THEMATIC REPORT 6
OPERATION PEACE SPRING AND
POTENTIAL TURKISH INTERVENTION
SCENARIOS
GLOSSARY

EU European Union
GOS Government of Syria
HLP Housing, land and property
IDP Internally Displaced Person
IED Improvised Explosive Device
ISI Islamic State of Iraq
ISIS Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham
JAN Jabhat al Nusra
KNC Kurdish National Council
NES Northeast Syria
OES Operation Euphrates Shield
OOB Operation Olive Branch
OPS Operation Peace Spring
PKK Kurdistan Workers’ Party
PYD Democratic Union Party
RCM Returns Context Monitoring program
SANES Self Administration of North and East Syria
SDC Syrian Democratic Council
SDF Syrian Democratic Forces
SIG Syrian Interim Government
TAF Turkish Armed Forces
TSO Turkish-Supported Opposition
UXO Unexploded Ordnance
US United States
WoS Whole of Syria
YPG People’s Protection Units
KEY FINDINGS

OPERATION PEACE SPRING

- What is today referred to as the Operation Peace Spring (OPS) area comprises the Ras al Ain, Tell Abiad, and Suluk subdistricts along the Syrian–Turkish border in northeast Syria (NES).
- Prior to OPS, the OPS area was home to an Arab majority, a significant Kurdish minority, and declining Yazidi, Armenian Christian, Syriac Christian, Turkmen, Circassian, and Chechen communities.
- Between 2012 and 2019, the OPS area witnessed acute instability and uncertainty, as well as nearly a dozen waves of displacement as a result of the Syrian conflict.
- As the largest displacement event to occur in NES since the campaign against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), Turkey’s OPS displaced over 200,000 people during a two-week period in October 2019.
- The majority of those displaced returned immediately after the conclusion of OPS in late October and early November, however, an estimated 44,000 to 60,500 people have remained displaced from the Turkish-held OPS area, including 39,000 to 54,000 people from Ras Al Ain and 5,000 to 6,500 people from Tell Abiad and Suluk.
- Approximately 37,500 of those still displaced as a result of OPS are living in internally displaced person (IDP) camps and informal settlements in and around Al-Hasakeh city and Ain Issa, while the remaining 6,500 to 23,000 are believed to be living in host communities across NES, Government of Syria (GoS) held areas of Syria, and Iraq.
- Those still displaced make up the OPS area’s entire Kurdish population, Arabs with close ties to the Self Administration and/or GoS, and a small number of Yazidis and Armenian Christians who remained in the area prior to OPS.
- Three interrelated factors, including Turkish policy towards the Democratic Union Party and People’s Protection Units (PYD-YPG)\(^1\) and Self Administration\(^2\), local Arab–Kurdish tensions, and housing, land, and property (HLP) issues remain the primary barriers to return for those still displaced as a result of OPS, and especially displaced Kurds.
- While actively discouraging the return of those still displaced as a result of OPS, Turkey has allowed approximately 75,000 people to remain in the area and facilitated the return and resettlement of 65,000 residents and IDPs.
- In addition to facilitating the return of OPS residents who had previously relocated to northern Aleppo, Turkey has allowed Turkish-supported opposition (TSO) fighters and their families, IDPs from other parts of Syria previously based in Turkish-held northern Aleppo, and Arabs fleeing Self Administration and GoS-held areas to resettle in the OPS area.

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\(^{1}\) While the YPG is the armed wing of the PYD and a distinct organization, due to overlapping leadership, policies, and aims, for clarity they are referred to jointly as the PYD-YPG throughout this report.

\(^{2}\) The Self Administration is the outwardly more inclusive set of military, political, and governance structures established by the PYD-YPG between 2015 and 2018. These include the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), Syrian Democratic Council (SDC), and Self Administration for North and East Syria (SANES).
To date, the strongest incentive to return and resettlement to the OPS area has been the abundance and low cost of housing and land in the OPS area, largely resulting from property seizures. Meanwhile, services, the economy, and access remain relatively poor compared to northern Aleppo.

Return and displacement dynamics of the OPS area are unlikely to change in the foreseeable future.

As Turkey equates the PYD-YPG with the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK), the PYD-YPG’s previous role in the OPS area and its ties to the area’s Kurdish population will preclude Turkey from permitting and safeguarding Kurdish returns in large numbers.

A small number of Kurdish IDPs may attempt to secure return on an individual basis, however, the PYD-YPG and Self Administration are also likely to continue discouraging such attempts as the continued displacement of Kurds from the OPS area is politically and economically valuable to them.

Turkey is unlikely to use the OPS area for an expanded IDP resettlement effort in the near future, but is likely to continue to use the area’s strategic resources and position to pressure the Self Administration on multiple fronts.

POTENTIAL TURKISH INTERVENTION SCENARIOS

Through Operation Euphrates Shield (OES) in 2016, Operation Olive Branch (OOB) in 2018, and OPS in 2019, Turkey has demonstrated a clear willingness to intervene directly in Syria to address concerns along its southern border.

As seen in previous Turkish interventions, the likelihood of another Turkish intervention in NES will primarily be determined by Turkey’s relations with the United States (US) and Russia, Turkey’s position on US and Russian policies in Syria, and the status of the Self Administration.

So long as the Self Administration is present in NES, Turkey’s policy towards the PKK and PYD-YPG is unchanged, Turkey and Russia continue to pursue territorial swaps in Syria, and US-Turkish relations are poor, another Turkish intervention in Syria will remain a possibility.

Currently, Turkey’s options for intervention in Syria include seven zones: 1) Menbij; 2) Ain Al Arab/Kobani; 3) the M4 highway, Ain Issa, and Tal Tamer; 4) Darbasiyah and Amuda; 5) Tall Refaat; 6) Al-Malikeyyeh/Derik, Al-Qahtaniyah, and Al-Jawadiyah; and 7) Quamishli.

Each zone constitutes an area of distinct strategic and symbolic importance to Turkey, the Self Administration, PYD-YPG, US, and Russia.

Turkey is unlikely to intervene without tacit Russian approval, as Russian Military Police are currently stationed in all zones and, with US support for an intervention, Turkey will need assurances of continued coordination with Russia in Syria.

Based on the pattern of territorial swaps between the two states in Syria over the past four years, Russia is likely to demand Turkey cede control of southern Idlib and/or the stretch of M4 highway in Idlib in exchange for its approval of any Turkish intervention.

Turkish intervention against Zone 6: Al-Malikeyyeh/Derik, Al-Qahtaniyah, and Al-Jawadiyah or Zone 7: Quamishli would almost certainly lead to the immediate collapse of the Self Administration and the long-term displacement of hundreds of thousands of residents.
and IDPs, as both zones hold unrivaled strategic and symbolic importance to the Self Administration.

- Turkish intervention against Zone 2: Ain Al Arab/Kobani, Zone 4: Darbasiyah and Amuda, or Zone 5: Tall Refaat could each lead to the long-term displacement of more than 100,000 people and do significant political damage to the Self Administration, as all three zones are Kurdish-majority areas, and in the case of Zones 2 and 5, PYD-YPG strongholds.

- While Turkish intervention against Zone 1: Menbij could also lead to the long-term displacement of 100,000 people, it is likely to be the most economically devastating to the Self Administration and NES, due its position as the primary gateway for crossline trade with both GoS-held areas and the OES area and the presence of the Tishreen dam.

- In addition to zone-specific outcomes, there are several common outcomes of Turkish intervention across all zones, namely, Russia will seek to exploit Self Administration fragility to gain concessions for itself and the GoS in NES, return and resettlement dynamics following a Turkish intervention are likely to resemble those seen across OES, OOB, and OPS areas, Self Administration-held areas will host tens of thousands of additional IDPs, and NES will require increased support in order to respond to the needs of thousands of IDPs and likely deterioration in the provision of key services.

- Without an immediate and long-term increase in support, humanitarian actors will likely be forced to divert resources from programming elsewhere in NES, and as needs increase, will be unable to address or slow a potential rapid deterioration of the humanitarian situation in NES.
BACKGROUND

The Return Context Monitoring (RCM) project was established at iMMAP in June 2020 to fill qualitative information gaps around experiences of and conditions for IDP and refugee returnees inside Syria. RCM operates through two main deliverable streams, return and reintegration area profiles which cover specific geographic areas, and thematic reports on topics relevant to return dynamics at the regional or whole of Syria (WoS) level. RCM works with a variety of stakeholders to identify key information gaps and develop research aims, including durable solutions working groups, sector working groups, and bilateral partner and donor consultations.

This report is the sixth RCM thematic report and explores the displacement, return, resettlement, and future implications of Turkey’s OPS in NES, as well as the dynamics around and impacts of potential Turkish intervention scenarios. OPS was the largest displacement event to occur in NES since the campaign against ISIS. An estimated 45,000 to 60,000 people are still displaced, and continue to reside as IDPs in camps, host communities, and informal settlements across NES, as well as refuges in neighboring Iraq. In addition to examining the historical and ongoing impacts of displacement, return, and resettlement to assess the OPS area’s future prospects, this report uses the dynamics around and impact of OPS to identify and assess prospective scenarios of Turkish intervention in Syria, which remains the most likely catalyst for largescale displacement in Syria.

METHODOLOGY

The information and findings in this report are based on desk research and primary research. Desk research consisted of two components: 1) a review of relevant local and international news reports, social media content, and humanitarian reporting; and 2) a review of population data from operational partners and the GoS.

Building on initial desk research findings, the core RCM analysis team developed three semi-structured questionnaires for qualitative primary research, including: 1) a questionnaire on the historical political, security, and demographic dynamics of the OPS area; 2) a questionnaire on OPS displacement dynamics and lasting implications; and 3) a questionnaire on potential scenarios of further Turkish intervention. Following discussions around each questionnaire with the core RCM analysis team, three Syrian research consultants completed the questionnaires through discussions with dozens of local stakeholders, including community leaders, residents, current IDPs, returnees, and Self Administration and opposition officials. Both the core RCM analysis team and researcher consultants also carried out ad hoc follow-up with relevant stakeholders to address outstanding information gaps and to support triangulation efforts.
**METHODOLOGY AND LIMITATIONS**

**LIMITATIONS**

The RCM analysis team faced three limitations throughout data collection for this report. The main limitation was inconsistent population data. While collecting and assessing population and movement data in Syria is always challenging, the scope of pre-OPS and OPS-related displacement and political sensitivities around discussing displacement, returns, and resettlement represented additional layers of complexity. Faced with these challenges, the RCM team sought clarification from those responsible for compiling population data and worked to triangulate population data with field reporting through numerous ad-hoc follow-up requests, allowing the team to identify what are considered accurate overall displacement, return, and resettlement ranges and trends.

Repeated shifts in control since 2011 also complicated data collection around the OPS area generally. As the OPS area witnessed periods of opposition, Self Administration, ISIS, and Turkish control, the RCM analysis team had to navigate the particular dynamics and conflicting narratives of each period. While the RCM analysis team and researcher consultants identified this challenge early on and overcame it by ensuring desk research and primary research accounted for each period and explored various issues both within each period and across multiple periods, it did necessitate longer than normal data collection periods.

Poor security conditions in the OPS area, increased scrutiny of journalists and local media in Self Administration areas of NES, and general sensitivities around OPS inside Syria also presented a distinct limitation. The RCM analysis team consequently chose to forgo direct field data collection and relied on three experienced Syrian researcher consultants with deep knowledge of the OPS area to carry out qualitative primary research remotely via extensive networks inside the OPS area and Self Administration areas of NES.
PRE-OPS OVERVIEW: GEOGRAPHY, DEMOGRAPHY, DYNAMICS, AND DISPLACEMENT

The following section explores the conditions and dynamics that existed in the Ras Al Ain, Tell Abiad, and Suluk subdistricts prior to OPS. Sub-section 3.1 provides a basic overview of the area’s geography, as well as the key infrastructure sites that contribute to its strategic relevance across areas of control in northern Syria. Sub-sections 3.2 to 3.4 collectively present background on local circumstances, developments, and issues that are essential to understanding displacement and return patterns since OPS and illustrative of the potential challenges and impacts of future Turkish interventions. Section 3.2 thus details the make-up and distribution of the area’s population prior to OPS, as well as the nature of relations amongst its multiple ethnoreligious communities. Building on these findings, sub-section 3.3 explores the trajectory of local political and security dynamics between 2011 and 2019, while sub-section 3.4 examines the multiple waves of displacement and return throughout this period.

GEOGRAPHY

Map 1. Operation Peace Spring Area
According to GoS administrative lines, what is today referred to as the OPS area comprises the majority of the Ras al Ain subdistrict within the Ras Al Ain district-Al-Hasakeh governorate and the Tell Abiad and Suluk subdistricts within the Tell Abiad district-Ar-Raqqa governorate, as well as a small portion of the Ain Issa subdistrict within the Tell Abiad district-Ar-Raqqa governorate. In addition to Ras Al Ain city, Tell Abiad city, and Suluk city, the OPS area is home to over 300 rural communities. The high level of rural settlement is attributed to the area’s continued economic reliance on agriculture. While the OPS area contains fertile, flat terrain ideal for growing wheat, recurrent droughts and gradual exhaustion of surface and ground water have placed the sector under increasing stress over the past two decades.

The OPS area contains several strategic infrastructure sites, all of which have been impacted by the Syrian conflict and the subject of various agreements amongst conflicting parties. There are two border crossings with Turkey in the OPS area, one just north of Ras Al Ain city and one just north of Tell Abiad city. Both crossings connect to the nearby M4 highway via local roads, providing people and goods easy access to the rest of Syria. The Allouk water pumping station is also located just east of Ras Al Ain city, while the Mabruka power station is located southwest of the city. Both stations are essential to NES’s water and power supply, with the Allouk station representing Al-Hasakeh city’s main source of drinking water and the Mabruka station acting as a key transfer station for power from the Tishreen dam.

### POPULATION AND DEMOGRAPHY

According to GoS Central Bureau of Statistics, the population of the OPS area reached approximately 210,000 people by 2010. The Ras Al Ain subdistrict was home to approximately 60% of the area’s population, with the remaining 40% evenly split between Tell Abiad and Suluk subdistricts.

Prior to the Syrian conflict, the OPS area was home to a diverse mix of Arabs, Kurds, Armenian Christians, Yazidis, Turkmen, Circassians, and Chechens. Of the three subdistricts that comprise the OPS area, the Ras Al Ain subdistrict was the most diverse. Local sources estimate Arabs made up 70% of the population, Kurds made up 25%, and Yazidis, Armenian Christians, Syriac Christians, Circassians, and Chechens collectively made up the remaining 5%. As the Ras Al Ain countryside was overwhelmingly Arab, with the exception of several Kurdish and Yazidi villages, much of the subdistrict’s diversity was found in Ras Al Ain city. While the Tell Abiad and Suluk subdistricts were overwhelmingly Arab, the former was home to several thousand Kurdish residents and small Turkmen and Armenian Christian minorities, concentrated in Tell Abiad city, Kurdish-majority communities west of the city, and Turkmen-majority communities south of the city.

The OPS area’s Arab population is heavily tribal, with tribal structures, tribalism, and tribal identity playing a significant role in all aspects of life. Prior to OPS, Ras Al Ain was home to six tribal confederations and tribes, with the Al-Adwan and Harb confederations and the Al-Sharhabiyyeen tribe enjoying the greatest presence, followed by the Al-Gharajneh tribe (Baggara confederation), Al-Naeem confederation, and Al-Maghmoureen. Meanwhile, Tell Abiad and Suluk were home to five tribal confederations and tribes, the largest being the Al-Fadaan tribe (Al-Aniza confederation), Albu Assaf tribe (Al-Duleim confederation), and the Jeis confederation, with the Al-Mashour tribe (Baggara confederation) and Al-Naeem confederation enjoying a more limited presence.
As witnessed across NES, the GoS exploited tribal structures to cement its authority in Ras Al Ain, Tell Abiad, and Suluk. With threats of coercive force on the one hand and promises of patronage and access to the state on the other, the GoS worked to ensure key local tribal figures reinforced the state's presence and authority. While there were GoS loyalists amongst all of the OPS area's confederations and tribes, local sources report tribal leadership within the Al-Adwan and Al-Sharabiyeen in Ras Al Ain and Al-Fadaan and Jeis in Tell Abiad have historically been viewed as especially close to the GoS.

In contrast to the OPS area's Arab population, the practical role of tribal structures and tribalism have continued to decline amongst Ras Al Ain6 and Tell Abiad's 7 Kurdish population over the past several decades. While local factors have played a role in this 6, local sources report the primary factor is the GoS's oppressive anti-Kurdish policies. Until 2011, the GoS maintained a 1962 law that withheld Syrian citizenship from over 100,000 Kurds in NES. Under the law, generations of Syrian Kurds were forced to register as foreigners and forbidden from owning property, marrying Syrians, gaining government employment, receiving subsidized services, and operating businesses. Along with policies targeting thousands of individual Kurds, the GoS also sought to undermine Kurdish identity in Syria more broadly. For decades the GoS discouraged the use of Kurdish language in public, outlawed Kurdish-language schools, and replaced Kurdish city and town names with Arabic names. It also used rhetoric which fostered suspicions of Kurds and perpetuated damaging anti-Kurdish stereotypes and discrimination.

The cumulative impact of GoS policies was the rise of a collective Kurdish identity amongst Syrian Kurds, which paved the way for competing political networks and identities to take root and erode traditional tribal structures and identities. This dynamic became more pronounced after the 2004 Quamishli riots and recurrent crackdowns on Kurdish protests and celebrations across NES. Although local sources report relations between Kurds and Arabs, as well as other ethnoreligious communities, had improved in Ras Al Ain and Tell Abiad in the decade preceding the protests, the GoS's increasingly anti-Kurdish rhetoric and its use of local Arab tribes in the crackdown on protests, had a pronounced negative impact on Kurdish-Arab relations. Arab-Kurdish tensions would only grow more intense with the start of the Syrian conflict, with Syrian and international actors on all sides of the conflict exploiting the Arab-Kurdish divide to advance their own interests.

As the GoS, and most Kurds, considered Yazidis to be ethnically Kurdish, Yazidis suffered from both the GoS's oppressive anti-Kurdish policies and religious-based persecution and discrimination. The GoS also refused to recognize the Yazidi faith as distinct from Islam, and registered all Yazidis as Muslims, thus forcing them to use GoS Islamic courts to register and resolve family and civil matters. Meanwhile, due to common misconceptions about the Yazidi religion, accusations of religious heresy from Muslims, and widespread bigotry, Yazidis were treated as second class citizens across Syria, including in the OPS area. According to local sources, these dynamics pushed a significant proportion of the Yazidi population across NES to migrate abroad prior to the Syrian conflict.

In contrast to Kurds and Yazidis, Armenian Christians, Syriac Christians, Circassians, Chechens, and Turkmen in the OPS area generally enjoyed positive relations and faced little to no discrimination prior to the conflict. Armenian Christians were amongst the first residents of Tell Abiad, which was established during the French mandate. While Armenian and Syriac Christian population continued to grow in both Tell Abiad and Ras Al Ain in the decades preceding the French mandate, it began to decline from the 1960s onward as Christians migrated to Al-Hasakeh, Quamishli, Aleppo, and Damascus due to a variety of social and economic reasons. Meanwhile, local sources report that Circassians, Chechens, and Turkmen to varying degrees all assimilated into the area's Sunni Arab-majority.

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6 Kurdish tribes in Ras Al Ain include the Al-Diwan, Barakhani, Goran, Qara Keej, Al-Sheikhan, Baraziyeh, Al-Khaljan, Ramaka, Dudkan, Om-reiyen, and Al-Muhajeriyeh tribes.
7 Kurdish tribes in Tell Abiad include the Ali Zer, Shadad, Sheikhan, and Zonjak tribes.
8 Kurdish communities in Ras Al Ain and Tell Abiad historically belonged to tribes centered in the neighboring Kurdish-majority areas of Darbasiyah and Ain Al Arab/Kobani respectively, as well as adjacent Kurdish-majority areas of Turkey. Consequently, local sources report tribal identity and leadership in Ras Al Ain and Tell Abiad was relatively weak and underdeveloped when compared to other Kurdish-majority areas of NES and Turkey.
LOCAL SECURITY AND POLITICAL DYNAMICS PRE-OPS

Between September and November 2012, opposition factions and Al-Qaeda's Syrian affiliate Jabhat An-Nusra (JAN) expelled GoS forces from Tell Abiad and Ras Al-Ain. While opposition forces and JAN enjoyed full control of Tell Abiad, due to Ras Al-Ain's sizeable Kurdish minority, the PYD-YPG remained in the city and surrounding countryside. Over the coming months, Ras Al-Ain witnessed recurrent clashes and several failed ceasefires as both sides attempted to consolidate control of the area.

During this period, two key developments emerged that would determine the OPS area's trajectory over the next six years. By mid-2013, a dispute between Al-Qaeda's Iraqi affiliate, the Islamic State in Iraq (ISI), and Al-Qaeda central leadership over control of JAN led to the establishment of ISIS and the splintering of JAN. Following the split, all JAN units in Ras Al Ain and Tell Abiad joined ISIS and began cementing their control of the area. At the same time, the PYD-YPG witnessed significant growth as the GoS withdrew from Kurdish-majority areas along the Syrian-Turkish border following opposition advances in NES. Initially, Syrian Kurdish groups linked to the wider opposition, such as the Kurdish National Council (KNC), attempted to administer these areas in cooperation with the PYD-YPG. However, the PYD-YPG exhibited superior organizational and political capacity and showed little interest in power sharing arrangements. With hundreds of new local recruits and material support from the GoS and networks in Europe and the Middle East, the PYD-YPG pushed all local Kurdish rivals out of NES by mid-2013.

Considering the PYD-YPG to be the Syrian extension of the PKK, Turkey remained extremely concerned about the PYD-YPG presence along its southern border. While Turkey encouraged armed opposition factions to confront the PYD-YPG in Ras Al-Ain, the PYD-YPG eventually overpowered the opposition and gained control of the area in July 2013. Consequently, Turkey looked the other way as ISIS began consolidating control in opposition-held areas of northern Syria, including Tell Abiad and Suluk. While Turkey may have considered ISIS an effective bulwark against further PYD-YPG advances, it tacit approval of ISIS ultimately backfired by late 2014 with the ISIS siege of nearby Ain Al Arab/Kobani.

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9 Turkey's view of the PYD is based on the group's establishment, ideology, and leadership, all of which exhibit strong ties to the PKK. Turkey holds the same view of the YPG, as it is the armed wing of the PYD and is believed to include former PKK members.
**PRE-OPS OVERVIEW: GEOGRAPHY, DEMOGRAPHY, DYNAMICS, AND DISPLACEMENT**

Map 2. Areas of Control - 2013-2019

Map 3. Areas Of Control - Late 2014
Just four months after the fall of Mosul, fearing a massacre of the local Kurdish population, and looking to step up operations against ISIS, the US chose to support besieged PYD-YPG forces in Ain Al Arab/Kobani. After breaking the siege, the PYD-YPG launched operations with US support to expel ISIS from neighboring Tell Abiad and Suluk, gaining control of both subdistricts by July 2015. Just as Ras Al Ain was the first Arab-majority area to come under PYD-YPG control two years prior, Tell Abiad and Suluk became the first Arab-majority areas taken by the PYD-YPG in the campaign against ISIS.

As the PYD-YPG increasingly looked to become the US’s local partner in the campaign against ISIS in NES, in late 2015 it began to establish political, military, and governance structures that could accommodate NES’s diverse population. While this led to the establishment of the outwardly more inclusive Self Administration, comprising the SDF, SDC, and SANES, the PYD-YPG maintained firm control over these nascent structures. Kurdish PYD-YPG leadership determined the Self Administration’s overall policy, and dispatched Kurdish advisors, known as kadros, across NES to manage regional and local military, security, and governance bodies.

Over the next four years, the PYD-YPG integrated the Ras Al Ain, Tell Abiad, and Suluk subdistricts into Self Administration structures and maintained a modicum of local stability. Nevertheless, local resentment simmered beneath the surface. Alongside chronic dissatisfaction with poor services and declining economic conditions, residents and IDPs opposed controversial PYD-YPG conscription and education policies, which would be continued under the Self Administration. While Kurdish support for the PYD-YPG was not monolithic, the PYD-YPG’s role in shaping the Self Administration and continued control over its structures was deeply problematic for Arabs and worked to exacerbate general Arab hostility towards Kurds. The PYD-YPG were aware of these issues, but were unwilling and/or unable to carry out genuine reforms.

In lieu of such reforms, the PYD-YPG relied on continued US support for the Self Administration and several targeted approaches to shore up support and maintain stability in the area. While the PYD-YPG continued to empower loyalists and local Kurdish elites on the one hand and silence Kurdish political opponents and critics on the other, they also exploited their role in protecting NES’s Kurdish population to drive support within the Kurdish community.

Meanwhile Kurdish PYD-YPG kadros fostered transactional relationships with local Arab tribal leaders, who in exchange for economic concessions expressed support for the Self Administration and worked to ensure stability amongst Arab communities. This approach proved to be straightforward in Ras Al Ain, where local Arab–Kurdish relations were relatively positive and support for the opposition was weak compared to other Arab-majority areas. Tell Abiad and Suluk proved more challenging. As Tell Abiad and Suluk’s Arab majorities dwarfed their Kurdish populations and maintained strong opposition ties, Arabs in both subdistricts were strongly opposed the role of Kurdish kadros in local affairs and the Kurdish-centric character of the Self Administration. At the same time, kadros were extremely suspicious of Tell Abiad and Suluk’s Arab population due to their perceived support for the expulsion of Kurds in mid-2013 and ISIS’s ascendance in 2013 and 2014. While the PYD-YPG were able to secure support from amenable Arab tribal leaders, in large part they maintained stability in Tell Abiad and Suluk through a strong security presence and a low tolerance for descent.

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10 Establishing the SDF and SDC in 2015, the PYD-YPG had established three governance and services bodies prior to the establishment of the outwardly more inclusive SANES in late 2018, including the People’s Council of Western Kurdistan in 2011, the Democratic Autonomous Cantons of Afrin, Kobane, and Jazeera in 2013, and the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria in 2016.
Between 2012 and 2019, the Ras Al Ain, Tell Abiad, and Suluk subdistricts witnessed several waves of displacement, as well as brief periods of IDP inflows. The first wave of displacement occurred during initial opposition-GoS and opposition-PYD-YPG clashes from late 2012 to early 2013. In addition to temporarily displacing thousands of residents, general instability and shifting political and security dynamics during this period also pushed thousands to relocate or resettle elsewhere in Syria or seek refuge abroad. While several thousand residents fled to Turkey in search of long-term stability, the majority of Armenian Christian, Syriac Christian, Chechen, and Circassian residents, as well as Arab GoS loyalist residents, fled to GoS-held Al-Hasakeh, Quamishli, Ar-Raqqa, Aleppo, and Damascus. Throughout this period, the Ras Al Ain and Tell Abiad subdistricts also became transit points for thousands of IDPs seeking refuge in Turkey.

The second wave of displacement occurred in July 2013, when the PYD-YPG expelled opposition forces from Ras Al Ain and opposition factions and ISIS consolidated control of Tell Abiad and Suluk. Throughout the month, opposition factions and ISIS in Tell Abiad threatened and detained Kurdish residents to pressure the PYD-YPG. Consequently, most of the subdistrict’s Kurdish residents fled to Ain Al Arab/Kobane, Ar-Raqqa, and Turkey. At the same time, several thousand Arab residents sympathetic to the opposition fled PYD-YPG-held Ras Al Ain to opposition-held areas of northern Aleppo and Idlib, as well as Turkey.

In August 2013, opposition factions attacked Al-Assadiyah, one of approximately ten Yazidi villages in the Ras Al Ain countryside. During the attack, opposition fighters killed two local men and injured several others. The incident confirmed Yazidi fears of persecution and led the majority of the remaining local Yazidi population to relocate elsewhere in Syria and seek refuge in Europe over the coming year. While there were an estimated 3,000 Yazidis in the Ras Al Ain subdistrict prior to 2012, it is estimated that only 100 remained in the area when Turkey launched OPS in late 2019.

The rise of ISIS also led to several more waves of displacement in Tell Abiad and Suluk between January 2014 and August 2015. When ISIS gained control of the subdistricts in early 2014, thousands of Arabs fled to Turkey and Idlib, including many with ties to opposition factions and civilian opposition bodies. While residents continued to trickle out as security, economic, and humanitarian conditions deteriorated, more than 20,000 residents and IDPs fled into Turkey at the start of PYD-YPG operations to expel ISIS in June 2015.

Once the PYD-YPG gained full control of the Tell Abaid subdistrict in July 2015, it raided several Arab and Turkmen majority communities in the countryside around Tell Abiad city, arresting hundreds of local men and destroying dozens of homes. While most were released after PYD-YPG officials determined they had no substantial ISIS connections, local sources report the incidents had a chilling effect on the local Arab population, causing hundreds of to flee and discouraging thousands from considering return. After the PYD-YPG gained control of Suluk in mid-2015, it classified the city and neighboring villages as a security zone and prevented residents who had fled the recent fighting from returning. As the PYD-YPG maintained this policy for nearly a year, during which time they reportedly destroyed dozens of homes under the pretext of unexploded ordnance (UXO) removal, an increasing number of residents who had waited in Self Administration areas chose to leave for Turkey and the OES area. Conversely, the return of the PYD-YPG to Tell Abiad allowed several thousand Kurds who had fled in 2013 to return to the city and Kurdish-majority villages in the western countryside.

From 2015 until OPS in late 2019, Ras Al Ain, Tell Abiad, and Suluk continued to witness gradual outflows due to the deteriorating economy, political uncertainty, and security concerns, including fear of mandatory conscription. Meanwhile, all three subdistricts temporarily hosted IDPs from Ar-Raqqa and Deir-ez-Zor displaced by the campaign against ISIS between 2017 and 2019 and a small number of families fleeing OOB in Afrin in early 2018.
OPS OVERVIEW: DYNAMICS, DISPLACEMENT, RETURNS, RESETTLEMENT, AND PROSPECTS

This section examines the dynamics and events that led up to OPS, the operation itself, and its subsequent impact. Sub-section 4.1 demonstrates how Turkey and the US’s divergent interests in Syria and deteriorating relations gradually paved the way for OPS, with the operation covered in the following sub-section. While sub-section 4.3 details the immediate displacement as a result of OPS, sub-section 4.4 focuses on return and resettlement patterns in the OPS area since the conclusion of the operation, outlining common return and resettlement pathways and patterns and highlighting the political and economic dynamics driving returns and resettlement. Sub-section 4.5 focuses on the estimated 45,000 to 60,000 people still displaced as a result of OPS, and examines the prevailing political, security, social, and economic factors undermining prospects for their return. Finally, sub-section 4.6 builds on the dynamics presented throughout the section to assess prospects for returns and the OPS area generally, concluding that significant change is not anticipated in the near to mid-term.

REGIONAL DYNAMICS AHEAD OF OPS

From 2015 onward, Turkey grew increasingly frustrated with US support for the Self Administration. While the US sought to assuage Turkey’s concerns and identify avenues for US-Turkish cooperation on the campaign against ISIS in NES, the two states were repeatedly unable to overcome their divergent policy positions. Consequently, Turkey chose to take unilateral action, launching OES in mid-2016 to block any potential PYD-YPG advances towards the Kurdish-majority PYD-YPG stronghold of Afrin in northwest Aleppo. Soon after the start of OES, Turkish-Russian coordination began to increase in Syria. By 2017, both states had an interest in reducing US influence in Syria, as the US prevented Turkey from expelling the PYD-YPG from its southern border and Russia from securing a definitive GoS victory. Thus, Turkey and Russia began to pursue a number of transactional security agreements through the Astana platform and bilaterally, which allowed them to gradually advance their own policy objectives and undermine the US’s position in Syria.

While Turkey had hoped the US would wind down support for the Self Administration following the defeat of ISIS in Ar-Raqqa and other strongholds in late 2017, it was incensed by the US announcement in January 2018 that it intended to remain in NES following the territorial defeat of ISIS. Unable to address the PYD-YPG in NES due to the presence of US forces and unwilling to consider an alternative policy, Turkey launched OOB against Afrin just weeks after the US announcement. Although the two-month operation displaced an estimated 150,000 Kurds, in what amounted to ethnic cleansing, the international response was relatively muted, and Turkey faced no significant consequences. Additionally, Russia, which had been a strong backer of the PYD-YPG in Afrin, provided tacit support for the operation. Russia’s reaction, and Turkey’s relative silence during the successful Russian-supported GoS campaign to retake southeastern Idlib and northern Hama just weeks before OOB, led to growing perceptions that the two states had engaged in a quid pro quo.

As talks between US and Turkish officials remained unproductive throughout 2018, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan seized upon US President Donald Trump’s interest in ending the US presence in Syria to pursue Turkey’s interests. The approach proved effective and following a call with President Erdogan in December 2018, President Trump unexpectedly announced he intended to order the withdrawal of US troops from NES. The US subsequently began discussions with western allies and Turkey around alternative security arrangements for NES and by mid-2019 the US began proposing the establishment of a safe zone along the Syrian-Turkish border. Various iterations of the safe zone plan entailed some combination of US and European forces, Turkish forces, opposition factions, and the SDF jointly administering a strip of territory along the Syrian-Turkish border. While the US
sought Turkish and Self Administration support for the plan, both sides objected. Turkey refused to accept or participate in any plan that allowed the PYD-YPG and SDF to maintain a presence in the safe zone and demanded the safe zone should include the M4 highway and run the length of the Syrian-Turkish border. Meanwhile, the Self Administration expressed strong objections to overseeing the safe zone in coordination with Turkish forces so long as Turkey held Afrin and sought to deploy TSO forces within the safe zone.

By July, Turkey grew increasingly impatient with the progress of safe zone talks and began to amass Turkish military (TAF) and TSO forces along its border with NES. US officials ramped up talks with Turkey and the SDF. Despite conflicting views on the timeline, scope, and objectives, between August and October the US and Turkey established a joint operations room and began conducting joint patrols in NES. In parallel to these developments, the US also worked to secure agreements with the SDF to withdraw PYD-YPG units and remove defensive positions and heavy weaponry from border areas. Despite these achievements, the US response proved to be too little too late. Turkey remained impatient and unconvincing that the US was interested and able to follow through on its promises. Indeed, the Self Administration did not appear to take US warnings or the Turkish threat seriously at the time. Not only did they fail to withdraw PYD-YPG units from the border, but according to local reports they continued to expand defensive positions in plain view of US-Turkish patrols and held large, pro-PYD-YPG rallies in communities along the Syrian-Turkish border.

On 6 October, President Erdogan informed President Trump of Turkey’s decision to launch OPS in the coming days. President Trump did not push back and immediately ordered the withdrawal of all US troops from the Syrian-Turkish border. While Turkey did not publicly identify Ras Al Ain and Tell Abiad as the target of its offensive in NES, reports indicate it had informed US officials, who in turn informed the Self Administration. Nevertheless, the Self Administration took no steps to encourage the local population to seek shelter or protect their property and possessions ahead of the operations, nor did it transfer or destroy personnel records and other information linking residents to PYD-YPG and Self Administration structures.

OVERVIEW OF OPS

On 9 October, Turkey announced the start of OPS and immediately began shelling and launching airstrikes along five axes: 1) Ras Al Ain; 2) Tell Abiad and Suluk; 3) Darbasiyah, Amuda, Quamishli city, and Al-Malikeyyeh/Derik; and 4) Ain Al Arab/Kobani; and 5) Menbij. The following day, Turkey initiated ground operations, with TAF and TSO units moving into Ras Al Ain and Tell Abiad. Advancing rapidly around Tell Abiad due to precipitous withdrawal of Kurdish PYD-YPG units and defection of local Arab SDF fighters, TSO and TAF units gained control of the city and the adjacent countryside by 13 October and areas of Suluk just north of the M4 highway by 16 October. Meanwhile, TSO and TAF units surrounded Ras Al Ain city by 15 October and pushed south to the M4 highway over the next three days. While PYD-YPG and SDF counteroffensives reversed TSO and TAF gains along the M4 highway and slowed advances east of Ras Al Ain, they remained unable to break the siege on Ras Al Ain city.

Amidst rapid TSO and TAF advances, growing Turkish threats, and the partial US withdrawal, the PYD-YPG and SDF became increasingly concerned Turkey would expand operations around Menbij, Ain Al Arab/Kobani, and the M4 highway. In an attempt to deter Turkey, the SDF command reached an emergency agreement with Russia and the GoS on 13 October to deploy Russian Military Police and GoS forces along three fronts: I) west of Tell Abiad from Menbij to Ain Al Arab/Kobani; II) south of Tell Abiad from Al-Tabqah to Ain Issa; and III) east of Ras Al Ain from Tal Tamer to Darbasiyah, Quamishli city, and Al-Malikeyyeh/Derik. Turkey continued to pressure frontlines around Menbij, Ain Al Arab/Kobani, and the M4 highway over the following days, however, Russia’s role in the agreement appears to have discouraged further escalation.
Meanwhile, on 17 October, the US and Turkey agreed to a five-day, 13-point ceasefire following emergency talks between US Vice President Mike Pence and President Erdogan. According to the agreement the US agreed to refrain from imposing additional OPS-related sanctions on Turkey, in exchange for Turkey agreeing to halt operations to allow for PYD-YPG fighters to withdrawal from besieged Ras Al Ain. The US-Turkish ceasefire held over the next five days and allowed remaining fighters to withdrawal from Ras Al Ain by 20 October. It also provided tacit US recognition of Turkish control of the OPS area.

On 22 October, Turkey and Russia reached an extended ceasefire agreement, which the US acknowledged the following day. In exchange for Turkey suspending OPS, Russia agreed to recognize Turkey’s authority over the OPS area and to oversee the withdrawal of all PYD-YPG forces from areas along the M4 highway, Menbij, and Tall Refaat in northwest Syria. While the situation along frontlines remained tense throughout the rest of the month, by early November, hostilities had subsided and Russia and Turkey initiated joint patrols along frontlines.

**IMMEDIATE OPS DISPLACEMENT**

Over the course of OPS more than 200,000 people were displaced along four axes: 1) the OPS area; 2) Darbasiyah, Amuda, Quamishli city, and Al-Malikeyeh/Derik; 3) Ain Al Arab/Kobani and Ain Issa; and 4) Menbij. After the conclusion of OPS, approximately 75,000 were still displaced. An estimated 15,000 to 30,000 returned to axes 2 through 4 over the coming weeks, while approximately 44,000 to 60,500 are estimated to have remained displaced from the OPS area.

**Map 6. Displacement and Arrival of IDPs in October 2019**
The thematic report return context monitoring Jordan

Table 1. OPS Area Estimated Population and OPS Displacement Overview

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ras Al Ain Subdistrict</td>
<td>63,000</td>
<td>24,000</td>
<td>39,000/54,000</td>
<td>34,000</td>
<td>5,000/20,000</td>
<td>63,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tell Abiad Subdistrict</td>
<td>31,000</td>
<td>26,500</td>
<td>5,000/6,500</td>
<td>3,500</td>
<td>1,500/3,000</td>
<td>42,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>Suluk Subdistrict</td>
<td>26,500</td>
<td>26,000</td>
<td></td>
<td>37,500</td>
<td>6,500/23,000</td>
<td>38,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total OPS Area</td>
<td>120,500</td>
<td>76,000</td>
<td>44,000/60,500</td>
<td>37,500</td>
<td>6,500/23,000</td>
<td>143,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

According to figures from operational partners and local sources, OPS has displaced approximately 39,000 to 54,000 people from Ras Al Ain long-term. While Arab-majority communities of the Ras Al Ain countryside witnessed the least displacement, unprecedented levels of displacement in Ras Al Ain city and Kurdish-majority villages left these areas almost completely empty. Those displaced by OPS comprise the subdistrict’s entire Kurdish population, a significant proportion of the subdistrict’s Arab population, and a small number of Yazidis and Armenian Christians who had remained in the area. The majority of those who fled initially went to Al-Hasakeh city and Tal Tamer, where they took shelter in informal settlements established in vacant schools by the Self Administration. With limited returns amongst the aforementioned groups, the Self Administration and humanitarian actors have worked to host approximately 34,000 IDPs from Ras Al Ain, with 27,000 IDPs in the Washakani and Serekaniye camps outside of Al-Hasakeh city and the Newroz camp outside of Al-Malikeyyeh/Derik, as well as approximately 7,000 IDPs in informal settlements in Al-Hasakeh city. An estimated 5,000 to 20,000 additional IDPs from Ras Al Ain, are believed to be distributed across NES, GoS-held areas of Syria, and Iraq.

In the Tell Abiad and Suluk subdistricts, figures from operational partners and local sources indicate OPS has displaced approximately 10 percent of the population long-term, which stood at approximately 52,500 just prior to OPS. In contrast to Ras Al Ain, the subdistricts’ Arab-majority population enjoyed strong ties to the opposition and were largely supportive of OPS. Consequently, most of the population remained in the area, only temporarily fleeing to neighboring communities and farmland to avoid clashes and shelling as TAF and TSO forces advanced. Nevertheless, an estimated 5,000 to 6,500 people, including Tell Abiad and Suluk’s entire Kurdish population and local Arabs with ties to the Self Administration and/or GoS, fled the area to Ar-Raqqa, Ain Issa, and Ain Al Arab/Kobani. Since then, the Self Administration and humanitarian actors have hosted approximately 3,500 IDPs from Tell Abiad and Suluk in the Tel Samen-Daham camp outside of Ain Issa, while approximately 1,500 to 3,000 IDPs are believed to be distributed across NES, GoS-held areas of Syria, and Iraq.

In addition to IDPs living in host communities, OPS displaced nearly 19,000 IDPs and refugees living in the Mabruka camp west of Ras Al Ain and the Ain Issa camp north of Ain Issa. Just prior to the start of Turkish ground operations, the Self Administration successfully transferred all Mabruka camp residents to the Areesha IDP camp in southern Al-Hasakeh. However, the Self Administration chose not to transfer residents of the Ain Issa camp, believing Turkish and TSO forces would not reach the M4
highway, and thus pose no threat to the camp. Nevertheless, as fighting intensified near the camp, camp guards fled following clashes with camp residents and TSO shelling. All 16,800 camp residents, including so-called ISIS families, fled into the surrounding countryside. Although nearly 13,000 camp residents sought shelter in other camps, 3,800 camp residents fled into the OPS area and other parts of Syria and Iraq.

Outside of Ras Al Ain, Tell Abiad, and Suluk, OPS initially displaced as many as 150,000 people along the three remaining axes: 2) Darbasiyah, Amuda, Quamishli city, and Al-Malkeyyeh/Derik; 3) Ain Al Arab/Kobani and Ain Issa; and 4) Menbij. Along all three axes, people fled to areas away from the border and frontlines to avoid shelling and a potential expansion of Turkish ground operations. As fighting subsided and the Self Administration retained control of areas along the three axes, most who fled returned by mid-November.

POST-OPS RETURN AND RESETTLEMENT

Since hostilities concluded in November 2019, Turkey has facilitated gradual return and resettlement in the OPS area. While limited for several months following the completion of OPS due to security concerns \(^{11}\), population figures and local reports indicate returns and resettlement picked up by early to mid-2020 as conditions improved.

Map 7. Areas of Control - September 2021

\(^{11}\) Throughout the six months following the conclusion of OPS, the area witnessed more than 50 IED blasts and repeated rounds of TSO infighting.
According to figures from operational partners, the population of the OPS area stood at approximately 120,000 people just prior to OPS and has risen to approximately 140,000 people over the past two years. Based on these figures, Turkey appears to have allowed approximately 75,000 people to remain in the area and 65,000 to return or resettle. However, because Turkish and local authorities do not reliably distinguish between resident returns and IDP resettlement, there is currently no way to determine precisely what proportion of the current population is made up of original residents and IDPs or non-displaced people who have moved to the area from other parts of Syria.

Despite this issue, population data and local reports do indicate the Tell Abiad and Suluk subdistricts, as well as Arab-majority areas of the Ras Al Ain countryside, have generally witnessed the highest rates of resident returns. Conversely, as Turkey, TSO factions, and local authorities have worked to prevent the return of anyone with ties to the PYD/YPG, Self Administration, and/or GoS, Ras Al Ain city and Kurdish-majority communities in the Tell Abiad and Ras Al Ain countryside have witnessed extremely limited resident returns. While a small number of Arab residents with limited ties\(^\text{12}\) to the Self Administration and/or GoS have been able to secure their return with the support of tribal figures or relatives serving with TSO factions, such cases are reportedly rare and represent a minority of Arab resident returnees. Similarly, only 100 to 200 Kurdish residents are believed to have returned to the OPS area. In nearly all cases, local sources report returnees are elderly men from families with no ties to the PYD-YPG and/or Self Administration, who have returned to look after property and assets in the area.

In the case of displaced residents returning from the OES area, Turkish and local authorities allowed residents to register for transfer via Turkey. In order to qualify for transfer, local sources report residents either presented their Syrian Interim Government (SIG) biometric ID or witness statements attesting to their status as a former resident of the OPS area. Outside of formal Turkish channels, local sources report a minority of returns from the OES area arrived via smuggling routes through Self Administration areas. Meanwhile, displaced residents returning from Self Administration areas reportedly arranged their return in coordination with local tribal figures and notables, who would secure permission from authorities and TSO factions to allow them to return safely via smuggling routes around Ain Issa and Tal Tamer.

Alongside resident returns, the OPS area has witnessed gradual resettlement of IDPs from other areas of Syria. Immediately following the conclusion of OPS, Turkey allowed TSO fighters deployed to the OPS area to resettle their families there. While there are no precise figures on how many people fit this profile, local sources report such cases may account for approximately 3,500 people. According to the composition of TSO factions in the OPS area, this population is made up of Arab IDPs from Deir-ez-Zor, Homs, Rural Damascus, and Idlib, as well as non-displaced Arab and Turkmen residents of northern Aleppo. During the same period, Turkey also allowed an estimated 800 Iraqi refugee families to settle in Ras Al Ain city. Most of these families are believed to have fled Ain Issa IDP camp during OPS, however, Iraqi families smuggled out of Al Hol IDP camp have also settled in the city since then.

Throughout 2021, the OPS area has also witnessed and influx of Arab residents and IDPs fleeing Self Administration and GoS-held areas due to growing concerns around mandatory conscription and deteriorating economic conditions. Most arrivals are reportedly from Deir-ez-Zor and Ar-Raqqa and chose the OPS area over other Turkish-held areas due to its ease of access, relatively low cost of living, and large IDP communities from Deir-ez-Zor and Ar-Raqqa. To reach the OPS area, individuals from GoS-held areas reportedly cross into Self Administration areas undetected via informal river crossings along the Euphrates river in Deir-ez-Zor. Once in Self Administration areas, individuals must travel to frontlines north of Ar-Raqqa or northwest of Tal Tamer where smugglers transport them into the OPS area via motorcycle. Until mid-2021, individuals could enter the OPS area via the aforementioned smuggling routes without obtaining any formal permission. However, due to Turkish concerns around the rising number of unregulated arrivals and increasing attempts to cross into Turkey from the OPS area illegally, Turkish and local authorities now require individuals seeking to cross into the OPS area to be registered with authorities via a local guarantor prior to arriving.

\(^\text{12}\) Turkish, TSO, and local civilian authorities do not appear to have an established framework defining ties to the Self Administration, PYD-YPG, or GoS. In practice, local sources report authorities often permit Arabs who served in low level administrative positions within the Self Administration and/or GoS or in the SDF as part of mandatory conscription, to return to the OPS area so long as they are not a direct relative of a high profile or high-ranking figure in the Self Administration, PYD-YPG, and/or GoS.
Finally, over the past two years, Turkey has also used the OPS area to receive individuals deported from Turkey. The circumstances of those deported from Turkey vary, but common cases include individuals residing in Turkey illegally, individuals with an expired temporary protection card, or kimlik, and individuals who have been arrested for petty crimes.

To date, the strongest incentive to return and resettlement has been the abundance and low cost of housing and land in the OPS area. While residents who remained in the OPS area and returning residents have been able to live in their original homes, IDPs can generally obtain housing from residents or through TSO factions and local authorities responsible for managing vacant homes seized during OPS. Thus, TSO fighters and their families, as well as IDPs with ties to TSO factions, can live free of charge in seized homes, while all other IDPs can rent homes from residents or TSO factions at relatively low fees when compared to the OES area and Turkey. In all cases, residents and IDPs are required to register their address with local civilian and security authorities in order to receive a SIG biometric ID card. Meanwhile, TSO factions also benefit from large swathes of seized agricultural land. Local sources report TSO factions provide seized agricultural land to individuals close to them for free or provide such lands to residents and IDPs in exchange for a rental fee or a portion of the harvest profits.

Despite the draw of housing, local sources report the OPS area suffers from weak governance and services relative to the OES area. Although the Wali of Urfa and his office have publicly advocated for greater support, local authorities are extremely weak and Turkey has continued to prioritize the development of governance and services in the OES and OOB areas. Access to and from the OPS area is also extremely limited, as Turkey has not established a formal route for residents and IDPs living in the OPS area to travel to the OES and OOB areas. Finally, security has gradually improved since the months immediately following OPS. Improvised explosive device (IED) blasts have largely subsided, TSO faction infighting is increasingly infrequent, and kidnapping is reportedly uncommon. While this is notable, local sources report that in light of the OPS area’s other shortcomings, its relatively stable security situation is not yet a strong pull factor for return and resettlement.

PROTRACTED DISPLACEMENT AND CHALLENGES TO RETURN

Kurds make up the overwhelming majority of the estimated 45,000 to 60,000 people still displaced from the OPS area. The primary factor preventing their return is Turkish policy towards the PYD-YPG and Self Administration. While Turkey and TSO factions forbid Kurdish PYD-YPG members and their families from returning, as well as high profile local Kurdish and Arab Self Administration figures, fears of being falsely accused of PYD-YPG ties have discouraged returns amongst Kurds generally, as such accusations could place them at risk of arrest, interrogation, and/or long-term detention. Due to the ambiguous distinction between PYD-YPG and Self Administration structures, such as SANES and the SDF, it is difficult for Kurds with ties to SANES and the SDF to disprove PYD-YPG ties.

Arab–Kurdish tensions in the OPS area have also prevented Kurdish returns. As the various political and military actors who have overseen the OPS area over the past decade have pursued a zero-sum approach to power sharing, they have consistently exploited the Arab–Kurdish divide to shore up their authority. In doing so, actors have transformed the legacy of Arab–Kurdish mistrust to direct hostility and have destroyed traditional channels for Arab–Kurdish cooperation and reconciliation. Just as Kurds in the OPS area previously viewed Arabs with mistrust and as potential threats to the Self Administration, today there are widespread perceptions amongst Arabs, both residents and IDPs, that Kurds are PYD-YPG sympathizers opposed to Turkey’s role and the opposition. When combined with the multitude of TSO factions present across the OPS area, fears of enduring unchecked discrimination, exclusion, and retributive violence at the hands of the OPS area’s Arab population also play a significant role in preventing Kurdish returns.

13 Turkey does permit Syrians living in Turkey to visit the OPS area via the Tell Abiad crossing.
Housing, land, and property (HLP) issues related to Turkish policy towards the PYD-YPG and Self Administration have also worked to prevent Kurdish returns and complicated their access to their property more broadly. As previously discussed, Turkey has allowed TSO factions to seize property and assets belonging to PYD-YPG members and high-profile local Kurdish and Arab Self Administration figures, as well as GoS loyalists and ISIS members. Local sources indicate that TSO factions have liberally applied these definitions to justify the seizure of hundreds of vacant Kurdish-owned properties, while for political reasons Turkey has forbidden TSO factions from occupying Armenian and Syriac Christian-owned properties, and since mid-2021, Yazidi-owned properties.

Local authorities have developed formal processes to address seized property, however, several factors prevent Kurds from seeking resolution through these. Formal processes require original property owners to be physically present for proceedings, which is challenging for displaced Kurds due to poor access to the OPS area and security concerns. Additionally, although formal processes can be used to confirm ownership and oblige a TSO faction to conclude a symbolic rental contract with a property owner, due to enforcement difficulties, they cannot compel a TSO faction to vacate a property. Formal processes therefore do not offer displaced Kurds who have lost their property to seizure any clear pathway to return. Even for Kurds who have returned to their homes unscathed, but have lost additional property to seizure, the threat of retribution for raising a case and limited benefits reportedly deter most from considering it as a worthwhile effort. Finally, traditional channels for informal resolutions between Arabs and Kurds are also not always an option for Kurds, as they have not only broken down over the course of the conflict, but potentially place Arabs engaged in such resolutions at risk of appearing sympathetic to Kurds.

14 Current formal processes require the original property owner to submit ownership documents and sworn statements from two residents and the local mukhtar attesting to their ownership of the property to relevant authorities, which includes the Ras Al-Ain and Tell Abiad local councils and courts, as well as local TSO Military Police. Once submitted, authorities review the claims, and so long as the documents are valid and the owner has no ties to the PYD-YPG, Self Administration, GoS, or ISIS, they are meant to ensure the property is returned to its owner.
While Turkish policy is the main obstacle to returns, Self Administration policies have also worked to discourage returns. Alongside reinforcing anti-Kurdish prejudice and suspicions by encouraging Kurdish IDPs from the OPS area to participate in pro-PYD-YPG rallies condemning OPS and Turkey, the PYD-YPG have reportedly harassed and/or detained individuals who have returned or are contemplating return. While such cases have not been made public to date, the circumstances of the detentions and harassment could place Kurds in the OPS area in significant danger. Conversely, the KNC has sought to lobby Turkish officials and various Syrian opposition bodies to permit and safeguard Kurdish returns. To date, the impact of the KNC's efforts has been limited to several individual return cases.

Alongside those displaced due to factors previously discussed, there are former OPS area residents who are able to return but have chosen not to for various personal reasons. For Arabs originally from the OPS area based in the OES area or Turkey, the OPS area's relatively poor economic conditions, limited services, and isolation continue to discourage permanent returns. Additionally, Turkey has thus far limited the local Arab population's role in local security and governance. While the original Arab residents who remained or returned have been relatively accepting of this dynamic and developed strong ties to TSO factions and incoming IDP communities, shifting local dynamics and networks may discourage some from considering return. Finally, local sources report there are thousands of former OPS area residents currently living in Europe and the Gulf who have no interest in either returning permanently or visiting in the near to mid-term.

As a result of the current local policy on property management and delegation in the OPS area, former residents who can return but have chosen not to also face HLP issues. According to the current policy, absentee property owners can delegate an individual to manage their property and rent the property on their behalf. However, the delegate cannot sell the property or pursue a case against a TSO faction or individual occupying the property, which both require the owner to be physically present according to the current policy. Local sources report that TSO factions and individuals occupying property have benefitted from this policy, as it is uncommon for individuals in Syria, Turkey, Europe, or the Gulf to travel into the OPS area to resolve property matters.

RETURN PROSPECTS

Return and displacement dynamics of the OPS area are unlikely to change in the foreseeable future. As Turkey equates the PYD-YPG with the PKK, the PYD-YPG's previous role in the OPS area and its ties to the areas' Kurdish population will preclude Turkey from permitting and safeguarding their return in large numbers. In the event of an unprecedented and unlikely shift in Turkish policy around the PKK, PYD-YPG, Self Administration, and/or Kurds generally, this dynamic could change. However, any shift in Turkish policy would also have to be complemented by a significant effort to resolve the HLP issues which have arisen as a result of rampant property seizures. In the meantime, Kurdish IDPs may attempt to secure return on an individual basis. However, the Self Administration is likely to continue discouraging such attempts as the continued displacement of Kurds from the OPS area is politically and economically valuable for the Self Administration leadership and kadros.

Amongst Arab residents and IDPs, it appears a significant proportion of those who wanted to return or resettle in the OPS area amidst current circumstances have been able to do so. The exception to this is Arabs with ties to the Self Administration and/or GoS. While the passage of time and cooling of the Syrian conflict could gradually make it easier for such individuals to return, this is likely years away. In lieu of an influx of IDPs from a potential Russian-backed GoS campaign in Idlib, the OPS area is therefore unlikely to witness significant return and resettlement over the coming year.

While Turkey may not use the OPS area for an expanded IDP resettlement effort in the near future, it will continue to use the area's strategic resources and position to pressure the Self Administration on multiple fronts. Turkey's control of the Allouk water station and Mabruka power station have allowed it to repeatedly cut water to Al-Hasakeh city and the surrounding area, while also drawing electricity from the national Syrian grid to power infrastructure sites in the OPS area. Turkey is also able to increase military pressure on the Self Administration from the OPS area, shelling Ain Issa to the south and Tal Tamer to the east and placing it in a position to isolate Ain Al Arab/Kobani and cut the M4 highway.
FUTURE TURKISH INTERVENTION SCENARIOS: DISPLACEMENT, RETURNS, ECONOMIC, SERVICES, AND POLITICAL IMPACTS

The following section builds upon the in-depth exploration of the history, lead up, and impact of OPS and applies that understanding to examine the potential humanitarian, economic, and political impacts and significance of similar Turkish interventions in other areas of northern Syria. Section 5.1 briefly outlines the general dynamics and impacts of Turkish intervention the specific zones it is likely to target. The sub-sections that follow examine each of the specific implications of potential Turkish intervention in each zone, including: 5.2 Menbij; 5.3 Ain al Arab/Kobani; 5.4 M5 highway, Ain Issa, and Tal Tamer; 5.5 Darbasiyah and Amuda; and 5.6 PYD-YPG-held Tall Refaat in northwest Syria.

SCENARIOS OVERVIEW

Over the past five years, Turkey has demonstrated a clear willingness to intervene directly in Syria to address concerns along its southern border. The likelihood of another Turkish intervention in NES will primarily be determined by three factors: 1) Turkey's relations with the US and Russia; 2) Turkey's position on US and Russian policies in Syria; and 3) the status of the Self Administration. While shifts in any three that exacerbate and/or fail to address Turkey's concerns are considered to increase the chances of another Turkish intervention, the number and complexity of variables make it impossible to assess the likelihood with any degree of accuracy. Nevertheless, so long as the Self Administration is present in NES, Turkey's policy towards the PKK and PYD-YPG is unchanged, Turkey and Russia continue to pursue territorial swaps in Syria, and US-Turkish relations are poor, another Turkish intervention in Syria will remain a real possibility.

Currently, Turkey’s options for intervention in Syria can be divided into seven zones: 1) Menbij; 2) Ain Al Arab/Kobani; 3) M4 Highway, Ain Issa, and Tal Tamer; 4) Darbasiyah and Amuda; 5) Tall Refaat; 6) Al-Malkeyyeh/Derik, Al-Qahtaniyah, and Al-Jawadiyah; and 7) Quamishli. Each of the seven zones constitutes an area of distinct strategic and symbolic importance to Turkey, the Self Administration, PYD-YPG, US, and Russia. While the scope and objectives of Turkey's previous interventions indicate it is most likely to intervene in a single zone, it could intervene in part of a single zone or across multiple zones at the same time. Zones 6 and 7 are not covered within the scenarios below as the continued presence of US forces in both zones make such interventions difficult to assess due to the number of variables potentially at play. Nevertheless, with the unparalleled strategic and symbolic importance of zones 6 and 7 to the Self Administration, a Turkish incursion into either would almost certainly lead to the immediate collapse of Self Administration structures and displacement of hundreds of thousands of residents and IDPs.15

In the remaining five zones, Turkey is unlikely to intervene without tacit Russian approval. Not only are Russian Military Police currently stationed in all five, but Turkey will need assurances of continued coordination with Russia in Syria, as it currently opposes US policy and will not gain US approval for any intervention. Based on the pattern of coordination between the two states in Syria over the past four years, Russia is most likely to demand Turkey cede control of southern Idlib and/or the stretch of M4 highway in Idlib in exchange for its approval of any Turkish intervention. As these are likely the last areas of Syria that Turkey is willing to surrender in the near to mid-term, any subsequent Turkish intervention could mark an end to territorial-swap model that has defined Russian-Turkish coordination for the past four years. Thus, the two sides will likely need to develop a new basis for coordination in Syria, which could lead to short to medium term tensions throughout northern Syria.

15 Population data from operational partners indicates the population of zone 6 is approximately 144,000 and zone 7 is approximately 300,000 as of late 2021.
Map 9. Impact of Turkish Intervention all zones

Table 1. Long-term Displacement Estimates as a Result of Future Turkish Intervention

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Zone</th>
<th>Current Population</th>
<th>Low Estimate</th>
<th>Median Estimate</th>
<th>High Estimate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Menbij</td>
<td>210,000 – 400,000</td>
<td>25,000</td>
<td>62,000</td>
<td>100,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ain Al Arab/Kobani</td>
<td>150,000</td>
<td>80,000</td>
<td>115,000</td>
<td>150,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M4 Highway, Ein Issa, and Tal Tamer</td>
<td>75,000</td>
<td>7,500</td>
<td>16,000</td>
<td>25,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Darbasiyah and Amuda</td>
<td>85,000 – 100,000</td>
<td>45,000</td>
<td>72,000</td>
<td>100,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tall Refaat</td>
<td>55,000 – 110,000</td>
<td>55,000</td>
<td>83,000</td>
<td>110,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In addition to zone-specific impacts, there are several common outcomes of Turkish intervention across all zones. Turkish intervention allows Russia to exploit Self Administration fragility to gain concessions for itself and the GoS in areas of NES outside the US’s sphere of influence. Thus, both Russia and the GoS could further expand their presence in Menbij, Ain Al Arab/Kobani, western Al-Hasakeh, and Ar-Raqqa and demand various political and economic concessions from the PYD-YPG and Self Administration. While the continued US presence may limit the scope of what Russia can demand, Turkish intervention would facilitate the gradual return of GoS authority to NES. If this return is extensive, Turkish intervention could lead to additional waves of displacement across NES, especially in Arab-majority areas of Ar-Raqqa, Al-Hasakeh, and Deir-ez-Zor where opposition to the GoS remains strong.

Across all zones, Turkish intervention will also have a significant impact on the humanitarian response. All seven zones will require increased support in order to respond to the needs of thousands of IDPs and potential deterioration in the provision of key services. Without an immediate and long-term increase in support, humanitarian actors will likely be forced to divert resources from programming elsewhere in NES, and as needs increase, will be unable to address or slow a potential rapid deterioration of the humanitarian situation in NES.

Finally, return and resettlement dynamics following a Turkish intervention are likely to resemble those seen across OES, OOB, and OPS areas. As another Turkish incursion would indicate a continuation of Turkey’s current policies towards the PKK, PYD-YPG, and Self Administration, in all likelihood Turkey will prevent the large-scale return of Kurds, as well as Arabs with ties to the aforementioned actors, as well as the GoS. While Turkey would likely resettle IDPs from Idlib in the event of a Russian-backed GoS campaign, if such need does not arise, it is unlikely to quickly resettle a significant number of IDPs from other parts of Syria. This is not only due to the lack of infrastructure needed to support large inflows, but also hesitance and resistance amongst IDPs currently settled in OES, OOB, and OPS areas to relocate. Thus, immediate resettlement following any Turkish intervention may be confined to TSO fighters and their families from northern Aleppo and a limited number of IDPs currently based in adjacent Turkish-held areas who choose to relocate for various personal reasons.
Displacement and Returns

Turkish intervention against Menbij would likely encompass the Menbij, Abu Qalqal, and A’rima subdistricts and could temporarily displace their entire population of between 210,000 and 400,000 people. While many are likely to temporarily seek shelter within neighboring communities in the zone, the Jebel Saman, Al-Khafsa, Dayr Hafir, Ar-Raqqa, Sarin, and Jurneyyeh subdistricts would also be expected to witness significant IDP inflows. As witnessed during OPS, concerns around Turkey expanding operations could also lead to temporary displacement from the Ain Al Arab/Kobani and Sarin subdistricts and communities along the Syrian-Turkish border. Based on figures recorded during OPS, this could reach more than 150,000 people, most of whom are likely to seek temporary shelter in subdistricts away from the border, such as the Al-Hasakeh, Tal Hmis, Ya’robiyah, and Be’r Al-Hulo Al-Wardeyyeh subdistricts.

Following the conclusion of fighting, Turkish control of the Menbij, Abu Qalqal, and A’rima could displace between 25,000 to 100,000 people long-term. While Kurdish IDPs are likely to relocate to the Ain Al Arab/Kobani, Ain Issa, and Al-Hasakeh subdistricts, Arab IDPs are likely to relocate in the Self Administration areas of Ar-Raqqa or GoS-held Aleppo. The high end of the displacement range is based on higher population estimates of the area and includes the Menbij area’s entire Kurdish population and Arabs affiliated with the Self Administration and/or GoS. The low end of the range is based on lower population estimates of the area and holds that half of the Kurdish population and half of Arabs affiliated with the Self Administration and/or GoS are not permitted to return or choose not to do so. Turkish control of Menbij would allow several thousand IDPs currently in northern Aleppo and Turkey to return to Menbij. However, due to the likelihood that much of the Arab population remains in Menbij, Turkey is unlikely to resettle IDPs from other parts of Syria in the area.
Economic and Services Impact

Turkish control of Menbij would severely disrupt NES's economy, as Menbij is NES's primary gateway for crossline trade to both GoS-held areas and the OES area. Without Menbij, all trade between Self Administration and GoS-held areas would need to be routed through crossings at Tabqa, which could create several logistical challenges. The Self Administration would also lose existing crossings with the OES area. While a crossing could be established at the Qara Qawzaq bridge along the M4 highway, this would take time to establish and both Turkey and the Self Administration may be hesitant to permit crossline trade amidst such public exposure. With the disruption to crossline trade between NES and the rest of Syria, Russia and the GoS would seek to exploit the situation and, among various measures, could compel the Self Administration to surrender control of remaining crossline crossings. While this would allow the GoS to further extend its authority and influence into NES, it would also deny the Self Administration a key financial resource.

Turkish control of Menbij could also allow Turkey to gain control of the Tishreen dam, which is located along the Euphrates river 20 kilometers southeast of Menbij city. The least impactful outcome is one where Turkey and Russia agree to place the dam under full GoS control. However, any such agreement would likely necessitate Menbij and the OES area receive additional power from the Syrian national power grid. The most impactful scenario is one where Turkey takes full control of the dam and disrupts the national power grid across NES and GoS-held Aleppo. Due to the inadequacy and fragility of the power grid, in either scenario, NES would likely face further reductions in power that would complicate service provision across sectors.

The scope of displacement from Menbij and potential impact on services and the economy will have a major impact on humanitarian programming across NES. Humanitarian actors and the Self Administration will be faced with an influx of IDPs potentially greater than that witnessed during OPS, which will further strain resources and the overall humanitarian response. Past the immediate impact, reductions in power could disrupt drinking water and irrigation networks and place a range of services reliant on generators, thus increasing demands for fuel.

Political Impact

While Turkish control of Menbij may not be politically damaging to the Self Administration in the immediate term, over the mid to long-term, its impact on services and the economy in NES could fully erode any belief in the Self Administration's longevity. Further, Turkish control of Menbij also deprives the Self Administration important leverage for use in future talks with Russia and the GoS around a political and security solution for NES.

Turkish intervention in Menbij would almost certainly face international condemnation. While it would also work to further undermine Turkey's relations with the US and European Union(EU), this could be temporary if coordination between Turkey and the US and EU on issues outside of Syria improve. Conversely, like all scenarios, Turkish-Russian relations are likely to remain unchanged, as it would be extremely unlikely for Turkey to intervene without tacit Russian support. Nevertheless, if Russia were to quietly approve Turkish intervention in Menbij, due to the area's strategic value for Russia and the GoS, it would likely need concessions from Turkey beyond surrendering the M4 highway in southern Idlib.
**Displacement**

Turkish intervention against Ain Al Arab/Kobani would likely encompass the Ain Arab/Kobani, Sarin, and Lower Shyookh subdistricts and could temporarily displace their entire population of approximately 150,000 people, many of whom are likely to flee to the Ar-Raqqa, Jurneyeh, Al-Hasakeh, and Ain Issa subdistricts. As witnessed during OPS, concerns around Turkey expanding operations could also lead to temporary displacement in communities along frontlines and the Syrian-Turkish border. Based on figures recorded during OPS, this could reach more than 150,000 people, most of whom are likely to seek temporary shelter in the Al-Hasakeh, Tal Hmis, Ya’robiyah, Be’r Al-Hulo Al-Wardeyyeh, and Ar-Raqqa subdistricts.

Following the conclusion of fighting, Turkish control of the Ain Arab, Sarin, and Lower Shyookh subdistricts could displace between 80,000 to 150,000 people long-term. Most of those displaced long-term are likely to relocate to Al-Hasakeh city, Quamishli city, Ain Issa, and Self Administration camps, while a significant proportion may also flee to Iraq. The high end of the displacement range includes the entire population, which is believed to be over 95% Kurdish and 5% Arab. The low end of the range includes half of the Kurdish population. While OPS led to the long-term displacement of the entire OPS area’s Kurdish-minority, Turkey may find it politically necessary to permit part of Ain Arab/Kobani’s Kurdish-majority to remain, as it did in the OOB area.

As there are not believed to be any sizable IDP communities from Ain Al Arab/Kobani currently based in northern Aleppo or Turkey, the area is unlikely to witness any notable returns from these areas. Nevertheless, immediate resettlement would likely comprise TSO fighters and their families from northern Aleppo and individuals moving from the OPS area.
Economic and Services Impact

Turkish control of Ain Al Arab/Kobani could have a significant impact on NES's services, as well as humanitarian programming. Even as Ain Al Arab/Kobani lacks key infrastructure sites and is not strategically important to the NES economy, the Self Administration and humanitarian actors will face significant challenges addressing an influx of IDPs which could reach numbers not witnessed in NES since the campaign against ISIS. This will likely require them to divert resources and attention from elsewhere, which could lead to the deterioration of services across NES.

Political Impact

Turkish control of Ain Al Arab/Kobani would likely do significant political damage to the Self Administration. Ain Al Arab/Kobani is not only a Kurdish-majority area, but a PYD-YPG stronghold of symbolic importance to Kurds generally. While the Self Administration could weather the political fallout of such an operation so long as the US maintains its presence in NES, the loss would immediately undermine any belief in the Self Administration's longevity. The only factor that could potentially reverse this would be an unprecedented reaction from the US in support of the Self Administration. However, this would be extremely damaging to US-Turkish relations and, as demonstrated by the lead up to OOB and OPS, could trigger additional Turkish interventions in NES.

Turkish intervention against Ain Al Arab/Kobani would undoubtably face severe international condemnation and likely harm Turkey's relations with the US and EU. As intervention in Ain Al Arab/Kobani would entail an assault on Self Administration-held territory in NES and could result in ethnic cleansing, it could do lasting harm to Turkey's relations with the US and EU if combined with continued tensions on issues outside of Syria. The US and EU response would also likely be more severe than previous responses to OOB and OPS. Thus, the US could implement additional sanctions against Turkey, as well as publicly reassert some level of commitment to the Self Administration and expand its presence in NES.

Like all scenarios, Turkish-Russian relations are likely to remain unchanged, as it would be extremely unlikely for Turkey to intervene without tacit Russian support. However, as Ain Al Arab/Kobani has little strategic value and would further undermine the Self Administration and Turkish-US relations, Russia could permit Turkey to intervene without major concessions in return.
**M4 HIGHWAY, EIN ISSA, AND TAL TAMER**

**Displacement**

Turkish intervention against the M4 highway, Ain Issa, and Tal Tamer would likely encompass the Ain Issa and Tal Tamer subdistricts, and remaining areas of the Ras Al Ain, Tell Abiad, and Suluk subdistricts under Self Administration control. This could temporarily displace the area's entire population of approximately 75,000 people. Most are likely to flee to the neighboring Ar-Raqqa and Al-Hasakeh subdistricts. As witnessed during OPS, concerns around Turkey expanding operations could also lead to temporary displacement in communities along nearby frontlines and the Syrian-Turkish border. Based on figures recorded during OPS and previous escalations along the M4 highway, this could reach more than 75,000, most of whom are likely to seek temporary shelter in subdistricts away from the border, such as the Al-Hasakeh, Tal Hmis, Ya’robiyah, Be’er Al-Hulo Al-Wardeyyeh, and Ar-Raqqa subdistricts.

Following the conclusion of fighting, Turkish control of the M4 highway, Ain Issa, and Tal Tamer could displace between 7,500 to 25,000 people long-term. Most of those displaced long-term are likely to relocate to Al-Hasakeh city, Quamishli city, Ar-Raqqa, and Self Administration camps, while a significant proportion may also flee to Iraq. The high end of the displacement range includes the entire Kurdish and Assyrian Christian populations and Arabs with close ties to the Self Administration, while the low end of the range includes the entire Kurdish and Assyrian Christian populations.
As there are not believed to be any sizable IDP communities from Ain Issa and Tal Tamer currently based in northern Aleppo or Turkey, the area is unlikely to witness any notable returns from these areas. Nevertheless, immediate resettlement would likely comprise TSO fighters and their families from northern Aleppo and individuals moving from the OPS area.

Economic and Services Impact

Turkish control of the M4 highway, Ain Issa, and Tal Tamer would further disrupt NES’s struggling economy, but would not represent an insurmountable loss to the Self Administration or traders in NES. While traffic along the M4 highway is limited to twice daily trips accompanied by Russian Military Police, the highway remains the primary artery for commerce and trade in NES. Cutting the M4 highway between Menbij and Al-Hasakeh would thus slow the pace of trade and increase transit costs, as shipments would need to be routed through roads in Ar-Raqqa and Deir-ez-Zor.

Political Impact

Turkish control of the M4 highway, Ain Issa, and Tal Tamer would do relatively limited political damage to the Self Administration. While any loss of territory undermines the Self Administration, with the transfer of SANES offices from Ain Issa to Ar-Raqqa, the Self Administration has no political assets in the area.

Similarly, international condemnation of a Turkish intervention against the M4 highway, Ain Issa, and Tal Tamer would likely be relatively muted. The US and EU would likely protest the move but not take any measures against Turkey in response. Like all scenarios, Turkish-Russian relations are likely to remain unchanged, as it would be extremely unlikely for Turkey to intervene without tacit Russian support. If Russia were to approve further Turkish intervention along the M4 highway, Ain Issa, and Tal Tamer, due to the highway’s strategic value for Russia and the GoS, it would likely at a minimum require Turkey to surrender the M4 highway in southern Idlib.
Turkish intervention against Darbasiyah and Amuda would likely encompass the Darbasiyah and Amuda subdistricts and could temporarily displace their entire population of approximately 85,000 to 100,000 people. The majority of IDPs would likely leave to nearby Al-Hasakeh and Be’er Al-Hulo Al-Wardeyyeh subdistricts, as well as the Quamishli subdistrict. Concerns around Turkey expanding operations could also lead to temporary displacement in subdistricts along the Syrian-Turkish border, including Ain Arab, Quamishli, Al-Malikeyyeh/Derik, Qahtaniyah, and Jawadiyah. Based on figures recorded during OPS, this could reach more than 150,000 people, most of whom are likely to seek temporary shelter in subdistricts away from the border, including the Al-Hasakeh and Be’er Al-Hulo Al-Wardeyyeh subdistricts.

Following the conclusion of fighting, Turkish control of the Darbasiyah and Amuda subdistricts could displace between 45,000 to 100,000 people long-term. Most of those displaced long-term are likely to relocate in Al-Hasakeh city, Quamishli city, and Self Administration camps, while a significant proportion may also flee to Iraq. The high end of the displacement range includes the entire population of the higher population estimate, which believed to be over 90% Kurdish and 10% Arab. The low end of the range includes approximately half of the Kurdish population. For political reasons and strong KNC support amongst Kurdish population, Turkey may find it advantageous to allow a significant proportion of Darbasiyah and Amuda’s Kurdish-majority to remain.

As there are not believed to be any sizable IDP communities from Darbasiyah and Amuda currently based in northern Aleppo or Turkey, the area is unlikely to witness any notable returns from these areas. Nevertheless, immediate resettlement would likely comprise TSO fighters and their families from northern Aleppo and individuals moving from the OPS area.
Economic and Services Impact

Turkish control of Darbasiyah and Amuda would have a significant impact on NES’s economy and services. While the area lacks key infrastructure sites, the scope of displacement could place NES’s economy and services under additional stress. Darbasiyah and Amuda’s farmland is also important to NES’s overall wheat production, as the area is a strategic wheat producing area during strong harvest seasons. Finally, if Turkey chose to use its position in Darbasiyah and Amuda to increase military pressure on nearby Qamishli city and the M4 highway, it could further undermine economic activity in NES generally. As Qamishli city is the center of trade and commerce in NES, any threat to the city or access to Al-Hasakeh city via the M4 highway would not only interrupt trade but could also lead to capital flight from Qamishli and NES generally.

Displacement from Darbasiyah and Amuda will impact humanitarian programming across NES, as humanitarian actors and the Self Administration will face significant challenges addressing an influx of IDPs which could reach numbers not witnessed in NES since the campaign against ISIS. Additionally, Turkish control of the area would also force humanitarian actors to transfer operations elsewhere, likely leading to temporary interruptions to the humanitarian response.

Political Impact

Turkish control of Darbasiyah and Amuda would likely do significant political damage to the Self Administration. As a Kurdish-majority area that is considered relatively stable, the shock of such an operation would place the Self Administration under considerable local pressure. While the Self Administration could weather the political fallout of such an operation so long as the US maintains its presence in NES, the loss would immediately undermine any belief in the Self Administration’s longevity.

Turkish intervention against Darbasiyah and Amuda would undoubtably face severe international condemnation and likely harm Turkey’s relations with the US and EU. As intervention in Darbasiyah and Amuda would entail an assault on Self Administration-held territory in NES and could result in ethnic cleansing, the US and EU response would likely be more severe than previous responses to OOB and OPS. Thus, the US would likely threaten, and potentially implement, sanctions against Turkey, as well as publicly reassert some level of commitment to the Self Administration.

Like all scenarios, Turkish-Russian relations are likely to remain unchanged, as it would be extremely unlikely for Turkey to intervene without tacit Russian support. Nevertheless, if Russia were to approve Turkish intervention in Darbasiyah and Amuda, due to the area’s proximity to Qamishli city and M4 highway, it would likely need concessions from Turkey beyond surrendering the M4 highway in southern Idlib.
TALL REFAAT

Map 14. Impact of Turkish Intervention Tall Refaat

Displacement

Turkish intervention against Tall Refaat would likely encompass the Tall Refaat subdistrict, as well as small parts of the Jebel Samaan, Azaz, Maraa, Aghtarin, and Nubul subdistricts under PYD-YPG control. This could temporarily displace the area’s entire population of between 55,000 and 110,000 people, all of whom are likely to flee to GoS-held Aleppo city and Self Administration areas of NES. As Tall Refaat represents an isolated swathe of PYD-YPG-held territory, Turkish intervention against the area is unlikely to lead to temporarily displacement elsewhere.

Following the conclusion of fighting, Turkish control of the Tall Refaat is likely to lead to the long-term displacement of the area’s entire population of approximately 55,000 to 110,000 people. The high likelihood of Tall Refaat’s entire population being displaced long-term is due to several factors. More than half of Tall Refaat’s current population is made up of Kurdish IDPs from Afrin who are unlikely to remain in or be permitted to return to Turkish-controlled Tall Refaat. As this population has chosen to remain in areas under firm PYD-YPG control, rather than Kurdish neighborhoods of GoS-held Aleppo city, they may attempt to relocate to Self Administration areas of NES following Turkish intervention against Tall Refaat. As Turkey is unlikely to permit these remaining residents to stay in the area or return, they are likely to relocate between GoS-held areas, and potentially, Self Administration areas of NES.
FUTURE TURKISH INTERVENTION SCENARIOS: DISPLACEMENT, RETURNS, ECONOMIC, SERVICES, AND POLITICAL IMPACTS

Turkish control of Tall Refaat would allow Arab residents displaced by the PYD-YPG’s expulsion of opposition forces in 2016 to return to the area. The majority of those displaced in 2016, estimated comprise at least 45,000 people, are centered in the OES area and Turkey. Due to Tall Refaat's limited size and likelihood of high rates of return amongst those previously displaced from the area, Turkey is unlikely to resettle IDPs from other parts of Syria in the area.

Economic and Services Impact

Turkish control of Tall Refaat could have a significant impact on NES’s services, as well as humanitarian programming. With the high proportion of IDPs who may seek to relocate to Self Administration areas, the Self Administration and humanitarian actors will face significant challenges addressing an influx of IDPs which could reach numbers not witnessed in NES since the campaign against ISIS. This will likely require them to divert resources and attention from elsewhere, which could lead to the deterioration of services across NES.

Political Impact

Turkish control of the Tall Refaat could do significant political damage to the Self Administration. While the PYD-YPG and Self Administration were able to weather the loss of Afrin relatively unscathed, as Turkish control of Tall Refaat would displace IDPs from Afrin for a second time, it would represent a humiliating defeat and potentially lead to major local backlash.

The scope of international condemnation of a Turkish intervention against Tall Refaat is likely linked to the trajectory of displacement. If IDPs relocate primarily to GoS-held Aleppo, the US and EU would likely protest the intervention but not take any measures against Turkey in response. Conversely, if a significant number of IDPs relocate to Self Administration areas of NES, the intervention could lead to a more severe response, as the impact of displacement is in plain view of policy makers and a major issue for the Self Administration.

Like all scenarios, Turkish-Russian relations are likely to remain unchanged, as it would be extremely unlikely for Turkey to intervene without tacit Russian support. Although Turkey could feasibly surrender the M4 highway in southern Idlib in exchange for Russian approval for intervention in Tall Refaat, it is likely to request additional concessions from Russia, such as informally acknowledging a Turkish claim on northern Idlib, gradually working to normalize Turkey’s presence in northern Aleppo and northern Idlib, and/or agreeing to further Turkish intervention in NES.

Even though Tall Refaat is separate from Self Administration-held NES, Russia and the GoS are likely to exploit Turkish intervention in the area to gain concessions from the PYD-YPG and Self Administration in NES. With Tall Refaat surrounded on three sides by opposition forces, Russia and the GoS could use access to Aleppo city and Self Administration areas of NES to demand political concessions from the Self Administration and expand the GoS presence in areas outside the US’s sphere of influence such as Ar-Raqqa, Menbij Ain Al Arab/Kobani, and western Al-Hasakeh.