

Afrin: Possible Scenarios

In April 2017, the Turkish government indicated an escalation of its involvement in Syria through several statements. In addition, the Turkish Armed Forces escalated their military operations by bombing the Kurdish-held towns of Afrin and threatening to take over this area. This occurred after the Turkish Forces launched the military operation of 'Saif al-Furat' (Euphrates Sword) along with Free Syrian Army factions on the eastern border of Afrin. The campaign was met with threats from the Self-Administration which controls the area. This escalation could lead to many possible scenarios that have the potential to influence the social peace of the area, which is already fragile because of the current situation in Syria, particularly given the presence of multiple influential forces. This paper attempts to outline some of the possible scenarios that could take place in the future in light of the recent developments at the political and military levels.

I. Introduction:

Afrin (sometimes also spelled Efrîn) is the name of a town and a district and is one of the Kurdish majority areas in Syria. The district of Afrin was part of the Aleppo governorate. However, Syrian government forces lost control of Afrin in 2012, and the area, later called the Afrin Federal Region, has become one of the three areas controlled by the de facto Kurdish Self-Administration in the north of Syria.

The three Kurdish regions in Syria are:

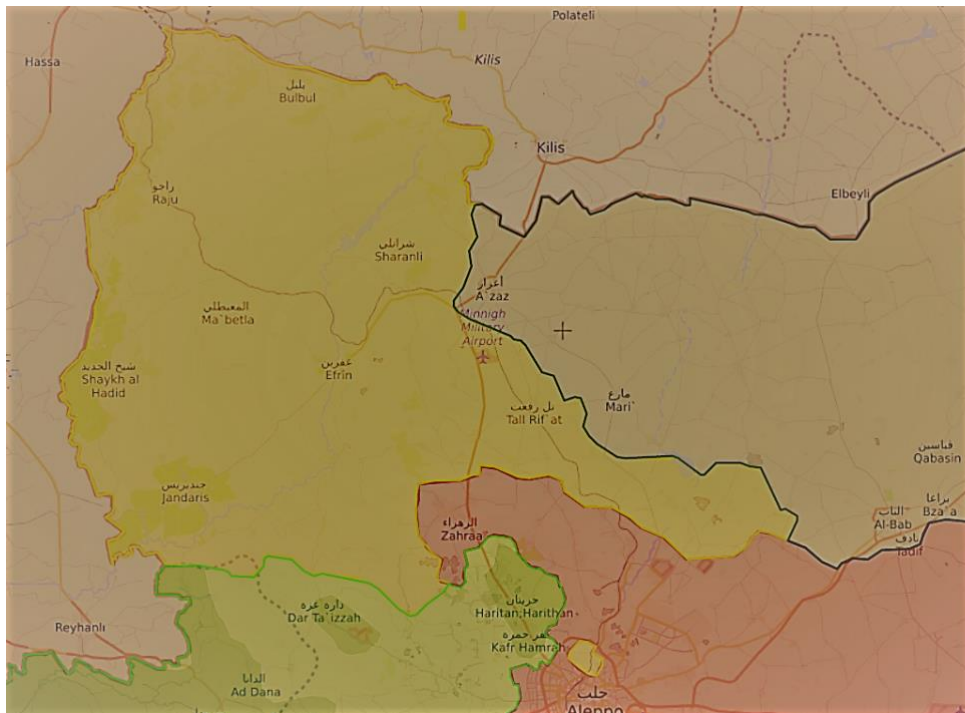
- The Jazeera Federal Region including the cantons of Hasakah and Qamishli.
- The Euphrates Federal Region including the cantons of Kobani and Tel Abyad.
- The Afrin Federal Region including the cantons of Afrin and Shahba.

Afrin is one of the areas in Syria that joined the popular protests when they began in 2011. It continued to participate until the year 2012, when the Syrian government pulled its forces out of the town. Consequently, the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) seized control of Afrin.

II. Key events in the district of Afrin:

- Afrin has witnessed security tension between the Kurdish Self-Administration that controls Afrin and armed opposition factions which control the areas surrounding Afrin, as well as Turkey. These tensions were manifested when multiple brigades of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) carried out attacks on Afrin from the towns of A'zaz (Qastal Jendo which is a village with a majority of Yazidi), from Atama in the country side of Jinderis (Diwa village) and al-Ghazawiyeh and Eshan from St. Simeon Church (Samaan Citadel). A total siege was imposed on Afrin in June 2013.
- In February 2016, Jaysh al-Thuwar (Army of Revolutionaries) allied itself with the YPG to recapture Menagh Military Air Base, which was controlled by FSA brigades since August 2013. Thus the process of expanding the control of the Jaysh al-Thuwar and the Kurdish Front, as well as the Kurdish Self-Administration began with Russian air support in the areas of Tal Rifaat, Deir Jamal, Maraanaz, Ain Dakneh, Shawarga, and al-Faisal Mills.

- In May 2016, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) advanced from the town of Kobani to Manbij, in rural Aleppo and seized control of Manbij after it had forced the ISIS fighters to withdraw. Then the SDF attempted to advance towards the city of Jarablus, which led to direct Turkish intervention. Consequently, the 'Euphrates Shield' military operation was launched on August 24, 2016 leading to the capturing of the cities of Jarablus, al-Raayi, Dabeq and Azaaz. This military campaign succeeded in cutting the road between the cities of Kobani and Afrin to prevent the Democratic Union Party (PYD) from expanding the areas under its control. Turkey considers the PYD as part of The Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which has been designated as a terrorist group.



- After Turkey officially ended the 'Euphrates Shield' military operation and announced that the operation had achieved its goals, it launched a new operation, 'Euphrates Sword', on February 24, 2017. This military operation is considered to be the second phase of the previous Euphrates Shield operation and it was intended, according to the Turkish media, to:
 - Eliminate any potential threat by the YPG forces and prevent them from advancing to the town of Marea in the south and al-Bab in the east. The military operation also aimed at preventing any possibility of establishing a Kurdish entity that may be an incentive and motivation for the Turkish Kurds to do the same.
 - Control the rest of the villages and towns east of Afrin; Menagh Military Air Base, Tal Rifaat, Deir Jamal and Ain Dakneh. And to expand its control over areas in north and northwest Aleppo province.

- Play a key role in the Syrian political file after a common ground was reached with Russia and Iran.
- Secure a land corridor between the Turkish forces and their allies in Azaaz and Jarablus (Bab al-Salam) and their forces in the surrounding areas near Idlib (Bab al-Hawa); and to link the rural areas of northern and eastern Aleppo with Idlib.
- Weaken the YPG and the SDF forces and prevent them from playing any role in any coming military campaign to recapture the city of Idlib.

Future scenarios

i. First Scenario:

Turkey and its allied Syrian opposition factions launch a military operation to control the villages east of Afrin and subsequently advance into Afrin in an attempt to control the entire area.

This scenario would face many challenges at the military level due to the difficult topography of Afrin, which is mountainous, making fighting by conventional armies challenging. Furthermore, Turkey and its allied Syrian opposition factions lack popular support in Afrin.

This scenario would take a terrible human toll because of the high population density in the area. Afrin hosts a high number of IDPs who left Aleppo and the northern countryside. The population is estimated at 800,000, of whom 300,000 are displaced. The progress of the Turkish Forces in the region would contribute to changing the demographics of the region, which is of great concern to the Kurds. It is possible that tensions and conflicts may increase among the neighboring population of Arabs and Kurds.

ii. Second Scenario:

Afrin is handed over to the Syrian government to prevent Turkey from controlling it. This scenario, from a practical point of view, can be implemented as well as accepted by the various conflicting powers. Even Turkey will not oppose it as a last resort to stop the Kurdish Self-Administration from expanding. Russia could push toward this scenario and could force YPG to yield and accept this option that drives the opposition factions led by Turkey away from Afrin. In this scenario the YPG considers that the Syrian regime's control over Afrin presence will have less severe consequences than Turkey's. This option also provides for the possibility of concluding agreements similar to those held in the city of Hassakeh. Furthermore, Iranian-backed militias that are present near Afrin in Nubl and al-Zahraa could also seek to implement this scenario.

iii. Third Scenario:

Turkey and its allied Syrian opposition factions only capture the towns of East Afrin, the villages with the Arab majority, such as Tal Rifaat, Deir Jamal, Ain Dakneh, Maraanaz and Menagh Military Air Base and ultimately impose a siege on Afrin.

This scenario is less expensive for Turkey because Turkey's borders surround Afrin from the west, northwest and southwest, as well as its allies who surround the area from the east (Azaaz), the

southwest (Atmeh) and the southeast (Darat Azza and Samaan Citadel). Turkey and its allies could surround Afrin from almost all sides except for a narrow land corridor from the southeast through the town of Nubal, which is controlled by the Syrian government.

III. Recommendations for action:

- Stop the media discourse inciting violence, hatred and sectarianism.
- Stop arrests of civilians and the blocking of roads as a means of pressure. Crossings and roads must be considered neutral from the conflict, and allow free entry and exit of foodstuffs, medical supplies and fuel.
- Stop the mutual bombardment between the conflicting forces and call on the parties (Syrian opposition factions and the Kurdish Self-Administration) to engage in negotiations.
- Allow civil society organizations to exist and operate freely without restrictions and do not subject the needs of civilians to political and military objectives.
- Allow relief assistance to be delivered and distributed immediately to those in need.
- Reopen an old border crossing between the Turkish border and Afrin or work on opening a crossing with Afrin.
- The Bab al-Salam-Azaaz – Afrin road, the Afrin – Aleppo road and the rest of roads must be considered neutral from any political calculations, and they should be put under the supervision of a joint committee.
- The Afrin area and its surroundings should be included in the so called de-escalation zones and an interposition force to separate the parties should be deployed.
- Pull out all foreign fighters and militias.