

After the Turkish Elections, Now What for Syria?

Introduction

On May 28, 2023, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan solidified his 20 year rule as Turkey's premier by winning the latest presidential election. Despite facing challenges including a declining economy and the aftermath of a devastating earthquake, Erdoğan's relationship with the government of Syria (GoS) played a crucial role in the elections and their aftermath. Before the elections, he sought to improve ties with the GoS due to public dissatisfaction with his Syrian policy, particularly concerning Syrian refugees and war fatigue. Post-election, Turkey's priority will be its ongoing conflict with the Kurdish Syrian Democratic Forces and the large number of Syrian refugees. As regional actors are normalizing relations with the GoS and effective engagement on Syria requires involvement with Turkish interests by the international community, an understanding of the context is vital.

Turkish presence in Syria

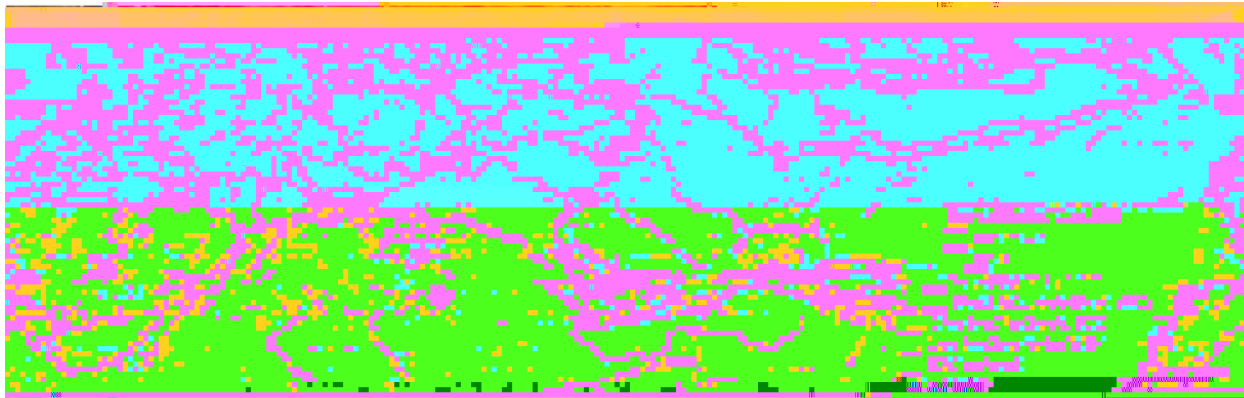


Figure 1: Areas of Control in Northern Syria as of 1 July 2023. Data from The Carter Center

Turkey currently controls significant parts of northern Syria, including parts of Aleppo Governorate obtained through Operations Euphrates Shield (2016) and Olive Branch (2018) as well as parts of Ar Raqqa and Al Hassakah Governorates obtained through Operation Peace Spring (2019). Turkey still funds, supports, and controls the Syrian National Army, one of the largest opposition alliances. Idlib Governorate, currently controlled by the hardline opposition Hayat Tahrir al Sham (HTS) and home to at least 3 million internally displaced Syrians, has largely been spared any new GoS offensive due to Turkey's military presence in the governorate. While Turkey does not support the Kurdish Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) which it accuses of being its Syrian affiliate. Domestically, Turkey

is concerned

with the approximately 3.7 million Syrian refugees and 790,000

Previously military operations helped boost the AKP's election prospects. belligerent foreign policy in Syria has led to weariness from the general public. Increasingly xenophobic pushback has led nearly all

major Turkish parties to try and find a way to "return"

Syrian

Moving Forward

Many regional governments in the greater Middle East have largely normalized their relationship with the GoS and even readmitted them to the Arab League providing a significant symbolic victory for Assad and his supporters. Several Gulf countries that previously supported the opposition have lost much of their influence among the armed groups. Turkey still exerts control over much of the opposition (some directly, like the SNA, and some indirectly, via the HTS). It also controls large chunks of territory in northern Syria. Turkey's key role in the conflict gives them important leverage to effect change on the GoS. The U.S., EU, and UN should engage with Turkey on Syria. In the early years of the Syrian war, Erdoğan maintained a diplomatic backchannel with the PKK for rapprochement. The U.S. can play a productive role in de-escalating tensions between Turkey and the SDF by working with allies in the region to push for positive change toward sustainable peace and a unified Syria.