



Turkey and Power Play in Syria

OE Watch Commentary: Turkey's Operation Olive Branch to enter the Syrian city of Afrin raises the risk of direct military confrontation between Turkey and the Syrian regime. An article from the Turkish daily *Hurriyet* states that on 20 February Turkey launched rocket attacks on al-Assad forces en route to Afrin to help the People's Protection Units (YPG) to defend Afrin. Any military confrontation could result in a shift of power dynamics in Syria between Russia, Iran, and Turkey.

As the accompanying article suggests, Iran could use its military proxies in an engagement between Damascus and Ankara. Therefore, Turkish gains in Syria will threaten its objectives. By the same token, if Turkey and the Syrian regime engage in a direct military confrontation, Russia might not just stand by. As it did after Turkey shot down its fighter jets in 2015, Russia may close Syrian airspace to Turkish fighter jets in support of the al-Assad regime. The article states that this will derail Russian plans in Syria as it is the biggest supporter of the Syrian Regime; however, there is a strong possibility that Russia will use its influence over Turkey and prevent a possible military engagement.

The article notes that military confrontation is the worst-case scenario. Despite all the disagreements between Iran, Russia, and Turkey, the good relations they established without interruptions during the Astana process, a series of negotiations between parties involved in the conflict in Syria which took place in the city of Astana, Kazakhstan. This provides assurances. However, the article cautions against unanticipated possibilities of things getting out of control because of the presence of different armed groups that are waging proxy wars. For example, there is the possibility of friction between Shia elements in areas under the control of the Syrian government in southern Afrin and Turkish forces. The author cites a recent report from the Turkish think-tank EDAM, stating that Shia militias supported by Iran might be bothered by the Turkish supported Sunni Free Syrian Army. In essence, Turkey might face some difficult choices in Syria with Moscow and Tehran. **End OE Watch Commentary (Gunduz)**

Source: Sedat Ergin, "Afrin'de her ihtimale hazırlıklı olmak (To be ready for every possibility in Afrin)," *Hurriyet*, 9 March 2018. <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/yazarlar/sedat-ergin/afrinde-her-ihhtimale-hazirlikli-olmak-40766053>

One of the consequences of confrontation between the Assad regime and Turkey will be Russian and Turkish relations coming under serious pressure. A development in this direction will overturn the entire game plan of Russia, a number one supporter of al-Assad regime in Syria.

If such a possibility emerges, al-Assad regime's another supporter, Iran will not be a spectator on the scene, and it will enable its proxies in Syria.

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