realization of a buffer zone in northern Syria, which would satisfy all of Turkey's security needs. The arguments for these are as follows: a safe zone would keep at bay the most urgent defense risks regarding the Kurdish PYD group

¹ The PYD was established as a Syrian branch of the Kurdistan Workers Party in 2003 and was regarded as a terrorist organization at the time, maintaining its status in current times.

advancement; the country will regain border control and deny Daesh the access to oil resources, making the organization less likely to survive²; the buffer zone could ensure a forward operation base for the Free Syrian Army with a continued supply line from Turkey and ultimately it could also offer an alternative to refugees wanting to remain in Syria but away from the war zone.

In March 2017, the end of the “Euphrates Shield” Operation took place, when Daesh agreed to surrender the villages West of Manbij to the Syrian government.

Turkey is involved in this conflict for two reasons: first, there is a large influx of refugees into Turkey, and second, there is the Kurdish dimension of the crisis, represented by the PKK, a terrorist organization (Australian Government 2015). Some authors (International Crisis Group 2012, 27) say that the Kurdish people could use the civil war as an opportunity to demand an autonomous or even sovereign Kurdish region in Syria. The crisis has reopened the never-ending Kurdish issue.

Geostrategically, Turkey has several interests at stake in Syria (Peerzada 2015, 202-224).

One of them is Turkey's aspirations to become a great power - not just in the Middle East. Since 1989, Turkey has been involved in the Black Sea, the Balkans, the Caucasus and Central Asia. The United States-led invasion of Iraq has allowed Turkey to engage actively with its neighbors. During the 2001 uprising in Syria, Turkey tested the limits of its power and its ability to lead the demand for revolution - trying to become the central power in the region. However, contrary to Turkey's expectations, the state has met with strong resistance in Syria. Politics has failed to achieve its goal (Robins 2003, 131-154).

Another interest for the Turkish state is the preservation of territorial integrity. The Kurds, an ethnic group that is widespread in Iraq, Turkey, Iran and Syria, have long aspired to have their state, and the Turkish state's security mentality reflects a deep fear of dismemberment. Turkey is following the conflict closely, with the government concerned about the spread of cross-border effects, as the Syrian conflict has had a direct impact on the Kurdish issue in Turkey.

The conflict in Syria has drawn attention to the Kurdish minority in Syria - they are now more vocal than ever and the local population fears that in the near future they could pronounce autonomy or even independence (Cebeci and Kadir 2012, 133-176). Turkey's Kurdish problem is increasingly challenging the state internally and has serious regional implications that are destabilizing it.

The Syrian humanitarian crisis is also affecting the region's civilian population, especially women and children. As a result, several refugees cross the Syrian border into neighboring countries daily. The humanitarian problem continues to worsen as violence intensifies and fighting continues in the region. In the last five years of the conflict, up to 220,000 people have been killed, 7.6 million displaced, 12.8 million injured. The total number of Syrians registered in Turkey was 1,757,500, with another 255,562 Syrian refugees living in shelters in 10 provinces (Ifantis 2013, 56-72).

Since Turkey annexed Hatay province in 1939, Syria has had a major problem in the area – Turkey (Bilgin and Sarihan 2013, 130-189). From a Turkish perspective, state security depends on keeping Syria in check, especially after 1970, due to the existence of the PKK terrorist group. After the death of former PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan, Turkey has developed better regional relations, but the long line of deaths from the conflict between the two countries has left deep marks not only on Syrian bodies but also on history – Syria will not forget (Brannen 2008, 2-20).

² Daesh had been known throughout its history as involving itself in the oil trade, in order to finance their terrorist activities.

Although the political factor has a very big impact, the effects on the local population in the region are another decisive factor in ending this conflict, especially since the refugee problem would continue to grow. The generated humanitarian crisis, which has received more media attention recently, has existed and continues to exist, as a result of this conflict which, although it has taken a break, shows no signs of stopping.

2. Current outlook

On October 9, 2019, Turkey launched a military operation in northern Syria (Andreiana 2019), targeting Kurdish insurgent groups along the common border, after the United States withdrew its troops two days earlier. To provide a context for this conflict - on the border between Turkey and Syria, for a few weeks, the USA and Turkey have been trying to create a "security zone". Under this security mechanism, although the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) has agreed to withdraw its fortifications, Turkey has been accused of delays.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who considers members of the People's Defense Units (YPG) to be terrorists, has said he wants to eliminate threats against his country. His goal was to build a 32-kilometer security zone in northern Syria by removing Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) members from the area, where he planned to take refugees to Turkish territory (Tănase 2019).

The FDS leader "froze" the operations against Daesh on the day of the Turkish intervention. "We have frozen all our activities against Daesh." Just 2 days later, a Daesh-linked attack on Qamichli killed 6 people (Gemici 2019).



Figure no. 4. Car bomb near church in Syria (Catholic News Agency 2019, 46-87)

Following these events, several countries decided to stop selling weapons to Turkey, including Germany, the Netherlands and France (Dorman and Kaufman 2010, 33-69).

Following a telephone conversation with the Turkish president on October 13, Donald Trump said the situation had been managed. He did not agree to the launch of the operation, according to his statement on October 16. He also added that he did not want US troops to be "in the wrong path" (Bursa 2019).

As the Operation continued, SDF released prisoners from Daesh to stop Turkey's attempts to secure the area or be unable to control those prisons simultaneously as the armed attack. A Syrian prison with 800 members of Daesh, formerly under SDF control, is now empty (Hamit 2019).

On October 15, with the intervention of Russian forces, the city of Minbej was occupied by the SDF (Ivaz 2019). Several days later, the Turkish army already controlled half of Ras al-Ain, according to a report issued by the United Nations Population Fund

(2019:32). According to the same report, the Turkish offensive has killed at least 72 people among Syrian civilians and 203 killed among SDF fighters since October 9, 2019.

On October 22, 2019, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan paid a visit to Russia to negotiate with Vladimir Putin to resolve the conflict (Gauthier-Villars 2019). After 6 hours and 20 minutes on the same day, Turkish military operations in Syria were suspended.

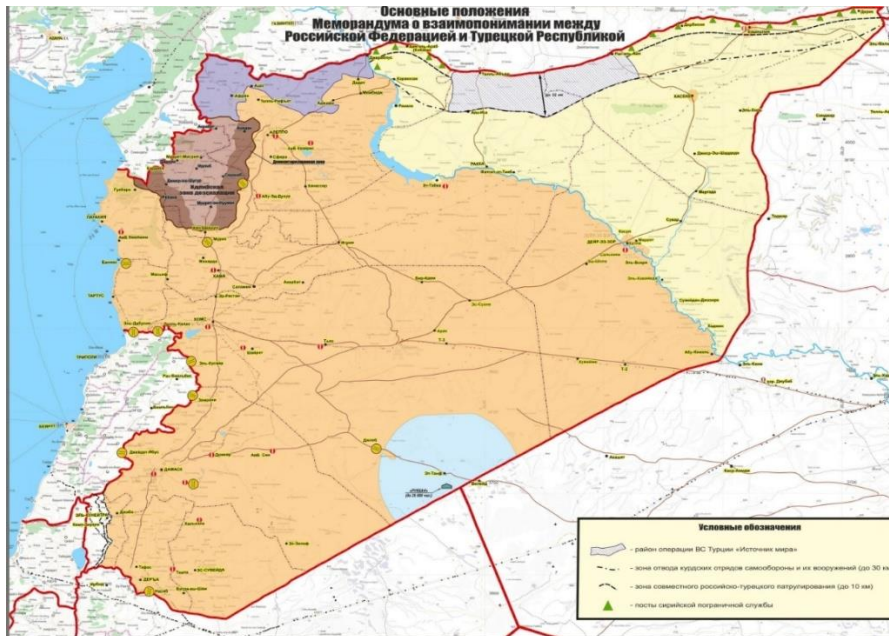


Figure no. 4. The intense fight-zones alongside the Turkish-Syrian border during the “Peace Spring” Operation (Hrolenko 2019)

The final memorandum signed between Turkey and the Russian Federation contains 10 points and sets out a mechanism for the Russian-Turkish operation in northern Syria. Until the armistice, Turkish troops took control of 160 localities and 2,200 square kilometers of Syrian territory (Digi 24 2019).

For achieving the stated research objectives, I will mention the events following the operation, carried out by the Turkish state. Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has decided to send troops to Libya due to internal instability in the African country (Blacknews 2019, 40-74).

Large-scale military clashes have been taking place on the outskirts of the Libyan capital for several months between the Libyan National Army paramilitary group, led by Marshal Khalifa Haftar, and the troops of the National Union government led by Fayeza aS-Sarraj, recognized by the international community (Middle East Eye 2017).

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has said that Ankara has begun transporting military units to Libya to support the internationally recognized Government of Libya (GNA). The statement came a few days after Turkey's parliament approved the deployment of troops in Libya (Crisis Group 2019), following a request for military support from the GNA, led by Fayeza aS-Sarraj.

Erdoğan has announced since the beginning of December 2019 that he intends to support the government in Tripoli, which has created tensions in the region. Marshal Khalifa Belqasim Haftar, the commander of the Tobruk-based Libyan National Army (LNA), fighting against the Tripoli government, is backed by countries such as Russia, Egypt and the United Arab Emirates (Dogan 2012, 210-224).

The Turkish President was forced to accept Putin's conditions for Russia to satisfy its national interests to exist as a power in Syria through a permanent military presence. This did not satisfy the President of Turkey, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, which led him to intervene in the

Libyan conflict as a supporter of the Tripoli government, in the opposite position to the Russian Federation, which supports Marshal Haftar (Necula 2019).

3. Geostrategic implications on the European Union

After seven years of conflict, one of the worst humanitarian crises the world has ever experienced has been delayed in Syria (European Commission 2011, 24). The impact of the conflict is increasingly destabilizing in the region, by moving the population in the area, spreading economic problems and terrorism, but also straining the political situation in the region to the extreme.

The EU continues to work to end the Syrian conflict. The Union believes in a political solution, in line with the 2012 Geneva Communiqué and United Nations Security Council Resolution no. 2254. This will end the war and ensure the long-term stability of Syria and the region (The European External Action Service 2018).



Figure no. 4. European Union strategy for Syria (European Commission 2019)

The EU is involved in resolving the conflict by implementing the following measures (The European External Action Service 2018):

- Saving lives by assisting the humanitarian needs of Syrians in the region;
- Supporting the political opposition to promote a meaningful and inclusive transition;
- Helping the resilience of Syrian society and refugees in the region;
- Strengthen civilian organizations in Syria to promote human rights and democracy;
- Involvement in national justice processes regarding war crimes;
- Promoting UN Syrian negotiations to legitimize the authenticity of the political transition.

The European Union will fully support the reconstruction of Syria after the implementation of an inclusive and genuine political transition, negotiated by the Syrian parties³.

³ Based on the United Nations Security Council Resolution no. 2254 and the 2012 Geneva Communiqué.

Conclusions

The Turkish president, following talks in Sochi with the Russian president, ended his entry into Syrian territory. An important question is, "Why now?" Russia's involvement in the conflict complicates matters for Recep Erdoğan, who chose to end Operation "Peace Spring" once Turkey is victorious. However, the Russian forces intervened in favor of the Syrians and reclaimed all territories, bringing unwanted chaos in addition to the existing aftermath.

During negotiations, the Turkish President refused to end the "Peace Spring" operation, yet the Russian Federation managed to turn the situation around, suspending the crisis as much as possible in the region. Russia managed to negotiate the conditions that satisfy their national security interests, orienting their capabilities towards Libya, in a joint Russian-Turkish military operation. The exercise of military operations in Libya will not only affect Turkey's relationship with the North Africa region but may also lead to the exclusion of the Turkish state from NATO, mainly since this issue has been raised before.

History repeats itself, and often history speaks most clearly. That is why the history of this Turkish-Syrian conflict is of particular importance - to prevent future conflicts and the emergence of totalitarian, undesirable regimes at the European and international level, which would destabilize international relations and social security for the countries involved at a regional level.

Despite the conflict not being as actual as others, from a humanitarian crisis point of view, if no action is taken in the near future to calm the situation in the Turkish-Syrian region, there is a risk of new terrorist organizations or the strengthening of existing ones.

Also, the SDF fighters who fought until October, 2019 with Daesh ceased their anti-terrorist activity, and although this organization was taken out of play in Iraq on February 27, 2017, according to the statement of the Prime Minister of Iraq, Haider al-Abadi (France 24 2017, 2), two days after the start of Operation "Peace Spring", an attack was carried out by a terrorist cell belonging to Daesh in Syria - this could mean a regional regrouping for the terrorist organization. Daesh will take advantage of the lack of initiative from the SDF and regain its power, which will further destabilize the region.

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