

THE YPG AND OPERATION OLIVE BRANCH

Mahmut Aytekin



To cite this article: Aytekin, Mahmut, "The YPG and Operation Olive Branch", INSAMER, 2018. (link)

February, 2018

Introduction

The YPG is an off-shoot of the separatist PKK terrorist organization, currently found within Northern Syria. The YPG was founded in the 8th Congress of the PKK in 2003 and currently governs approximately 900km land opposite to the Turkish border. It possesses approximately 50,000 militia on the ground with 10,000 of these concentrated in the region of Afrin. The YPG aims at state-building similar to organizations such as DAESH, intending to join the 'four regions of Kurdistan'.

The YPG has been backed up and supported by the US, being flooded with ammunition, artillery, and weapons such as Stinger's, Javelin's and other anti-tank/anti-aircraft missiles. The Turkish State has initiated Operation Olive Branch on Jan 20, 2018, by means of its Armed Forces in

collaboration with the Free Syrian Army (FSA). The operation aims to secure Turkey's border and slice through the YPG corridor within Northern Syria, as the PKK/YPG are planning onto create a 'Kurdish homeland'.

This analysis will be based upon three types of evaluations:

1. Evaluation of the environment of the YPG
2. Evaluation of the YPG as an adversary and
3. Evaluation of the center's of gravity present within Operation Olive Branch. The most likely outcome of Operation Olive Branch is its prolonging with foreign terrorist fighters and fresh legs coming into Syria to aid the YPG. The possession of ATM and ATGM's and US support

given to the YPG is evaluated to being the most dangerous outcome needing urgent attention by the Turkish government. The least likely outcome is stagnated to the operation being halted because of international government pressure and human rights organizations.

Evaluation of the Environment

The YPG has currently established a corridor in the north of Syria, upon the Turkey-Syria border. Currently, YPG-controlled territory has been divided into two due to Operation Euphrates Shield executed by Turkish Armed Forces and the FSA in September 2016, cutting off the connection between the two regions. Turkish controlled areas currently consist of Azaz, Jarablus and Qabasin, acting as a buffer zone between the two YPG regions, and also providing safe-haven for Syrian refugees.

Currently, YPG areas extend firstly from Shayh Al-Hadid to Tal-Rifat, and secondly from Manbij to Al-Malikiyah. YPG-controlled regions are neighbored by Turkey and Iraq, also by pro-Assad, Free Syrian Army (and other rebel groups) and finally by DAESH domestically. Current Turkish governed territory is divided by the Euphrates River down along Syria. As a result of the Euphrates river, condensed vegetation can be seen from the region of Talik continuing on into the province of Raqqa. This shows the YPG can self-sustain the region's economy and provide food and supplies to its members and other in the region. The Euphrates River has been used from time to time as a weapon by the Turkish State in cutting of water going towards PKK/ YPG held areas.

YPG held territories such as Shaykh al-Hadid, Raju, Bulbul and the north of Shahranlı are bedded with mountains and mountainous terrain that are shared with the regions of Hatay and Kilis. These mountains can possibly shield the YPG and act as the first line of defense. In terms of infrastructure, railway stations and tracks are present in the region of Raju which may aid in logistics of ammunition, militia and weaponry.

The current lines of operation show that the Turkish Armed Forces and the FSA are using a top-to-bottom approach whereby bombardments and operations have been initiated on the outskirts of the borders between Syria and Turkey, first aiming to take over mountainous terrain whereby hideouts, ammunition and weapons depots and tunnels may be present. The first line of defense for the state of Turkey also starts from the mountains and outskirt terrain to initiate the first line of defense and move towards the center of Afrin. Weather conditions in the upcoming days seem suitable for aerial bombardments and shelling of previously labeled non-civilian areas discovered with means of intelligence preparation of the operational environment (IPOE).

In terms of infrastructure, YPG held areas also hold other forms of transportation means as well. The Minakh (Minnag) military airport held by the YPG is known to be one of the main hubs whereby the organization is receiving its military equipment from the United States and others nations. The airport neighbored by the region of Azaz sits on approximately 2 kilometers of land. Military equipment and personnel are flown into Syria via. Minakh airport, and then transported to YPG held areas from here onwards. The Minakh airport, being strategically placed sits tightly into the highway network near highway 214 and 217, serving to connect effectively to both mountainous terrain present towards the West, and also Afrin city center towards the South East. The Minakh airport will be a high-level target and center of gravity for the operation.

Evaluation of the Adversary

The YPG, as stated above, is the Syrian arm of the PKK terrorist organization, and also overlooked by the KCK umbrella organization connecting the PKK and its arms in the Middle East. It consists of approximately 50,000 militia and is also receiving support from foreign terrorist fighters as well. International media outlets have been trying to whitewash the YPG, and distance it from the PKK in the eyes of its viewers. Official documentation show the YPG being formed in the 8th congress



of the PKK in October 2003. The YPG since then has expanded its activities in the North of Syria, sharing the border with the Turkish state.

The YPG possess an ideology inspired by Marxist-Leninist and Kurdish nationalist doctrine. The YPG have aspired to build a Kurdish state based upon the theory of the ‘four regions of Kurdistan being colonized from 1618 onwards’. In this sense, the YPG may be willing to join its activities with its other partners; the PKK in Turkey and the PJAK in Iran. State building narratives and those of ‘colonization’ have been utilized successfully in YPG propaganda online.

The mean age of YPG militia cannot be definitely said, but based on estimations of its latest casualties, the mean age of 1072 militia killed by the Turkish Armed Forces (TAF) and the Free Syrian Army (FSA) could be of 25-35 years of age. The YPG also consists of both men and women. Latest YPG propaganda shows the women being between the ages of 20-25 being utilized as suicide bombers towards the TAF and FSA. Footage of foreign terrorist fighters coming into Afrin show the mean age to being about 28-35 years of age.

The order of battle by the YPG is one of asymmetric conflict. A differentiation between the YPG and DAESH in the region could be the logistical support the YPG has been receiving, especially from the United States of America (USA). Reports show the YPG being given 500 million dollars worth of military equipment support as approved by the Pentagon. Military support given to the YPG by the US include 6,000 automatic rifles (mostly Kalashnikov type rifles), 100 anti-tank (ATM) and anti-tank guide missiles (ATGM) such as the Stinger missile which is portable and possesses quick and effective over-the-shoulder use. Also, 2000 military vehicles have also been given to the YPG as well.

The YPG currently fighting mostly in mountainous terrain may pull-back to city centers where civilian population is higher. Since the initiation of the operation, the YPG have been reported to using civilians as human shields, and also not allowing civilians to leave their homes and areas

of conflict. 20,000 Kurdish civilians have also been reported to being internally displaced and migrated to other regions by giving bribery to YPG militia. Civilian points in towns and cities could be used as buffers where the YPG may try blend into the population. Urban warfare seems quite imminent in this instance, though the Turkish Armed Forces do possess experience from its war on terror in 2015 in the regions of Sur and Cizre in Turkey, though the character of urban warfare to take place may be subject to change as a result of weaponry used by the YPG.

Centers of Gravity Analysis

The center of gravity in Operation Olive Branch revolves around four main points:

1. Propaganda
2. Recruitment
3. Capacity of weapons and
4. terrain.

Recruitment of fresh legs by the YPG in this operation will serve to prolong it, and may aim to gain a psychological advantage of the TAF and FSA. Foreign terrorist fighters coming in and joining the YPG in Afrin may also aid in skills transfer to new recruits coming in such as using weapons, bomb-making and operational planning. Fresh recruits may also aid in the radicalization of those not radicalized, allowing the flow of radicalized militia coming in. This could be identified as a highly likely outcome.

The YPG gaining logistical and technical support by the United States can be identified as the most dangerous outcome for the Turkish Armed Forces and the FSA. Anti-tank guided missiles possessed by the YPG have the capacity to severely halt operations while trying to sweep the area of Afrin. Urgent attention is needed to implement defense systems against the ATM and ATGM’s possessed by the YPG.

Finally, the control of both mountainous and high altitude terrain, especially on the outskirts of Afrin shared by the Turkish border is forecasted being

the most important outcome. Mountains on the outskirts dividing the Turkish-Syrian border aim to bed the border from incoming attacks and also aid in monitoring of terrorist activities as well. Civilian casualties suffered by rockets fired from Afrin to the Turkish towns of Kilis and Reyhanli have come from high altitude urban areas such as the Bulbul village and possibly Sheikh al-Hadid and Jindaras. Taking an outside-to-inside approach will allow for a strong line of defense to protect the Turkish border and neighboring Turkish downs from rocket-fire, and also suppress the likelihood of attacks to come from behind and being surrounded by YPG entities.

Conclusion

All in all, Operation Olive Branch as a result of the presence of civilians, skills transfer and propaganda seems highly likely to be prolonged. By taking an outside-to-inside approach, Turkish

neighboring towns will be secured, and possible attacks will be suppressed. Military casualties will also be brought down dramatically. The most dangerous outcome of the operation is forecasted to being the targeting of Turkish armed vehicles by YPG ATM and ATGM's. Defense systems need to be urgently implemented to combat this outcome.

Justifications as to why Operation Olive Branch is taking place also need to be continuously explained to the global public by the Turkish State in order to counter PKK/YPG narratives and propaganda taking place on social media and news agencies as well. PKK discourse in this regard needs to be countered. Finally, YPG foreign terrorist fighters also need to be identified in coordination with foreign intelligence agencies to cut-off and stop skills transfer to local YPG militia.

