

Turkey in Review: October 29 – November 17, 2021

Turkey Reverses Syria Incursion Plans after Russian and US Pressure

By Ezgi Yazici

Turkey likely abandoned its plans for an incursion into Syria after a significant military buildup in October.

Turkey and the Turkish-backed Syrian National Army (SNA) planned, signaled, and prepared for a Turkish military incursion into northern Syria in late October after Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan called for the military operation on October 11.¹ The incursion would have been Turkey's fourth into Syria and targeted the Kurdish-majority autonomous region controlled by the US-partnered Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). SDF commander Mazloum Abdi told al-Monitor on November 9 that SDF forces expected a Turkish military campaign on November 5.² Turkey's recent military mobilization was the largest in northeastern Syria since its most recent incursion in October 2019, indicating likely genuine preparations for an incursion and not simply posturing. However, the social media reports of Turkish military reinforcements and SNA statements on an "upcoming incursion" came to an end by October 31. Turkey likely abandoned plans by early November.



A combination of Russian military and US diplomatic pressure likely prevented the incursion. Turkey could conceivably launch an operation without the assent of both Russia and the United States, but this is a highly unlikely scenario. Russia could slow down or impose high casualties on a Turkish operation.³ The United States could impose a high diplomatic and economic cost on the Turkish government.⁴ Russian and Syrian regime forces held joint military exercises that Russia "coordinated with" the SDF on October 31.⁵ Russia deployed rotary and fixed-wing aircraft in Qamishli and near Ayn al Arab close to areas of likely Turkish military buildup to deter a possible Turkish campaign on October 31.⁶ Russia also conducted multi-day joint exercises with the Syrian regime near Tal Tamr, Hasaka

Governorate, on the same day. For more information on the Russian deployment, see the first item in the “Turkey’s Activities Abroad” section. The Russian military response is a step change from past incursions where Russia was willing to greenlight Turkish incursions in exchange for territorial or political concessions from Turkey.⁷ Similarly, the United States held limited patrols and reportedly built a new base between Qamishli and Tal Tamr to deter a Turkish incursion against the US-partnered SDF in late October and early November.⁸ The key US influence over Turkey likely lies outside Syria, however, as Erdogan seeks to repair the withering Turkish economy and secure defense sales from the United States. US officials may have voiced opposition to a Syria incursion during numerous high-level meetings in late October, including US President Joe Biden’s October 31 meeting with President Erdogan.⁹

Russia may be growing less tolerant of further Turkish land grabs in Syria. The absence of a Russian-Turkish agreement for the October military buildup suggests that the Russian strategy in Syria may have shifted to reject any new territorial losses to Turkey. SDF commander Mazloum Abdi argued that Russia seeks to limit further Turkish territorial incursions during his November 9 interview.¹⁰ ISW previously assessed that Russia could be amenable to a Turkish incursion if Turkey withdrew from its bases near Idlib in northwestern Syria.¹¹ Southern Idlib is important for pro-regime forces in northwestern Syria to gain access to the strategic M4 highway and to push the Salafi-Jihadi groups further north away from key terrain. Instead, Russia may be prioritizing its long-term objective to consolidate pro-regime control over all of Syria—an objective that Turkish military operations undermine—and not just the northwest. Moreover, the mere threat of a Turkish incursion likely motivates the Syrian Kurds and the SDF to work with Russia to deter Turkey’s military ambitions in Syria—creating opportunities for Russian outreach to the SDF in northeastern Syria.

Turkish objectives in Syria remain unfulfilled, and Ankara can still maintain destabilizing pressure on actors in northern Syria without an official military campaign. The Turkish government still seeks to remove Syrian Kurdish fighters from areas near its border and describes their continued presence as unacceptable. Russia and the United States have likely deterred this attempt but Turkey’s military and political objectives remain unfulfilled. Turkey’s expanding military and political footprint in Syria will continue to cause consistent disruption and instability as the fighting between Turkish-backed and Kurdish forces is not confined to the limits of an official operation. Turkish-backed factions clash with Syrian Kurdish fighters regularly in a prolonged war of attrition. Humanitarian organizations have also widely documented Turkish-backed Syrian fighters’ role in cutting water supplies to Syrian Kurdish areas, conducting arbitrary detentions, and exacerbating mass displacements ahead of Turkish campaigns. These activities undermine both the US-led counter-ISIS campaign and the stability of fragile institutions and civilian areas, while also creating opportunities for Russia to expand its military presence in northeastern Syria.

Turkey’s Activities Abroad

1. Russia deployed aircraft and air-defense systems and conducted military exercises to deter a Turkish incursion in northeastern Syria. The Russian military deployed additional forces to northeastern Syria, likely to deter any potential Turkish offensive operations and to improve ties with the Syrian Kurdish-dominated Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). Russia deployed an unknown number of fighter jets and helicopters to Russian airbases near Qamishli, Hasaka Governorate, and Ayn al Arab, Aleppo Governorate, on October 31.¹² Russia began conducting multi-day joint exercises with the Syrian regime near Tal Tamr, Hasaka Governorate, Syria, on the same day. Russian Defense Ministry sources claimed that Russia also held these exercises “in coordination” with

the SDF. Russia likely deployed S-300 anti-aircraft missiles to its airbase in Tabaqah, Raqqa Governorate, Syria, on November 12—marking a rare example of Russian air-defense system deployments to the east of the Euphrates River. The S-300 deployment is likely a pre-planned effort to provide air defense for the fighter jet deployments from October 31. Russian deployments likely played a significant role in halting both the Turkish military buildup and calls for a new incursion so far.

2. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and US President Joe Biden met on the sidelines of the G20 Summit in Rome, Italy, on October 31. Erdogan and Biden discussed Turkey's new request to receive F-16 fighter jets from the United States, Turkey's purchase of the Russian S-400 missile system, defense cooperation between Turkey and the United States, and developments in Libya, Syria, and the eastern Mediterranean, according to the White House readout.¹³ Erdogan and Biden met at the height of the Turkish military buildup for a potential incursion into Syria. Biden likely expressed opposition to Turkey's plans. Turkish and US officials are continuing high-level talks on a wide range of issues, including a new joint working group to work on US–Turkish disagreements.¹⁴ Ankara seeks the normalization of US-Turkey relations to secure new fighter jets for its aging fleet and to repair the crumbling Turkish economy.

3. Turkey attempted to position itself as a diplomatic mediator in the Bosnia and Herzegovina crisis. Bosnian Muslims have called for Turkish support in the political crisis between the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Republika Srpska (RS) that started in late October.¹⁵ Bosnia and Herzegovina accuses Republika Srpska and Serbian officials of violating the 1995 Dayton Peace Agreement after Bosnian Serb leader Milorad Dodik threatened to break away from Bosnian institutions and the government by the end of November 2021.¹⁶ Turkey has historically supported Muslim communities in the Balkans as a vector of influence into Eastern Europe.

However, Turkey has met with or sought meetings with officials on both sides of the crisis in an attempt to appear impartial. Turkish President Erdogan met with Dodik and Bosnian Muslim representatives in Ankara, Turkey, on November 9, and offered to meet with Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic.¹⁷ Ankara wants to ensure the conflict does not harm Turkey's economic relations with the wider region or its already-fragile relationship with Russia.

4. The Turkish Foreign Minister visited Iran after likely Iran-backed militias targeted a Turkish military base in Iraq. Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu traveled to Iran to meet with Iranian government officials on November 15. Cavusoglu's visit came after the November 7 likely Iranian proxy militia attack against the Turkish military base in Bashiqa, Ninewa Province, Iraq.¹⁸ Cavusoglu met with Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi and Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir Abdollahian to discuss Iranian–Turkish counterterrorism cooperation, investments, and regional developments in Syria, Yemen, Iraq, and Afghanistan.¹⁹ Turkey conducted joint military exercises with Azerbaijan near the Iranian border on October 4-6. The exercises came in response to Iranian exercises near the Iranian-Azerbaijani border on October 3. Cavusoglu's visit is likely an attempt to reduce tensions with Iran after the Bashiqa attack and Iranian–Azerbaijani escalations.

5. Poland and the European Union accused Turkey of fueling the Polish-Belarusian border crisis. Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki on November 9 accused Turkey of providing passage for migrants to fly to Belarus and of “coordinating its actions” with Belarus and Russia on the Poland-Belarus border crisis.²⁰ Belarusian security forces gathered thousands of Middle Eastern migrants at the Polish border beginning on November 8, a likely Kremlin-supported effort to coerce the European Union (EU) to remove sanctions on Belarus.²¹ European news sources stated that the migrants might be flying to Belarus through Turkey via Turkish

Airlines.²² European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen also stated on November 8 that the EU was exploring how to “sanction third-country airlines that take a part in human trafficking.”²³ The Turkish government denied the allegations and invited Polish technical teams to inspect proceedings at the Istanbul airport on November 10. On November 12, Turkey banned Syrian, Yemeni, and Iraqi citizens from flying to Belarus via Turkey.²⁴ The Turkish government has previously spoiled or softened NATO actions and statements against Belarus and Russia as part of its efforts to manage its relations with the Kremlin.²⁵ A direct Turkish government role in facilitating migrants’ travel to Belarus remains unproven, but the European sanction threat likely pressured the Turkish government to shift what was likely complicit behavior and to regulate flights.²⁶ Turkey also has vested interests in maintaining good relations with Poland—particularly with its recent Bayraktar TB2 armed drone sales to that country.²⁷

6. Russia brokered a ceasefire between Azerbaijan and Armenia after the most noteworthy kinetic escalation since November 2020. Azerbaijan likely initiated clashes between Azerbaijani and Armenian forces in at least two separate locations on the Azerbaijani–Armenian border around noon on November 16.²⁸ The two countries have sustained low-level fighting since the November 2020 ceasefire in Nagorno-Karabakh and its

surrounding territories that the Azerbaijani offensive targeted and captured in 2020. However, this round of fighting marked the first clashes in Armenia instead of in Azerbaijani-controlled Nagorno-Karabakh. Russia brokered a ceasefire that entered into effect at 6:30 pm local time, according to the Armenian Defense Ministry.²⁹ Russia and the European Council held separate joint calls with Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan and Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev to de-escalate the fighting.³⁰ The Turkish government limited its official response to a private call between the Turkish and Azerbaijani defense ministers until after the ceasefire was announced.³¹ Ankara likely did not support or have prior knowledge of the limited Azerbaijani attack into Armenia. Whether the November 16 clashes were the result of Azerbaijani planning or spontaneous escalation is unclear, but the fighting emerging in two separate locations in Armenia indicates Azerbaijani coordination and preparedness. The Azerbaijani and Armenian governments had stated before the fighting that they were willing to discuss a peace process and regional integration opportunities.

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¹ The Turkish Armed Forces (TSK) sent at least ten military convoys to reinforce its military positions across northern Syria between October 26-29. The bulk of these deployments reached Tal Abyad in Raqqa Province, and southern Idlib—additional reinforcements to Ras al Ayn. Turkish and Turkish-backed forces have been targeting parts of Tal Rifat, Tal Tamr, and Ain Issa
<https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/erdogan-says-latest-kurdish-ypg-attack-turkish-police-is-final-straw-2021-10-11/>
<https://twitter.com/bedbolukbasi/status/1453488350795554818>
<https://twitter.com/LindseySnell/status/1453666308856352768>
<https://twitter.com/OGNreports/status/1452992409839837201>

² <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/11/syria-kurdish-commander-assured-washington-turkey-wont-invade-again>

³ Russia maintains air superiority in areas Turkey planned to target. Russia is also able to impose high costs on Turkey by increasing the tempo of its regular airstrikes against both civilians and military forces in Idlib where Turkey has a large military and humanitarian presence.

⁴ The Turkish government is currently requesting to purchase F-16 fighter jets from the United States after the United States removed Turkey from the F-35 program. The Turkish government also depends on improving relations with its US and European partners to offset the electoral cost of its crashing economy and high inflation. Some Turkish officials and pro-government sources have recently advocated for improved US-Turkish relations for these reasons—

marking a change from Turkey's confrontational stance toward the US in 2020.

⁵ https://t.me/anna_news/16972

Pro-Kremlin Russian media outlet ANNA News reported that Russian air force and Syrian regime units began multiday exercises in northeastern Syria on October 31. A confidential Russian MoD source stated the exercises are being "coordinated" with Kurdish groups. These exercises likely intended to deter any potential Turkish operations east of the Peace Spring zone

⁶ https://t.me/anna_news/16972

Russia deployed twelve Su-34 bombers and five Su-35 multirole fighters to the Russian airbase at Qamishli, Hasaka Governorate, Syria, on October 31. Pro-Kremlin Russian media outlet Abkhazia Network News Agency (ANNA) reported that Russia deployed twelve Mi-8 and five Ka-52 rotary-wing aircraft to the Ain al Arab airbase, in Sarrin, west of Ayn Issa on October 31.

⁷ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-security/russia-turkey-reach-deal-to-remove-kurdish-ypg-from-syria-border-idUSKBN1X10ZE>

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/9/17/idlib-assault-on-hold-as-russia-turkey-agree-on-buffer-zone>

⁸ <https://twitter.com/5thSu/status/1456325928397639692?s=20>

<https://english.aawsat.com/home/article/3296341/us-russia-expand-military-movements-northeastern-syria>

⁹ <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/10/31/readout-of-president-bidens-meeting-with-president-recep-tayyip-erdogan-of-turkey/>

¹⁰ <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/11/syria-kurdish-commander-assured-washington-turkey-wont-invade-again>

¹¹ Overwatch Episode 58: Turkish Troop Movements on Syrian Border Indicate Possible Incursion against US Partner Forces

<https://open.spotify.com/episode/46qBKF9l7ap1QLfGAOubCj?si=YrSxxqYEQDO6KDvFFCjxvA>

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¹³ <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/10/31/readout-of-president-bidens-meeting-with-president-recep-tayyip-erdogan-of-turkey/>

¹⁴ Turkish Defense Minister Hulusi Akar and US Secretary of Defense Lloyd James Austin discussed regional defense and security issues over phone on October 27.

<https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/politika/milli-savunma-bakani-akar-abd-savunma-bakani-austin-ile-telefon-gorustu/2405046>

Turkish presidential spokesperson Ibrahim Kalin and US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan discussed fighter jet sales and regional developments by phone on October

27. (<https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/10/27/statement-by-nsc-spokesperson-emily-horne-on-national-security-advisor-jake-sullivans-meeting-with-ibrahim-kalin-spokesperson-and-chief-advisor-to-the-president-of-turkey-2/>)

US and Turkey will establish a joint working group to work on disagreements, according to Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu on November 4.

<https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/diplomacy/turkey-us-to-form-joint-working-group-on-disagreements>

¹⁵ 2021-11-03: Bosniak organizations and Balkan NGOs in Turkey urge the Turkish government to speak out about Bosnia's political crisis on November 3. (Twitter, BalkanInsight)

2021-11-02: Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Bosnian House of Peoples Collegium member Bakir Izetbegovic meet in Istanbul, Turkey, on November 2. (Reuters DNGTS: TCCB Milliyet)

¹⁶ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-59130945>

¹⁷ <https://euronews.al/en/balkans/2021/11/08/erdogan-to-meet-vucic-we-dont-want-another-conflict-in-bosnia/>

2021-11-08: Turkish President Erdogan meets with the representatives of Bosnian nongovernmental with Turkish Interior Minister Suleyman Soylu and Turkish Presidential Spokesperson Ibrahim Kalin organization in Istanbul on November 8. President Erdogan states Turkey's determination to support Bosnia-Herzegovina's well-being.

<https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/diplomacy/turkey-determined-to-support-well-being-of-bosnia-erdogan>

<https://euronews.al/en/balkans/2021/11/08/erdogan-to-meet-vucic-we-dont-want-another-conflict-in-bosnia/>

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<https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/diplomacy/turkey-determined-to-support-well-being-of-bosnia-erdogan>

¹⁸ Likely Iranian proxy militants launched between two and eight 122mm Grad rockets targeting the Turkish Armed Forces (TSK) Zlikan camp from a truck positioned outside Mosul on November 7. Two rockets impacted the camp. Likely Iranian proxy militants also targeted the Zlikan base on April 14, August 12, and September 24, 2021, with similar munitions.

<https://twitter.com/CalibreObscura/status/1457421555185733632>

<https://twitter.com/TamerBadawii/status/1457415212798251014>

¹⁹ <https://president.ir/fa/132615>

https://www.mfa.gov.tr/no_-374_-sayin-bakanimizin-15-kasim-2021-tarihinde-iran-i-ziyareti-hk.tr.mfa

<https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/diplomacy/turkey-iran-to-strengthen-cooperation-in-security-fm-cavusoglu>

²⁰ <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/poland-turkey-synchronising-migration-crisis-russia>

²¹ <https://apnews.com/article/europe-middle-east-poland-migration-warsaw-8cf4879019d24406dcca21922af48ff1>

²² <https://euobserver.com/world/153468>

EU Observer claimed that Turkish Airlines was one of the complicit airlines with its twice-a-day flights between Istanbul and Minsk

²³

https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/statement_21_5867

²⁴ <https://ahvalnews.com/turkey-belarus/turkey-bars-iraqis-syrians-and-yemenis-flying-belarus>

²⁵ <https://ahvalnews.com/thy-belarus/turkish-airlines-eu-crosshairs-facilitating-lukashenkos-hybrid-warfare-belarus-flights>

²⁶ Turkish Airlines is a private company, but the Turkish government controls half of Turkish Airlines shares.

²⁷

<https://www.defensenews.com/global/europe/2021/05/24/poland-to-buy-turkish-bayraktar-tb2-drones/>

²⁸<https://tass dot ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/12936753>

<https://tass dot ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/12936667>

²⁹

<https://twitter.com/ArmeniaMODTeam/status/1460674778386341890?s=20>

³⁰

<https://twitter.com/eucopresident/status/1460611678782074880?s=20>

<https://apnews.com/article/europe-russia-moscow-sergei-shoigu-azerbaijan-b4bb5cc58f9435db7d5c287cee52de4d>

³¹ <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/world/turkish-azerbaijani-defense-ministers-discuss-tension-at-armenia-border/2422692>