IT'S TURKISH RULE IN SYRIAN BORDER TOWNS

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In 2016, Turkey launched its first military operation in Syria to prevent both the Islamic State (IS) and the People's Protection Units (YPG), a Kurdish militia, from advancing on the town of Azaz. Though the stated objective was to push the IS further away from the border, what concerned Ankara more was the linkage of the three Kurdish cantons spread along its southern border. Turkey sees the YPG as a part of the outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). The operation, called 'Euphrates Shield', which reached as south as the commercial town of Al-Bab, managed to create a safe zone that covered a territory of around 2,000 sq km.

Two years on, Turkish troops still maintain garrisons inside the area, with much of the town's affairs managed by the Governor of the neighbouring Turkish province of Gaziantep. Turkish universities like Bahcesehir and Harran have either opened — or are in the process of opening — branches in Al-Bab and Jarablus towns, and elementary schools provide curriculum books printed in Turkey.

Ankara is also building an industrial zone and a large hospital that is to open its doors later this month, and Al-Bab's local council has even started issuing ID cards in Turkish and Arabic to local residents, a step that raises concerns about Turkey's real intentions.

Residents say living conditions have improved notably since the 2016 operation and services like electricity and water are gradually returning. Further, an "increasing number of kids [are] enrolling into schools", according to an aid worker.

Creation of 'safe zones'

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoan has long called for creation of such "safe zones" inside Syria to enable the return of Syrian refugees. His country hosts around 3.5 million Syrians, who fled their country following the eruption of the violence in 2011. In a statement in June, Mr. Erdoan claimed that 2,00,000 people had returned to northern Syria, vowing to "liberate" more areas along the border. However, the recent lira currency crisis could impact Turkey's ambitions.

Still, what concerns the locals more is the ever-shrinking territory held by fighters opposed to Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. The Syrian regime, under Russian air cover, is regaining control over the country by capturing one rebel territory after another. Mr. Assad considers Turkey's presence an occupation. But Turkey's coordination with Russia, Mr. Assad's main backer, is an obstacle for any attempt to change the status quo. Both countries are already engaged in negotiations to prevent any attack on the neighbouring province of Idlib, home to more than two million people. Mr. Erdoan's government fears another influx of refugees into Turkey in the wake of an attack on Idlib. In Al-Bab, people are following closely the developments in Idlib. Jamal Al-Othman, the head of Al-Bab's local council, seems confident that Turkey will protect them. "The Turkish presence is a guarantee for us. There's no fear of a regime comeback," he says.

However, people like Milad Shihabi, a resident in the area who fled Aleppo City more than a year ago, fear a deal that would throw them under the bus. "The Damascus government wants to reach the border crossing of Bab Al-Salamah near Azaz to reopen the trade routes all the way from the north to the south of the country... A scenario similar to that of Daraa [a town on the

southern border with Jordan where Russia brokered a deal which enabled the Syrian regime to retake the area] would be catastrophic."

As Ankara deepens its footprint in the border towns, playing a crucial role in reconstruction efforts, some locals have begun looking at the country as a bulwark against the Assad regime's comeback

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