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**Turkey's Offensive in Northeastern Syria:**  
**The Expected, the Surprising, and the Still Unknown**  
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Operation Peace Spring, Turkey's third operation in northern Syria since 2016, constitutes its most ambitious action in Syria yet. The developments leading up to the offensive and the outcomes of the operation have regional and international ramifications well beyond this specific campaign – particularly for the conduct of the various actors in light of President Donald Trump's desire to end US involvement in conflicts in the region. The offensive was not in itself surprising given the numerous Turkish threats to this effect, and the Kurds' deal with the Assad regime once the threats were carried out was also expected. However, the emergence of the deal after only four days of fighting was a surprise. Following the deal, a question arises as to what will remain of Kurdish autonomous rule in northeastern Syria. There are concerns that the weakening of Kurdish forces will enable a resurgence of the Islamic State and its control over territory. In the Israeli context, the departure of US forces from Syria grants an easier-than-expected victory to adversaries of the United States, especially Iran. The US withdrawal is further expected to significantly ease Iran's operation of a land route from Iran through Iraq to Syria and Lebanon, and in effect leaves Israel alone in the fight against Iran's entrenchment in the northern theater.

Operation Peace Spring, the Turkish military offensive in northeastern Syria that began on October 9, 2019, is the third offensive carried out by Turkey in northern Syria and its most ambitious action in Syria to date, as well as the one that has elicited the most international censure. The developments that led to this offensive and its outcomes have regional and international significance that go well beyond the specific campaign.

The Turkish decision to enter northeastern Syria was expected, given the frequent threats from Ankara to do so, which peaked with the speech by Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan to the UN General Assembly in September. In his speech, Erdogan presented a map that included the delineation of what Turkey calls the "safe zone" it seeks to establish in northeastern Syria. Since the territorial defeat of the Islamic State, the Trump administration – which already in late 2018 declared its intent to withdraw US forces from the region – found it hard to justify its continued support for the Democratic Union Party, or PYD, which is aligned with the PKK, the Kurdish underground active in

Turkey. The military wing of the PYD was the ally of the United States in fighting the Islamic State, and responsible for defeating the Islamist forces in ground combat. In discussions between the United States and Turkey in a bid to reach agreement on the "safe zone" issue, there was a significant gap in the determination evinced by the two sides, as well as the importance each attributed to the subject. Though the Trump administration had tried to ensure that minimum harm would befall US allies, the President, once again surprising even his closest supporters, ordered the withdrawal of forces after a phone call with Erdogan, thus preparing the ground for the start of the Turkish operation.

For Turkey, this is a cardinal matter, significant in terms of both national security and domestic interests. Regarding national security, Turkey saw a threat in the emergence of autonomous Kurdish cantons in northeastern Syria, and took action to prevent their territorial contiguity. With the current operation, Turkey aims to turn back the clock on the autonomous Kurdish control over these areas. In addition, there is noticeable mounting domestic indignation at the presence of some 3.6 million refugees from Syria in Turkey. To address the problem, Ankara plans to send refugees to territory within Syria that it will control in the future. According to Turkish officials – albeit citing numbers that are questionable – some 350,000 refugees have already returned "voluntarily" to areas Turkey conquered in previous operations within Syrian territory.

Another development that might have been anticipated was the PYD opting to forge a deal with the Bashar al-Assad regime once the Turkish threats were realized. Indeed, in the 1990s there was close cooperation between the PKK and the previous regime, that of Hafez al-Assad, and this cooperation even brought Turkey and Syria to the brink of war – until the Syrian side yielded to Turkish pressure. Given the current instability in northeastern Syria, doubts persist as to the ability of the sides to maintain this deal over time.

In tandem, there were more surprising aspects of the operation. The PYD decision to reach a deal with Damascus occurred only four days after the Turkish offensive commenced, although ahead of the offensive, many predicted that the Kurdish forces would withstand the Turks longer before reaching that decision. Yet in the framework of advance contacts between Washington and Ankara, intended to prevent unilateral action by Turkey in northeastern Syria, the Turks demanded that the Kurdish forces dismantle fortifications they had erected along the border with Turkey. The start of the dismantlement of these fortifications has contributed to the Kurds' inferiority in the face of the Turkish military.

Turkish strikes against Kurdish centers are not a new phenomenon, but the current offensive has drawn relatively broad international censure. This was manifested, for example, in the imposition of an arms embargo by European states, led by Germany, France, and Italy. Although Turkey claims that its defense industry meets some 70 percent of the Turkish military's needs, it still requires advanced systems and replacement parts, which makes an embargo of this sort significant.

President Trump's decision to order a withdrawal of US forces from Syria again (after his previous directive was diluted and executed only in part) may have posed a tactical surprise to regional and international players, but it figured in the backdrop of discussions with Ankara and arose in previous talks with Erdogan. The dynamic generated in relations between the United States and Turkey since the withdrawal decision and the beginning of the Turkish operation, which included the publication of Trump's October 9 letter to Erdogan and the threat to destroy the Turkish economy, alongside the redeployment of US forces in Syria and Iraq and the visit to Ankara of US Vice President Mike Pence, as well as the ensuing October 17 announcement of a 120-hour "pause" in the fighting, are a direct outcome of the administration's need to contend with harsh censure within the United States, including from senior Republican lawmakers. This censure stressed the ethical and operational ramifications of abandoning a loyal ally that had fought alongside the United States, the ability to enlist future allies, and the stature of the United States in the Middle East as well as its ability to project deterrence in the face of growing threats, mainly from Iran.

Other concerns (including those voiced by critics of the move in Washington and in the international sphere) focus, *inter alia*, on the possibility that the expected disbanding of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), in which the Kurdish forces have been dominant, will increase the chance of a resurgence of the Islamic State and its control over territory. An additional question is whether President Trump also intends to order an end to the presence of US forces in southern Syria, and specifically in the border crossing area of al-Tanf, which has significantly contributed to the effort to hinder Iran and its allies from crossing into Syrian territory from Iraq.

The agreement between the Kurds and the Assad regime raises the question of what will remain for the Kurds of the autonomous rule they managed to carve out for themselves after the civil war erupted in Syria. Moreover, even if the Kurds do exact concessions, will the regime respect the agreements over time, and can it indeed enforce its rule in these areas? Another critical question is to what extent Moscow will pressure Assad to consent to the Turkish presence that was already in existence, as well as to the new one, for a protracted period. In addition, will the Syrian regime allow the return of refugees to areas over which it will regain control?

As far as Turkey is concerned, the operation has achieved important military and political goals. Furthermore, it is the view of Ankara and other regional and international players that the US decision to withdraw, as well as statements made by President Trump, underscores his interest in ending the United States military involvement in conflicts in the region. This perception strengthens the understanding that both political and military preparations should be made for a different strategic reality, both within Syria and in the regional sphere. With an emphasis on the areas for maneuvering actors may take bolder steps to safeguard interests, or alternatively, promote other strategic moves that will provide responses to threats. This incurs ramifications for Israel as well, and more generally for the eastern Mediterranean theater, where Turkey has greatly stepped up its activity and assumed an assertive policy.

The show of empathy in Israel for the Kurds against the backdrop of the current Turkish offensive comes from both right and left of the political map. While censure of Turkey, and specifically of Erdogan, has become a familiar stance in Israel, there is also a noteworthy, deeper identification with the Kurdish people. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu condemned the Turkish assault and pledged, in Israel's name, to provide humanitarian aid to the Kurds, though Israeli access to these areas is limited. As far as Ankara is concerned, and certainly regarding the Turkish public, this amounts to support for the Kurdish underground and relates to its national security.

The bottom line is that Trump's decision to withdraw US forces from northeastern Syria significantly undermined stability in that part of the country. The abandonment of Kurdish partners within the SDF framework, which spearheaded the ground defeat of the Islamic State, serves as a warning signal to other United States partners – even though historically the Kurds are familiar with the disappointment of being betrayed by international and regional players and with the fact that external support for them has mostly proven transient. The exit of US forces in the way it was executed grants an easier-than-expected victory to adversaries of the United States, and especially Iran. It is, furthermore, expected to significantly ease Iran's operation of the Shiite land conduit from Iran through Iraq to Syria and Lebanon, and in effect leave Israel alone in the campaign against Iran's entrenchment in the theater.