

SHIFT IN TURKEY'S SECURITY APPROACH AND OPERATION PEACE SPRING

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Today, the lack of authority in countries such as Syria, Iraq, Yemen and Libya has led to the strengthening of non-state armed actors and terrorist organizations. The PKK terrorist organization is one of the structures that have turned this gap into an opportunity for itself in both Iraq and Syria. After the Assad Regime's withdrawal from North Syria due to the ongoing civil war, the Syrian extension of the terrorist group (YPG / PYD) which aims to gain dominance in the Turkish borderline has expanded its area of dominance to *Deir ez-Zur* by turning the instability in the region into an opportunity. Undoubtedly, the US' support for the PKK / YPG in the struggle against ISIS and its use as an armed apparatus in the field had a major impact on this expansion.

Thus, after the removal of Öcalan from Damascus, except for the establishment of PYD in 2004, the organization had the opportunity to make its presence in Syria permanent for

the first time. In this process, the relations of regional and global actors active in Syria with each other and with non-state armed actors, the relations among those non-state actors, the areas of competition and conflict, and the ability of the competing actors to cooperate in different fields were also important determinants in the progress of the organization. Also, the fact that the organization's - which received US support under the name of fight against ISIS in the east of Euphrates - cooperation with Russia in regions such as *Afrin* and *Tell Rifaat* has been a facilitating factor in preserving its presence in the region. In a sense, these variables in the field, canton establishment by the organization and its effort to become permanent in the region has been important factors for Turkey to delay its operation.

This table has made "the quest for security" to become a priority for Turkey, a neighbor of Syria, which was affected the most from the conflicts



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and waves of migration. The uncertainties in the intentions of the active actors in the field, the use of organizations by different actors as apparatuses for different purposes, the instability experienced in their borders, the threat posed by radical organizations such as ISIS and the control of the PKK / YPG along the borderline has been decisive in this attitude of Turkey. This situation has forced Turkey to adopt a new concept of security that leans towards creating deterrent and controllable areas based on its military power in the area, in the scope of “ensuring the security of the state” and “survival”.

Changing Security Approach: Defense-Offence Perspective

Turkey revealed a “defensive” reaction which aims to keep the threats outside its border and prioritizing border security in the post-2013 period, when the crisis in Syria has turned into a series of multi-faceted asymmetrical conflicts. As a part of this strategy, Turkey tried to combat against terrorists by cooperating with its allies. It also blocked the transit of foreign fighters and established new security structures along the border (border wall, establishment of electronic systems and so on.) Parallel to this, Turkey, which also participated in the international coalition formed to fight ISIS, prioritized responding to the attacks of the regime and terrorist organizations within the framework of rules of engagement.

However, the increase in terrorist attacks of ISIS, expansion of the PKK/YPG’S dominance in the area with the support of the United States and distrust in Washington pushed Turkey to change its perception of threat. In addition, the effects of global, regional and sub-regional developments of actors in the region paved the way for Turkey to implement a new concept. In this sense, it

can be considered that apart from global and regional actors, non-state armed actors’ ability to influence the order affected the sensitivities on security.

Since in such structures threat is not only expected from global or regional actors but also armed groups, in Turkey’s perception of threat, these armed groups began to occupy a larger portion. US support for one of those organizations, the PKK/YPG, increased future security concerns of Turkey. For Ankara, the US’ arming of the PKK / YPG was not seen as a mere strategy to combat ISIS; training, logistical assistance and armed support provided to the organization is considered as a major risk for the country’s medium and long term security. The dilemma that was created by the uncertainty of both the US and YPG’s true intentions about future led Turkey to stress on how to weaken the current threat instead of taking defensive actions. This process has triggered a security dilemma

for Turkey and has necessitated a new security concept foreseeing “threats beyond the borders and welcome in the forward line”. Following are the factors that led Turkey to adopt such a security concept:

- Increased asymmetric security problems in the area extending from Iraq to Syria and the July 15 military coup attempt
- US military and logistical support for the PKK / YPG and an attempt by the SDG to form a corridor along the borderline
- Uncertainty of real intentions and main objectives of the actors in the region
- Mistrust and ambiguity in bilateral relations caused by US failure to comply with *Manbij* agreement

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Under these circumstances, Turkey carried out the Euphrates Shield and Operation Olive Branch. Also, in order to weaken the elements of terrorism in Iraq, it organized the Operation Claw . With the effect of the difficulties in the field, Turkey has aimed to realize the possible operation planning in certain stages. As a result, from 2016 onwards, Turkey has gone beyond the concept of “defense” and used active military force in the regions where it has vital interests and perceives a threat.

Negotiation with Global Powers

The military presence of two global powers - the USA and Russia - in Syria during this period has been one of the most important difficulties Turkey has faced. Indeed, Turkey had to take into consideration the actions of these two global powers. As a result, Turkey, while in combat threats, also focused on the actions of the present actors in the region. This situation showed its impact during the Euphrates Shield and Operation Olive Branch. Before the operations, Turkey ran negotiations with the US and Russia on the potential difficulties that could be faced in the field. Within this framework, the gap between Ankara and Washington due to US cooperation with the PKK / YPG created new opportunities for the Ankara-Moscow line and facilitated the establishment of various mechanisms, particularly the Astana Process in Syria. It is widely accepted that diplomacy with Russia has a facilitating effect in the process of *Afrin's* demilitarization from the terrorist organization, PKK / YPG.

Dual Push and Operation Peace Spring

While trying to achieve its strategic objectives within the new security concept it adopted, Turkey initiated the Operation Claw to weaken PKK's presence in Iraq and its connection with Syria. Within this framework, Turkey established strategic bases and control areas outside its borders and took precautions against possible infiltrations of the terrorist organization, concentrating on preventive operations in

Iraq, thus enabling Turkey to push east of the Euphrates from both the west and east. On the other hand, to create the necessary conditions for a new operation in east of Euphrates, Turkey began to bring forward the military option and focused on pushing the US to end its military support on the organization during diplomatic negotiations. In this context Ankara focused on preparations for operation, however, due to the difference of opinion on both sides and lack of unity in the institutions of Washington, Turkey had to wait for a long time to take action. While President Trump's desire to withdraw from Syria and the differences in the approach of the Pentagon and CENTCOM shelved the withdrawal and led the process to uncertainty, the first serious agreement between Ankara and Washington was made months later in August 2019. Although the safe zone agreement between the two sides has begun to be implemented, delays and congestion in the process have led Ankara to regard this agreement as a second *Manbij* agreement syndrome and to consider the safe zone agreement as a distraction process.

As Turkey accelerated the preparations for operation in accordance with the 20 miles issue that was mentioned by President Trump, Washington was pushed into an implicit consent process to carry out the operation. The factors that brought in this consent were undoubtedly the bilateral relations between President Trump and President Erdoğan, trade, preventing Turkey and Russia to grow closer ties and finally Washington to realize the importance of Turkey after the difficulties Saudi Arabia and other regional countries faced due to the recent developments in the Gulf. On October 9, after Washington's tacit consent, Turkey started the Operation Peace Spring. The Turkish Armed Forces (TSK), which acted with the Syrian National Army within the scope of the Operation Peace Spring , entered the region between *Ras al-Ayn* and *Tell Abyad* and pushed the button for the operation to clear the terrorist organization from the border. With the operation, The Turkish Armed Forces and the Syrian National Army are planning to establish a safe zone that covers the

strategic area up to the M4 road and from *Ayn al-Arab* (Kobane) to Derik on the Iraqi border. During the operation its initial plan is to liberate centers like *Ras al-Ayn* and *Tell Abyad* from terrorism which would, in the second stage of the operation, facilitate the expansion of the operation in the east and west directions.

Uncertainties caused by the US and Russia

There are some risks and uncertainties in the operation process. Firstly, the fact that US President Trump is an unpredictable leader and his ability to change decisions in a short time may cause some problems between Ankara and Washington during the operation. The fact that CENTCOM and the Pentagon are not in full harmony with the White House, their demands to limit the operation and the public debate can

put pressure on Trump to push him against Ankara. As economically based decisions like the Senate's decision to impose sanctions on Turkey and the introduction of CAATS sanctions could create new problems, the existence of US soldiers in the field also makes the process more difficult. At this point, it should be kept in mind that the PKK / YPG's propaganda where US soldiers are targeted can be repeated in the process. On the other hand, the eastern part of the Euphrates, unlike the Operation Olive Branch area, is the main center where the US provides

arms, logistic support, and training aid directly to the organization. The military weapons and equipment in the hands of the PKK / YPG terrorist organization, which has approximately

65,000 to 100,000 militants, may also cause difficulties as the process lengthens.

On the other hand, Russia, the Assad regime and Iran's attitude are among the factors that should be considered. Firstly, the Moscow administration, which does not react negatively to the operation on the axis of the protection of Syria's territorial integrity and Ankara's security concerns, carefully monitors the possible fragilities between Ankara and Washington. Secondly, since the Trump administration's decision to withdraw from Syria could allow Russia to increase its power in the region, the course of the process pushes Moscow to a "wait-and-see" position. Thirdly, a crisis between Ankara and Washington may provide new opportunities for Moscow and weakening of the PKK / YPG may create new opportunities for Putin administration. Moscow will be one of the decisive actors in the distancing of the terrorist organization from Washington and a possible negotiation process with the Assad regime. As it seems preferable to negotiate with the PKK / YPG, which is weakened in the operation, the Damascus administration may take some new steps in areas such as *Manbij* and *Tell Rifat*. As a matter of fact, Moscow and the regime may see the gap that may occur in the region after the US announces that it will withdraw 1,000 troops from North Syria can be considered as an opportunity to dominate the PKK / YPG. Such an approach may pave the way for the regime, with the support of Moscow, to enter *Manbij* with the PKK / YPG, and may bring similar formulas to the east of the Euphrates. Since a possible agreement between the regime and the PKK / YPG cannot be achieved without Moscow's consent, Ankara needs to pay attention to Moscow's influence in the process. Given that the regime's capacity to dominate the region will be limited, it should not be forgotten that Moscow's actions will be decisive.

Just as how vital the threat in east of Euphrates is for Ankara, continuation of the PKK / YPG presence in *Manbij* will remain a similar threat.

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In such an equation, the entry of the Damascus regime into the region will mean that the PKK / YPG will continue to exist and that security threats will continue in the medium term. Considering the occasional harassment shots from *Tell Rifaat* (where PKK / YPG, Assad Regime and Russia still exist) to the Euphrates Shield area, the severity of this threat can be more clearly understood. Since the entry of the regime forces into *Manbij* and other regions in a similar way will not mean anything other than the maintenance of protected areas for the

existence of the PKK / YPG, Ankara needs to be aware of the possible developments in areas such as *Manbij*, *Tell Rifaat* and *Ayn al-Arab*. This will strengthen the hands of the regime in negotiating for oil resources, such as *Deir ez-Zur*, in the east of the Euphrates. On the other hand, the picture in Idlib continues to stand out as the area that the regime would like to deal with in the first place. In Idlib, where a fragile ceasefire continues, it can be stated that the regime will want to utilize possible opportunities with the support of Russia.