

ISSUE BRIEF

Turkey's Syria Predicament

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Turkey's strategy and policies have profoundly shaped the course of the war in Syria, as well as the insurgency's character and fortunes, but not always as Turkey intended. Turkey is the regional party most responsible for the emergence of a serious rebellion in Syria, but miscalculations about the regional and international environment, a narrow approach to handling the armed opposition, and failure by Turkey and its allies in the West and Middle East to manage their conflicting priorities have damaged Turkish interests in Syria. At the same time, the local players and military balance in Syria have come to reflect some of the tenets and contradictions of Turkey's policies. Inevitably, Turkish-Kurdish tensions also have risen dramatically as the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) has captured substantial areas of Syria.

In August 2011, President Barack Obama became the first foreign leader to call on Syrian President Bashar al-Assad to leave power amid widespread anti-regime protests. Pro- and anti-regime Syrians, Turkey, and other regional states mistakenly read this as a US commitment to Assad's removal, whereas it apparently was meant to convey the president's preference, rather than his policy. Some media, analysts, and US officials attributed the opposition's militarization largely to its mistaken assumption that the United States would come to its rescue, as well as to Saudi-Iranian proxy competition. There is some truth to this, but it leaves out a crucial element, because it does not grant Turkey either agency or credit in nurturing a Syrian armed opposition.

Unlike the distant Gulf states, which merely gave money and weapons to the rebellion, Turkey established cross-border rebel supply lines into northern Syria and hosted Syrian dissidents, defectors, and rebels. Their presence in Turkey and the latter's physical proximity to the war also made it sensitive to the insurgency's character, while allowing it to dominate many Syrian Arab and Turkmen-majority rebel groups. Unlike other backers of the opposition, Turkey reacted to the war by trying to build a specific, defined long-term political order in Syria. Whereas the United States has largely focused on managing the threat from jihadist groups, and Saudi Arabia supported groups it judged to be most effective against the regime, with less regard for ideology, Turkey sought out and strengthened ideologically compatible partners that produced military results.

The Atlantic Council's Rafik Hariri Center for the Middle East studies political and economic dynamics in the Middle East and recommends US, European, and regional policies to encourage effective governance, political legitimacy, and stability.

Turkey initially hoped to use the Syrian nationalist defectors already in Turkey against the Assad regime, but weak US support for them, along with disorganization and internal rivalries among their regional supporters, made them an unappealing option. Turkey, therefore, sought more committed and capable fighters already in place in Syria—usually Islamists linked to the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, independent moderate Islamist or nationalist groups, and hardline Salafi Islamist factions.¹ Turkey's interests only partly related to the conflict between the insurgents and regime; above all, concern over Kurdish expansionism in Syria, magnified by Turkey's own domestic Kurdish issues, deeply influenced its actions in Syria and its dealings with both Arab and Kurdish Syrian groups. Additionally, ethnic/nationalist affinities (and long-established direct personal links) with Syrian Turkmen communities also shaped official thinking in Turkey.

This combination of strategic and more parochial factors—misreading of American intentions, the shortcomings of the opposition's other regional supporters, the ideological views of Turkey's regional role, geography, and the Kurdish problem's centrality in Turkish thinking—explain much of Turkey's decision-making and its impact on the insurgency and balance of power in Syria. Whatever its successes or failures in Syria, Turkey remains the most important external, pro-opposition actor there. It retains core interests in the war's outcome, although Russia's recent military offensive has seriously challenged these and altered the conflict's trajectory.

This issue brief examines Turkey's Syria policy, its implications for Turkish domestic politics, including concurrent peace talks with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), its impact on the Syrian insurgency and course of the war, and the implications for US policy. The authors recognize that all of Turkey's policies took shape in complex and highly constraining geopolitical and regional contexts. The analysis acknowledges these contexts, including the effects on Turkish

calculations of serious mistakes by allies—not least the United States—and real threats from enemies; the main focus, however, is on Turkey's actions, as well as its reactions to developing events.

The Roots of Turkey's Syria Policy

The architect of the Justice and Development Party's (AKP's) foreign policy, current Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, argued that Turkey's history and unique geography allowed it to act as a “center state,” deepening its influence with countries in its near periphery by abolishing visa restrictions and trade barriers. Dubbed “Strategic Depth,” this strategy presumed that the deep rooted antipathy between Turkey and the Arab world were byproducts of the Ottoman state's collapse and Western colonialism's subsequent role in creating the modern Middle East. Davutoğlu argued that this import of Western nationalism, anchored to secular strongmen and repressive regimes, was an unsustainable status quo and was incompatible with the modern Middle East's political realities. The region's Baathist regimes and monarchies would, therefore, be overthrown eventually and replaced by governments that would be representative of the Muslim masses. These perceived political inevitabilities, combined with Turkey's more robust presence in its near periphery, would eventually result in its having “zero problems with its neighbors.”²

The AKP therefore began to deepen ties with Bashar al-Assad in 2002, building on its political predecessors' efforts to strengthen economic relations with Syria after Hafez al-Assad withdrew support for the PKK in 1998. This yielded tangible results: The countries signed a free trade agreement, which entered into force in 2007, and abolished visa requirements in 2009. Therefore, at the outset of the uprising in Syria, the Turkish government initially sought stable relations with the Assad regime. In the first months of the 2011 “Arab Spring,” Ankara

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1 Jennifer Cafarella and Genevieve Casagrande, “Syrian Opposition Guide,” Institute for the Study of War, October 7, 2015, http://understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Syrian%20Opposition%20Guide_0.pdf.

2 Ahmet Davutoglu, *Stratejik Derinlik* (Istanbul: Kure Yayinlari, 2001); Republic of Turkey, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Interview by Mr. Ahmet Davutoglu published in AUC Cairo Review (Egypt),” March 12, 2012, http://www.mfa.gov.tr/interview-by-mr_-ahmet-davuto%C4%9Flu-published-in-auc-cairo-review-_egypt_-on-12-march-2012.en.mfa; Aaron Stein, *Turkey's New Foreign Policy: Davutoglu, the AKP and the Pursuit of Regional Order* (London: Routledge, 2014).



Turkish army tanks manoeuvre as Turkish Kurds watch over the Syrian town of Kobani from atop a hill near Mursitpınar border crossing in the southeastern Turkish town of Suruc in Sanliurfa province October 11, 2014.
 Photo credit: REUTERS/Umit Bektas.

feared the Syrian regime's collapse would drive thousands of refugees to Turkey and allow the PYD to take advantage of the chaos to declare an independent Kurdish state in northern Syria.³ The PYD is the Syrian branch of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), a US-, EU-, and Turkish-designated terrorist group that has waged an insurgency in Turkey for three decades.

Between March and late-August 2011, in the Syrian uprising's early days, Turkey pressured Assad to make concessions to the protesters in the form of minor reforms, designed to appease the demonstrators rather than radically alter the Syrian state's composition. Eventually, however, the Syrian regime's increasingly violent crackdown on protesters, coupled with strong official encouragement from the United States, prompted then-Prime Minister Erdoğan to publicly call on Bashar al-Assad to step down in early September 2011.

3 BBC Monitoring Europe – Political, "Turkish Daily Says Ankara on Alert over Escalating Tension in Syria," April 26, 2011, LexisNexis database.

The Policy of Regime Change

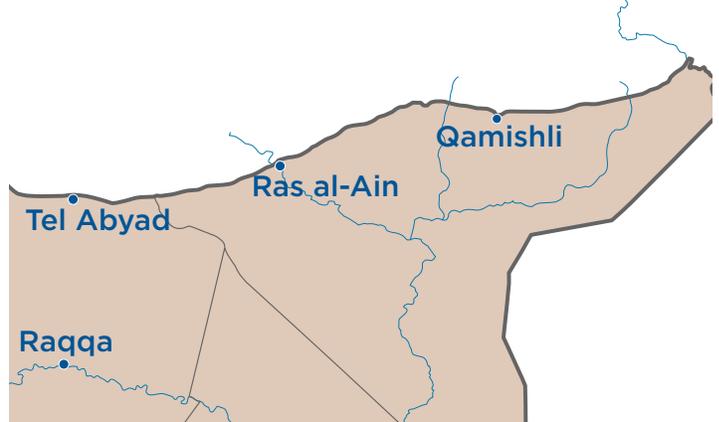
This shift in Turkish policy regarding Assad overlapped with the first wave of Syrian refugees entering Turkey. Among them were several Syrian military defectors who, from Turkish-built refugee camps, began to coordinate arms deliveries to the nascent rebel forces. In late 2011, Turkey and several Gulf Arab states took the lead in this effort and in forming a Syrian political opposition organization, the Syrian National Coalition (SNC). Arms deliveries were initially coordinated through Esenboğa airport in Ankara to Free Syrian Army forces, which comprised military defectors and, from mid-2011, more Islamist-leaning factions as well.⁴

4 C.J. Chivers and Eric Schmitt, "Arms Airlift to Syria Rebels Expands, With Aid From C.I.A.," *New York Times*, March 24, 2013, http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/25/world/middleeast/arms-airlift-to-syrian-rebels-expands-with-cia-aid.html?_r=0; United Nations Security Council, "Final report of the Panel of Experts established pursuant to resolution 1973 (2011) concerning Libya," S/2013/99, March 9, 2013, pp. 35-39, available at: http://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s_2013_99.pdf.

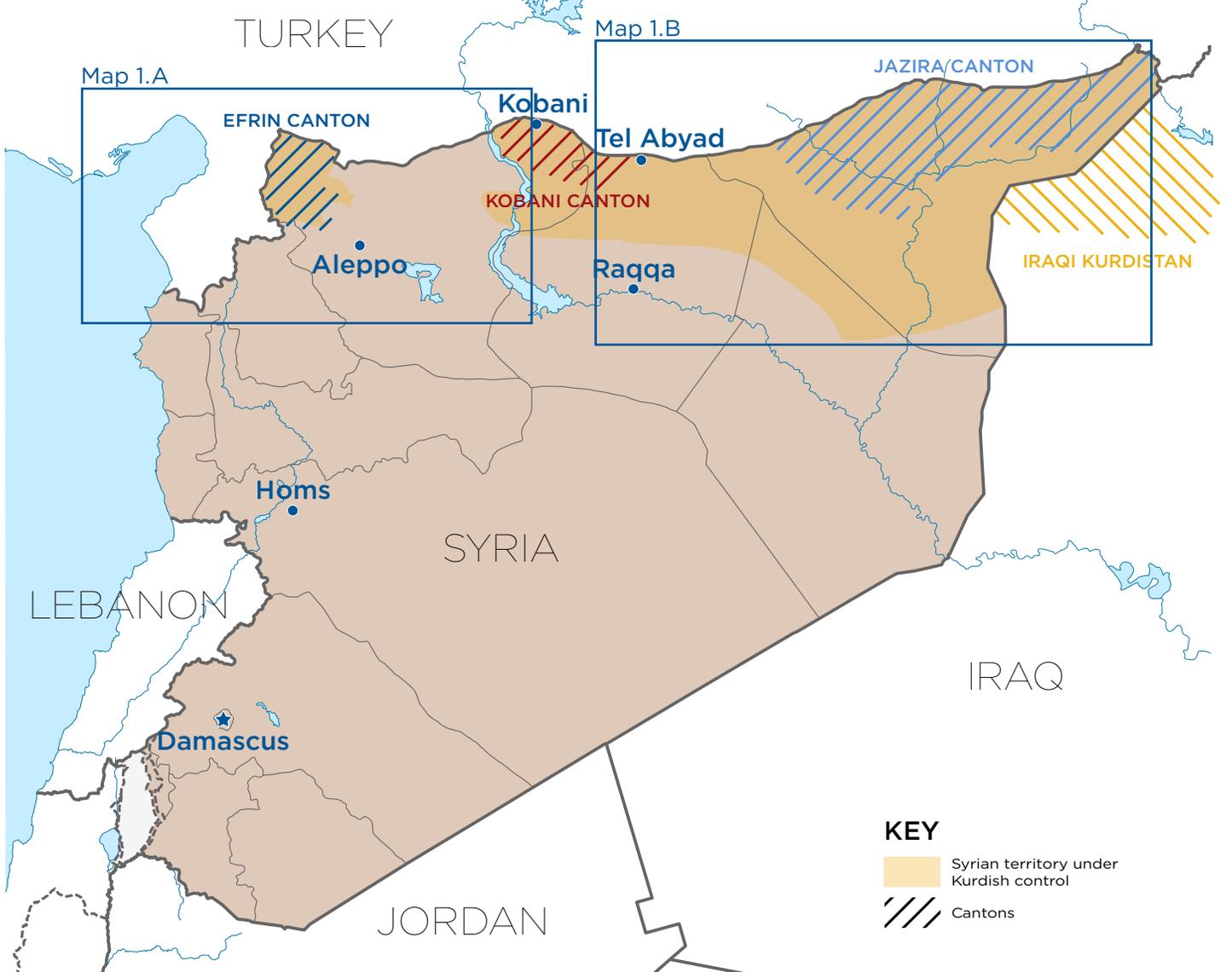
Map 1.A Key Locations in Northwestern Syria



Map 1.B Key Locations in Northeastern Syria



Map 1.C Original Cantons and Areas of Kurdish Control as of April 1, 2016



The Turkish government also proposed establishing a safe zone in northern Aleppo and Idlib provinces, to protect the rebels from regime air strikes. It envisioned establishing an opposition government in this territory, ready to replace Assad upon his removal.⁵ Turkish thinking was informed by the US imposition of “no fly zones” in northern and southern Iraq after the 1991 Gulf War, which permitted mostly-Kurdish Iraqi refugees who had fled to Turkey to return to Iraq.

Turkey's initial strategy sought safe zones along the border to empower nationalist rebels and put military pressure on Assad. By late-2012, however, al-Qaeda-affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra (the Nusra Front) had emerged as an important component of the insurgency. The various rebel groups active in Idlib and elsewhere had come to rely on its suicide bombers in anti-regime offensives. The Nusra Front, in turn, integrated itself with the insurgency and played down its links to al-Qaeda. This strategy—which al-Qaeda central has embraced—helped the Nusra Front attract substantial support from the mainstream opposition.

Turkey, however, prioritized defeating the Syrian regime and helping Syrian civilians over what it saw as the short-term problem of jihadist organizations—a policy at odds with the US focus on potential terrorist threats. It imposed few restrictions on entry into Syria from Turkey (although other European countries also failed to share adequate intelligence with Turkey to interdict suspected foreign fighters).⁶ As a result, an estimated 2.7 million de facto Syrian refugees remain in Turkey, of whom 280,000 reside in settlement camps. The open border policy near Arab-majority areas of Syria also allowed masses of both Syrian and foreign fighters to cross into Syria to

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join the insurgency. Many among them, especially the foreign fighters, joined the Nusra Front and later, ISIS.

In Turkey's southeast, where there is a Kurdish-majority however, the government pursued a different border strategy, owing to concerns about an empowered PYD seizing Syria's Kurdish-majority areas. This section of the border is mined, and the official crossings have been closed for years, due to the related PKK threat.

The Syrian Conflict and Turkey's Kurdish Issue

After the regime withdrew from the Turkish border in mid-July 2012, the PYD took control over three non-contiguous “cantons”—Jazira, Kobani, and Efrin—that it collectively calls Rojava (West Kurdistan). There, the PYD established a governing structure modeled on PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan's vision of autonomous governance. Turkey adopted a two-pronged policy towards the Syrian Kurds in 2012: It opened peace negotiations with Öcalan, agreeing to a ceasefire with the PKK in 2013; then, the government sought to undercut the PYD political dominance in Syria by pressuring it to join with the Turkish-backed Syrian opposition, while also supporting Kurdish political groups linked to Turkish ally Masoud Barzani.⁷

The PYD's rise in Syria brought it into conflict with the mostly-Arab anti-Assad insurgents, particularly near the border towns of Ras al-Ain and Tel Abyad in 2012 and 2013. For nearly a year, the PYD's militia, the People's Protection Units (YPG), clashed with elements of the Free Syrian Army, some of whom fought alongside the Nusra Front.⁸ The YPG eventually became the dominant force in the area, displacing potential Kurdish rivals allied with Barzani, whom Turkey preferred.⁹ Partly based on these early battles, the PYD would frame the anti-Assad opposition

5 Aaron Stein, “The Origins of Turkey's Buffer Zone in Syria,” *War on the Rocks*, December 11, 2014, <http://warontherocks.com/2014/12/the-origins-of-turkeys-buffer-zone-in-syria/>.

6 Ninety-three percent of the foreign fighters listed in the ISIL files, which “provides an accurate assessment and understanding of who exactly was joining the group in 2013 and 2014,” entered Syria through Turkey. See: Brian Dodwell, Daniel Milton, and Don Rassler, “The Caliphate's Global Workforce: An Inside Look at the Islamic State's Foreign Fighter Paper Trail,” *Combating Terrorism Center*, West Point, April 2016, <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/the-caliphates-global-workforce-an-inside-look-at-the-islamic-states-foreign-fighter-paper-trail>.

7 *Flight of Icarus?: The PYD's Precarious Rise in Syria*, International Crisis Group, Middle East Report, no. 151, May 8, 2014, pp. 2-3, <http://www.crisisgroup.org/-/media/Files/Middle%20East%20North%20Africa/Iraq%20Syria%20Lebanon/Syria/151-flight-of-icarus-the-pyd-s-precarious-rise-in-syria.pdf>.

8 “Marsad Auriant al-Hududi: Al-Jaysh al-Hurr Yusaytar 'ala Kamil al-Hudud Sharqan (Orient's Border Monitor: The Free Syrian Army Controls all of the Border in the East),” *Orient News*, November 22, 2014, <http://www.orient-news.net/ar/>.

9 Al-Hududi, *op. cit.*, pp. 6-7.

as dominated by Turkish-backed Islamist extremists and inseparable from the Nusra Front and, later, ISIS.

The YPG-ISIS battle for the border town of Kobani from summer 2014 to early 2015 crystallized Turkey's Syria policy and, as importantly, its profound disagreement with the United States over the desired means and ends relating to the Syrian conflict. The rise of ISIS, and particularly its capture of Mosul in 2014, had shifted US attention from aiding the insurgency against Assad—which had always been a limited effort—to degrading and destroying ISIS. It needed an ally in Syria that would meet several criteria: it should function as a mobile expeditionary force in or near the areas held by ISIS; it should not espouse an Islamist ideology; and, perhaps most importantly, it would not drag the United States into an armed confrontation with regime forces. The YPG met all these criteria, given their location near ISIS's heartland, their relative mobility, their secular ideology, and their cold peace and occasional cooperation with the regime. The United States essentially based its Syria strategy—actually an anti-ISIS strategy—on the YPG.

US military intervention on the YPG's behalf allowed the latter to keep Kobani and eventually take territory from ISIS. This US-Kurdish partnership antagonized Turkey, which viewed the PYD's territorial expansion as a serious long-term threat. Turkey warned the United States and PYD against the group's taking territory west of the Euphrates River, which would allow the PYD to connect all three Kurdish cantons along the Turkish border. The area west of the river and separating these cantons is held by various groups, including ISIS in and around Manbij. Thus far, Turkey's warning has apparently deterred the United States from supporting a PYD offensive against ISIS-held towns of Manbij and Jarablus, but these areas will have to be cleared of ISIS to enable a US-backed offensive to take ISIS's capital in Raqqa.¹⁰

To overcome this disagreement, the United States is asking Turkey to put pressure on rebel groups it backs near Azaz and Marea, Aleppo province, to cooperate with Arab insurgents allied with the YPG. This collection of Arab militias and the YPG has been dubbed the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF).¹¹ Turkey has refused

to support these groups owing to their alliance with the YPG, but does allow American aircraft based at Incirlik air base in Adana to fly strike missions on their behalf. Turkey favors a different strategy altogether, and is asking that the United States withdraw support for the YPG and convince Arab SDF members to form a new, YPG-free fighting group with Turkish-backed rebels along the current front line with ISIS near Marea. The United States would then expand the scope of its air strikes in the area to support an Arab-majority offensive to take territory from ISIS. This US-Turkish disagreement has slowed plans to oust ISIS from its last stronghold along the Turkish border, delaying a planned SDF-led offensive on Raqqa.

Russia has exploited this US-Turkish disagreement in recent months, cultivating ties with YPG elements in the, as-yet isolated, Kurdish canton of Efrin (where the United States has no presence) and with the PYD. In February, the PYD opened an office in Moscow—a move that helps to decrease the group's isolation, owing to its links to the PKK.¹²

In early February 2016, Syrian regime forces, backed by Russian air strikes, broke the rebel siege on Nubl and Zahraa, north of the city of Aleppo.¹³ This severed the Kilis-Azaz-Aleppo supply route to Turkish-backed insurgents, leaving the Cilvegözü/Bab al-Hawa border gate near Reyhanlı as Turkey's sole supply line to rebels in Idlib and in Aleppo city. The heavy rotation of Russian flights and indiscriminate bombing in northern Aleppo also allowed Kurdish units based in Efrin to attack eastward into the Turkish-backed insurgents' territory and frontlines with ISIS. These military developments seriously undermined Turkey's previously dominant position in northern Syria. The YPG, with US backing, now controls the entire Turkish-Syrian border east of the Euphrates, and is well-positioned to connect its westernmost canton in Efrin by targeting rebel- and ISIS-held areas, perhaps as part of the expected efforts to clear ISIS from the Manbij pocket.

Syria Deeply, January 22, 2016, <http://www.syriadeeply.org/articles/2016/01/9346/origins-syrian-democratic-forces-primer/>.

12 "PYD opens office in Moscow, inauguration attended by HDP deputy," *Daily Sabah*, February 11, 2016, <http://www.dailysabah.com/diplomacy/2016/02/11/pyd-opens-office-in-moscow-inauguration-attended-by-hdp-deputy>.

13 Faysal Itani and Hossam Abouzahr, "The Military and Political Significance of Aleppo," *SyriaSource*, Atlantic Council, February 3, 2016, <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/syriasource/the-military-and-political-significance-of-aleppo>.

10 "Turkey says west of Euphrates 'red line' in northern Syria," *TRT World*, July 1, 2015, <http://www.trtworld.com/turkey/turkey-says-west-euphrates-red-line-northern-syria-3972>.

11 Aron Lund, "Origins of the Syrian Democratic Forces: A Primer,"

The State of Play inside Turkey and Syria

Turkey: The Syrian Conflict Spills over the Border

Turkey's close relations with Islamist rebel groups in Syria profoundly affected the government's peace negotiations with the Kurdistan Workers' Party. The concurrent war between Turkish-backed Arab insurgents in Syria and the PKK-linked PYD further polarized Turkish politics, and brought the war home to many Kurds in Turkey's southeast.

Tensions increased in 2013, after the Nusra Front, the Islamist Ahrar al-Sham, and ISIS jointly fought the YPG for the Ras al-Ain border gate.¹⁴ The fighting prompted a number of Turkish Kurds to come to the YPG's aid, crossing the border into Qamishli in northeast Syria, then deploying to the front line. The Kurdish dead were sent to Turkey for burial at several well-attended funerals in different towns and cities between 2013 and 2015. At least twice, children of elected officials of the Kurdish Democratic People's Party (HDP) died fighting with the YPG, underscoring the growing links between events in Syria and Turkey's southeast.¹⁵ The HDP is Turkey's third largest party by representation in parliament.

The battle for Kobani exacerbated these tensions and created a tripartite, interrelated Kurdish-Turkish conflict that helped undermine government-PKK peace talks in 2015.¹⁶ Turkey moved troops and tanks to the

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border near Kobani, but did not come to the YPG's aid, no doubt due to concerns about supporting a PKK-linked group. Turkey's military action also blocked people from crossing into Syria to fight with the YPG. This part of the border historically was poorly policed, allowing Kurdish youth to cross back and forth. Thus, Kurdish anger was not over Turkey's refusal to intervene militarily, but rather at its perceived attempts to prevent Kurds from joining the anti-ISIS fight; this reinforced the deeply held conviction among a large subset of Turkey's Kurdish population that the Turkish government supports ISIS. Ankara eventually did allow Peshmerga to transit its territory to join with the YPG, but, while helpful, the presence of Barzani-allied Peshmerga forces served to reinforce Syrian Kurdish perceptions that Turkey was trying to gain more influence over the course of events, rather than to seriously help the YPG against ISIS.

More broadly, US intervention on the YPG's behalf transformed Turkey's Syria policy. The Turkish government has sought to pressure the PYD to join the formal Syrian opposition against the regime. Turkey argues that the regime and the PYD are empowering ISIS by weakening the mainstream, mostly Arab opposition. Thus the Turkish government often speaks of a de facto tripartite alliance, wherein Kurdish and regime gains bolster ISIS at the expense of the anti-Assad insurgency. In turn, according to Turkey's reading, eliminating the opposition makes the point to the West that the regime and the PYD are the only forces available to fight ISIS.

Turkey and the Jihadist Problem

Turkey now faces longer-term policy problems, stemming from its early border policy and approach toward elements of the insurgency, particularly in northern Syria. Turkey's most extreme critics claim AKP-led Turkey is a jihadist state in disguise, and that extremist groups are its natural allies. A more nuanced, and more accurate, view is that Turkey sees some benefit in allowing extremists to fight the PYD and the Syrian regime, and sees the cost of defeating the former as unacceptable at present. Regardless, Turkey's single-minded focus on the PYD and regime apparently

¹⁴ Lister, *The Syrian Jihad*, op. cit., p. 153.

¹⁵ "BDP'li Başkanın oğlunu IŞİD öldürdü," *Hürriyet*, June 29, 2014, <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/bdpli-baskanin-oglunu-isis-old-urdu-26706467>; More broadly, Kurds from Turkey total 49.24 percent of the YPG's self-reported casualties between January 2013 and January 2016, according to an ongoing Atlantic Council study. YPG martyrdom notices show that 359 Turkish citizens, 323 Syrians, 32 Iranians, seven Iraqis, two Australians, two Azeris, and a person from England, Germany, Greece, and the United States each have been killed fighting with the group since January 2013. To be sure, there are methodological problems with the data: The two authors relied on self-reported numbers and have not been able to cross-reference this information with the PYD. See: Aaron Stein and Michelle Foley, "The YPG-PKK Connection," *MENASource*, Atlantic Council, January 26, 2016, <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/the-ypg-pkk-connection>.

¹⁶ Cale Salih and Aaron Stein, "How Turkey misread the Kurds," *Al Jazeera*, January 20, 2015, <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2015/01/how-turkey-misread-kurds-201511910421859659.html>.



A member of the Nusra Front carries his weapon as he squats in the town of the northwestern city of Ariha, after a coalition of insurgent groups seized the area in Idlib province May 29, 2015. *Photo credit: REUTERS/Ammar Abdullah.*

made it tolerate foreign fighter flows across the Syrian border from 2011 to 2014. This provided extremist groups with recruits and freedom of movement, and allowed cross-border networks to emerge that helped to sustain these groups economically.¹⁷ One unintended result is that the Nusra Front became a powerful entity in and beyond northern Syria. ISIS eventually captured entire provinces in Syria and two major urban population zones, along with substantial oil reserves and infrastructure, emerging as one of the strongest and most well-resourced fighting groups.

Turkey's approach does not mean that it endorses extremism. Its thinking is more complex, and perhaps even paradoxical. Turkish officials correctly saw the jihadists' usefulness against their enemies, but also

early on in the conflict seemed to dismiss them as a marginal (or, at least, not an urgent) threat to Turkey itself—and, tangentially, as a minor component in what remained a broadly nationalist anti-Assad insurgency. Turkey also seems to see the Nusra Front as focused only on the war against the Assad regime and not on attacks against the West; by this logic, it could be co-opted into the broader insurgency. In the meantime ISIS could wait—it could simply be destroyed later with a “comprehensive strategy” that includes the ousting of Assad, whom Turkey blames for the rise of ISIS.¹⁸ Turkey eventually would attack ISIS in mid-2015, but it has maintained an ambivalent attitude toward the Nusra Front, giving support to the Jaysh al-Fateh coalition, whose members includes the Nusra Front, Ahrar al-Sham, and various other groups affiliated with Free Syrian Army (FSA).

17 Ben Taub, “The ISIS Oil Trade, From the Ground Up,” *New Yorker*, December 4, 2015, <http://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/the-isis-oil-trade-from-the-ground-up>; Mike Giglio, “This Is How ISIS Smuggles Oil,” *Buzzfeed*, November 3, 2014, <http://www.buzzfeed.com/mikegiglio/this-is-how-isis-smuggles-oil#.mwq-9jXJD0r>.

18 Daniel Dombey, “Alarm over rise of al-Qaeda linked Jihadists in Syria,” *Financial Times*, November 1, 2013, <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/463a78a6-4216-11e3-bb85-00144feabdc0.html#ax-zz41CDn9Dus>.

The debate in media and policy circles over blame for the jihadists' rise in Syria has been heated and often dishonest. Regime and PYD supporters deny any culpability, and instead blame the insurgency's foreign patrons, not least Turkey. The insurgency's supporters tend to blame the regime's large-scale violence and overtly sectarian war strategy, PYD belligerence and cooperation with the regime, and the US failure to support non-jihadist rebel groups. All these factors certainly helped radicalize the insurgency, but lax border control helped internationalize it, thus indirectly facilitating ISIS's rise. Also, by tolerating rather than trying to weaken the Nusra Front, Turkey allowed it time and resources to embed itself in the rebellion and eventually dominate Idlib province.

The Nusra Front's rise brought the opposition significant short-term military benefits, providing a committed, disciplined attack force against difficult regime targets. Eventually, however, the jihadists became yet another threat to the insurgents, who found themselves fighting the regime, ISIS, YPG, and occasionally the Nusra Front as well. The latter alternated between attacking rebel militia and fighting alongside them against the regime and ISIS. At some point, rebel groups simply became stuck with the Nusra Front, unable either to defend against it or forsake it as a powerful tactical ally against the regime. Its presence within the insurgency also made it easy for enemies (and ostensible international friends as well) to portray the rebels as extremists. The February 2016 International Syrian Support Group agreement on cessation of hostilities in Syria highlighted this quandary. The terms, and subsequent US statements, implied that insurgents operating with, or alongside, the Nusra Front were legitimate targets.¹⁹ This perverse situation demonstrated quite clearly the insidious threat the Nusra Front posed to the insurgency.

The Insurgency's Character

Even by the Syrian civil war's standards, northern Syria presents a complicated and fractious insurgent landscape. This has given foreign states opportunities to persuade, coerce, and otherwise manipulate armed groups in their interests. Throughout the conflict, the various rebel groups' fortunes rose and fell. Some were

destroyed, others were folded into more powerful, usually Islamist, groups that eventually dominated the northern insurgency. While the Nusra Front and ISIS receive the greatest international attention, it is these other Islamist groups that truly transformed and dominated the rebel landscape.

After experimenting with various groups and alliances, Turkey eventually built its strategy around the Islamic Front (Jabhat al-Islamiya) insurgent coalition, dominated by the hardline Salafi-Islamist group Ahrar al-Sham. Ahrar al-Sham fought well and governed relatively effectively alongside the Nusra Front. While not a transnational jihadist group like the Nusra Front and ISIS, it had significant historical and ideological ties to al-Qaeda and cannot credibly be described as 'moderate' or nationalist. The success of Ahrar al-Sham and other hardline groups therefore shifted the entire northern insurgency to a more radical point on the Islamist spectrum. Less ideological insurgent groups struggled and came to depend on the hardline Ahrar al-Sham for protection against the still more extreme Nusra Front, which attacked them on several occasions.²⁰

Groups like Ahrar al-Sham made remarkable military strides in an immensely hostile environment, but Turkey's insurgent strategy was arguably short-sighted. Rather than encourage a grass-roots popular revolution, the insurgency's radicalization alienated potential Syrian and international supporters.²¹ It sidelined nationalist groups, instead of widening the war effort's popular base. It also weakened what elements of civil society and inclusive governance had survived regime bombardment of opposition areas. Moreover, it deepened Kurdish suspicion of the Sunni-Arab opposition, and allowed the PYD to portray its territorial expansion as a war on extremism, thereby winning essentially unconditional US support. Worst of all for the rebellion and Turkey alike, the joint failure of Turkey and the international community to stop cross-border fighter flows early in the revolution strengthened ISIS. ISIS proved unwilling to fight the regime, unable to fight the Kurds, and focused on weakening the insurgency instead. The ISIS problem became the basis for the US military partnership with the PYD that gave

19 Marc C. Toner, Daily Press Briefing, Department of State, February 22, 2016, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/dpb/2016/02/253123.htm>; Erika Solomon, "Fears Syria ceasefire could intensify fighting," *Financial Times*, February 25, 2016, <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/b4446756-dbb8-11e5-98fd-06d75973fe09.html#axzz41CDn9Dus>.

20 Erika Solomon, "Nusra fighters oust moderate rebels from Syria stronghold," *Financial Times*, November 3, 2014, <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/1ea89a66-6335-11e4-8a63-00144feabdc0.html#axzz41f6H1Jp>.

21 To be sure, the United States was not likely to have intervened in Syria anyway, but regional powers may well have considered it.

the latter major territorial gains in Syria—a catastrophe for both the insurgents and Turkey.

The radicalization of a significant segment of the Syrian insurgency was driven by many factors, including extreme regime violence against primarily Sunni victims; the role of sectarian Shia militias in suppressing the rebellion; the threat posed to Sunni Arabs by Kurdish expansionism; and the absence of competent and committed international backers willing to invest in and protect a nationalist Syrian opposition. The blame, therefore, does not fall on Turkey alone. It was not responsible for any of these drivers, which can be blamed on the regime, its foreign backers (including Russia and Iran), and indeed US policy. The United States refused to commit to building a nationalist Syrian opposition, failed to protect civilians from regime violence, and encouraged PYD expansion; all of which fueled the jihadist problem. Yet Turkey's strategy undoubtedly contributed to developments that undermined its own interests, including Ankara's primary goals of weakening the regime and containing the PYD.

Geopolitical and International Dimensions

Turkey's Syria policy highlighted differences with other states invested in the Syrian conflict—especially Russia and the United States—and its own limitations. By working against the regime and shooting down a Russian jet fighter that violated its airspace, Turkey directly challenged Russian interests.²² For its part, Russia's air campaign has directly targeted Turkish-backed insurgents and, in the process, facilitated PYD territorial gains at their expense, thereby seriously undermining Turkey's position in the war.²³

Turkey and Russia inevitably clashed in Syria, given irreconcilable differences over the regime and insurgency. Turkey's falling out with the United States, a historic NATO ally, is more complex—a result of profound disagreement over means and ends in Syria. Turkey sought to weaken the regime, contain the PYD, and incubate a stable post-Assad state, albeit while leaning heavily on the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood or similar groups to do so. In Turkey's view, fighting ISIS should follow, or at most complement, but certainly

not precede these accomplishments. The United States has worked against every one of these Turkish goals. It showed no appetite for defeating the regime or significantly strengthening local Islamists, prioritized defeating ISIS, and made the PYD its key strategic partner.

The United States did manage to secure greater Turkish cooperation against ISIS eventually, particularly from mid-2015 onward, including for strike missions in support of the YPG.²⁴ After months of negotiations, Turkey allowed the United States to use its Incirlik air base to fly missions against ISIS in Syria and increased efforts to stop foreign fighter flows across its border with Syria. The latter policy also includes greater intelligence sharing with Europe, which withheld information from Turkey—and therefore hindered efforts to stop potential foreign fighters at first point of entry—for close to three years under civilian privacy laws.²⁵ Overall, however, the United States could not change Turkey's core agenda. One reason may be distance—it affords the United States the luxury of picking and choosing its priorities, as it faces no serious opponents in, or threats from, Syria. This has allowed the United States far more flexibility in its policies. Turkey, on the other hand, is much more exposed to the conflict and its effects, and therefore has much less room for maneuver or appetite for risk.

Options for the United States

Despite differences with the United States over Syria, Turkey remains an important strategic US ally and a key NATO member. In the specific case of Syria, Turkey is obviously critical to facilitating a durable political settlement to the war between the insurgency and the regime. Any armistice that threatens vital Turkish interests will be untenable, because it will carry an ever-present risk of either Turkish proxy, or direct, intervention, against either the regime or Kurdish militants. At the same time, by virtue of its capabilities and location, Turkey is the pro-opposition state best-situated to facilitate an enduring political settlement in Syria, and further, to support Sunni Arab forces in Syria, who are needed to inflict a lasting defeat on

22 "Turkey's downing of Russian warplane - what we know," BBC News, December 1, 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-mid-dle-east-34912581>.

23 "Turkey shells Kurdish-held air base in Syria's Aleppo," *Al Jazeera*, February 16, 2015, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/02/turkey-shells-kurdish-held-airbase-syria-aleppo-160213160929706.html>.

24 Daniel Dombey, "Turkey's clampdown on Isis bearing fruit in border areas," *Financial Times*, September 3, 2014, <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/910e190c-3363-11e4-9607-00144feabdc0.html#axzz41CDn9Dus>.

25 Sinan Ulgen and F. Doruk Ergun, "A Turkish Perspective on the Rise of the Islamic Caliphate," Centre for Economic and Foreign Policy Studies, September 1, 2014, <http://www.edam.org.tr/en/File?id=2157>.



Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) fighters carry their weapons while riding on the back of a pick-up truck in Qamishli, Syria, March 11, 2016. *Photo credit: REUTERS/Rodi Said.*

the jihadist groups—two goals Turkey shares with the United States.

Despite their common interest in ending the war and defeating the jihadists however, Turkey and the United States do not agree on the means. US cooperation with the PYD is the most visible, heated point of contention, but it is just a symptom of a larger, more profound disagreement over the management of the civil war itself and the question of the Syrian regime and its fate. The Obama administration—judging by its actions and the President's statements—may share Turkey's view that the ultimate driver of the conflict and all its negative externalities—including ISIS and the Nusra Front—is the Assad regime. It is not likely to act on that view however. Instead, the United States will focus on fighting ISIS with PYD support, and the question of the war and Assad will recede into the background, dealt with through a separate political track that Secretary of State John Kerry is leading. Turkey, in contrast, views these issues as intertwined and believes that

the political track is dependent on increasing military support for the Arab-majority opposition, in order to force Assad to step down as part of a phased transition negotiated with Russia and the United States.

Admittedly, this makes a broad Turkish-US convergence of priorities and policies in Syria highly improbable under the current US administration. This leaves the United States with one logical approach: Identify areas of common interest with Turkey and exploit them to the maximum extent possible, provided this does not violate either party's other core interests. One such area is the so-called Manbij pocket, the last area of territory ISIS controls along the border with Turkey. To force ISIS from its de facto capital, Raqqa, the United States must force ISIS from this stretch of territory to protect the eastern flank of attacking ground forces. The United States and Turkey disagree over how to take this territory, but it may be a valuable opportunity to exploit.

An Opportunity for US-Turkish Cooperation in Jarablus

The Syrian town of Jarablus, in the corner of the Manbij pocket, lies just south of the Turkish border and west of the Euphrates River, in the province of Aleppo. It borders Kurdish PYD-held territory to the east and has been under ISIS control since mid-2013. This places Jarablus squarely in the path of any potential westward expansion by the PYD aimed at connecting and securing the borders of the three Kurdish cantons in Syria. Such a thrust would potentially provoke military action by Turkey, both to check the PYD and to protect its investment in Syrian rebels, whose supply lines would be severed in this scenario. Ultimately, it is difficult to imagine the PYD not attempting this maneuver, when it judges the timing to be right.

Neither the United States nor Turkey have an interest in a PYD takeover of Jarablus. They do, however, share an interest in liberating the town from ISIS control. A Turkish capture of Jarablus from ISIS would have exponentially positive effects on US interests, Turkish interests, and US-Turkish relations. It could also facilitate a Turkish-Kurdish (and Arab-Kurdish) modus vivendi in northern Syria. Liberating Jarablus from ISIS would be a positive outcome in itself of course, but the benefits extend beyond that. Turkish control of Jarablus would establish it as the first state to officially send ground troops to fight ISIS in Syria, enhancing its global standing (which has suffered due to the jihadist controversy) and bolstering the strategic relationship with the United States. It would create facts on that ground that give Turkey negotiating leverage with the regime and its foreign backers, forestall the potential consequences of a westward PYD offensive into Arab territory, and establish a Turkish and coalition-protected area from which to expand the anti-ISIS ground offensive.

A Turkish capture of Jarablus would carry risks as well. Most obviously, such an enclave would be surrounded on three sides by enemies—ISIS and the PYD. Turkish-ISIS hostilities would almost certainly continue, and direct confrontation with the PYD would become possible. Less plausibly but more seriously, Turkish forces might be targeted by the regime or Russia. While none of these scenarios can be ruled out, it would seem that the first is inevitable, the second is manageable, and the third is unlikely—a Turkish ground presence in Syria might anger the Assad regime and make Russia nervous, but the regime is simply not in a position to go to war with Turkey (if, indeed, it retains enough agency to make such a decision); and Russia can likely tolerate

a distant Turkish presence in what is, after all, territory that it has liberated from ISIS, not the regime. However, there is a risk of Russia-NATO escalation, particularly if Russia attacks Turkish positions or vice versa.

The United States would have a critical role to play, by including Turkey's military actions in the US-led anti-ISIS coalition's broader mission, thereby affording Turkey protection and support from the air. The coalition, using the rules of de-confliction and a heavy rotation of flights, has successfully deterred Russian attacks in this area. Thus, the coalition need not adopt a new policy, but simply needs to better articulate its intentions to protect Turkish ground forces. The United States might consider augmenting its own military presence in Turkey to support a Jarablus offensive and deter Russian action through the rules of de-confliction, including an increased deployment of NATO ships in the Mediterranean Sea. The United States would also have to restrain the PYD, using positive incentives and warnings, and communicate to Russia and the regime that it will respond to any attempt to disrupt anti-ISIS operations, including using military means as a last resort. This is, in fact, already US policy in Syria, but in this case, the policy would be extended to cover a vital ally as well.

Turkey, likewise has a crucial role to play beyond simply contributing troops. This incursion into Jarablus would have the best chance of success if accompanied by a de facto non-aggression pact between Turkey and the PYD. For one to take hold, Turkey would need to drop its veto of PYD inclusion at Syrian peace negotiations and allow the PYD to participate as a third party, distinct from both the regime and the Syrian opposition. This could serve as a prelude to addressing certain Kurdish demands for a negotiated peace settlement in Syria—a process that would likely have to include a return to Turkish-PKK peace negotiations. The United States, in this scenario, could offer to play the role of neutral third party mediator in future Turkish government-PKK peace talks. Moreover, this would provide Turkey and the coalition with an exit strategy: Once a peace deal is arranged, Turkey withdraws.

Conclusion

The war in Syria has revealed just how constrained and vulnerable Turkey is, despite its military, economic, and demographic weight. During the five years of the Syrian conflict, it undertook no decisive military action against either the regime or the PYD, even long before Russia's entry into the conflict introduced the

possibility of retaliation, and the presence of a serious opponent. Russia's actions further embarrassed and harmed Turkey by facilitating territorial gains by PYD and regime forces, at the expense of Turkish-backed insurgents. Yet, under the current circumstances Turkey appears unlikely to carry out major ground or air operations in Syria without US involvement, which seem highly improbable. Turkey has limited its response to reorganizing insurgent proxies and moving them around the battlefield to better resist Russian, PYD, and regime offensives. Barring significant international intervention in the opposition's favor, Turkey's options in Syria are likely to narrow further, even as the threat across its border grows.

Despite these unfavorable circumstances, Turkey has shown little sign that it intends to disengage from Syria. This is understandable. Its interests there are simply too important, including the conflict's centrality to the Kurdish question, the vigor and viability of political Islam, geopolitical competition with Iran and Russia, and, not least, the larger issue of Turkey's role in the

region. None of these relate exclusively to Syria—they shape and are shaped by region-wide Turkish interests and aspirations, making them all the more critical. Further, unlike the United States and Russia, Turkey is a frontline state in the Syrian conflict, and cannot withdraw to avoid its effects, even if it so wished. For all these reasons, Turkey is likely to stay committed to its local allies and goals in Syria. Capturing Jarablus would advance Turkish interests significantly, but without robust US support it would be perilous and reap lower benefits. Deprived of prudent means to protect its rebel allies, contain the PYD, and weaken ISIS, Turkey would come under immense pressure to take far greater risks in Syria.

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