



Vox

Operation Peace Spring: Delusion in Turkey's Objectives

Turkey announced its plan to engineer a 'safe zone' in northern Syria, an initiative that, according to Turkey, mainly emanates from the country's discontent from the presence of armed Syrian Democratic Forces' (SDF) on its southern borders. At their essence, safe zones are employed by states to pursue politically motivated objectives. In the case of northern Syria, Turkey's ambitions go beyond pushing the Kurds away from its border. Turkey appears determinant to fill-in the gap left by the Kurds' departure through settling Syrian refugees that are currently present in Turkey, an initiative outlined by President Erdogan in the course of the previous General Assembly. This approach risks a demographic flick with possible spillovers over the entire region's societal texture.

Using a critical lens, this paper attempts to provide an illustration to the delusion in Turkey's objectives behind creating the safe zone in northern Syria. This paper revolves around and discusses three main ideas. First, defining a safe zone and examining the applicability of its conditions in the case of northeast Syria. Second, Turkish endeavors to enforce a demographic change in northern Syria. By resettling Syrian refugees in the safe zone, Turkey aims at creating a refugee wall located at its southern borders and weakens Kurdish armed movements. Last, this paper refutes Turkey's humanitarian claims regarding sending refugees back to their homes. In fact, refugees who will be sent to the safe zone descend from different areas in Syria and are, in simple terms, moved out from Turkey and not moved into their homes.

Introduction

On the 9th of October 2019 Turkish President Erdoğan announced the start of cross-border Operation Peace Spring in north eastern Syria. The operation is carried out by the Turkish Armed Forces (TAF) and the Turkey-backed Syrian National Army (SNA) against the SDF that is composed mainly of the People's Protection Units (YPG), which are labelled by Turkey as a terrorist organization due to their alleged ties with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK).¹ Operation Peace Spring is a Turkish endeavour to impel the SDF from the Syria-Turkey border, thus paving the way for creating a 'safe zone' in northern Syria that accommodates the resettlement of up to 2 million Syrian refugees.² These refugees are to be mainly extracted from the 3.6 million Syrians that are present in Turkey.³ Not only the operation would allow Turkey to reduce the amount of refugees it has by more than half, but it will also be able to structure a predominantly non-Kurdish ethnic belt that separates the SDF from Turkey.

Considering the above, this piece has set to discuss Turkey's plans to form a safe zone in northeast Syria and, using a critical lens, analyzes the delusion in Turkey's objectives. This is mainly done through examining the Turkish plan and assessing the possibility of its implementation. The paper is divided as follows. The first part discusses the context that galvanized Turkey into launching Operation Peace Spring. The second part analyzes Turkey's objective and is divided into three parts. Firstly, the applicability of safe zone conditions in northeastern Syria. Secondly, the Turkish policy of structuring a demographic replacement to inhabitants of the safe zone. Thirdly, challenging Turkish claims to sending Syrian refugees back to their homes.

Background

The SDF's close presence to Turkey's southern borders has long constituted disturbance for the latter. The SDF has reportedly conducted several attacks on Turkish troops and Turkey-backed rebels present in Syria's northwestern district of Afrin.⁴ As a response, Turkey has threatened to deploy its military to incapacitate the SDF. However, Turkey's delay in materializing a military solution can be mainly understood as a result of the United States' (US) presence in north eastern Syria as part of its support for the SDF in the fight against the self-proclaimed Islamic State.

The US attempted to prevent or possibly delay a Turkish military action through concluding a safe zone agreement in early August with Turkey that stipulated the withdrawal of SDF personnel and artillery away from the Turkish border.⁵ The progress of implementing the US-Turkey plan lacked clearance as signs of disagreement overshadowed the deal as the safe zone's depth was disputed between both

¹ Cameron Abadi, "Turkey Claims That Syria's Kurds Are Terrorists. Should Anyone Believe Them?," *Foreign Policy*, October 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/10/17/turkey-claim-syrian-kurds-terrorists-not-isis-ypg-pkk-sdf/>.

² Patrick Wintour, "Recep Tayyip Erdoğan Proposes 'safe Zone' for Refugees in Syria," *The Guardian*, September 24, 2019, sec. World news, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/sep/24/erdogan-proposes-plan-for-refugee-safe-zone-in-syria>.

³ "Situation Syria Regional Refugee Response," UNHCR-Operational Portal refugee situations, November 2019, <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/syria/location/113>.

⁴ Wladimir van Wilgenburg, "Continues Attacks on Turkish Army and Rebels in Afrin," *Kurdistan24*, July 2018, <https://www.kurdistan24.net/en/news/02701924-aa19-4978-870e-ded15e10ded9>.

⁵ Sarah Dadouch, "Turkey, U.S. Agree to Form Joint Operation Center for Syria Safe Zone," *Reuters*, August 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-security-turkey-idUSKCN1UX0Y9>.

countries. The state of uncertainty continued until President Trump announced the withdrawal of US troops from northeastern Syria. A decision that implied the removal of the main deterrence standing between Turkish military action and the SDF which, in turn, triggered Operation Peace Spring.

The proposed Turkish safe zone runs 32 km deep into Syria and stretches for 480km from the Syrian border with Iraq to the city of Manbij in the west, thus encompassing the three governorates of al-Hassakah, al-Raqqa and Aleppo.⁶ The inhabitants of northeastern Syria are estimated to be around two million people with ethnic Syrian Kurds representing the majority of inhabitants.⁷ These areas are believed to be protected by around 40,000 to 60,000 SDF fighters that have long benefited from US support.⁸ While the presence of these fighter constitute a challenge to the Turkish plans in northeastern Syria, they are not the only setback in the way of Turkish ambitions. As such, in this section, I attempt to analyze the three main delusions in Turkey's objectives in creating the safe zone.

Is northeast Syria a safe zone?

In the course of the ongoing Syrian Civil War, calls for creating safe zones reoccurred by different actors.⁹ Yet these calls trigger a very basic question: what is a safe zone? There appears to be no consensus on a clear definition of safe zones.¹⁰ However, in generic terms, such zones encompass "an area within a country engulfed in armed conflict or generalized violence that is made safe from military attack. The idea is that those within the zone can live there safely, protected from the impacts of the conflict".¹¹ Using these features as a lens to observe the security situation in northeast Syria following the start of Operation Peace Spring, we can see that the area Turkey is after had probably higher chances of serving as a safe zone prior to Turkey's incursion. Today, while considering the ceasefire agreement, the situation in northeast Syria has not been made safe from military attack and violence. Civilians were subject to different forms of violence that have resulted into death, rape, abduction as well as loss of property.¹² Between the 11th and the 23rd of November, three car bomb attacks were perpetrated that killed around 30 persons and left more than 60 injured, most of whom were civilians.¹³ Another issue is that in many of these attacks no one is claiming responsibility for them.

What is being observed today in northeast Syria is a conflict that jeopardized the civilian's security. The situation is not expected to alleviate as signs of armed engagements continue between the SDF and the SNA. It is undoubtable that civilians are not protected from the impacts of the current conflict.

⁶ "Erdogan: The zone will be secured from Manbij to the border with Iraq," Enabbaladi, October 15, 2019, <https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/335236>.

⁷ Lindsay Maizland, "Who's Who in Northern Syria?," Council on Foreign Relations, November 2019, <https://www.cfr.org/in-brief/whos-who-northern-syria>.

⁸ Sarah El Deeb, "US Commander: Partnership with Kurds against IS Still Strong," AP NEWS, November 15, 2019, <https://apnews.com/2a0292ecea745be990f217b8cf654b3>.

⁹ Esther Meininghaus and Andreas Heinemann-Gruder, "Safe Zones for Syria: Mitigating the Humanitarian Crisis," BICC, January 2017, https://www.bicc.de/uploads/tx_bicctools/BICC_Policy_Brief_2017_1.pdf.

¹⁰ Anna Magdalena Rüsç and Geoff Gilbert, "Creating Safe Zones and Safe Corridors in Conflict Situations: Providing Protection at Home or Preventing the Search for Asylum?," no. The Andrew & Renata Kaldor Centre for International Refugee Law (June 2017): 24.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² "Damning Evidence of War Crimes by Turkish Forces and Allies in Syria," Amnesty International, accessed November 25, 2019, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2019/10/syria-damning-evidence-of-war-crimes-and-other-violations-by-turkish-forces-and-their-allies/>.

¹³ AFP, "Car Bomb Kills 9 in Northern Syria Town: Monitor," NST Online, November 23, 2019, <https://www.nst.com.my/world/world/2019/11/541457/car-bomb-kills-9-northern-syria-town-monitor>.

And if civilians that are familiar with the region and the nature of the conflict have suffered, the resettlement of complete strangers could increase civilian damage. An increase in civilian population can widen the scope of car bombs. It is very unlikely that Turkey's plan to pour millions of Syrians into the northeast would make civilians more protected from the impacts of the conflict.

A plan of resettlement or replacement?

The outbreak of conflict triggers various consequences for civilians. The available literature suggests a strong correlation on how conflicts and violence generate threats that galvanize civilian displacement.¹⁴ After more than eight years of conflict, the displaced Syrians remain an outstanding phenomenon. Today, Syria has more than 6 million internally displaced people which makes it the biggest internally displaced population in the world.¹⁵ The case of civilian displacement was very evident in northern Syria, particularly in the context of Turkish military action in the region.

For example, Turkey's cross-border Operation Olive Branch in early 2018 in Afrin resulted in the displacement of between 140,000 to 350,000 people, most of which are ethnic Kurds.¹⁶ During that operation, Turkey endeavored to impose a demographic change through mainly replacing the displaced population with ethnic Arabs and Turkmen.¹⁷ However, Turkey repudiated these claims.¹⁸ According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, nearly 300,000 persons were forcibly displaced from their areas in the course of Peace Spring actions.¹⁹ Meanwhile, the Syrian refugees that Turkey plans to resettle in northeastern Syria are mainly Arabs that previously inhabited northwestern Syria, which prompted observers to accuse Turkey of enforcing a demographic change in the areas.²⁰

Interestingly, Turkey today is also denying any objectives to structure a demographic change in northeastern Syria through mirroring its Olive Branch policies in Operation Peace Spring.²¹ However, through looking at Turkey's previous policies in Afrin as well as the current situation in the northeast, there is scant evidence that supports Turkey's repudiation of engineering a demographic change in the safe zone. On the contrary, Turkey is forcibly deporting Syrians into the war-torn country as inhabitants of northeast Syria continue to be forcibly deported from their areas.²² More than 315,000

¹⁴ Prakash Adhikari, "Conflict-Induced Displacement, Understanding the Causes of Flight: *CONFLICT-INDUCED DISPLACEMENT*," *American Journal of Political Science* 57, no. 1 (January 2013): 82–89, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-5907.2012.00598.x>.

¹⁵ "Internally Displaced People - UNHCR Syria," *UNHCR* (blog), accessed November 25, 2019, <https://www.unhcr.org/sy/internally-displaced-people>.

¹⁶ Matthias Von Hein, "Opinion: The Kurds Lose out Again | DW | 08.10.2019," *DW.COM*, October 2019, <https://www.dw.com/en/opinion-the-kurds-lose-out-again/a-50741424>.

¹⁷ Khayrallah Al-Hilu, "Afrin under Turkish Control : Political, Economic and Social Transformations," Technical Report (European University Institute, 2019), <https://doi.org/10.2870/136668>.

¹⁸ "Turkish Military 'Encircles' Syrian Town of Afrin," *The Irish Times*, March 2018, <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/world/middle-east/turkish-military-encircles-syrian-town-of-afrin-1.3425588>.

¹⁹ "Turkish Military Operation East Euphrates Kills More than 70 Civilians so Far and Forces Nearly 300 Thousand People to Displace from Their Areas • The Syrian Observatory For Human Rights," *The Syrian Observatory For Human Rights* (blog), October 2019, <http://www.syriaohr.com/en/?p=144078>.

²⁰ Nick Ashdown, "Turkey's Erdogan Wants to Redraw Syria's Map of Kurds and Arabs," *Foreign Policy*, November 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/11/08/erdogan-wants-redraw-middle-east-ethnic-map-kurds-arabs-turkey-syria/>.

²¹ Ayhan Simsek, "'Turkey Has No Plans for Demographic Change in Syria,'" *AA*, October 2019, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/operation-peace-spring/-turkey-has-no-plans-for-demographic-change-in-syria-/1622670>.

²² "Turkey Is Illegally Deporting Syrians into War Zones," *Amnesty International*, October 2019, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2019/10/turkey-syrians-illegally-deported-into-war-ahead-of-anticipated-safe-zone/>.

were sent back to Syria which, according to Turkey, returned on voluntary basis.²³ Amnesty International suggests that due to absence of official numbers, it remains difficult to distinguish between those that were forcibly deported or have in fact returned on voluntary basis.²⁴ However, it remains evident that there are several cases of forcible deportation of Syrian refugees by Turkey.²⁵

Turkey's reallocation of Syrian population

Turkey's plan to resettle refugees in northeast Syria would imply the expropriation of the inhabitants' property at best and the risk of structuring a predominantly non-Kurdish ethnic belt that separates Turkey from the SDF at worst. Yet according to President Erdogan, the plan is to send Syrians back to their homes.²⁶ The justification President Erdogan formulated is based on the safe zone's desert topography that is more suitable for the inhabitation of Arabs and not the Kurds.²⁷ While despite the fact that Turkey has only managed to control 120km strip of borderland, which accounts for only one quarter of the land Turkey is after for creating the safe zone, the area lacks the means of size and infrastructure to host the resettlement of two million refugees.

Another issue emanates from the origin of refugees Turkey wants to send back 'home'. While the origins of the 3.6 million refugees in Turkey is unknown, some reports suggest that a significant portion of the refugees Turkey wants to resettle descend from the Syrian governorates of Idlib and Aleppo. In simple terms, the homes of these refugees are in these governorates. As such, President Erdogan's claim is misleading at its essence. If Turkey continues with its plans to resettle refugees in the safe zone, this implies sending refugees back to their country but not to their homes. By doing this, Turkey risks a significant reallocation of a significant portion of the country's population.

Conclusion

Almost two months have passed since the start of Turkey's Peace Spring operation. Within this period, uncertainty remains overshadowing the destiny of the safe zone. Yet it remains certain that Turkey's decision to embrace a military solution has only exacerbated more tension and widened civilian exposure to violence. Resorting to armed action will only provoke more violence amongst the involved actors and will probably increase the likelihood of a political stalemate. As we have observed signs of mutual violence unfold between Syria's Arab and Kurdish population, the continuity of military action will trigger spill overs to the societal texture of the. There remains a space for an all-inclusive dialogue that concludes with a political solution to the problem.

Turkey's plans to create a safe zone for the resettlement of Syrian refugees through a military incursion situated the region's security in a quagmire. This piece outlined some of the delusions in Turkey's objectives. The areas that Turkey wants to compel for hosting refugees lack the preliminary security as violence continue to overshadow the situation. Pouring refugees into northeast Syria

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ <https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/EUR4411022019ENGLISH.pdf>

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-security-turkey-erdogan-homes/erdogan-says-operation-aims-to-send-syrians-back-to-their-homes-idUSKBN1WP1YO>

²⁷ <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2019/10/25/Turkey-s-Erdogan-Northeast-Syria-is-suitable-area-for-Arabs-not-Kurds-to-live.html>

would only increase civilian vulnerability to different forms of violence. Furthermore, the region's societal texture is at jeopardy considering of the continuous displacement of the region's inhabitants that Turkey aims to replace with Arabs and Turkmen, thus risking a demographic change in northeast Syria. The safe zone also lacks suitable areas and infrastructure to host two million refugees that would perceive humanitarian assistance as a prerequisite.

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