

MIDDLE EAST

Turkey, Russia Start Clock on Kurdish Withdrawal From Northern Syria

Six-day pause in Turkish offensive begins under agreement with Russia



Turkish soldiers, right, and Turkey-backed opposition fighters stand atop a building next to their flags in Syrian town of Ras al-Ain, northeastern Syria, on Wednesday. PHOTO: UGUR CAN/ASSOCIATED PRESS

By Jared Malsin

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ISTANBUL—Turkish forces suspended their offensive in northern Syria and Russian security forces began patrolling nearby, under an agreement that gives Kurdish fighters 150 hours to leave what Ankara calls a safe zone in the war-torn country's north.

The approximately six-day pause began midday Wednesday after Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan struck an agreement with Russian President Vladimir Putin in the Black Sea resort town of Sochi a day earlier.

Under the pact, Russian and Syrian security forces would oversee the withdrawal of Kurdish fighters from a 300-mile-long strip of land along the Turkish border. After their departure, Turkey and Russia plan to conduct joint patrols in parts of the area.

The arrival of Russian security forces confirmed Moscow's role as the main power broker in Syria, filling a vacuum after President Trump ordered American troops to withdraw from the region this month.

Mr. Trump on Wednesday said he is lifting U.S. sanctions against Turkey after being assured that the country is permanently halting an offensive in northern Syria as part of the deal brokered with Russia.

"Over the last five days, you have seen that a cease-fire that we established along Syria's border has held and has held very well," Mr. Trump said.

The commander of the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces, Gen. Mazloum Abdi, said he spoke with Mr. Trump on Wednesday. "We THANK President Trump for his tireless efforts that stopped the brutal Turkish attack and jihadist groups on our people," he said in a tweet by a spokesman. "President Trump promised to maintain partnership with SDF and long-term support at various spheres," he also said without specifying what kind of support to which he was referring.

The deal effectively replaces a cease-fire agreement brokered by Vice President Mike Pence last week that expired on Tuesday, and highlights how the American withdrawal has diminished Washington's ability to exert influence in Syria.

The U.S. withdrawal is transforming the battle lines of the yearslong Syrian conflict, expanding the influence of the Russia-backed regime of President Bashar al-Assad after more than eight years of revolution and civil war, and threatening the self-ruled Kurdish region with collapse.

The Russian Defense Ministry published a map on Wednesday showing that, as part of the agreement reached with Turkey, Russian military police had begun patrolling a 40-mile-wide area around the Syrian town of Manbij, a significant U.S. base during the campaign against Islamic State.

A convoy of Russian military police also arrived on Wednesday in Kobani, a town that is an icon of the Kurdish autonomous region in Syria and a symbol of the fight against Islamic State. Russian officers met with local officials there to discuss how they would interact, the Russian Defense Ministry said.

Russian presidential spokesman Dmitry Peskov on Wednesday said Kurdish fighters who don't leave the border area voluntarily would be driven away by Russian and Syrian security forces. When the 150-hour period expires, "the remaining Kurdish fighters will face the Turkish army's steamroller," Mr. Peskov said, according to Russian state news agencies.

Kurdish forces didn't say whether they would withdraw from the border area as mandated by Russia and Turkey.

“Turkey will never let a terror corridor be established to the south of its borders and our resolute fight against terrorism will continue,” the Turkish Defense Ministry said.

Separately on Wednesday, a car bomb exploded in the center of the city of Qamishli, the

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regional hub of northeastern Syria’s Kurdish-ruled area, highlighting fears that extremist groups such as Islamic State would exploit the U.S. withdrawal.

There was no claim of responsibility for the explosion, which injured two people.

Following the U.S. withdrawal, the Kurdish groups struck a deal that allowed the Syrian regime to redeploy forces in areas under Kurdish control.

Turkey has fought a decadeslong, intermittent war with an armed group called the Kurdistan Workers’ Party, or PKK, which Turkey and the U.S. regard as a terrorist group. But in the fight against Islamic State, the U.S. backed Kurdish militias whose roots are in the PKK.

The U.S. partnership with Kurdish groups in Syria had been a source of tension between the U.S. and North Atlantic Treaty Organization ally Turkey for years.

Turkey says it wants to remove Kurdish militia forces from the Syrian side of the border, and aims to return half of the four million refugees living in Turkey to Syria.

“Turkey’s efforts have prevented establishment of a terror state in northern Syria,” Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu told the official Anadolu news agency on Wednesday.

The agreement between Turkey and Russia also outlines an endgame in the Syrian war, giving backing for the Assad regime to reassert control over a section of territory that for years had been held by Syrian Kurdish groups.

Mr. Assad ceded territory to Kurdish groups in 2012 during the height of the antigovernment revolt.

U.S. forces later partnered with Kurdish forces in the campaign against Islamic State and remained in Syria after the extremist group was driven from the last of its territory this year,

which gave the Kurds a degree of protection.



Turkish soldiers patrol the northern Syrian town of Tal Abyad, on the border between Syria and Turkey, on Wednesday. PHOTO: BAKR ALKASEM/AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE/GETTY IMAGES

—*David Gauthier-Villars contributed to this article.*

Write to Jared Malsin at jared.malsin@wsj.com

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