

**Kurdish Buildup in Northern Syria
What is at Stake for Turkey?**

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Office of Turkey

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In the last three weeks or so, the tragic pandemonium in Syria has witnessed two parallel dynamics with enormously significant regional and global ramifications which can potentially throw the region into another vortex of disasters. One is turning the tide of the war in favor of the Syrian government and the second is an equally interesting development marked by a massive gain of territories by Kurdish fighters in Northern Syria. Under the cover of an immense Russian aerial bombardment, the Syrian regime has not only gained a large swath of land, but has also turned the balance of power by dislodging rebel groups who are aided by Turkey and its regional allies from key areas along the principal pivot of the conflict.

Exploiting this propitious opportunity, the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG), the armed wing of the Syrian Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD), have advanced swiftly between Tal Rifaat and Azaz; two important cities in Northern Syria and close to the border with Turkey, having captured an important foothold, the Menagh air base. The Kurdish units are threatening to attack Azaz, the last stronghold of Turkish-backed Syrian rebels north of Aleppo. In the eyes of Turkey, this is a nightmare scenario and nothing can be more menacing than a re-galvanization of the Kurdish forces in its backyard.

The Turkish government has already started sounding the alarm, warned the Kurdish units that Azaz is a red line not to be crossed, and requested its NATO and regional allies for ground military operations in Syria. But, what is the geostrategic significance of the city of Azaz for Turkey and what can it do to secure it?

The basis for the current surge in power of the Kurdish forces in North Syria was laid in the summer of 2012 when forces loyal to Syrian President Bashar al Assad withdrew from the northeast of the country. Since then the Kurds have enjoyed more autonomy than any other time

in recent history¹. The PYD and its military wing, the YPG, rule over this autonomous region. The YPG fighters have established themselves as formidable combatants and scored victories against the Islamic State (ISIS) and other forces roaming the region. The group also earned respect, praise and support from the United States despite the intense disquiet felt by Turkey.

The full-blown Russian involvement in the Syrian war with its incessant aerial bombardment of rebel groups opposing the Syrian regime made it easier for the YPG to flex its muscles. Since the beginning of February 2016, the group has exploited the weakening of other rebel groups in the area and began pushing eastwards from their enclave around Afrin, taking over the Menagh airbase and the town of Tal Riffat from other Syrian rebels². In a bid to control the whole northern Syrian region bordering Turkey, the group continued to advance towards the strategic city of Azaz. Occupying this city, which is just 8 Km from the Turkish frontiers, would be a game changer for the Kurds, as it would accelerate the control of the 100 km stretch remaining from Azaz to the IS-held town of Jarablus, thereby completely cutting off Turkey from Syria.

Fabrice Balanche, a researcher from the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, argued that “if the Kurds take Azaz, then they could join the land gap between their two enclaves, Kobane and Afrin. Turkish Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu fears that if the Kurds capture Azaz, they could start a big offensive from Kobane to the west and from Afrin to the east”³. The Turks have made it unequivocally clear that this is the ultimate nemesis of their national security interest and would do all what it takes to prevent it.

¹Stratfor (2015), The Fragile Gains of Syria’s Kurds, retrieved from: <https://www.stratfor.com/sample/analysis/fragile-gains-syrias-kurds>

²Girit, S (2016), Syria Conflict: Why Azaz is so Important for Turkey and the Kurds, BBC, retrieved from: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-35595023>

³ Ibid.

Turkey requested the YPG forces to withdraw from the areas they have captured in the northern part of Aleppo, and began shelling their positions on the 13th of February⁴. On the 16th of the same month, Davutoğlu said the shelling had succeeded in halting the YPG from advancing upon Azaz and vowed that the group will face the “harshest reaction” if it tried to march on the town again. He declared that Turkey “will not allow Azaz to fall, and the whole world should know this”⁵.

Turkey intensified its assaults after the deadly suicide car bombing in the heart of Ankara on 17th February, and it held the YPG responsibility. The country has called on its western allies, especially the United States, to list the YPG forces as a terrorist group and to, immediately, stop partnering with them. However, Turkey’s attempt to classify the Kurdish fighters as terrorists did not get a matching enthusiasm from the United States. Instead, the US is calling Turkey to scale down its attacks. The long telephone conversation held between President Barack Obama and his Turkish counterpart Recep Tayyip Erdoğan on the 19th of February shows that not much has changed as far as the US stance vis-à-vis the Kurdish forces. While calling on the YPG not to “seek to exploit circumstances in this area to seize additional territory”, Obama urged Turkey “to show reciprocal restraint by ceasing artillery strikes in the area”⁶. However, there is too much at stake for Turkey to sit on its hands and see things in its neck of the wood exhaust their dynamics without doing anything on its part. A lot is at stake for Turkey.

Generally speaking, the main strategic goals of Turkey as far as Syria is concerned is the attenuation, if not the complete neutralization, of the Kurdish movements’ threat, in Northern

⁴Uras, U (2016), Turkey Shells Kurdish Positions in Syria for a Second Day, Aljazeera English, retrieved from: <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/02/turkey-shells-kurdish-positions-syria-day-160214091007489.html>

⁵Girit, Op. cit.

⁶ Office of the Press Secretary, White House (2016), Readout of the President’s Call with President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, retrieved from: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2016/02/19/readout-presidents-call-president-recep-tayyip-erdogan-turkey>

Syria. In addition to the exclusion of Assad from any future political settlement. Can Kasapoglu, a defence analyst with the Istanbul based think-tank, the Center for Economics and Foreign Policy Studies, writes that Turkey's geostrategic outlook and policy in Syria is consistent with its grand strategy of broadening its influence through the rise of conservative forces in the Middle East which sprouted in the wake of the Arab Spring⁷. Therefore, the recent resurgence of the Kurdish forces in the Syria region close to Turkey's southeastern borders and the coming back of the Assad regime largely hinder this grand geostrategic plan. The prospect of the city of Azaz falling into the hands of the YPG fighters especially represents a high tide of the danger in Turkish perception of the threat's spectrum. There are three specific reasons for this.

Can Acun, a researcher at the Turkish pro-government think-tank SETA, says that Azaz and its surrounding area, are very important for Turkey's national security and the future of the Syrian war. The area is on the land corridor stretching from the Turkish border to the city of Aleppo. He reasons that if this strip of land falls into the hands of the Kurdish fighters, as a result of their occupation of the city of Azaz, the humanitarian aid transported through this corridor would be interrupted⁸. However, the disruption of the aid convoys heading to Syria is one of the least worries of the Turkish leaders. In order for Turkey to be able to influence the dynamics inside Syria by aiding the Syrian rebels and show itself off to its enemies and allies that it is a regional force to be reckoned with, the existence of a physical corridor is absolutely necessary. The occupation of Azaz by the YPG would mean, therefore, the cutting off one of the corridors which connect Turkey to the Syrian theater. If left unchecked, Turkey fears that the Kurds will continue to expand to the point of sealing off the entire border between Turkey and Syria. The prospect of

⁷Kasapoglu, C (2016), Predicting Turkey's Next Move in Syria, retrieved from: <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2016/02/predicting-turkey-move-syria-kurds-isis-160215085930162.html>

⁸Girit, Op. cit.

losing this Archimedean point whereon Turkey can stand and move events in Syria is a veritable geostrategic loss that it cannot afford, as per to its claims.

The second reason why Turkey is so keen to avoid the YPG domination of Northern Syria, is because it raises the specter of the revival of separatist ambitions among its restive Kurds. The existence of a formidable Kurdish force, which is affiliated to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), a movement the country and its western allies consider as a terrorist group, in its backyard is a recipe for the resurrection of the Kurdish cause which it did everything to suppress.

The third reason for Turkey's nervousness towards the prospect of YPG takeover of Azaz is said to be demographic. Along Arabs and Kurds, ethnic Turkmens live in the area as well⁹, who have been driven out of Northern of Syria towards Turkey as a result of the Kurdish forces' expansion. Turkey has claimed several times that the Kurds have committed ethnic cleansing in the area that they controlled.

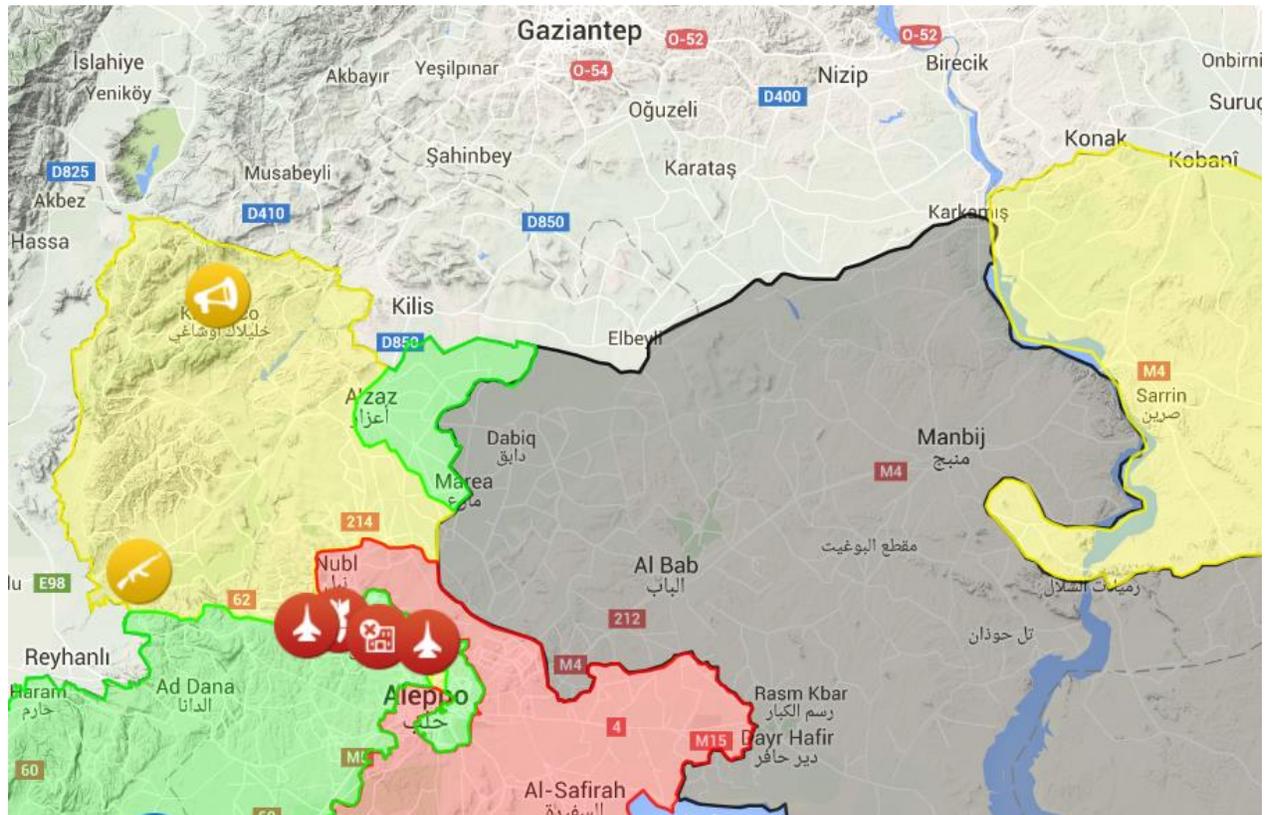
So, if the current twin dynamics pointed above represents the ultimate threat for Turkey's national interest, what options does it have to halt it? Amidst US reluctance to commit itself to ground military operation in Syria and its estimation of the YPG as important ally in the fight against ISIS and aggressive Russian posturing accentuated by the downing of its Su-24 on 24th of November 2015 by Turkey, can Ankara afford to go solo and send ground troops to Syria?

Turkish Defence Minister Ismet Yilmaz recently affirmed that there were no plans to send ground troops into Syria¹⁰. The country has been banking on the possibility of convincing the US-led coalition against ISIS to send troops, but as of yet nothing is showing up. Therefore, it looks like Turkey's only remaining option is to continue doing what it's been already doing, i.e.,

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Hume, T (2016), Turkish Defense Minister: 'No Intention' of Sending Ground Troops to Syria, retrieved from: <http://edition.cnn.com/2016/02/15/middleeast/syria-turkey-strikes-kurds/>

pressuring the United States to force the YPG fighters to halt their advance while continuing its artillery shelling of their positions.



Source: Liveuamap website, available online <http://syria.liveuamap.com/> accessed on February 29, 2016