

# Turkey's military operation in Syria and its impact on relations with the EU

## SUMMARY

'Operation Peace Spring', launched on 9 October 2019, is the third major Turkish military operation on Syrian territory since 2016, following the 'Euphrates Shield' (2016-2017) and 'Olive Branch' (2018) operations. Though the decision of Turkish President, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, to invade the north-east Syrian region governed by the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD), may have come as a surprise to some, it is in fact consistent with the rationale of a regime that counts the fight against the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) – considered 'terrorist' not only by Turkey, but also by the United States and the EU – among its top security priorities.

What is new is not the fight against the PKK, but rather Turkey's further strategic decoupling from two of its allies, the EU and the United States. This decoupling started in 2016, when the failed military coup in Turkey prompted President Erdoğan to reinforce his ties with Moscow. Since then, he has grown more authoritarian, using anti-Western rhetoric and making foreign policy choices contrary to the interests of the trans-Atlantic alliance. In light of the Trump administration's withdrawal from Syria, Turkey's military move might also be perceived as an attempt to fill a power vacuum in the region and jointly consolidate its influence there with its new ally, Russia.

Turkey is a long-standing EU partner; however, negotiations on the country's EU accession have stalled since 2016, after it drifted further away from the EU benchmarks for the rule of law and fundamental rights. In 2019, the European Parliament called upon the Council of the EU and the European Commission to suspend talks on Turkey's EU accession. Despite positive cooperation on migration and the EU-Turkey agreement, under which a total of €6 billion has been allocated for around 3.6 million Syrian refugees, Turkey's incursion into north-east Syria could further damage its EU membership perspective and lead to a new wave of internally displaced persons and refugees, as well as to security threats linked to ISIL/Da'esh foreign fighters present in Syria.



### In this Briefing

- From a failed military coup to Operation Peace Spring
- EU-Turkey relations
- EU reactions to Operation Peace Spring
- A new refugee crisis on the horizon?

## From a failed military coup to Operation Peace Spring

Turkey's 'Peace Spring' military operation launched on 9 October 2019 in north-east Syria is the result of both internal and external dynamics created in the wake of the Syrian civil war (2011) and the [failed military coup](#) in Turkey (2016). The non-democratic methods and decisions of Turkey's President, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, including the adoption of [18 amendments](#) to the Constitution (2017), the merging of ministries and attachment of other institutions, such as the General Army Staff, the National Intelligence Agency and the National Security Council, directly to the president, helped him establish an '[imperial presidency](#)'. While these changes triggered [strong criticism in the West](#), they were received with understanding and [support](#) in Moscow. In July 2016, during the military coup, Russia voiced support for Erdoğan, and showed approval, at the Putin-Erdoğan bilateral meeting in St Petersburg, for Turkey's first major operation in Syria, [Euphrates Shield](#), which lasted from August 2016 to March 2017. Previously, Erdoğan's plans for military intervention in Syria had been opposed by both the Obama administration and the Turkish military. Politically, Euphrates Shield paved the way for the [Astana process](#), wherein Russia and Turkey tried to reach a *modus vivendi* in Syria. Iran later joined this initiative, and Iraq became an 'observer' in October 2019.

In 2016, Turkey found itself stuck between a strong rival – Russia – in Syrian territories west of the Euphrates, and an ally unsympathetic to its needs – the US – to the east of the Euphrates. Euphrates Shield allowed Turkey to clear the area to the west of the Euphrates both of the [Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant](#) (ISIL/Da'esh) and the [People's Protection Units](#) (YPG), mainly Kurdish groups that are a primary component of the Syrian Democratic Forces of the Democratic Union Party (PYD, opposed to the Bashar al-Assad regime). Turkey views the YPG as the Syrian Kurdish affiliate of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which it considers a 'terrorist' organisation. Furthermore, the PKK is on the EU list of 'individuals and entities against whom specific restrictive measures to combat terrorism apply' ([Decision 2002/460/EC](#)) since 2002, and also on the US State Department list of [Foreign Terrorist Organizations](#) (FTOs). However, Western countries consider the PYD and the PKK two legally distinct entities, though linked historically and operationally. Despite the fact that the PYD fought against ISIL/Da'esh and was therefore a Western ally against terrorism, US President Donald Trump [said](#) in October 2019 that the PKK was 'probably' a 'bigger terrorist threat' than the Islamic State armed groups.

When, between January and March 2018, Turkey ran a second major military operation in Syria, [Olive Branch](#), directed at the Syrian Kurdish canton of Afrin, it was clear that the ISIL/Da'esh forces had been considerably weakened. The US [military withdrawal from Syria](#), announced by Trump in December 2018 after he claimed that Islamic State had been 'defeated', created a new window of opportunity not only for Turkey but also for its regional allies, Russia and Iran. Given the evolution of the conflict, the October 2019 operation may be understood as a 'war within a war'. It was a further step in the direction of a [strategic decoupling](#) of Ankara from its Western allies, aided by the Trump administration's [erratic decisions](#) and the [EU's weak stance on Syria](#) where, with the exception of UK and French military forces, there are no EU troops on the ground. [Chatham House](#) scholars speak of the 'absence of a coherent strategic vision' that has led to 'Western marginalisation in Syria'.

## EU-Turkey relations

Turkey has been a NATO member since 1951 and is a long-standing partner of the EU. The [association agreement](#) concluded between the European Economic Community (EEC) and Turkey in 1963 was an interim step towards the country's accession to the EEC, for which it had applied in 1959. The EU-Turkey Customs Union came into force in 1995 and Turkey obtained EU candidate status in 1999. In December 2004, the European Council decided that Turkey sufficiently fulfilled the EU accession criteria, making it possible to [open EU accession negotiations](#) with it. In 2008, the Council adopted a revised [accession partnership with Turkey](#). Since 2015, Turkey is party to the EU Civil Protection Mechanism and has agreed to participate in the European Solidarity Corps.

In 2016, under the [EU-Turkey statement](#), the two agreed on the EU [Facility for Refugees in Turkey](#). The Facility manages a total of €6 billion in funds: €3 billion for 2016-2017 has been fully contracted

and more than €2 billion has been disbursed, with the balance to be disbursed in the course of the implementation of Facility projects up to mid-2021. The European Council agreed in 2018 to the financing of the second tranche of the Facility, with resources coming from the EU budget (€2 billion) and Member States (€1 billion). Importantly, the EU-Turkey statement [stipulated](#) with regard to the Facility that 'All new irregular migrants crossing from Turkey into Greek islands as from 20 March 2016 will be returned to Turkey'. A bilateral Greece-Turkey agreement (2016) envisaged reciprocal presence of police forces within the refugee camps in Greece and Turkey respectively.

At the [Varna Meeting](#) (2018), EU-Turkey discussions again centred on cooperation on migration, combating terrorism, and Turkey's involvement in Syria. Despite EU concerns on the rule of law, freedom of the press and parliamentary democracy, the EU-Turkey high-level political dialogue continued, with a strong focus on foreign affairs and security, mainly in relation to Syria and Iraq. However, as noted in the [2019 Commission report on Turkey](#), there has been 'slow movement towards concrete implementation of jointly agreed actions'. The report further observes that, 'concerning counter-terrorism, the situation in the Turkish south-east area has continued to be challenging. The government continued security operations against a background of the recurrent violent acts by the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which remains on the EU list of persons, groups and entities involved in acts of terrorism'. The report also notes that, 'while the Government has a legitimate right to fight terrorism, it is also responsible for ensuring this is done in accordance with the rule of law, human rights and fundamental freedoms. Anti-terror measures need to be proportionate.'

## EU reactions to Operation Peace Spring

The EU–Turkey divide will continue to deepen as a consequence of Peace Spring, which Turkey sees as a tool to tackle the PKK terrorist threat and the situation of Syrian refugees inside Turkey. EU High Representative/Vice-President (HR/VP), Federica Mogherini, [stated](#) at Parliament's 9 October plenary session that, '[Turkey's] military action will undermine the security of the Coalition's local partners, namely the Kurdish forces, and risk protracted instability in north-east Syria, providing fertile ground for the resurgence of Da'esh'. She also added: 'We hope that the Turkish attack will not delay the first meeting of the Constitutional Committee. Yet we cannot exclude this eventuality.' The 150-member Syrian [Constitutional Committee](#), split evenly between Syria's government, the opposition and Syrian civil society, was established in September 2019. It is tasked with amending Syria's constitution and launching a broader political process before 2021 presidential elections.

At the European Council meeting on 17-18 October. EU leaders discussed relations with Turkey, and endorsed the [Council conclusions of 14 October](#), condemning Turkey's unilateral military action as well as urging Turkey to withdraw its forces and to respect international humanitarian law. They also stressed that the Turkish operation 'causes unacceptable human suffering, undermines the fight against Da'esh and threatens heavily European security', and stated that, 'recalling the decision taken by some Member States to immediately halt arms exports licensing to Turkey, Member States committed to strong national positions regarding their arms export policy to Turkey on the basis of the provisions of the [Common Position 2008/944/CFSP on arms export control](#)'. EU leaders stated that the Union 'remains committed to the unity, sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Syrian state. These can be assured only through a genuine political transition in line with [United Nations Security Council Resolution 2254](#)'. Finally, they urged Turkey to respect the 120-hour ceasefire agreement negotiated by US Vice President, Mike Pence, on 17 October, and said that the UK, France and Germany would meet in a trilateral format for further consultation with Ankara, 'within weeks'.

European Parliament President, David Sassoli, [characterised](#) the Turkish invasion as an 'act of war'. In his speech to the European Council on 17 October, he said: 'We must do everything in our power to stop this act of aggression and launch an initiative that can be thrashed out within NATO and submitted to the UN Security Council. The European Union would show itself to be speaking with one voice when working for peace in multilateral fora'. He added: 'Against this background, the European Parliament reiterates its call for the accession negotiations with Turkey to be suspended'. On 24 October, the Parliament adopted a resolution on [the Turkish military operation in northeast](#)

[Syria and its consequences](#), in which it strongly condemned Turkey's intervention and urged it to withdraw all of its forces from Syrian territory. The resolution highlighted the risk of Islamic State resurgence and, rejecting the Turkish plan for a 'safe zone', called for a UN-led security zone.

## A new refugee crisis on the horizon?

So far, Turkey has received the highest number of Syrian refugees. This ever-increasing refugee presence has resulted in heightened social tension and clashes with the Turkish population, unleashing [anti-Syrian rhetoric](#) during the 2019 local elections. Some politicians regard Syrian refugees as a threat within the context of Turkey's deteriorating economic situation – a trend ongoing since 2018. New Istanbul Mayor, Ekrem İmamoğlu, (Republican People's Party, CHP) played a leading role in nurturing aversion for Syrian refugees, [saying](#) that Turkey badly managed refugees and 'people are unhappy'. The loss by the governing Justice and Development (AK) party of the mayoralty was perceived as a major setback. This is the context in which Erdoğan expressed his desire to create a 'safe zone' in Syria, to which Syrian refugees could return, lessening the pressure on Turkish society. The idea had, however, already been [proposed](#) by Syrian Kurds in early 2019.

However, Erdoğan's plans to move Syrian refugees currently in Turkey to the Kurdish Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria ('Rojava') seem unrealistic, with military operations likely to boost the number of internally displaced persons. [Observers](#) speak of 'ethnic replacement', 'ethnic cleansing' and 'demographic engineering', echoing the historical experience of some nations at the fall of the Ottoman Empire. North-east Syria hosts at least 300 000 people reported as [displaced](#) as a result of Turkey's military operation, with some [figures](#) pointing to 750 000. Some observers (e.g. Belgian Minister of Asylum Policy and Migration, [Maggie De Block](#)) note that a 'new asylum crisis is looming' and that 'there is a chance of 9 out of 10 that the people [from Syria] will come to Europe'.

A new refugee crisis cannot be excluded, in particular in view of Erdoğan's repeated [threats](#) that Turkey 'will open the gates and send 3.6 million refugees your way' (to the EU). In addition, [reports](#) estimate that there is a significant number of 'foreign fighters' and around 6 000-13 000 members of ISIL/Da'esh, some of whom are EU citizens, in [detention](#). Many have been in custody for two or more years without trial. Some EU Member States are exploring the possibility of transferring some of these prisoners to Iraq and putting them on trial there. Baghdad may [ask](#) countries to pay €2 million for each foreign combatant tried on its territory. There are concerns that liberated foreign fighters might try to re-enter EU territory, but Paul Van Tigcheld, head of Belgium's Coordination Unit for Threat Assessment, [said](#) that such a scenario 'is now unlikely'. Syrian Kurdish territory's [refugee camps](#) hold in excess of 100 000 people and pose security threats as well. The largest, the al-Hawl camp, holds around 70 000 mainly Islamic State family members who fled the jihadists' last stand in Baghouz earlier this year. On 24 October, [media](#) and NGOs [reported](#) that ISIL/Da'esh has taken 'full control' of this camp, smuggling guns inside as Islamic State vowed to restart their jihad.

## DISCLAIMER AND COPYRIGHT

This document is prepared for, and addressed to, the Members and staff of the European Parliament as background material to assist them in their parliamentary work. The content of the document is the sole responsibility of its author(s) and any opinions expressed herein should not be taken to represent an official position of the Parliament.

Reproduction and translation for non-commercial purposes are authorised, provided the source is acknowledged and the European Parliament is given prior notice and sent a copy.

© European Union, 2019.

Photo credits: © Orlok / Shutterstock.com.

[eprs@ep.europa.eu](mailto:eprs@ep.europa.eu) (contact)

[www.eprs.ep.parl.union.eu](http://www.eprs.ep.parl.union.eu) (intranet)

[www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank) (internet)

<http://epthinktank.eu> (blog)

