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*Safe Zones and Devil in Details:  
Turkey is Running out of Options*

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Over a year now the Turkish-American agreement over the so called Manbij Roadmap is in a stalemate. US President Donald Trump's announcement in December 2018 to withdraw American troops from Syria even further complicated the situation. Just after Ankara's acquisition of the Russian S-400 air defence missile system US Syria, envoy James Jeffrey arrived in Turkey for July 22-23 meetings to make progress in the plans for the proposed safe zone and the Manbij Roadmap. However, the first round of talks ended unsuccessful according to Turkish officials with new talks scheduled for next week. Turkey is threatening to launch a unilateral military action east of the Euphrates River to drive out the terrorist-designated Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) from Manbij and to establish a militarily protected safe zone if its security concerns are not met. The area shall be entirely cleansed from YPG forces and replaced and protected by the Turkish Armed Forces (*Türk Silahlı Kuvvetleri* TSK) and the Turkish-allied so-called National Army (NA)<sup>1</sup>. With this, Ankara aims at reshuffling the cards and diversifying its options for the political transition process ahead. If the US doesn't relent, Turkey will need to get on common grounds with Russia concerning a safe zone in northeast Syria. However, with Moscow too, Ankara is at odds, mainly on Idlib and the implementation of the Sochi agreement from September 2018. Nevertheless, Ankara's frustration with Washington pushed Turkey increasingly into the arms of Moscow. However, being dependent on the US on the safe zone, Turkey plays a risky gamble. Placing everything on the card of maximum pressure on Washington, Turkey might bet on the wrong horse since Russia, too, might leave Turkey empty handed concerning concessions on Syria.

### **Manbij Roadmap and Safe Zone**

On the 4<sup>th</sup> of June 2018 Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu and American Secretary of State Mike Pompeo announced that they had reached an agreement over the prevailing Manbij Roadmap dispute. According to the agreement, YPG-related forces shall withdraw from Manbij to the east of the Euphrates and joint Turkish-American military patrols will give Turkey a more direct role in controlling and providing security around Manbij. Secondly, based on Turkey's insistence, the composition of the local system of governance which is currently run by the YPG-dominated Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) will change. The roadmap shall be a role model to follow in further areas at the Turkish-Syrian border. Almost a year after the announcement, there's still no tangible progress

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<sup>1</sup> Term used by Turkey.

in the implementation of the roadmap. The US announcement of withdrawal from Syria in December 2018 further complicates the situation. Since November 2018 Turkish and American military forces are carrying out joint patrols while the negotiations over the governance of the Manbij Military Council (MMC) are still going on. Washington has reportedly put forward names to be vetted by Ankara.

The strategic city of Manbij was taken over by YPG-forces from the Islamic State in Syria and the Levant (ISIS) in June 2016. Only three weeks after the failed coup-attempt, the TSK launched Operation Euphrates Shield to contain YPG's expansion along the Turkish-Syrian border. The operation held strategic importance, as it took place between Manbij and Afrin and prevented a possible YPG-controlled corridor. A year after the YPG took over control in Manbij, the US proposed a plan to oust ISIS from Raqqa with the help of the YPG through training and equipping YPG militants with new weapons in Manbij. Once more, this was perceived as an affront, proving to Ankara that the YPG would not withdraw from Manbij. In October 2017, the YPG took over Raqqa from ISIS. In January 2018, the Pentagon introduced its controversial plan to set up a 30.000-strong border force composed of YPG forces along Syria's border with Turkey and Iraq. As response, on 20 January 2018, Turkish forces together with the Free Syrian Army (FSA) launched another military operation. Operation Olive Branch that dispersed the YPG from Afrin, about 100 km (62 miles) from Manbij.

Ankara's primary objective is to create a militarily protected safe zone that will be liberated from terrorist-designated YPG-entities, prevent the YPG's territorial continuity in the eastern part of the Euphrates River, and then open up a territorial zone to protect Turkey's border against, according to the Turkish narrative, any terrorist infiltration. The area mentioned is 40 km deep, 550 km long and harbours 22 US military bases. Currently there are mainly disagreements over the control of the urban settlements, the protection of the air space of the planned safe zone, and the monitoring of the cease-fire line. Another rationale Turkey follows is that of the resettlement of Syrian refugees in the safe zone area. The main argument behind that is that through this, societal tensions in Turkey will be eased. However, the bigger driving force is to build a natural buffer through demographics against Kurdish aspirations for local exercise of power.

“The main problem is that the Americans struck a deal with the Turks but are not abiding to its conditions. Especially CENTCOM is delaying its implementation. What we see here is that with the US Administration's declaration of withdrawal, Washington linked the Manbij Roadmap to the safe

zone discussion. Thus, both negotiation processes are going on simultaneously,” Ömer Özkızılcık from SETA Foundation in Ankara stated<sup>2</sup>.

For Ankara, the upholding of the Manbij Roadmap is pivotal, as a major national security concern, but also as the last opportunity for the US to prove their sincerity in moving forward with Turkey in Syria. The US cooperation with the SDF, the continued delay of the implementation of the Manbij Roadmap, and more lately, the Pentagon’s announcement to establish observation points alongside Syria’s Turkish and Iraqi border, once more proved the prevailing perception in Ankara that despite all claims coming from Washington, the US-YPG collaboration is not tactical but has a strategic vision at the expenses of Turkey’s national security.

### **Regional Obstacles to a Safe Zone**

Even though the ethnic composition of the border stretch is mainly Arab, the two Kurdish enclaves of Ayn al-Arab and Qamishli are highly YPG-dominated and build the core of the YPG-rule. US forces will hardly be able to persuade the YPG to withdraw from the region, given that the YPG does not show any sign to concede a retreat. At this backdrop, an entirely Turkish-controlled border seems quite unrealistic.

“In that sense, the Turkish (propagated) narrative of cleansing the whole border region from the YPG and installing the armed opposition (NA/FSA) is just impossible,” states Nawwar Shaban from the Istanbul-based Omran Center for Strategic Studies.

Shaban sees a more strategic vision behind that ambition. According to this, the TSK probably will attempt to take Tel Abyad as a crossing border point and Ayn Issa as a strategic route. “If they [TSK] take Tel Abyad without Ayn Issa it will have no impact; they need Ayn Issa which is, as said, a strategic route which would be under Turkish control. But beyond that, let’s face it, it’s just rhetoric. To claim that this region is originally Arab is not enough due to the stated regional realities on the ground. The only reasonable area Turkey will be able to bring and hold under its control is Manbij.”<sup>3</sup>

Sinan Hatahet from the same Omran Center for Strategic Studies sees it similarly. “There will be certain agreements around Manbij, Tel Abyad and Ayn Issa. Ayn Issa is very important because it is

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<sup>2</sup> Author’s interview in April 2019.

<sup>3</sup> Author’s interview in December 2018.

at a crossroad that connects the north of Syria with Iraq. It will be easier for Turkey to deploy its forces in Tel Abyad because it has a mainly Arab population. But the rest of the region most probably will fall under regime control. In exchange for that Turkey will demand some compromises from Russia and the regime on Manbij and Tel Abyad.”<sup>4</sup>

For Özkızılıç a non-military exit plan does still exist. “If the Americans can persuade the YPG to withdraw from the region, there could be unarmed local political representatives that administer the area which could be protected by the Turks, Americans and Europeans. But again, we face the question of who will administer the area.”

The NA as Turkey’s proxy and local player on the ground shall lend the TSK leverage and acceptance with regards to the local population.

### **Formation of the “National Army”**

Turkey’s long-term geostrategic calculation with the NA goes beyond an urgent joint military operation in the east of the Euphrates. In a future political transition process Ankara aims at installing the NA as a holistic entity inside the Syrian security structure within a decentralized structure of local governance.

The formation of the NA is seen as a revitalization of the moderate forces by Washington and Western allies after the neglected and decentralized FSA in 2014 that from the very beginning was designed to be a centrally-commanded insurgent organization. In other words, as a counter-weight to the US’ favoured insurgent group of the YPG on the ground, Turkey re-invested immensely in its own favoured rebel group. Almost half of the FSA-groups within the NA were formerly supported either by the Pentagon or by the CIA.

The decreasing international support to the moderate armed opposition after 2014 led the Syrian opposition – political and military – to intensify its unification efforts as a matter of survival. Already in December 2012, the Supreme Military Council (SMC), a command structure of the FSA, was formed in Turkish Antalya to be later dissolved in September 2014 by the National Coalition of Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces (SNC) for allegations of rampant corruption. On the downside, the decline in international support for the moderate armed opposition opened the way

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<sup>4</sup> Author’s interview in December 2018.

for Turkey that was left to be the almost exclusive foreign backer of the Syrian armed opposition, hence enabling a growing Turkish iron grip on the armed opposition.

Operation Euphrates Shield from August 2016 to March 2017 was a turning point for the FSA. The TSK gathered all participating armed groups under the formation called Hawar Kilis Operations Room. After the termination of Operation Euphrates Shield, Ankara as well as the armed opposition held on to the objective of centralizing and professionalizing the FSA. Finally, on 30 August 2017, the Istanbul-based Syrian Islamic Council called upon the military opposition to form unity which was enforced by the Minister of the Interim Government, Javad Abu Hattab. The final decision to form the NA was taken on the 4<sup>th</sup> of September 2017 at a conference in Gaziantep where alongside to the Interim Government and the armed opposition Turkish state representatives were present. Abu Hattab was appointed Interim Minister of Defence of the to-be established Interim Ministry of Defence.

The NA has largely been a Turkish initiative officially announced on 30 December 2017 as a merger of 29 armed groups operating in northern Aleppo. All the armed groups involved took up arms in the TSK-led Operation Euphrates Shield and Operation Olive Branch. Since the inception of the insurgency in Syria Turkey has launched many initiatives to unite the fragmented armed opposition to counter ISIS and mainly the YPG. The formation of the NA is the latest among these and up until today the most cohesive initiative for military unification. All armed factions are considered FSA elements upholding the Syrian Revolutionary Flag, including also those who have a more Islamist-inclined ideological outlook such as the Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated Faylaq al-Sham.

Özkızılcık explains that for the first time there is a direct connection between the political and armed opposition. The central command of the armed factions is meant to lend leverage to both the political representation of the Syrian armed opposition in Geneva and to the armed opposition on the ground.

### **Challenges Ahead: Overcoming Fragmentation**

Especially with regards to overcoming fragmentation within the ranks of the armed opposition, there are major obstacles ahead. The NA is an umbrella coalition merger of around 30 armed factions that continue to preserve their respective organizational and command structures inside the NA. The idea behind the formation of the NA is in the long-term to break these structures and to

reorganize the whole armed insurgency within a more cohesive body. But Turkey is facing difficulties to reach that goal, especially taken into consideration that these groups were in competition over the rule of power for a long time.

Özkızılcık admits that, although this is formally and officially proclaimed, the NA has no hierarchical structure but is a hybrid entity. The Commander of the NA is not the Chief of Staff but the Council of so-called Squad Leaders. The squad leaders are the military leaders of each armed group that joined the NA structure. Currently, the Council of Squad Leaders consists of a total of 36 squad leaders and 29 different armed groups. The divergence in the number of squad leaders and armed groups is due to the fact in some cases there are two squad leaders, for example when two factions merged. Özkızılcık explains that Jabhat Shamiyya has two squad leaders because it formed an armed coalition with a former faction of Ahrar al-Sham. The northern Aleppo faction of Ahrar al-Sham splintered from Ahrar al-Sham and integrated in Jabhat Shamiyya while preserving its military commanders.

“Actually, the Syrian Interim Ministry of Defence and the Turks are facing the same problem. There are no reliable and competent military leaders in the NA that are able and willing to fuse and unite the different factions under one command. And what makes it even more difficult is that the Syrian Interim Government has no authority either,” attests an Istanbul-based Syrian expert<sup>5</sup>. One further major reason why leaders of the armed groups do not facilitate that process is that serves their interests as well. To give up on military leadership means to give up on individual power and influence. Military leaders seek, especially in the tribal areas they originate from, power and influence and hence, a scope of action which is not under Turkish control. To escape somehow the Turkish iron grip on them, military leaders of the armed groups try to get stationed at areas in the south where Turkish military control is not that tight which is strongest in the border regions of Jarablus and al-Bab.

Given that circumstance, the armed factions still do operate autonomously since the decision-taking authority lies with the squad leader of the respective brigade. The Turkish objective is to overcome exactly this structure. According to Özkızılcık this evolution is being shaped now. “Before the formation of the NA the Turkish army was very frustrated with the military capacities of the FSA but this changed enormously after the formation of the NA. After Operation Euphrates Shield

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<sup>5</sup> Author’s interview from December 2018.

commanders within the ranks of the NA were awarded with medals for their outstanding military performances.”

In that sense, Turkey is following a long-term strategy aimed at transforming the NA to a wholly professionalized military force while for the time being adapting to the underlying dynamics. However, currently neither the Ministry of Defence of the Interim Government nor the Chief of Staff has a say over the NA but the squad leaders and the Turkish National Intelligence Agency (MIT).

One measure Turkey takes to overcome gradually that factionalism is a coordinated military training. The NA is organized in three army corps that are trained through a two-fold strategy. Some factions are trained separately as a whole entity whereas some are mixed with other groups. Special brigades are trained fractionally, for example those who are originating from the east of the Euphrates in preparation for an upcoming military action in the region to gain the support of the local tribes. To further institutionalize professionalization, each corps goes through a daily military training which is devised by the Turkish army in collaboration with the squad leaders. Wages are paid exclusively by Turkey and their connections for foreign backers are extensively vetted. In future these fighters shall be transferred into a professionalized military structure in which they receive enough salary to earn their living and “stay in the barracks,” says Özkızılcık.

### **Decentralised Security Structures**

Ankara’s presence in northern Syria obeys its security interests long-term. To serve this interest the preservation of the NA-entity is pivotal for Turkey that gambles with Russia over an arrangement according to which the NA as a whole entity will be absorbed within a decentralized military structure in Syria’s north.

There are already examples of special security arrangements based on decentralized local security structures. Under Russian mediation, inter alia, insurgent leader Ahmad al-Oudah in the southern city of Busra al-Sham surrendered in July 2018 to the regime NDCF - Atmaca - Paper - 260719.docx. According to Syrian knowledgeable sources the Russians are negotiating with other surrendered opposition leaders to transfer them to different regions as special security forces located in specific areas without even the need to raise the Syrian flag and with no relation to the regime. “It is the Russians who are protecting al-Oudah against assaults by regime forces. Russia is following this



strategy to avoid any vacuum that might be filled in by Iran. For this, Russia knows that it needs those armed oppositional factions (as well),” says an Istanbul-based expert.<sup>6</sup>

The highly weakened Syrian Arab Army owes its survival not only to foreign militias but also to the absorption of former rebel groups. After 2017, with the recapture of many opposition strongholds, the Syrian military regained around half its manpower losses with the integration of former defectors and opposition militias that were recruited in the retaken areas. Since 2016, Russia gathers armed groups under Russian-controlled unified umbrellas. The Fourth Corps provides professional protection to Russian installations in Latakia, while, for example, the Fifth Corps fights ISIS in the east. This high security hybridity is mainly enhanced by Russia and to a lesser extent by Iran and will expectedly even further increase during the political transition process.

Considering the enduring stalemate with the US on Manbij and the safe zone, Turkey might try to get on common grounds with Russia and advocate the implementation of a similar, but Turkish-controlled, hybrid security structure in the north based on the principle of devolution. Therefore, Turkey is channelling its efforts on installing the NA at certain strategic areas along the border region within a decentralized structure but cannot openly advocate for a federal system since this runs oppositional to its commitment to Syria’s territorial integrity and could stir similar claims by the Kurds.

Given that the northern Aleppo and Idlib-based armed factions are the staunchest in opposition to Assad, it depends from Russian decision-making if this will happen, much against the will of Assad. “To Assad, the armed opposition is all made of terrorists. Only an external power may force him [Assad] to accept such an [decentralized] arrangement. This force is only Russia”, says defected Colonel Arafat Hammoud who served for 33 years as commander in the Raqqa province<sup>7</sup>.

Think tanks close to the Turkish government hint at a unilateral Turkish military action in north-eastern Syria based on arrangements with Russia. However, Russia, as the strongest actor at the Syrian playing field, has currently no incentive to make concessions to Turkey.

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<sup>6</sup> Author’s interview from December 2018.

<sup>7</sup> Author’s interview in December 2018.

## Dwindling Options

Ankara is eager to launch a third military operation in the east of the Euphrates.

In fact, the US withdrawal was not in the interest of Turkey, despite official rhetoric. Ankara did not want the US to withdraw but to insert its favoured NA Arab proxy, mainly in Arab-dominated towns such as Raqqa, Manbij and Tel Abyad. Until now, it is uncertain what kind of security arrangement the US will leave behind, further complicating the situation.

Consequently, Turkey's options in northeast Syria are increasingly dependent on Russia's position. After the withdrawal of the US, Russia and Iran are focusing on minimizing the already vulnerable Turkish role in Syria. Assad is eager to regain control over every inch of Syria and restore his authority. Moscow and Tehran want the whole area to the west and east of the Euphrates as well as Idlib to be handed over to regime control. On several occasions Russia made clear that there cannot be a safe zone in northeast Syria without cooperating with Assad and that such a safe zone should be under regime control. Turkish analysts trace this back to Moscow bringing forward the Adana Protocol from 1998 between Ankara and Damascus. Under the agreement, Syria closed PKK bases on its territories, imprisoned PKK fighters, and expelled PKK head Abdullah Öcalan, resulting in his 1999 capture. Ankara rejects such a proposal since it does not trust the regime's intent that has a record of collaborating with the PKK/YPG against Ankara in the past.

Since April, the spiral of violence by the Assad regime and Russia in Idlib (targeting also Turkish observation points and causing the death of a Turkish soldier) puts Ankara under massive pressure, reminding Ankara of who has the final say in Syria. With Russia, Turkey faces a major negotiation partner in the political transition process ahead that does not shy away from using its military superiority in Syria to achieve political ends in the Astana and the Geneva Peace Process. Notwithstanding, the coinciding times of the delivery of the Russian S-400 missile system with the Turkish deployment of armoured vehicles and elite forces to the southern border hints at a tactical move from Ankara to put maximum pressure on Washington through maximum rapprochement with Moscow.

Despite of that, Turkey will try to overcome the divergences with the US on the safe zone since it needs US approval to gain access to the area, especially the airspace. Nonetheless, most probably a failure in negotiations will not hinder a Turkish invasion to the region any longer, though with a limited military incursion. Yet, the current Turkish-Russian rapprochement on many issues should

not be misleading since the divergences on Syria still prevail. More importantly, having played off the two NATO allies against each other, Russia has even less incentive to make concessions to Turkey on the safe zone, thwarting Ankara's utmost national security priority. Ankara's options in northeast Syria are a risky gamble of balancing its relations with the US on the one hand and Russia on the other that might backfire, also regarding its NA-project whose fate is linked to the safe zone.





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