

Turkey, the U.S., Russia, and the Syrian Civil War

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ABSTRACT *This commentary provides an analysis of the Turkey's relations with the U.S. and Russia in the context of the Syrian civil war. Owing much to the dynamics of the Syrian civil war and the American support to the PYD/YPG, Ankara has recently made considerable changes in its foreign policy and its relations with Washington and Moscow. As the U.S. government has failed to understand Turkey's security concerns, Turkey, despite being a NATO member, now seems to be closer to Moscow than to Washington.*

Although a member of NATO, which continues to stress its attachment to the alliance, in several policy areas Turkey is now closer to Moscow than to Washington. This paradox has been abruptly demonstrated by international reactions to the Turkish offensive in Northeastern Syria since October 2019. More broadly, it can also be seen as a delayed response to the end of the Cold War. Without the security threat from Russia, Turkish governments felt free to relax their relations with their northern neighbors, and develop political and economic relations with them. Changes in the Middle East have also been instrumental in this shift. Within the region, the

most important transformation of the past decade has been the dramatic decline of American power, combined with the unexpected re-emergence of Russia as a powerful actor, especially in Syria. On the one side, America's bitter experiences in Iraq between 2003 and 2012 sharply reduced domestic public support for any further military involvement in the region. America's interests must be protected, it was urged, but with the minimum number of American boots on the ground. On the other side, Vladimir Putin, apparently unhindered by parliamentary or media opposition, was anxious to reassert Russia's role as a global power after the disastrous years under Boris

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Yeltsin. In his campaign to rescue the Assad regime, as Russia's only firm ally in the region, and with Iranian support, he has been given an almost free hand in Syria. Turkey, like other regional actors, cannot openly resist this: to play any effective role it is obliged to work through Russia, like it or not.

The U.S., Russia, and the Syrian Civil War (2012-2017)

The turning point in this process began in August 2012, when President Barack Obama apparently pledged to take effective action if Bashar al-Assad's regime used chemical weapons in Syria's escalating civil war.¹ What form this action would take was unclear, but the unanswered question became impossible to ignore on August 21, 2013, when the Syrian regime forces used Sarin nerve gas against civilian targets in Eastern Ghouta, near Damascus, reportedly killing over 1,000 people. President Obama's response on August 31 was that he was prepared to launch missile attacks against Syrian government targets. He first went to Congress to ask permission for this, although he was not constitutionally obliged to do so.

In the event, the President's request was turned down without a floor vote in either House, although it would have limited the action to 60 days, with a possible extension to 90 days, and specifically prohibited the use of ground troops.²

Of course, we cannot know the exact extent of, or how effective, the threatened missile attacks against Syria in 2013 would have been. In the worst case scenario, the conflict could have escalated out of control, worsening rather than improving the plight of the Syrian people. Against this, it is strongly argued that if such an attack had been carried out at the time, Assad could have been forced to accept a ceasefire or even a settlement of the civil war, as large parts of his country were controlled by the rebels. As a result of America's inaction, Russia was able to seize the initiative. In September 2013, under pressure from both Washington and Moscow, the Syrian regime agreed to surrender its chemical weapons stocks, under international supervision,³ a process which was reported to have been completed by the summer of 2014.⁴

Tragically, the Western powers' failure to act put Russia in a position of dominance, and Assad was able to carry on the civil war for years to come. The result was the emergence of far more militant groups on the rebel side, notably the fanatics of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS or Daesh). This prolonged the war by some three to four years, making it hard for the west to identify who was the enemy Assad or Daesh. To escape



Turkish and U.S. troops conducted their second round of joint patrols in the northern Syrian city of Manbij on November 8, 2018.

Turkish Ministry of National Defense / Handout / AA Photo

appalling suffering, millions of Syrian refugees fled into neighboring countries, with at least 3.5 million in Turkey, and many trying to continue into Europe under heartrending conditions. Therefore, the Syrian civil war surged onto the doorstep of European states that had done nothing to stop it.

Turkey, Syria, and the Start of the Civil War (1998-2013)

The refugee influx came as the latest upheaval in the roller-coaster ride of Turkey's relations with Syria since the latter gained independence in 1946. Until 1998 there was almost constant tension between the two countries, caused by Syrian resistance to the annexation of Alexandretta province (Hatay) from Syria to Turkey in 1939. Later disputes arose over distribution

of the waters of the river Euphrates, flowing from Turkey into Syria, and above all by Syrian support for the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which carried out terrorist attacks on civilian as well as military targets in Turkey from bases in Syria.⁵ A turning point came in the winter of 1998-1999 when Hafez al-Assad, Syria's then President, came under direct military pressure from Turkey to end his support for the PKK. With the Soviet Union then approaching its death throes, and thus unable to act on his behalf, and with no support from the other Arab states, the Syrian President threw in the towel by expelling the PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan from Syrian-controlled territory in October 1998. After travelling to Russia, Italy, and Greece, Öcalan was captured by a Turkish security team, with the help of the CIA, in Nairobi in February 1999.

He was duly tried and imprisoned in Turkey. Meanwhile, in October 1998, Turkish and Syrian officials met in Adana to sign a historic agreement under which the Syrian side promised to stop supporting the PKK. A hotline was established between Ankara and Damascus to prevent future clashes, with joint inspection of security measures on both sides of the frontier.

The Turco-Syrian detente of 1998 ushered in an unprecedented honeymoon in relations, which lasted until the summer of 2011. Following the death of Hafez al-Assad in June 2000, Ahmet Necdet Sezer became the first Turkish President to set foot in Damascus when he attended the funeral. Bashar al-Assad, who had succeeded his father in what was virtually a hereditary dictatorship, paid a return visit to Ankara in January 2004. With over-optimistic hopes on both sides that Bashar would be more liberal and more open to the West than his father, there was a steady flow of mutual visits, a burgeoning of cross-frontier trade, the abolition of mutual visa requirements, and the establishment of a High Level Co-operation Council between the two countries. In effect Syria became the centerpiece of Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu's ambitious 'zero-problems with neighbors' strategy, which he hoped to expand into the rest of the region.

Tragically, this process was ended by the false dawn of the 'Arab Spring', and the Syrian regime's reaction to it. Initially, it was thought that the

'Spring' would not affect Syria, but when oppositional demonstrations broke out in March 2011 the regime reacted with predictable ruthlessness. This set off a civil war, which had killed almost 5,000 people by the end of the year. During April-May 2011 President Erdoğan, then the prime minister, tried a positive approach, by trying to persuade Assad to enact social and economic reforms so as to allay the discontent. When this proved fruitless, he changed his tune, describing the regime's crackdown on the opposition as 'savagery'. From now on, the overthrow of the Assad regime became the stated aim of the Erdoğan government. Over the following four years, it put this principle into practice by hosting a mainly Sunni Arab political resistance group currently known as the Syrian Interim Government, and an associated military organization, the Free Syrian Army (FSA), originally mainly made up of Sunni Arab deserters from Assad's army. After 2013, however, neither of these achieved much success, as the Damascus government gradually regained its strength, with Russian and Iranian support.

Turkey and the Syrian Kurds (2014-2018)

By 2014, attention was shifting back to the position of the Kurdish population of Northeastern Syria, with serious implications for Turkish foreign policy. In July 2012, Syrian government forces had withdrawn from the area, which then emerged as a sepa-

rate region, known as Rojava. This enjoyed *de facto* autonomy, under the control of the Kurdish Democratic Unity Party (PYD) and its military wing, the People's Protection Units (YPG). Initially, during 2013-2014, the Turkish government tried to reach an accord with the PYD, inviting its leader Salih Muslim to Ankara for secret talks in which it was proposed that the YPG should link up with the FSA in a joint platform against the Assad regime.⁶ Apparently, Muslim turned down the offer. Hence, he was strongly opposed by Ankara, which identified the PYD/YPG as the Syrian extension of the PKK, as did the Iraqi Kurdish leadership and (occasionally) U.S. officialdom.⁷

During 2014, ISIS established itself as the ruler of most of Eastern Syria and Northwestern Iraq. In September it began a fierce attack on the city of Kobani, just south of the border with Turkey and east of the Euphrates, and defended by the YPG. Although Turkey was officially committed to supporting the U.S.-led international coalition in Syria, and allowed coalition forces to use Turkish bases, it refused to become engaged in the battle for Kobani and denied their use unless Syrian regime forces were targeted. The furthest it was prepared to go was to allow some units of the FSA and Iraqi-Kurdish *peshmerga* fighters to join the Kurdish forces defending Kobani. Nevertheless, coalition air forces played a decisive role in the defeat of the ISIS attack.⁸ As a result, the U.S. military formed an effective alliance with the YPG against ISIS, rebranding the YPG and some other

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non-Kurdish militias under the umbrella title of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). This created a clear clash with Turkish policy.

With the eventual defeat of ISIS in the autumn of 2015, in which the SDF played a major role, Turkish policy-makers had to face the fact that their main strategic ally in NATO was now allied with an organization close to the PKK, which in turn controlled territory along most of its southern frontier. As the main instrument in the defeat of ISIS, it was bound to enjoy support in Western capitals, whatever its reputation in Turkey.

In August 2016, and in the face of this situation, Turkish forces took action in Syria by launching an independent offensive against ISIS forces, which controlled a 100-kilometer strip of the frontier, west of the area of SDF control, and up to the eastern borders of the Kurdish controlled enclave of Afrin. They began by capturing the town of Jarablus, just west of the Euphrates. 'Operation Euphrates Shield,' as it was called, took a long time to complete, as it was not until March

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2017, after a fierce battle for the ISIS strong-hold of al-Bab, that the operation was completed. The U.S. did not object, since the main target was ISIS, but Turkey also aimed to prevent the westward spread of SDF forces. In this, it was not entirely successful, since the SDF continued to hold the town of Manbij, west of the Euphrates.⁹ In January-February 2018 Turkish forces followed this up with 'Operation Olive Branch' in which they controlled the Afrin enclave, displacing the local Kurdish militias.¹⁰ As a result, the Turkish-Syrian border was now divided into three sections – firstly, in the west, along the southern frontier of the Turkish province of Hatay, where the Syrian side was controlled by Arab forces hostile to the Assad government. Next the Turkish controlled section between Afrin and the Euphrates, and finally the section under SDF/U.S. control, running up to Syria's eastern frontier with Iraq, about 600 kilometers long. What the PYD entitles the 'Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria' includes the triangle of territory between the Euphrates, the Turkish-Syrian frontier and Syria's eastern frontier with Iraq.

Turkey, Russia, and Syria (2015-2019)

Since 2015 Turkey's policy in Syria has also been profoundly influenced by its relations with Russia, now the dominant external actor in Syria along with Iran. With constant Russian air operations in northern Syria, Turkey complained of frequent violations of its frontier by Russian planes. This issue came to a head on November 24, 2015, when a Turkish F-16 fighter aircraft shot down a Russian SU-24 attack plane which Turkey claimed had entered Turkish territory, the violation was promptly denied by Russia. One of the crew of the SU-24 was rescued, but the other, who had ejected from his plane, was killed by local Turkmen militia. This infuriated President Putin, who engaged in a bitter war of words with President Erdoğan. In response, Russia banned imports of fruit and vegetables from Turkey, interrupted Turkey's overland trade with Central Asia and prevented Russian package tourists from visiting the country. All this caused serious losses to Turkish agriculture and the tourist industry.¹¹ Clearly, Turkey could not afford to have tense relations with both the U.S. and Russia simultaneously.

In the event, the crisis produced an important turnaround in relations between Ankara and Moscow. Initially, President Erdoğan refused to apologize for the shooting down of the Russian plane, but he had a strong economic as well as political incentive for healing the breach. The result was a round of intense secret

diplomacy involving the then Chief of the Turkish General Staff, General Hulusi Akar, the businessman and former Minister Cavit Çağlar, and the President of Kazakhstan, Nursultan Nazarbayev. As a result, a form of (Russian) words was found which President Putin could interpret as an apology, and was also acceptable to Erdoğan.¹² Following the ending of the ban on package tours for Russian visitors, the Turkish President flew to Moscow for talks with ‘my friend Vladimir.’ On the substantive issue of Syria he admitted that ‘without Russia’s participation it’s impossible to find an answer to the Syrian problem.’ Special links were established to prevent future clashes, including a direct hotline between the Russian and Turkish Chiefs of Staff. The Turkish government had not abandoned its fundamental commitment to the eventual removal of the Assad regime, but it now accepted the idea that Bashar al-Assad might remain in office during the hoped-for transition to a democratic system in Syria.

By the end of 2016, the rapprochement with Russia appeared to be producing some important results. With the recapture of Aleppo by the Syrian regime forces in December, the Turkish government reversed its previous position by accepting the *fait accompli*, marking a significant shift towards the Russian position. On December 20, 2016 it was announced that the Russian and Turkish governments had brokered a partial ceasefire between the regime and opposition forces, with the exclusion of ISIS and the al-Nusra Front, which were clas-

sified as terrorist organizations.¹³ On January 23, 2017, with talks in Astana, the capital of Kazakhstan, the Turkish and Russian representatives, plus representatives of Iran and the United Nations, together with the delegates of those rebel organizations, which had accepted the ceasefire, agreed to set up a mechanism to monitor the process.

After this initial success, however, the Russian-Turkish relationship hit serious problems. Two fundamental issues still divided the two sides. One was Turkey’s continuing refusal to support any resolution of the civil war, which would allow Bashar al-Assad to retain power. Against this Russia had to keep him in place, unless it were prepared to take the (for Russia) risky step of removing him by force and replacing him with an alternative ruler who would still serve Russian interests. Second was Russia’s continuing links with the PKK/PYD, which it refused to recognize as a terrorist organization. PKK/PYD was thus in the unusual position of apparently enjoying support from both Washington and Moscow, with Russia attempting to persuade the Turkish government to drop its opposition to the participation of the PYD in prospective peace talks in Geneva. An SDF spokesman was quoted as saying “the main purpose of our alliance with Russia [*sic*] is to keep Turkey off our backs” –referring to Turkish attacks on the SDF forces holding out in Manbij, paradoxically, with American support. However, this apparent alliance between Russia and PYD/YPG had evidently died out by the time of the Turkish capture of Afrin

Chief of the General Staff of the Turkish Armed Forces, Akar (C), Russian Armed Forces General Gerasimov (R) and Chairman of the U.S. Joint Staff General Dunford (L), held a trilateral meeting on the situation in Syria and Iraq on March 7, 2017 in Antalya, Turkey.

Turkish Ministry of National Defense / Handout / AA Photo



in January 2018. By this stage, Russia was evidently prepared to turn a blind eye to ‘Operation Olive Branch,’ since it was prepared to allow the Turkish air force a free hand in Afrin, which it could easily have prevented if it had chosen to do so. When pro-Syrian government militias attempted to enter Afrin on February 20, 2018, they were repelled by Turkish artillery – according to President Erdoğan, in agreement with President Putin, and President Rouhani of Iran.¹⁴

Following the recapture of Aleppo, and parallel advances in southern Syria by the regime forces, the main area in northern Syria still controlled by anti-regime militias was the Idlib province. In the attempt to carry through the Astana process, Turkey’s main role was to monitor the unofficial border between Idlib and areas now controlled by the Syrian

government forces. According to this program, and beginning in October 2017, Turkey established a series of twelve observation posts, manned by its own troops and elements of the Free Syrian Army. Within Idlib, the most powerful militia organization was the Islamist *Hey’et Tahrir al-Sham* (HTS), a branch (or reincarnation) of the previous al-Qaeda. Since the Syrian government refused to recognize HTS as a legitimate party to the ceasefire agreement, it continued to launch attacks against it, often with Russian aerial support. Hence, the rebel-held area was steadily whittled down during 2018-2019. As a result, the ceasefire monitoring operation seemed to be of little value.¹⁵

Meanwhile, and in spite of the tensions over Idlib, and the failure of previous efforts to bring peace to Syria by negotiation, Turkey, Russia, and Iran

began discussions aimed at ending the civil war, and hopefully reconstructing the country. Following the Astana meeting of January 2017, Presidents Putin, Rouhani, and Erdoğan met again the following November in the Russian Black Sea resort of Sochi, after which Erdoğan claimed that “we have agreed on an inclusive, free, fair, and transparent process.” According to Putin, the Syrian government would be committed to the peace process, constitutional reform, and free elections – although what this would mean in practice remained doubtful. The three governments set up what was ambitiously called the ‘Syrian Congress of National Dialogue’ at another meeting in Sochi in January 2018. However, the Syrian Negotiations Commission, the designated umbrella group for the Syrian opposition, voted not to attend, robbing the meeting of potential value. More trilateral meetings, supposed to advance the ‘Astana peace process’ were held in Ankara in April 2018, in Tehran the following September, and in Sochi in February 2019, with no clear progress being made.

The Crisis Erupts (2019)

By the summer of 2019, Turkish-American disputes were coming back onto the top of the agenda. These were only partly about Syria, since they were seriously exacerbated by the Erdoğan government’s decision to opt for the Russian S-400 missile defense system rather than a Western equivalent which would have been compatible with NATO equipment.

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Additionally, there is the continued residence in Pennsylvania of Fetullah Gülen, widely blamed for the botched military coup of July 15, 2016, whose extradition is repeatedly demanded by the Turkish government.

Arguments over Syria thus came on top of these other disagreements, but were potentially far more dangerous, since they could result in military clashes. During the summer of 2019 the Turkish government pressed for the creation of a ‘safe zone’ some 30 kilometers deep and running along Turkey’s southern frontier from the Euphrates to the Iraqi border. This was justified by the need to prevent terrorist attacks into Turkey, although most of the evidence was that PKK operations in Turkey were being internally organized, or from PKK bases in Iraq, not from Syria. Earlier ISIS terrorist attacks in Turkey were reported to have killed around 300 people, but these had effectively been eliminated by the defeat of ISIS by the end of 2017. In December 2018 President Trump had announced that, now that ISIS had been defeated, he would withdraw the 2,000 U.S. troops from Syria, potentially allowing a forward military move from Turkey. However, he later backtracked by saying that a ‘residual force’ would remain in the

region, with Ambassador James Jeffrey, U.S. Special Representative for Syria, claiming that the President had been ‘misunderstood.’¹⁶ On August 7, 2019, U.S. and Turkish officials reached agreement on setting up joint patrols along the southern side of the border, with a joint operations center established in southern Turkey. By October 4 three such patrols had been carried out.¹⁷ However, this did not satisfy President Erdoğan, who continued to demand a 30-kilometer ‘safe zone’ all along the border under Turkish control, with the Turkish armed forces making well-publicized preparatory moves for carrying out this operation.¹⁸

The break-point came later on in the evening of October 6, 2019, when President Trump called his Turkish counterpart to announce that U.S. troops would be withdrawn from the SDF zone. In the face of fierce criticisms from his domestic critics, he claimed that “it is time for us to get out of these ridiculous endless wars, many of them tribal, and bring our soldiers home.”¹⁹ In later messages, he appeared to be changing tack again by announcing that, “if Turkey does anything that I, in my great and unmatched wisdom, consider to be off limits, I will destroy and obliterate totally the Economy of Turkey (I’ve done before).” Pentagon spokesman Jonathan Hoffman also stated that “the Department of Defense made clear to Turkey –as did the president– that we do not endorse a Turkish operation in Northern Syria.” Trump’s domestic critics in Congress and elsewhere described his decision as a ‘di-

saster in the making,’ demonstrating a ‘complete lack of understanding of anything happening on the ground.’²⁰ According to a later statement by a U.S. official, the joint security mechanism, with joint patrols, had been working well, but in the crucial telephone conversation with Donald Trump of October 6, Tayyip Erdoğan had abruptly rejected it, insisting on his own maximalist position. The official added that Erdoğan had not been given a ‘green light’ for the operation,²¹ although it has to be added that Trump’s announcement that U.S. forces would be withdrawn from the area had that effect.

These declarations did not deter the Turkish side from launching its loudly signaled offensive in northern Syria on October 9, using regular army and air force units as well as FSA militias, now known as the ‘Syrian National Army.’ At the time of writing land and air attacks were continuing in the central section of the Turkish-Syrian border, with Kurdish sources stating that tens of thousands of civilians had left their homes.²²

Questions and Prospects

The outbreak of yet another local war has raised a host of critical issues, which can be considered in turn. First, what were the Turkish government’s actual objectives, and the likely domestic reactions? This question seems worth asking, since it was a dimension largely ignored by the international media. The need to prevent attacks from across Turkey’s southern

border was a legitimate one, but it was argued by President Erdoğan's many critics that his real objective was a project of drastic 'ethnic engineering' by resettling two to three million Syrian Sunni Arab refugees in the border area.²³ Whether the Kurdish inhabitants of the affected areas would be displaced to make way for this was unstated, although it should be borne in mind that much of the pre-civil war population of the border region was Arab or Turkmen rather than Kurdish – in many areas, entirely so.²⁴ The aim, evidently, was to create a zone of population along the border, which was expected to be pro-Turkish, but the plan also had the objective of meeting domestic demands for the reduction of the refugee burden in Turkey.

More broadly, it was suggested that Erdoğan's prime aim, was to burnish his nationalist credentials – in particular, his alliance with the ultra-nationalist Nationalist Action Party (MHP), on which he was reliant to maintain his parliamentary majority. For the opposition Republican People's Party (CHP), which had shown strong advances in most of Turkey's big cities in the local elections of June 2019, Deputy Group Chairman Faik Öztrak urged that the government had started an unnecessary war as a means of evading criticisms of its domestic economic and political failures. "They [the government] have brought the economy to ruins," he argued, "they are looking for a way out and do not abstain from driving Turkey into the Middle East swamp." "The shortest road to peace in Syria passes through the road from Ankara

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to Damascus," he suggested – repeating a long-held CHP line that Turkey should pull out of Syria altogether, and try to establish peace by direct talks with the Assad regime.²⁵

Even if the outcome of the Turkish operation was uncertain, it was clear by early October that it had set off the biggest crisis in relations between Turkey and the western powers since the clashes over Cyprus in 1963-1964, and 1974. In Washington, President Trump's critics now included several prominent members of his own party, who had previously supported him through thick and thin, but now promoted the idea of enforcing economic sanctions against Turkey.²⁶ Admittedly, the Turkish government could argue that the operation was in line with its right to self-defense under international law, as provided by UN Security Council Resolutions 1624 (2005), 2170, and 2178 (2014).²⁷ However, critics argued that it had gone way beyond that, with European countries issuing a joint statement calling for an immediate halt to the

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offensive. In an emergency session of the UN Security Council on October 10, Turkey was only saved from censure by the Russian delegation, which insisted on calling for the withdrawal of all ‘illegal’ foreign forces from Syria (that is, all but the Russian and Iranian forces, which had been officially invited to intervene by the Syrian government).²⁸

Second, how long would the fighting continue, and what were the military risks? A major point of doubt here was whether the U.S. government would impose economic sanctions on Turkey, in what conditions, and whether these would be effective in halting or significantly limiting the Turkish operation. On October 10, an unnamed U.S. official spelled out what Turkish actions would trigger U.S. sanctions, saying “[T]hat would include ethnic cleansing. It would in particular include indiscriminate artillery fire and other fire directed at civilian population.”²⁹ However, whether this would “destroy and obliterate totally the economy of Tur-

key,” as President Trump had threatened, remained in question. The U.S. is normally Turkey’s fourth biggest foreign trade partner, accounting for just over five percent of its total annual merchandise trade, but Turkey’s exports to the U.S. are usually much lower than its imports (in 2018, \$8.3 billion, compared to \$12.4 billion).³⁰ In other words, U.S. firms would suffer more from an embargo on trade with Turkey than their Turkish equivalents. However, the weak Turkish Lira would be vulnerable to sanctions on its financial institutions. A run on the Lira would increase the already high inflation rate in Turkey and badly damage the government’s domestic standing – the opposite of what it had set out to achieve.

A preliminary assumption was that the YPG/SDF would be isolated, and thus unable to put up lasting or effective resistance to Turkey’s powerful armed forces. By failing to pick up the olive branch, which had been offered in 2013-2014, they had painted themselves into a corner. Hence, they were dangerously reliant on their alliance with Washington, now under an unpredictable and impulsive President for whom foreign policy took second place to cultivating his domestic grassroots support. However, the YPG’s powers of resistance were far from negligible since, while its alliance with the U.S. lasted, it had received substantial stocks of modern weaponry, including armed drones and up-to-date training in defensive tactics. These had allowed the YPG to develop its urban warfare abilities, leading to its new strategy of urban guerrilla



warfare – just what it would need to resist the Turkish onslaught. According to one well-informed report:

The YPG has developed a new set of abilities that is transforming it into a regular army. Such capabilities include territorial control/area denial... sniper operations, indirect fire support... sophisticated-military engineering for tunnel warfare; building defensive perimeters in urban warfare; IED [Improvised Explosive Devices] and counter-IED operations, artillery and rocket fire support without line-of-sight availability; large-scale logistics movements; artillery forward observation [and] surveillance and reconnaissance with unmanned aerial vehicles.³¹

Given this, the Turkish army could be expected to have a hard fight on its hands, at least for some time, before the YPG's supplies were exhausted.

Another major military complication was the presence of large numbers of former ISIS militants and their families in camps located within the SDF's territories, including some near the frontier area. They included a reported 12,000 ISIS fighters, plus family members put at 60,000-74,000 in number, currently guarded by the SDF. The fear was that if these guards were drawn off by the fight against the Turkish army ISIS would be free to re-establish itself. Initially, it was unclear whether Turkey would take on responsibility for guarding the camps, or would try to return those prisoners of European origin to their home countries, as had been threatened.³²

Third, a crucial factor in all this – frequently ignored by western commentators – was the position and likely policies of Russia and Iran, which, as already emphasized, were now the dominant external actors in

A Syrian child holds a football in a camp built by AFAD in the Suruç district of Şanlıurfa, Turkey on January 16, 2018.

HALİL FIDAN / AA Photo

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Syria. There seemed little doubt that President Erdoğan would not have launched the latest offensive without a green light from Moscow, as he admitted that he had discussed it previously with President Putin.³³ In an interview on October 10, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov confirmed that, “we understand Turkey’s concerns over its border security.”³⁴ Put more bluntly, Russia and Iran were only too happy to see the U.S. forces withdrawn, and for the Turks to defeat America’s former allies, the YPG. However, this would evidently only be part of their grand strategy of securing the withdrawal from Syria of all foreign forces, which had not been invited by the Syrian government –including the Turks. This would be part of the re-establishment of the Assad’s rule throughout the country, with a return to the Adana Agreement of 1998 for the mutual suppression of the PKK (read, in this case, the YPG). In Lavrov’s words, “Russian and Turkish military officials are in contact over the operation. Now, we will try to establish a dialogue between Damascus and Ankara.”³⁵

While this might seem a logical, if morally repugnant, solution, there were huge obstacles to its realization.

In the first place, the unpredictable President Trump might be pressured by domestic opinion to go back on his commitment to end the alliance with the SDF, in which case Erdoğan would have to rapidly reconsider his options. Performing a U-turn, by recognizing and negotiating with Assad, as Russia required, would be a huge moral and political defeat for him, but there might be no other solution. Almost certainly, any deal between Ankara and Damascus would be hotly opposed by the FSA –trained and armed by Turkey and a primary source of its boots-on-the-ground in northern Syria. A deal with Assad could thus mean a counter-guerrilla war against two enemies at once. On the other hand, if Turkey rejected the idea of a dialogue with Damascus, Russia would exert maximum counter-pressure, creating a highly perilous situation for Turkey of being opposed by both Russia and the western powers simultaneously. In the worst case scenario Assad, aided by Russia, could restart the PKK campaign in Turkey, with chronic consequences. No one in the West could be expected to like this, but it seemed possible that the only practical way out would be a package deal between Turkey, Russia, and the Syrian regime. ■

Endnotes

1. In an apparently off-the-cuff comment, Obama, who had hitherto kept his distance from the Syrian conflict, had declared that moving or using large quantities of chemical weapons by the regime would cross a ‘red line,’ and would ‘change my calculus.’ According to a senior Washington official, “the idea was to put a chill into the Assad regime without trapping the president into any predetermined action.” See, Peter Baker, Mark

Lander, David E. Sanger, and Anne Barnard, "Off-the-Cuff Obama Line Put US in Bind on Syria," *The New York Times*, (May 4, 2013), retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/05/world/middleeast/obamas-vow-on-chemical-weapons-puts-him-in-tough-spot.html>.

2. For the full text of the proposed resolution, see, "S. J. Res. 21 (113th): Authorization for the Use of Military Force against the Government of Syria to Respond to Use of Chemical Weapons," (September 6, 2013), retrieved from <https://www.govtrack.us/congress/bills/113/sjres21>.

3. Julian Borger and Patrick Wintour, "Russia Calls on Syria to Hand over Chemical Weapons," *The Guardian*, (September 9, 2013), retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/sep/09/russia-syria-hand-over-chemical-weapons>.

4. That was actually appeared doubtful, notably in October 2017, when the UN found that the Syrian regime had used Sarin gas in an attack on the town of Khan Sheikhun in Idlib province the previous April, which killed more than 87 people. See, "Syrian Regime Responsible for Gas Attack on Rebel-Held Town, UN Finds," *The Guardian*, (October 26, 2017), retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/oct/26/syria-gas-attack-bashar-al-assad-un-tillerson>.

5. The writer has given a fuller account of these events, see, William Hale, *Turkish Foreign Policy since 1774*, third edition (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013).

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