

## Operation Euphrates Shield

### **Background:**

Syria and Turkey engaged in an international crisis from August 2016 to March 2017, as part of the broader violence in northwest Syria at the time. The Syrian Civil War – which erupted in the wake of the Arab Spring of 2011 when the Authoritarian Syrian leader Bashar al-Assad refused to relinquish power and responded to massive protests with violence – is among the bloodiest conflicts to date in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. An April 2016 UN envoy's estimate put the total death count at roughly 400,000; civilians likely constitute over one quarter of that number. The conflict has involved a wide range of state and non-state actors, including the United States, Russia, Iran, ISIL, the Syrian Democratic Forces, and the Free Syrian Army, among others. Many states and international organizations condemned the Assad regime's actions, even as others, such as Russia, would ultimately use military force to help consolidate the Syrian government's hold on power.

In the immediate aftermath of Assad's crackdown, Turkey verbally criticized the regime, ended all arms shipments to Syria, and provided safe haven for Syrian refugees and military defectors. By mid-2012, Turkey had imposed sanctions on Syria and suspended all financial dealings, with the aim of blocking the delivery of all weapons and military equipment. Turkey also had begun training and equipping Syrian military defectors and select Syrian rebel forces, and Turkish Prime Minister Recep Erdogan had publicly demanded that Assad step down. In May 2013, U.S. President Barack Obama hosted a joint press conference with Erdogan, and stated that the two agreed that "Assad needs to go."

The train-and-equip strategy, which the United States also supported, ultimately fell flat even after international pressure increased following evidence of Syrian use of chemical weapons against anti-Assad supporters (see Crisis #470). Assad's regime did not feel sufficient coercive pressure to relinquish authority, or even to seek a negotiated settlement; this was especially so once Russia intervened with military force on its behalf in September 2015. During 2014 and 2015, however, ISIL managed to take over and control significant swathes of territory in Syria, filling the void left by the degraded Syrian government security forces. Other rebel groups within Syria made gains, as well. The Free Syrian Army, elements of which were comprised primarily of defectors from the Syrian army, held pockets in the Northwest and Southwest parts of the nation; the predominantly Kurdish Syrian Democratic Forces controlled a large region in the Northeast.

The relative success of the Kurdish groups caused concern in Ankara. Since 1978, the Turkish government has experienced armed conflict with various ethnically Kurdish separatist groups that have pushed to secede, and establish an independent Kurdistan. Turkey perceived the Syrian Democratic Forces to have links to its domestic insurgents, and to be a threat, despite the group's relationship with the United States. As early as June 2015, rumors swirled that Erdogan would order a military intervention in Syria; that month, Erdogan stated that he would "never allow the establishment of a Kurdish state in northern Syria."

Through 2015 and 2016, Turkish leaders began to soften their rhetoric on Assad, seeming to walk back from the clear-cut 'no-Assad' position they had taken during the conflict's earlier years, indicating instead that they would accept a role for Assad in a political transition. The nation also experienced an increase in terror attacks in the years preceding the crisis. In late 2015, and into 2016, Turkey and some of its NATO allies experienced a crisis after Turkey shot down a Russian fighter jet in the region (see Crisis #476). And in July 2016, a faction within the Turkish military attempted a coup in the name

of restoring democracy to the. Reportedly, the coup nearly succeeded. Into that summer, the Syrian Democratic Forces continued to make gains in the northern Syria, and deepened their cooperation with the United States, generating further anxiety among Turkish political leaders.

### **Crisis:**

At 4 a.m. on 24 August 2016, under order from Erdogan, Turkish military tanks, fighter planes, and special operations forces, supported by U.S. airstrikes and other military support, crossed the border into Northern Syria in an operation dubbed Euphrates Shield. The incursion triggered a crisis for Syria. The move — which was Turkey's first direct military involvement in the conflict — drew criticism from Russia, but nothing more, underscoring the rapprochement that had been reached between the two nations. Immediately, the Syrian regime harshly criticized the use of force, though from a military standpoint there was little that the nation, whose security forces were already overextended, could do to retaliate.

Turkish forces, in coordination with elements of the Free Syrian Army armed group (often referred to as the “Turkish-backed Free Syrian Army” in this region), quickly captured the border city of Jarabulus, which had been an important supply line for ISIL. Later on 24 August, U.S. Vice President Joe Biden stated publicly that the United States strongly supported Turkey's actions, and the U.S. had communicated to the Syrian Democratic Forces that they would need to meet a Turkish demand to withdraw to the east of the Euphrates river, and that they would not receive U.S. support if they ventured west. This served to ease U.S.-Turkish tensions.

The Turkish intervention continued apace into October 2016, successfully clearing the area in northern Syria. On 22 October Erdogan announced that Turkish forces would continue southwest to the city of al-Bab, a city perceived to be a potential flashpoint for Turkish, Russian, and Syrian regime forces due to its strategic importance. Syrian Democratic Forces, too, were present in the area. For these reasons, U.S. forces did not follow, nor did they support, Turkish operations in al-Bab.

The fighting for al-Bab began in early November, and proceeded smoothly for several weeks. On 24 November, however, Turkish forces perceived that they may have been bombed by a Syrian government warplane, and notified Erdogan and other high-ranking political leaders. This put Turkey into crisis. Erdogan and other top Turkish officials responded by scrambling Turkish planes in the region, and reportedly speaking on the phone with Russian President Vladimir Putin the following day. These actions successfully eased tensions, though it did not end Turkey's crisis — the risk of some conflict with the Syrian government remained as long as Ankara continued its move on al-Bab.

The extent to which Turkish-Russian relations could be managed peacefully as their forces engaged in operations near each other was put to the test on 9 February 2017 when a Russian plane accidentally struck Turkish troops in the al-Bab area. Yet another phone call between Erdogan and Putin, in which the Russian leader acknowledged and apologized for the incident, settled the matter.

By the end of February 2017, Turkish forces had gained full control of the city, yet Syrian regime forces to the South had advanced to within 1.5 kilometers of the city. Fighting between Turkish allied forces and the Syrian Democratic Forces continued in neighboring towns.

On 9 March Erdogan traveled to Moscow for a two-day summit. Once he returned to Ankara, nearly all clashes within Turkish controlled Syria had ceased. Turkey had achieved its narrowly defined goals of clearing ISIL in particular locations, and weakening the Kurdish forces in Syria. With several

thousand kilometers of Syrian territory under its de facto control, the Turkish government declared on 29 March 2017 that Operation Euphrates Shield had succeeded, and concluded. The Turkish forces began to transition to a stabilization effort that would provide services and security so that Syrian refugees in Turkey might be resettled. This terminated the crisis for both Syria and Turkey.

While the Syrian regime was dissatisfied after the conclusion of Turkey's intervention, it was also fairly well assured that Turkey would not continue to plunge deeper into its territory in pursuit of regime change. Turkey, for its part, was satisfied with the outcome as it achieved some of its primary goals of degrading Kurdish influence along the Turkey-Syria border, and toppling ISIL strongholds in the region.

In terms of the role of international organizations, NATO applauded Turkey's efforts against ISIL in Syria but the organization determined that it would not send forces or provide other military aid. The decision frustrated Turkish leadership. The UN, meanwhile, worked to resolve the intensifying humanitarian crisis in the Syrian city of Aleppo. The Assad regime had moved to cut off all supply lines to the city, perceived to be a strategically important rebel stronghold, depriving all civilians living in the city of food and water in the process. Over the fall of 2016, Russia vetoed two UN resolutions that called for an end to military fighting over Aleppo. UNSC Resolution 2336, which called for immediate humanitarian aid to, and evacuations from, the city, finally passed in December 2016. While UNSCR 2336 most directly regards the humanitarian crisis in Aleppo, the process of the resolution's adoption indirectly eased tensions among the crisis actors. This rare resolution pertaining to the civil war in Syria originated from close cooperation between Turkey and Russia. The limited public collaboration helped assure both Syria and Turkey that the potential for major escalation in the fighting against one another (and, in Turkey's case, against Russia) was low.

#### Sources:

Al Jazeera; ARA News; Asia News Monitor; Atlantic Council; BBC; EFE News Service; Financial Times; Foundation for Defense of Democracies; The Guardian; Hurriyet Daily News; International Crisis Group; Middle East Eye; New York Times; The Press; Reuters; SyndiGate Media; Trend Capital; UN News; Wall Street Journal; War on the Rocks; Xinhua