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Turkey in northwestern Syria

Rebuilding empire at the margins

This policy brief analyses the official discourse and actual practices of Turkish control and reconstruction in northwestern Syria. It finds that Turkey pursues a strategy that seeks to achieve control and influence through a mix of military occupation and full-scale reconstruction based on the logic of Turkification and the deployment abroad of the domestic apparatus of the Turkish state. The main objective of this strategy is to contain and undo the politico-territorial gains of the Syrian Kurds. In the process, Turkey largely bypasses the Syrian National Coalition. While this 'reconstruct-the-buffer-zone' strategy has been comparatively successful in the Al-Bab-Azaz-Jarablus area, it is running into trouble in the Kurdish-dominated Afrin area due to heavy-handed Turkish tactics of repression and the insurgency campaign that was launched by the Syrian Kurds. Yet, the nature of Turkish reconstruction engagement suggest it is there to stay, which in turn is likely to prolong the Syrian conflict. It will also create several problems from an EU policy perspective, including repression of Syria's Kurds, an uncertain future of Syrian refugees in Turkey and violation of international law.

Introduction

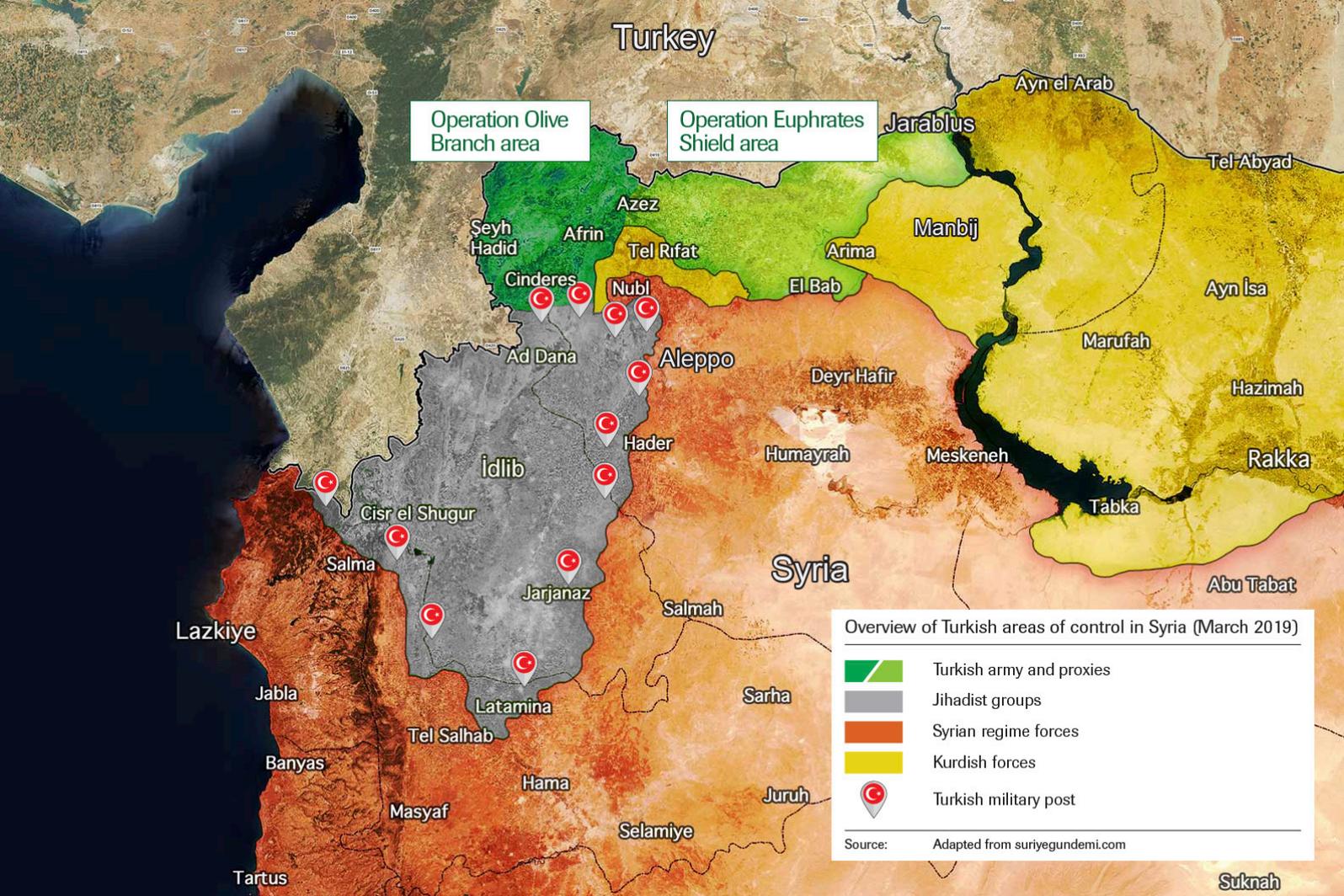
Over the past four years, Turkey's strategy towards the Syrian conflict shifted from supporting the wholesale overthrow of President Assad and replacing him with a Syrian Muslim Brotherhood-inspired government to containing and undoing the political and military advances of Syria's Kurds.¹ Turkey's new approach consists essentially of the creation of areas of control along the Turkish-Syrian border as a buffer zone against groups such as the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) based on the perception that they had become existential threats to Turkish national security.

Turkey implemented its new 'buffer zone' strategy in two phases. It first established

territorial control over the Azaz/Al-Bab/Jarablus area through Operation Euphrates Shield (OES) in 2016 and over the Afrin area through Operation Olive Branch (OOB) in 2018. Both operations were conducted by a mix of co-opted former Free Syrian Army (FSA) proxies under the notional control of the Syrian National Council (SNC) and direct Turkish military intervention (phase 1). Subsequently, Turkey started to deepen control over its newly established buffer zone by starting to reconstruct these areas. To this end, it deployed an array of governance, socioeconomic and cultural-religious interventions (phase 2). Map 1 below illustrates the current Turkish presence in northwestern Syria.

This policy brief analyses the official discourse and actual practices of Turkish control and reconstruction in northwestern Syria with the aim of understanding the drivers behind it and to assess current and future consequences of the Turkish presence for the Syrian civil war.

¹ We would like to thank Pieter van Ostayen (University of Leuven) and Floor El Kamouni-Janssen (Clingendael) for their helpful comments on an earlier version of this brief. Its contents remain the responsibility of its authors.



Map 1 Turkish control and presence in northwest Syria (March 2019)

Source: Adapted from Suriyegundemi.com with appreciation

Turkey's official narrative on the reconstruction of Syria

Because of its initial anti-Assad stance, the unfinished business of Syria's civil war and its own economic contraction, Turkey has not engaged in Syria-wide reconstruction.² Instead, Turkey's official political narrative focuses on improving the humanitarian situation in Syria via the Syrian National Coalition (SNC) and on supporting this body, which is internationally recognised as the legitimate representative of the Syrian people by 120 states and organisations.³

² Van Veen, Erwin, *The Geopolitics of Syrian Reconstruction: A Case of Matryoshka*. The Hague: Clingendael, 2019.

³ The SNC is officially called 'the National Coalition of Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces'. It is also referred to as the 'Interim Government' or 'transitional government'. See: <http://en.etilaf.org> (accessed 24 April 2019).

This approach is based on Turkey's new 'human and conscious approach to security' policy.⁴ On the surface, this approach envisages the deployment of Turkish civilian and administrative tools⁵ in support of the SNC to reclaim and restructure 'liberated territories'.⁶ Turkey has formally encouraged the SNC to 'take on governance and

⁴ See: <http://www.suriyegundemi.com/2018/05/10/guvenlige-insan-vicdan-odakli-yaklasim-afirin-zeytin-dali-harekati/> (accessed 24 April 2019).

⁵ These tools are primarily domestic in nature and include, for example, a role for the Ministry of Turkish Religious Affairs, the Turkish Housing Development Administration (TOKI), the Anadolu Media Agency and other pro-government companies. See: <http://www.suriyegundemi.com/2018/05/10/guvenlige-insan-vicdan-odakli-yaklasim-afirin-zeytin-dali-harekati/> (accessed 16 April 2019).

⁶ See: <https://www.haberler.com/cumhurbaskani-erdogan-suriye-nin-yeniden-ihyasi-10743880-haberi/> (accessed 16 April 2019).

service provision responsibilities during the transition period [between the ending of the civil war and the establishment of a new Syrian government] in accordance with the demands of the population'.⁷ Although no such transition period ever started, Turkey has nevertheless sponsored both the SNC and its military wing, the Free Syrian Army (FSA), for years for this purpose – up to and including the present.⁸

Underneath the official narrative lies a somewhat darker reality, however. To start with, Turkey took full and direct responsibility for the reconstruction of those parts of northwestern Syria it controlled after its military operations terminated, employing the full weight of its state apparatus in support of its efforts. For example, the Minister of Services of the SNC (a.k.a. Interim Government), Abdullah Razzouk, clarified that the local councils in areas under Turkish control work and communicate directly with Turkish authorities without reference to the SNC.⁹ Although the SNC has been reluctant to criticise Turkey's control over reconstruction efforts in northwestern Syria due to its own inability to stabilise the area,¹⁰ it is safe to say that Turkey's rhetoric of supporting SNC efforts contrasts with its actual practice of being in the driving seat.

Moreover, developments on the ground – discussed below – suggest that much of the Turkish reconstruction effort consists of top-down 'Turkification' through economic exploitation of Syrian resources,¹¹

suppression of political and civic liberties,¹² and the expulsion of Syrian Kurds from the area.¹³ Turkification is a nationalist concept that was originally deployed in the early 20th century by the Committee of Union and Progress (the Young Turks) to forge a national state out of the Ottoman empire by 'systematically depriving non-Turks (i.e. Kurds, Arabs, Albanians and non-Muslims) of their established social, political and cultural rights'.¹⁴ Its implementation often consisted of top-down measures that enforced administrative integration, economic nationalisation and cultural assimilation.¹⁵ Power was centralised in the heart of the Turkish state and nationalism standardised, undoing the more decentralised power structure and the recognition of diverse identities that characterised the Ottoman empire. 'Turkification' is being operationalised by the Turkish government in northwest Syria in a largely similar manner. This has not only reinforced the Turkish presence in Syria, but also boosted President Erdogan's nationalist credentials at home.

As a result, Turkish reconstruction efforts have created governance and administrative bodies – local councils in particular – in northwestern Syria that are entirely dependent on Turkey's political, economic and military backing for their survival. These bodies in turn provide basic services, security and administrative support to the areas' Syrian population. The approach has several advantages for Turkey. First, engaging in tightly orchestrated reconstruction prevented a power vacuum from emerging in key border areas after the above-mentioned

7 Turkish MFA, <http://www.mfa.gov.tr/suriye-siyasi-gorunumu.tr.mfa> (accessed 24 April 2019).

8 See: <http://en.etilaf.org/about-us/fact-sheet.html> (accessed 24 April 2019).

9 See: <https://english.enabbaladi.net/archives/2018/05/private-turkish-companies-impose-themselves-on-northern-aleppo/> (accessed 24 April 2019).

10 See: <https://www.meforum.org/57975/local-council-azaz> (accessed 14 May 2019).

11 See: <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2018/06/turkey-syria-exports-revived-under-shadow-of-war.html> (accessed 16 April 2019).

12 See: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2018/08/syria-turkey-must-stop-serious-violations-by-allied-groups-and-its-own-forces-in-aftrin/> (accessed 16 April 2019).

13 See: <https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-mideast-crisis-syria-turkey/in-schools-and-hospitals-turkey-carves-north-syria-role-idUKKBN1CH269> and <http://archive.is/WzINT> (both accessed 16 April 2019).

14 Kayali, H., *Arabs and Young Turks*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997.

15 Ülker, E., 'Contextualising 'Turkification': Nation-building in the late Ottoman Empire, 1908-18', *Nations and Nationalism*, Vol.11, pp:613-636, 2005.

Turkish military operations by reducing popular support for groups like the Kurdish YPG. Second, stability *à la Turc* strengthens the country's leverage in negotiations about Syria's post-war order.¹⁶ Thirdly, Turkish companies benefit from reconstruction-oriented investment projects that boost its domestic economy.

Turkey's reconstruction practices in northwestern Syria

While Turkey pursues a unified strategy in northwestern Syria, which aims to achieve control and influence through a mix of military occupation and full-scale reconstruction based on the logic of Turkification and the deployment abroad of the domestic apparatus of the Turkish state, the application of this strategy looks rather different in the two main areas under Turkish control.

On the one hand, Turkey has implemented an integrated and mostly consent-based approach to reconstruction in the area captured by Operation Euphrates Shield (OES), which includes Azaz, Al-Bab, Al-Rai and Jarabulus (see Map 1).¹⁷ Despite some of the problems noted above, this approach has led to fairly positive economic developments.¹⁸ It was enabled by the considerable ethnic (Turkmen) and/or religious (Sunni) compatibility of the Syrian population in the Azaz-Jarabulus corridor with Turkey, as well as by the local population's cooperative and appreciative attitude towards Turkish interventions. As engineer Zakaria Haj Hassan in Al-Bab

expressed it: 'Dependency on Turkey is natural and historic. I remember our grandparents singing, "from Aleppo to Antep" [using the old Ottoman name for Gaziantep]. We still have relatives in Turkey.' As to the future, he added: 'Are we going to be part of Turkey? Are we going to be a small independent statelet? We don't know. Those who are nationalists would call it colonialism. Those who are religious would say we are all Muslims. We have no problem. In the old days, we were one nation from Istanbul to Yemen to Morocco.'¹⁹

On the other hand, Turkey has only been able to pursue a basic, security-focused version of its reconstruct-the-buffer-zone strategy in the Afrin area that was captured by Operation Olive Branch (OOB) (see Map 1). Here, Syrian Kurds represented the majority of the population.²⁰ Turkey has – and does – struggle(d) to establish a basic level of control through tactics of suppression, confiscation and expulsion of the area's Kurdish population and its leaders which, in turn, has triggered a YPG-led insurgency. In essence, the overwhelming Kurdish population of Afrin triggered a militaristic approach to occupation in which Turkey uses its counter-terrorist toolkit as the starting point for reconstruction efforts with predictably negative results. These include an increasing sense of mistrust and dissent among the population, a growing insurgency and a deteriorating security situation.

In both areas, Turkish Army units and Syrian National Army (SNA) fighters have been tasked with maintaining security around urban centres after military operations terminated. The SNA was put together in late 2017 from a number of former FSA groups and is estimated to comprise three corps

16 International Crisis Group, *Prospects for a Deal to Stabilise Syria's North East*, ICG: Brussels, Report No. 190, 2018.

17 See: <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/78450> (accessed 16 April 2019).

18 See: <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2019/02/syria-azaz-turkey-support-real-estate-department.html#ixzz5gSWIJM8t> and <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2019/03/syria-aleppo-al-bab-regime-turkey-opposition-crossing.html> (both accessed 16 April 2019).

19 See: <https://www.apnews.com/3adcaa2b9b214465bb9e61d8427ab774> (accessed 27 April 2019).

20 See: Balanche, F., *Rojava's Sustainability and the PKK's Regional Strategy*, Washington: The Washington Institute, 2016, online: <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/rojavas-sustainability-and-the-pkks-regional-strategy> (accessed 10 May 2019).

(about 10,000–25,000 men)²¹ that are trained and paid by Turkey.²² Security in urban centres is ensured by having trained and equipped a 7,000-strong Syrian police force, which is also on the Turkish payroll.²³

Under the security umbrella of these organisations, local councils have been able to reestablish governance and administration after the Syrian regime lost control of the area in 2012.²⁴ SNC guidelines state that local councils are intended to be an extension of the opposition's revolutionary armed groups operating against the Syrian regime.²⁵ But, as noted, counter to both Turkey's and the SNC's official narrative, local councils are not supervised by the SNC but by Turkey. For instance, according to the head of the local council in Azaz, Muhammed Hamdan Yusuf, all the local councils work directly with Turkey.²⁶ Although the longstanding and generally accepted practice continues that council members are elected by the elders of a given locality, who themselves represent the interests of influential families (in part on

a tribal basis), it is Turkey that oversees this process today.²⁷

Reconstruction in more detail: The Operation Euphrates Shield area

In the predominantly non-Kurdish areas captured during Operation Euphrates Shield (OES) (see Map 1), Turkey has been setting up institutions that mirror Turkish structures and practices, creating favourable conditions for private (Turkish) investment and encouraging refugee return. These institutions also reflect Turkey's own brand of national Islamism. Nationalism manifests itself in the introduction of the Turkish language in the primary school curricula in the area.²⁸ State Islamism reveals itself in the 1,472 clerics²⁹ and 5,686 religious teachers³⁰ that Diyanet – the government's directorate of religious affairs – has hired among Syrians to spread Turkey's political interpretation of Islam among the local population, including anti-Kurdish and anti-Gülenist sentiments. In the Euphrates Shield area between Al-Bab, Jarablus and Azaz, Turkey has also been renovating administrative and social service buildings, including 450 schools.³¹ It has furthermore built roads, post offices

21 See: Hage Ali, M., *A Quagmire in the Making?*, Beirut: Carnegie Middle East Center, 2019, [online](https://www.trtworld.com/middle-east/what-is-the-new-syrian-national-army--14648); <https://www.trtworld.com/middle-east/what-is-the-new-syrian-national-army--14648> (accessed 25 April 2019).

22 See: <http://www.suriyegundemi.com/2018/04/07/ozgur-suriye-ordusu-nedir-ne-degildir/>; <https://www.yenicaggazetesi.com.tr/osocular-isyan-etti-maaslarimizi-til-olarak-almak-istemiyoruz-203384h.htm> (both accessed 8 April 2019).

23 <https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-mideast-crisis-syria-turkey/in-schools-and-hospitals-turkey-carves-north-syria-role-idUKKBN1CH269>; <https://www.sabah.com.tr/galeri/turkiye/afrin-yerel-polis-gucleri-goreve-hazir/7> (both accessed 8 April 2019).

24 Institute for Peace and War, *Local Governance inside Syria: Challenges, Opportunities and Recommendations*, London, 2014, [online](https://iwpr.net/sites/default/files/download/publication/iwpr_syria_local_councils_report_web.pdf); https://iwpr.net/sites/default/files/download/publication/iwpr_syria_local_councils_report_web.pdf (accessed 9 May 2019).

25 See: <http://en.etilaf.org/syrian-local-councils/establishment-of-local-councils.html> (accessed 10 May 2019).

26 See: <https://www.meforum.org/57975/local-council-azaz> (accessed 8 April 2019).

27 See: <https://www.meforum.org/57975/local-council-azaz> (accessed 8 April 2019).

28 See: <https://www.apnews.com/3adcaa2b9b214465bb9e61d8427ab774> (accessed 3 May 2019).

29 See: Din Hizmetleri Genel Müdürlüğü, *Suriye Fırat Kalkanı ve Zeytin Dalı Faaliyet Raporu*, Ankara, 2018, [online](https://dinhizmetleri.diyaret.gov.tr/Documents/FKB-ZDB%20Faaliyet%20Raporu.pdf); <https://dinhizmetleri.diyaret.gov.tr/Documents/FKB-ZDB%20Faaliyet%20Raporu.pdf> (accessed 3 May 2019).

30 See: <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2018/09/turkey-syria-religious-body-becomes-pillar-influence-tool.html> (accessed 3 May 2019).

31 See: <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2018/09/turkey-syria-religious-body-becomes-pillar-influence-tool.html> (accessed 8 April 2019).

and hospitals,³² and has even established a Syrian Branch of the Turkish University ‘Harran’ from Sanliurfa.³³ Moreover, Turkey has appointed thousands of Syrian officials who have been trained in Turkey and who are paid monthly salaries by the Turkish government.³⁴ Lastly, local councils have compelled inhabitants to obtain new ID cards equipped with a special code that is linked to Turkey and which provides access to its basic social services (health, education and the like).³⁵ All these elements are part of a policy of ‘Turkification’³⁶ that suggests an intent to influence and control, not just support.³⁷

The positive relationship between Turkey and local councils in OES-captured areas has mutual benefits. On the Syrian side of the equation, reconstruction moves swiftly and both basic safety and social services have been restored. On the Turkish side of the balance sheet, local councils guarantee Turkey a major share in private reconstruction projects that could also stimulate the resettlement of the c. 3.6 million Syrian refugees in Turkey. Turkish private companies are, for example, the sole contractors of big infrastructure and energy projects throughout the area. To protect its own commercial interests in northwest Syria and boost its own economy, Turkey obliged an estimated 7,000 Syrian firms that have been established in Turkey since 2011 to invest in Istanbul and Gaziantep instead of

Syria.³⁸ The economic benefit of this strategy is visible in the fact that Turkish exports to Syria (OES and OOB areas combined) are now roughly US\$1.34 billion (2018) and rising, on the way to reaching their 2009 pre-war level of \$2 billion. Turkish imports from Syria have, however, remained well below their pre-crisis level.³⁹

A useful illustrative case of the nature of Turkish engagement in northwestern Syria is its \$7 million thermal power station project in Azaz. In return for the establishment of a thermal station by a Turkish company, the local council gifted the required land and construction materials. For their part, Azaz residents have started paying monthly electricity bills – in Turkish Lira – to the Turkish operator of the plant via Turkish post offices in Azaz.⁴⁰ This profit-making model illustrates how Turkey approaches the territories it controls as if they were Turkish.

Reconstruction in more detail: The Operation Olive Branch area

In the predominantly Kurdish area of Afrin that was captured during Operation Olive Branch (OOB) (see Map 1), Turkey’s security-focused approach rapidly generated broad popular grievances after the YPG’s withdrawal in 2018. To start with, Turkey’s military presence significantly decreased the level of safety for ordinary citizens in Afrin,

32 See: <https://www.dailysabah.com/war-on-terror/2018/08/06/turkey-establishes-university-campus-after-freeing-al-bab-from-daesh> (accessed 8 April 2019).

33 See: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-turkey-syria-universit/turkish-university-to-open-campus-in-northern-syria-idUSKCN1J2243> (accessed 8 April 2019).

34 See: Din Hizmetleri Genel Müdürlüğü (2018), *op.cit.*

35 See: <https://www.almasdarnews.com/article/turkey-issuing-turkish-ids-azaz/> (accessed 8 April 2019).

36 See: <https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-mideast-crisis-syria-turkey/in-schools-and-hospitals-turkey-carves-north-syria-role-idUKKBN1CH269> (accessed 8 April 2019).

37 Hage Ali (2019), *op.cit.*

38 See: Türkiye-Suriye İş Ortaklıkları, *Fırsat Yeniden Doğuyor*, Building Markets, 2018, online: https://buildingmarkets.org/sites/default/files/pdm_reports/syrian-turkishbusinesspartnerships_tr_pagebypage.pdf and <https://english.enabbaladi.net/archives/2018/05/private-turkish-companies-impose-themselves-on-northern-aleppo/> (both accessed 2 April 2019).

39 See: http://www.tuik.gov.tr/PreTablo.do?alt_id=1046 (accessed 2 April 2019).

40 See: <https://english.enabbaladi.net/archives/2018/05/private-turkish-companies-impose-themselves-on-northern-aleppo> (accessed 2 April 2019).

according to Amnesty International.⁴¹ In large part this was because of human rights abuses by Turkish-backed armed proxies – such as Firqat 55, Jabhat al-Shamiyya, Faylaq al-Sham, Firqat al-Sultan Murad and Ahrar al-Sharqiyya – that were given relatively free reign against the local Kurdish population. For example, a number of these groups confiscated valuable civilian properties, such as over 75% of Afrin's olive groves that have a market value of \$150 million per year.⁴² Turkey has tolerated such illegal appropriation and purchases thousands of tons of olives from Afrin, the revenues of which mostly benefit its Syrian proxies. The Turkish agriculture minister, Dr. Bekir Pakdemirli, justified Turkish indifference towards this seizure by arguing that it denied olive-production revenues from accruing to the PKK.⁴³

UN reporting moreover indicates that an estimated 150,000 Kurdish residents of Afrin were displaced in the wake of the Turkish invasion⁴⁴ and that Turkey has subsequently sought to change the area's demography in favour of Syrian Arabs by privileging and promoting Arab settlements.⁴⁵ In similar vein, Turkish authorities have actively sought to stifle Kurdish political dissent by arresting the president and members of the Kurdish

National Council in Afrin, as well as over 2,600 politically active Kurdish citizens because of their alleged relations with the YPG, according to the Syrian Observatory.⁴⁶ Lastly, Turkey has built a wall separating Afrin from Tel Rifaat and other parts of northern Syria, patrolling its length with armoured vehicles of its own armed forces.⁴⁷

In response to such tactics, the YPG and its front groups – Ghadab al-Zaytoun and Hezen Rizgariya Efrine – have initiated an insurgency in both the Olive Branch and Euphrates Shield areas, which is now about 15 months old. These groups claim to have carried out about 220 attacks with an estimated 100 casualties between late March 2018 and end January 2019, aiming to raise the cost of Turkey's military presence and disrupt both its reconstruction projects and the local administration.⁴⁸ In a hit-and-run attack on 30 April, for instance, seven Turkish servicemen were wounded in action.⁴⁹ While Turkey and its proxies have sought to downplay the importance of these attacks by attributing casualties to demining operations,⁵⁰ the YPG seeks to magnify their significance through its social media channels.

41 Amnesty International, *Syria: Turkey must stop serious violations by allied groups and its own forces in Afrin*, 2018, online: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2018/08/syria-turkey-must-stop-serious-violations-by-allied-groups-and-its-own-forces-in-afrin/> (accessed 25 April 2019).

42 See: <http://www.syriahr.com/en/?p=102951>; <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2018/12/turkey-syria-making-money-from-afrin.html> (accessed 25 April 2019).

43 See: <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2018/12/turkey-syria-making-money-from-afrin.html> (accessed 16 April 2019).

44 United Nations, Human Rights Council, *Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic*, Geneva: HRC, A/HRC/39/65, 9 August 2018; UNHCR, *Syria Factsheet January–November 2018*, 2018, online: <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/unhcr-syria-factsheet-january-november-2018> (accessed 11 May 2019).

45 See: <https://syriauntold.com/2018/08/13/afrin-on-the-road-to-arabization/> (accessed 1 May 2019).

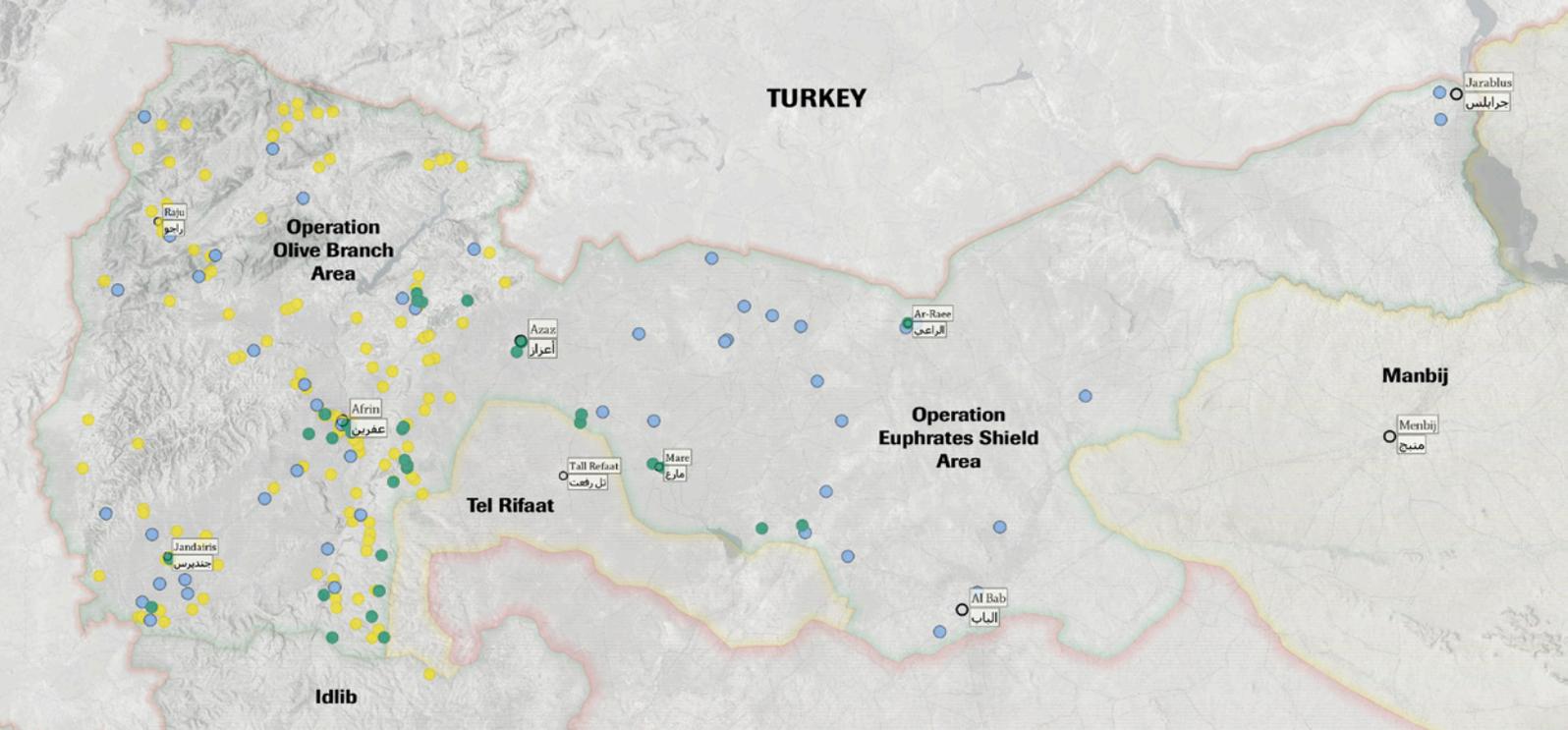
46 See: <http://www.syriahr.com/en/?p=122844> (accessed 25 April 2019).

47 See: <https://twitter.com/StoicViper/status/1119530483065294848/photo/1> (accessed 25 April 2019).

48 See: <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/mena/2019/03/01/wrath-of-the-olives-tracking-the-afrin-insurgency-through-social-media/> (accessed 25 April 2019).

49 See: http://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/haber/turkiye/1371152/Firat_Kalkani_harekat_bolgesinde_saldiri_7_asker_yaralandi.html (accessed 1 May 2019).

50 See: <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/mena/2019/03/01/wrath-of-the-olives-tracking-the-afrin-insurgency-through-social-media/> (accessed 25 April 2019).



**Map 2 Insurgent attacks on Turkish-linked forces in northwest Syria
March 2018–January 2019**

Legend: YPG=Yellow; Ghadab al-Zaytoun=Blue; Hezen Rizgariya Efrine=Green)

Source: Bellingcat by Nathan Ruser, [online](#)

But what about next-door Idlib?

It is difficult to analyse the extent of Turkish influence and control in Idlib after Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), formerly known as Al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra, assumed full control of the province by defeating the Turkish-backed National Liberation Front (NLF) and forming the Syrian Salvation Government in early 2019.⁵¹ After this Islamist takeover, Turkey’s activities in Idlib have been limited to providing security along the 14–20 km deep demilitarised zone that resulted from the provisions of the Sochi Agreement (see Map 1 for the location of Turkish military posts) and to delivering humanitarian assistance to a number of refugee camps via NGOs. In general terms, Turkey’s presence in Idlib seeks to preclude a military offensive against HTS that may trigger sizeable refugee flows towards Turkey. It is, in a sense, a temporary containment strategy that is different from the reconstruct-the-buffer-zone approach Turkey pursues in its Euphrates Shield and Olive Branch areas.

51 See: <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2019/01/turkey-syria-idlib-mission-gets-tougher.html> (accessed 8 May 2019).

On balance

The establishment of semi-autonomous Turkish protectorates west of the Euphrates river has effectively undermined – and to some extent undone – the political and territorial progress of the Syrian Kurds. Turkey’s private-public reconstruction model could also help Turkey to dampen its own recession, especially if it develops a flexible model that can be scaled up to include Aleppo at some point in the future (obviously, this province and city will remain under Syrian regime control).⁵² Finally, a stable, safe and reconstructed northwestern Syria could ultimately facilitate the return of the significant number of the c. 3.6 million Syrian refugees that Turkey currently hosts.⁵³

Yet, the sustainability of Turkey’s strategy of control and reconstruction in both areas remains to be seen because its modus operandi has created a whole set of new

52 UN ESCWA estimates the investment potential of full-scale reconstruction of Syria at roughly \$120 billion. See: <https://www.unescwa.org/news/syrian-experts-discuss-post-conflict-reconstruction-policies-after-political-agreement-syria> (accessed 26 April 2019)

53 See: <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/syria/location/113> (accessed 26 April 2019).

challenges. To start with, Turkey relies on local councils to provide local governance but current popular protests numbering in the hundreds – particularly in Azaz and Al-Bab – suggest that these councils are at least in part unpopular due to their undemocratic and corrupt nature, as well as the poor quality of the services they provide.⁵⁴ Moreover, if the large-scale return of Syrian refugees that President Erdogan has occasionally hinted at actually happened, it could easily destabilise northwestern Syria.⁵⁵ In any case, a few safe enclaves in northwestern Syria are unlikely to be sufficient to convince the millions of Syrians currently residing in Turkey to return.⁵⁶ Moreover, Syrian refugees in Turkey associate ‘security’ in Syria with the end of the fighting, the removal of President Assad and holding the Syrian security forces accountable for their wartime behaviour.⁵⁷ These conditions are unlikely to be met in the near future. Although there are allegations that Turkey has encouraged, perhaps even forced, around 300,000 Syrian refugees to return to Syria, it seems self-defeating to continue this approach at scale before the end of the Syrian civil war since it would most likely just generate Turkey’s next border problem.⁵⁸ In brief, the official Turkish rhetoric of refugee return appears to be largely intended for domestic consumption without significant practical effect in the real world. Finally, Turkish suppression of Kurdish communities and organisations in Afrin

triggered YPG-led insurgency attacks against Turkish reconstruction projects, armed proxies and local councils. There is a risk of Afrin falling prey to a protracted guerrilla war reminiscent of Turkey’s decades-long fight at home against the PKK. If these problems persist, it is likely that Turkey’s response will be militarised in nature. However, the Turkish military is neither trained nor equipped to address civilian and multidimensional reconstruction problems while also suppressing a guerrilla war.

Conclusion

Faced with the failure of its original strategy to overthrow the regime of President Assad through the Syrian opposition, Turkey shifted to an approach that focuses on containing and undoing the gains of the Syrian Kurds. The scale and perseverance of Turkey’s reconstruction efforts in the buffer zone it has established in northwest Syria suggests it may well be permanent.⁵⁹ The SNC is used as a fig leaf for Turkish occupation that brings benefits to the Turkish state as well as the Syrian communities in the area, but which are mostly concentrated in the Euphrates Shield area.

It must be noted that Turkey’s reconstruct-the-buffer-zone strategy only covers the border area west of the Euphrates river. There remains unfinished business further to the east and south of the OES and OOB areas, in places like Manbij and Tel-Rifaat. Here, Turkey seeks a political compromise with the US and Russia respectively, which would allow it to deploy military force against the YPG. Moreover, Turkey has tirelessly emphasised the applicability of its strategy for the area east of the Euphrates river as well. President Erdogan has repeatedly underlined Turkey’s willingness to extend its military operation eastwards, arguing that: ‘[o]therwise, we cannot provide a sustainable solution for the matter of Syria’.⁶⁰ It is relevant

54 See: <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2019/04/protests-aleppo-countryside-bab-suran-against-local-councils.html> (accessed 26 April 2019).

55 It appears that most Syrian refugees in Turkey have no intention of returning home soon, while the feeling in Turkey is increasing that they are overstaying their welcome. See: <https://www.economist.com/europe/2019/04/27/as-turkeys-economy-slows-attitudes-toward-syrian-refugees-harden> (accessed 2 May 2019).

56 See: <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/78450> (accessed 26 April 2019).

57 See: <https://seefar.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Syrians-in-Turkey.pdf> (accessed 26 April 2019).

58 See: <https://multeciler.org.tr/turkiyedeki-suriyeli-sayisi/>; <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/03/22/turkey-mass-deportations-syrians> (accessed 26 April 2019).

59 Van Veen, E. and E. Yüksel, *Too big for its boots, Turkish foreign policy in the Middle East 2002–2018*, The Hague: Clingendael, 2018.

60 See: <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkey-will-clear-off-east-of-euphrates-in-syria-erdogan-141615> (accessed 3 May 2019).

to note here that Turkey has recently sought to make military advances into the Tel Rifaat area by capturing a few small villages, which it subsequently withdrew from due to stronger-than-anticipated resistance. Taking control of this area would conclude its operations west of the Euphrates and set the scene for crossing the river.⁶¹

Considering the nature of Turkish engagement in the areas it currently occupies, especially from a reconstruction angle, suggests that Turkey intends to stay for the long haul. President Erdogan stated in one of his recent speeches that: ‘we will stay until we are done’ – without being clear about his desired end-state.⁶² As permanently undoing the gains of the Syrian Kurds is likely to require a long-term Turkish presence in northern Syria, this comment can be understood as setting the scene for Turkish annexation, or the creation of ‘breakaway regions’ under Turkish protection. However, Turkey’s territorial advances in Syria have not produced a security situation conducive to sustaining their benefits. Not only does the situation seem unstable (Afrin) and mired in corruption (Azaz-Jarablus-Al-Bab), it is also vulnerable to Syrian regime pressure and Kurdish resistance.

More permanent Turkish control over northwest Syria also runs counter to a number of strategic EU objectives:⁶³

1. The EU’s objective of achieving a peaceful resolution of the conflict will become more complex since animosity will remain between Turkey and Syria as long as the

- former retains a part of the latter. This risks creating a new ‘frozen conflict’.
2. Turkish marginalisation of the SNC directly contradicts EU support for this body as part of its conflict resolution efforts.
3. Turkey’s continued militarised and repressive approach towards the Syrian Kurds pays scant attention to the value the EU attaches to the promotion of democracy and human rights in Syria.
4. If Turkey were to permanently annex these areas, or create a *de facto* autonomous region, this would be incompatible with EU commitments towards the territorial integrity of Syria and with international law on the impermissibility of annexation through conquest.
5. Forced refugee return from Turkey to northwest Syria would violate international humanitarian law and could contribute to a new wave of Syrian refugees to Europe.

While only the last argument may count in the eyes of Western politicians of the more realpolitik-oriented variety, the issues outlined above risk creating new factors of instability that could plague the Levant for years to come. It would be wise to include the Turkish role in Syria as another urgent discussion point in EU-Turkish dialogue with a view to pushing for greater protection of Syrian refugees in Turkey and the region’s Kurds. At the same time, the EU will not want to jeopardise its migration deal with Turkey by taking too critical a stance. In fact, a relatively safe and Turkish-secured buffer zone that allows the return of Syrian refugees from Turkey would fit the EU’s border (and refugee) externalisation strategy rather well.

The central policy question to answer is therefore whether short-term minimisation of negative spillover from the Syrian civil war is a higher priority than working to prevent long-term regional instability. In the case of the former, the EU will largely leave Turkey to its own devices in northwestern Syria. In the case of the latter, it will have to critically engage as part of its broader policy-dialogue and negotiations, risking a further dent in EU-Turkish relations.

61 Note that this will be a complex undertaking as Syrian, Russian and Turkish forces, or their proxies, are all present in different parts of Tel Rifaat. See: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-security-turkey/turkey-russia-reviewing-deployment-in-syrias-tel-rifaat-region-turkish-vp-idUSKCN1SB05X>; <https://ahvalnews.com/turkey-fsa/turkey-backed-fsa-launches-operation-syrias-tal-rifaat-region> (accessed 14 May 2019).

62 See: <https://www.bbc.com/turkce/live/haberler-turkiye-43413735> (accessed 27 April 2019).

63 European Council, *Council adopts EU strategy on Syria*, 2017, online: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/syria/> (accessed on 26 April 2019).

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Clingendael – the Netherlands Institute of International Relations – is a leading think tank and academy on international affairs. Through our analyses, training and public debate we aim to inspire and equip governments, businesses, and civil society in order to contribute to a secure, sustainable and just world.

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