

Turkey's Operation Olive Branch Enters A New Phase

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Executive Summary

» Operation Olive Branch has reached a critical juncture. At the time of writing, the campaign successfully cleared nearly the entire mountainous outer ring surrounding Afrin along the southwest – northeast axis. Securing this tactical depth in harsh terrain and hostile territory within a month marked an important achievement for Ankara. Nevertheless, maintaining the rear area security and subterranean warfare still remain critical issues against the adversary's infiltrations.

» At this point, Operation Olive Branch is getting more urbanized in terms of battleground parameters and characteristics of the conflict. As EDAM predicted in the previous report, Turkish military planners are altering the force generation patterns for the forthcoming phase. At the time of writing, the Gendarmerie and the Police special operations units, which are the urban warfare and counter-terrorism elite of the Turkish Security Forces, are being deployed to the area of operations.

» In the rural phase of the Olive Branch, which witnessed a thorough mountain warfare effort, the Turkish Armed Forces' heavy fire-power superiority, namely the Air Force and the Army's land-based fire-support assets, played a key role. On the other hand, as the characteristics of the campaign gets closer to urban warfare, the rules of engagement for the use of air power and heavy artillery will be more restricted to avoid civilian casualties. In this regard, the YPG / PKK's use of human shield and paramilitarized civilians remain highly problematic.

» Although the YPG / PYD's military capacity is currently dwarfed by that of the Lebanese Hezbollah, the ongoing uptrend in key hybrid warfare capabilities strongly hint at the prospects of reaching such a level in the next decade, if it continues unchecked. In this respect, systematic rocket attacks to Turkey's border towns, along with dangerous

anti-tank guided missiles (ATGM) and man-portable air defense systems (MANPADS, including the 3rd-generation ones) at the hands of the YPG / PYD, coupled with a menacing subterranean warfare complex, are alarming pieces of evidence.

» Within 15 days starting from January 21, 2018, the YPG / PKK militants managed to launch 94 rockets into Turkey's populated areas, killing 7 civilians and injuring more than one hundred. Notably, while the civilians killed / rockets launched ratio remains 0.07 for the YPG / PKK's attacks within the referred 15 days-period, the same ratio was 0.01 resulting from Hezbollah's 34-days rocket campaign back in 2006. Of course, the Lebanese Hezbollah's missiles were counted in thousands in that conflict. Yet, it should be underlined that the militant group made a drastic progress in ten years. A comparative assessment of Hezbollah's rocket campaigns in the 1996 conflict (Operation Grapes of Wrath / the April War) and the 2006 Second Lebanon War shows how a non-state violent actor could boost its capabilities in a decade.

» In the hybrid warfare literature, the effects of rocket attacks are not only evaluated by casualties. Severe disruption of socio-economic life comes into the picture as one of the most important risk factors. Turkey is not an exception in this regard. This is why Turkey needs to ensure the tactical depth, just like it did by capturing al-Bab, to deny the range of the rockets that terrorist groups use (some 20 – 30 kilometers), while developing – in its case urgently – robust C-RAM (counter – rocket, artillery, and mortar) capabilities at the same time. In addition, more formidable punitive, offensive capabilities are also needed.

» In the course of the campaign, Turkey's burgeoning defense industry has boosted its efforts to finalize the active protection system acquisition. In cooperation with

Ukraine, Operation Olive Branch will probably witness the first active protection systems-equipped armored platforms of the nation soon. If completed successfully, this modernization project will not only improve the armor survivability in the face of the ATGM threat, but would also mark an impressive achievement for the Turkish military-industrial complex.

▶▶ The Syrian regime's elite and battle-hardened formations are now concentrated in the Ghouta front. The Syrian Arab Army cannot get prepared for a large military buildup in and around Afrin, at least in short term. Thus, as yet, Damascus can only mobilize militias for an escalatory move. However, the towns of Nubl and Zahra in the vicinity of Afrin are emblems and epicenters of Syria's Shiite militancy. In recent years, many Shiite militant groups mushroomed up in Syria using the 'saga of the liberation of two towns, Nubl and Zahra'. There is a strong Iranian Revolutionary Guards Quds Forces and the Lebanese Hezbollah influence particularly in these population centers. The Shiite militancy in the area would be extremely uneasy about having the Free Syrian Army presence around, and could opt for provocations. Even more importantly, Russia might have limited control over these groups when compared to its institutional and strategic cultural influence over the Syrian Arab Armed Forces. All in all, as the dust settles in the Syrian Civil War, the divergences between Moscow and Tehran could surface in Afrin.

▶▶ Furthermore, the Syrian Arab Air Defense Force remains a true wildcard in the escalation scenarios. Following the US Navy's Tomahawk strike on al-Shayrat Air Base, in April 2017, the Russian Defense Ministry announced that it would boost the Syrian air defense capacity. Furthermore, at the outset of the Turkish cross-border campaign, the Syrian Military leaked their new air defense deployments in the Aleppo and Idlib areas to the press. In this regard, Ankara should well assess the Israeli F-16I downing incident, not primarily from a technical standpoint, but through the lens of the 'chain of command'

responsible with the incident, in order to understand the limits of the Russian control over the Syrian air defenses.

▶▶ Since the publication of EDAM's initial report on Turkey's Operation Olive Branch, two important developments have changed its political context. Firstly, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) adopted a resolution for a temporary cease fire in Syria triggered by the humanitarian tragedy in east Ghoutta. The second development is the agreement between the PYD and the Syrian regime for collaboration in Afrin to disrupt the Turkish military campaign.

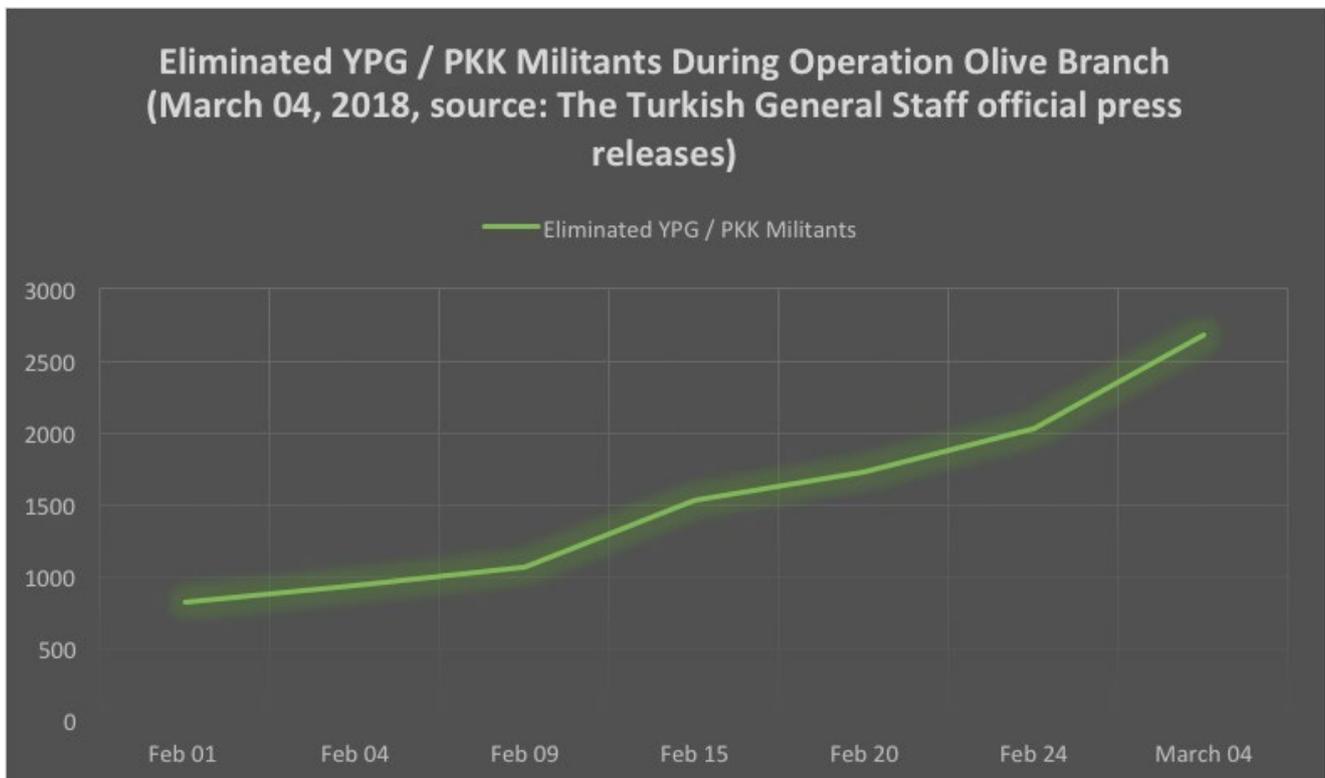
▶▶ Ankara seems to be unfazed by the UNSC Resolution. But, the regime – PYD agreement could potentially have a much more consequential impact on the future of Operation Olive Branch. Turkey may now be involved in a race against time to fulfill its military and ultimately political objective. At present, the regime has limited military capacity to reorient to Afrin. A significant share of its forces is currently occupied around east Ghoutta. The remaining elements are needed to consolidate the control of terrain in other, and geopolitically more important, parts of Syria.

▶▶ But if the Syrian regime forces move to Afrin to directly confront the Turkish military, after having (successfully?) terminated their engagement in east Ghoutta, the political context of Operation Olive Branch would be altered. Then, Damascus might opt for claiming that Turkey is in violation of its obligations under the UN Charter, and particularly Article 2 (4), which enshrines the principle of non-aggression.

▶▶ Ankara would then need to decide whether to continue its campaign risking a direct confrontation with the regime forces or to conditionally suspend its military operations in northern Syria. The conditions are likely to be related to an end state where regime commits itself to prevent the YPG from threatening Turkey's national security.

ASSESSING THE MILITARY - GEOSTRATEGIC SITUATION

As illustrated in the maps of this section, Operation Olive Branch is now about to fully clear the rural belt surrounding the city of Afrin along Turkey's immediate doorstep. Turkish military planners acted very cautiously in the initial phase of the operation. The air power played a decisive role at the overture of the campaign, while the army's land-based fire-support assets showed a good performance enabling the advance in geographically harsh, hostile territory. Besides, the Turkish Army's elite mountain warfare units made a clear difference on the ground. Furthermore, a comparative assessment of Operation Euphrates Shield and Operation Olive Branch suggest an uptrend in the warfighting capabilities and discipline of the indigenous component which is centered on the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and local Turkmen groups. At the time of writing, the Turkish cross-border operation has, according to press statements by the Turkish General Staff, eliminated more than 2,600 YPG / PKK militants in northern Syria.



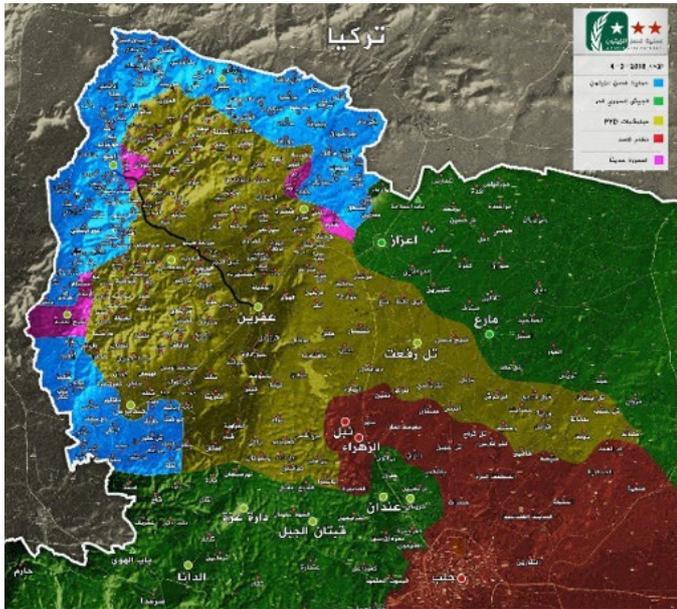
Despite the cautious approach, the Turkish Armed Forces lost 41 troops and the indigenous component of the operation had 116 losses as of March 2, 2018,¹ due to the hybrid character of the conflict. In fact, starting from the anti-ISIS effort of Operation Euphrates Shield, hybridization of the battleground remains the primary cause of the Turkish casualties.

At present, Operation Olive Branch is about to clear the border ring in its area of responsibility from the YPG / PKK presence. By doing so, the outer echelon of the siege will have been established. However, the southern approach to

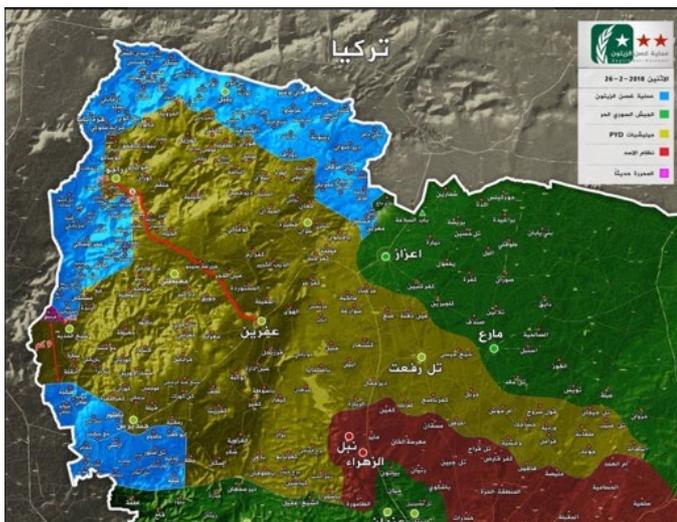
the Afrin city center, starting from the Shiite-populated towns of Nubl and Zahra under the Syrian regime's control, still remains open and intact. Besides, as this report discusses subsequently, the Ba'ath regime is now enabling its militia forces to enter Afrin to make things harder for Turkey through this corridor. Thus, the key decision for Ankara would be about whether carrying on with a robust, yet incomplete, encirclement –and leaving the regime's / Iran's support to the YPG in Afrin to be solved by diplomatic efforts between Ankara and Moscow–, or to launch a massive envelopment in the southwest – southeast direction to cut Afrin's supply routes through the regime-held areas.

¹ Hurriyet, <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/gundem/milli-savunma-bakani-acikladi-41i-tsk-mensubu-157-sehidimiz-var-40758764>, Accessed on: March 4, 2018.

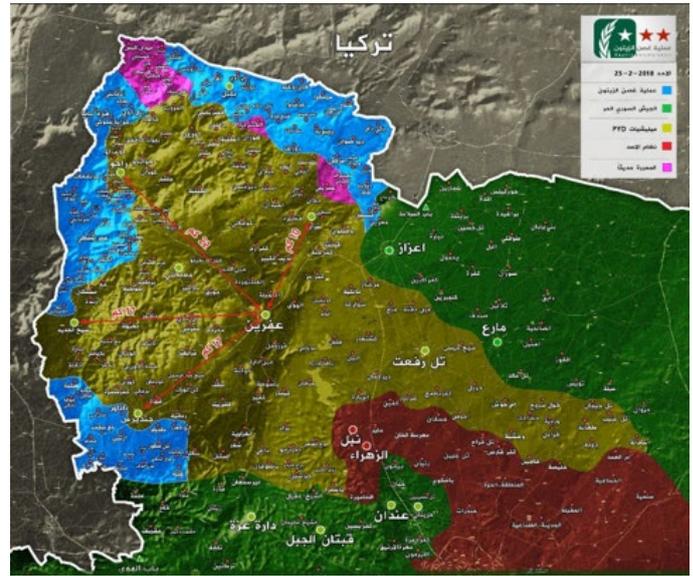
The Recent Advance in Maps:2



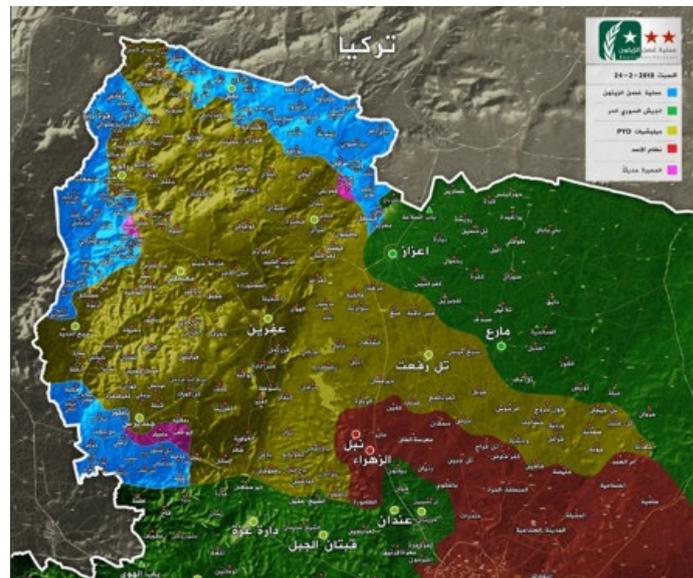
March 04: The updated battleground input reveals that Operation Olive Branch has completed clearing the mountainous belt surrounding the city of Afrin. At the time of writing, the Turkish General Staff announced that the primary routes from Raco and Cinderes to the city center, as well as the western district of Sheikh Hadid, were under control.³ The primary achievement at present is securing the area from the YPG / PKK presence, and gaining tactical depth. Nevertheless, the regime's routes to Afrin are open in the south. It remains to be seen if Ankara would opt for a complete siege of the city center by taking the risk of a line of contact with Nubl and Zahra. The area highlighted in red, in the south, refers to the provinces controlled by the Syrian Ba'ath regime and its allies. The two red dots in the upper edge of the regime-controlled area are the towns of **Nubl and Zahra**.



February 26: Together with the February 25 map on the right, it is clear that the Olive Branch makes the decisive assault for finalizing the outer-ring envelopment along the southwest – northeast axis. The decisive assault was accomplished on March 4, 2018, as highlighted in the map above.

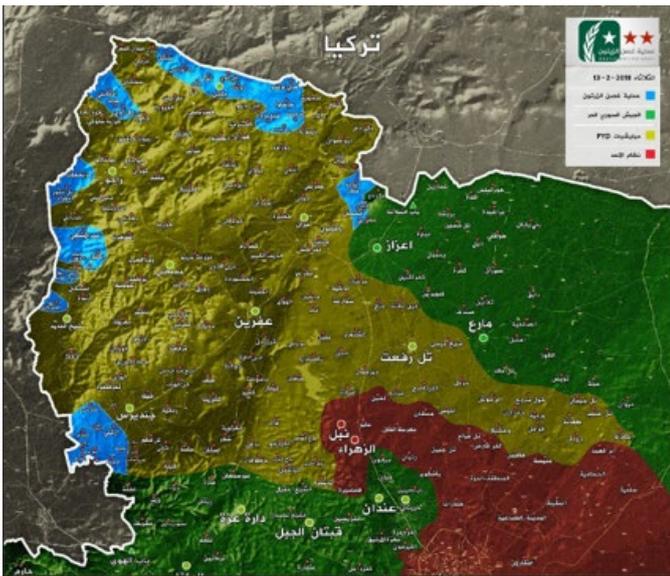


February 25, 2018: While the blue area illustrates the already captured territory by the Olive Branch offensive, the pink refers to very recent advances. As of February 24, the rural belt surrounding Afrin is largely controlled by Operation Olive Branch formations.



February 24, 2018: When compared to the February 25 map above, it is seen that the Olive Branch marked an impressive progress within a day by a decisive assault. It should be noted that the YPG / PKK losses rose to 1931 from 1829 in two days, from February 22 to February 24.⁴

2 The maps were retrieved from the Sultan Murat Division, an indigenous and battle-hardened Turkmen armed group under the Free Syrian Army, <https://twitter.com/stumeni?lang=de>, Accessed on: March 04, 2018.
3 http://www.tsk.tr/ZeytinDaliHarekati/ZDH_19, Accessed on: March 04, 2018.
4 The Turkish Armed Forces General Staff, <https://twitter.com/tskgnkur?lang=de>, Accessed on: March 01, 2018.



February 13, 2018: The mapping from an early stage of the Olive Branch reveals the military-geostrategic gains made by setting multiple attack positions in several fronts from the southwest to the northeast of Afrin. By doing so, Turkish military planners deprived the YPG / PKK defensive from maintaining the necessary force concentration. Besides, since Operation Olive Branch was not a surprise at the strategic level, the multiple-front assault compensated for this handicap by ensuring the surprise factor at the operational level.

SHIFTS IN THE FORCE GENERATION PATTERNS OF THE CAMPAIGN

As predicted by EDAM's previous report on Operation Olive Branch, force generation patterns are about to shift from a predominantly mountain warfare effort into urban warfare as the campaign unfolds. Since late January, Turkish military planners have been readying the battle-hardened urban warfare units for further phases.⁵ At the time of writing, special operations units from the Gendarmerie and the Police –over 3,000 personnel along with the 'village guards'– were about to be deployed to the front.⁶ As reported by the Turkish press, these units will be primarily used to control the key towns of Cinderes and Raco, and to maintain the rear area security, since the surrounding rural villages are now mostly cleared.⁷

Controlling the town centers of Raco and Cinderes is of key geostrategic importance for the Olive Branch. For one, these towns are located on critical roads leading to Afrin city center. Secondly, exerting full control over Cinderes and Raco would promote the rear area security aspect of the campaign, which is of key importance. Last but not least, there are large and small urban and sub-urban areas on the way to the Afrin center. The special operations units

will probably be assigned the missions to both clear and hold these areas for the Olive Branch's progress.

Under the Interior Ministry, both the Gendarmerie and the Police Special Operations (Özel Harekat) formations are true experts in conflicts in urbanized environments, and gained experience against the PKK's urban terror campaign in southeastern Turkey, a few years ago.



Turkish Special Operations Units fall under the Police and Gendarmerie of the Interior Ministry, and are experts of urban warfare situations.⁸

⁵ CNNTurk, <https://www.cnntrk.com/turkiye/zyetin-dali-harekatinda-mesk-n-mahal-hazirligi-ozel-harekat-sinirda-bekliyor>, Accessed on: February 24, 2018.

⁶ Hurriyet, <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/joh-ve-pohler-afirni-teroristlerden-temizleme-40751610>, Accessed on: February 24, 2018.

⁷ Hurriyet, <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/afirne-girecek-ozel-harekatcilar-hazir-40750499>, Accessed on: February 24, 2018.

⁸ Hurriyet, <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/joh-ve-pohler-afirni-teroristlerden-temizleme-40751610>, Accessed on: February 24, 2018.

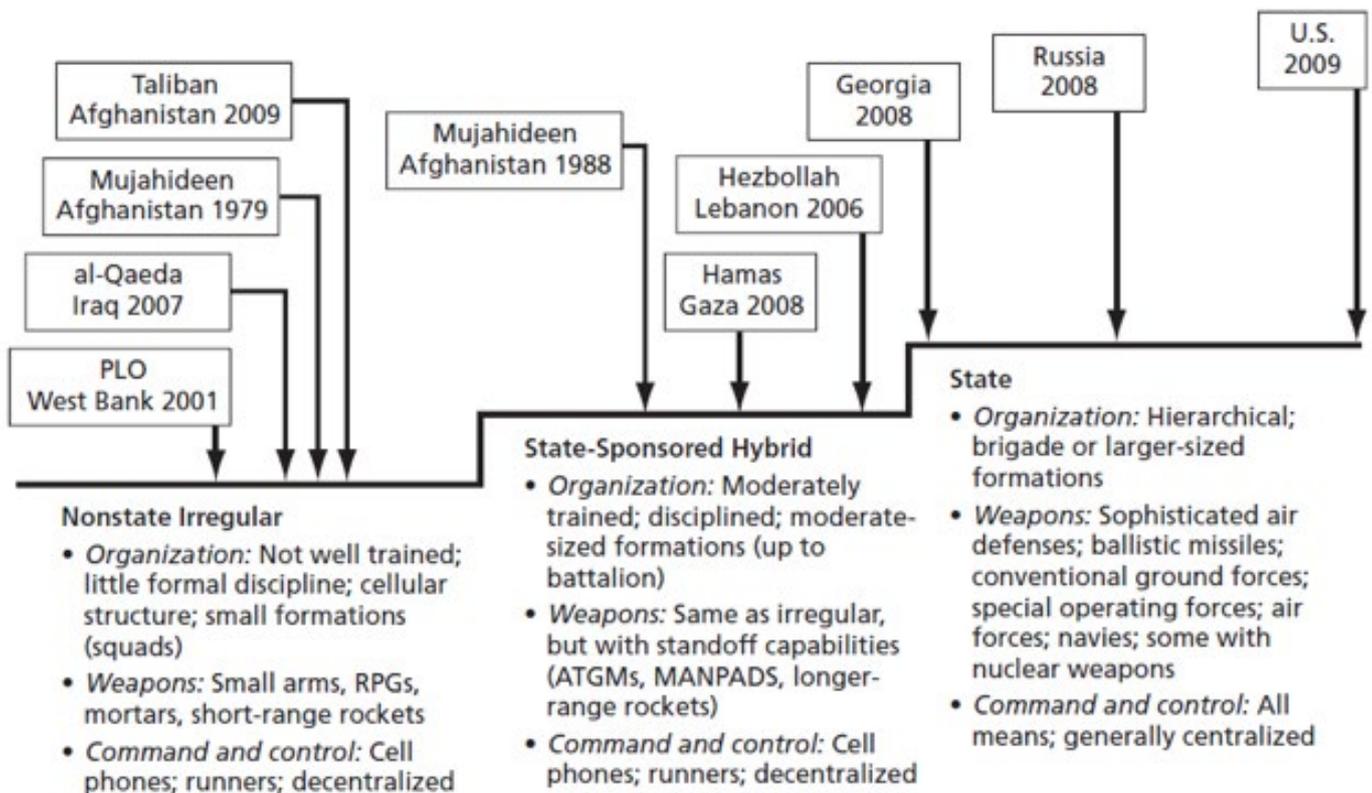
HYBRID CHARACTER OF THE THREAT

The YPG / PYD military capabilities have gained a menacing edge throughout the Syrian Civil War. If unchecked, the group, which has irrevocable ties with the PKK terrorist organization, could develop a dangerous capacity comparable to the Lebanese Hezbollah.

From a political–military standpoint, the abovementioned comparative assessment depends on tangible parameters regarding the hybrid threats as follows:⁹

- Acquisition of relatively advanced stand-off weapons (ATGMS, MANPADS, and rockets) that can stress the conventional superiorities of regular armed forces.
- Moderately trained manpower –better than primitive non-state irregulars with poor discipline and training–.
- Larger formations than small cell structures of traditional terrorist organizations.

Steps in Warfare and Capability



RAND OP285-1

Classification of Military Capabilities from Non-State Irregular Groups to Hybrid Threats, and to State-led Challenges.

⁹ David, E. Johnson. Military Capabilities for Hybrid War: Insights from the Israel Defense Forces in Lebanon and Gaza, RAND, 2010, p.5.

In essence, hybrid threats incorporate full-range of the warfare scale ranging from –albeit limited– conventional capabilities to terrorism, indiscriminate violence, and criminal disorder. In doing so, hybrid actors use multi-modality within the very same battlespace.¹⁰

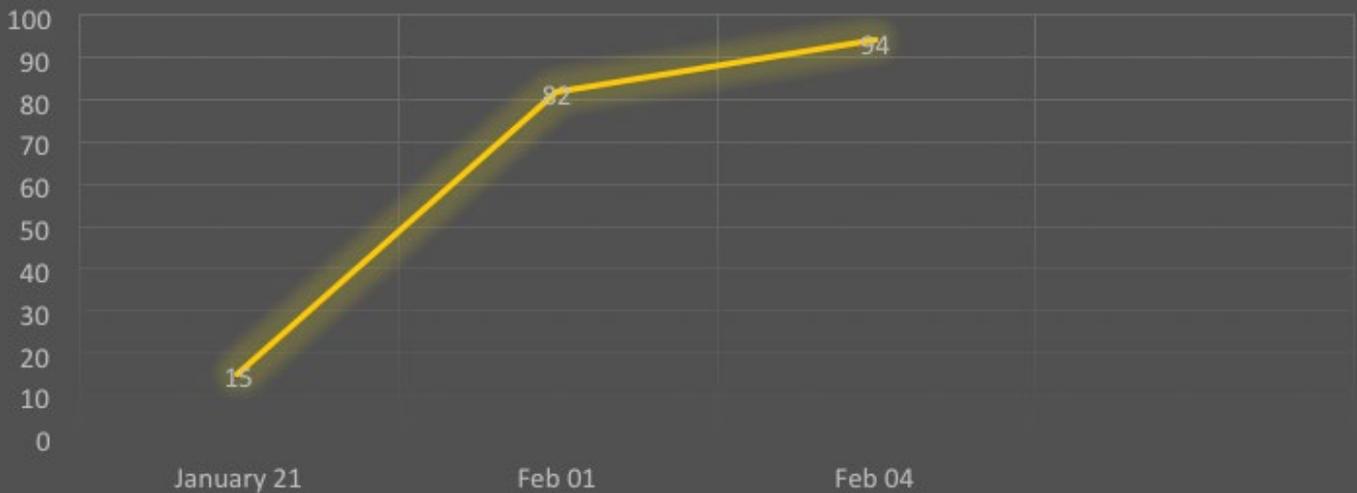
In compliance with the abovementioned depiction, the YPG / PKK responded Operation Olive Branch with a rocket campaign. The YPG / PKK militants started their rocket attacks, many of which targeted the civil population in Turkey, on January 21, 2018.¹¹ Turkey’s Prime Minister Binali Yıldırım explained that as of February 4, 2018, a total of 94 rocket attacks hit the Turkish soil –60 rockets hitting the city of Hatay while 34 rockets landed to Kilis–. These attacks claimed the lives of 7 civilians and injured over 100.¹²

During the 2006 conflict, rockets killed 43 Israeli civilians and 12 troops within 34 days.¹³ Leaving aside the

Lebanese Hezbollah’s exaggerated claims (unrealistically, some 8,000 rockets during the 34-day long conflict), it is assessed that the group launched 115 to 118 rockets per day.¹⁴

Although the YPG / PKK’s rocket operations are dwarfed by that of Hezbollah, one should focus on the uptrend shown by the Lebanese armed group within a decade to understand what Turkey could face in the late 2020s in case the YPG / PYD challenge remains unchecked. For example, back in 1996, (Operation Grapes of War / the April War), the Shiite armed group fired 639 rockets total in 16 days, which marks approximately 40 rocket per day.¹⁵ In other words, when it came to 2006, in only ten years, the Lebanese Hezbollah was able to perform almost 3 times more intensive operational tempo. In fact, terrorist groups and insurgents are learning organizations with very effective adaptation skills most of the time.

The YPG Rocket Attacks (number of rockets landed) Hitting Population Centers and Adjacent Areas in Turkey Between January 21, 2018 and February 04, 2018



¹⁰For a cornerstone work on hybrid warfare in the literature, see. Frank, Hoffman. Conflict in the 21st Century. The Rise of Hybrid Wars, Potomac Institute for Policy Studies, Arlington – Virginia, 2007.

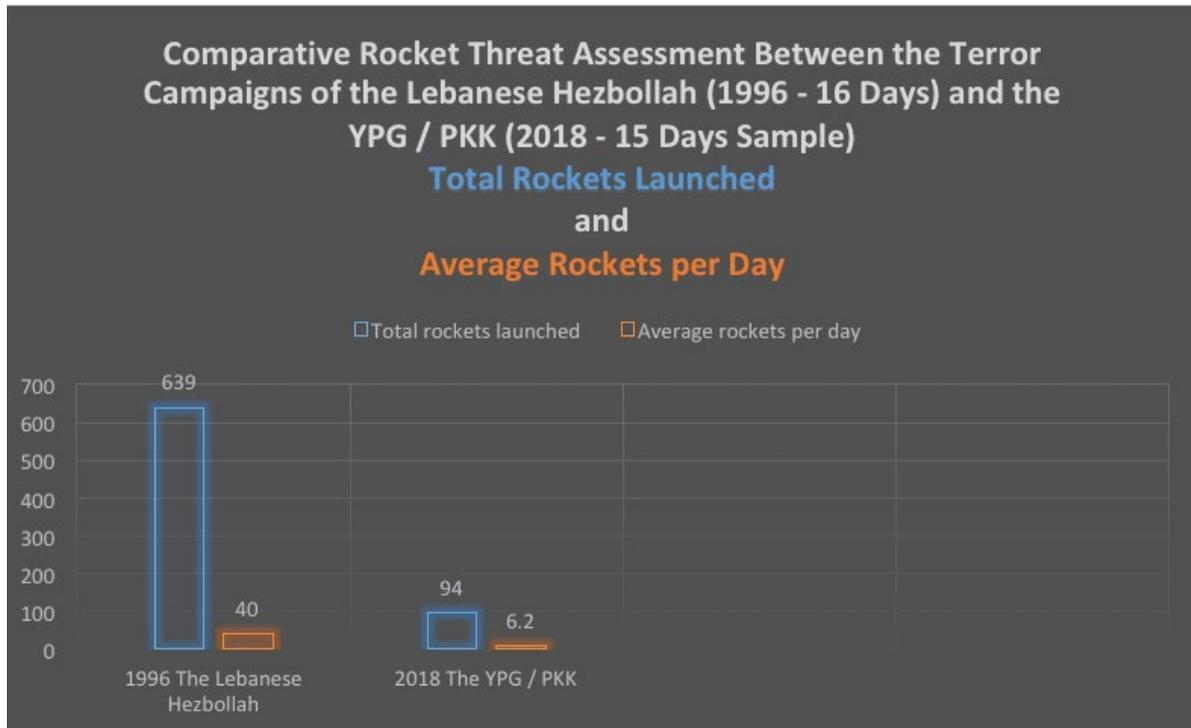
¹¹Hurriyet, <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/son-dakika-reyhanliya-havan-topu-dustu-40717285>, Accessed on: February 24, 2018s

¹²Hurriyet, <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/yildirim-bir-cift-sozumuz-var-natoda-muttefikimizsiniz-40731376>, Accessed on: February 24, 2018; On the first day, January 21, 2018, 11 rockets fell to Hatay, while Kilis was hit by 4, Hurriyet, <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/son-dakika-reyhanliya-havan-topu-dustu-40717285>, Accessed on: February 24, 2018; On the day 12, the Turkish Prime Minister announced 82 rockets targeted Turkey within 12 days, Hurriyet, <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/basbakan-yildirim-afrinden-12-gunde-82-roket-attilar-40729259>, Accessed on: February 24, 2018.

¹³Human Rights Watch, Civilians under Attack: Hezbollah’s Rocket Attacks on Israel in the 2006 War, August 2007.

¹⁴Jeffrey, White. “A War Like No Other: Israel vs. Hezbollah in 2015, the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Policywatch 2363, January 2015; Human Rights Watch, Civilians under Attack: Hezbollah’s Rocket Attacks on Israel in the 2006 War, August 2007.

¹⁵Human Rights Watch, Civilians under Assault: Hezbollah’s Rocket Attacks on Israel in the 2006 War, August 2007, p.114.



Notably, another comparative assessment between the 2006 rocket campaign by the Lebanese Hezbollah and the 2018 rocket campaign by the YPG / PKK militants give interesting results about the civilian casualties. **On the one hand, within 34 days, the Lebanese armed group killed 43 civilians by 3,917 rockets of which approximately 23% landed to built-up areas. Thereby, during the 2006 conflict, the ratio of civilian killed per rocket remains 0.01.¹⁶ On the other hand, as a result of the initial 15 days of the YPG's rocket campaign targeting Turkey's population centers in Kilis and Hatay, 7 civilians were killed by 94 rockets. Therefore, the civilians killed per rocket ratio was 0,07.**

It should also be noted that while the YPG / PKK launched 34 rockets to Kilis within only 15 days, back in 2016, ISIS launched around 70 rockets to Kilis in about five months.¹⁷

Last but not least, it should be underlined that the rocket threat to populated areas always have non-kinetic effects.

Socio-economic destruction that these attacks bring about could be significant.¹⁸ This is why Turkey needs to ensure the tactical depth, just like it did by capturing al-Bab, to deny the range of the rockets that terrorist groups use (some 20 – 30 kilometers), while developing – in its case urgently – robust C-RAM (counter – rocket, artillery, and mortar) capabilities at the same time. In addition, more formidable punitive, offensive capabilities are also needed.

Open-source intelligence pieces of evidence suggest that the YPG / PKK have also gained other hybrid warfare capabilities including ATGMs and MANPADS. Since the beginning of the operation, many ATGM incidents were recorded. The most destructive attack took place on February 3, 2018, when a Turkish tank near Sheikh Horoz was hit by ATGM fire, probably a Soviet-manufactured, wired-guided 9M113 Konkurs (NATO reporting name, AT-5 Sprandel), claiming the lives of 5 Turkish troops.¹⁹ When it comes to the MANPADS, the presence of high-

¹⁶Human Rights Watch, *Civilians under Assault: Hezbollah's Rocket Attacks on Israel in the 2006 War*, August 2007, p.10; However, a 2007 CSIS study report the killed civilians 42, rockets landing in northern Israel as 3,790 with no marginal difference of the ratio of civilians killed per rocket.

¹⁷BBC Türkçe, http://www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler/2016/05/160509_kilis_roket, Accessed on: March 01, 2018.

¹⁸For a detailed study also referred in the footnote above, see: Anthony, Cordesman, George Sullivan and William D. Sullivan, *Lessons of the 2006 Israeli – Hezbollah War*, CSIS, Washington D.C., 2007.

¹⁹Hurriyet Daily News, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkish-tank-in-afrin-might-have-been-hit-by-russian-made-anti-tank-weapon-konkurs-126804>, Accessed on: February 24, 2018.

end systems is noteworthy. For example, in late January, 2018, the Free Syrian Army fighters seized an advanced, SA-18 MANPADS from the YPG militants near Cinderes.²⁰ Notably, it was the same type of MANPADS that the PKK downed a Turkish AH-1W Super Cobra attack helicopter in May 2016.²¹



The FSA fighter showing the captured SA-18 MANPADS from the YPG. It was the same type of MANPADS that the PKK used to down a Turkish AH-1W Super Cobra attack helicopter in May, 2016.²²

Since Operation Euphrates Shield against ISIS, the Turkish Military has been fighting hybrid battles beyond the borders. This experience will have crucial influence over Turkey's defense modernization, as well as the doctrinal order of battle of the Turkish Armed Forces, in the 2020s.

AIR POWER AND OPERATION OLIVE BRANCH

Air Strikes Comparative Assessment Immediately Before and After the Airspace Closure

Turkey's airpower has been a key factor since the beginning of the Olive Branch. Especially, the intensive air-ground mission at the overture of the campaign, which witnessed at least one-quarter of the Turkish Air Force's F-16 variants and F-4 2020s engaging over 100 targets with 95% success, marked an impressive achievement. This very air-ground mission was also crucial since it was carried out amidst the pilot-to-cockpit ratio debates.

It should be emphasized, for instance, that the Turkish Army's main battle tanks and armored platforms still lack a comprehensive modernization, including the long-debated active protection systems, for countering the hybrid threats. Notably, at the time of writing, Turkey's Defense Minister, Nurettin Canikli, announced that Pulat active protection system, in cooperation with Ukraine, would be deployed on the Turkish armor as an urgent-demand program. Still, AKKOR active protection system awaits the 2020s to enter into service.²³ According to the Turkish defense company ASELSAN, while AKKOR will enjoy hard-kill and soft-kill features,²⁴ Pulat will provide security to armored platforms by using only hard-kill capabilities.²⁵

In fact, at the time of writing, Turkey's Undersecretariat for Defense Industries announced that the abovementioned Pulat active protection system passed the tests, and will enter into service shortly for the Olive Branch. Interestingly, the Undersecretariat used the term "Akkor Pulat" – instead of only Pulat – when introducing the system, and also extended special thanks to ASELSAN and Tübitak SAGE, showing the involvement of Turkey's national defense industries to the process.²⁶ Thus, in short term, we will probably see the performance of Pulat-protected Turkish armor against the hybrid challenges faced in northern Syria.

Notably, in early February, a incident led to four-day suspension of the Turkish air strikes. On February 3, 2018, a Russian Su-25 attack aircraft was downed over Idlib, probably by MANPADS fire.²⁷ The ejected pilot engaged in firefight with the militants in the area, and in the end, blew himself up to avoid capture.²⁸ Then, starting from February 5, 2018, the Russian contingent closed the airspace in western Syria for adjusting its defensive measures for

²⁰ Daily Sabah, <https://www.dailysabah.com/war-on-terror/2018/01/31/russian-made-manpads-seized-from-ygp-terrorists-fsa-says>, Accessed on: February 24, 2018.

²¹ For a comprehensive report analyzing the PKK terrorist organization's reach to the 3rd generation MANPADS, see: Can, Kasapoglu and Doruk Ergun, From Low Intensity Conflict to Hybrid Warfare: MANPADS at the Hands of PKK, EDAM, May 2016.

²² Daily Sabah, <https://www.dailysabah.com/war-on-terror/2018/01/31/russian-made-manpads-seized-from-ygp-terrorists-fsa-says>, Accessed on: February 24, 2018.

²³ Aksam, <http://m.aksam.com.tr/yasam/afindeki-tanklarimiza-gorunmeyen-zirh-pulat-geliyor/haber-711972>, Accessed on: March 04, 2018.

²⁴ ASELSAN, http://www.aselsan.com.tr/tr-tr/basin-odasi/Brosurler/Elektronik-Harp-Sistemleri/AKKOR_TR.pdf, Accessed on: March 04, 2018.

²⁵ ASELSAN, http://www.aselsan.com.tr/tr-tr/basin-odasi/Brosurler/Elektronik-Harp-Sistemleri/PULAT_TR.pdf, Accessed on: March 04, 2018.

²⁶ The Undersecretariat for Defense Industries, <https://mobile.twitter.com/SavunmaSanayii>, Accessed on: March 04, 2018.

²⁷ Russia Today, <https://www.rt.com/news/417810-russia-needs-know-supplied-syria-rebels-manpads/>, Accessed on: February 25, 2018.

²⁸ Sputnik, <https://sputniknews.com/russia/201802121061571364-jet-manpads-protection/>, Accessed on: February 25, 2018.

a few days.²⁹ The closure was allegedly for the manned aircraft only, while the unmanned platforms carried on their activities uninterrupted.³⁰ Following the four-day delay, the Turkish Air Force resumed its operations in the Syrian airspace on February 9, 2018.³¹

Below, this report illustrates a comparative assessment of the Turkish Air Strikes Tempo before and after the temporary suspension of the access to the Syrian airspace:³²



²⁹Haberturk, <http://www.haberturk.com/rusya-nin-hava-sahasini-turk-jetlerine-kapattigi-iddia-edildi-1828797>, Accessed on: February 25, 2018.

³⁰Hurriyet, <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/afrin-avasinda-rusya-molasi-40734830>, Accessed on: February 25, 2018.

³¹Hurriyet, <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/son-dakika-jetler-afrinde-pkyi-vuruyor-40735996>, Accessed on: February 25, 2018.

³²The data was derived from the Turkish Military's official releases, <https://twitter.com/TSKGnkur>, Accessed on: February 25, 2018.

With the exceptions of January 30, 2018, and February 4, 2018, –there is a good likelihood that the latter was a result of the Russian Su-25 downing and related precaution measures– there is no decrease in the Turkish Air Force’s operational tempo immediately after the opening of the Syrian airspace on February 9, 2018.

In fact, while a total of 61 targets were struck between January 31 and February 3, within four-day period, a total of 89 targets were eliminated between February 9 and February 12. Thus, the Air Force operations did not slow down after the temporary closure of the airspace, and the operational tempo picked up where it left off. However, as the battleground gets more urbanized, the utility of the airpower –and probably the sortie rates of combat platforms– would differ.

Turkish Airpower in the Forthcoming Sub-Urban and Urban Phases of Operation Olive Branch

Operation Olive Branch will probably have an urban warfare phase. Even if Ankara opts for laying siege on the Afrin city center, instead of launching an intensive assault, still, the sub-urban parts would need to be cleared. This necessity brings the utility of air power in urban environments to the agenda.

Air power plays certain roles in urban warfare. Its missions range from close air support (CAS), cover against enemy fighters, logistics, to medical evacuation (MEDEVAC). Yet, irregular adversaries in civilian-populated shelters offer few lucrative targets to the offensive air power, especially under strict rules of engagement. Furthermore, although air power could be effective, it cannot win an urban fight by itself, since urban warfare is, in essence, a combined arms operation.³³

Urban warfighting environments’ physical and social complexities make air operations very hard. Above all, urban environments make identification harder, and increase the

collateral damage risk. Besides, infrastructure preservation comes into the picture as an important drawback. All these factors lead to more restrictive rules of engagement, including limitations on target identification parameters and munitions of choice. Even more importantly, CAS missions become very difficult, especially when house-to-house fighting takes place on the ground.³⁴ In doctrine, the bulk of the urban engagements occur where enemy and friendly forces are within 250 meters to 50 meters to each other, depending on the supporting arms employed. Thus, the risk of friendly fire is serious. In consequence, both the collateral damage and the friendly fire risks affect the weapons and munitions selection.³⁵ Finally, many sensitive issues belonging to the law of armed conflict could become the top agenda of the operating air component.³⁶

The MANPADS threat, along with anti-aircraft guns, make low altitudes extremely risky over urban areas. Some of the low-altitude air defenses could be even deliberately placed in populated areas. Furthermore, reconnaissance and surveillance missions over urban battlegrounds are also problematic. Since day-to-day activities continue in cities, the adversaries can utilize a dense clutter of vehicles, people, and electromagnetic signals. Thereby, poor line of sight and intense clutter, coupled with demanding identification needs, make urban surveillance and reconnaissance very difficult.³⁷

Finally, as mentioned above, aerospace operations over urban areas are also demanding in terms of the law of armed conflict. Simply put, the proximity of legitimate targets to the civilian population exist in both horizontal and vertical dimensions in urban environments.³⁸ Moreover, most urban environments contain shared resources between the civilians and the armed elements, along with dual-use housing facilities, transportation networks, and telecommunications systems. This very fact brings about certain targeting restrictions. In addition, apart from the legal constraints, the need for maintaining the domestic and foreign support to the operations brings about a political dimension to the utility of air power in urban areas.³⁹

³³ For a detailed assessment derived from the lessons-learned in urban warfare records, see: Asymmetric Warfare Group, *Modern Urban Operations: Lessons Learned from Urban Operations from 1980 to the Present*, 2016.

³⁴ For the US doctrine of joint urban operations, see: The US Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Joint Urban Operations*, Joint Publication 3 – 06, November 2013.

³⁵ The US Joint Chief of Staff, *Close Air Support*, Joint Publication 3-09.3, November 2014.

³⁶ The US Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Joint Urban Operations*, Joint Publication 3 – 06, November 2013.

³⁷ For a detailed report on the utility of aerospace power in urban environments, see: Alan J. Vick et.al. *Aerospace Operations in Urban Environments: Exploring New Concepts*, RAND, 2002.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

The law of armed conflict also places certain obligations on the defending side. For example, deliberate placement of civilian population in the vicinity of military targets or deploying weapons to the protected sites are strongly prohibited.⁴⁰

The Turkish Armed Forces enjoy a degree of fire-power that can be a game-changer. Heavy artillery presence⁴¹ and intensive air operations tempo have brought about an overwhelming edge to Operation Olive Branch so far. On a separate note, the Turkish multiple-launch rocket systems' (MLRS) precise shelling to halt a convoy carrying arms and munitions supplies to Afrin was militarily impressive. The incident, which took place in late February 2018, in 15km southeast of Afrin, revealed the high-end capabilities of the Turkish MLRS against time-sensitive targets, as well as the level of integration between the Turkish Armed Forces' artillery and unmanned aerial systems (UAS). The tactical use of UAS for reconnaissance, target acquisition, and further battle damage assessment for the artillery (and MLRS) give decisive results in longer ranges with more successful kill ratios.⁴²

The key advantages highlighted above, coupled with the warfighting capabilities of Turkey's elite ground troops, as well as better trained FSA and Turkmen fighters, led to a clear dominance for the Turkish Military in the ongoing

campaign. However, fire-power advantages will probably be restricted by tighter rules of engagement as the conflict becomes more urbanized. The YPG / PKK defensive's use of the civilians as human shield could make the situation even more complicated. Besides, the urban environment of Afrin would pose additional challenges to the Turkish military aviation, especially at low altitudes.

On the one hand, Turkey could still use its air power in urban warfare. For example, unmanned aerial vehicles could well be assigned to ISTAR (intelligence, surveillance, target acquisition, and reconnaissance) missions, as well as point, precision strikes. In areas with low collateral damage risk, precision-guided munitions delivered from manned and unmanned aircraft could still be employed against the targets identified with high confidence. Furthermore, attack helicopters could be used to patrol the rear areas against infiltrations, of course, by being vigilant about the MANPADS threat.

On the other hand, as mentioned earlier, clearing the urban Afrin would be more about a difficult combined arms effort, rather than a heavy-handed fire-support capacity. This is where the urban warfare expert Gendarmerie and the Police special operations units, as well as the indigenous elements, could make a real difference. Moreover, countering the IED threat would be of vital importance for force protection.



Counter-IED activities during Operation Olive Branch.⁴³

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ IHS Jane's, <http://www.janes.com/article/77567/turks-call-in-heavy-artillery-against-kurds>, Accessed on: February 27, 2018.

⁴² Lester, Grau and Chuck Bartles. "Integration of Unmanned Aerial Systems within Russian Artillery", *Fires*, July – August 2016.

⁴³ The Turkish Armed Forces General Staff, <https://twitter.com/tskgnkur?lang=de>, Accessed on: February 27, 2018.

THE WILDCARD: THE BA'ATH REGIME'S MILITARY MOVES IN AFRIN

A potential wildcard is the involvement of Assad's forces in the already tense situation. At the time of writing, both the Syrian Ba'ath regime and the YPG / PYD sources first hinted at the prospects of a pragmatic agreement which would allow Damascus to deploy troops in Afrin. Ankara made it very clear that in case the Syrian Arab Army enters Afrin to fight alongside the militants, instead of taking control of the province and cleansing the terrorist threat, then no one could stop the Turkish troops and Operation Olive Branch.⁴⁴

Indeed, in late February, when the Ba'ath regime's National Defense Forces, a paramilitary group with a strong Iranian Revolutionary Guards influence, was entering Afrin, the Turkish Military shelled their convoy, and forced them to stop. Nevertheless, some of the regime militia were reported to enter the city.⁴⁵

There are a few key facts to know for getting a good grasp of the situation:

➤ **Open-source pieces of evidence suggest that the Syrian Arab Armed Force's elite units (i.e. the 4th Mechanized Division, Republican Guard, the Air Force Intelligence's special operations detachments, and the Tiger Forces) are concentrated in the south, for the ongoing east Ghouta offensive that already caused a humanitarian disaster. The Ba'ath regime even deployed Tochka tactical ballistic missiles (SS-21 in NATO designation), a destructive asset with a notorious combat record,⁴⁶ to the area of operations.⁴⁷ In sum, although the Syrian Arab Armed Forces do have**

combat-capable units that should not be neglected, its limited manpower cannot fight a multi-front battle. **In other words, Damascus, at present, does not have the *marge de manoeuvre* to escalate the situation with Turkey through a significant military buildup to match Operation Olive Branch.**

➤ The regime-controlled territory in the south remains the primary logistical route to maintain the YPG / PKK defensive in the city center. Thus, Turkey could opt for **'splicing the two ends of its C-shaped encirclement'** along the rural belt surrounding Afrin. Such a move has military-geostrategic pros and cons. On the positive side, it would provide Operation Olive Branch with a perfectly prepared siege warfare option, and deprive the Ba'ath regime from its war of attrition card to bleed the Turkish forces in a prolonged conflict. However, on the negative side, it could bring about a line of contact with the regime forces –albeit it would be the militia currently– alongside **the towns of Nubl and Zahra**. These towns are Shiite-populated centers which came under siege for a long time throughout the Syrian Civil War. Thereby, during the offensive to break the siege, Hezbollah and the Iranian Revolutionary Guards poured into these towns, and brought about a robust, sectarian motivation. **In fact, these two settlements now function as a fertile ground for the Shiite militancy and the epicenter of a new wave called 'the Syrian Hezbollah'⁴⁸ under the influence of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards and the Lebanese Hezbollah.⁴⁹ In sum, although the Syrian Arab Army cannot maintain an elite military deployment at the time being, the Shiite militants in the area, who would be very reactionary against the FSA, could be a problematic factor for Operation Olive Branch.**

⁴⁴ Reuters, <https://in.reuters.com/article/mideast-crisis-syria-aftrin/turkey-warns-syrian-army-against-helping-kurdish-ypg-in-aftrin-idlNKC1G30S9?il=0>, Accessed on: February 28, 2018.

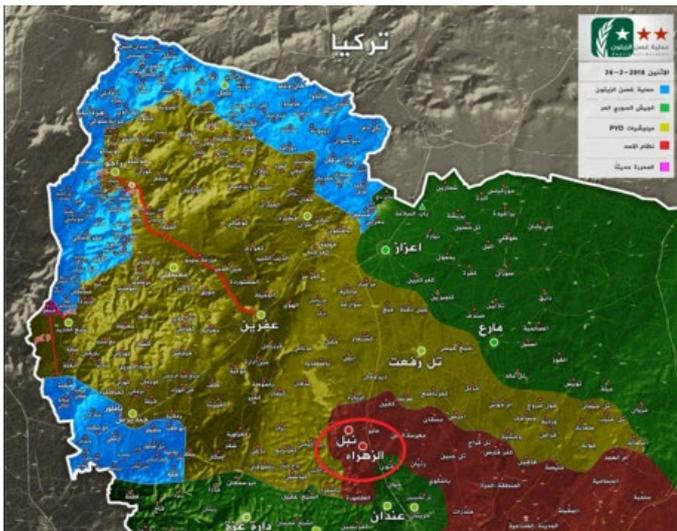
⁴⁵ CNN, <https://edition.cnn.com/2018/02/20/middleeast/turkey-syria-ypg-aftrin-intl/index.html>, Accessed on: February 28, 2018.

⁴⁶ Sebastien, Roblin. "SS-21 Scarab: Russia's Forgotten (But Deadly) Ballistic Missile", the National Interest, September 2016, <http://nationalinterest.org/blog/ss-21-scarab-russias-forgotten-deadly-ballistic-missile-17679>, Accessed on: February 28, 2018.

⁴⁷ Al-Masdar News, <https://mobile.almasdarnews.com/article/video-syrian-army-deploys-tochka-ballistic-missiles-east-damascus-amid-arrival-another-huge-armored-convoy/>, Accessed on: February 28, 2018.

⁴⁸ In fact, this term refers to various Syrian Shiite militancy groups and factions, such as the Junud al Mahdi and Fawj al-Imam al-Hujja. For a comprehensive assessment, see: <http://www.joshualandis.com/blog/syrian-hezbollah-militias-nubl-zahara/>, Accessed on: February 28, 2018.

⁴⁹ Phillip, Smyth. "How Iran is Building Its Syrian Hezbollah", the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Policy Watch 2580, March 2016.



The towns of Nubl and Zahra (in the northern tip of the regime-controlled area, illustrated by the red circle) remains the epicenter and emblem of the Shiite militancy of Syria.⁵⁰

➤ While the Turkish strategic community is focused on the pro-regime militia, the true wildcard, in terms of capabilities, remains the Syrian Arab Air Defense Force which surprised

many experts by the downing an Israeli F-16I.⁵¹ Following the US' Navy's Tomahawk attack on al-Shayrat Air Base, in April 2017, the Russian Defense Ministry announced that it would boost the Syrian air defense capacity.⁵² Furthermore, at the beginning of the Turkish cross-border operation, the Syrian Military leaked their new air defense deployments in the Aleppo and Idlib areas to the press, noting that this was a "message to everyone".⁵³ Ankara's diplomatic rapprochement with Moscow now enables the Turkish Air Force to operate in the Syrian airspace. Yet, in case this rapprochement cannot be maintained or significant divergences occur, or somehow, a faction in the Syrian Arab Air Defense Force –*for example, a pro-Iranian faction among the Air Defense Command ranks who perceives threat from the Turkey-backed FSA deployments very close to Nubl and Zahra*– opts for a rogue provocation, then whole parameters of Operation Olive Branch could change. In fact, the Turkish Air Force has SEAD (suppression of enemy air defenses) capabilities to counter the Syrian air defenses.⁵⁴ Yet, in such a scenario, the Olive Branch campaign would have to be pursued under contested combat airspace conditions.

THE EVOLVING POLITICAL FRAMEWORK

Since the release of EDAM's initial report on Turkey's Operation Olive Branch, two important developments have changed the political context.

Firstly, the United Nations Security Council adopted a resolution for a temporary ceasefire in Syria triggered by the humanitarian tragedy in east Ghouta. The text can be read as being binding on all parties including Turkey. Indeed, the exceptions listed in the resolution don't include the PYD/YPG/PKK. Ankara has, however, decided not to interrupt its advancing military campaign. The international reaction has so far been limited. The lack of a more severe reaction is also certainly linked to the inability of the

international community to halt the regime's attacks in and around east Ghouta. In other words, the provisions of the resolution cannot even be enforced for its primary target which is the Syrian regime. Ankara, therefore, seems to have calculated that a toothless international instrument should not be a hindrance to its own military and political aims in northern Syria.

The second important development is the agreement between the PYD and the Syrian regime for a military collaboration in Afrin to disrupt the Turkish military campaign. This agreement could potentially have a much more consequential impact on the future of Operation

⁵⁰ The map (without the circle illustration of the towns in the original form, showing the control of terrain for the Olive Branch on February 26, 2018) was retrieved from: Sultan Murat Division, <https://twitter.com/stumeni?lang=de>, Accessed on: February 28, 2018.

⁵¹ Defense News, <https://www.defensenews.com/global/mideast-africa/2018/02/13/syrian-downing-of-f-16i-begs-question-why-didnt-israel-deploy-f-35s/>, Accessed on: February 28, 2018.

⁵² Sputnik, <https://sputniknews.com/world/201704071052397935-russia-syria-ministry-defense/>, Accessed on: February 28, 2018.

⁵³ Reuters, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-defences/syria-deploys-new-air-defenses-in-north-commander-in-pro-assad-alliance-idUSKBN1FP2SC>, Accessed on: February 28, 2018.

⁵⁴ IISS, Military Balance 2018, Routledge, London, 2018.

Olive Branch. As elaborated in the previous sections of this report, the regime has little military capacity to reorient to Afrin. A significant share of its forces is currently occupied around east Ghouta. The remaining elements are needed to consolidate the control of terrain in other parts of Syria. Therefore, despite the announced agreement, the regime has been unable/unwilling at this stage to undertake a major military secondment to the Afrin region. Instead, Iran-backed paramilitaries have attempted to position themselves in the city. These developments are not likely to change Ankara's calculus.

Yet, Turkey may now be involved in a race against time to fulfill its military, and ultimately policy, objectives. Ankara has a freer hand in an operation that essentially targets the YPG. The international community has so far been receptive to Turkey's arguments that the cross-border military campaign falls under the Article 51 of the UN Charter (self defense). But if the Syrian regime forces move to Afrin to directly confront the Turkish military, having (successfully?) terminated their engagement in east Ghouta, the political context of Operation Olive Branch would be altered. Damascus could then claim that Turkey is in violation of its obligations under the UN Charter, and particularly Article 2(4), which enshrines the principle of non-aggression.

In case of the abovementioned situation, Ankara would need to decide whether to continue its campaign risking

a direct confrontation with the regime forces, or to conditionally suspend its military operations in northern Syria. The conditions are likely to be related to an end state where regime commits itself to prevent the YPG from threatening Turkey's national security. Even though direct talks between Ankara and Damascus may not be diplomatically feasible under current circumstances, both parties may turn to Moscow to facilitate this outcome. This is why the Adana Memorandum of 1998 where Damascus undertook a commitment to refrain supporting the PKK may become relevant one more time. The Turkish leadership could then explain to the domestic public opinion that its ultimate objective of eliminating the security threat from Afrin has been reached, and unravel the operation before the more risky and possibly casualty heavier phase of the campaign for the control of Afrin center unfolds.

Viewed from this perspective, the UN Security Council Resolution 2401 on a temporary cessation of hostilities in Syria may paradoxically be of tactical benefit to Turkey. Ankara remains unhindered by this resolution which at the same time give more room to Turkey to progress with its military campaign by postponing the day when the regime forces would move to Afrin.



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