



IRAN'S PERCEPTION TOWARD TURKEY'S MILITARY OPERATION IN SYRIA

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INTRODUCTION

S yria, as one of the focal points of Iran's foreign policy, is of critical importance for Tehran's regional engagements. Considering its influence in Syria as a useful instrument for its foreign policy, Iran tends to increase its presence in military, economic, religious/sectarian, and administrative matters in the region controlled

by the Damascus administration. Although Iran's increasing presence in Syria is seen as a threat by many actors involved in the civil war, the implications of this situation for Iran have been limited. The shift of attention of Russia, one of the most powerful actors in Syria, to Eastern Europe after the Ukraine crisis brought along a process in which Iran's presence in Syria was further consolidated. In this period when Russia was distracted

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Iranian Foreign Minister Abdullahiyan visits Damascus.

to a certain extent, the air operations of the USA and Israel remained far from being a deterrent and could not prevent Iran's efforts to maximize its interests in Syria. While all indicators were positive for Iran, Ankara's decision to launch an operation in the north of Syria caused Tehran to review its calculations. First of all, the Tehran administration seeks to prevent Turkey's possible operation and, if this does not happen, to minimize the risks that may pose a threat to its interests in the post-operation process. Therefore, it started to implement shuttle diplomacy in the triangle of Ankara, Moscow, and Damascus. This diplomatic alarm had repercussions in Syria, and the Iranian-backed militias were mobilized in some regions. Therefore, after having acquired its strongest position in Syria since the beginning of the civil war, Iran is uneasy about a Turkish military operation. The

background of this uneasiness can be understood more clearly by examining Iran's current engagements in Syria.

IRAN'S CONCRETE PRESENCE IN SYRIA: NUBL AND ZAHRA

Although Iranian-backed militias have started to show up in many parts of Syria, the towns of Nubl and Zahra, located in the north of Syria near Aleppo, are of particular importance to Iran. Sixty thousand people live in these towns, which stand out as Iran's holding points in Aleppo when their geographical and demographic characteristics are taken into account. Located on the highway connecting Turkey to Aleppo via Kilis, these towns are almost equidistant from the center of Aleppo and the Turkish border. With the advantage of their geographical location, Nubl and Zahra had an important position in the import and ex-

port routes of Aleppo before the civil war. Unlike the Arab Alawites, most of the local people living in these towns endorse the Twelver Shi'ism and therefore accept the spiritual leadership in Iran. In addition, Zahra and Nubl have a distinctive demographic character amplified by the fact that they are situated between the Sunni Arab -dominated territories in the east and Kurdish towns in the west. Therefore, these two towns have strategic importance in the region, both geographically and demographically, and Iran has succeeded in turning this situation into a useful instrument in line with its own interests. Today, the role of Nubl and Zahra in the establishment of footholds by the Iranian-backed militias in Aleppo and the increasing Iranian presence in the economy of Aleppo is too great to be ignored. In other words, Nubl and Zahra are the keys to Aleppo for Iran.

Even though the geographic and demographic characteristics of Nubl and Zahra are the factors that make these towns crucial for Iran, it is necessary to mention Iran's military and economic support for these territories during the Syrian civil war in order to emphasize the importance of the situation. It is to this extent that Iran or-

ganized regional resistance to avoid losing the region and deployed heavy militia support to maintain the Shiite presence in Nubl and Zahra. During the Syrian civil war, Iran's first support for Nubl and Zahra had an indirect character. In July 2012, organized militia groups under the name of "popular resistance groups" were created and equipped with weapons in Nubl and Zahra by Iranian-backed militias against the Al-Nusra Front, which controlled an important area around Aleppo. Al-Nusra's strategy of controlling these towns by blockade instead of direct intervention remained an ineffective attempt as a result of the intense support provided by the Iranian-backed militias. As a matter of fact, the blockade, which lasted for a long time, ended with the military intervention of the regime army and Hezbollah in February 2016. Afterwards, these two towns received further military and economic reinforcement from Iran. While the control of the region is in the lands of the Iranian-backed militias, the Assad regime has also been a shield against the threats that may arise against this region. Therefore, Nubl and Zahra stood out as privileged regions even during the most intense periods of the civil war.

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The connection between Nubl and Zahra was considered one of the most important obstacles against the southward movement of the Turkey-backed groups that control the territories between Azaz and Aleppo. Iran started fortifying Nubl and Zahra more than ever after Turkey expressed its determination to launch an operation in Tel Rifat and Manbij¹. Syrian National Army (SMO) Spokesperson Yusuf Hammud stated in June 2022 that all militia groups in areas that Turkey is likely to launch operations, including regime forces, were given consultancy services by the Iranian Revolutionary Guards. Stating that Tehran will resist Turkey's operation both politically and militarily, Hammud stated that Iran has started to fortify Nubl and Zahra, which are right next to Tel Rifat, with new military shipments². The fact that the Russians did not take a firm stance against this possible operation further increases Iran's concerns. Uncomfortable with Iran's increasing presence in northern Syria, including Tel Rifat, Russia prevented Iran from participating in its meeting with the Syrian regime and YPG on May 30. It is likely that Turkey's possible operation was the main agenda item of this meeting, from which Iran was excluded. Seeking to increase its military capacity in Tel Rifat in spite of Russia, Iran wanted to deploy Grad missile launchers from Nubl and Zahra to Tel Rifat, but Russian forces prevented Iran's attempt. By strengthening the fortifications in Tel Rifat, Iran is trying to create an axis of resistance to ensure that Nubl and Zahra are not affected by the new operation. However, Russia closely monitors Iran's plans to gradually

settle in northern Syria and shows its discomfort with these attempts through military measures³. Seeking to overcome the obstacles presented by Russia, Iran is trying to increase its presence in the field, including Tel Rifat and Manbij, against Turkey through the support it provides to the regime elements. In fact, the Tehran administration considers that Turkey's operation is inevitable and that this operation has a very high probability of encompassing Nubl and Zahra. Therefore, it is likely that Iran aims to create a deterrent force against Turkey by taking early measures through sending shipments to militias.

TEHRAN'S SHUTTLE DIPLOMACY

While the Iranian-backed militias were intensely fortifying their positions, the Tehran administration initiated diplomatic attempts to make Ankara abandon this operation. President Erdogan's message on May 24, 2022, that the fifth operation toward the north of Syria will be launched, triggered Tehran to intensify these initiatives. Therefore, June and July 2022 were hectic months for Iran's Syria dossier. While Tehran hosted important diplomatic meetings, Iranian Foreign Minister Hussein Emir Abdullahiyan also made a series of diplomatic contacts. Iran's first reaction to Turkey's operation decision came from the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs on May 29. Iranian Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Said Hatibzade stated that they are against a Turkish operation. He also claimed that this operation was against Syria's territorial integrity and would lead to instability in the region. The Tehran administration hosted an important guest on June 23. Russian Foreign Minister

¹ "Tel Rifat'taki İran Devriyeleri Rusların Çekilmesiyle Birlikte Daha da Arttı", *Şarkul Avsat*, 10 June 2022.

² "Iran may Defend Nubbul and Zahraa with the Start of the Turkish Operation in Aleppo", *Baladi News*, 5 June 2022

³ "Suriye'nin Kuzeyinde Rus Güçlerinin Hareketliliği Sürüyor", *Anadolu Ajansı*, 4 June 2022.



Sergey Lavrov made his first visit to Iran after Ibrahim Reisi became President. In Tehran, Lavrov met with President Reisi and Foreign Minister Abdullahiyan. His agenda included the issue of security cooperation regarding Syria as well⁴. Immediately after this meeting in Tehran, Abdullahiyan visited Ankara on June 27. Having met with Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu first and then President Erdoğan, Abdullahiyan said, "We understand Turkey's security concerns very well. The current situation may require a special operation. Turkey's security concerns should be addressed permanently⁵," he said. These

words by Abdollahian gave the impression that Iran cared about Turkey's concerns, yet this impression did not last long. Abdollahian visited Damascus on July 2, right after his visit to Ankara, and spoke differently there. He said, "The Syrian nation and government are working hard to defend their territorial integrity. The purpose of my visit is to establish peace and security in the region between Syria and Turkey. We understand Turkey's concerns about security issues, but we are also against any military action through statements. Iran is trying to resolve the misunderstanding between Syria and

⁴ "Rusya Dışişleri Bakanı, Rusya Dışişleri Bakanı Lavrov Tahran'da", *Şarkul Avsat*, 23 June 2022.

⁵ "İran Dışişleri bakanı Abdullahiyan: Suriye'de Türkiye'nin Güvenlik Endişeleri Kalıcı Şekilde Giderilmeli", *Anadolu Ajansı*, 27 June 2022.

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Turkey through dialogue." Ab-dollahian's contradictory statements became even more reinforced with the Tripartite Summit held in Tehran on July 19. Erdogan also held a meeting with Iranian religious leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, in addition to Vladimir Putin and Ibrahim Reisi. Immediately after this meeting, Khamenei's social media account posted harsh statements against a Turkish operation: "Any military attack by Turkey in northern Syria will be harmful for Syria, Turkey, and the region, and will only be beneficial for terrorists. Such an attack will not fulfill the political action that Turkey expects from the Syrian government."⁶ President Erdoğan clearly responded to Khamenei's social media statements at the joint press conference after the Tripartite Summit. " "Tel Rifat and Manbij have turned into hotbeds of terror. It is high time to clean up the terror nests," Erdoğan said. "We are determined to drive out the evil that seeks to harm our national security from Syria. As Astana guarantors, our expectation from Russia and Iran is that they support Turkey in this process." During these diplomatic processes, which developed in the context of the military operation Turkey is

planning to carry out in northern Syria, Iran has engaged in inconsistencies with Iran in terms of discourse and action. Although Iranian politicians' statements refer to counterterrorism and diplomatic engagements continue, the Iranian militias are preparing for an attack against Turkey by deploying to the territories controlled by the YPG. Therefore, it should be taken into account that the discourses developed in the diplomatic arena will not reverberate on the ground. In addition, one could infer from the politicians' statements that Iran and Turkey will experience further tensions regarding the Syria case.

It is also worth noting that the 18th of the Astana meetings was held in Nur Sultan, the capital of Kazakhstan, on June 15-16, about one month before the 7th Astana Summit, where the leaders met in Tehran. These meetings failed to come up with an important roadmap for Syria's problems. Therefore, the Astana format has begun to give the impression that it is an unsuccessful attempt to offer solutions for reaching a political solution in Syria. In fact, Astana's functions are brought into question when Iran sends militias to contested areas af-

⁶ "İran Cumhurbaşkanı Reisi: Türkiye ve İran Arasında 30 Milyar Dolar Ticaret Hacmi Belirledik", *Anadolu Ajansı*, 19 July 2022.



Reconstruction of Aleppo

ter stating that it understands Turkey's concerns. President Erdoğan has called on Astana to return to its calling by stating in the 7th Astana Summit that "As the guarantors of Astana, we expect Russia and Iran to support Turkey in this process." However, Iran's policy on this issue is focused on maximizing its own interests in Syria while appearing far from understanding the concerns of its partners in Astana. As it stands, Turkey's emphasis on bilateral diplomatic relations with Russia may be a more realistic method in terms of achieving results than insisting on the Astana format.

IRAN'S CONCERN FOR ITS INTERESTS IN ALEPPO

Although the scope of the Turkish operation has been defined in general terms, it may be stretched during the operation. In fact, a Turkish operation is likely to have an impact on Nubl and Zahra, which act as a kind of logistics base for terrorist groups in Tel Rifat. So far, there has been no concrete indication that these two towns will be within the operation area. Yet, the Turkish Armed Forces (TSK) is likely to extend the scope of the operation if the terrorist groups, particularly in Tel Rifat, continue to receive

logistical support from Nubl and Zahra. The recent deployment of a large number of Iranian-backed militias to Tel Rifat and Manbij shows that these regions may receive military and logistical support from Nubl and Zahra. In such a case, it is likely that the Iranian troops in Nubl and Zahra will be natural targets of the Turkish Armed Forces. If such a scenario becomes real, Iran's interests in Aleppo will be affected the most. As a matter of fact, Iran's public and private sectors have made many infrastructure and superstructure investments for the reconstruction of Aleppo.

Iranian companies were handed the contracts for the rebuilding of the electricity infrastructure of Aleppo that was almost completely destroyed during the intense fighting between 2012 and 2017. According to the agreement signed between the Syrian Ministry of Electricity and the Iranian Ministry of Energy in September 2017, five gas-fired power plants to produce 25 MW of electricity for the electricity needs of Aleppo will be constructed. In addition, Iranian company MAPNA Group was handed the contract for the repair of the Aleppo Thermal Power Plant, which was destroyed during the civil war. This tender, worth 155.6 million dollars, is at the completion stage. The company completed the repair of the fifth unit of the Aleppo Thermal Power Plant, which will generate 200 MW of energy in January 2022. MAPNA Group invests not only in the electricity infrastructure of Aleppo but also in renewable energy, rail transport, oil and natural gas infrastructure⁷. Iranian compa-

nies have a great interest in superstructure investments in Aleppo as well as infrastructure investments. After Aleppo was recaptured by the regime, Iranian-backed militias deliberately confiscated the houses of the opposition members and created a kind of monopoly in Aleppo's real estate sector⁸. Taking this situation even further, Iranian private companies have started investing in building new residences in Aleppo. Iranian companies are investing in the construction of a total of 30,000 residences in Damascus, Homs, and Aleppo⁹.

As of 2017, Iran's investments in Aleppo continue to increase, but for the Tehran administration, holding Aleppo is not only about preserving the economic interests related to reconstruction. The Iranian influence, which has been going on for many years in Iraq, has also moved to Syria, and an opportunity has emerged for Iran to create a land corridor from Tehran to the Eastern Mediterranean. Aleppo is located at the focal point of Iran's strategic objective¹⁰. In fact, the Sunni population living in Aleppo for centuries has been almost completely removed from this region and driven towards Idlib as of 2017, and Iranian-backed militias have started to fill the gap in this region. By increasing its influence in Aleppo through militias, Iran has crossed the most critical threshold for the land corridor likely to reach Latakia from Tehran. The Iranian influence, which started to take root in the strategic regions of Syria, especially with the reconstruction of Aleppo, increased even further during the period when Russia was engaged in the Ukraine

⁷ "Rusya Dışışleri Bakanı, Rusya Dışışleri Bakanı Lavrov Tahrân'da", *Şarkul Avsat*, 23 June 2022.

⁸ "Syria: Ruling over Aleppo's Ruins", *International Crisis Group*, 9 May 2022.

⁹ "Russian and Iranian Economic Interests in Syria", *GCSP & OMRAN*, 7 February 2019.

¹⁰ "Russia's Influence Has Risen but Iran Is the Real Winner in Aleppo", *The Guardian*, 17 December 2016.

crisis. Therefore, Turkey's possible operations in northern Syria are seen as the biggest obstacle for the Tehran administration's ability to maximize its interests.

In order to be permanent in Aleppo, Iran is increasing its militia forces at many strategic points in the province, including military and civil airports. In addition to Aleppo International Airport and Nayrab Military Airport, Iranian-backed militias are also present at Quwayris Military Airport in the east of Aleppo. While the Iranian-backed militias are mainly located in eastern Aleppo, they are also increasing their influence in the south of the province. There is a military training center belonging to the Iranian-backed militias in southern Aleppo. Many Iranian-backed militia groups, especially the Lebanese Hezbollah, Liwa al-Baqir and the 80th Brigade, are deployed in Aleppo ¹¹. Therefore, in order to achieve its strategic goals, the Tehran administration has initiated many military and economic engagements in Aleppo. This situation started a process in which the administration of Aleppo was gradually captured by Iran. Having a strong presence in almost all regions and sectors of Aleppo and expand-

ing its sphere of influence day by day, Iran perceives a new Turkish operation to be carried out in northern Syria as a threat, with the reflex of protecting all these interests.

CONCLUSION

Ankara is determined to launch a new operation since the YPG's activities in northern Syria pose serious risks to Turkey's security. Ankara has made its security concerns known to the international community, especially to its counterparts in Astana. Even though there are some other countries that do not view a Turkish operation favorably, Iran's harsh rhetoric and implicit threat language are unmatched by any other country. There may be many reasons behind Tehran's use of this rhetoric, but the most important reason is the concern that Iran's presence and investments in Aleppo will be endangered. Although the path of dialogue between Ankara and Tehran is open, the Tehran administration tends to further consolidate its maximalist interests in Aleppo by ignoring Ankara's security concerns. This situation significantly disrupts the diplomatic channels between these two regional actors. The messages

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¹¹ "As Syrian Regime Touts Reopening, Iran Continues to Lurk at Aleppo Airport", *Al-Monitor*, 26 January 2021.

Regardless of what Tehran thinks when it comes to security concerns, one could safely argue that Ankara will not hesitate to launch a new operation. So much so that the other four operations carried out so far in northern Syria show that a fifth operation can also be launched when security concerns are at stake.



The Turkish Army's Operation Olive Branch.

given after President Erdogan's meeting with Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei on the occasion of the summit in Tehran clearly showed Tehran's stance against a new Turkish operation in northern Syria. Turkey's determination to carry out this operation was also emphasized by the President in the final declaration of the summit.

Apart from diplomatic moves, Iran has also attached great importance to the deployment of its militia groups to possible operational areas of Syria. Iran-backed militias have started mobilizing in order to be ready for any surprise attack by Turkey and to demonstrate that the threats spoken on the diplomatic table are backed by actions on the ground. Nubl and Zehra, the Shiite towns of Aleppo, are used as logistics

bases by Iran in order to meet the needs of the rising numbers of Iranian-backed militia in Tel Rifat ad Manbij, such as military equipment and food. Although these towns are important for the northbound militia presence of Nubl and Zahra, the Turkish Armed Forces are likely to focus their attention here if they are continuously used in attacks against Turkey. The Tehran administration utilizes its diplomatic and military instruments in order to prevent this operation from being carried out. If the Iran-backed militias stationed in Nubl and Zahra are targeted by Turkish strikes and the Iranian control over these towns are abolished, Iran's large-scale interests in Aleppo will be endangered. However, it does not seem possible to say that all these efforts can prevent a Turkish operation.

In fact, Ankara's motivation for a new operation is to eliminate the security concerns on its borders, while Tehran's motivation is to preserve its maximalist interests without any compromise. Regardless of what Tehran thinks when it comes to security concerns,

one could safely argue that Ankara will not hesitate to launch a new operation. So much so that the other four operations carried out so far in northern Syria show that a fifth operation can also be launched when security concerns are at stake.

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