

# Turkey's Hard Choices in Syria and Iraq

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In the past few weeks, Turkish officials repeatedly affirmed their readiness for an armed invasion of Afrin, a small district in northwestern Syria where the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) declared autonomy in January 2014. As the thousands of Turkish troops were mobilized for the Afrin operation, Turkish Deputy Prime Minister Veysi Kaynak summarized the perception in Ankara: "In the past, most of the terrorists infiltrated into Turkey from this area [Afrin] and provided weapons to the PKK... That is why Afrin must be cleared from terrorists." Turkish artillery already began shelling Afrin's countryside and its al-Ashrafyeh area. The YPG has long aimed to merge the Kurdish cantons east of the Euphrates with the Afrin canton. Indeed, the Kurdish gains in the strategic Manbij region with the support of the United States have raised eyebrows in Ankara and caused tensions in Turkish-American relations.

In fact, current developments shed light on Turkish-Russian cooperation in northern Syria since the "de-escalation zones" agreement in early May. In return for Turkish assistance in implementing the de-escalation zone in the Idlib region, Ankara now receives a green light from Moscow for a military operation in Afrin. In March 2017, the Kremlin announced the establishment of a military area to secure a ceasefire in Afrin, prompting angry responses from Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. For long, Russia had used the Afrin-based YPG forces as a counter-escalation tool to stop Turkey's advances during Operation Euphrates Shield. The recent development of Russian

acquiescence to a Turkish operation in Afrin thus indicates a policy shift. Russian sources reported that Moscow is preparing to set up a joint military base with Turkey in Idlib as an outcome of negotiations over Afrin.

In the larger picture, however, Turkey finds itself in a strained position in post-Islamic State Syria and Iraq. On the one hand, Washington would like to collaborate with Ankara against Tehran's ambitions in the region, while it simultaneously seems willing to continue to support Kurdish autonomy in northern Syria. On the other, Ankara also suffers from a lack of leverage in its relations with Moscow. Given that the Syrian opposition is divided on the Turkish role in Idlib, the Ankara-Moscow deals look fragile. As a result, Turkish foreign policy appears compartmentalized for the foreseeable future: in Syria, Ankara will prioritize securing its borders from the emerging threat of a Syrian Kurdistan (also known as Rojava) by cooperating with Moscow; in Iraq, it will seek US support against both the PKK and the Shia militias of the Popular Mobilization Forces. However, while appearing practical, such compartmentalization will pose significant challenges for Turkish influence.

### **Ankara-Moscow Rapprochement in Syria**

There are several factors at play behind the Ankara-Moscow rapprochement in Syria. For one, the future of Idlib, which has become the main rebel stronghold after the fall of Aleppo, remains a puzzle for Moscow. Russia counts on Turkey's help to mobilize the opposition against Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS)—the

former al-Qaeda affiliate previously known as Jabhat al-Nusra. With more than a million civilians, Idlib is the only major Syrian enclave where HTS rules. Ankara's agreement to deploy Turkish troops to ensure de-escalation zones is a victory for Moscow. HTS has already increased its attacks against the Syrian opposition aligned with Turkey.

Russia's deals with Turkey are not necessarily seen as a threat by the Asad regime. In fact, Damascus welcomes an escalation of in-fighting among Syrian opposition factions—especially HTS versus the Turkey-aligned Ahrar al-Sham—as it needs to pay more attention to the southern front in the war. Recent transformations of Ahrar al-Sham, a powerful Salafi group that previously disengaged from al-Qaeda, are noteworthy. The group has now endorsed the Syrian opposition's flag to brand itself as the moderate alternative to HTS. Members of the Ahrar leadership have announced that they plan to launch a “unified administration” for northwestern Syria, including political, judicial, and civil bodies. The recent clashes between Ahrar and HTS are the first serious acts of violence since the parties signed a truce in February 2017.

Washington's approach in Idlib appears to be in line with Moscow's desire to mobilize the Syrian opposition against HTS. According to credible reports, the Pentagon is playing with the idea of merging 17 Free Syrian Army (FSA) groups—estimated at 30,000 fighters in total—into one faction in order to counter HTS. If such a merger is realized, it would mark a significant

shift from the Obama Administration's approach of working with smaller opposition factions to retain American influence over them.

Indeed, the future of Moscow-Ankara negotiations in Syria is dependent on the Syrian opposition's perception of Turkey's role, which will be determined by how much Ankara delivers on its promises to the opposition. The relative calm in eastern Aleppo in the past few months led to increasing sympathy for Turkey's role in peacekeeping. Those favoring Ankara point to the danger of the Syrian regime's offensive on Idlib; thus, they see the Turkish presence as a guarantor of security. Others, however, are skeptical of Turkey's intentions in the negotiations, blaming Ankara for prioritizing its own plans against Kurds by using the Syrian opposition as bargaining chips.

As it gives up hope for Asad's downfall, Ankara would like to expand its zones of influence in the Idlib region. Turkey also fears that a regime offensive on Idlib would cause yet another wave of migration to its border cities, which have long suffered from having to absorb masses of refugees.

Moscow's relations with Ankara have put the Syrian Kurds in check—an outcome welcomed by the Asad regime. By limiting Kurdish options to ensure their loyalty to Damascus, Russia also punishes the YPG for its alliance with the United States. Yet, Moscow does not want Ankara to have an all-out war in Afrin against the Kurds. Worried about triggering a backlash from the United States, Turkey also is limiting the Afrin operation to carving out a

strategic corridor from Azaz to Idlib, and therefore, to hamper the YPG's plan of merging Kurdish cantons.

Turkey-Russia cooperation is strongly supported by an emerging Eurasianist civil-military bureaucracy in the Turkish state apparatus. Eurasianists supported the steps that would detach Turkey from western institutions such as NATO, and they backed the Ankara-Moscow deal on the S-400 long-range anti-aircraft missile system. If realized, Turkey would be the first NATO member to buy advanced Russian missiles—which are incompatible with the systems used by NATO. Last week, Ankara declared that the parties had reached an agreement on technical aspects, and thus, the deal will be signed soon.

For the Trump Administration, a Turkey-Russia rapprochement in Syria is not harmful as long as it does not cause a distraction in the Raqqa operation. Although the Syrian Kurds aim to convince Washington that Turkish operations in Afrin would have negative consequences in Raqqa, there is a growing fear among YPG forces that the United States will look the other way. For Washington, Ankara's role in post-ISIS Iraq is critical, and thus, Trump Administration officials have promised to help in Turkey's fight against the PKK in Iraq.

### **Ankara-Washington Cooperation in Iraq**

Despite having tensions in Syria over the Kurdish question, Ankara and Washington find shared ground in Iraq. Post-stabilization efforts in Iraq's Sunni regions will require Turkey's

support in building trust with locals, as sectarianism has reached its peak in the country. Washington also perceives Ankara as a partner against Iran's expansionist goals in Iraq.

Although the Baghdad government declared total victory over the Islamic State in Mosul, most serious challenges that helped IS to flourish in the first place remain. Media reports on the extrajudicial killings of alleged IS fighters raise the concern that sectarian fears may haunt Iraq's future. According to Human Rights Watch, among allegedly IS members in Mosul prisons were hundreds of Sunni detainees who were arbitrarily arrested without criminal charges by the Iraqi authorities. Given the corrupt nature of the Iraqi judicial system and feelings of revenge by Shia militias, Sunnis are frightened to be wrongly associated with IS. Earlier, in October 2016, Amnesty International documented how Interior Ministry forces extrajudicially tortured and killed villagers in Mosul in "cold blood" because of their alleged ties to the Islamic State.

Turkey has been most vocal in criticizing the role of the Popular Mobilization Forces which are a growing concern for the United States as well. Estimated at around 100,000 soldiers within 40 groups, the PMF is a formidable power with undetermined potential. The Iraqi government incorporated the PMF as an official force into its army in November 2016; and yet, the senior leadership of the major groups remains under strong Iranian influence.

In order to curb the Shia militias' influence over the Sunni population, Turkey's local allies in Iraq called for an international peacekeeping force to supervise Sunni affairs for an interim period. Some other Iraqi politicians close to Turkey have opened an office in Washington to promote the idea of an autonomous Sunni region, whose formation—with Washington's help—has increasingly gained support from regional powers including Saudi Arabia and Jordan. The proponents of the idea expect that it would serve the interests of the United States and its allies in the region. The independence of Iraqi Kurdistan will accelerate the debate over the de-centralization of Iraq.

The main challenge for both Ankara and Washington, however, is the possible Balkanization of the Sunni leadership. The Iraqi government has co-opted many Sunni politicians who oppose the idea of an autonomous region. Sunni political parties are divided on whether to demand autonomy for each Sunni province or for one region that includes all six predominantly Sunni locales. Such divisions do not only hamper Turkey's influence but also generate a power vacuum in these regions, which Shia militias filled as they expanded their command in the war against the Islamic State. Moreover, prospects for an autonomous Sunni region look grim as Iran would perceive such a policy as a national security matter, similar to its approach to Iraqi Kurdistan's independence. Separate Sunni provinces are key for Iran's corridor to the Mediterranean.

Adding further complexity is the changing nature of Turkish-Kurdish relations in Iraq. Similar to the dynamics of the Syrian war, Turkey's relations with Sunni Arabs may suffer from trust issues: Ankara is likely to prioritize its fight against the PKK in Iraq as the group has remarkably expanded its influence in the past two years. Turkey finds strong support from the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) to conduct military operations in Sinjar, where the PKK has gained a stronghold. On the one hand, becoming a close ally of Iraqi Kurds and Sunni Arabs may provide Turkey a better role as arbitrator in resolving disputed territories in the multiethnic Nineveh region. On the other hand, Turkish soft power will entail building trust with all parties to reassure them that Ankara does not pursue a self-interested policy against the PKK, and thus, has a genuine interest in contributing to long-term stability in Iraq.

### **The Trump Administration and Turkish Foreign Policy**

Despite early hopes in Ankara regarding Donald Trump's presidency, the new US administration has decided to pursue a number of policies it inherited in Syria and Iraq. The US decision to arm Syrian Kurds by rejecting the Turkish proposal for Raqqa has pushed Ankara into Moscow's orbit—a development that is not likely to change in the near future. Washington's cooperation with Ankara in Iraq, however, is most feasible and may compensate for the souring relations. US support for the Turkish army's operations in Sinjar against the PKK was a major reassurance in the bilateral relationship.

Such compartmentalization of policies in Syria and Iraq, however, is not risk-free for Ankara. Turkey's main opponents in Iraq, namely the PKK and the Shia militias, do not perceive Iraq and Syria as separate playgrounds. The PKK's presence in Sinjar, for example, is a strategic move that would allow the YPG's plan to ensure the economic independence of Kurdish cantons.

Likewise, when Shia militias seek to cultivate better relations with Russia, the implications for Turkey will be felt in both Iraq and Syria. These dynamics thus deprive Ankara of its traditional capability to maneuver its otherwise dialectical relations simultaneously with Moscow and Washington.