A Compromise Between Adversaries?

Prospects for a Peaceful Resolution of Control over North-Eastern Syria

Since US President Donald J. Trump announced his intention to withdraw US troops from Syria in December 2018, US diplomats have been scrambling to arrange an orderly exit strategy. But Turkey considers continued control by the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK)-linked YPG over north-eastern Syria to be anathema and has threatened intervention. US-Turkish agreement can probably be reached over the Arab-majority city of Manbij but the question of who will govern north-eastern Syria and provide security looks unlikely to be resolved either quickly or to the YPG's liking. It therefore seems that Kurdish sacrifices in the fight against the Islamic State (IS) will not be rewarded with autonomy and that the YPG will be forced to relinquish significant territorial control.

Introduction

Since its outbreak in 2011, the Syrian civil war has strained relations between Nato member Turkey, its Western allies generally and the USA in particular. Nowhere is this more apparent than in relation to Syria's north-eastern region, which is currently mainly under the control of the People's Protection Units (YPG). The YPG was founded by the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which is listed as a terrorist organization by the USA and the European Union. Although it professes autonomy, Turkish officials see the YPG as little more than the Syrian wing of the PKK. This view is largely supported by the International Crisis Group (ICG), which points out that while the YPG may enjoy some organizational autonomy, militants trained by the PKK in the Qandil mountains in Iraq have been appointed to most of the central decision-making positions and wield huge informal power.

While there were several Kurdish organizations active in north-eastern Syria prior to the civil war, the PKK has a long history of operating and recruiting there. During the 1990s, the PKK and its leader, Abdullah Öcalan, were offered a safe haven by Syria until Turkey threatened an invasion over the issue in 1998. In addition, a substantial proportion of PKK militants are Syrian. When the Syrian uprising began in 2011, the PKK was able to swiftly insert substantial numbers of trained cadres – apparently with implicit acceptance by the Assad regime – even though it was far from the dominant Kurdish organization. Thus, when Syrian regime forces withdrew from Kurdish-majority areas in July 2012 and relinquished territorial control, the YPG was able to swiftly establish hegemony. This presented Turkey with a strategic headache. From Ankara's point of view, the PKK now had bases not only in the Qandil Mountains, but also along a vast stretch of its Syrian border.

The rise of pro-PKK groups in Syria likely contributed to Turkey's lax enforcement of border security in 2011–2015, a period in which thousands of foreign fighters crossed into northern Syria, primarily joining salafi groups connected to al-Qaeda or IS. The expectation was presumably that a growth of Sunni Islamist groups would put pressure on both the Assad regime in Damascus and the Kurds in north-eastern Syria. Eventually, as IS expanded and laid siege to the Kurdish town of Kobane in the autumn of 2014, Turkish troops stood idly by just across the border. Instead, Iraqi Kurdish Peshmerga and PKK fighters crossed into Syria to aid in the defence of the city following a deal brokered by the USA. The counteroffensive to retake Kobane eventually succeeded with the help of US airpower. This was a visible setback that broke the strategic initiative of IS, which retreated with significant losses and its aura of invincibility badly tarnished.

My Enemy's Enemy

For Turkey, enabling "my enemy's enemy" through sins of omission therefore backfired badly by fostering an unlikely alliance between the YPG and the USA. While most Syrian armed groups have been prone to constant fracturing and in-fighting, the YPG benefited from having a pre-existing and well-established chain of command, experienced commanders and resilient logistical networks. This allowed the YPG to provide effective ground forces in the battle against IS in Syria, which greatly

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reduced the risks faced by US troops. Hence, in spite of the fairly clear links between the YPG/PYD and the terrorist-branded PKK, the collaboration continued with the aim of defeating IS in Syria. In order to justify this cooperation, the US administration, in the words of the ICG, "performed a semantic dance" by claiming that the YPG and the PKK were not the same organization and by only channelling weapons to them indirectly. Aware that this angered Turkey, US diplomats also took to referring to the cooperation as "tactical, transactional and temporary", while emphasizing that nothing else had been promised.

The YPG, on the other hand, saw both a need to protect the Kurds in Syria and an opportunity to realize its vision of Kurdish autonomy. As such, the socialist YPG gladly cooperated with the USA. In 2015, the YPG formed the backbone of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), a multi-ethnic force where key positions were nonetheless held by PKK-trained veterans. The USA, with a small contribution from France and the United Kingdom, backed the SDF with airpower, artillery, some 2,000 ground forces, intelligence, reconnaissance and surveillance (ISR), weaponry and training. In 2015–2018, the SDF made steady progress, wresting control of key urban areas such as Raqqah from IS in at times gruelling fighting. As of early 2019, the "physical Caliphate" (the area under the control of IS) is all but gone, even though it still has a large number of sympathizers, conducts terrorist attacks and may well re-emerge as it did following the US surge in Iraq. For the USA, the cooperation to date has proved a resounding success. While IS was one of the most formidable insurgent groups in the world, its physical Caliphate in Syria was crushed with only eight US deaths. Exact figures are difficult to come by but the YPG reports that almost 4,000 of its fighters have been killed. They died, YPG spokesmen insist, fighting not only on behalf of Kurds, but also "for the world".

The YPG has also sought to make the most of its temporary alliance with the USA, intent on establishing "facts on the ground" prior to, or in the absence of, peace negotiations on Syria. In August 2016, with US support, the YPG/SDF took control of Arab-majority Manbij, west of the Euphrates. Aware of Turkish fears of a "Kurdish belt" spanning its entire southern border, the USA sought to manage Kurdish expectations, but with mixed success. The YPG promised to withdraw, but nonetheless maintains a presence, at least by proxy. Manbij thus is a sore spot in Ankara-Washington relations and the USA has based troops there to deter a Turkish offensive to capture the city. Beyond threats of a Turkish incursion into north-eastern Syria, others have also tested the strength of the US commitment to the YPG. In February 2018, a detachment of Russian private military contractors and Syrian regime forces attacked a YPG unit near Deir al-Zor, where US Special Forces were embedded. The US responded with waves of airstrikes, reportedly resulting in 200–300 casualties among the attacking force.

The Turkish Counteroffensive

While President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has been grudgingly forced to implicitly accept that Bashar al Assad is likely to remain in power in Syria, he has by no means resigned himself to the idea that the YPG will maintain control of north-eastern Syria. This is especially so as fighting between Turkish security forces and the PKK has intensified in south-eastern Turkey since 2015, leading to almost 3,000 casualties in the July 2015–July 2017 period alone. The Turkish Armed Forces have also conducted extensive raids against the PKK in the Qandil mountains during this period. In early 2017, the city of al-Bab, northeast of Aleppo, was recaptured from IS by a Turkish-led operation with first Russian and later US air support. Dubbed Operation Euphrates Shield, the intervention also thwarted YPG ambitions to create a land corridor between Manbij and Afrin. A year and a half after ending the operation, Turkish Minister of Defence Hulusi Akar claimed that 260,000 Syrian citizens had returned to areas under Turkish control. In March 2018, Turkey led a coalition of fighters from the al-Bab region west into the Kurdish enclave Afrin in Operation Olive Branch. The operation met fierce resistance from YPG fighters, but the USA refused to get involved and Turkish forces took control of the area within five weeks. Fifty Turkish soldiers died, as well as hundreds of allied rebel fighters. The YPG reported almost 600 deaths. As the hilly area around Afrin is easier to defend than the flat, open terrain of north-eastern Syria, the Turkish victory there illustrates the vulnerability of the YPG to a Turkish intervention should the USA withdraw its forces. In both al-Bab and Afrin, Turkish forces seem to be digging in for a long-term presence.

After victory in Afrin, President Erdoğan claimed that Turkish forces would now move to take over all YPG-controlled cities along its southern border. To assuage Turkish concerns, the USA and Turkey agreed on a "roadmap for Manbij" in June 2018 to ensure the withdrawal of the YPG. By late October, however, President Erdoğan was threatening renewed intervention and Turkish forces shelled YPG positions. In November, the USA and Turkey began joint patrols near Manbij. Even so, on 11 December 2018 Erdoğan warned that Turkish operations east of the Euphrates would begin "within days". The USA responded that this would be unacceptable, as the YPG was a "committed partner" in the fight against IS.

Directly challenging the USA and threatening the YPG while the offensive against IS was still in full swing

Map of North-Eastern Syria

might seem to be a high-risk move. However, YPG control in north-eastern Syria is seen as a threat to vital Turkish interests, and the idea of intervening to create a "safe zone" has been floated for years. US support for the YPG is a major irritant, but the list of perceived affronts to Turkish interests and dignity is long. Operation Olive Branch therefore proved popular in Turkey. Municipal elections will be held in Turkey on 31 March 2019 and Erdoğan might be tempted to use further advances in Syria to shore up his support. Moreover, President Trump has long wished to withdraw from Syria. In April 2018 he stated that US troops would be coming home "very soon", but was persuaded by his advisers to delay.

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On 19 December 2018, President Trump tweeted: "We have defeated ISIS in Syria, my only reason for being there during the Trump Presidency". Reflecting dissent within his own administration, this was followed in short order by the resignation of Secretary of Defense James Mattis and special envoy Brett McGurk, while the commander of operations in the Middle East warned that IS might quickly regroup if US troops withdraw. Since then, US diplomats have scrambled to negotiate an acceptable exit strategy that ensures that IS cannot regroup and prevents an offensive against the YPG while not alienating Turkey further.

Regarding Manbij, prospects for successful implementation of the "roadmap" seem fair, at least as long as US troops remain in Syria. The USA and Turkey are discussing who will run Manbij and the make-up of the local security units once the YPG has withdrawn. President Erdoğan has said that Turkey will only wait a few weeks for YPG withdrawal. Close observers note that if demonstrable progress is made in Manbij before 31 March, this may satisfy Erdoğan's wish to attract votes prior to local elections in Turkey. That said, Syrian and Russian troops have taken up positions on the outskirts of Manbij, and the city may become contested if and when US troops withdraw.

The central fault line, however, concerns the proposed "safe zone" that would stretch 30 kilometres inland along the entire Turkish border east of the Euphrates, and specifically who would provide security inside such a zone. The area would include all the major Kurdish-majority urban centres, such as Kobane, Amoude and Qamishli.

Erdoğan's insistence that the area must be controlled by Turkish security forces would therefore be intolerable to the YPG. The US also has misgivings about Turkey's proxy groups, some of which have extremist elements. Trying to square this circle, US diplomats have reportedly inquired whether European allies would be willing to deploy troops to protect the safe zone, with US air cover. This seems like a tough sell, with limited US ground forces, subject to Russian good will, exposed to the risk of Islamist attacks or Iranian infiltration and against the will of Turkey.

While there is currently a US-Turkish task force negotiating the safe zone, it seems unlikely that it will reach any durable solution as interests are diametrically opposed regarding the YPG. While cognizant of the need to tread carefully, it is clear that the long-term aim of Ankara is to crush the YPG, whether in one fell swoop or step by step. If US troops withdraw, there is a clear risk that the SDF will fragment, which would weaken the leverage of the YPG. Turkish analysts also believe that if the YPG is pushed out to the south of Kurdish-majority regions it is likely to clash with tribes in Arab-majority areas. Close observers have also floated the idea that the Turkish Armed Forces could intervene in Arab-majority areas of Syria's north-east, such as Tel Abyad, hence fragmenting the region. As in al-Bab, Turkey also silently hopes to eventually repatriate some of its Syrian refugees into the would-be safe zone, which could dramatically alter the demographic realities on the ground.

However, the US-Turkey impasse may not matter in the end. Since the USA announced its impending exit, it has lost leverage with allies, competitors and foes alike. Recognizing this, YPG officials – while still hoping for another US about-face – have sought negotiations with other arbiters, specifically Damascus and its patron Moscow. One option might involve having Syrian troops at the border crossings, and folding the YPG into the national security structure but allowing the YPG some level of self-governance inside the region, loosely based on the Iraqi model. Moscow has similarly floated the idea of reviving the Adana agreement, under which Damascus would be responsible for keeping the YPG away from the Turkish border, and the Assad regime is tentatively positive towards the idea. Ankara opposes this, however, and it is easy to see why Russian interest in driving a wedge between Turkey and its Nato allies would take precedence over rewarding the Kurds for their sacrifices against IS.

While the prospect of a Turkish intervention east of the Euphrates seemed imminent in late 2018, the risk has for now decreased significantly, as Turkey does not want to complicate the US withdrawal. Security arrangements in Manbij also seem resolvable for the time being, as the US and Turkey agree on the principles if not every practical detail. The broader issues of control over northern Syria and the future of YPG, however, remain as fraught as ever. Hence, following a potential US withdrawal, there is still a risk of an incursion – by Damascus, Ankara or both – with a palpable risk for intensified fighting and humanitarian suffering.

Given its track-record of dramatic shifts, US Syria policy may still change yet again, even though close observers now believe that US troops will have withdrawn by April. Even so, it is difficult to forecast how the tug-of-war over north-eastern Syria will play out. In part, this is because no single actor can simply impose its will on the others. Turkey can certainly intervene militarily against the YPG, but fears a Syrian offensive against Idlib in north-western Syria, which could push up to three million refugees and thousands of jihadis into Turkey. The Syrian National Army is worn out, spread thin and dependent on Russian air support, and can hence ill afford to open a new front against a capable adversary. Lastly, Russia has limited ground forces deployed with which to impose its will militarily. That said, even talk of a US withdrawal has left Moscow as the potential king-maker, allowing it to use coercive diplomacy to balance between the interests of Syria, Turkey and the YPG.

Recognizing a shift in regional power, Turkey has since 2016 forged closer links with Russia[1]. Following a meeting on February 12 in Ankara, the Turkish and Russian defence ministers said they had reached a "mutual understanding" regarding YPG and north-eastern Syria. While the details remain unknown, such an agreement will surely not be to the YPG's liking. Ultimately, acquiescing to terms set by its strategic competitor Russia – backing its adversary Assad – may prove more useful to Turkey than compromising with its NATO allies.

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[1] See Bitte Hammargren "Turkey's tightrope act: Staying in Nato while warming towards Russia" FOI Memo 6676.