

Operation Olive Branch: A Political – Military Assessment

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Executive Summary

➤➤ Operation Olive Branch's air campaign, especially at its outset, marked the highest sortie– rates and the most intensive operational tempo in Turkey's cross–border military record in the last decade. As reported by the Turkish General Staff, on the very first day of the intervention, the air force assigned 72 combat aircraft which is tantamount to roughly 25% of the total F–16 variants and the F–4 2020s in the inventory.¹ At the time of writing, about %10 of the fighter arsenal have been flying combat missions over Afrin. Despite the pilot–to–cockpit ratio problems, so far, the Turkish Air Force is performing decisively.

➤➤ The underlying reason of the abovementioned heavy bombardment strategy is to gain rapid dominance for the follow–on land operations. The use of high–precision stand–off munitions against the adversary's subterranean warfare / tunnel capabilities reflects the effective internalization of the lessons–learned obtained from Operation Euphrates Shield. In addition, Ankara may also opt for using non–kinetic, psychological effects of its airpower to encourage desertions at the YPG ranks.

➤➤ From a military standpoint, Operation Olive Branch's ground offensive will probably consist of two main phases with radically different characteristics. A shift in the determining parameters of the conflict would inevitably bring about changes in the force generation.

➤➤ The ongoing initial phase could be best depicted as a mountain warfare effort –at around 1,000m elevation harsh terrain– under hybrid conditions. Successfully capturing the key high–ground of Mount Bursaya marks an important achievement in this respect. Should Ankara firmly pursue

the already declared objective of clearing the entire Afrin province from PKK terrorist organization's offshoots, then the second ground phase has to take place in the form of urban warfare. Considering the al–Bab offensive during the Euphrates Shield, Turkish military planners should attach utmost importance to tunnel and trench complexes, improvised explosive devices, and anti–tank guided missiles (ATGMs).

➤➤ An alternative option to fighting a risky urban warfare is to lay siege on Afrin's town center, and force the YPG militants to the leave. Although siege warfare is legal in terms of the law of armed conflict, such a risk–averse concept could only succeed when coupled with very effective information warfare, strategic communications and diplomacy efforts. Besides, YPG will probably attempt to use human–shield and forcibly paramilitarize the local population, coupled with a global propaganda campaign. Thus, evacuation of civilians from the area of operations should be the utmost priority.

➤➤ As the Olive Branch operation further unfolds, safeguarding the rear area against the adversary's infiltrations will matter as the most important aspect of force protection. Ankara has already hinted at the possibilities of advancing some 30km. Establishing and protecting supply lines through such depth, and more importantly in hostile territory, could be challenging.

➤➤ YPG, an armed group with irrevocable organic ties with PKK terrorist organization, has gained unprecedented military and paramilitary capabilities in the course of the Syrian Civil War. If unchecked, YPG could well gain ad-

¹ Disregarding the combat–readiness levels of the platforms. The ratio could be even higher when evaluated for only combat–ready F–16 variants and F–4 2020s.

vanced hybrid warfare capabilities –for example, a formidable rocket arsenal coupled with low-to-medium altitude air defenses– within a decade. Such a boost in conventional and unconventional warfighting capacity would be comparable to the Lebanese Hezbollah in the Middle East. In this respect, the Olive Branch was considered by Turkish policymakers to be a necessary effort for Turkey’s national security.

➤ US policy circles did not fully assess that YPG issue goes well beyond Turkey’s involvement in the Syrian Civil War, and remains an existential aspect of national security. In fact, Ankara’s terrorism problem stemming from the PKK threat has always had a Syria dimension, even decades before the civil war erupted. The Hafez Assad regime openly harbored and used the terrorist organization as a proxy war tool against Turkey. Syrian Kurdish militants have traditionally assumed critical positions in the so called armed–wing of PKK. And the Ba’ath regime’s notorious Muhabarat had played a catalyst role in the violent terror campaign of the 1980s and the 1990s that claimed thousands of lives. The Hafez Assad regime was forced to put an end to sponsoring terrorism against Ankara only after a robust gunboat diplomacy championed by Turkey’s late president, Suleyman Demirel, in 1998.

➤ Politically, Ankara aims to achieve a number of different policy objectives with the Olive Branch operation. The first aim is domestic. The US support to the PYD, which culminated with the ultimately retracted statement of building up a 30.000 strong border guard YPG unit, has led to a public pressure at home for a more severe Turkish response to address the increasingly palpable security challenges linked to the expansion of the PYD influence in northern Syria.

➤ The second aim is to position Turkey as a strong and inevitable actor of the Syrian conundrum. The hard power–backed approach aims to enhance Turkey’s role in the slated negotiations on Syria’s future order where Turkey, having dropped the regime change agenda, now primarily aims to constrain the territorial ambitions of the Syrian Kurds.

➤ A third component relates to deterrence. With this show of force, Turkey aims to deter the US, its NATO Ally,

and to make it desist from backing the PYD.

➤ The third phase of the operation is slated to target Manbij, the US controlled region west of the Euphrates. Obviously, this expanded scope would raise the possibility of direct confrontation with the US forces positioned in and around the Manbij region for the training of and support to the YPG. Ankara’s hope will be to convince the US to remove its troops from Manbij, which would also signal the weakening commitment to the YPG.

➤ The risk is for US policy makers deciding to test Ankara’s resolve. Because, indeed, such as scenario would open the way to the undesired and unique case of two NATO Allies involved in military conflict against each other. Such an outcome would not only have long term consequences for the bilateral relationship but would also severely weaken NATO cohesion and therefore impact overall transatlantic security.

➤ Against this backdrop, it becomes increasingly urgent to re-establish a reliable path to US-Turkey convergence.

➤ Future efforts will be handicapped by the dysfunctionality that have come to characterize this important relationship. The military–to–military ties have become fraught with a lack of trust. The diplomatic bureaucracy have lost their traditional weight, both in Ankara and in Washington, under a governance marked by personal initiative. But given the acuity of the crisis and their implications, a common US – Turkey agenda needs to be fostered.

➤ The humanitarian angle could provide for such an opportunity. The imminent operation targeting Afrin town raises the prospect of either a military siege or urban warfare with enormous risks for the civilian population, including the risk of being used as human–shield by the YPG militants or being forced to paramilitary roles. Turkey and the US should give priority to a humanitarian corridor that would allow the civilians to safely leave the theater of conflict towards US controlled Manbij, and even, to further east. The success of this collaborative approach could then be used as stepping stone towards a sounder framework of dialogue that could then tackle the deeper issues affecting this key bilateral relationship.

INTRODUCTION

On January 20, 2018, Ankara launched Operation Olive Branch into Afrin, northwestern Syria. The primary objective of the campaign is to repel the Democratic Union Party (PYD)—the Syrian offshoot of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) terrorist organization—and its armed-wing, People's Protection Units (YPG), from Turkey's immediate doorstep. The Turkish leadership's decision came right after Washington hinted at its intentions to form a 30,000 border guard centered on Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) which is largely manned by YPG militants.

In recent years, the arms transfers to YPG, within the framework of anti – ISIS operations, have already made Turkey perceive a serious threat to its national security. Thus, the prospects of contemporary military aid to a group with irrevocable ties with PKK, which is also designated as a terrorist organization by the US, provoked an outcry in Ankara.

Operation Olive Branch came after high-level security and defense meetings between Turkish and Russian officials. Despite the threats from the Syrian Ba'ath regime to shoot down Turkish platforms, the Russian military contingent in Syria controls the country's airspace in western provinces and the capital Damascus. Thus, the Kremlin's green light for the Afrin campaign was enough to sideline Assad's air defense units.

At the time of writing, Ankara's already declared intentions of extending the campaign to Manbij, where the US personnel is also deployed, sets the stage for yet another crisis in the fluctuating Turkish – American relations. Above all, the burgeoning de facto administration of PKK terrorist

organization's offshoots in northern Syria, their attempts to change the demographics of formerly Arab and Turkmen populated provinces, as well as the flow of tactically game-changer weapons to YPG militants are each tantamount to a nightmare for the Turkish strategic community. Simply put, within a decade, YPG's military and paramilitary capabilities could rise to a whole new level that would be comparable to the Lebanese Hezbollah.

The Olive Branch commenced with an overwhelming airpower along with a land incursion into the mountainous belt surrounding Afrin's urbanized center. According to the official reports, Turkey dispatched 72 combat aircraft for the overture of the campaign, an impressive force generation which refers to one-fourth of the Turkish Air Force's principal fighter arsenal composed of F-16 variants and F-4 2020s. Militarily, such an all-out airstrike marked an impressive success since it was conducted amidst the problematic pilot-to-cockpit ratio debates concerning the combat-readiness of the Turkish Air Force.

At the 9th day of the campaign, on January 29, 2018, the Turkish General Staff reported that 597 terrorists were eliminated.²

This report will firstly shed light on the high operational tempo of the Olive Branch. Subsequently, the land incursion phases will be assessed concerning various scenarios and possible outcomes including the political-military context of laying a prolonged siege on the urbanized center of Afrin. Finally, the report will highlight its findings and policy recommendations.

² <https://twitter.com/tskgnkur?lang=en>, Accessed on : Jan. 29, 2018.

THE OPERATIONAL DIMENSION

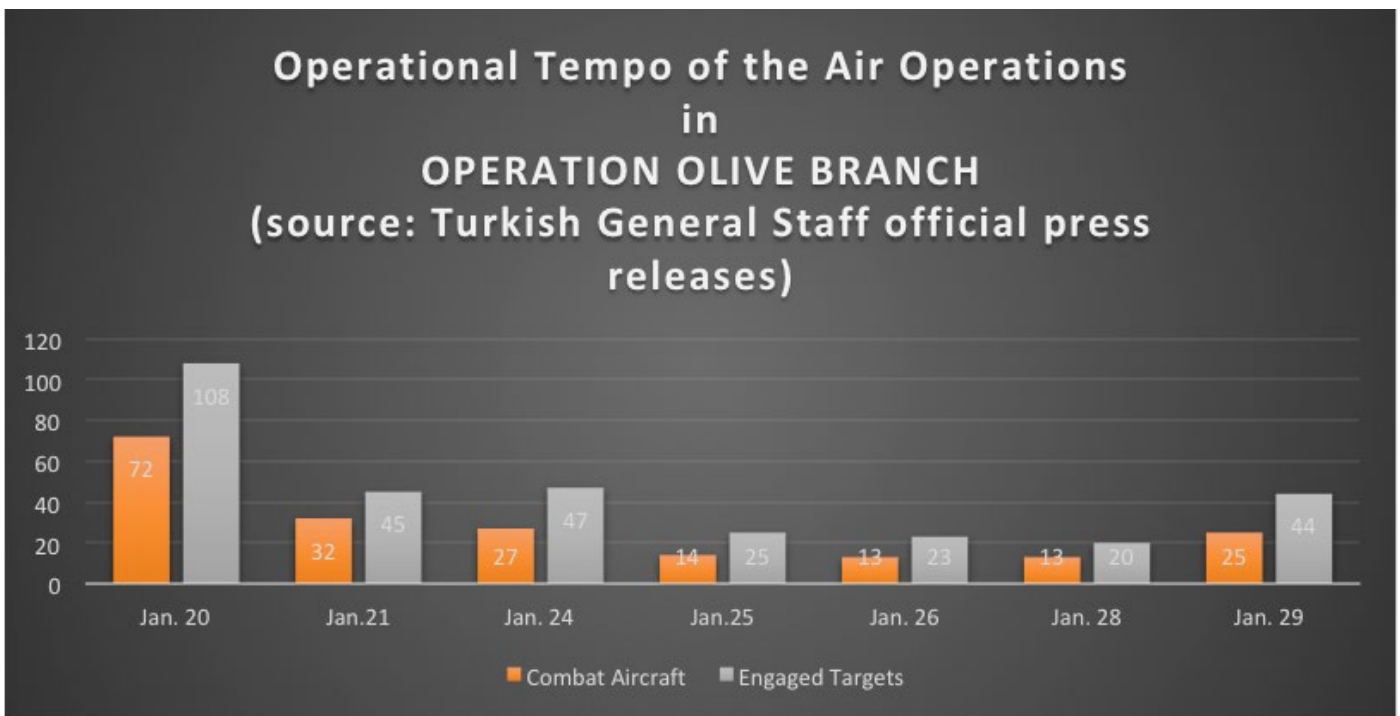
Overwhelming Operational Tempo: 1/4 Of The Turkish Air Force On Afrin Skies

The most notable characteristic of Operation Olive Branch remains the intensive tempo and high sortie-rates conducted by the Turkish Air Force at the very outset of the campaign. The Turkish General Staff officially announced that 72 combat aircraft struck 108 targets (of 113³) in 7 sectors at the overture of the operation. This is probably the highest level in Turkey's recent cross-border efforts. Operation Euphrates Shield, for example, commenced predominantly by artillery fire (294 rounds on 81 targets reported by the Turkish press⁴) while the initial air component was composed of reinforced combat air patrols for striking mobile, pop-up and time-sensitive targets.⁵

As a comparative reference regarding sortie-rates and target

set, during the Israeli Air Force's (IAF) engagement with the Lebanese Hezbollah back in 2006, which was commanded by the first airman chief of the IDF, General Dan Halutz, the IAF had struck 7,000 targets in 34 days (205 targets average per day) with 352 combat sorties daily.⁶

Notably, a very high proportion of the air force participated in the opening bombardment of the Olive Branch. According to official reports, there is a total of 289 F-16 variants and F-4 2020s in the Turkish Air Force's inventory (with slight difference to open-source data, and disregarding the combat – readiness levels of platforms).⁷ Thus, on the very first day of the Afrin campaign, Turkey flew nearly one-fourth of its entire fighter aircraft arsenal.



³ Anadolu Agency, <http://aa.com.tr/tr/gunun-basliklari/afrinde-teror-orgutu-pyd-pkk-hedeflerinden-108i-vuruldu/1036861>, Accessed on : Jan. 23, 2018.

⁴ Hurriyet, <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/son-dakika-haberi-cerablus-operasyonunda-son-durum-40207104>, Accessed on : Jan. 23, 2018.

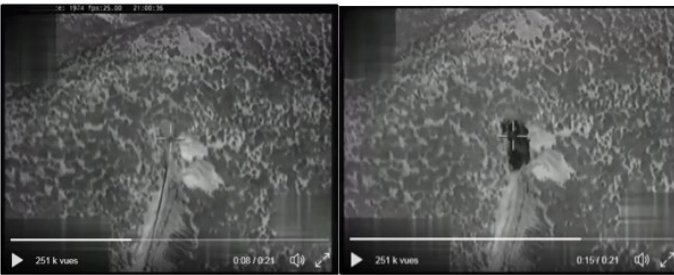
⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Benjamin, S. Lambeth, *Air Operations in Israel's War Against Hezbollah: Learning from Lebanon and Getting It Right in Gaza*, RAND, 2011, pp.vii – viii.

⁷ The Turkish Air Force official website, https://www.hvkk.tsk.tr/tr-tr/T%C3%BCrkiye_Hava_Kuvvetleri/Hakk%C4%B1m%C4%B1zda/G%C3%BCn%C3%BCm%C3%BCz_Hava_Kuvvetleri/Envanterdeki_U%C3%A7aklar, Accessed on: Jan. 24, 2018. While other open-source military surveys report negligible differences, this report prefers taking the official declaration into consideration.

This difference between the Euphrates Shield and the Olive Branch with regards to the use of airpower at the operational level largely emanates from three reasons:

Firstly, having digested the lessons-learned from the Euphrates Shield, Turkish defense planners now pay utmost attention to eliminate the adversary's subterranean / tunnel warfare capabilities with high-precision smart munitions in the very beginning of the conflict. In this respect, on January 20, 2018, the Turkish Military disseminated the visuals of an air-ground standoff missile (probably an AGM-142 / Popeye) destroying an underground munitions depot belonging to YPG.⁸

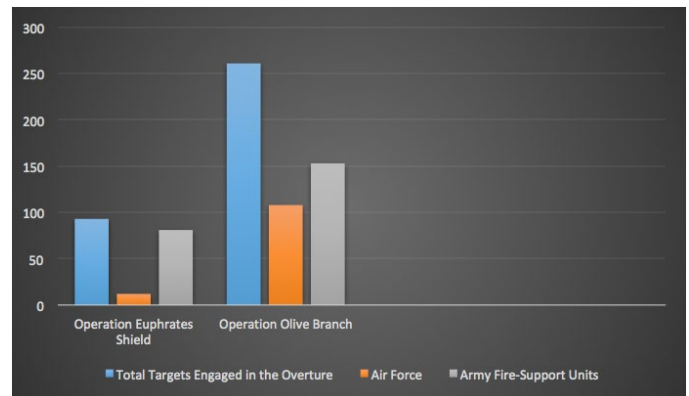


Visual 1 and 2 showing the high – precision standoff missile's approach to its target and the impact point.⁹

Secondly Ankara probably opts for softening the YPG defenses decisively to ensure maximum armor survivability and force protection for the land forces in the hybrid battlespace of Syria. In this regard, a comparative assessment between the overtures of Operation Euphrates Shield and Operation Olive Branch may give a hint.

On the one hand, at the outset of the Euphrates Shield, 12 targets were engaged by the Turkish Air Force while the Army's land-based fire-support units destroyed 81 targets.¹⁰ On the other hand, the opening phase of the Olive Branch witnessed 108 targets eliminated by the Turkish Air Force,¹¹ and the Army's land-based fire-support units engaged 153 targets.¹² All in all, while the Euphrates Shield kicked-off with an initial set of 93, the Olive Branch raised the bar by engaging 261 targets.

And thirdly, this paper anticipates that Ankara might also



Graph showing the Rapid Dominance concept adopted by Operation Olive Branch

be opting for utilizing the psychological warfare effects of employing intensive airpower. In military theory, apart from the kinetic and direct effects, namely destruction of the targets, airpower could also deliver non-kinetic and psychological results by striking fear into the adversary's formations. Especially in counterinsurgency and counterterrorism missions, an advanced air force's ability to "operate beyond the insurgent's visual and acoustic range", and to deliver mass destruction leads to panic and motivational collapse among the enemy ranks.¹³ Simply put, non-state armed groups are unable to respond the "effects of kinetic airpower with force on force application",¹⁴ especially above the effective altitudes of MANPADS. This clear superiority naturally brings about secondary, non-kinetic advantages to the state actor.

At the outset of the Afrin campaign, quoting Prime Minister Binali Yildirim, Turkish press sources reported that there could be 8,000 to 10,000 YPG militants in Afrin.¹⁵ Without a doubt, such a force concentration would be extremely dangerous in narrow and urbanized terrain, and especially under ambiguous hybrid warfare conditions concealed with 'fog of war'. The most effective way out for Turkey is to encourage desertions and to cause collapse of discipline among the YPG / PKK ranks. Thus, most probably, Turkish military planners are intentionally keeping the intensity and tempo of the air-ground operations high to hit the adversary's motivation and will to fight.

⁸ <https://twitter.com/tskgknur?lang=en>, Accessed on : Jan. 23, 2018.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Al Jazeera Turk, <http://www.aljazeera.com.tr/haber/cerablusa-firat-kalkani-harekati>, Accessed on: Jan. 26, 2018.

¹¹ Turkish General Staff, Press Release, Jan. 20, http://www.tsk.tr/BasinFaaliyetleri/BA_48, Accessed on: Jan. 26, 2018.

¹² Turkish General Staff, Press Release Jan. 21, http://www.tsk.tr/BasinFaaliyetleri/BA_49, Accessed on: Jan. 26, 2018.

¹³ Eugene, L. McFeely, Balancing Kinetic Effects of Airpower with Counterinsurgency Objectives in Afghanistan, U.S. Army War College Class of 2009, Carlisle Barracks, 2009, p.11.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Hurriyet Daily News, <http://www.hurriyetsdailynews.com/turkey-launches-major-land-operation-into-ypg-militants-in-syrias-afrin-126031>, Accessed on: Jan. 23, 2018.

At operational and tactical levels, the Turkish Air Force's military approach to the conflict in Operation Olive Branch is consistent with the Rapid Dominance concept. In this respect, 'rapid' is tantamount to the "the ability to move quickly before an adversary can react"; and 'dominance' means "the ability to affect and dominate an adversary's will both physically and psychologically". All these efforts are carried out to destroy the adversary's will to carry on.¹⁶

Therefore, it is clear that Operation Olive Branch will keep having a strong and intensive airpower component to sustain the momentum and to keep the upper-hand in the course of the conflict. At this point, it should be underlined that maintaining such an operational tempo would primarily depend on the Turkish Air Force's ability to advance with high sortie-rates.

Without a doubt, air operations also depend on ground crews along with pilots. Having effective ground crews and state-of-art facilities, along with a modern and highly combat-ready inventory of platforms, which would necessitate fewer repairs during the mission, would be another boost factor for generating high sortie-rates.



Factors affecting the sortie generation in an air campaign.

In brief, basing posture, the inventory's readiness level, ground crew's performance, and being able to operate ceaselessly constitute the main pillars of the operational tempo in an air campaign.

This report concludes that Turkey has adequate means to sustain a rapid dominance-driven (albeit, at tactical and operational levels) air campaign to keep generating high sortie-rates over Afrin.

Above all, the Turkish Air Force's basing posture is convenient for such a strategy. Although most of the Turkish airbases are located in the west of the country, the 8th Main Jet Base in the southeastern city of Diyarbakir provides the required facilities to Turkey's robust airpower.¹⁷ Besides, Incirlik Airbase also offers close proximity to the area of operations to boost the sortie-rates by minimizing the distance to the targets.

Furthermore, Turkey indeed enjoys the capabilities to sustain its air campaign on a 24-hour basis. In this respect, the 181st Squadron, equipped with LANTIRN pods which enables low altitude navigation and precision targeting at night, is stationed in the 8th Main Jet Base.¹⁸ Another LANTIRN-equipped squadron, the 161st, is also assigned to the operations.¹⁹ Furthermore, open-source pieces of evidence suggest that Turkish military planners have deployed a formidable concentration of forces in the eastern bases of the country by sending reinforcements from other bases in Eskisehir, Balikesir, and Merzifon.²⁰ At the time of writing, press sources reported that combat aircraft from the western bases, such as the 192nd Squadron of the 9th Main Jet Base in Balikesir²¹ and the 132nd Squadron of the 3rd Main Jet Base in Konya,²² have been participating in the intensive bombardment.

¹⁶ Harlan, Ullman. James, Wade Jr. et.al., *Shock & Awe: Achieving Rapid Dominance*, NDU Institute for National Strategic Studies, 1996, p.xxv.

¹⁷ IHS Jane's, *Turkey – Air Force*, 2018.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Hurriyet, <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/teror-mevzilerine-kartal-ve-pars-vurusu-40723074>, Accessed on: Jan. 28, 2018.

²⁰ Hurriyet, <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/bombardimana-hancer-filodan-12-savas-ucagi-da-katildi-40717050>, Accessed on: Jan. 24, 2018.

²¹ Hurriyet, <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/incirlikten-kaplan-havalandi-40717195>, Accessed on: Jan. 24, 2018.

²² Hurriyet, <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/afrindeki-bombardimana-hancer-filodan-12-sav-40717055>, Accessed on: Jan. 24, 2018.



An F-16 from the 192nd 'Tiger' Squadron before taking-off in Incirlik Airbase to perform its mission over Afrin. Combat payload is visible on the platform.²³

Nevertheless, an air-ground campaign's tempo is also strongly related with the target set provided by the intelligence. Thus, as the rural and suburban belt surrounding the town of Afrin is gradually cleared, sortie-rates and operational tempo might decrease proportionally to the number of remaining targets. In this respect, on the 4th day of the campaign, Turkey's official news agency reported 27 aircraft striking 47 targets.²⁴ On the 5th day, the air force struck 25 targets with 14 combat aircraft.²⁵

Close Air Support (CAS) Preferences In The Afrin Operations

An interesting fact about the Close Air Support (CAS) aspect of the Olive Branch is, contrary to the practice during Operation Euphrates Shield, the use of attack helicopters. On January 24, 2018, in early morning, the Turkish Army Aviation's T-129s made their cross-border debuts, and engaged YPG targets with Cirit guided rockets²⁶ (produced by ROKETSAN) and gatling-cannons. T-129s performed combat duties before. In April 2017, a Bayraktar TB-2 drone designated targets for the T-129 attack helicopters operating in southeastern Turkey.²⁷ In fact, during the 1990s' counterterrorism efforts against PKK, the procurement of

gunships was a game-changer for the Turkish Armed Forces.

In doctrine, attack helicopters are very important assets that combine fire-power with mobility. Yet, especially in recent decades, helicopter losses sparked doubts about the utility and future of these rotary-wing platforms in the age of advanced man-portable air defense systems (MANPADS).

Especially the US experience during Operation Iraqi Freedom (2003) left many analysts pessimistic about the role of attack helicopters in future CAS missions.²⁸

Notably, there is strong evidence suggesting that PKK boosted its outreach to advance air defense systems in recent years. On May 13, 2016, the terrorist group downed a Turkish AH-1 W Super Cobra attack helicopter using a third-generation, SA-18 Soviet / Russia made MANPADS.²⁹ The Syrian Civil War has witnessed a dangerous influx of arms into the country. Open-source intelligence sources revealed that (by 2014 estimates) "armed groups have acquired at least eight different models of MANPADS, at least three of which had not been seen outside of government control prior to sightings in Syria".³⁰ YPG is not an exception in this regard.

This report assumes that the Turkish Army Aviation most probably received very reliable intelligence confirming the absence of MANPADS threat in the area of operations before employing the T-129 attack helicopters. Even though Turkey's new rotary-wing platforms enjoy ASELSAN – manufactured countermeasures, the low-altitude air defenses still remain a significant risk factor for the Afrin campaign.

On a final note, Turkey's rapidly burgeoning unmanned aerial systems capabilities are also being used in Operation Olive Branch.³¹ By the end of the operation, the lessons-learned would be invaluable for Ankara's armed drone programs.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Anadolu Agency, <http://aa.com.tr/tr/gunun-basliklari/tsk-zeytin-dali-harekatinda-47-hedef-imha-edildi/1041384>, Accessed on: Jan. 24, 2017.

²⁵ Hurriyet, <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/son-dakika-tdskdan-aciklama-25-hedef-imha-edildi-40721889>, Accessed on: Jan. 25, 2018.

²⁶ Anadolu Agency, <http://aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/turkeys-t-129-helicopters-hit-pyd-pkk-targets-in-afrin/1040814>, Accessed on: Jan. 24, 2018.

²⁷ Milliyet, <http://www.milliyet.com.tr/milli-silahlar-vurdu-26-pkk-li-gundem-2436373/>, Accessed on: Jan. 24, 2018.

²⁸ For a comprehensive assessment of the utility of attack helicopters in close air support missions, see:

Andrew, S. Groenke, *CAS Interdiction and Attack Helicopters*, the US Naval Postgraduate School, Monterey – California, 2005.

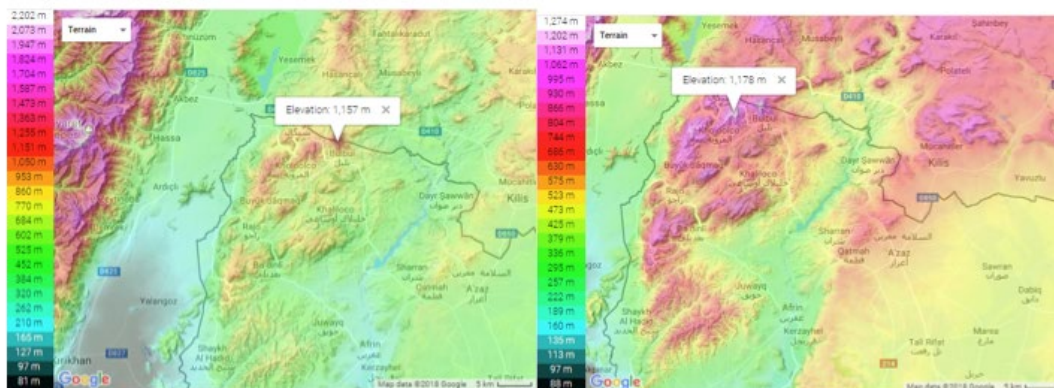
²⁹ For EDAM's in-depth coverage of the MANPADS threat posed to Turkey's national security, see: Can, Kasapoğlu and Doruk Ergun, *From Low-Intensity Conflict to Hybrid Warfare: MANPADS at the Hands of PKK*, EDAM, Istanbul, 2016.

³⁰ Small Arms Survey, "Fire and Forget: The Proliferation of Man – Portable Air Defense Systems in Syria", Issue Brief, No.9, August 2014, pp.2–3.

³¹ Sabah, <https://www.sabah.com.tr/gundem/2018/01/22/ilk-kez-kullanilan-milli-ihalar-afrinde-gorevde>, Accessed on: Jan. 25, 2018.

Land Warfare

All military endeavors are strictly shaped by geographical factors. While the town of Afrin is predominantly lowland with less than 300m elevation, its surrounding belt is mountainous with around 1,000m elevation with some exceptions of sharp hilltops and deep valleys.



Shifts in the elevations between rural Afrin and the town center

From a military – geostrategic standpoint, EDAM’s assessment of the campaign suggests that the initial phase of Operation Olive Branch focuses on clearing the rural and sub-urban outer belt surrounding the urbanized center of Afrin. This course of action stems from specific reasons and necessities. Above all, the town offers critical urban warfare edges to the defensive side which could lead to serious casualties for the offensive.

At the time of writing, the Turkish supply lines were 5 to 10km deep from the Turkish – Syrian border to the area of operations. When the Olive Branch comes to the final push

for its declared objective, namely clearing the town of Afrin from the YPG, the campaign’s supply lines would reach the peak of more than 30km. In doctrine, when a combined joint task force gains such depth, especially in mountainous and hostile terrain, safeguarding the rear area comes into the picture as the most critical aspect of force protection which remains essential to all military efforts. Technically, force protection is vital to defend lines of communications as well as to preserve all vital sources to an operation –namely the manpower, materiel, and equipment³². When, and if, the Olive Branch extends some 30km from the border to the area of operations, the adversary would probably seek to adopt

³² For a detailed doctrinal approach, see: U.S. Marine Corps Warfighting Publication, Rear Area Operations, MCWP 3–41.1, 2000.

an asymmetric defensive strategy to disrupt the supply lines and lines of communication. YPG and PKK militants could also aim to conduct hit-and-run raids in small groups targeting the tactical command & control nodes of the Turkish Armed Forces in rural Afrin. Thus, most probably, the Turkish General Staff has taken the potential depth of the operation into consideration, and planned the initial phase of the Olive Branch to clear the entire rural belt carefully to mitigate risks with respect to the rear area security.

This report concludes that Operation Olive Branch, if everything goes as planned, will probably witness two main phases on the battleground. The first (ongoing) phase could be best depicted within the framework of Mountain Warfare Operations under hybrid conditions. As the operations get closer to the center, the conflict would probably shift to Urban Warfare. Therefore, it is likely to see drastic changes in Turkey's force generation strategy as the campaign progresses.

Mountain Warfare and Urban Warfare have fairly different characteristics. In other words, the Turkish Armed Forces and the indigenous friendly components are expected to fight two different battles in Afrin.

Mountain Warfare In Rural Afrin

In military doctrine, mountainous battlegrounds are classified according to elevation. The US Marine Corps Mountain Warfare Field Manual use the following categorization for evaluating the terrain:³³

- ▶▶ Very high: greater than 3,048 meters
- ▶▶ High: 1,829 to 3,048 meters
- ▶▶ Moderately high: 914 to 1,829 meters
- ▶▶ Moderately low: 305 to 914 meters
- ▶▶ Low: 152 to 305 meters
- ▶▶ Very low: less than 152 meters.

In other words, for the time being, Operation Olive Branch is being fought at moderately high terrain. In fact, at the time of writing, nearly all the clashes are taking place around the mountainous belt along the Afrin frontier.³⁴

Fighting on mountainous battlegrounds is not easy. As the elevation becomes higher and the terrain turns harsher, the required skills for a unit vary from walking techniques to professional mountaineering, and even to assault climbing with fixed ropes in extreme cases. Besides, climate conditions become worse in mountainous battlegrounds. Finally, fog in high elevations could bring about the risk of infiltrations and restricted visibility.³⁵ In this regard, recent reports from the Afrin campaign reveals the intense fog in hilltops.



Operation Olive Branch is being run in mountainous terrain with dense fog.³⁶

³³ For the current USMC doctrine, see : US Marine Corps, Mountain Warfare Operations, MCTP 12 – 10A, 2016.

³⁴ Hurriyet, <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/kritik-dagda-catisma-afinde-son-durum-40718737>, Accessed on: Jan. 24, 2018.

³⁵ US Marine Corps, Mountain Warfare Operations, MCTP 12 – 10A, 2016.

³⁶ Hurriyet, <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/kritik-dagda-catisma-afinde-son-durum-40718737>, Accessed on: Jan. 24, 2018.

From a doctrinal standpoint, mountain warfare is briefly about capturing the dominant terrain to control lines of communications.³⁷ The Turkish military's elite commando brigades, as well as the Special Forces, are well experienced in operating in high elevations and mountainous landscape thanks to the counterterrorism operations in the harsh topography of eastern Anatolia. These battle-hardened and experienced formations had played an essential role in the Euphrates Shield against ISIS.

Nevertheless, Afrin's outer belt still remains problematic for force protection. To mitigate the risk, on the very first day of the operation, the Turkish military and the indigenous friendly formations set multiple jump-off points and attack positions in the northern and northwestern rural areas. In the following days, the operation extended to the eastern and northeastern front by new assaults from Az'az.³⁸ This strategy prevented YPG from force concentration, and led to the initial retreats.

Armor Survivability In Operation Olive Branch And Lessons-Learned From The Euphrates Shield

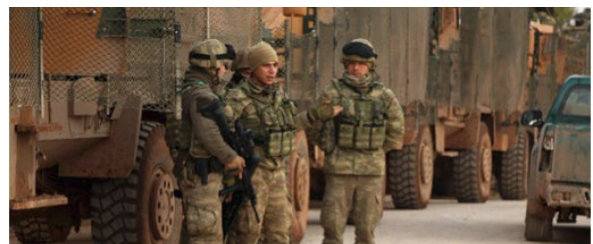
Operation Euphrates Shield's biggest challenge was to maintain efficient armor survivability in hybrid warfare conditions, and against an adversary, namely ISIS, equipped with guided anti-tank missiles and improvised explosive devices.

At the time of the Euphrates Shield, EDAM had comprehensively covered the Turkish armor modernization in hybrid warfare situations. Without a doubt, the most problematic issue was the absence of active protection systems for Turkey's main battle tanks and infantry fighting vehicles.

Right before the commencement of the Afrin campaign, Turkish press sources –in an 'echo chamber' fashion– reported that the main battle tanks participating in the operation would be protected by ASELSAN – manufactured

AKKOR active protection systems.³⁹ In fact, this very incident revealed the need for a significant professionalization of the Turkish media on defense issues. Indeed, Turkish defense giant ASELSAN is to develop an indigenous active protection system called AKKOR equipped with hard-kill and soft-kill capabilities.⁴⁰ And this system, by all means, is expected to be a game-changer for Turkey's forthcoming Altay line. Yet, AKKOR will enter into service by the early 2020s, and it is very unlikely that the armored units of Operation Olive Branch are equipped with this system. A reasonable ground for the Turkish press sources' claims could be the Ukrainian active protection system Zaslon-L.⁴¹ Recently, an agreement was signed between the Ukrainian and Turkish defense industries to promote the cooperation in armor survivability. The deal covers Zaslon-L active protection system –expected to be delivered within 2018– and reactive armor technologies. Thus, if the Turkish armored platforms participating in the Olive Branch, or at least some of them, are indeed equipped with any such systems, then it would be logical to assume that the Ukrainians has delivered the first batch of the procurement in a prioritized deal.⁴²

Apart from the active protection systems debate, Turkish military planners have put several measures into practice regarding the lessons learned from the Euphrates Shield. Notably, Kirpi MRAPs (mine-resistant ambush protected vehicles) joining the campaign are provided with extra protection thanks to ROKETSAN–manufactured RPG shield, or the 'cage-armor'. The flexible layered armor cage system is primarily designed for boosting the survivability of land platforms against rocket-propelled grenade threats that many terrorist groups around the world use.⁴³



ROKETSAN–manufactured RPG cage on Kirpi MRAPs, Operation Olive Branch.⁴⁴

³⁷ US Marine Corps, Mountain Warfare Operations, MCTP 12 – 10A, 2016.

³⁸ CNNTurk, <https://www.cnnurk.com/son-dakika-tesk-azezden-afrine-operasyon-baslatti>, Accessed on: Jan.26, 2018.

³⁹ Hurriyet, <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/dikkat-cekken-detay-akkor-koruyacak-40713126>, Accessed on: Jan. 25, 2018; Akşam, <http://www.aksam.com.tr/ekonomi/afirin-hattina-akkorla-donatilmis-tanklar-koruyacak/haber-699358>, Accessed on: Jan. 25, 2018; NTV, <https://www.ntv.com.tr/galeri/turkiye/afirin-icin-tanklara-fuze-onlemi,hfbr7F-1xE-GQExUwGvdcuw>, Accessed on: Jan. 25, 2018

⁴⁰ ASELSAN, AKKOR: Active Protection System, http://www.aselsan.com.tr/en-us/press-room/Brochures/Electronic-Warfare-Systems/AKKOR_ENG.pdf, Accessed on: Jan. 25, 2018.

⁴¹ Ukroboronservice, Zaslon info, <https://en.uos.ua/produktsiya/sistemi-zashchiti/49-kompleks-aktivnoy-zashchiti-zaslon>, Accessed on: Jan. 25, 2018.

⁴² Can, Kasapoglu. "Afrin Harekati ve Jeostratejik Şartlar", Anadolu Agency, Jan. 19, 2018. <http://aa.com.tr/tr/analiz-haber/afirin-harekati-ve-jeostratejik-sartlar/1035498>, Accessed on: Jan. 25, 2018.

⁴³ ROKETSAN, Ballistic Protection Systems, <http://www.roketsan.com.tr/wp-content/uploads/2012/09/BALISTIK-ENG-email1.pdf>, Accessed on: Jan. 25, 2018

⁴⁴ Hurriyet, <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/afirindeki-zirhli-araclarda-dikkat-cekken-detay-40721846>, Accessed on : Jan. 25, 2018.



ROKETSAN's RPG cage shield for enhanced protection.⁴⁵

Furthermore, the elite Turkish formations on the battleground are also using unconventional solutions for adapting to the hybrid warfare conditions. In this respect, a 4X4 platform equipped with an interesting combination of ZSU-23-2 23mm twin-barreled autocannon and ROKETSAN ballistic armor protection was spotted in Afrin.⁴⁶ This platform itself reveals a smart tactical breakthrough. First, the ZSU-23 class 23mm cannons enjoy better elevations which best suit for urban environments.⁴⁷ Besides, a 1999 US Marine Corps publication assessing several case studies in urban warfare, which evaluated a broad-array of battlegrounds ranging from Chechnya to Northern Ireland, concludes that air defense guns, like the ZSU-23 variants, are very effective for suppressing ground targets.⁴⁸

As expected, Operation Olive Branch has no shortage of artillery and multiple-launch rocket systems (MLRS). In the 2000s, Turkish defense industry has shown impressive improvement in fire-support capabilities for land warfare. Especially, the Turkish military's 122mm-class rocket systems and 155mm-class howitzers played a dominant role during Operation Euphrates Shield.

This time, differently than the Euphrates Shield, EDAM's monitoring of open-source pieces of evidence concludes that there is a better division of labor between the air force and the army's fire-support platforms. This improvement could emanate from weather conditions, the Rapid Dominance concept adopted by the Olive Branch, and characteristics of the target set in rural Afrin.



Turkish troops' new 'hybrid vehicle' spotted in Afrin. The 4X4 platform is equipped with ROKETSAN – manufactured ballistic armor protection and ZSU-23-2 23mm autocannon.⁴⁹

⁴⁵ ROKETSAN, Ballistic Protection Systems, <http://www.roketsan.com.tr/wp-content/uploads/2012/09/BALISTIK-ENG-email1.pdf>, Accessed on: Jan. 25, 201.

⁴⁶ Star, <http://www.star.com.tr/guncel/roketan-balistik-zirhi-afrinde-haber-1301413/>, Accessed on: Jan. 25, 2018.

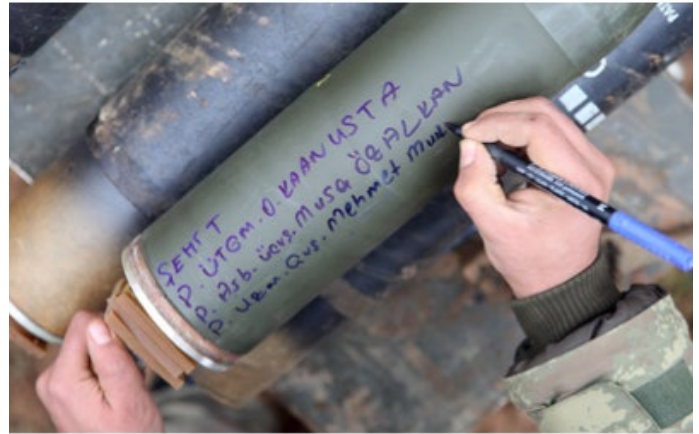
⁴⁷ Richard, M. Gorkiewicz, "Armor and Future Urban Warfare", *Armor*, March–April 2004.

⁴⁸ For the referred report, see: The US Marine Corps, *Urban Warfare Study: City Case Studies Compilation*, 1999.

⁴⁹ Star, <http://www.star.com.tr/guncel/roketan-balistik-zirhi-afrinde-haber-1301413/>, Accessed on: Jan. 25, 2018.



Turkish 155mm 'Firtina' (Storm) artillery shelling targets in Afrin.⁵⁰



A Turkish soldier is writing the names of the fallen troops of Operation Olive Branch on an artillery munition.⁵¹

THE STRATEGIC DIMENSION

Follow-On Urban Warfare Phase Of Operation Olive Branch

As mentioned earlier, should Turkey opt to pursue the operation into the Afrin town center, the characteristics of the campaign would shift from mountain warfare to urban warfare due to the topographical and demographic profile of the battlespace.

Without a doubt, urban warfare, or military operations in urbanized terrain, remains one of the hardest tasks to achieve for armed forces. In doctrine, an urban area is defined as a "topographical complex where man-made construction or high population density is the dominant feature. ...The urban environment includes the physical aspects of the urban area as well as the complex and dynamic interaction and relationships between its key components—the terrain (natural and man-made), the society, and the supporting infrastructure—as an overlapping and interdependent system of systems".⁵²

Urban operations are not solely military operations. In fact,

the 'urban terrain' consists of both physical and social dimensions, as well as these dimensions' interactions.⁵³ More importantly, urban environments favor the defensives. Buildings provide obstacles to heavy equipment, limit the armor superiority of advanced armies, and multi-story buildings offer various angles to anti-tank weapons. Besides, since the defender has absolute information superiority about the area of operations, any offensive incursion, most notably by mechanized forces, would face with serious risks and threats.⁵⁴

An urban operations effort in the town of Afrin is feasible but risky. The YPG militants would establish their defenses on a menacing subterranean complex, anti-tank and sniper positions, low-altitude air defense nests, and improvised explosive devices. This strategy will probably be supported by a human-shield conduct by strictly restricting the civilian population from leaving the town center.

Lessons-learned from recent urban warfare cases reveal that tanks and armored personnel carriers have limited utility in urban environments, especially in the absence of adequate dismounted infantry.⁵⁵

⁵⁰<https://www.sabah.com.tr/gundem/2018/01/22/tsk-o-bolgeyi-cnralarla-yerle-bir-etti>, Accessed on : Jan. 25, 2018.

⁵¹Anadolu Agency, <http://aa.com.tr/tr/dunya/zeytin-dali-harekatinda-303-terorist-etkisiz-hale-getirildi/1041917>, Accessed on. Jan. 25, 2017.

⁵²The US Army, FM 3-06 Urban Operations, 2006.

⁵³Max, Neiman. "Urban Operations: Social Meaning the Urban Built Form and Economic Function" in *Soldiers in Cities: Military Operations on Urban Terrain*, Michael C. Desch [ed.] US Army SSI, 2001.

⁵⁴Barry, R. Posen. "Urban Operations: Tactical Realities and Strategic Ambiguities" in *Soldiers in Cities: Military Operations on Urban Terrain*, Michael C. Desch [ed.] US Army SSI, 2001.

⁵⁵The US Marine Corps, *Urban Warfare Study: City Case Studies Compilation*, 1999.

The Turkish Armed Forces have been working on improving its urban warfare capabilities for some time. In this regard, many commando units have been receiving intensive urban operations training, especially following the PKK's recent terror concepts in city centers.⁵⁶ Many of Turkey's elite military formations, with urban warfare training and also combat experience from the Euphrates Shield, are now deployed along the border areas or directly in rural Afrin.⁵⁷



The 49th Commando Brigade (an elite formation with advanced urban operations training) in their deployment to Afrin with the IED Detector Dog 'Ayevi'.⁵⁸

In case Ankara opts for urban operations in the Afrin center, the risk of having casualties would be naturally higher than the ongoing mountain warfare phase of Operation Olive Branch. After all, the urban operations phase was also the most problematic one during the Euphrates Shield. Nevertheless, the robustness of the adversary's defensive performance would also depend on the effects of the ongoing operations, especially the Turkish fire-power superiority, to encourage more desertions among the YPG militants.

A must for the –possible– urban warfare phase of the Olive Branch remains putting heavy international pressure on the PYD / YPG for the evacuation of civilians from the area of operations, and rendering any human shield strategy abortive from the very beginning. In fact, even this necessity confirms the aforementioned analysis indicating that urban environments are composed of physical and social dimensions.

An Alternative Strategy? Siege Warfare Option In Operation Olive Branch

An alternative strategy for the Olive Branch could be completing the Mountain Warfare phase of the campaign, and then, conducting a variant of 'siege warfare' on the town. This option could bring about several benefits as well as drawbacks.

Legally, Article 27 of the Hauge Regulations does not rule out sieges in international armed conflicts while putting a special emphasis on strictly observing the principle of distinction between targets, protection of "buildings dedicated to religion, art, science, or charitable purposes, historic monuments, hospitals, and places where sick and wounded are collected...".⁵⁹

When it comes to non-international armed conflicts, as observed in the case of Operation Olive Branch since YPG is not a state actor –in fact, it is designated as a terrorist organization by Ankara–, there is no specific regulation governing the siege warfare conduct, thereby, it is not prohibited. Nevertheless, international humanitarian law considerations would still focus on protecting the civilians in the area of operations. Furthermore, in terms of non-international armed conflicts, the principle of distinguishing between civilian and military objectives would be important. In this regard, area bombardment on the besieged area shall not be treated as a single military objective. Last but not least, although siege warfare is a legal conduct in any type of armed conflict, still, humanitarian access to the besieged area should be granted.⁶⁰

The main drawback of a siege warfare on the urbanized areas of Afrin would be taking the risk of PYD / YPG's set of responses, such as using human shield, forcing the civilians to paramilitary roles, and blockading any attempts to evacuate the civilian population in the area of operations. In its de facto administration of the so-called cantons, PYD established a strict control over the local populace through establishing 'communes', and pursued a drastic demographical shift policy.⁶¹ Thus, the chances are slim

⁵⁶ CNNTurk, <https://www.cnntrk.com/fotogaleri/turkiye/tsk-hakkari-ve-tuncelide-meskun-mahalde-muharebe-egitimi-yapti?page=1>, Accessed on: Jan. 26, 2018.

⁵⁷ Hurriyet, <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/afrinde-mehmetcik-in-gozu-olacak-40721960>, Accessed on: Jan. 26, 2018; NTV, <https://www.ntv.com.tr/turkiye/tsk-en-az-260-terorist-etkisiz-hale-getirildizeytin-dali-harekatinda5inci-g%2cGhZpDJftGOWRyLRty7J2wA>, Accessed on: Jan. 26, 2018; Milliyet, <http://www.milliyet.com.tr/afrin-kahramanlari-icin-kurban-kestiler-kayseri-yerelhaber-2557934/>, Accessed on: Jan. 26, 2018.

⁵⁸ Hurriyet, <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/afrinde-mehmetcik-in-gozu-olacak-40721960>, Accessed on: Jan. 26, 2018.

⁵⁹ For a detailed international law assessment of modern siege warfare, see: Susan, Power. "Siege Warfare in Syria: Prosecuting the Starvation of Civilians", Amsterdam Law Forum, 2016.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Fabrice, Balanche. "From Qamishli to Qamishlo. A Trip to Rojava's New Capital", The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, May 2017. <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/from-qamishli-to-qamishlo-a-trip-to-rojavas-new-capital>, Accessed on: Jan. 26, 2018.

for any civilian move out of the conflict zone. Besides, YPG would probably do its best to portray Turkey's military operations as a 'siege to starvation' attempt. In fact, while Operation Olive Branch enjoys a good public relations aspect at home, domestic actors would probably fall short of effectively contributing to any strategic communications effort abroad.

The second drawback of a siege warfare course is the risk of prolonging the conflict. In the absence of a rapid and decisive Turkish victory, PYD / YPG would sprint its propaganda machine to capitalize on the psychological operations aspect of the conflict.

On the other hand, siege warfare could also provide Ankara with some advantages. Without a doubt, the most important positive factor would be minimizing the casualties that could stem from urban warfare.

Secondly, in case Turkey could use its diplomatic capacity and build an effective strategic communications roadmap to render the PYD / YPG propaganda abortive, then it could impose 'the green buses' option, namely evacuating the civilians out of the town at first, and then opening a corridor for the militants into the east of the Euphrates. This way forward has to have an agreement with Washington about clearing Manbij from the YPG elements, and reducing the US plans about the PYD / YPG into, simply, an anti-ISIS ground with no other plans following the civil war in Syria. Besides, Ankara should also convince Russia for excluding any PKK-related groups from the talks about Syria's future. In addition, such a Turkish-Russian accord should incorporate a clear political vision that prioritizes the unity of Syria with no autonomous entity along Turkey's borders, as well as the continuation of the Adana Agreement between Ankara and Damascus by which the Syrian regime pledged to halt its support to PKK.

The Political Dimension

Ankara aims to achieve a number of different political objectives with the Olive Branch operation. The first aim is domestic. The US support to the PYD which culminated with the ultimately retracted statement of building up a 30.000 strong border guard YPG unit has created a public pressure at home for a more severe Turkish response to address the increasingly palpable security challenges linked to the expansion of the PYD influence in northern Syria.

The second aim is to position Turkey as a strong and inevitable actor of the Syrian conundrum. The hard power backed approach aims to enhance Turkey's role in the slated negotiations on Syria's future order where Turkey,

having dropped the regime change agenda, now primarily aims to constrain the territorial ambitions of the Syrian Kurds. Operation Olive Branch helps to dispel doubts, after the failed coup attempt of July 2016, about Turkey's ability to project force across the border and therefore contributes to the strengthening Turkey's diplomatic influence.

A third component relates to deterrence. With this show of force, Turkey aims to deter the US, its NATO Ally, and to make it desist from backing the PYD. The Turkish president's and the government's rhetoric have been pretty clear about the scope of the operation. Accordingly, following this first phase, the operation is to continue with the siege of the Afrin town where most of the YPG paramilitary elements have now taken refuge. The third phase of the operation is slated to target Manbij, the US controlled region west of the Euphrates. Obviously this expanded scope would raise the possibility of direct confrontation with the US forces positioned in and around the Manbij region for the training of and support to the YPG. Ankara's hope will be to convince the US to remove these troops from Manbij also a signal of its weakening commitment to the YPG. The risk is for US policy makers deciding to test Ankara's resolve. Because indeed such a scenario would open the way to the undesired and unique case of two NATO Allies involved in military conflict against each other. Such an outcome would not only have long term consequences for the bilateral relationship but would also severely weaken NATO cohesion and therefore impact overall transatlantic security.

Against this backdrop, it becomes increasingly urgent to re-establish a reliable path to US-Turkey convergence. Future efforts will be handicapped by the dysfunctionality that have come to characterize this important relationship. The military-to-military ties have become fraught with a lack of trust. The diplomatic bureaucracy have lost their traditional weight, both in Ankara and in Washington, under a governance marked by personal initiative. But given the acuity of the crisis and their implications, a common US-Turkey agenda needs to be fostered.

The humanitarian angle could provide for such an opportunity. The imminent operation targeting Afrin town raises the prospect of either a military siege or urban warfare with enormous risks for the civilian population, including the risk of being used as human-shield by the YPG militants or being forced to paramilitary roles. Turkey and the US should give priority to a humanitarian corridor that would allow the civilians to safely leave the theater of conflict towards US controlled Manbij, and even to further east. The success of this collaborative approach could then be used as stepping stone towards a sounder framework of dialogue that could then tackle the deeper issues affecting this key bilateral relationship.



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