EXPLAINER: Shifting power plays in North and East Syria

Agreement with Syrian Government forces, 13 October 2019
The US – Turkey ceasefire agreement, 17 October 2019
The Russia - Turkey Agreement, 22 October 2019

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Agreement with Syrian Government forces, 13 October 2019

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North and East Syria has long been a place of interest for international powers manoeuvring for regional influence. The withdrawal of US troops created a military power vacuum that the Syrian Democratic Forces were unable to fill. This factsheet aims to shed light on how the withdrawal of US forces has played out in terms of the involvement of other regional and international powers: Turkey, the Syrian government and Russia, and the USA.

AGREEMENT WITH SYRIAN GOVERNMENT FORCES, 13 OCTOBER 2019

On the 13th October 2019, the Autonomous Administration announced that following the withdrawal of US forces in North and East Syria, they had entered into a military agreement with the Syrian government, and by extension with Russia. The specifics of

the agreement were initially unclear, with alleged versions of the agreement and rumours circulating on social media.

On the 16th October, a spokesperson for the Kobane legislative council explained the agreement with the Syrian Army, as it is understood on the Autonomous Administration side: "The Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria never once divided the territorial unity of Syria. We want a federal, decentralised system. In this system the protection of the border is the work of the center, that is, the Syrian government. On this basis, the Syrian government has come to protect the border, apart from Sere Kaniye and Tel Abyad, because war is already underway there. Nothing has changed on the administrative level. Our administration and civil society organisations are working as before. The army cannot pass into the city, its only work is to protect the border."

It is true that the agreement is so far limited to the military sphere, and that there is no Syrian Government presence in any of the cities covered by the agreement. However, we understand from diplomatic sources that a political settlement is yet to be reached, and that at this time there will likely be far-reaching consequences not limited to frontlines away from the population centers. Although many of the political implications of the agreement with the Government are yet to be seen, it can be assumed that it will have a significant impact on the future of the region.

What was the Autonomous Administration's relationship with the Syrian Government prior to the agreement?

The relationship between the Autonomous Administration and the Syrian Government is difficult to pin down. During the Arab Spring, Kurdish forces initially aligned themselves with anti-government forces, but eventually broke away from the Syrian National Council. From summer 2012 through 2013, Kurdish popular movements, backed by militias, ousted government forces from Afrin, Kobane and Jazeera regions. There were armed clashes at this time and throughout the following years, particularly in Hasakah and Qamishlo, but for the most part regime forces withdrew without a serious fight.

Since then, non-majority Kurdish areas have been incorporated into what is now the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria as they were liberated from ISIS. However, the region never sought to declare secession from the Syrian state, just to establish a degree of autonomy. In fact, small strategic pockets of Syrian Government control still remain within Qamishlo and Hasakah, and the Autonomous Administration and Assad regime find themselves in a relationship of uneasy cooperation more often than hostility. The majority of oil in Syria is derived from North and East Syria, but it is sold to the Government for refining, and then sold back. Fundamentally, the Syrian Government does not have the military or political power to regain power over the region. Negotiations have been ongoing over a political settlement for years, and took on new urgency following Trump's December 2018 withdrawal threat, but neither side has been willing to acquiesce to the other's demands: decentralisation, autonomy and the protection of rights on the part of the Autonomous Administration, and a return to centralised control demanded by Damascus. However, the withdrawal of the US greatly increased the Government's bargaining power.

As the SDF fought against the invasion of Afrin by Turkish proxy forces – supported by Turkish air power – early in 2018, they made a similar deal with the Assad government

to enter Afrin and take up positions against the Turkish invasion. However, Russia's support of the Turkish invasion meant that the deal did not swing the balance of power and the SDF had to pull out of Afrin, which remains under Turkish occupation. With the US no longer an SDF ally, Russia may play its cards differently this time.

What is the context of the US withdrawal from Syria?

From December 2018, Trump has made noises about pulling US troops out of Syria, but due to conflicting internal policy regarding pull-out – with the Pentagon generally in strong opposition – US presence has remained. Erdogan's threats to invade continued throughout 2019, reaching a new level of urgency towards the end of July 2019, triggering emergency negotiations between the US and Turkey in early August. A tentative deal for a jointly-patrolled 'safe zone' was reached and was in the process of being implemented when the USA announced its immediate withdrawal of all troops from the threatened border region on the 6th October, following a Trump-Erdogan phone call.

The Turkish invasion started two days later with shelling of cities and villages along the border, and air strikes and ground invasion concentrated in the cities of Sere Kaniye (Ras al Ain) and Tel Abyad (Gire Spi). At times the US indicated that it would keep some positions around North and East Syria, but when the Autonomous Administration entered into the agreement with the Syrian Government, US forces decided to fully withdraw from North and East Syria, and are destroying some of their military bases as they leave. The withdrawal is ongoing, with troops in Kobane, Manbij, Raqqa and Tabqa leaving in the days following the announcement of the agreement. As of the 20th October the US withdrew from their military base in Tel Tamer, but there are still troops and equipment still in the process of withdrawal. The withdrawn troops are expected to relocate only as far as Western Iraq.

Where have Syrian Government troops been deployed?

Per interviews conducted with officials of the Autonomous Administration, we have learned that the Syrian army will be deployed along the border from Derik to Sere Kaniye (Ras al Ain), and Tal Abyad until Manbij. The Syrian army will not enter Sere Kaniye or Tel Abyad.

On the 14th October, Syrian Army Forces moved through Raqqa, Tabqa, Hasakeh, Ayn Issa, Tel Tamer and Manbij and established military positions outside Tabqa, Ayn Issa, and Manbij. In Manbij they successfully repelled attacks from Turkish proxies in coordination with Manbij Military Council. They also took positions around the city in the villages Al-Farat, Ar-Rabhasan, Omglod, and Al-Sagor.

On the 15th October the Syrian Army established military positions on the roads north and west of Tel Tamer to defend from attacks, working in coordination with the SDF. The same day the Syrian Army attempted to enter Kobane, but Coalition forces had not yet completed withdrawal so they refused to allow them to cross. The Syrian Army finally entered Kobane on the evening of the 16th, taking positions along the Euphrates between Kobane city and Jarablus, a Syrian city held by Turkey and its proxy forces and on the border with Turkey.

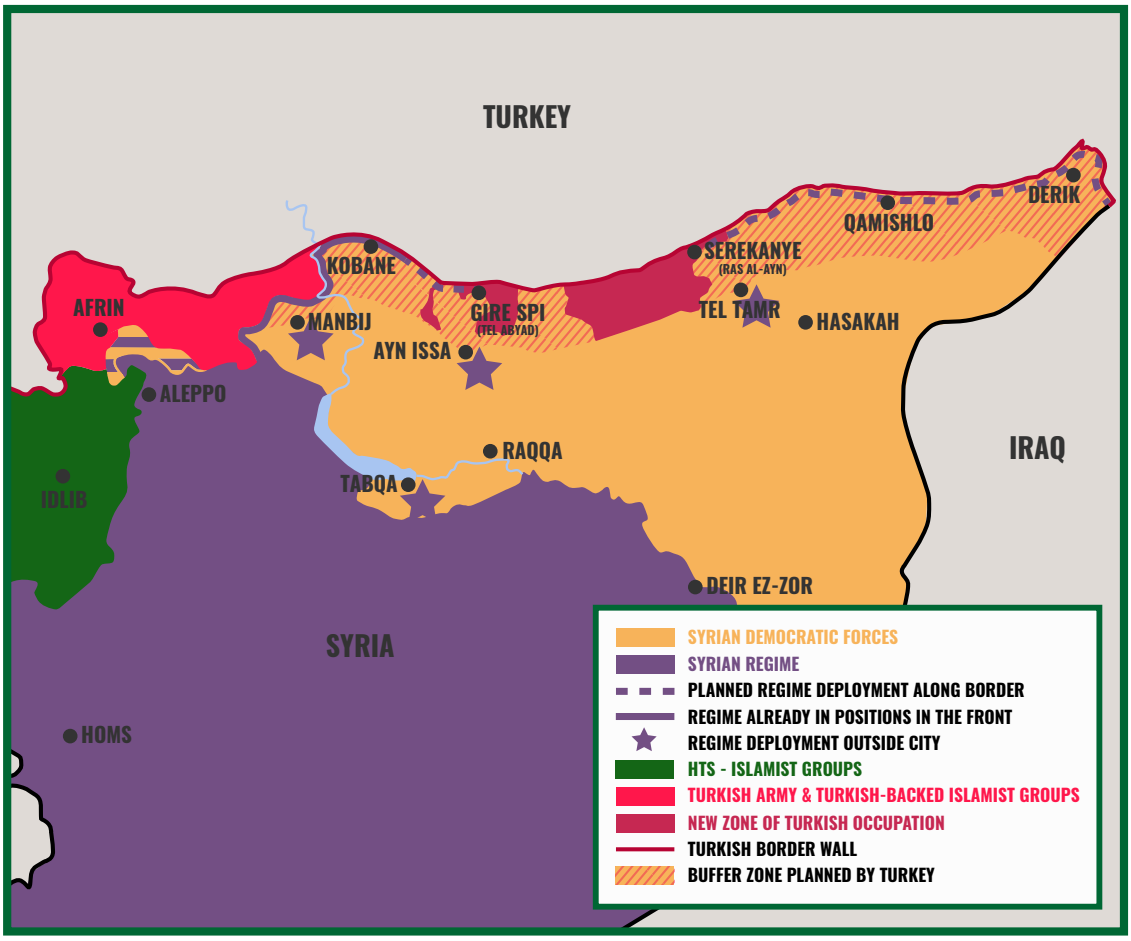
On the 16th October the Syrian Army, in coordination with the SDF, clashed with Turkish

proxy forces in villages in between Kobane and Ayn Issa and east of Ayn Issa. The SDF and the Syrian Army established a string of joint positions around Ain Issa, equipped with tanks and artillery.

Until the 19th October, there was no new Syrian Government presence anywhere east of Kobane along the border. In Hasakah, local sources have said "there isn't really an increased regime presence, though near the previously-held Regime areas things feel tense," and in Tel Tamer local sources say "Syrian Army are only outside the city, not inside, and not setting up active check points." On the 21st October we received information that the planned deployment east of Sere Kaniye would be realized.

As per the agreement, the Syrian Army has not entered the zone of conflict Tel Abyad or Sere Kaniye, and nor have they yet arrived in Dirbesiye, Qamishlo (outside of previously-held Regime areas), or Derik. Though they have filmed themselves and been filmed in the population centers they have traversed, there is no more Syrian Government or Syrian Army presence in any of the population centers of North and East Syria than prior to the agreement. In Manbij, uniquely, Russian patrols take place within the city, but as of the 21st October, they had no permanent presence there. On the 23rd October, Russian forces visited Kobane city and conducted an informal patrol to the front along with the local military council. This is significant as it suggests Russia are willing to acknowledge the local military councils established along the border as legitimate entities, separate to the YPG.

SYRIAN ARAB ARMY PRESENCE IN NORTH EAST SYRIA, 22. OCTOBER 2019



Map produced by Rojava Information Center, October 2019

How will this affect civil institutions and the Autonomous Administration?

The Autonomous Administration have been insistent that the agreement is a purely military agreement, and that there is no written agreement outlining any level of future political cooperation. They have stressed that the institutions of the Autonomous Administration will remain, and from our observations on the ground, this is proving to be the case. However, a future political settlement will likely be reached which may have ramifications on the political organisation of the region, and on the internal security of the cities, roads, checkpoints, and border crossing, which for now all remain, as before, under the control of the Autonomous Administration and its 'Asayish' internal security force.

There has also been a stated intention by both the SDF and the Syrian government to eventually push Turkish backed forces out of Afrin region, which has been under Turkish backed occupation since early 2018.

How will this affect international NGOs and press?

From the 14th October, following the announcement that the Autonomous Administration had entered into an agreement with the Regime, most international press left due to the Syrian Government's track record of targeting international journalists. We received reports that in anticipation of this agreement, some international press correspondents had been told not to enter North and East Syria in the days prior to the announcement. International NGOs, many of which were already evacuating international staff due to the volatility of the situation, accelerated the evacuations and by the end of the day on the 14th October, virtually all international NGO staff had evacuated to KRG Iraq. A significantly reduced presence of United Nations and ICRC staff remained, whose official registration with the Syrian Government affords them a higher degree of security.

There has been increased coordination between the Syrian Arab Red Crescent – which has close ties to the Syrian government – and the Kurdish Red Crescent – which historically has had an "arms length" relationship with the Syrian government and the Syrian Arab Red Crescent. On the 19th October, representatives from Kurdish Red Crescent, Syrian Arab Red Crescent, an American NGO and independent international volunteers took part in a civilian convoy to Sere Kaniye.

A number of international press remained in North and East Syria following the announcement, and more have started to return in the following week, with international TV crews and newspapers from the USA, Germany, France and Spain, among others, all still on the ground in North and East Syria. At least one international NGO has also arrived in North and East Syria. As of now, the process of travelling to and reporting in North and East Syria remains the same as before, with no need to interact with the regime or enter their sphere of control. Both the local press union and the Autonomous Administration have said they will inform press before any change in this situation: however, as always, it is advisable to remain alert to the military situation on the ground and consult with international press currently in the region before making your trip.

What was the response from the people of North and East Syria to Syrian Government troops?

Responses were mixed, but in general the people of North and East Syria find themselves reluctant allies with the Syrian Government. In some cities there were scenes of celebration upon arrival of Government troops, but in many places – particularly Kobane – the arrival of Government troops was met with reserve. On the 18th October there were protests reported in Deir ez Zor, Raqqa and Tabqa against the presence of Government troops. Conducting interviews on the ground, we found a general sentiment that 'if the alternative is Turkey, we would make a deal not only with the regime, but with the devil,' as one interviewee told us in Qamishlo. However, people have a number of fears and reservations about the agreement, and the Autonomous Administration is still negotiating to push back on some points.

What impact does this have on airspace?

There has not been any No Fly Zone established over North and East Syria, and aircraft from various air forces have been flying over much of the region. Although on the 7th October the USA removed Turkey from the coalition's air tasking order, claiming to have effectively cut off Turkey's access to North East Syrian air space, air strikes have hit Sere Kaniye, Tel Abyad and Ayn Issa. Turkey has been largely carrying out air strikes using strike drones, minimising the risk to its flight crews.

Russian aircraft were reported as flying over Manbij on the 14th October. On the evening of the 16th October we spoke to a source in Ayn Issa: "For three days there has been heavy war in the region around Ayn Issa and Tel Abyad, especially since the Syrian Army joined... Now the airspace is in the hands of Russia, that's why there are all the time Russian and Syrian air planes and surveillance aircraft over this region in the air. Once these air planes came there were no Turkish air planes any more in this region."

THE US – TURKEY CEASEFIRE AGREEMENT, 17 OCTOBER 2019

In the evening of the 17th October, a "ceasefire agreement" was agreed upon and announced following USA and Turkish negotiations. Following the announcement of the agreement, there has been a lot of confusion about the parameters of the agreement, as well as uncertainty about its scope for offering a lasting peace. As Turkish shelling and attacks by Turkish-backed forces continued throughout the night and the following day, the initial relief that many people in North and East Syria felt upon first hearing about the agreement is quickly dissipating. This document seeks to clarify what the agreement says, how it is different from the previous "security zone" agreement that was made on the 7th August, the positions of all of the key players, and possible steps forward.

What is the history and motivation behind Turkish incursions into Syria?

The Kurdish minorities in all four regions of Kurdistan (split between Turkey, Syria, Iraq and Iran) have long been the targets of cultural erasure, discrimination and violence. Turkey has a conflictual relationship with Kurdish minorities within Turkey, and has violently suppressed outbreaks of pro-autonomy movements. Erdogan's political party – the AKP – derives its political identity and strength from nationalistic rhetoric and an ideology that marginalises minorities and centralises power. The Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria puts into practice an example of localised democracy and ethnic

and cultural diversity that the AKP has tried to suppress.

Directly following the SDF's liberation of Manbij in August 2016, Turkey launched Operation Euphrates Shield, backing up jihadist proxy groups with heavy fire power in order to counter SDF presence in the region and – as stated by Turkish Defence Minister Fikri Isik - prevent territorial connection between the isolated 'canton' of Afrin and Kobane, and the unity of the Autonomous Administration across the whole of northern Syria. This was followed up by the Turkish invasion and occupation of the Afrin region starting in January 2018, which remains under Turkish-backed occupation. The Turkish occupation of Afrin serves Erdogan's expansionist ambitions as well as providing an arena for anti-Kurd politics. It is probable that the current focus of Turkish attacks on Sere Kaniye and Tel Abyad also serves this dual purpose, driven both by anti-Kurdish sentiment as well as being part of a longer term strategy to drive a territorial wedge between the regions of Kobane and Jazeera.

What was the situation before the start of the war?

Following months of escalating threats from Erdoğan, by the end of July 2019 it appeared that Turkey was on the brink of launching an invasion. An American team met with Turkish officials for three days and negotiated an agreement which held off immediate invasion. The initial terms of the agreement were: "a) the rapid implementation of initial measures to address Turkey's security concerns; b) to stand-up a joint operations center in Turkey as soon as possible in order to coordinate and manage the establishment of the safe zone together; c) that the safe zone shall become a 'peace corridor', and every effort shall be made so that displaced Syrians can return to their country."

In the following days, additional terms were clarified. Some key terms were:

- The establishment of a "security zone" east of the Euphrates and west of the Tigris (115km of border)
- The zone would span from 5km deep to 9-14km deep between Sere Kaniye and Tel Abyad, with an eventual extension to 18km between Sere Kaniye and Tel Abyad.
- The US and Turkey to conduct joint patrols (frequency not explicitly specified, but between every two weeks and monthly) but not establish permanent posts
- The YPG would withdraw and the "security zone" would be under the control of local military councils forming part of the SDF but without access to heavy weapons.
- Turkish fighter jets would not be able to enter the airspace, but monitoring drones would be allowed
- The SDF would destroy fortifications it had built along the border

To a large extent, the arrangement that Turkey and the USA had agreed to was being implemented. Throughout the "security zone," the SDF was supporting the establishment of local military councils to oversee defence responsibilities as the YPG and other SDF forces withdrew. Removal of military positions and fortifications was documented and confirmed by the US, and three joint US-Turkey patrols were conducted along the "security zone." However, Turkey expressed ongoing dissatisfaction with the terms of the agreement and stated its intention to act unilaterally. This was made possible following the US withdrawal.

What are the proposed terms of the 17th October agreement?

The Turkish invasion has been met with almost universal condemnation from national governments, human rights bodies and international organisations such as the UN and EU, with many countries banning arms sales to Turkey or imposing sanctions. The USA imposed particularly harsh sanctions on the 15th October. Two days later, a US delegation arrived in Turkey, and after several hours announced the current "agreement."

The agreement made by Turkey and the USA was called a "ceasefire" by the USA and a "pause of operations" by Turkey. It contains 13 points, which start with broad expressions of commitment to cooperation, to more specific plans for military control of occupied territories and lifting of sanctions. The clearest and most relevant actionable points come in the latter half of the document – points 7, 8, 9, 10 and 11 – and we will therefore consider these points in turn.

1. The US and Turkey reaffirm their relationship as fellow members of NATO. The US understands Turkey's legitimate security concerns on Turkey's southern border.

2. Turkey and the US agree that the conditions on the ground, northeast Syria in particular, necessitate closer coordination on the basis of common interests.

3. Turkey and the US remain committed to protecting NATO territories and NATO populations against all threats with the solid understanding of "one for all and all for one".

4. The two countries reiterate their pledge to uphold human life, human rights, and the protection of religious and ethnic communities.

5. Turkey and the US are committed to D-ISIS/DAESH activities in northeast Syria. This will include coordination on detention facilities and internally displaced persons from formerly ISIS/DAESH-controlled areas, as appropriate.

6. Turkey and the US agree that counter-terrorism operations must target only terrorists and their hideouts, shelters, emplacements, weapons, vehicles and equipment.

7. The Turkish side expressed its commitment to ensure safety and well-being of residents of all population centers in the safe zone controlled by the Turkish Forces (safe zone) and reiterated that maximum care will be exercised in order not to cause harm to civilians and civilian infrastructure.

> This is a key point, as it quietly defines the "safe zone" as the area currently controlled by Turkish forces. In a televised statement shortly after, SDF commander-in-chief Mazloum Abdi accepted the "safe zone" as being between Tel Abyad and Sere Kaniye, but it remained unclear how far south it would extend.

8. Both countries reiterate their commitment to the political unity and territorial integrity of Syria and UN-led political process, which aims at ending the Syrian conflict in accordance with UNSCR 2254.

> UN SCR 2254 'reiterates' "that the only sustainable solution to the current crisis in Syria is through an inclusive and Syrian-led political process that meets the legitimate aspirations of the Syrian people." Referencing this resolution in an agreement which

was made by two non-Syrian powers, and which essentially cedes a portion of Syrian territory to Turkey, calls into question the extent to which this citation of UNSCR 2254 is more than a token gesture.

9. The two sides agreed on the continued importance and functionality of a safe zone in order to address the national security concerns of Turkey, to include the re-collection of YPG heavy weapons and the disablement of their fortifications and all other fighting positions.

It is important to note that the YPG were already in process of handing in heavy weapons to the USA, and were documented destroying fighting positions within the "safe zone."

10. The safe zone will be primarily enforced by the Turkish Armed Forces and the two sides will increase their cooperation in all dimensions of its implementation.

This point is key, as it constitutes a significant concession to Turkey. Whereas previously Turkey agreed to joint US-Turkey patrols in which Turkish forces played more the role of an observer than enforcer, here the agreement grants Turkey the right to de-facto occupation.

11. The Turkish side will pause Operation Peace Spring in order to allow the withdrawal of YPG from the safe zone within 120 hours. Operation Peace Spring will be halted upon completion of this withdrawal.

Although this clearly sets the responsibility for "pausing" the operation on Turkey, it is important to note that Turkey has not done so. Drone strikes, shelling and ground clashes in the 24 hours following the agreement have been reported and documented from immediately after the "ceasefire" announcement and lasting throughout the day of the 21st. Per the Kurdish Red Crescent, at least 20 civilians have lost their lives to Turkish attacks since the 'ceasefire' was declared.

12. Once Operation Peace Spring is paused, the US agrees not to pursue further imposition of sanctions under the Executive Order of October 14, 2019, Blocking Property and Suspending Entry of Certain Persons Contributing to the Situation in Syria, and will work and consult with Congress, as appropriate, to underline the progress being undertaken to achieve peace and security in Syria, in accordance with UNSCR 2254. Once Operation Peace Spring is halted as per paragraph 11 the current sanctions under the aforementioned Executive Order shall be lifted.

13. Both parties are committed to work together to implement all the goals outlined in this Statement.

What is the proposed safe zone as per the 17th October "agreement"?

The 17th October "agreement" proposes an altogether new definition of "safe zone," scrapping the idea of the zone as extending along the Syria – Turkey border, and instead just focussing on the areas that Turkish proxies have seized since the start of the invasion. This includes the cities and surroundings of Tel Abyad and Sere Kaniye, extending south towards Ayn Issa. Although SDF maintained control over the majority of Sere Kaniye city up until the "ceasefire" was announced, it is assumed that the city itself is also understood

as territory that would be ceded to Turkey if the "agreement" were to be implemented.

The wording of the agreement does not specifically indicate a depth of the security zone, although 32km has been mentioned in press conferences and statements – for example by Turkey's Foreign Minister, Cavusoglu. It is noteworthy that Ayn Issa, the location of the headquarters of the SDF and the Syrian Democratic Council, the representative governing body that is responsible for the SDF, is 32km within Syrian territory. Additionally, the M4 highway – a crucial transport artery spanning North and East Syria – also runs through Ayn Issa. James Jeffrey acknowledged that this is part of the framing of the agreement, referencing the M4 road as a boundary of the agreement in an interview. Although Turkish-backed forces have at points reached 32km into Syrian territory, they have not held the area directly around Ayn Issa city and the M4 road with any stability throughout the conflict.

An open question is what will happen outside the 'safe zone' from Tel Abyad to Sere Kaniye: throughout the 'ceasefire' window Turkey has continued to conduct attacks outside this area, from Manbij to Kobane to Dirbesiyeh, and it is unclear if they will settle for a partial occupation of Tel Abyad to Sere Kaniye or simply continue their operation as before. As of the 21st October civilians are fleeing Dirbesiyeh, fearing an extension of the offensive.

Who are the refugees that Erdoğan wants to resettle in North and East Syria?

Turkey currently houses 3.6 million Syrian refugees who have fled the Syrian civil war. Although some are from North and East Syria, 83% are from other regions, many of which continue to be unstable or in critical need of rebuilding. In 2016 Turkey struck a deal with the EU, agreeing to contain the flow of refugees in exchange for 6.6 billion USD. These are the refugees that Turkey wants to forcibly settle in North and East Syria, a region which already has a population of 5 million people, of whom over 250,000 have become displaced since the invasion.

[To find out more about the refugee aspects of the conflict, see our factsheet "Erdogan's 'security zone: Refugees and humanitarian aid in North and East Syria"]

What are all sides saying?

Cavusoglu, Turkish Foreign Minister:

> *"SDF must withdraw 32 km deep inside Syrian territory and surrender their weapons and destroy their fortifications... we have reached a full agreement for the Turkish army to control this zone"*

> *"We got what we wanted. This is not a ceasefire. We [will] only halt our operations."*

Mazloum Abdi, SDF Commander in Chief:

> *"This ceasefire and this agreement have been created for those regions where there is now war, that is, the region between Sere Kaniye and Gire Spi [Tel Abyad]. The ceasefire is for this region, and we accept it in this sense. Whatever we can do as SDF to make this ceasefire work, we will do. America has led [brokered] this ceasefire, and is responsible for ensuring that it is carried out in the correct way... Nothing has been discussed for the*

other regions. Our forces remain there. Maybe there will be discussions over these other regions in the future. This agreement is for that region."

James Jeffrey, Special Representative for Syria Engagement:

"...the Turks have pushed down to that 30-kilometer level in a central part of the northeast and they're still fighting in there, and that's the focus of our attention now because that's the area that we define as the Turkish-controlled safe zone... that's basically the 30-kilometer area, which is also the road, M4-M10 – and then we will work with the Turks to focus on taking care of humanitarian issues in the zone, protection of religious and ethnic minorities, taking care of civilian, humanitarian issues, and managing and monitoring human rights. This is all based upon prior agreements that we had done with the Turks and the – indirectly the SDF back in August on the ways that we would be helpful on monitoring all of that through mainly non-military means or air means, not ground troops... Now, the Turks have their own discussions going on with the Russians and with the Syrians in other areas of the northeast and in Manbij to the west of the Euphrates. Whether they incorporate that later into a Turkish-controlled safe zone, it was not discussed in any detail. That right now is not Turkish-controlled territory."

Sergey Lavrov, Russian Foreign Minister:

"We will help build a dialogue which will lead to create appropriate conditions on the ground to guarantee Syria's sovereignty and territorial integrity."

The Syrian Government:

"What has been agreed between Washington and Ankara does not mean that Russia and Syria will agree to it."

Buseyne, Advisor to Assad:

"The safe zone is wrong, this is the occupation, Erdoğan is the invader in our lands. We are looking to get back Afrin, Jarablus and Idlib."

President Trump:

"It's a great day for the United States, it's a great day for Turkey ... it's a great day for the Kurds. It's really a great day for civilization."

Can this ceasefire agreement lead to lasting peace?

If a lasting peace is to be achieved in North and East Syria, the following factors must be considered:

Ongoing attacks
As the ceasefire agreement has failed to lead to a suspension of Turkish attacks during the 120 hours that was given as a window for SDF withdrawal, the chances of it leading to peace in the long term are virtually non-existent. Mazloum Abdi, Commander in Chief of the SDF, stated that "Turkey prevented the withdrawal of our forces," saying that the SDF

willing to withdraw its forces if it leads to genuine cease-fire and negotiations. SDF forces withdrew from Sere Kaniye on the 20th October. However, attacks and clashes continue within and outside this zone, on the Kobane and Manbij fronts, as well as around Ayn Issa and toward Dirbesiyeh to the south and east of the 'safe zone'.

Turkey's history of occupation
Turkey's track record in the Afrin region of North and East Syria, in which jihadist proxy groups directed by and reporting to Turkey are enacting demographic engineering, repressing dissent, enforcing social rules based on Sharia law, kidnapping and carrying out extra-judicial killings, is relevant to any future possibility of peace in zones under Turkish control. Turkey has overseen an ongoing breakdown in the rule of law, and any safe zone under the control of the Turkish Armed Forces – as mooted in the ceasefire agreement – seems likely to follow similar patterns.

Humanitarian crisis
The humanitarian impact of the war has been severe, with over 250,000 people displaced from their homes, dozens of neighbourhoods and crucial infrastructure destroyed by shelling and air strikes, and the irretrievable loss of human life. The war so far has seen a high toll on civilian life, particularly in terms of death and injury of children.

Who has a seat at the table
Despite the military agreement with the Syrian government and the presence of Syrian and Russian troops on the ground, it is important to recognise that the Autonomous Administration is the primary civil authority for the region, while the leading political body is the Syrian Democratic Council, to which the SDF reports. As such, the most recent round of negotiations between the USA and Turkey did not involve the most relevant political actors in the region.

ISIS resurgence
The invasion of Turkey has already facilitated the escape of dozens if not hundreds of ISIS-linked individuals, as well as creating the instability which ISIS sleeper cells can take advantage of to strike and to recruit.

Security concerns of both parties
Based on our research, the "security concerns" Turkey uses as the justification for its cross-border incursion are largely fabricated, and in no way commensurate to the risk posed to Syrian civilians by Turkish forces. As demonstrated by our analysis of cross border attacks, between January 2019 and July 2019 there were 30 documented Turkish attacks onto the Syrian side of the border, resulting in 27 injuries and deaths. Conversely, there was only one attack onto Turkey from the Syrian side, and in this case the attacker was promptly arrested by local security forces on the Syrian side of the border.

Given the agreement's political inviability; the collapse of rule of law in Afrin; and ongoing human rights violations and rapid deterioration in the humanitarian situation precipitated by the Turkish invasion, continuing despite the ceasefire; it appears highly unlikely that the Turkish-American ceasefire deal is likely to achieve any lasting peace, whether or not hostilities cease following the end of the ceasefire.

What is needed to achieve lasting peace?

Third party observation and enforcement of ceasefire and peace negotiations
It is necessary for any future cease-fire arrangements and steps towards peace to be monitored and facilitated by a third party, such as the UN, Arab League, or another power which is not directly involved in the conflict. Any future security mechanism on the Syria – Turkey border should be enforced by a third party. Third party observation is also necessary to investigate possible use of chemical weapons, war crimes and compliance with humanitarian standards. In addition, given the repeated attacks on North and East Syria throughout the past year from Turkish soil, any future security mechanism should extend into both Turkish and Syrian territory.

Inclusion of Autonomous Administration in negotiations
The Autonomous Administration is best placed to realize any future agreements concerning the future of the region. Any negotiations regarding the future of North and East Syria must have the Autonomous Administration involved as a primary actor. The failure of the international community to acknowledge the Autonomous Administration as a legitimate political entity has had disastrous consequences for both the security situation – in particular with regards to ISIS – and the humanitarian situation in the region. If Turkey and the USA are truly committed to principles of political sovereignty, then the future of Syria needs to be decided by Syrians, with the Autonomous Administration as an equal component alongside the Assad government and opposition representatives.

Humanitarian mobilization and access
A sustainable political solution will need to include significant support from the international humanitarian community, investment into reconstruction, and monitoring to ensure that aid reaches the people and places who need it the most. All parties involved in the conflict must facilitate full access to humanitarian organisations.

ISIS: Justice and rehabilitation
Ensuring the future security of the region will depend on the ability to counter a resurgence of ISIS, tackling the root causes of ISIS ideology as well as dealing with the immediate threat. Implementing proposals for an international tribunal for ISIS fighters located in North East Syria would enable a justice process connected to those who suffered at the hands of ISIS.

Continuing the Autonomous Administration's approach of reconciliation and re-education will minimize the build-up of resentments and hostility. Further effort must also be made for the repatriation of ISIS-linked women and children who are not being charged with a crime to their countries of origin.

[*For more information about ISIS detainees in North and East Syria, and prospects for justice, read our report "Bringing ISIS to Justice"]*

Conclusion

Given the mitigating factors outlined above, the 'ceasefire' agreement appears little more than a figleaf for Turkish occupation. What Turkey seems to understand by the 'safe zone' agreement is the handover of everything it was originally demanding, ie. de facto occupation of the entire Syrian-Turkish border region.

Meanwhile, the agreement with the regime does not present a solution for securing

lasting peace in the regions already occupied by Turkey; nor is it a guarantee that Turkish violations will not continue as they have to date on areas theoretically now under regime protection. It remains to be seen if a political settlement can be reached to shore up the military agreement between the two parties.

As such, the establishment of a safe zone spanning both Syrian and Turkish soil with international, third-party surety and observation is the only sure-fire way to prevent further Turkish violations against North and East Syria, and bring an end to the humanitarian crisis which has already displaced over a quarter of a million IDPs.

THE RUSSIA - TURKEY AGREEMENT, 22 OCTOBER 2019

As the 5 day ceasefire drew to a close, Erdoğan and Putin met for marathon talks which lasted for several hours beyond their allotted time. For Putin, it was a chance to establish himself as the power broker in the region, and for Erdoğan, it was a chance to get a "better deal" on his Syrian land grab than the US was willing to give to him. On the evening of the 22nd October, with hours left before the ceasefire drew to a close, the ten-point agreement was announced.

The agreement stated that joint Russian – Syrian military forces would begin clearing a 30 km "buffer zone" along the border from "YPG elements and their weapons" from noon on the 23rd October 2019, less than 24 hours after the announcement of the agreement. At the time of writing, the SDF did not comment directly on the agreement. SDF commander-in-chief Mazlum Abdi spoke directly with US President Trump and Russian officials, while negotiations on the ground between Russian officials and representatives of North and East Syria are also ongoing. Officials in North and East Syria are expected to accept some points of the agreements, push back on others, and give an official response in the coming days.

What does the Russia - Turkey agreement say?

1. The two sides reiterate their commitment to the preservation of the political unity and territorial integrity of Syria and the protection of national security of Turkey.

> Needless to say, this is simply paying lip service to the idea of territorial integrity as the agreement proceeds to cede the Turkish-occupied zone to Turkey.
>
> As previously argued, the oft-repeated "national security concerns" of Turkey are largely fabricated and certainly negligible compared to the security concerns that North and East Syria faces from Turkey.

2. They emphasize their determination to combat terrorism in all forms and manifestations and to disrupt separatist agendas in the Syrian territory.

> There is a huge body of evidence indicating that Turkey knowingly and intentionally supports jihadist groups in its proxy forces – both through the current "Operation Peace Spring" invasion and occupation as well as the 2018 invasion and occupation of Afrin. Rojava Information Center has documented over 40 former ISIS members

now part of Turkish-backed militias in Syria, including at least 5 now in the new area of 'Peace Spring' control. The Syrian Observatory of Human Rights says at least 150 former ISIS militants are operating in the region already as part of the Turkish chain of command. Groups like Ahrar-al-Sharqiya emerged from Jabhat al-Nusra (Al-Qaeda in Syria), while others like Faylad Majid have been transferred from al-Nusra-held Idlib to participate in the assault. Both of these groups have filmed themselves committing war crimes during the course of the invasion.

The reference to "separatist agendas" is an intentional misrepresentation of the Autonomous Administration, which explicitly sought political participation within the framework of the Syrian political system.

3. In this framework, the established status quo in the current Operation Peace Spring area covering Tel Abyad and Ras Al Ayn with a depth of 32 km will be preserved.

This point cedes the area from Tel Abyad and Sere Kaniye (Ras al Ain) down to Ayn Issa and the M4 road to Turkey, which represents a significant "gain" for Turkey compared to the 7th August 2019 agreement with the USA. If this agreement stands, we expect this region to follow the pattern of Afrin, where Turkish proxies such as Ahrar-al-Sharqiya, Jaysh-al-Islam and Sultan Murad – all of which subscribe to jihadist ideology – will be given administration over the region. As in Afrin, we expect to see demographic engineering, violence against ethnic and religious minorities, and institutionalized misogyny if control via Turkish proxies is actualized.

4. Both sides reaffirm the importance of the Adana Agreement. The Russian Federation will facilitate the implementation of the Adana Agreement in the current circumstances.

The Adana agreement was signed by Syria and Turkey in 1998, restoring bilateral relations after a long period of escalating conflict. The Agreement contains assurances that both sides would refrain from undermining each other's security situations. The Agreement provides both justification for but also limitations on Turkish incursions onto Syrian soil in order to take action against suspected PKK presence within Syria. The Adana Agreement allows for temporary presence of Turkish military forces up to 5 km into Syrian territory. A key question is who defines which groups present a legitimate security concern for Turkey, and which groups are considered as affiliates of the PKK. Historically until the present day, Turkey has slapped the label of "terrorist" on any Kurdish group in opposition to its policies, thus justifying severe repression of domestic Kurdish rights movements.

It is not a given that either Turkey or Syria see the Adana Agreement as feasible or beneficial. Doubts have been raised from within the Assad administration concerning the ability of the Syrian Government to cut links with any groups that Turkey considers to be PKK linked due to the strong Kurdish presence in the SDF and Autonomous Administration. Turkey may see the Adana Accords as limiting its aspirations for future annexing of Syrian territory.

5. Starting 12:00 noon of October 23 2019, Russian military police and Syrian border guards will enter the Syrian side of the Turkish Syrian border, outside the area of Operation Peace Spring, to facilitate the removal of YPG elements and their weapons to the depth of 30km

from the Turkish-Syrian border, which should be finalized in 150 hours. At that moment, joint Russian – Turkish patrols will start in the west and the east of the area of Operation Peace Spring with a depth of 10 km, except Qamishli city.

This agreement echoes the basic formulation of the 7th August 2019 US – Turkey agreement, with an expansion of the patrolled depth to 10km. YPG soldiers were already in the process of being withdrawn, and fortifications destroyed, at the point of Trump's withdrawal order, so this agreement largely replaces US 'oversight' with Russian presence.

It is likely that Qamishlo was excluded from the agreement due to the existing Syrian government presence within a small section of the city, including the airport and border crossing to Turkey. However, on the 23rd October the Turkish Foreign Minister confirmed that the YPG would be expected to withdraw from Qamishlo as well.

6. All YPG elements and their weapons will be removed from Manbij and Tal Rifat.

Manbij had already established a local military council and therefore had no YPG presence, whereas Tel Rifaat is under the military authority of Damascus rather than the SDF, so it is unclear what the impact of this agreement will be.

7. Both sides will take the necessary measures to prevent infiltrations of terrorist elements.

This point can be considered to be a token gesture to address international concerns about the resurgence of ISIS. As noted earlier, Turkey's ties to terrorist elements including ISIS have been well documented throughout the Syrian civil war.

8. Joint efforts will be launched to facilitate the return of refugees in a safe and voluntary manner.

There are two chief questions concerning the return of refugees/IDPs following the invasion. First, Erdogan's stated desire is to resettle between 1 and 2 million Syrian refugees currently in Turkey in the occupied zone. It is important to note that 83% of Syrian refugees in Turkey are not from North and East Syria, and therefore resettling them in the occupied zone does not constitute a genuine return home. As with the example of Afrin, it seems likely that Turkey will use this as a tool for demographic engineering, settling Arabic families in an area where formerly Kurds, Arabs, Syriacs, Armenians and Circassians used to live side by side. Almost all of the local Christian minority in Sere Kaniye, for example, has already been displaced by the Turkish invasion.

Secondly, the Turkish invasion has already displaced over 200,000 people, primarily from the Sere Kaniye – Tel Abyad region. Although some returns may be possible if this agreement leads to a genuine pause in conflict, many of the people displaced from the occupied zone will not able to safely return. In Afrin, a net flow of refugees out of the region has continued. Our researchers met families in the Shebha -Tel Rifaat region within the last month who had newly fled forced marriage at the hands of jihadist proxy forces in Afrin, or been driven from their homes as they were taken over by these same forces as headquarters. Virtually none of the 300,000 people who were displaced by Turkey's invasion have returned, fearing the violence and repression

now established across the region. Return would be particularly dangerous for ethnic and religious minorities, as well as anyone perceived as having political ties to the Autonomous Administration.

9. A joint monitoring and verification mechanism will be established to oversee and coordinate the implementation of this memorandum.

It remains to be seen how this agreement will be realized on the ground, how power over implementation will be distributed between Russia, Turkey and the Syrian government, and what role the SDF and Autonomous Administration will continue to play.

10. The two sides will continue to work to find a lasting political solution to the Syrian conflict within Astana Mechanism and will support the activities of the Constitutional Committee.

As previously stated, a political solution that does not involve the Syrian Democratic Council – the representative governing body of North and East Syria – is unlikely to result in a genuinely democratic political proposal or a lasting peace.

Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Vershinin stated on the 23rd that "since the deadlines have not been set, then the lack of deadlines means that they have no time limitations at this point," raising questions about what role they will play in longer term political negotiations.

Is the agreement being implemented on the ground?

Although the SDF neither publicly accepted nor rejected the deal, aspects of the deal appear to be being implemented. Prior to the announcement of the agreement, a spokesperson for US Vice President Pence confirmed that "Today the vice president received a letter from Gen. Mazloum [Kobane] notifying him that all SDF forces have withdrawn from the relevant area of operations." Although this may have been referring to the SDF understanding of the ceasefire, which was withdrawal from Tel Abyad and Sere Kaniye, on the 24th October, the SDF said in an interview with Sky News Arabia "we have withdrawn 32km from the border."

On the 23rd October, Russian military police patrolled in Manbij and in Kobane. As noted above, the joint patrol in Kobane is significant in indicating a Russian willingness to engage with local military councils in Kurdish-majority cities such as Kobane. Pictures and eyewitness accounts emerged on social media which indicated that YPG forces were withdrawing from their positions. However, later that day a Turkish drone strike hit municipality offices in Abu Rasen, east of Sere Kaniye and outside of the zone currently occupied by Turkey, while clashes have continued between SDF and Turkish-backed proxy forces around this zone to the west, south and east.

What are all sides saying now?

The Turkish Defence Ministry stated that Operation Peace Spring will now draw to a close, saying *"There are no offensives planned outside our current operational zone."* However, as noted above, offensives have continued outside the current operational zone.

USA President Trump tweeted: *"Big success on the Turkey/Syria Border. Safe Zone created!*

Ceasefire has held and combat missions have ended. Kurds are safe and have worked very nicely with us. Captured ISIS prisoners secured. I will be making a statement at 11:00 A.M. from the White House. Thank you!"

Erdoğan emphasized his commitment to clearing the area of the YPG, saying: *"Russia surely will not allow for it, we do not doubt this,"* but that if they *"do not leave, we will do everything necessary."*

For several days after the agreement was made, the SDF did not comment directly on the terms of the agreement, but continued to pursue diplomatic relations with America and with Russia. On the evening of the 23rd October, Mazloum Kobani spoke to Donald Trump on the phone. The conversation was summarised via Mustafa Bali, head of SDF press, on Twitter: *"I just spoke with President Trump and explained to him the Turkish violations of the truce that would not have been possible without his great efforts. We THANK President Trump for his tireless efforts that stopped the brutal Turkish attack and jihadist groups on our people. President Trump promised to maintain partnership with SDF and long-term support at various spheres."*

The same day, Mazlum Abdi also spoke to the Minister of Defence of the Russian Federation, and gave thanks to President Vladimir Putin and the Russian Federation *"for their work to defuse the war in our regions and spare civilians from its scourge"* as well as expressing reservations about some terms of the agreement which *"require discussions and dialogues in order to bring the views closer."*

On the 24th October, SDF officials gave some more detailed comments on their stance regarding the current political situation to Sky News Arabia, saying *"Kurds are ready to consider joining the Syrian army once the Syrian crisis is settled politically"* and *"we withdrew 32km from the Turkish border."*

What does this agreement change?

Although there are some similarities between the 22nd October agreement and the 7th August agreement – with the substitution of Russian forces for American - the new agreement also presents several key changes.

The first, and most drastic, is the acceptance of Turkey's occupation of territory stretching from Tel Abyad to Sere Kaniye, down to the M4 road 32 km south of the border.

The depth of the patrolled area is double the distance from the border: 10km from the previous 5km.

The Syrian Arab Army is more involved in this scenario, giving it joint responsibility with Russia for ensuring YPG withdrawal. In the 7th August agreement, the US worked with the SDF more directly to facilitate withdrawal and the establishment of local military councils.

Although it was not explicitly listed in the agreement, plans for 15 Syrian military observation posts – located west of the occupied zone as far as the Euphrates, and east of the occupied zone along the remainder of the northern border – have been released.

However, it does not represent a complete deviation from the 7th August framework.

The SDF previously accepted joint Turkey-US patrols along the border, and the proposed Russia - Turkey patrols present a similar situation. According to a source involved in the diplomatic process, the Autonomous Administration is willing to enter into a partnership with either the USA or Russia, not seeing either as a more "natural" ally.

What are the developments to keep an eye on?

Local Military Councils

The role of the local military councils – which were previously seen by America and the international community as a legitimate replacement for YPG presence – is yet to be clarified. It is possible that Turkey will not accept the military councils because they are supported by the SDF and will inevitably contain Kurds within their units. Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said that if the YPG do not retreat, then Syrian and Russian forces would retreat and "remaining Kurdish formations would then fall under the weight of the Turkish army."

The relationship between Assad and Erdoğan

The relationship between Syria and Turkey has a rocky history, and although the 22nd October agreement claims to re-establish the cooperative bilateral relations brought about by the Adana Agreement, Erdogan's occupation of Syrian territory isn't a solid foundation from which to rebuild friendly ties. However, the Russian-brokered arrangement will necessitate further cooperation between Syria and Turkey as the Russian – Turkish patrols will happen within the oversight of the Syrian government. Yet Erdoğan and Assad still find themselves in opposition to each other in two other regions in Syria: Idlib and Afrin. Despite backing Assad throughout the civil war, Putin gave approval for the 2018 invasion of Afrin by Turkey. The region of Idlib also remains in conflict, with Turkish-backed proxy forces fighting against the Syrian government's Russian-backed military campaign.

The relationship between Erdoğan and Putin

The increasing cooperation between Erdoğan and Putin – despite Turkey's theoretical NATO membership - looks set to grow, with reports of sales of additional S-400 missile defence systems already being negotiated. As the USA and NATO become more uneasy with Turkish ties to Russia, they may consider applying political or economic pressure. For now, sanctions applied on Turkey and leading political figures in the Erdogan administration have been lifted.

The relationship between the Syrian government and the Autonomous Administration and SDF

In many ways the 22nd October agreement appears to undermine the 13th October agreement between the SDF and Syrian Army. How this plays out in practice remains to be seen. As the agreement between the SDF and Syrian Army was limited to military cooperation, with the political details to be worked out later, there is still scope for political developments, and negotiations are ongoing on this basis. However, the Autonomous Administration is likely to be on the back foot in any future negotiations.

CONCLUSION

The latest development in the constantly changing political arena of North and East Syria is a sobering reminder that without the political will of the international community, ethnic cleansing, war crimes and the destruction of human life can be carried out without consequence. In fact, Erdogan's land grab was legitimized by his agreement with Russia, potentially paving the way for future operations.

The humanitarian crisis continues to unfold in the region, and despite increasing difficulties in access is more important than ever for the international humanitarian community to support local actors in coping with the crisis. Over 200,000 people have been displaced, infrastructure destroyed, and hundreds killed. In addition to facilitating the escape of hundreds of ISIS fighters and ISIS-linked women and their children, the conflict has also created the conditions for a resurgence of ISIS as security structures and counter-terrorism measures are severely disrupted.

The illegal occupation of Sere Kaniye and Tel Abyad – along with the occupation of Afrin – ought to be recognized as such by the international community. The sanctions which were lifted from Turkey after just a couple of days should be reapplied with new force. The presence of jihadist-linked groups and groups who stand accused of war crimes within Turkish proxy forces must necessarily lead to Turkey's identification as a state sponsor of terror. All measures must be taken to prevent forced demographic change or ethnic cleansing in these occupied regions, and restore the democratic administration that existed prior to invasion.

Though the balance of power has shifted dramatically away from NATO, the USA and the EU and towards Russia in recent weeks, all members of the international community can play a part in ensuring representation of all Syrian citizens – including those from North and East Syria – in future negotiations over a political settlement encompassing the whole of Syria. Analysts tend to focus myopically on the admittedly significant military arrangement, but whichever military force in whichever formulation ends up in the border regions of North and East Syria, there remains scope for a significant range of political outcomes for people on the ground. Pushing for legitimate representation of the civilian population of the region, as embodied currently through the Syrian Democratic Council and constituent local political assemblies, will ensure the best possible outcome for people on the ground.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