

COUNCIL *on*
FOREIGN
RELATIONS

Center for Preventive Action

DISCUSSION PAPER

Reconciling U.S.-Turkish Interests in Northern Syria

Aaron Stein
February 2017

The Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) is an independent, nonpartisan membership organization, think tank, and publisher dedicated to being a resource for its members, government officials, business executives, journalists, educators and students, civic and religious leaders, and other interested citizens in order to help them better understand the world and the foreign policy choices facing the United States and other countries. Founded in 1921, CFR carries out its mission by maintaining a diverse membership, with special programs to promote interest and develop expertise in the next generation of foreign policy leaders; convening meetings at its headquarters in New York and in Washington, DC, and other cities where senior government officials, members of Congress, global leaders, and prominent thinkers come together with CFR members to discuss and debate major international issues; supporting a Studies Program that fosters independent research, enabling CFR scholars to produce articles, reports, and books and hold roundtables that analyze foreign policy issues and make concrete policy recommendations; publishing *Foreign Affairs*, the preeminent journal on international affairs and U.S. foreign policy; sponsoring Independent Task Forces that produce reports with both findings and policy prescriptions on the most important foreign policy topics; and providing up-to-date information and analysis about world events and American foreign policy on its website, CFR.org.

The Council on Foreign Relations takes no institutional positions on policy issues and has no affiliation with the U.S. government. All views expressed in its publications and on its website are the sole responsibility of the author or authors.

For further information about CFR or this paper, please write to the Council on Foreign Relations, 58 East 68th Street, New York, NY 10065, or call Communications at 212.434.9888. Visit CFR's website, www.cfr.org.

Copyright © 2017 by the Council on Foreign Relations® Inc.
All rights reserved.

This paper may not be reproduced in whole or in part, in any form beyond the reproduction permitted by Sections 107 and 108 of the U.S. Copyright Law Act (17 U.S.C. Sections 107 and 108) and excerpts by reviewers for the public press, without express written permission from the Council on Foreign Relations.

The Council on Foreign Relations acknowledges the Rockefeller Brothers Fund for its generous support of this publication and the Contingency Planning Roundtables and Memoranda.

Introduction

Since spring 2015, Turkey has suffered a wave of high-profile terror attacks linked to the self-proclaimed Islamic State and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). In response, Turkey deployed ground combat forces across the border into Syria, with the aim of pushing the Islamic State and Kurdish forces from a small self-declared "safe zone." This military operation, dubbed Euphrates Shield, is part of a new Turkish security strategy to attack terrorists where they reside, rather than wait for them to infiltrate Turkey. Amid Turkey's deteriorating domestic security, elements of the Turkish armed forces revolted against the elected government of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan on July 15, 2016, but failed to assert control over the government.

Turkey faces a complicated, interrelated conflict: its military operations in Syria are partly designed to counter the insurgency it faces within its borders. The linkages between the Syrian conflict and domestic Turkish security are driving internal political instability, and the outcome of the Syrian conflict will have repercussions for U.S.-Turkey relations and U.S. policy objectives in Syria.

Although some of the United States' and Turkey's objectives in northern Syria are complementary, others are contradictory. Northern and eastern Syria are under the control of various actors—including the Islamic State, which President Donald J. Trump has pledged to destroy. The most effective U.S. ground partner fighting the Islamic State is the People's Protection Unit (YPG), which is the main armed force of the Democratic Union Party (PYD), the dominant Kurdish group in Syria. However, the PYD is also an affiliate of the PKK, which is designated as a terrorist organization by the United States, Turkey, and the European Union (EU). Turkey considers armed Kurdish nationalist groups as major threats to its security. Further complicating the situation, Turkish and U.S. efforts to degrade the Islamic State could bolster other extremist groups on the ground, such as Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), an umbrella organization dominated by al-Qaeda elements. HTS—previously known as Jabhat Fateh al-Sham and, before that, Jabhat al-Nusra—is fighting alongside other Syrian insurgent groups.

The Syrian conflict is complex, and a solution is elusive. The various actors involved in the conflict are pursuing different interests and goals often at odds with those of the United States—such as the creation of a semiautonomous Kurdish territory or defeating the Syrian regime without a plan for the day after the collapse of the central government. Meanwhile, most armed groups are also targeting the Islamic State. Thus, a U.S. effort to address only one aspect of the conflict (e.g., arming Kurdish groups to fight the Islamic State) could undermine competing objectives in the region (e.g., maintaining a strong relationship with Ankara).

The United States needs to consider the effects of its intervention in northern Syria on Turkey, its North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) ally, and on terrorist groups it seeks to destroy, including the Islamic State and HTS. The same challenges that confronted the Barack Obama administration will persist during the Trump administration. To address these systemic problems, the United States should reconcile the contradictory aspects of its relationship with Turkey, including considering whether it is possible to eradicate the Islamic State without also addressing the Kurdish-Turkish sub-conflict or whether U.S. forces should participate in a new front in the multisided civil conflict.

Competing Interests in Northern Syria

The regional dynamics of the Syrian civil war were further complicated on August 24, 2016, when Turkey sent an armored battalion and supporting ground forces into northern Syria to fight alongside nearly three thousand allied insurgents. This operation, dubbed Euphrates Shield, faced no resistance when forces entered Jarabulus, a strategic city that the Islamic State relied upon to move weapons, foreign fighters, and materials across the border. Shortly thereafter, Turkey sent forces across the border to al-Rai; together, these forces turned west toward Sawran and then Dabiq, a symbolic city for the Islamic State. The Turkish government gave the United States little warning before moving across the border. However, the U.S. military supported the operation from the outset, deploying special operations forces on the Turkish side of the border and then sending them across to al-Rai to help the Dabiq and Sawran operations (see map).

Map of the Border Between Syria and Turkey



Source: Created by the Council on Foreign Relations.

Euphrates Shield cleared the border of Islamic State fighters in early September 2016, prompting calls from Turkish political leaders to use the existing force to expand operations to include al-Bab, a city thirty kilometers south of the Turkish border. Al-Bab has little strategic value for the United States, but the town's location, at the juncture of Kurdish, Turkish, Syrian regime, and Islamic State front

lines, makes it valuable for the non-U.S. combatants. For the Islamic State, al-Bab is a tax base and was the final center of operations for its then spokesman, Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, who was killed in a drone strike in August 2016. For Turkey, the city is critical in blocking Kurdish expansion while also carving out a self-declared safe zone for refugees currently in Turkey to return to Syria. However, Ankara has not articulated a plan to protect this zone. In a series of battles for small villages around northern Aleppo, Turkish and allied insurgent forces advanced to within one mile of al-Bab, which led to clashes with Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)—an umbrella insurgent group made up mostly of Kurdish-dominated YPG, although some YPG units operate independently from the SDF. The SDF and Turkish-allied insurgent forces share a goal in ousting the Islamic State but are hostile to each other, prompting concerns that the expulsion of the Islamic State from the territory could simply portend the expansion of a civil conflict. The Turkish government has suggested that it will continue its military operations in Syria after the battle for al-Bab, threatening the SDF in Manbij and the YPG in Afrin in northwestern Syria. As of February 2017, Turkish forces controlled the western and northern outskirts of al-Bab, but had not taken control of the entire city.

U.S. INTERESTS AND INVOLVEMENT IN SYRIA

The Islamic State conducts and directs external operations from the territory it controls in Syria, attacking U.S. treaty allies in Western Europe and seeking to inspire and direct attacks in the United States. The United States has a clear interest in defeating the group, which former U.S. Director of National Intelligence James Clapper called the “preeminent terrorist threat” to the United States. Since August 2014, the United States has sought to degrade and destroy the Islamic State largely through the use of precision air power to drive out the group from territory it controls. The United States has also deployed a few hundred members of U.S. special operations forces who, alongside French and British troops, enable SDF-affiliated indigenous Arab and Kurdish partners to lead ground combat operations and aid in the air campaign in Syria. These U.S. and allied forces advise and assist local ground forces, provide situational awareness through battlefield intelligence, and facilitate the delivery of arms and ammunition to Arab and Kurdish partners on the ground. The U.S. strategy is to deny the Islamic State a safe haven from where it can extract money from residents, disseminate its extremist messaging, and plot attacks against countries in the region and the West. This strategy fundamentally requires cultivating capable ground forces that will not only partner with U.S. forces but also be cohesive enough to wage sustained combat against Islamic State fighters and capture and control reconquered territory. The Obama administration implemented this strategy by creating a global coalition to defeat the Islamic State that brought sixty-six countries together to contribute to the ongoing military campaign.

However, Turkey’s competing interests, at home and in Syria, have complicated U.S. efforts to defeat the Islamic State. In the opening days of the U.S.-led air war in August 2014, the Islamic State began a concerted effort to take control of Kobani, a Kurdish-majority town on the Syrian-Turkish border under PYD control. The United States dedicated considerable resources to defending the city, including through hundreds of air strikes and an airdrop of weapons and ammunition to arm the YPG. Erdogan opposed the airdrop over concerns that the direct arming of the PKK affiliate would be detrimental to Turkey’s long-term security interests.

The expansion of the U.S. military’s role in Syria’s civil war further complicated the conflict between U.S. and Turkish interests. Following ten months of negotiations with Ankara about coordinating strategy in Syria, U.S. and coalition aircraft began to fly strike missions from Incirlik Air Base, located

seventy miles from the Syrian border, in August 2015. These missions moved in parallel with a clandestine effort, run by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and allied intelligence services, to arm and equip vetted Syrian opposition groups.

The United States further augmented its presence in northern Syria in October 2015 by deploying fifty special operations forces. These troops were tasked with securing Turkey's border with Syria and enabling local forces to take and hold Raqqa, the Islamic State's administrative capital in Syria. The efforts to build a local force capable of working closely with U.S. troops resulted in the formation of the SDF. East of the Euphrates River in northern Syria, U.S. and allied aircraft provided air support for the special operations forces-enabled SDF. To help assuage Turkish and local concerns about the rapidly expanding territory under Kurdish control, the SDF incorporated Arab tribal elements into its ranks.

TURKISH INTERESTS AND INVOLVEMENT IN SYRIA

U.S. efforts to manage Turkish concerns broke down in the summer of 2016 over planning for operations in the Manbij pocket in Syria, a former Islamic State stronghold along the Turkish border. The Turkish government has repeatedly warned against a YPG presence west of the Euphrates, and the SDF-led operation to take Manbij would require just that. Between late 2015 and the summer of 2016, the United States allayed Turkish concerns, winning tacit acceptance of SDF operations west of the Euphrates. To take Manbij, the SDF, backed by U.S. airpower and special operations forces, surrounded the city before advancing into the urban area. The YPG component of the SDF was expected to withdraw from the city, leaving Arab SDF elements to hold it.

The fall of Manbij, as well as the concurrent surge north of SDF elements, contributed to the Turkish decision to send forces across the border into Syria. The YPG elements fighting under the SDF umbrella have withdrawn from the city. However, the Arab-majority force that now controls the city, dubbed the Manbij Military Council, is allied with the YPG. Turkey, therefore, does not differentiate between the two groups, regardless of their ethnic composition. The continued tensions about Manbij strain U.S.-Turkish relations and have prompted repeated Turkish threats to oust the U.S.-backed force in Manbij as part of the expanding military goals of Euphrates Shield.

Turkey's cross-border military operation started about two months after an attempt on July 15, 2016, to overthrow the elected Turkish government. In the wake of the coup attempt, many Turkish institutions were purged of suspected coup supporters, including hundreds of military officers and pilots. At the same time, military units were deployed in Turkey's southeast as part of ongoing operations against the PKK insurgency. These stresses compromised the effectiveness of the Turkish military but did not stop the Turkish armed forces from sending troops across the border into Syria on August 24, 2016. Much of Turkey's military operation in Syria remains opaque, but it appears that special operations units, along with an armored battalion, led the cross-border military operation. As of February 2017, the number of Turkish troops in Syria had increased to aid in the fight for al-Bab.

Euphrates Shield achieved both of its goals, blunting YPG movement westward and pushing the Islamic State from Turkish-Syrian border towns. The initial taking of Jarabulus, a town the Islamic State held between 2014 and 2015, allowed Turkish troops to blunt a potential SDF northward advance toward the Turkish border, while also pushing the Islamic State from its last strongholds near Turkey. Units in al-Bab have also moved to encircle the SDF's westernmost front line to block any potential advance on al-Bab.

KURDISH INTERESTS AND INVOLVEMENT IN SYRIA

The PYD's immediate goals remain antithetical to those of Turkey. The group has adopted a political model based on the teachings of Abdullah Ocalan, the imprisoned leader of the PKK. The PKK began as an ethno-nationalist political movement, committed to using insurgent tactics to create an independent Kurdish state in southeast Turkey, but has since disavowed its ambitions for Kurdish independence. The PKK updated its articulated political goal following Ocalan's arrest in 1999, resulting in a new goal of democratic self-administration but not an independent state. PYD operations in Syria could bring the PKK closer to this revised goal. The consolidation of Kurdish control over al-Bab would enable the two cantons west of the Euphrates—Jazira and Kobani—to be connected with Afrin, an isolated canton in northeastern Syria. This would bring the PYD closer to achieving territorial contiguity in northern Syria, where the group could further consolidate political control.

The PYD has sought to pair its political goal with its military strategy. As a result, the PYD has occasionally cooperated with Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria in pursuit of its political interest. This cooperation, combined with historical ethnic grievances and vastly divergent political ambitions, has undermined support for the PYD among Arab and Turkmen rebels in Syria. The PYD's cooperation with the Syrian regime is tactical, as the Kurds have been mostly spared from regime bombing and artillery strikes. This has enabled the Kurds to focus on the Islamic State and other Islamist and nationalist elements of the Syrian insurgency. The Syrian regime, however, has ruled out support for Kurdish autonomy, a policy diametrically opposed to the PYD's political ambitions. The regime's policy likely has the support of Iran, an important ally. Iran has a restive Kurdish population, and its forces face a threat from another PKK-affiliated group. Russia, another important ally of the Syrian regime, has expressed contradictory policies toward the Syrian Kurds, from potential support for the devolution of powers in Syria to the maintenance of a strong central government. Moscow's support appears dependent on its relations with Ankara, although Russia continues to push for a separate track for dialogue between the PYD and the regime.

The PYD has leveraged its cooperation with the United States and alternatively with Russia, to some extent, to serve its long-term interests: international recognition and support for autonomous governance inside postconflict Syria. This explains the PYD's willingness to work with the United States to help take Raqqa, an Arab-majority city that the PYD admittedly has no interest in governing or occupying, from the Islamic State. The military goals, in this case, support a larger effort to win diplomatic recognition, the first step of which would be a seat at the negotiating table alongside representatives of the Syrian regime and the Arab-majority opposition. The United States has balked at this request, largely out of deference to Turkey, which holds sway with the Arab opposition and has threatened to boycott the as-yet-unsuccessful peace negotiations should they include PYD representatives.

Potential Outcomes of Turkey's Involvement in Syria

As Turkey continues its military operations in Syria, several scenarios could unfold, each with implications that could further complicate U.S. interests in the region.

THE ISLAMIC STATE EXPLOITS THE CIVIL CONFLICT IN SYRIA

The expansion of the civil conflict between the YPG-dominated SDF and Turkish-allied forces could indirectly benefit the Islamic State. In the past, Islamist extremists have preyed on these ethnic cleavages to retain footholds in the same territory that the Islamic State has lost. The Islamic State could do the same now. The group's modus operandi is to melt into local populations, where its operatives remain clandestine. These operatives remain connected to the Islamic State bureaucracy in areas where Islamic State forces maintain administrative networks and functions, even if not military capabilities. In Iraq, the group managed to survive intense U.S. and Iraqi pressure and continued to access funding, largely by extracting rent from local populations and skimming construction contracts. The Islamic State also launched an assassination campaign against local Sunni military and insurgent leaders who threatened the group's long-term ambitions. In cities where the Islamic State maintains a presence, the group is able to carry out occasional suicide attacks. Over time, these attacks will likely contribute to further ethnic polarization, creating grievances among the Sunni Arab population that allow for the group's remnants to return to areas where they had once been ousted.

The Turkish military would also have to play a major role in holding the territory it has taken from the Islamic State, including al-Bab. The Turkish government has yet to articulate an end state or exit strategy, saying only that it has no long-term ambitions to control or annex Syrian territory. The forces fighting alongside it, though augmented in number before and during Euphrates Shield, have a poor track record against the Islamic State. The United States, operating before the start of Euphrates Shield, gave considerable military backing to Turkish forces to combat the Islamic State along the Marea line (the Islamic State former front line, stretching from Azaz to Aleppo). Despite significant U.S. air support and the provision of considerable weapons and ammunition, the insurgent forces struggled to take and hold territory from the Islamic State along the border. The Turkish intervention has helped overcome the weaknesses of the Arab and Turkmen forces now fighting as part of Euphrates Shield, but these forces have still struggled to take territory from the Islamic State in villages and towns surrounding al-Bab. These struggles raise serious questions about whether these groups can be trusted to hold territory without direct Turkish support. A long-term Turkish presence in Syria, however, risks confrontation between Turkish forces and Syrian regime forces or the YPG. Such clashes would exacerbate ethnic fissures, increasing domestic grievances about security and governance, which the Islamic State could exploit to return to territory it had lost.

TENSIONS WITH THE YPG WORSEN THE KURDISH CONFLICT IN TURKEY

The linkages between the PYD in Syria and the PKK in Turkey mean that the Kurdish sub-conflict in Syria is also linked to Turkish domestic politics. Euphrates Shield forces share a long front line with the SDF north and west of Manbij and with the YPG further west in Afrin. In Turkey, the PKK remains active, carrying out attacks every week, either with small arms or improvised explosive devices. After a year of urban and rural combat, the Turkish military has managed to decrease the frequency of PKK attacks, but the insurgency has continued. Kurds who join the YPG likely come from towns and cities in Turkey rife with violence and political tensions, which have prompted a minority of the youth population to join an ethno-nationalist movement fighting in Syria. This situation could suggest social and political problems in southeastern Turkey in the future. The expansion of Euphrates Shield operations to include either Afrin or Manbij could exacerbate tensions inside Turkey and help fuel the PKK insurgency or prompt more people from Turkey to join the YPG.

TURKEY GIVES SUPPORT TO GROUPS HOSTILE TO THE SDF

In order to prevent the SDF from consolidating power in territory it has captured from the Islamic State, the Turkish government could train or fund groups hostile to the SDF. To do so, Turkey could empower locals or elected members of various Syrian governing councils, residing in Turkey or in Turkish-protected areas inside of Syria, to challenge the governing legitimacy of the SDF in ethnically mixed towns. The SDF's Arab elements are largely pulled from the male population in areas where the YPG is expanding—because of the large-scale displacement of Syrians into Turkey—or areas free from Assad regime bombing. In Manbij, for example, the YPG were the primary ground forces that fought to take the city, but they then turned the control of the city over to the Manbij Military Council, which is primarily made up of ethnic Arabs and Turkmen. However, despite its ethnic makeup, this council retains its links to the PYD in Kobani.

The SDF's Manbij Military Council replaced a separate elected council that is now based in Azaz under de facto Turkish protection. The two rival groups have poor relations and could compete for power in territory freed from the Islamic State. The Turkish government could choose to back the Azaz-based council in these power struggles to put pressure on the Manbij Military Council, or to foment ethnic tension to undermine political support for the SDF.

CONFLICT BREAKS OUT IN AL-BAB

The Afrin-based YPG has clashed with Euphrates Shield forces seven kilometers west of al-Bab. The YPG's presence there risks opening yet another front, particularly along the YPG-Euphrates Shield front line in the town of Sheikh Issa.

In the earlier stages of the Turkish-led incursion, the YPG repelled an attack by Euphrates Shield forces on Sheikh Issa in north Aleppo. The town remains a flash point due to Arab anger at the YPG's takeover eight months earlier. Euphrates Shield has blocked the southern entrance to al-Bab after taking control of roads leading to the city, but these areas remain a potential point of conflict with the YPG.

In addition, the Syrian regime, with Russian assistance and frequent bombardment by the Syrian air force, is pushing north from a front line with the Islamic State to advance on al-Bab from the south.

Following a rapprochement with Turkey, the Russian military and political leadership has given support to Euphrates Shield. The two sides have reached agreement to de-conflict and coordinate air strikes in and around al-Bab against the Islamic State. The Russian strikes have helped to engender goodwill from Turkish officials—despite the fact that the strikes aid the regime forces operating in the area and that the Turkish-Russian de-confliction arrangement also helps to facilitate regime advances south of the city. Russia is effectively playing both sides of the conflict by giving support to Turkey while aiding in the consolidation of regime control. This undermines Turkey’s standing with the Arab majority insurgency, despite Ankara’s steadfast military and financial support for many of these groups.

The United States and the anti-Islamic State coalition have also supported the al-Bab operation, albeit after weeks of negotiation to ensure that Euphrates Shield forces and the SDF do not clash west of the city. The U.S.-led coalition has carried out air strikes supporting Turkey and is providing reconnaissance and targeting assistance for the Turkish air force. However, Turkey has blamed the United States and the coalition for attempting to condition air strikes on guarantees that Turkey will refrain from attacking the SDF. Russia, therefore, is hailed by Turkish politicians and analysts as a more willing partner, and the United States is accused of giving support to both the Islamic State and the YPG—which exacerbates anti-U.S. sentiment in Turkey.

Strategic Options for the United States

In order to strengthen U.S.-Turkey relations while pushing the Islamic State out of northern Syria, the Trump administration has the following options:

ESCALATE SUPPORT FOR THE SDF

The United States has sought to manage its relationship with Turkey, a NATO ally since 1952, while simultaneously fighting a war alongside the SDF, which is dominated by the YPG; the YPG's parent group, the PKK, is fighting as insurgents in Turkey. This process has succeeded in the narrow sense that the SDF has managed to take large swaths of territory from the Islamic State. The SDF has begun shaping operations north of Raqqa, while Euphrates Shield forces have managed to seal the Turkish border, cutting the Islamic State off from its most important overland route outward from Syria. The fundamental problem, however, is that Turkish pressure on the YPG near Manbij would slow the coalition's offensive for Raqqa. The SDF is concerned about a possible Turkish advance near Manbij and also across the border in Tel Abyad, perhaps using an Arab force trained in Turkey.

These concerns, combined with the PYD's overarching indifference to Raqqa, initially slowed the southward movement of the SDF to the Raqqa front line. The SDF's movement is intended to surround the eastern and western entrances to the city to block Islamic State supply lines. To facilitate a Kurdish-led offensive inside the city, the United States could opt to directly arm the YPG, instead of only providing arms to Arab groups fighting under the SDF umbrella, or offer diplomatic recognition to the PYD, perhaps as part of a broader agreement with Russia about a future Syrian political arrangement. A more aggressive approach would involve authorizing special operations forces to go beyond their current advise-and-assist role and fight Islamic State forces directly to break through the defenses in Raqqa, perhaps alongside regular U.S. combat forces.

Russia, with support from Turkey and Iran, has pushed its own agenda to resolve the conflict, independent from a separate U.S.-preferred approach. The Russian dialogue met in January 2017 in Astana, Kazakhstan. The goals of the summit were limited and ultimately linked to future negotiations to be held in Geneva, Switzerland. The United States decided to send its ambassador to Kazakhstan to attend the dialogue, rather than the team from the State Department in charge of outreach to the Syrian opposition. The outcome of the talks has had little tangible impact on the fighting inside of Syria, but Ankara's participation signaled a reprioritization of its goals in Syria. For Turkey, the goal is now to prevent the formation of a PYD-run federal area in Syria, rather than to ensure that Assad step down as a precursor to any final peace agreement.

Despite limited U.S. involvement in the Astana negotiations, any long-term solution to the conflict would require U.S. participation. The United States is the primary active combatant in the war against the Islamic State and, together with Turkey and other Arab states in the region, has helped arm and supply the Syrian insurgency in western and southern Syria. At some point, these parties would have to reconcile their differences and agree to a common position to end the conflict. In this scenario, the Trump administration would seek to de-escalate support for the Arab-majority opposition in favor of a Kurdish-only approach, regardless of Turkish concerns. This policy could help oust the Islamic State

from Raqqa more quickly, in return for granting Kurdish demands and as a precursor to Kurdish participation at a future peace negotiation. Russia could support such an effort. Moscow has signaled support for a more decentralized Syrian state and has been receptive to PYD participation in peace talks aimed at ending the conflict, but not necessarily resulting in Assad's departure.

Because of the immediate effect this decision would have on the U.S.-Turkish bilateral relationship, this scenario would elevate the Islamic State threat in the short term. The Turkish government would likely respond by putting pressure on its allied forces to attack SDF and YPG front lines. In parallel, Ankara would put pressure on the Arab opposition members to boycott or stall a PYD-attended peace conference. However, the Turkish response would also prompt concerns among Western leaders about Turkey's role in indirectly protecting an Islamic State safe haven, preventing Ankara from withdrawing support for coalition air operations from Incirlik Air Base. Therefore, despite short-term gains, the Islamic State would likely be degraded in the long term.

The secondary effects on the U.S.-Turkish relationship, however, would be substantial. The consolidation of PYD-controlled territory along the Turkish border is a threat to Turkey. Through military action, leveraging its partnership with the United States, or by creating competing governing structures in territories under its control, Ankara will continue to resist Kurdish efforts for a diplomatic and political *fait accompli*. Beyond this, Erdogan has employed anti-Westernism as an instrument to bolster populist support for the overhaul of Turkey's political system following the coup attempt. The anti-Western rhetoric has helped nurture the conspiracy theory that the United States was either involved in or supported the coup and, more recently, the Islamic State terror attacks in Turkey. The Turkish government could use growing anti-Western sentiment, along with the continued anger about support for the SDF, to justify a reevaluation of its commitment to NATO. Ankara would not break ties completely but would become more neutral in other geopolitical disputes where Washington has an interest, either through NATO or in bilateral disputes with Russia, which Turkey is now cooperating more closely with in Syria.

ABANDON THE KURDS IN FAVOR OF EUPHRATES SHIELD

Erdogan has announced an intention to participate in the Raqqa offensive, albeit without offering any specifics. Al-Bab is one of the last major Islamic State strongholds, and its capture would presage the start of a larger, more comprehensive offensive to capture Raqqa. In this scenario, the current Turkish contingent involved in the Euphrates Shield would be augmented with troops, along with more Arab and Turkmen groups willing to fight alongside the U.S. special operations forces. Backed by coalition airpower, this group could push south some 180 kilometers toward the city.

The United States could work with Russia to de-conflict airspace, perhaps in conjunction with a broader Turkish-supported cease-fire arrangement in all of Syria. The United States would also need to convince Kurdish leaders that this operation would not target SDF front lines but focus on territory that is, for the most part, politically inconsequential for the Kurds' long-term ambitions. The flash points, however, would be al-Bab, Manbij, and Tabqah. In this scenario, Washington would have to assume the risk of Kurdish-Turkish escalation in favor of the broader effort to appease Ankara while also ousting the Islamic State from Raqqa with a Turkish-backed force.

The United States, working with Turkey, could also pressure the Syrian regime to refrain from carrying out strikes or attacks on advancing forces. The United States could threaten cruise missile strikes on Syrian regime targets in retaliation for any attack on U.S. allied forces. This policy would require

tacit Russian acquiescence or direct support in order to prevent an escalation and to ensure a narrow focus on Syrian regime targets. This would also be contingent on Turkey significantly increasing its military presence within Syria. However, the current deployment of Turkish forces in Syria is too small for such a military offensive.

This scenario would sacrifice the U.S. relationship with the SDF and the YPG, albeit in favor of a relationship with Turkey that is more important to various long-term interests in the Middle East, Eurasia, and Europe. It would also slow the war against the Islamic State, allowing the group to continue to retain a safe haven where it can generate revenue and plot external attacks in the short term. In the long term, however, the United States could gain from mending ties with Turkey, an ally that is sure to remain relevant for global U.S. interests.

NARROW THE U.S. MISSION AND REVISIT JOINT AIR OPERATIONS WITH RUSSIA

The United States faces two transnational jihadist threats in Syria: the Islamic State and HTS, the al-Qaeda-dominated group in Idlib. Both are targets of the coalition.

Al-Qaeda has inserted itself into the broader, Western-backed insurgency in Idlib, which makes it much more difficult to target al-Qaeda without also striking other groups fighting the Syrian regime or those that would counterbalance al-Qaeda after the war is over. The United States has targeted al-Qaeda throughout the Syrian conflict, albeit intermittently and with much less focus than it has attacked the Islamic State. Increasing airstrikes on al-Qaeda-affiliated targets in Syria would likely force local groups to break ties with al-Qaeda to avoid being targeted themselves by the coalition.

In this scenario, the United States would decrease its covert aid to the Arab and Turkmen groups fighting in Idlib, as the provision of arms to these groups indirectly empowers groups that fight with or are absorbed by HTS. The United States would instead increase its own military and intelligence personnel committed to fighting the Islamic State. This policy would include efforts to coordinate air strikes with Russia, particularly against al-Qaeda-related targets in Idlib.

This change in tactics would also include a general cease-fire in order to minimize casualties from indiscriminate Syrian regime artillery and air strikes. This policy would entail cooperation with Russia and Turkey, mirroring elements of the Obama administration's previous efforts to create a joint target list with the Russian air force, largely to limit the frequency and destruction of Russia's area bombing campaign with unguided bombs. However, in this scenario, the United States would also increase the frequency of strikes on Tahrir al-Sham in order to coerce insurgent elements allied with or fighting alongside it to sever political and military ties with the group. Turkey would play a political role in this effort, alongside Arab and Turkmen groups it has good relations with, while also continuing to host aircraft dedicated to this expanded mission set.

The Turkish government, as part of its participation in the cease-fire, would also halt attacks against the SDF and the YPG, and vice versa. This approach would also freeze the ground offensive for Raqqa in favor of an air campaign to take the city. This approach has limits: airpower has proven to be ineffective at ousting forces from territory they control, unless it is paired with a ground offensive. However, in the interest of containing Kurdish-Turkish tensions, the strategy of the SDF and special operations forces would be pared back. In its place, the United States would focus heavily on the Iraqi side of the border, with the goal of dividing Islamic State-held territory. This strategy, therefore, would

combine airpower with a ground strategy to encircle the group's territory, in order to contribute to its eventual collapse.

This scenario, however, would also push states in the region, including Turkey, to offset any decrease in U.S. weapons to opposition groups with increased unilateral or coordinated arms shipments to Syria. This would decrease U.S. awareness of arms flows, how the arms are tracked in Syria, and what types of weapons are being supplied. However, this scenario would de-escalate U.S. involvement in one aspect of the war: proxy combat with the Syrian regime.

*MAINTAIN THE STATUS QUO, MANAGE TENSIONS WITH TURKEY,
AND COOPERATE WITH THE KURDS*

The current U.S. strategy has paid dividends in eastern Syria. According to independent analysts, in 2015 the Islamic State lost 14 percent of the territory it controlled, and an additional 16 percent in just the first nine months of 2016. The group's operations have been disrupted, and its access to the Turkish border has been severed. The United States has managed to mitigate tensions between the SDF and Turkey following Euphrates Shield, albeit with numerous flare-ups that could escalate at any time. The SDF has cleared Manbij, has taken considerable territory north of Raqqa, and appears firmly in control of both places. The United States could continue with its current strategy of intense diplomacy with Turkey, even though frequent visits to Ankara have done little to ameliorate long-term concerns about Kurdish empowerment or to prevent Euphrates Shield from slowing down the Raqqa operation.

The United States could continue to deny the PYD official recognition at future peace talks and instead work with Turkey to ensure that there is broad-based Arab participation at such peace talks. To offset Turkish concerns, the United States would continue with its current visibility policy, whereby it consults with and provides operation details of its future war planning to Turkey and allows Turkish liaison officers at Incirlik Air Base to access drone feeds of unfolding battles. In addition, the United States could continue to arm vetted opposition groups, together with Turkish and allied intelligence agencies, from an operations room in Turkey.

Turkey would likely react negatively to continued U.S. support for the SDF, perhaps accelerating efforts to foment political tensions in SDF-controlled areas or to use military force in Manbij or Tel Abyad. If Turkey were to do either, this could undermine U.S. efforts to oust the Islamic State from Raqqa and expand this subset of the broader civil conflict unfolding in Syria. The United States could take steps to manage potential conflict, replicating its efforts to calm fighting between Euphrates Shield forces and the SDF between Manbij and Jarabulus.

Recommendations for the United States

There is no risk-free scenario that would allow the Trump administration to achieve its strategic objective of destroying the Islamic State. Each option is fraught with risk and could result in a NATO ally and a U.S. ground partner in the war against the Islamic State coming into direct conflict. Moreover, all options leave a major problem unaddressed: an extended Kurdish-Turkish front line in northern Syria. The conflict in Syria risks spilling over into Turkey, and vice versa, until the underlying political and security tensions among these antagonistic blocs are addressed. To confront this challenge, there are four policies that the incoming Trump administration should pursue.

First, the United States should publicly encourage a resumption of the PKK-Turkish peace talks that collapsed in July 2015. The United States should directly offer to mediate while its military increases intelligence cooperation with the Turkish government in its fight against the PKK. The United States is already involved with both sides of the conflict, albeit with two disparate policies: targeting assistance for the Turkish military against the PKK and direct military support for the SDF. To marry these two policies, the United States should consider deepening intelligence coordination with the Turkish military against the PKK, while also increasing diplomatic pressure for a PKK-Turkish cease-fire and future U.S.-mediated peace talks.

To facilitate the intelligence-sharing arrangement, the United States should appoint a special envoy to Turkey, based on a similar agreement the Bush administration reached with Turkey in 2006, when retired General Joseph W. Ralston was appointed as special envoy for countering the PKK. This person, ideally a retired military officer with experience in the Middle East, would leverage the visibility policy already in place, whereby Turkish liaison officers have access to real-time intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance for joint missions to monitor the PKK. The Treasury Department could also track PKK financing activities. The State Department, in turn, would be expected to take the lead on calling for a cease-fire and proposing a mediator. In doing so, the United States would leverage its ability to drive domestic political debate in Turkey, with the intention of putting political pressure on the ruling party to pursue peace talks.

The Turkish government will likely react negatively to any U.S. proposal to get involved in the PKK issue. In response, Ankara could downgrade diplomatic relations with Washington or increase the government's already frequent anti-Western rhetoric. The Turkish government could also disregard U.S. pressure in favor of its current unilateral military-led approach. The effects could reverberate in Syria, where Turkish forces could expand their offensive against the SDF as a means to put pressure on U.S. efforts in Syria and the PKK in Turkey. These negative outcomes, however, rely on the assumption that Ankara will not sacrifice its most important military and political relationship and, instead, will eventually acquiesce to U.S. efforts to push forward a peace process in which the Turkish government has, at certain points over the last ten years, been fully invested.

Second, the president's special envoy to the Global Coalition to Counter the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), U.S. regional diplomats, and military leaders should privately put pressure on the PYD to declare a unilateral cease-fire with Turkish-backed forces and freeze its military operations near al-Bab. To gain leverage over the PYD, the United States would agree to PYD representation at a future peace conference as long as the group refrains from attacking Turkish forces. If the PYD violates this agreement, the

United States could increase its intelligence cooperation with Turkey to include PKK-PYD collaboration, particularly along known resupply routes between Iraq and Syria. The United States would also drop its support for PYD representation at any future peace talks. This policy should be coordinated with Russia as part of a broader effort to expand on the recent Astana talks. A Syria-wide cease-fire, with exceptions for operations against the Islamic State and al-Qaeda-linked elements, would then freeze Euphrates Shield operations against the SDF. This outcome would achieve the same result as Turkey agreeing to a cease-fire without declaring one. This is contingent on increased U.S.-Turkish intelligence cooperation, particularly for the mapping and then targeting of the PKK in its safe havens in Iraqi Kurdistan.

The Turkish government, however, could argue that it is winning its domestic counterinsurgency campaign against the PKK and demand that the group declare a unilateral cease-fire with the Turkish government, depriving Washington of leverage over Ankara's actions. The PKK has held firmly that it would not declare a unilateral cease-fire, although it would likely be amenable to a mutually declared halt in fighting. The Defense Department could try and offset Turkish demands through an increase in military assistance, like cooperation on countering improvised explosive devices or the sharing of best practices learned from counterterrorism operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. This military-to-military outreach would serve two functions: it would give more indirect aid to the Turkish fight against the PKK and lead to more lower-level military-to-military interaction and exchanges. The costs associated with this approach stem from the increased military footprint in Turkey, although any augmentation of forces could piggyback on systems in place for the fight against the Islamic State or existing U.S.-Turkish intelligence-sharing arrangements.

Third, the State Department and the Pentagon should quietly indicate to opposition group leaders, the Syrian government, and U.S. allies and coalition partners U.S. support for a decentralized future Syrian state, albeit one that remains territorially contiguous, united, and with a national parliament in Damascus. This policy would reconcile current military strategy and ongoing political efforts aimed at brokering a cease-fire and then finding a political solution to end the violence. The U.S. military strategy depends on a sub-state actor whose political goals are at odds with those of the regime and other groups fighting in Syria. Therefore, this strategy is de facto contributing to the end of the current Syrian political system, if not the breakup of the Syrian state, an outcome also facilitated by support given to the Arab- and Turkmen-majority forces fighting against the Syrian regime. This proposal is politically difficult to execute and would require the United States to actively plan for the decentralization of the Syrian state—a contingency at odds with existing U.S. policy. It also depends on continued U.S. interaction with the various state actors involved in the Syrian civil conflict. However, absent a clear articulation of what it is that the United States wants in Syria—besides defeating the Islamic State—the United States will struggle to articulate a viable political solution to help end the conflict, including any effort to extract concessions from the Syrian Kurds vis-à-vis their relationship with Turkey.

Upon receiving a pledge from the PYD to refrain from attacking Turkey, U.S. diplomats could agree to discuss decentralization models with all the parties attending future peace talks, including a power-sharing arrangement with the smaller Kurdish parties that the PYD has marginalized in the course of consolidating its power. The diplomats involved in this process should put forward a governance model wherein local entities would be expected to abide by the rulings of parliament and refrain from independent action against the Turkish state, perhaps using a model based on the United Kingdom's unitary system of government. This approach would require the regime's acquiescence, an unlikely outcome at this juncture in the conflict. To pressure the regime, the United States would also need to work with Iran and Russia, two untrustworthy actors that have a history of using violence to undercut

agreements made about Syria. In the event of noncompliance, the Treasury Department should craft sanctions on the Syrian regime and allied entities in conjunction with efforts to push the EU to pass similar financial measures, while continuing to advocate for peace talks in Geneva among the parties involved in the conflict.

The Turkish government should be expected to push back against any effort to decentralize the Syrian state, largely over concerns that the imposition of any system of government that could include local rule or contain regional councils would embolden the PKK and allied local Kurdish forces in Turkey. To gain leverage over Turkey, U.S. diplomats should seek to link the future peace process in Turkey with the desired political end state in Syria's Kurdish-majority regions, a process contingent on public diplomatic pressure on Turkey to resume peace talks with the PKK. This policy would include provisions for Turkey-based PKK fighters to withdraw from cease-fire areas in Turkey's southeast and settle in PYD-controlled territory in Syria. This approach is contingent on the PYD's upholding of a cease-fire with Turkey. To monitor and enforce this cease-fire, the U.S. military, working through NATO, could use surveillance drones to monitor the Turkish-Syrian border. This mission's intent would be to deter cross-border action by either side and to provide the parties with a dispute resolution mechanism, should disagreement arise over a border incident. This approach would require an increased U.S. military footprint in Turkey, perhaps based at Incirlik Air Base or attached to the Ankara-based data-fusion cell already in place, to monitor drone feeds of PKK strongholds in Iraq.

Fourth, as an extension of PKK-Turkish government talks, the president's special envoy to the Global Coalition to Counter ISIL and the U.S. military should leverage any progress on the PKK-Turkish front to broker local cease-fires between the YPG and elements of the Arab/Turkmen insurgency. Such action would require Turkish acquiescence or outright support. Thus, any such progress on the PKK and intelligence-sharing arrangement could generate support for cease-fires. This arrangement would be premised on the overarching efforts to finalize a unified vision of a future Syrian state and therefore depends on the iterative involvement of the parties in the conflict, including the PYD.

This policy's immediate intention would be to decrease tensions within the insurgency. The United States, however, has little leverage with the groups involved, beyond providing arms and ammunition for most of the actors along different front lines. The Trump administration could threaten to completely sever the provision of arms and ammunition to the Arab/Turkmen insurgents to try and increase U.S. leverage over these actors. This approach would move in tandem with renewed efforts to work with Russia to broker a Syria-wide cease-fire, designed to ensure that no group can take advantage of any scaling back in lethal support. These twin efforts, in turn, could then be used to call for another round of negotiations to try and resolve the conflict. This approach would require the secretary of state and coordinator for the counter-Islamic State mission to remain involved on various aspects of the conflict, as opposed to scaling back U.S. involvement in favor of an effort led by Russia and the Syrian regime to militarily win the conflict.

Conclusion

The United States and Turkey remain at odds over Syria, as they pursue different military strategies despite having shared interests in defeating the Islamic State. This schism risks undermining the planned U.S.-led effort to capture Raqqa, while also contributing to Turkish political instability caused mainly by the PKK's domestic insurgency. The situation in Syria remains complex, and the United States has little plausible leverage to coerce the actors to adhere to its primary objective of defeating the Islamic State. To achieve the objective of defeating the Islamic State while preserving its relationship with Turkey, the Trump administration should simplify an element of the Syrian conflict while contributing to a political solution to the crisis.

The approach with the most likely success and the least cost to the United States would be to encourage the resumption of peace talks between Turkey and Kurdish representatives, to reduce conflict on front lines between U.S.-backed SDF forces and Arab- and Turkmen-majority Turkish-backed forces around al-Bab, and to expand air strikes against the HTS and al-Qaeda in Syria. This approach would reassure Turkey that the United States is committed to assisting in its war against the PKK, while contributing to a stabilizing political solution in Syria. It would give the United States leverage over Turkey and the PYD to shape outcomes. Although Ankara may object to this approach at first, the current U.S. strategy in Syria will further damage U.S.-Turkish relations in the coming years.

This policy is more advantageous than continuing with the status quo. The SDF-led approach has been militarily successful and, given the proper allocation of resources, would likely succeed in taking Raqqa from the Islamic State. Intense U.S. diplomacy would also likely prevent direct Turkish action against the SDF in Manbij or Tel Abyad in the coming months. However, absent a broader effort to address the drivers of the SDF-Turkish antagonisms, the United States could leave behind a Kurdish-dominated enclave in Syria that exacerbates political instability inside Turkey and risks a Kurdish-Turkish conflict that could rupture relations between the United States and Turkey. It could also further destabilize the tenuous military balance in Syria and potentially create ethnic and religious fissures that the Islamic State could exploit to regain lost territory. Turkish-PYD tensions would also benefit to Russia, which has managed to deftly play both sides of the Kurdish-Turkish conflict in Syria. Moscow could leverage this subconflict for its geopolitical benefit—particularly if U.S.-Turkish tensions undermine NATO. Thus, the United States should address this aspect of the Syrian conflict, lest it undermines longer-term interests in a region of continued importance.

About the Author

Aaron Stein is a resident senior fellow in the Rafik Hariri Center for the Middle East at the Atlantic Council. He was previously a doctoral fellow at the Geneva Center for Security Policy, an associate fellow for the Royal United Services Institute, and a researcher with the Center for Economics and Foreign Policy Studies. He also worked as a consultant for the International Crisis Group in Istanbul and has published articles and reports on Turkey's nuclear capabilities and Turkish elections. Stein holds a BA in politics from the University of San Francisco and an MA in international policy studies from Middlebury Institute of International Studies at Monterey. Stein received his PhD in Middle East and Mediterranean studies from Kings College, London.