



How Turkey sees its Syria invasion

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A new phase of the Syrian civil war appears to have been averted — at least for now. On Oct. 17, following an urgent meeting with Vice President Mike Pence and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan announced a temporary halt to military operations in northern Syria that had, up to that point, killed scores of civilians and displaced some 130,000 others.

Yet the current ceasefire could end up being only a temporary pause to a broader Turkish push into Syrian territory. That's because, behind the scenes, powerful ideological forces are urging Turkey's government to press its advantage.

So far, the Turkish government has styled its invasion as a war of necessity. In his October 15th *Wall Street Journal* editorial, Erdogan depicted the military offensive — ironically dubbed "Operation Peace Spring" — as the logical product of legitimate Turkish security concerns regarding lingering extremism and instability, and the persistent failure of Western leadership. "The international community," Erdogan argued, "missed its opportunity to prevent the Syrian crisis from pulling an entire region into a maelstrom of instability," so it should now support the Turkish government in its decision to intervene.

At home, however, Erdogan's supporters and aligned ideologues have been singing a significantly different — and more telling — tune. In assorted op-ed columns and media appearances, backers of the Turkish government's Syria strategy depicted the "green light" given to Erdogan by President Trump as a historical moment in which their country should seize the initiative and impose its vision on the region.

Perhaps the clearest example appeared in the pages of the conservative *Yeni Safak* daily, where columnist Ibrahim Karagul made the intellectual case for a revival of Turkish expansionism. "A new and forceful step is going to be taken aimed at 'shaping the region and history,'" Karagul wrote. "Patience has run out, warnings are over, preparations are complete" for the invasion of northern Syria, as a result of which "Turkey's power will kick into gear once again."

The message is unmistakable. If Karagul and other like-minded Erdogan enthusiasts have their way, Turkey's recent incursion into Syria would be just the start of a larger, and distinctly imperial, project.

That idea is hardly new. Turkish politicians have long propounded an outsized view of their country's regional presence — one rooted in its historic greatness. It did not take long after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire for the idea of "greater Turkey" to be revived by Turkish nationalists, although its implementation was hampered by the dynamics of World War II and subsequently the Cold War. The concept received renewed attention, at least temporarily, after the collapse of the USSR provided Turkey an opportunity for expanded influence among the newly-independent nations of Central Asia and the Caucasus. In turn, this "neo-Ottomanism" has continued into the Erdogan era, with Turkey's president styling himself as a new sultan and even issuing maps that take a decidedly expansive view of the country's territorial holdings. Today, the strategic opening in Syria appears have revived that impulse anew.

For the time being, at least, the Turkish government seems content with the current *status quo*, through which it has succeeded in creating a long-coveted buffer zone on Syrian soil. But only time will tell whether the arrangement holds, or whether Ankara decides to once again press forward. Supporters of a "greater Turkey," at least, are certainly hoping it will. In various media outlets, Turkish ideologues are now arguing that their country's adventurism in Syria is simultaneously a vital contribution to European security and a blow to Western imperialism. Thus the consensus for further military action, if Erdogan deems it necessary, appears to be firmly in place.

Whether that decision is taken depends greatly on just how deep the vision of an imperial Turkey truly runs among the Turkish president and his supporters.

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