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The Turkish Intervention in Northern Syria: One Strategy, Discrepant Policies

Khayrallah al-Hilu

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Executive Summary

Turkey has used military force to achieve its strategic objective of constraining the activity of the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG), which it views as the Syrian branch of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). Between 2016 and 2019, Turkey launched three military operations: in the northern Aleppo countryside; in Afrin; and in the northern Raqqa countryside – western al-Hasakah.

While Turkey's strategic objective has remained constant across these operations, Ankara's policy has varied in each area in several ways. In security terms, Turkish forces have acted with considerable severity in the Afrin region (Operation Olive Branch) while showing leniency in the northern Aleppo countryside (Operation Euphrates Shield). There has also been a clear disparity in Turkish policy between the towns of Tall Abyad and Ras al-Ayn, despite the two being located in the same operational area (Operation Peace Spring). Turkey has also given the Syrian factions loyal to it free rein against Kurdish communities, especially in Afrin, while maintaining a higher level of discipline among factions in non-Kurdish areas. Discrimination has been practised between the different regions in terms of services provided, such as electricity supply and road network maintenance. Finally, Turkey has launched operations aimed at demographic change, especially in the Afrin region, where it has settled internally displaced persons (IDPs) and the families of fighters loyal to it in the homes of forcibly-displaced Kurds while also transferring Turkmen IDPs from Homs and Latakia to areas adjacent to the Syrian-Turkish border.

This discrepancy in policies may be attributed to a growing Turkish concern with national security centred around dismantling the Kurdish Autonomous Administration project and securing all the territory five kilometres south of its Syrian border. The towns and communities located within this border strip are deemed of great importance and given priority in terms of service provision in order to incentivise Syrians to reside there. As for the similarities in Turkish policy across the three spheres of influence, they include deployment in a limited number of large barracks and several forward guard posts to confront YPG fighters. In addition, the same Turkish administrative division has been deployed across the three regions, as opposed to the forms of governance and laws that had been adopted by the Syrian opposition-affiliated Interim Government. As a result, services in these areas have been provided by Turkey's own institutions, albeit to varying standards. These similarities may be attributed to Ankara's desire to control the region in terms of both security and administration using a familiar model, and to prevent the Interim Government from playing any role at variance with Turkish interests.

Introduction

With the withdrawal of the Syrian regime from large swathes of territory in the east of the country in spring 2012, the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) along with its armed wing, known as the People's Protection Units (YPG), began building its own governance project in north-eastern Syria and in Afrin. Following an attempt by Kurdish fighters to take control of the border town of Ras al-Ayn in late 2012, Turkey responded by supporting Free Syrian Army (FSA) factions and Islamist brigades in order to expel them.¹ After a long battle, Kurdish fighters eventually took over the town in July 2013. Ever since then, Turkey has been on guard against what it sees as the danger of a Kurdish national entity on its southern border, a danger that was exacerbated by the collapse of negotiations in Ankara with the head of the PYD, Salih Muslim, then the breakdown of the peace process with the PKK in 2015 and finally the United States' reliance on the YPG as a key partner in its war against IS, which ended with Kurdish fighters taking control of Manbij in August 2016. All these developments shaped Ankara's strategy in Syria into one of containing the YPG, a strategy which moved it to launch three military operations in three different Syrian regions, at different times and in different circumstances.

International attitudes towards Turkey's military intervention varied with each operation depending on the level of tensions in relations with Ankara. The United States welcomed Operation Euphrates Shield against IS in the northern Aleppo countryside (August 2016-March 2017), deeming it to serve US national security interests. Germany and France agreed, although Russia voiced reservations.² By contrast, Operation Olive Branch against Kurdish fighters in the Afrin region (January-March 2018) was accepted by Washington, London, and Moscow, while Paris and Berlin both expressed concern that the operation was not conducive to stabilisation or a resolution in Syria, pointing to the success of Kurdish fighters in combating IS.³ As for Operation Peace Spring against the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in the border area between Tall Abyad and Ras al-Ayn (October-November 2019), it was met with understanding on the part of Russia, which deemed it a step towards weakening the Western-allied SDF, while the US and EU both spoke out against the operation.⁴ At the local Syrian level, the opposition's Syrian National Coalition welcomed all three Turkish operations, hailing them as positive steps against terrorism,⁵ while the Assad regime and SDF objected to what they described as a Turkish occupation of the north of the country.⁶

As a result of this Western opposition, international organisations ceased providing humanitarian assistance in the Peace Spring operation zone after Turkey took over the territory, opting instead to provide aid through Damascus rather than Gaziantep. In so doing, they gave Ankara the burden of providing humanitarian services in this region, as they had also done previously in Afrin.

¹ Skype interview with a former military commander in the Suqour al-Jabal Brigade, 11 June 2020.

² Middle East Monitor, "The Turkish Intervention in Syria Gets US Support and Angers Moscow" (in Arabic), 8 September 2016, <https://bit.ly/38VNtZK>; Anadolu Agency, "Hollande: We Understand Turkey's motives for Launching Euphrates Shield" (in Arabic), 25 August 2016, <https://bit.ly/36KIoAJ>; RT, "Varying Attitudes Towards Operation 'Euphrates Shield'" (in Arabic), 24 October 2016, <https://bit.ly/2HcWbak>

³ BBC Arabic, "Afrin: Different International Positions Regarding Turkish Force Invasion" (in Arabic), 22 January 2018, <https://bbc.in/3kELX0h>

⁴ Sputnik, "Kremlin: Putin and Erdogan Have Not Agreed to a Telephone Conversation on the Situation in Syria" (in Arabic), 10 October 2019, <https://bit.ly/3pO0aMf>; Al-Jazeera, "New International Positions... What is the Future of Operation Peace Spring?" (in Arabic), 17 October 2019, <https://bit.ly/3IMPLOf>

⁵ Syrian Opposition Coalition Website, "Committed to Fighting Terrorism and Liberating Syria" (in Arabic), 8 October 2019, <https://bit.ly/38Wwerc>

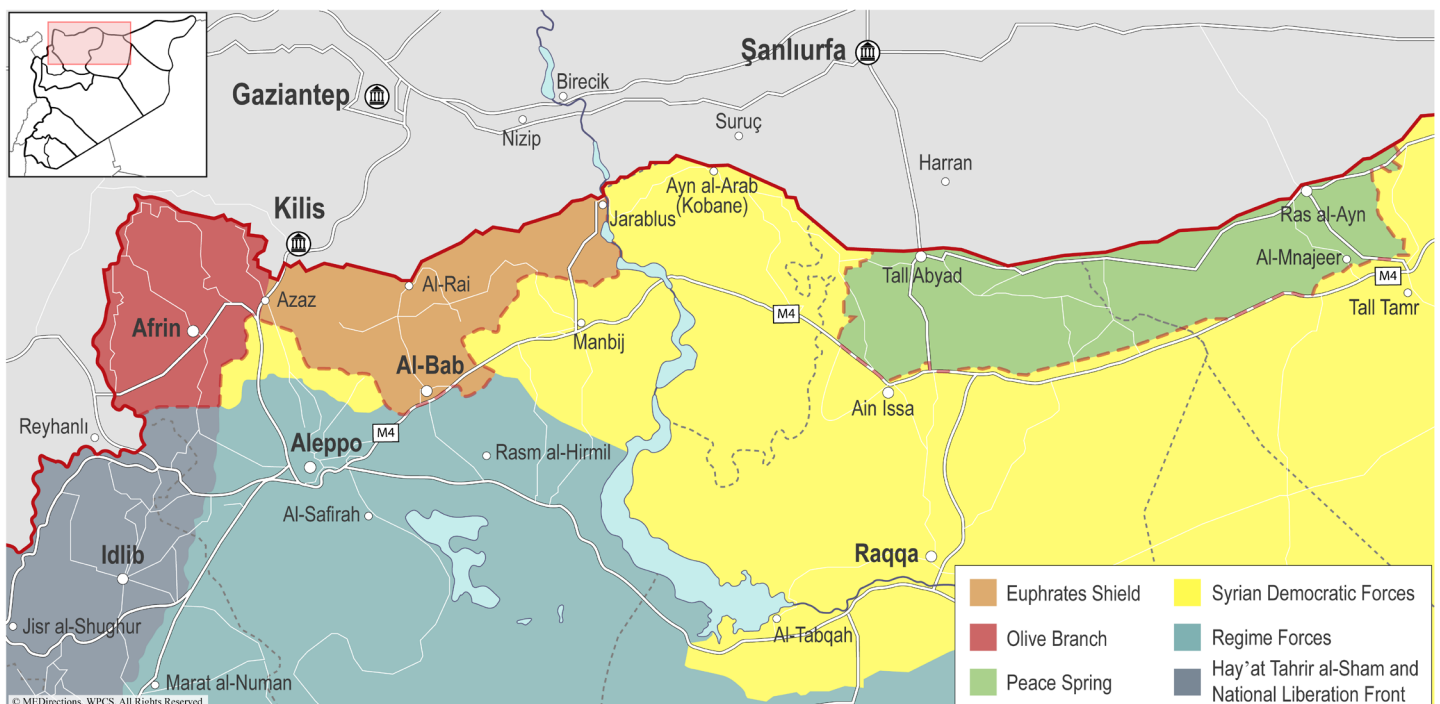
⁶ Syrian Ministry of Foreign Affairs Facebook Page, 10 October 2019, <https://bit.ly/2UFBnLS>; Reuters, "Syrian Democratic Forces: America Has Withdrawn its Forces from the Border with Turkey" (in Arabic), 7 October 2020, <https://bit.ly/3kKmuSU>

Immediately on concluding its military operations, Turkey sought to support the Syrian opposition in building local government structures under the administrative supervision of the Turkish provinces adjacent to each area of operations. The provinces of Kilis and Gaziantep oversaw the northern countryside of Aleppo; the province of Hatay supervised Afrin; and Şanlıurfa province handled Tall Abyad and Ras al-Ayn. In all three areas, Ankara provided basic services.

This paper addresses the question of whether there has been a unified strategy in the three Turkish intervention zones and what differences and similarities may have existed in the policies adopted in these zones. The paper begins with an analysis of the security policies adopted, including Turkey's direct military presence and the security roles assigned to factions of the Turkey-backed Syrian National Army (SNA). The paper then delves into aspects of Turkish involvement in the local Syrian context, whether through population resettlement and demographic change policies or the imposition of a local administration model subordinate to Turkish administrative structures. Finally, the paper examines the service provision policies and the economic conditions in the areas under Turkish influence.

The research is based on interviews with local council officials, including heads of offices and more junior employees; local Arab and Kurdish dignitaries; SNA commanders and senior officers; civil society and human rights activists, journalists and businesspeople (traders and farmers) who were affected, whether positively or negatively, by the shift in military control. These interviews were conducted between June and November 2020. The author also relied on intermediaries, specifically in Ras al-Ayn and Afrin, due to difficulty in gathering information in these areas. The author took pains to find nonpartisan sources not involved in the conflict or in violations against civilians. All the interviews were cross-referenced with information available on social media platforms with the aim of verifying their authenticity. Some interviewees' names have been withheld in the interests of their safety, so as not to expose them to harm or harassment by the de facto local authorities.

Map 1: Turkish Military Operation Zones



Source: The Author. Graphic designer: Ayoub Lahouioui. December 2020

1. Military and Security Forces in the Three Regions

Turkey has deployed its military directly on the ground in order to expel Kurdish forces from its southern border. To this end, it has erected a large number of bases and guard posts to confront the YPG. Turkey has also re-structured and re-organised the pre-existing armed opposition factions, bringing them under the SNA umbrella, and has also established a civilian police force. These SNA factions have been tasked with carrying out violent security measures against Kurds, both in Afrin and, to a lesser extent, Ras al-Ayn.

1.1. Direct Turkish Deployment

Turkish forces continue to be stationed at military outposts inside Syrian territory even after the end of the three operations (Map 2). In the northern Aleppo countryside, there are around 21 such outposts near the major towns and front lines with the SDF in Manbij and Tall Rifaat, and with the Syrian regime forces in Tadeif.⁷ The largest Turkish base in the area, which contains a helicopter landing pad, is located at Jabal al-Shaykh Aqeel, overlooking the town of al-Bab.

As for the Afrin region, Turkey has taken control of the erstwhile YPG bases concentrated near the major towns in the area. 12 main Turkish military bases have been established in the region, the most significant of which are in Bulbul, Raju, Shaykh al-Hadid, Jindires, Afrin, Barad, Jalbal, Shawarghah, Sharanli and Kfarjana, the latter also containing a helipad.⁸ Dozens of other small outposts have been erected along the front lines with the SDF.

Turkish forces are also deployed in two military positions in the town of Ras al-Ayn⁹ and three in Tall Abyad,¹⁰ in addition to several observation post points, especially near the international M4 highway.¹¹ Another two significant bases near Tall Abyad are in Karmazah, along the Raqqa-Tall Abyad road (25km to the south), which overlooks the positions adjacent to the M4 and is the closest of all bases to the SDF-held town of Ain Issa, and in Bir Asheq on the Tall Abyad-Suluk road.

Moreover, all three regions have seen Turkish forces deployed in a number of barracks. Turkish intelligence services, meanwhile, have taken over several local police stations. Turkey's military and intelligence presence is clearest in the regions of Afrin and the northern Aleppo countryside, where this presence takes multiple forms and there are frequent official visits. However, direct interventions by Turkish intelligence are considered rare in all three regions as Turkey uses the SNA to track down and suppress its opponents. Ankara has even enjoined the SNA to establish prisons for this purpose in order to avoid direct involvement in such violations. Turkish intelligence also relies on investigators from the Syrian National Police and General Security Forces in Afrin and Ras al-Ayn, which are directly tied to the Turkish security apparatus.

⁷ Harmoon Center for Contemporary Studies, "Turkish Military Bases in Syria" (in Arabic), 6 March 2019, <https://bit.ly/32VdlB9>

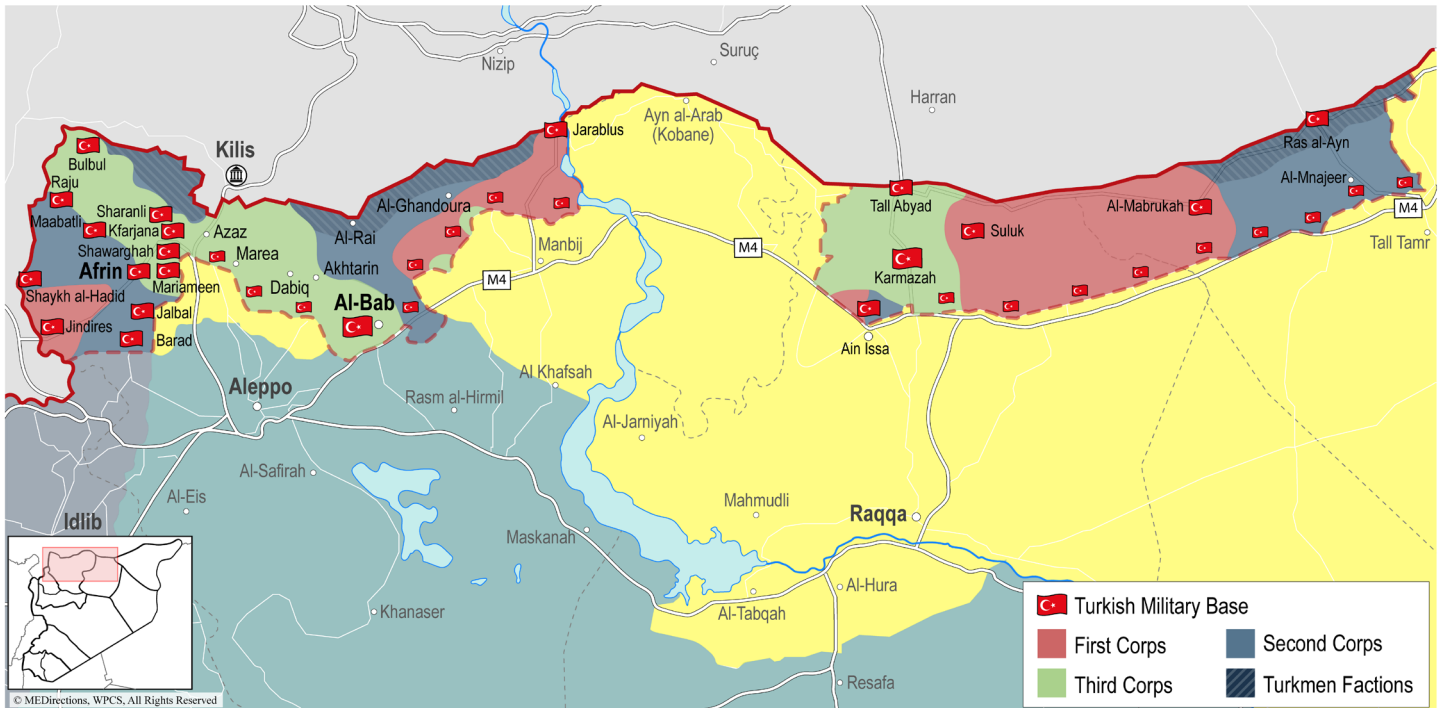
⁸ Khayrallah al-Hilu, "Afrin Under Turkish Control: Political, Economic and Social Transformations", Research Project Report, (Florence: European University Institute, Middle East Directions, Wartime and Post-Conflict in Syria, 25 July 2019), <https://bit.ly/38rfesx>

⁹ Interview with a media activist from Ras Al-Ayn, 27 October 2020.

¹⁰ Phone conversation with a member of the Syrian National Army in the city of Tall Abyad, 28 October 2020.

¹¹ Anadolu Agency, "Turkish Defence Ministry Announces the Establishment of Monitoring Points in 'Peace Spring' Areas" (in Arabic), 1 December 2019, <https://bit.ly/2IPCS09>; By early November 2020, Turkey had established five monitoring points north of the M4 roadway: in Kafifa, Ain Rummanah and Tinah, along the road between Ain Issa and the Saqr roadhouse, and west of the town of Ain Issa. Asharq Al-Awsat, "Ankara Establishes a Base North of Raqqa and Washington Reinforces Its Forces in Deir ez-Zor" (in Arabic), 6 November 2020, <https://bit.ly/32WtKFw>

Map 2: Distribution of Military and Security Forces in the Three Regions



Source: The Author. Graphic designer: Ayoub Lahouioui. December 2020

1.2. Reorganised Syrian Opposition Forces

The Syrian National Army

Since launching its first intervention in Syria in 2016, Turkey has sought to build a unified Syrian opposition military force. It has succeeded in combining several pre-existing factions into a so-called Syrian National Army, made up of three corps.¹² These corps include all the active military formations in northern Syria in addition to opposition factions displaced from Damascus and its countryside, Homs and Hama. In theory, the SNA reports to the Ministry of Defence of the Syrian Interim Government, which is the executive arm of the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces.¹³ In practice, however, the SNA receives logistical, material and training support from the Turkish military. Three factions deployed in the Euphrates Shield region (the Hamza Division, al-Mutasim Brigade and the 51st Brigade) had previously received support from the US Pentagon's Train and Equip Programme, before this support was suspended as a result of their participation in the 2018 Battle of Afrin.

With the exception of the Levant Front in Azaz,¹⁴ most SNA factions were formed at the time of Operation Euphrates Shield against IS. Since then, coordination between the SNA and the Turkish military has taken place at the highest levels. The relationship between the two remains warm.

¹² Nawar Shaban, "The Syrian National Army: Formation, Challenges, and Outlook", Geneva Centre for Security Policy, 19 November 2020, <https://bit.ly/33wYMUK>

¹³ BBC Arabic, "The Syrian National Army: Who Are Turkey's Allies Fighting in Syria?" (in Arabic), 16 October 2019, <https://bbc.in/3k11Ene>

¹⁴ The Levant Front is the only faction in the Euphrates Shield fighting force the formation of which preceded the Turkish military intervention in Syria. It is a local component that includes locals from the northern countryside of Aleppo in addition to fighters from rural Raqqah, especially Tall Abyad. The Levant Front has great weight and is considered the single largest northern Syrian faction.

Turkmen factions enjoy special influence within the SNA; especially the Sultan Murad and Hamza Divisions, which receive particularly heavy support from Ankara.¹⁵ Turkey has exploited its relationship with these Syrian factions in order to recruit hundreds of militants and send them off to fight overseas as part of the Turkish ‘SADAT’ private security company,¹⁶ whether alongside Government of National Accord forces in Libya¹⁷ or on the side of Azerbaijan against Armenia in the Nagorno-Karabakh region.¹⁸

Contrary to claims that the SNA has been structured so as to grant leadership positions to senior defected officers, the Third Corps is led by Levant Front commander Abu Ahmad Nour, a civilian figure, while the Second Corps is led by Mahmoud al-Baz, a university graduate. Only the First Corps is commanded by a defected officer, the commander of the Elite Army (Jaysh al-Nukhba), Brigadier General Mutazz Raslan. The Second Corps is considered a mere front for the Sultan Murad Division, as its commander is unable to rein in the leaders of the other factions under its banner, in particular the commander of the Sultan Süleyman Şah faction, Muhammad al-Jasem (known as Abu Amsha). The latter faction has carried out unrestrained looting campaigns and seizures of land and olive groves. The same can be said for military police commanders in all the areas under Turkish influence.

Another mark against the SNA is the fact it has not fought a single battle against the Syrian regime in any of the three regions, and that it is solely committed to battles decided by Turkey, whether in Syria against the SDF or in other countries. This has rendered the SNA akin to a Turkish border guard, tasked only with protecting Turkish national security interests and with taking over Kurdish villages and the properties of their fleeing residents.

Police and Security Forces

Ankara has attempted to structure the military police, first in the northern Aleppo countryside¹⁹ and later in Afrin, with the aim of reining in the factions, curtailing acts of looting and ending human rights violations. Meanwhile, in Tall Abyad and Ras al-Ayn, the Syrian Interim Government’s Ministry of Defence formed a military court and military police force in November 2019.²⁰ Ankara selects the commanders of these police forces, while the Syrian factions choose the more junior officers and members, each faction providing a number of its fighters without them having received any specialised training.²¹ These fighters continue to answer first and foremost to their factions, prioritising their interests at the expense of the public interest, which is why the military police remains weak and incapable of curtailing violations.

¹⁵ Ömer Özkizilcik, “The Syrian National Army (SNA): Structure, Functions, and Three Scenarios for its Relationship with Damascus,” Geneva Centre for Security Policy, 19 November 2020, <https://bit.ly/2Job2zU>

¹⁶ Asharq Al-Awsat, “Western Report Reveals the Role of Turkish ‘SADAT’ in the Libya War” (in Arabic), 9 June 2020, <https://bit.ly/3eH5qfd>

¹⁷ Nordic Monitor, “UN Launched Probe into Deployment of Syrian Fighters to Libya by Turkish Government and its Paramilitary Contractor SADAT,” 18 August 2020, <https://bit.ly/3p9kuY4>

¹⁸ Telephone interview with a member of the Syrian National Army, 15 October 2020. Also see Elizabeth Tsurkov, “The Syrian Mercenaries Fighting Foreign Wars for Russia and Turkey,” The New York Review of Books, 16 October 2020, <https://bit.ly/34njvc>

¹⁹ Syria News, “A Court and Military Police Formed in the ‘Euphrates Shield’ Region” (in Arabic), 20 February 2018, <https://bit.ly/32XqkC7>

²⁰ Operation Peace Spring Twitter Account, “Ministry of Defence Oversees the Formation of a Military Court in Ras al-Ayn” (in Arabic), 4 November 2019, <https://bit.ly/3IKSOX4>

²¹ Telephone conversation with a member of the Syrian National Army in Tall Abyad, 28 October 2020.

As for the civilian police, it has been supported by Turkey since the latter took control of the northern Aleppo countryside. Syrian volunteers have been trained in new camps established on Turkish territory²² or in Turkish police academy training centres in Adana and Mersin.²³ Turkey has also trained Syrian officers in the towns of Tall Abyad and Ras al-Ayn and provided the police force with weapons, vehicles and all logistical necessities.²⁴ Elsewhere, Turkey has founded a Syrian ‘commando’ division, subordinate to the Turkish General Security Directorate, which carried out its first mission in Afrin. This commando division protects the convoys of Syrian Opposition Coalition members and Interim Government ministers and joins Turkish forces in protecting and securing the visits of Turkish officials to the areas of Afrin, Tall Abyad, Ras al-Ayn and the northern Aleppo countryside.²⁵

1.3. Security Conditions in Turkey’s Spheres of Influence

Security within Turkey’s Syrian spheres of influence may be described as fragile. First, violations are committed by the SNA factions themselves in each region. Second, security lapses (clashes, bombings and assassinations) have become frequent in certain areas. The level of insecurity and disorder varies from one place to another depending on the particular factions in control and the area’s demographic composition.

Where the dominant SNA factions do not include local fighters, as in Afrin and Ras al-Ayn, violations are abundant and security is minimal. In Ras al-Ayn, for example, the two factions in control are the Turkmen Sultan Murad and Hamza Divisions, none of whose fighters hail from the town. This has emboldened them to act as they please, facing neither deterrence nor local resistance as they seize civilian homes and prevent the return of the displaced.²⁶ An estimated 800 homes have been seized by the two factions, all of which belonged to Syrian Kurds or Arabs affiliated with Autonomous Administration institutions. For its part, Turkey has facilitated the transfer of families of fighters from those same factions (both Turkmen and Arabs) across the border, with the aim of settling them in these areas and housing them in the expropriated homes of IDPs.²⁷

Similar violations have been perpetrated by SNA factions in Afrin, especially against the local Kurdish population. Reported acts have included arrests, assaults, kidnappings for ransom, harassment of media professionals and activists, seizures of civilian properties and homes,²⁸ and rape and sexual violence against detainees.²⁹ While the leaders of these factions bear direct responsibility for these violations, Amnesty International has also accused Turkish military forces, together with Turkey-backed Syrian armed groups, of having “displayed a shameful disregard for civilian life, carrying out serious violations and war crimes.”³⁰

²² Orwa Soussi, “Security and Police Forces in Jarablus: Their Structure, Functions and the Salaries of Their Members” (in Arabic), Eqtisad Net, 29 January 2017, <https://bit.ly/390TnJ7>

²³ Daily Sabah, “In Turkey: Graduating a Batch of Syrian Police Officers to Work in Afrin” (in Arabic), 19 May 2018, <https://bit.ly/3fa0yQb>

²⁴ TR Agency, “With Turkish Support, Security and Police Agencies Begins Their Duties in the ‘Peace Spring’ Region” (in Arabic), 22 January 2020, <https://bit.ly/36QITt1>

²⁵ Telephone interview with a media activist from Ras al-Ayn, 27 October 2020.

²⁶ Human Rights Watch, “Syria: Civilians Abused in ‘Safe Zones’; Summary Executions, Blocked Returns by Turkish-Backed Armed Groups,” 27 November 2019, <https://bit.ly/2LaC1Qj>

²⁷ Telephone interview with a media activist from Ras al-Ayn, 29 October 2020.

²⁸ The New Arab, “Security Turmoil in Turkish Influence Areas in Syria: Causes and Implications” (in Arabic), 2 May 2020, <https://bit.ly/3fbXW45>

²⁹ Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 14 August 2020, <https://bit.ly/3omsJPG>

³⁰ Amnesty International, “Syria: Damning Evidence of War Crimes and Other Violations by Turkish Forces and Their Allies,” 18 October 2019, <https://bit.ly/3scRffg>

By contrast, when local fighters make up the backbone of SNA factions, there are fewer violations and security is generally greater. Such is the case in Azaz, controlled by the Levant Front, in Marea, controlled by the al-Mutasim Brigade, and in Tall Abyad, controlled by the Third Corps, which includes a large number of locals. Violations are also rare in the Arab towns of Suluk and al-Mabrukah located between Tall Abyad and Ras al-Ayn and controlled by the Tajammu Ahrar al-Sharqiya faction. The latter comprises brigades from Deir ez-Zor governorate, most of the fighters of which are from the al-Aqeidat tribe, which ties them to the area by kinship. The faction also includes a large number of local fighters.³¹

At the same time, demographics play an important role in determining the levels of security and stability. In the town of Tall Abyad, for example, Kurds represent a small minority of less than 10 per cent of the 140,000 civilian residents, which reduces the frequency of violations and grants them protection as a minority in a cohesive tribal environment. As for Ras al-Ayn, Turkey has deliberately sought to undermine the stability of the area and change its mixed demographic composition due to the involvement of much of its population in the PYD project. This includes Arab tribesmen, such as Sheikh Muhammad Hassan Ubaid al-Khalil (a prominent member of the Harb clan), who was appointed Minister of Transportation by the Autonomous Administration government.

With regard to security breaches, there have been repeated internecine clashes between the factions in such areas as Jarablus, al-Bab, Azaz, Afrin and Ras Al-Ayn,³² which have often resulted in numerous civilian casualties. The town of al-Bab has seen widespread chaos manifested in repeated violations committed by the Hamza Division and frequent bombings and assassinations carried out by IS cells that remain active even after the organisation's loss of control over the town.³³ In the town of Azaz, assassinations have targeted those working in the judicial sector and police corps, the most recent such incident being the car-bombing of Military Criminal Court judge Melhem Melhem.³⁴ As for Afrin, assassinations have primarily targeted SNA members, and have been claimed by the Kurdish 'Olive Anger' operations room affiliated with the SDF. Despite Turkey's intense security grip over Afrin, Olive Anger managed to carry out 11 assassinations of SNA members in the first half of 2020,³⁵ bringing the total number of such operations to 40 since Turkish forces and the SNA took control of Afrin in March 2018. The professional manner in which these assassinations have been filmed suggests their perpetrators are linked to the Kurdish Internal Security Forces (known as the 'Asayish').

³¹ Telephone interview with an activist from Ras al-Ayn, 29 October 2020.

³² The New Arab, "Attempt to Seize Civilian Homes Causes Violent Clashes in Syrian Ras al-Ayn" (in Arabic), 21 April 2020, <https://bit.ly/2Km1Ax6>

³³ Anadolu Agency, "Al-Bab Bombing Victims Rise to 14 Killed and 50 Injured" (in Arabic), 6 October 2020, <https://bit.ly/3pFGVnU>; Telephone interview with a civilian activist in the city of al-Bab, 16 October 2020.

³⁴ Free Syrian Lawyers Association, Eulogy, Facebook, 19 November 2020, <https://bit.ly/3IKstlL>

³⁵ Omran Center for Strategic Studies, "Assassinations in Opposition Areas During the Period from January to October 2020" (in Arabic), <https://bit.ly/2UFFoQn>

2. Turkey's Relationships with Local Communities

2.1. Turkey's Demographic Policy

It appears that Turkey has given a free hand to the SNA factions with the aim of expelling the Kurdish community and eliminating the risk of any Kurdish national entity arising on its southern border under the leadership of the PYD, which it deems the Syrian wing of the PKK. In Afrin in particular, Ankara has pursued a policy of replacing the Kurdish population with Turkmen and Arabs opposed to Kurdish national aspirations, thereby protecting its own national security in the event of a future withdrawal of its forces from Syria.³⁶ This agenda is not limited to Afrin and Ras al-Ayn but includes all the regions along the border strip, including Arab villages. Hence its reliance on the Turkmen Sultan Murad Division to secure the border strip at a depth ranging from 3 to 15 km inside Syrian territory.

While official Turkish statements point to the return of more than 400,000 Syrian refugees from various Turkish provinces to northern Syria,³⁷ these figures do not account for those forcibly repatriated to Syria on the pretext that they lack temporary Turkish residence permits (known as 'Kimlik' cards) or that they have broken the law. Meanwhile, between 2016 and 2020, the zones of Turkish influence in Syria became the sole places of refuge for IDPs forcibly displaced from the so-called 'de-escalation zones,' namely Rural Damascus, northern Homs, southern Syria and Idlib. The same areas also received IDPs from Deir ez-Zor and Raqqa, who fled battles between IS and the SDF in 2017 and 2018. The areas are deemed preferable as refuges to Idlib, which remains insecure and under constant threat of attack by the regime and Russian air strikes.

In Afrin, Turkey has settled IDPs from Ghouta and northern Homs, together with the families of Turkmen fighters, in the homes of Kurds fleeing the military operations. The YPG, for its part, has prevented Kurdish civilians who fled to the northern countryside of Aleppo from returning to their homes. This led to a decline in Afrin's Kurdish population from 500,000 before the Turkish attack to around 150,000 by April 2019. Current estimates of the size of Afrin's Kurdish community do not exceed 100,000, given the further flights caused by the excesses and violations by SNA factions.³⁸

Turkey applied the same demographic policy in Ras al-Ayn, which had previously been inhabited by Kurds, Circassians, Chechens and Arab tribes. The population of the town before Operation Peace Spring was estimated at about 29,000, of whom some 5,000 were Kurds.³⁹ Today, with military operations over, only 12 per cent of Ras al-Ayn's population have returned to the town,⁴⁰ most of them Arab clansmen who had been temporarily displaced, in addition to activists and others wanted by the SDF who had previously been residing in Turkey. On the other hand, nearly 2,000 families of SNA fighters have relocated through Turkish territory from the northern Aleppo countryside to Ras al-Ayn, settling in the Kurdish neighbourhoods in the town's east and south.

³⁶ Khaled Bashir, "Four Pillars That Define Turkey's Expansionist Strategy in Syria" (in Arabic), *Hafriyat*, 6 July 2020, <https://bit.ly/35IB6xT>

³⁷ Syria TV, "Çavuşoğlu: More Than 400 Thousand Syrians Returned to Their Country" (in Arabic), 15 October 2020, <https://bit.ly/3olYIEJ>

³⁸ Violations Documentation Centre in North Syria, "Demographic Change in Afrin" (in Arabic) July 17, 2019, <https://vdc-nsy.com/archives/20694>; The centre transferred its report to a report by the PAX Organisation entitled "Turkish Control in Afrin Worsens Ethnic Tension," 21 May 2019, <https://bit.ly/38j66pE>

³⁹ The Arab Orient Centre for Strategic and Civilisation Studies, "Study of Demographic Distribution in al-Hasakah Governorate" (in Arabic), National Rally of Arab Youths, 2 August 2013, <https://bit.ly/33yJmPC>

⁴⁰ Enab Baladi, "Subject to Accountability: 'Systematic' Violations Affects Real Estate Properties in Ras al-Ayn" (in Arabic), 26 September 2020, <https://bit.ly/3ltQJOB>

Most of these families had themselves been displaced from Hama, Homs, Deir ez-Zor, Aleppo and Rural Damascus.⁴¹ The local council in Ras al-Ayn claims that around 100 Kurdish families and 40 Christian families currently reside in the town,⁴² although activists say the Kurdish families' number no more than 20 and Christian Assyrian families fewer than 10. In the al-Hawarnah neighbourhood in the town's east, known in Kurdish as Zor Afa, there are fewer than 10 Kurdish families, compared to hundreds of families of SNA fighters.⁴³

In the Tall Abyad area, which includes the town of Tall Abyad and the district of Suluk, the number of inhabitants was estimated at more than 250,000 in 2010. According to the town's local council, the current civilian population is 140,000, of whom around 6,000 have been displaced from other governorates.⁴⁴ Contrary to Turkish pledges that 200,000 Syrians would return to 'Peace Spring' areas within a year of the operation ending, almost no returns from Turkey have in fact been recorded.⁴⁵

Having failed in its bid to pressure the EU and obtain further humanitarian aid, Turkey now seeks to return Syrian refugees to Syria. However, the lack of security and continuing military operations – not to mention the deteriorating economy and services – prevent such a return. Ankara's efforts to encourage refugees to return have three primary objectives. First, it seeks to reduce the economic burden on Turkey, especially in the light of its economic downturn. Second, it aims to alleviate the political pressure on the Turkish president and his party from the opposition, which opposes the presence of Syrian refugees. Third and most importantly, it seeks to use the returnees to achieve lasting demographic change in Syria by settling them in Afrin, Ras al-Ayn and all along the border strip. Turkey believes the settlement of non-Kurds in Kurdish areas will eliminate the possibility of Kurdish self-rule⁴⁶ and preserve a great deal of political influence for Ankara in Syrian opposition circles. To achieve this ultimate goal in the short and medium terms, Turkey has to remain a key player capable of controlling developments on the ground inside Syria, and considers the expansion of its military presence the most effective means of bringing this about.⁴⁷ The implicit goal of its presence appears to be to create areas deep inside Syrian territory linked to Ankara both economically and security wise while nonetheless stopping short of outright annexation, which would violate international law and put Turkey on a collision course with all concerned.

2.2. Selecting 'Representatives' in Local Councils and Institutions

After the end of its military operations, Turkey provided Syrian local councils with support to manage the affairs of towns and villages in its zones of influence. In contrast to the northern Aleppo countryside, in which Turkey showed little administrative interest, Ankara has intervened heavily in Afrin, Tall Abyad and Ras al-Ayn to ensure the formation of loyal local councils and to exclude all opponents or even neutral parties. While in theory the local councils are subordinate to the Interim Government headed by the former leader of the Syrian Coalition, Abd al-Rahman Mustafa, a Turkmen with close ties to Ankara, in practice the Turkish Ministry of Interior directly supervises the councils with no real role being played by the Interim Government.

⁴¹ WhatsApp interviews with activists from Ras al-Ayn and with two members of the Syrian National Army and the Jaysh al-Islam within the Second Corps, September 2020. Telephone interview with a journalist in Ras al-Ayn, 27 October 2020.

⁴² Telephone interview with the director of the Media Office in the Ras al-Ayn Local Council, 16 September 2020.

⁴³ Telephone interview with three Arab activists from the city of Ras al-Ayn, September 2020.

⁴⁴ Telephone interview with the head of a local council office in Tall Abyad, 27 September 2020.

⁴⁵ Anadolu Agency, "A Year From 'Peace Spring' Turkey's Achievements in the Safe Zone in Syria" (in Arabic), 9 October 2020, <https://bit.ly/3pJ5MXI>

⁴⁶ Gonul Tol, "Turkey's Endgame in Syria," Foreign Affairs, 9 October 2019, <https://fam.ag/3pBSAUR>

⁴⁷ Michael Young, "What are Turkey's Ultimate Aims in Syria?" *Diwan, Carnegie Center*, 19 October 2017, <https://bit.ly/394zn6E>

By the replication of Turkish administrative divisions, creating local councils in large cities with smaller subordinate councils in the surrounding towns and villages, much as Turkey's own municipalities work, Ankara has imposed its influence on Syrian local councils by tying each region to the Turkish province adjacent to it (Map 3).

Map 3: Turkish Province Links to Border Areas



Source: The Author. Graphic designer: Ayoub Lahouioui. December 2020

There are 10 local councils in Syria's 'Euphrates Shield' region overseen by the Turkish provinces of Gaziantep and Kilis. These are the councils of al-Bab, Jarablus, Azaz, al-Rai, Marea, Akhtarin, Suran, Qabasin, Bazaa and al-Ghandoura, in addition to smaller secondary councils subordinate to them. In each of these councils, the Turkish authorities have appointed a person to serve as their deputy who mediates between the council and the relevant Turkish province. Locally, these actors are referred to as the 'Turkish governors,' although officially their title is 'Assistant Governor.'⁴⁸

As for Afrin, four primary local councils were formed⁴⁹ following the 'Save Afrin' conference held in Gaziantep in April 2018 and attended by dozens of Kurdish figures loyal to Turkey.⁵⁰ Later, three more councils were added, bringing the total to seven councils in the seven administrative areas. The Turkish province of Hatay directly oversees the councils in the Afrin region through the local Assistant Governor and six of his assistants.

⁴⁸ Khaled Al-Khatib, "'Euphrates Shield': Local Governments Supported by Turkey" (in Arabic), *al-Modon*, 1 July 2018, <https://bit.ly/2UGV1aa>

⁴⁹ Hassan Burhan, "Local Council Formed in the City of Afrin North of Aleppo" (in Arabic), *Smart News Agency*, 14 April 2018, <https://bit.ly/35JkICO>

⁵⁰ Enab Baladi, "'Save Afrin' Conference Emerges With 17 Items" (in Arabic), 18 March 2018, <https://bit.ly/3pHPCOO>

After the end of Operation Peace Spring, the local council of Tall Abyad was established in late October 2019 with official Turkish endorsement. The local council of Ras al-Ayn was then established on 7 November 2019. Both councils are subordinate to the Turkish province of Şanlıurfa. The Assistant Governor for the affairs of the Peace Spring region is referred to locally as the ‘Peace Spring Governor.’ Two Turkish officials work with him – the so-called ‘Governors’ of Tall Abyad and Ras al-Ayn – both of whom enjoy civil and security prerogatives similar to those granted to governors in the Turkish administrative system.⁵¹

In most of the areas in northern Syria under Turkish influence there is a Turkish coordinator in each local council who supervises its work and resolves any issues that may arise with the Turkish side. This is in addition to other Turkish coordinators at lower levels in the offices of the local council and Turkish administrative and technical personnel who provide counsel and assistance in decision-making. Several Turkish ministries (those of education, health, energy, trade, youth and sports, transportation and infrastructure) also have representatives in each of the three zones of Turkish influence with the aim of coordinating between ministerial bodies operating in these areas.⁵² The local councils in each district receive their budgets every month from the Turkish province overseeing them, which represent their shares of the revenues from border crossings after splitting them with the SNA. These budgets cover the costs of employee salaries, infrastructure restoration and municipal services, in the absence of any real role played by the Syrian Interim Government.

Turkey has made attempts to demonstrate the diversity of these councils and their representation of all the various segments of the populations in the towns in which they operate, including Kurdish, Turkmen, Arab, Christian and Alawite figures as members. In all cases, however, absolute loyalty to Turkey is mandatory. For this reason, Turkey has excluded a number of personalities over mere suspicions as to their loyalty and even dissolved entire councils, as happened in Maabatli and Sheikh al-Hadid. Local council staff are subjected to arbitrary arrests by Turkish intelligence and police forces, as happened to the Maabatli council members in October 2020⁵³ and those of Jindires in September 2020.⁵⁴ This points to a substantial level of intervention by Turkey in the affairs of Syria’s local administration, especially in Kurdish areas. No such arrests of council members have been recorded in the northern Aleppo countryside. At the same time, the role of the Syrian Interim Government in selecting local council representatives has been entirely marginalised. Despite its attempts to hold elections in certain district councils in the northern Aleppo countryside in October 2020,⁵⁵ the handover ceremonies for the new councils took place only in the presence of Turkish governors and under their supervision.⁵⁶

This policy of prioritising loyalty over competence has led to the appointment of marginal figures to the leaderships of most councils, figures whose sole qualification is being supported by the SNA or Turkey. Only a few councils have managed to maintain their previous status due to support from local military factions, such as the Azaz council, which is supported by the Levant Front. Similarly, the condition of absolute loyalty to Turkey has led to the exclusion of most competent technocrats and local actors together with the domination of political parties over certain councils. A case in point is the Ras al-Ayn council, which was taken over by figures affiliated with – or close to – the Muslim Brotherhood.

⁵¹ Telephone interview with one of the heads of a local council office in Tall Abyad, 27 September 2020.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Violation Documentation Centre in North Syria, “Turkish Authorities Launch New Arrest Campaign of Local Councils Members in Afrin” (in Arabic), 14 October 2020, <https://bit.ly/2Vw7NJ3>

⁵⁴ Kajin Ahmed, “Arrest Campaign Continues Against Kurds in Afrin by Turkish Intelligence” (in Arabic), *Xeber24*, 9 September 2020, <https://bit.ly/2UK0KMI>

⁵⁵ Facebook, Metro Media Centre, 5 October 2020, <https://bit.ly/2KlaJGd>

⁵⁶ Facebook, Metro Media Centre, 2 October 2020, <https://bit.ly/2INJvrk>

Meanwhile, relatives of the council offices' heads, along with fighters from other regions, have monopolised the majority of public service jobs, with no consideration given to experience or competence, which has further sharpened tensions between local populations and council leaderships.⁵⁷

3. Turkish Services and Development Policies

3.1. Basic and Social Services Targeted

In the light of the absence of international organisations in most of the territory of the three regions and the inability of the Interim Government to play any active role, Turkey has taken over the provision of basic services at all levels, including education, health, telecommunications, electricity and water – albeit to varying degrees.

The basic services provided to civilians in northern Syria include the maintenance of water networks, the operation of bakeries, the installation of telecommunication and internet infrastructure and the restoration of hospitals in major cities and provision of them with necessary equipment and appliances. Moreover, the Turkish government has restored schools and returned them to operation. For instance, 146 schools currently operate in Ras al-Ayn⁵⁸ and 270 in Tall Abyad.⁵⁹ Turkish universities have also opened branches in northern Syria, allowing students from these regions to resume their studies in Turkey through a scholarship system. It is worth noting that Turkey has cancelled the education curricula imposed by the SDF and adopted the Syrian Interim Government's curriculum instead.

On the relief front, Turkish organisations exert great efforts in northern Syria, especially in the Afrin and Operation Peace Spring areas, in both of which international organisations such as the German Agency for International Cooperation (GIZ) and GOAL have abstained from working for reasons related to human rights violations. UN agencies too are unable to deliver humanitarian assistance to Tall Abyad and Ras al-Ayn for legal reasons.⁶⁰ Among the most prominent organisations active in these regions are the Turkish Disaster and Emergency Management Presidency (AFAD), the Turkish Humanitarian Relief Foundation (IHH), the Syria Support and Coordination Centre (SUDKOM) of the province of Şanlıurfa, the Turkish Red Crescent Society, and medical organisations such as the Syrian American Medical Society (SAMS) and the Union of Medical Care and Relief Organisations (UOSSM). Most Syrian organisations that receive Western support are not permitted to operate in Ras al-Ayn, Tall Abyad or Afrin due to Western donors' opposition to Turkish military operations in these areas. Such organisations typically continue to operate in the Euphrates Shield area and in Idlib.

Similarly, Turkey has opened branches of the Turkish Postal Company (PTT) in Azaz, al-Rai, Jarablus, Afrin, al-Bab and Tall Abyad.⁶¹ These branches provide banking services, money transfer services and courier services. Turkey also requires employees' salaries to be paid exclusively through PTT, be they for the staff of local councils or Syrian organisations registered in Turkey that send transfers to their staff in Syria.

⁵⁷ Phone call with a member of the Ras al-Ayn Local Council, 27 October 2020.

⁵⁸ Telephone interview with the director of the Media Office of the Ras al-Ayn Local Council, 16 September 2020.

⁵⁹ Telephone interview with the head of the Tall Abyad Local Council, 27 September 2020.

⁶⁰ UNSC Resolution No. 2533 for the year 2019 stipulates the renewal of the cross-border humanitarian aid entry mechanism through one crossing, that of Bab al-Hawa, for a period of one year. As such, aid cannot be brought into that area from the Tall Abyad crossing, and it cannot be delivered through Bab al-Hawa as the areas of northern Aleppo and Tall Abyad are not interconnected.

⁶¹ Anadolu Agency, "Turkish Postal Company Opens a Branch in Tall Abyad, Syria" (in Arabic), 24 December 2020, <https://bit.ly/32Z1VMu>

In addition, Turkey has helped re-activate the directorates of the land registry, of the civil registry, which issues identification cards to residents,⁶² and of the transportation registry, which registers vehicles and issues number plates.

With regard to electricity, Turkey has dealt with each town differently. In Jarablus, for example, electricity is supplied from Karkamış in Turkey via the private Turkish company Akenerji.⁶³ In Azaz and al-Bab, the same company, along with ET Energy, was tasked with providing electricity through large power generators.⁶⁴ By contrast, Afrin did not receive electricity access – through the Syrian-Turkish Electricity Company (STE) – until 19 November 2020,⁶⁵ which was much later than other regions under Turkish influence. The Tall Abyad and Ras al-Ayn areas are dependent on electricity from the Tishreen Dam and thermal power plants under the control of the SDF. A barter process took place between the SNA and the SDF whereby the former agreed to supply drinking water to al-Hasakah from the areas under its control to the Alouk plant in Ras al-Ayn in exchange for the SDF supplying Tall Abyad and Ras al-Ayn with electricity. In August 2020, it was reported that water was cut off from al-Hasakah for several weeks, with the SDF and the local council in Ras al-Ayn exchanging accusations of responsibility for leaving nearly half a million civilians thirsty.⁶⁶

In general, it may be said that the services provided by Turkey fall short of meeting the needs of the population. More importantly, these services are targeted in a manner that discriminates against Kurds. For example, Jarablus and al-Rai, which are linked to the Turkish provinces of Gaziantep and Kilis respectively, have better access to services than Afrin, where services were delayed until Kurds had become a minority in comparison to Arabs and Turkmen. The same holds true when comparing the Arab town of Tall Abyad with the Kurdish town of Ras al-Ayn. Moreover, service provision neglects areas far from the Turkish border, concentrating instead on places near or adjacent to the border strip such as Jarablus and al-Rai. This is due to the comparative ease of access, the low cost of service delivery and to these places being located within the zone Turkey deems vital to its national security.

Finally, these services are not based on a policy of empowering the Interim Government. The scant support Turkey provides it with appears to be intended to keep it alive but lacking any effectiveness. By contrast, the role of Turkish governors in development and service provision is clear, especially the governor of Şanlıurfa, Abdallah Ireen, who visits the areas of Tall Abyad and Ras al-Ayn on a weekly basis, offers facilitations to Syrian organisations⁶⁷ and exerts noticeable efforts in mobilising support from Arab and Islamic foundations to assist the region.⁶⁸

⁶² Arabi Post, “Personal Identification Cards in Both Arabic and Turkish” (in Arabic), 10 August 2018, <https://bit.ly/38VTK7K>

⁶³ Turk Press, “Turkey Begins Supplying Electricity and Water to Jarablus, Syria” (in Arabic), 10 September 2016, <https://bit.ly/2UDR6Ln>

⁶⁴ Hussam Jablawi, “At Reasonable Costs: Aleppo Countryside Anticipates Electricity Through Two Turkish and Syrian Companies” (in Arabic), *Syria TV*, 23 April 2019, <https://bit.ly/2IM3SFa>

⁶⁵ Facebook, Local Council of Afrin, “Installation of Electricity Meters” (in Arabic), 1 October 2020, <https://cutt.us/oJMVz>; Facebook, Local Council of Afrin, 18 November 2020, <https://bit.ly/3pJazIG>

⁶⁶ BBC Arabic, “Al-Hasakah Is Thirsty: Wave of Anger and Solidarity Due to the Cutting Off of Water from the Area’s Residents” (in Arabic), 22 August 2020, <https://bbc.in/36MDy63>

⁶⁷ Skype interview with a director of a Syrian organisation operating in the area, 21 August 2020.

⁶⁸ Facebook, Syria Support and Coordination Centre (SUDKOM), 27 October 2020, <https://bit.ly/35h5IXn>

3.2. Local Economics

The economies of the three zones under Turkish influence depend on two primary revenue streams: border crossings and trade on the one hand and agriculture on the other. Since June 2020, Syria's northern regions have adopted the Turkish lira to mitigate the cost of living, given the continuing depreciation of the Syrian pound.⁶⁹

The six border crossings with Turkey are the most important financial resources of the three regions, in addition to the internal crossings with areas controlled by the Syrian regime and the SDF in the northern Aleppo countryside (Map 4). It is through these crossings that the areas receive all their food, consumer goods and aid. However, there are no common crossings between the SDF areas of al-Hasakah and Raqqa and the 'Peace Spring' zone, aside from smuggling routes near Ain Issa, where there are smugglers affiliated with SNA leaders and Autonomous Administration officials. This renders the Peace Spring areas isolated and limits their commercial activity, causing shortages of goods and vast differences in the prices of certain commodities.⁷⁰ For example, a tonne of cement in the Peace Spring areas costs USD 42 while in Raqqa it may fetch as much as USD 100. The reverse holds for fuel products: a barrel of petrol costs USD 84 in the Peace Spring areas, compared to USD 40 in Raqqa. This may be attributed to the relative abundance of oil in the areas controlled by the SDF.⁷¹ The head of the Tall Abyad local council says he petitioned Turkish and Russian intermediaries to open a crossing between Raqqa and Tall Abyad but the SDF refused.⁷²

Moreover, Turkey has supported the formation of chambers of industry and commerce in the cities of Azaz, al-Bab, Afrin⁷³ and Tall Abyad with the aim of stimulating the economy.⁷⁴ Trade activity in the three regions proceeds in one direction only, from Turkey to Syria, although there is also conspicuous trade with regime-held areas in Aleppo and the SDF areas in Manbij.

⁶⁹ Muhammad Kassah, "Turkish Lira Proliferating in Azaz: Who Started Its Provision?" *Eqtisad*, 10 June 2020, <https://bit.ly/3pGQFhO>

⁷⁰ Interview with a truck driver, 25 October 2020.

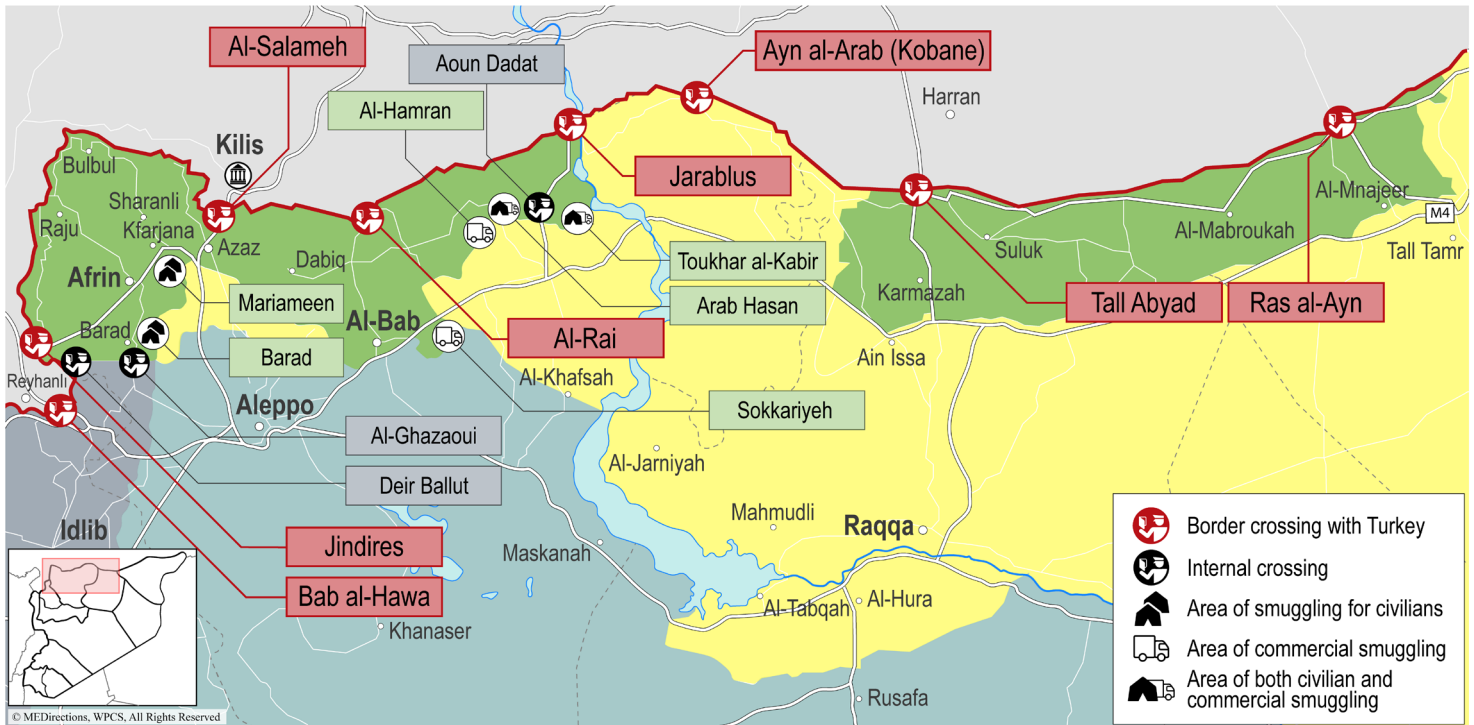
⁷¹ Kheder Khaddour and Manhal Bareesh, "A Fluid Frontier," *Diwan*, *Carnegie Middle East Center*, 2 October 2020, <https://bit.ly/35IH3Al>

⁷² Telephone interview with the head of the Tall Abyad Local Council, 27 September 2020.

⁷³ Facebook, Local Council of Afrin, 20 February 2019, <https://bit.ly/3pFywRc>

⁷⁴ Awtan Post, "Chambers of Industry and Commerce Begin Their Activities in the City of Tall Abyad. Opening a Center for 'Free Shopping'" (in Arabic), 17 January 2020, <https://bit.ly/38U2NWB>

Map 4: Internal and External Border Crossings



Source: The Author. Graphic designer: Ayoub Lahouioui. December 2020

Along with border crossings and trade, agriculture is the second source of income. The area of arable land in the northern Aleppo countryside is estimated at 100,000 hectares, of which 75,000 are designated for the cultivation of wheat and 25,000 for growing vegetables.⁷⁵ These are in addition to hundreds of thousands of fruit trees, especially pistachios and olives. The people of Afrin depend primarily on olive cultivation and related activities such as olive pressing and soapmaking.⁷⁶ SNA factions levy large fees on these businesses and confiscate olive groves or raze parts of them on security pretexts.⁷⁷ As for the residents of Peace Spring areas, they rely principally on farming wheat and barley. Turkey pays particular attention to the agricultural sector in this region,⁷⁸ buying the wheat harvest from farmers for the Turkish Grain Board (TMO) through local intermediaries.⁷⁹ The local council in Tall Abyad has also mentioned several local projects that will be opened soon, including factories, poultry farms and olive presses, some of which are overseen by Turkish companies.

⁷⁵ Maen Talaa et al., *Economic Recovery in Syria: Mapping Actors and Assessing Current Policies*, (Istanbul: Omran Center for Strategic Studies, 24 September 2019), <https://bit.ly/2XmwHvA>

⁷⁶ Khayrallah al-Hilu, *ibid*.

⁷⁷ BBC Arabic, "Afrin Olives Turned into 'Revenue Source' for Armed Groups" (in Arabic), 20 January 2019, <https://bbc.in/3lJVWm>

⁷⁸ Facebook, Local Council of Ras al-Ain, 19 October 2020, <https://bit.ly/3pJ8yfA>

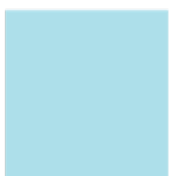
⁷⁹ Facebook, Local Council of Ras al-Ain, 15 October 2020, <https://bit.ly/3pHRVRy>

Conclusion

Since its inception, the Kurdish Autonomous Administration in northern and eastern Syria has been of great concern to Ankara, which has seen in it a threat to its national security. Turkey fears Syrian Kurdish self-rule may encourage Kurds in Turkey to take steps towards secession, especially as Syria's Kurdish community is predominantly situated along Turkey's southern border, extending from the Iraqi border to Afrin, close to the Mediterranean. The strategic objective of Turkish policy has been to destroy any such Kurdish national entity by force and to address the ensuing security challenges as an absolute priority, without crafting an integrated policy to meet needs and secure basic services.

In the course of the three military operations launched by the Turkish army in northern Syria, Ankara has pursued security and service policies differing from one region to another, depending on each area's relationship with its Kurdish population. Turkish forces have acted with great severity in the Afrin and Ras al-Ayn regions, unleashing the SNA against the Kurds, while also restricting access to services in these areas.

At the military and administrative levels, Turkey's policies appear more uniform across the three areas. Ankara has maintained the deployment of large barracks in the heart of the areas under its influence while also supporting forward guard posts to confront the YPG. Meanwhile, Turkish provinces have been tasked with overseeing their neighbouring Syrian regions, imposing on their local councils a model similar to Turkey's own, based on large municipalities and sub-municipalities attached to them, and so-called 'Turkish Governors' are considered the supreme authorities in the Syrian regions they supervise.



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