

Video: Is Northeastern Syria Turning into A Death Trap for Russia?

By [South Front](#)

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The northeastern part of Syria remains one of the main hot points of the conflict despite the ceasefire regime formally declared in the region.

Clashes between Turkish-backed armed groups, on the one side, and the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and the Syrian Army on the other side erupt on a regular basis. On November 23, Turkish proxies, supported by the Turkish Army, launched a large-scale attack on northern Raqqa with the aim of capturing Ayn Issa, where a Russian humanitarian and coordination center is located. By November 25, the SDF and the army had repelled this attack regaining all lost positions. Nonetheless, sporadic clashes north of Ayn Issa and southeast of Ras al-Ayn continued.

The Ayn Issa advance followed a November 18 statement by Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu, in which he said that Turkey will launch a new military operation in northeastern Syria if the area were not cleared of what he called terrorists.

Cavusoglu claimed that the United States and Russia had not done what was required under the agreements that had halted the Turkish offensive against the “terrorists” (i.e. Kurdish armed groups). Under the Turkish-US and Turkish-Russian agreements, Kurdish units had to withdraw from the border area and then a safe zone had to be established.

“If we do not obtain a result, we will do what is necessary, just as we launched the operation after trying with the U.S.,” Cavusoglu said, referring to coordination with the US to remove the YPG from the area before Turkey launched its Operation Peace Spring on October 9.

The statement of the Turkish foreign minister came just several hours after an attack on a joint Russian-Turkish patrol in northeastern Syria by YPG-affiliated radicals. YPG supporters threw petrol bombs at Russian and Turkish vehicles.

Russian Defense Ministry spokesman Major General Igor Konashenkov described Cavusoglu’s statement as surprising and said that such comments may lead to further tensions.

https://southfront.org/wp-content/uploads/video/FPD_Trap_28_11_2019.mp4

Later, Turkey informed Russia’s ambassador in Ankara that Cavusoglu’s remarks were a kind of misunderstanding. However, this doesn’t hold up under scrutiny. The November 18

statement is fully in accordance with the course of Ankara's foreign policy.

The Turkish leadership has never seen Russia as a long-term partner. Rather, Ankara sees Moscow as a situational ally and aims to exploit the gullibility of this ally to achieve their goals. Turkish foreign policy demonstrates that Ankara is not seeking to make 'friends' with other regional and global powers. Turkey's foreign policy is mobile and variable, and always designed to defend the interests of Turkey as a regional leader and the key state of the Turkic world.

Cavusoglu's statement hints at a new shift in Turkish foreign policy, which may be aimed at undermining Russian influence in northern Syria.

Turkish and Russian forces conducted over 10 joint patrols in the framework of the 'safe zone' agreement. Most of them, except the very first and last ones, were marked by attacks and provocations carried out by YPG-affiliated radicals. Pro-YPG rioters threw stones, blocked patrols, attacked vehicles and even used petrol bombs. It should be noted that the SDF's security force Asayish publicly apologized for the petrol bomb attack on Russian vehicles when it appeared that Ankara was ready to use this as a pretext to formally resume its Operation Peace Spring. This does not mean that the unconstructive stance of the Kurdish leaders has somehow changed.

By these provocations, they were testing Russia's red lines which are the main factor limiting Turkish response to such actions. Attacks on Russian vehicles also demonstrate that at least a part of the local Kurdish population sees the Russian military presence as hostile. The main reason is Moscow's open cooperation with Ankara.

The developments of the last few weeks demonstrate that Turkey launched its Operation Peace Spring in northeastern Syria in de-facto coordination with Iran and Russia. Besides this, the offensive was supported by the Trump administration behind the scenes. After the end of the operation under the US-Turkish and Russian-Turkish deals, the region of northeastern Syria had every chance of moving towards stabilization.

The full implementation of the steps agreed by Ankara and Moscow over the next 1-2 years would bring about a long-awaited peace to the territory of northeastern Syria. However, this is not what the Turkish leadership is interested in. The Erdogan government needs the "Kurdish threat" and instability in northern Syria to maintain a wide assortment of formal pretexts for further expansion into the neighboring country and for the backing of pro-Turkish groups operating there. Turkey is interested in maintaining peace on its own territory. At the same time, it prefers to keep a useful 'zone of instability' in northern Syria.

If Ankara successfully plays Russia in its northeastern Syria 'safe zone' game, it will be able to:

- discredit Russia and its personnel in the eyes of the Kurdish population;
- undermine Russia's political position in this part of Syria;
- indirectly demonstrate the deficiency of the Russian initiatives in northern Syria.

The growth of tensions in the region and continued attacks on Russian vehicles patrolling the area contribute to this scenario.

Russian forces were deployed to the north as a part of Moscow's effort to back the Assad

government and support a broader political settlement of the conflict. So although Russia has very few interests there it has already faced notable obstacles (from the intractability of the Kurdish leadership to the shift in Turkish policy). Russian withdrawal from the border area as a result of some major security incidents or a series of smaller ones would allow Turkey to continue pursuing its mid-term goals:

- To keep the “Kurdish threat”, which is being actively exploited by the Erdogan government in its domestic and foreign policies, under control;
- To seize key logistical routes, including the chunk of the M4 highway east of the Euphrates, in northern Syria. In some cases, Turkish forces may even push to capture some oil fields in the area;
- To justify an increase of support to pro-Turkish groups in northeastern Syria and in the Idlib de-escalation zone.

In its turn, the Kurdish leadership, by undermining the safe zone agreement and thus the Russian position, hopes to strengthen its negotiating position with Damascus and to gain additional political and financial revenue despite the failure of its pro-US policies. However, a wider look at the situation demonstrates that this approach is leading them towards an even larger catastrophe. If the safe zone deal collapses and Turkish forces resume their offensive, the Kurdish population will fall under the wheels of the Turkish military machine. A large part of the Kurds will be repressed or have to flee to the US-occupied or Damascus-controlled areas. The US will keep control of the oil-rich part of the country. Turkey will get the north. The Kurds will blame the Russians for failing to ‘protect them’.

The US appears fully aware of this scenario and its intelligence services worked to support the YPG radicals that attacked Turkish-Russian patrols because this gives Washington additional levers of pressure on forces of the Assad government and Russia on the eastern bank of the Euphrates.

On the other hand, the Syrian Army and its allies may use the escalation in northeastern Syria and the increase of Turkish support to radicals in Greater Idlib as a pretext for the resumption of large-scale counter-terrorism efforts in western Syria. Nonetheless, this kind of informal exchange will be small consolation for Syria, whose sovereignty and territorial integrity continue to founder because of the hostile actions of foreign powers.

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