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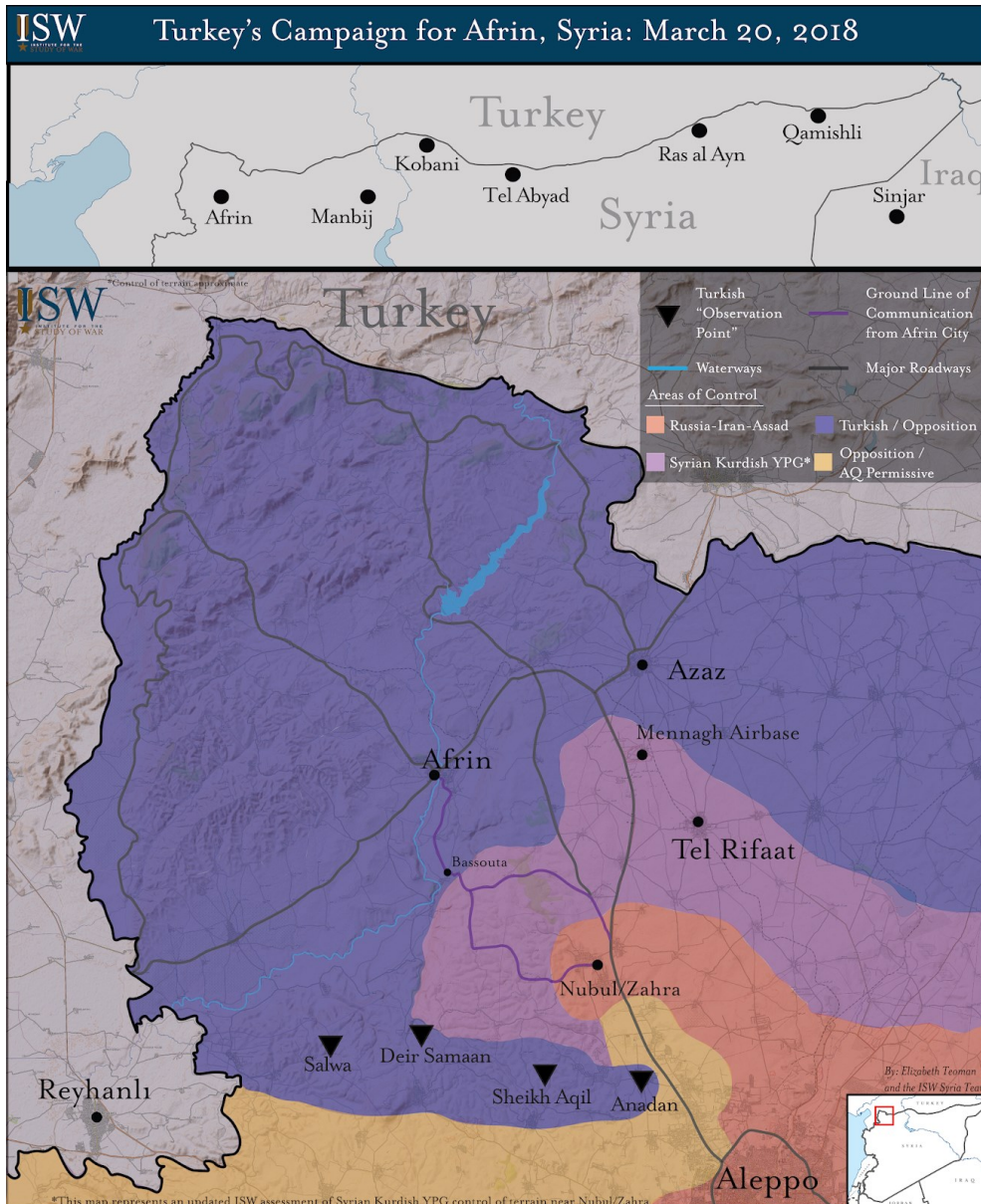


Turkey Threatens New Attacks in Syria and Iraq

By Elizabeth Teoman with Jennifer Cafarella

Key Takeaway: *Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has threatened to conduct military operations across six locations in eastern Syria and Iraq following the Syrian Kurdish withdrawal from Afrin City in northwest Syria. Russia and Iran seek to use Turkey to undermine the U.S. and may encourage Turkey to prioritize operations in areas that would put American forces at risk, disrupt U.S. supply lines, and constrain U.S. military operations, creating further opportunities for the Islamic State of Iraq and al Sham (ISIS) to resurge in southeastern Syria.*

The Syrian Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) ceded Afrin City to Turkey on March 18, 2018. Syrian Kurdish YPG forces and **tens of thousands** of Kurdish civilians **withdrew** to the towns of Tel Rifaat, Nubul, and Zahra before Turkish Armed Forces (TSK) and Turkish-backed rebels arrived in the city center. The YPG **announced** a transition from conventional fighting to a guerilla campaign against Turkey and its partner forces in Afrin. ISW assessed previously that Turkey's Operation Olive Branch pursued **five operational objectives**: secure the Syrian-Turkish border, isolate Afrin city, seize the Mennagh airbase, secure ground lines of communication, and establish a new forward line of troops (FLOT) to serve as a future "de-escalation" line with pro-Bashar al Assad regime forces including Russia. The YPG decision to withdraw from Afrin City allowed Turkey to take direct control, which may not have been a necessary outcome for Erdogan. Turkey is now working to establish a new forward line of troops with pro-regime forces and **deployed** an additional "observer position" on the front line west of Aleppo City in Anadan. It is unclear whether Erdogan intends to capture the Mennagh airbase, north of Tel Rifaat. The TSK could outfit Mennagh as a rotary wing airbase to support counter-insurgency operations in Afrin moving forward.



Erdogan threatened on March 19 to conduct additional military operations at six possible locations in Syria and Iraq. He stated that Turkish forces may attack Kurdish forces in Syria's Manbij, Kobani, Tel Abyad, Ras al Ayn and Qamishli in addition to Iraq's Sinjar areas. He may calculate the YPG is vulnerable in Eastern Syria due to its attrition fighting Turkey and its commitment to waging an insurgency in Afrin. Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu previously announced the Government of Iraq had agreed to conduct joint operations against the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in northern Iraq on March 8. Cavusoglu claimed operations would begin after Iraq's elections scheduled for May 12.

Erdogan may have acquired Russian and Iranian support for further military operations during a tripartite meeting in Astana, Kazakhstan on March 16. Russia and Iran seek to use Turkey to undermine the U.S. and may encourage Turkey to conduct operations in areas that would make U.S. forces vulnerable. A Turkish operation in Sinjar, Iraq could disrupt the U.S. and YPG supply line into northern Syria through the Fishkhabour Border Crossing. Turkey likely needs Iran's approval to conduct an operation in Sinjar. Iranian proxy forces are heavily deployed along the Syrian-Iraqi border north of Sinjar. A Turkish operation in Syria against Manbij or Kobani would put U.S. forces directly at risk. Operations farther east threaten to destabilize

U.S. rear areas and could force a contraction of U.S. forces to a smaller footprint, creating opportunity for ISIS to resurge in southeastern Syria. Turkey, Russia, and Iran may finalize an agreement during a tripartite presidential [summit](#) in Istanbul scheduled for April 4. American officials will [reportedly](#) meet with a visiting Turkish delegation in the coming days as part of discussions focused on resolving bilateral disputes, including in Syria. The working group will likely continue prioritizing the future of Manbij, which lies east of Afrin on the banks of the Euphrates River. The YPG-dominated Syrian Democratic Forces currently control Manbij with support from U.S. forces.

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