

Update

Since the Background paper was written, there have been new developments regarding the situation of Kurds in Syria.

The support to the Kurdish YPG and YPJ forces by the USA (the US has created half a dozen of bases

YPG was criticized by Turkey for its alleged continuous support for the [PKK](#), especially since the new [rebellion in southern Turkey](#) began. Turkey considers YPG a terrorist organization, and launched a [military operation against them](#) in January 2018.

USA

In violation of any international law concerning the sovereignty of a UN member state the US sent troops to Syria and created permanent bases (

<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-42731222>

In late January (21, 27 and 18.1.2018), the Turkish army bombarded the enclave of Afrin, reportedly killing 26 civilians, of whom 17 were children. The Defense minister Nurettin Canikli dismissed this statement as false, and Erdogan stated that the Operation Olive Branch^(*) will continue: the Turkish government feels that it has the responsibility to safeguard the country's borders against the YPJ and the YPG, i.e., from the Kurdish militias that reside in the area, which are allegedly allies of the PKK.

The Syrian President Bashar Al Assad, on the contrary, wishes to keep his control of the area and therefore he has intervened through paramilitary groups in favour of YPG. By doing so he made an enemy of the Turkish government, which has declared every ally of YPG an enemy: the Defense minister Canikli stated that "whoever sides with terror will become our target." For this reason he also threatened to attack another city in the area, Manbij.

The conduct of the Turkish government has been condemned by the Human Rights Watch because it did not take adequate measures to ascertain that the least number of civilians possible would be killed. Human Rights Watch viewed satellite imagery of the site bombed on January 28 and confirmed the survivors' accounts, i.e. that the "encampment was in an isolated location, with no apparent military positions or structures in the vicinity". "If the Turkish armed forces failed to detect the presence of dozens of civilians at the sites it targeted on January 21, 27, and 28 where civilians were killed, this raises serious concerns about how Turkey ascertains whether civilians are in the vicinity of a target and whether they took all feasible precautions to minimize civilian harm", Human Rights Watch said.

Operation Olive Branch

It is the codename for the Turkish military action against Afrin.

Afrin

With the Syrian civil war and the consequent expansion of the Rojava territories (i.e. Syrian Kurdistan, see main BGP), it is now considered by militants as part of their influence zone. In January, Turkey attacked it in an effort to wipe out any military forces affiliated with the PKK. Syrian forces have been sent on site to support the YPG.

Turkey

The Turkish government is acting as a consequence of the presence of armed forces near its border: moreover, these groups are closely related to the PKK, which is listed in EU, NATO and UN registers as a terrorist group since 2001. Therefore they have affirmed that they will target any allies of the YPG, reaching so far as the city of Manbij, where additional YPG (and US) bases are located. The accusations that have been made against them are numerous, but not all of them

are based on facts. They haven't breached Syrian airspace, as it was opened to them by Russia, which has control over it. However, they did harm civilians and have been addressed by HRW on the matter. What they focus upon is not the few civilian casualties that they have promised to avoid, but rather the fact that they are home to most Syrian refugees (3.4 million out of 5.6 million according to [Al Jazeera](#)) and their vow to "enhance the infrastructure and resources in Afrin after it is secured for them to return".

Read more about their point of view [here](#)

Syria

The Syrian government has opposed the Turkish action from the start, accusing it of a breach of Syrian sovereignty, but Russia, which controls Syrian airspace, opened airspace to Turkish war planes. On the other side, they supported the Kurdish population by sending a paramilitary group faithful to Bashar Al Assad to counteract any Turkish attacks.

Manbij

It is a city where there is a YPG base and, consequently, a base of the United States forces for collaboration in the war against ISIL. Having a consistent Kurdish population, it has become an objective for Turkey. After Erdogan's threat to attack Manbij, the United States of America had to intervene diplomatically. The request of Turkey is that the YPG be removed from the area, but they are a key US ally against ISIL.

Bibliography and links for further research:

Human Rights Watch, ["Syria: Civilian Deaths in Turkish Attacks May Be Unlawful"](#), 23/02/2018

Bethan McKernan, ["Syria: 'Unlawful' civilian deaths in Afrin condemned as Assad forces raise stakes in Kurdish-Turkey conflict"](#), "The Independent", 23/02/2018

Carlotta Gall, ["Syrian Militias Enter Afrin, Dealing a Setback to Turkey"](#), "The New York Times", 22/02/2018

David Graeber, ["Why are world leaders backing this brutal attack against Kurdish Afrin?"](#), "The Guardian", 23/02/2018

Matt Drake, ["Turkey 'using illegal napalm' against 'civilians' in Syria as fighting intensifies"](#), "The Express", 28/01/2018



In the meanwhile an offensive was started by the Syrian army in order to eliminate the presence of terrorist in the Ghouta area (15 km from the capital Damascus). The armed opposition groups (picture of Free Syrian Army flag mixed with the black flag of the jihadists) there aim at establishing an Islamic extremist government in Syria and are in part linked to al Qaeda.

<https://www.sbs.com.au/news/who-are-the-rebel-groups-fighting-in-syria-s-eastern-ghouta>