



What the temporary ceasefire deal in northern Syria means for key players in the conflict

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The temporary ceasefire announced Thursday by the U.S. and Turkey promised to bring the fighting in northern Syria to a halt for now — but what happens after the pause in Turkey's military operation is an open question.

According to the agreement, Turkey will pause its incursion into Kurdish-held territory in Syria for 120 hours, allowing the U.S. to help Kurdish forces withdraw from the region. The U.S. says Turkey has agreed to a permanent ceasefire once the Kurds withdraw.

Within hours of the deal's announcement key players were already disagreeing on the details and questioning how it would actually unfold on the ground.

The deal, while light on specifics, does provide a temporary respite for thousands of civilians caught in the crossfire. It also buys crucial time for a flurry of diplomatic activity that will be key to how the situation unfolds, some analysts say.

But just a day after the deal, journalists reported hearing shelling and gunfire in a Syrian town that was at the centre of clashes, despite the ceasefire.

Here's a look at what the deal means for the key players — if it holds.

The United States

"Great for everybody."

That's U.S. President Donald Trump's view on the deal reached after Vice-President Mike Pence and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo were dispatched to Turkey. But critics point out the hostilities his administration stopped were originally set in motion because of decisions Trump made.

During an Oct. 5 call, Trump promised Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan he would remove U.S. troops from the Kurdish-controlled border area on the Turkish-Syrian border. That decision effectively gave Erdogan a green light to attack Kurdish fighters, who Turkey associates with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), a designated terrorist group in Turkey.

"The arsonist then says he's putting out the fire. Well what do you know, there wasn't a fire in the first place," Lindsey Hilsum, international editor with Britain's Channel 4 News told CBC's *As It Happens* about Trump's response to the conflict and subsequent deal.

Democrats and some Republicans portrayed the deal as a betrayal of Kurdish fighters, who were U.S. allies in the fight against ISIS.

"What we have done to the Kurds will stand as a blood stain in the annals of American history," said Republican Sen. Mitt Romney in a scathing speech from the Senate floor.

Connecticut Sen. Chris Murphy, a Democrat, had a highly critical take on Twitter: "This isn't a ceasefire — it's a total capitulation to Turkey and the capstone of our abandonment of the Kurds. Don't pay attention to the headline — read the actual agreement. It's effectively surrender."

As for the president? He maintains that his course of action was the right one.

But Mustafa Akyol, a senior fellow at the CATO Institute, said a similar deal could have been reached without the bloodshed of the last week if the U.S had sought negotiation first.

"I think the U.S. lost some credibility in the past week because of [policy] zig-zags and the letter Trump sent to Erdogan," Akyol said, referring to a letter released by the White House this week in order to show the president's tough stance with Turkey.

Turkey

Analysts say Turkey is the clear winner here, essentially getting Trump's stamp of approval on what they sought from the beginning: a large swath of northern Syria serving as a buffer between Turkey and Kurdish-controlled territory.

Much of the outcome depends on whether Kurdish forces actually vacate a 30-kilometre-wide stretch from Manbij to the Iraqi border. But John Dunford, who works with the Institute for the Study of War, said for now Turkey gets what it wanted.

"This is a huge win for Turkey in that it basically cedes the YPG's core areas without much of a fight," Dunford said, referring to the group of Kurdish fighters known as the People's Protection Units (YPG), the armed wing of the Syrian Kurdish Democratic Union Party.

The deal allows Turkey to avoid possibly punishing U.S. sanctions. It also leaves a lot of wiggle room, said Heiko Wimmen, project director for Iraq, Syria and Lebanon with the International Crisis Group. He notes that there's little preventing Turkey from continuing to press ahead with its incursion after the initial pause in hostilities.

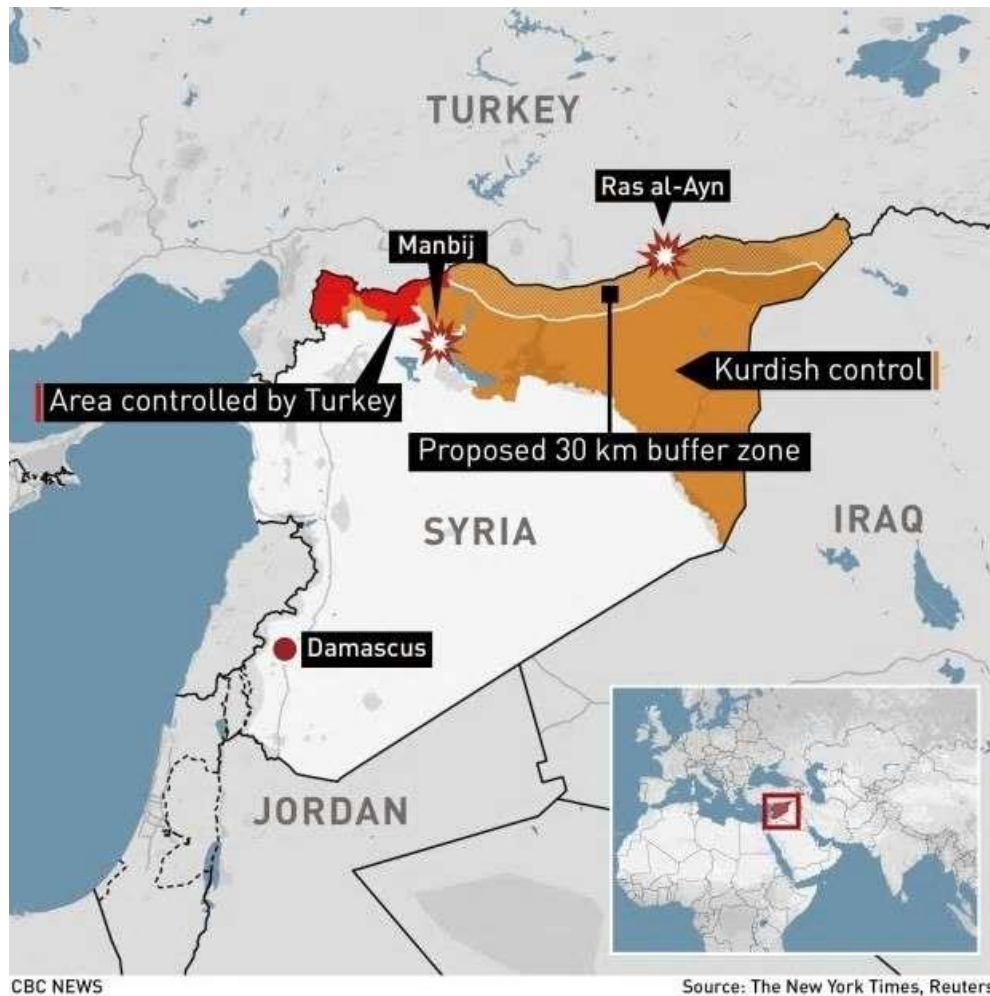
But Daniel Davis, a retired lieutenant-colonel who now works at a think tank called Defense Priorities, warned that Turkey may not be able to easily sweep through Kurdish-controlled territory in Syria. Recalling the challenges faced by the U.S. military in Iraq, he said Kurdish forces won't give up easily and an insurgency is likely.

"That's a very real possibility that the Turkish military could be getting into. These things never work out nice and clean militarily like they seem at the beginning," said Davis, whose Washington-based organization has argued for a more narrow use of U.S. force.

The Kurds

For the Kurds, the deal is effectively another sign the U.S. has abandoned its former ally in the fight against the ISIS.

"It can be seen as an even further betrayal of the YPG, by forcing them to give up their core terrain," Dunford said.



"They are the losers, they lose territory, their margin of manoeuvre has contracted dramatically," Wimmen said, noting that Kurds had in recent days turned to Syrian Leader Bashar al-Assad for military assistance.

Russia

The big winner in this could be Russia. The propaganda value alone of seeing U.S. troops withdraw and Russian troops move into the region is a win, said Dunford.

Russia can also step in to mediate between Kurds and the Assad regime — and potentially between the Kurds and Turkey.

"So that's a big boost for Russia, because Russia can use that to legitimize themselves as an international peace broker," Dunford said.

Davis said the vacuum left by the U.S. departure helps the Russians in Syria, which has been focused on keeping Assad in power and maintaining their military presence and influence in the region.

But Davis warned that Russia's increased role could be a double-edged sword. As Syrian forces align with the Kurds and push north toward Turkey, two past rivals — Syria and Turkey — could see renewed hostilities.

"The disaster and the chaos of northern Syria is no prize to be won," Davis said.

Turkey's president already has a meeting scheduled for the day the ceasefire ends, but it's not with American officials. Instead, Erdogan will be meeting with Vladimir Putin in the Russian resort town of Sochi.

Syria

With the U.S. president seemingly washing his hands of the region, Assad can now move his forces into parts of Syria he had once abandoned.

That allows the Syrian regime to try and re-establish its presence in the northern part of the country and impose limits on Kurdish demands for autonomy, knowing they have nowhere else to turn, Wimmen said.

Dunford noted that regaining that territory has been a long-standing goal of the Assad regime, but if Turkey is allowed to establish a safe zone with a Turkish armed presence, that could slow Syria's efforts.

He said a lot will be determined by what Russia, Assad's primary backer, is able to negotiate with Turkey.

"That's definitely a hindrance to what the regime wants in terms of being able to control the entirety of Syria and maintaining the Syrian borders as they are right now."