

MIDDLE EAST

Russia Agrees to Help Turkey Expand Buffer Zone in Syria

The so-called safe zone would be free of Kurdish fighters that Ankara views as a terrorist threat



Russian President Vladimir Putin, right, listens to Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan during a meeting in Sochi, Russia, on Tuesday. PHOTO: KREMLIN/REUTERS

By David Gauthier-Villars and Ann M. Simmons

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SOCHI, Russia—Russia agreed to help Turkey drive out Kurdish militias from a “safe zone” in northeastern Syria, highlighting Moscow’s flourishing ties with a NATO member and a rebalance of power in war-torn Syria as U.S. troops leave.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said he would suspend military action for nearly six days against Kurds who his government views as a terrorist threat to let them evacuate the area. During this period, Russian and Syrian security forces would push any remaining Kurdish fighters away from Turkey’s border.

After their departure, Turkey and Russia plan to conduct joint patrols in parts of a 300-mile-long area along Turkey’s border with Syria, Mr. Erdogan said Tuesday after talks with Russian President Vladimir Putin. The pact “could be a turning point,” Mr. Putin said in the Black Sea resort town of Sochi.

Russia and Turkey are seeking to divide influence in Syria as U.S. troops pull out and Washington's power in the region wanes. Mr. Putin has displayed a willingness to help Mr. Erdogan, in part to lure Turkey, a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, toward Russia's orbit.

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Russian support for Turkey's plan is likely to upset Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's other backer, Iran, which has condemned Turkey's assault against the Syrian Kurds.

President Trump's sudden withdrawal order was criticized by Republican and Democratic senators at a hearing of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on Tuesday, with many saying the move undermined an array of U.S. foreign-policy objectives, empowered U.S. foes and undercut the fight against the Islamic State extremist group.

"It is clear that the United States has been sidelined," said Sen. Bob Menendez (D-N.J.), the ranking minority member of the committee. "Russia and the murderous Assad regime are calling the shots."

James Jeffrey, the State Department's special envoy for Syria and the Islamic State fight, defended the policy, saying U.S. was maintaining ties with Kurdish military leaders in other parts of Syria and that options for cooperation were being considered. Mr. Trump has said he wants the U.S. to play a role in safeguarding oil fields.

The Putin-Erdogan talks coincided with the expiration Tuesday of a five-day truce. Mr. Erdogan agreed to halt the military offensive he launched in northeastern Syria on Oct. 9 in exchange for a U.S. commitment to help drive Kurdish fighters away from the Syrian border towns of Tal-Abiad and Ras al-Ain. The Kurdish forces told the White House on Tuesday that they completed their withdrawal from that area.

In addition to repelling Kurdish fighters, Ankara wants control over territories in northeastern Syria to relocate half of the nearly four million Syrian refugees living in Turkey. But the pact with Washington covers only about a quarter of Mr. Erdogan's proposed 300-mile-long safe zone.

The new accord with Russia covers the other three-quarters, according to Mr. Erdogan. After the truce ends, Russia and Turkey will patrol the border strip with a depth of 6.2 miles but won't

enter the Kurdish-held town of Qamishli, Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu said, where the Assad regime has established a presence.

Mr. Putin reiterated that “Syria must be free from foreign military presence,” and invited Turkey, which severed its diplomatic relations with the Assad regime shortly after the beginning of the war, to cooperate with Damascus.

“Both Turkey and Syria have to join their efforts,” said Mr. Putin, who spoke with Mr. Assad on Tuesday, according to Russian state media. “This is why they need to respect each other.”

The agreement with Russia is a breakthrough, Metin Gurcan, a retired Turkish military officer said, because Moscow is endorsing a solution to Turkey’s problem with Kurdish fighters near its border that was long rejected by Washington. “But we will test promises on the field,” he cautioned, noting that Mr. Putin had kept mum on many details.

The developments came as most of the 1,000 U.S. troops who were allied with Kurdish forces in fighting Islamic State in Syria were leaving the area under orders from Mr. Trump. Civilians in Kurdish areas hurled insults at a U.S. troop convoy that crossed from northern Syria into Iraq on Monday, venting anger over a withdrawal they see as a betrayal.

On Tuesday, Syrian military units moved into several new villages in northeast Syria as part of the agreement with the Kurds, according to Syrian government media. The seven villages lie along the strategic M4 highway, which extends across northern Syria, connecting the city of Hasakah with Aleppo.

Turkish authorities have played down prospects of a direct conflict with Damascus. But Turkey relied on Syrian rebels who fought against the Assad regime as part of its ground incursion in Kurdish-held territories, raising concerns of violent clashes if they come in contact with Syrian regime troops.

Mr. Putin has warned he would only accommodate a limited Turkish incursion in Syria. But Russia is facing its own challenges in Syria, which set the stage for the deal between Turkey and Russia.

In April, Syrian government troops and Russian combat jets launched an offensive to reclaim the northwestern Syrian province of Idlib, the last bastion held by rebels fighting the Assad regime, some of whom are supported by Ankara. One of Russia’s objectives is to protect the nearby Khmeimim air base because it has been within firing range from the rebel stronghold.

The confrontation sent half a million people fleeing, forcing them to seek refuge in makeshift camps along the Turkish border. All summer, Mr. Erdogan sounded the alarm over the humanitarian toll in Idlib, and Russia agreed to suspend airstrikes in late August.

With Russia's agreement to help Turkey in its safe-zone project, Turkish officials and analysts said the price to pay will be to let Russia and the Assad regime complete their offensive in Idlib.

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“Mr. Putin will definitely put pressure on Mr. Erdogan regarding Idlib,” said Pavel Baev, a professor at the Peace Research Institute Oslo and a former analyst at the Soviet Ministry of Defense.

Mr. Putin has said the offensive in Idlib was legitimate because the province had fallen under the control of radical

groups.

Highlighting Idlib's importance in the negotiations, Syrian state media showed Mr. Assad touring the front lines separating government troops from rebel groups in the province. “Erdogan is a robber...He has robbed the factories, wheat and oil, and today he is robbing the land,” he said in a statement carried by state media.

Asked last week if such an arrangement would be under consideration in Sochi, Mr. Erdogan said he was satisfied with Russia's adherence to its August cease-fire pledge. Idlib “isn't on my agenda but we can remind each other about this,” Mr. Erdogan said.

As the cease-fire drew to an end, the flow of Syrians into Iraq increased sharply, according to Tom Peyre-Costa, a spokesman for the Norwegian Refugee Council. Within the past 24 hours, 1,736 refugees had arrived, he said Tuesday, bringing the total to 7,135 since the start of the Turkish offensive.

Mr. Trump on Monday authorized \$4.5 million in direct support to the Syria Civil Defense, a rescue organization also known as the White Helmets, White House press secretary Stephanie Grisham said Tuesday, praising the organization's “important and highly valued work in the country.”

—*Raja Abdulrahim in Istanbul, Nazih Osseiran in Beirut, Nancy A. Youssef in Prince Sultan Air Base, Saudi Arabia, Michael R. Gordon in Washington and Isabel Coles and Sune Engel Rasmussen in Erbil, Iraq, contributed to this article.*

Corrections & Amplifications

Iranian President Hassan Rouhani didn't attend the Sochi meeting between Messrs. Putin and Erdogan. An earlier version of this article incorrectly said he would. (Oct. 22, 2019)



Turkey-backed Syrian rebel fighters patrol in the border town of Tal Abyad, Syria, on Oct. 21. PHOTO: KHALIL ASHAWI/REUTERS

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