



Turkey Will Likely Leverage Syrian Proxies for Afghanistan Mission

By Ezgi Yazici

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Key Takeaway: *There are increasing reports of Turkey’s plans to recruit Syrian fighters for deployment to Afghanistan as Ankara finalizes a deal to secure the Kabul International Airport. Turkish officials may be in talks with at least six Turkish-backed Syrian factions to prepare an initial round of 2,000 Syrians as private contractors for deployment to Afghanistan. Reporting is still limited as of July 20. Ankara’s deployment of Syrian proxies to expand the Turkish footprint and offset casualty risks for the Turkish Armed Forces in Afghanistan would be consistent with recent Turkish military behavior in Libya and Azerbaijan. A long-term Turkish presence in Afghanistan with the risk of Taliban attacks may not serve Ankara’s strategic interests at home or abroad in the long term, however.*

Turkey may be preparing to deploy Syrian proxies to Afghanistan in September 2021. Local Syrian sources report that Turkey is recruiting Syrian mercenaries to deploy to protect the Kabul airport, government institutions, and international forces for a relatively large monthly salary of 3,000 USD.¹ Turkish intelligence officials reportedly asked at least five Turkish-backed Syrian National Army factions to prepare an initial batch of 2,000 troops by September during an alleged meeting in northern Syria in late June.² Turkish private military company SADAT will likely lead the recruitment and transfer of Syrian mercenaries to Afghanistan in line with its past responsibilities in Libya and Nagorno-Karabakh.³ SADAT is a Turkish private security company founded by close Erdogan ally and retired Brigadier General Adnan Tanriverdi. SADAT has drawn domestic and international criticism for its reported role in training Islamist militias in Syria.⁴

Turkey and Russia may seek to move extremist groups out of Idlib to Afghanistan, according to low-confidence reporting from Russian news sources. Russian news outlet ANNA News claimed that Turkey and Russia may be negotiating for Turkey to fulfill its promise to clear the extremist presence from Idlib in Syria by moving fighters to Afghanistan or the borders of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan.⁵ ANNA News has previously reported accurate information on Russian deployments in Syria, but the source of this report remains unverified. This reporting follows Hayat Tahrir al-Sham's (HTS) campaign to provide international legitimacy to its quasi-security institutions by offering rival and independent groups the option to either “join HTS or leave Idlib.”⁶ The HTS campaign could push groups with organic connections to Afghanistan to move operations and recruits to Afghanistan.⁷ Both Turkish and Russian interests would benefit from an exodus of foreign fighters from the Idlib area. However, a Turkish role or Russian support in facilitating such a movement of fighters is unclear.

Turkey's Play in Afghanistan

A successful bid in helping stabilize Afghanistan or backing the right internal leaders could demonstrate that Turkey is a necessary player in the region and an important security partner to its allies in and outside NATO. Ankara could improve US-Turkish relations and build Turkish leverage over the United States by stepping up for a key NATO-encouraged mission in Afghanistan. A Turkish military-diplomatic foothold in Afghanistan could provide additional gains for Turkey like economic access, improvements to its global security posture, and greater power projection in Central Asia.

Turkey likely seeks to leverage the NATO departure and the Taliban's advance as an inflection point to maximize its impact in Afghanistan. Turkish officials timed Turkey's involvement in Libya and its support for Azerbaijan in Nagorno-Karabakh around similar inflection points where limited Turkish involvement had an outsized impact in shaping the military conflicts to favor Turkish interests. Both military campaigns led to mixed post-conflict diplomatic and strategic results, however. In Nagorno-Karabakh, Russia outmaneuvered Turkey in delivering the diplomatic victory in Azerbaijan. In Libya, Turkey's long-term influence is in question despite its significant role on the battlefield. President Erdogan will likely attempt to position Turkey as a unique actor that could leverage its Muslim outreach for a unique stabilizer role between Afghanistan's different stakeholders. Erdogan already stated on July 19 that Turkey is planning direct talks with the Taliban despite two statements calling for Turkish troops' withdrawal from Afghanistan.⁸ The details of future Turkey-Taliban talks are unknown as of July 20.

Expanding the Turkish presence with Syrian proxy support could better secure Turkish troops and maximize Turkey's powerbroker role. Turkey may seek to spread its political and military presence beyond the airport to add operational depth to its Afghanistan missions. Turkey also seeks to send "domestic security advisors" to the Afghan government, according to anonymous Turkish government sources. Turkey will likely support pro-Turkey and Turkey-amenable actors inside the former Northern Alliance against the Taliban in Afghanistan. Turkish officials seek to minimize their risk of casualties and financial cost by discussing security arrangements with the United States, Iran, Afghanistan, and Afghanistan's bordering countries. However, securing the Kabul airport will remain a high-risk mission for the Turkish Armed Forces (TSK) amid public Taliban threats. Acquiring backroom assurances and security understandings from regional partners like Pakistan or from the Taliban will likely be a requirement for Turkey to maintain troops after the NATO withdrawal.

Turkey's Need for Proxies

Syrian mercenaries can deliver Turkey additional power projection capabilities without further Turkish deployments. Turkey is more casualty-averse and less experienced than the other states with active interests in Central Asia. Turkey has used Syrian forces in combination with its air support and military advising abilities to achieve a military impact that rivaled states like Russia on the ground. Turkey could leverage Syrian recruits to achieve its initial operational objective of securing the Kabul Airport and key locations in Kabul at a lower cost than if it relied solely on TSK forces. Turkey's ability to fund, command, and control proxy forces will become even more critical if Ankara seeks to support Afghan political leaders related to the former Northern Alliance more actively.

The Turkish government will likely use Syrian recruits to mitigate domestic skepticism of the mission in Afghanistan. The Turkish military role in Afghanistan lacks public support. Most

Turks view Afghanistan as too far afield and not a Turkish responsibility—unlike perceived counterterrorism operations against Kurdish groups in Syria and Iraq. Employing Syrian mercenaries could allow Turkey to pursue high-risk missions without suffering the domestic political cost of a major casualty attack that might damage President Erdogan’s credibility. Ankara will likely seek to avoid creating a large Turkish troop presence in Afghanistan. Turkish Defense Minister Hulusi Akar stated that Turkey is not planning to deploy more Turkish troops to Afghanistan beyond the existing 600. However, Turkish-backed proxies remain plagued by in-fighting, limited operational security, and weak command structures. It is also unclear how well Syrian mercenaries will interact with Turkish troops on the ground.

Implications and Risks

A Turkish deployment of Syrian mercenaries could challenge Turkish-US security negotiations in Afghanistan. NATO allies will likely seek to keep Syrian mercenaries out of another NATO ally’s mission in Afghanistan—particularly after the US condemnation of Turkey for a Turkish-backed Syrian faction’s use of child soldiers on July 1, 2021.⁹ SADAT may offer official contracts to the mercenaries for the first time to “legalize” their presence, according to Syrian opposition sources.¹⁰ Contracting Syrian fighters could make the Turkish government’s often opaque and arbitrary arrangements with Syrian recruits more binding while still posing challenges to Turkish-US cooperation in Afghanistan.

Turkey risks facing Taliban or other Salafi-Jihadi attacks in Afghanistan without the NATO safety net. Erdogan stated that Turkey will negotiate with the Taliban [CM1] A further deterioration Ankara-Taliban relations could lead to a high-casualty Taliban attack in Afghanistan or a greater Salafi-Jihadi targeting of Turkish assets across the Middle East and put significant public pressure on Turkish officials. Moreover, the potential influx of radical Islamist groups into Afghanistan could deteriorate the security environment further and increase Turkey’s dependency on outsourcing fighters from Syria.

Turkey will likely struggle to translate its military presence in Afghanistan to its strategic advantage. Turkey’s most ambitious military presence abroad poses both opportunities and risks. Turkey has struggled to translate similar military opportunities in Libya and Nagorno-Karabakh into long-term strategic advantages, likely due to relative inexperience with such deployments. Ankara may be unable to stabilize Afghanistan rapidly or without higher casualty and financial costs even with the proxy presence or allies’ support.

¹ <https://efrinnews24.com/?p=3329>

<https://www.syriahr.com/en/219053/>

The London-based Syrian Observatory has often reported accurate information on Turkish-backed Syrian National Army factions due to its network of well-placed activists in northern Syria.

ISW assesses with medium-high confidence that Turkish officials are indeed describing the position as such to recruit enough Syrian fighters. Turkish officials could expand the mission description arbitrarily or in exchange for extra pay.

² <https://www.facebook.com/furat.netkuord/posts/769312043755157>

³ <https://twitter.com/UNWatch/status/1315012242866397186>

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- https://twitter.com/Hasan__Jan/status/1317200148578111489
- <https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/europe/tu-sadat.htm>
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- ⁵ https://t.me/anna_news/14120
- ⁶ <https://twitter.com/IdlibEn/status/1413108286170206213>
- <https://twitter.com/borwjij/status/1410976382012727300?s=20>
- ⁷ <https://twitter.com/OAjjob/status/1415681961633345542?s=20>
- <https://www.syria.tv/التفكك-أو-الانضمام-تحرير-الشام-تواصل-حملتها-على-الجماعات-الجهادية-الأجنبية>
- ⁸ <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/taliban-warn-consequences-if-turkey-runs-kabul-airport-2021-07-13/>
- <https://twitter.com/abdbozkurt/status/1417130796033495041?s=12>
- ⁹ <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/us-adds-turkey-list-countries-implicated-use-child-soldiers-2021-07-01/>
- ¹⁰ <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/afghanistan-turkey-us-near-deal-kabul-airport-mission>
- <https://www.syriahr.com/en/219053/>