

Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale

Bilagsnr.:	1171
Land:	Syrien
Kilde:	International Crisis Group
Titel:	Steadying the New Status Quo in Syria's North East
Udgivet:	27. november 2019
Optaget på baggrundsmaterialet:	17. december 2019



Steadying the New Status Quo in Syria's North East

Crisis Group Middle East Briefing N°72

Ankara/Qamishli/Brussels, 27 November 2019

What's new? The U.S. withdrawal announcement and subsequent Turkish incursion in north-eastern Syria shattered an awkward but fairly stable stalemate that had persisted for several years. A Russian-brokered ceasefire and partial reversal of the U.S. withdrawal have restored the impasse, but in far more fragile form.

Why does it matter? The ceasefire leaves the biggest question unanswered: who will govern and police the north east? As the Syrian regime, Turkey and the People's Protection Units (YPG) all stake potentially irreconcilable claims, and the U.S. stays put at the area's oil fields, the emerging dispensation is highly volatile.

What should be done? All sides should respect the ceasefire. The U.S. should protect its Kurdish and Arab partners in the Syrian Democratic Forces and prioritise stability in the north east in discussions with Russia and Turkey. The YPG should reassess its exclusive reliance on U.S. protection and pursue mutually beneficial arrangements with Damascus.

I. Overview

A stunning series of events in north-eastern Syria has upended the balance of power in the area and altered the various parties' strategic calculations. First came U.S. President Donald Trump's declaration that U.S. troops would stand aside from a Turkish cross-border attack upon the People's Protection Units (YPG), Washington's Kurdish ally in the fight against the Islamic State (ISIS). Turkey's offensive pushed some distance into Syria, as U.S. forces partially withdrew, before Washington switched course and called on Ankara to stop. Hours before a five-day U.S.-Turkish ceasefire was set to expire, it was superseded by a Russian-Turkish ceasefire accord, which both the YPG and Damascus accepted. A top priority now is to uphold that ceasefire, for humanitarian reasons and to keep ISIS at bay. The YPG, whose hold on the area has been weakened, should seek arrangements with Damascus, potentially through Moscow, to gradually reintegrate the area into the Syrian state; preserve as much as possible of its civil and security institutions; and shield its Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) partners from regime retaliation.

Beyond the blow that these developments have dealt to Kurdish trust in the U.S., the opportunities they have offered to America's rivals, and the humanitarian cost they have imposed, their main effect has been to undermine stability in the north

east. The ceasefire is fragile; Turkey has achieved some of its objectives but not all; Russia and the regime sense an opportunity to recover the north east; the YPG is seeking U.S. help to keep the territory, oil fields and institutions it still has; and ISIS hopes to exploit the chaos to stage a comeback. It is hard to imagine a more haphazard sequence of U.S. decisions. But what is done is done – the main task now is to limit the damage and seek a more sustainable long-term arrangement.

II. A U.S. Green Light, Then a Scramble

Turkey has long watched events in Syria's north east with alarm. Particularly unnerving to Ankara has been the YPG's rise, as both a fighting force and the core of an autonomous administration in the region. The Turkish state regards the YPG as little more than a front for the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), whose insurgency in south-eastern Turkey it has been fighting, off and on, for decades. It classifies the group as a terrorist organisation (as do the EU and U.S.). As the YPG, backed by the U.S., extended its reach with victories over ISIS in 2016, Ankara began telegraphing the desire to limit or reverse these gains, by force if need be.¹

For some time, the U.S. was able to dissuade Turkey from military action, most recently with promises to create a "safe zone" along the border that YPG fighters would vacate.² The U.S. military presence in Syria acted as a deterrent to attempts by either Ankara or Damascus to attack the YPG and capture its domain. On 6 October, however, after a telephone call with his Turkish counterpart Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Trump acquiesced to a Turkish offensive that Ankara had long threatened to put in motion. The White House said in a statement that Turkey would "soon be moving forward with its long-planned operation into northern Syria", adding that U.S. forces would leave their positions in the incursion's path, and that Turkey would be responsible for dealing with ISIS militants captured in Syria.³

On 9 October, Erdoğan announced the launch of Operation Peace Spring to "prevent the creation of a terror corridor" along Turkey's southern border.⁴ The Turkish military, alongside allied Syrian armed factions known as the Syrian National Army (SNA), commenced an offensive with the stated aim of clearing YPG militants from a strip 30-32km wide and 440km long in north-eastern Syria. According to Turkish officials, the operation had three objectives: ensuring border security; "neutralising"

¹ To fight ISIS and contain YPG gains, Turkey launched Operation Euphrates Shield on 24 August 2016, taking control of an area north of Aleppo and effectively blocking the YPG from advancing further west to connect its holdings in eastern Syria to the Afrin enclave. In mid-January 2018, Turkey moved on Afrin itself, capturing the city on 18 March. See "Turkey launches Olive Branch operation against PKK threat in Syria", *Hürriyet Daily News*, 20 January 2018.

² See "Statement on joint military talks regarding Syria", U.S. State Department, 7 August 2019. The U.S. later moved away from calling it a "safe zone", referring to it instead as a "security mechanism". Crisis Group telephone interview, U.S. official, September 2019.

³ "Statement from the Press Secretary", White House, 6 October 2019. The statement added that U.S. forces would not be involved in or otherwise support the operation.

⁴ Tweet by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, @RTErdogan, president of Turkey, 4:16pm, 9 October 2019; "Operation Peace Spring Press Release", Republic of Turkey, Ministry of National Defence, 9 October 2019.

“terrorists”; and establishing a “safe zone” in which Syrian refugees now living in Turkey could resettle.⁵

Turkey began its assault by bombarding positions inside Syria along the border with artillery and from the air. These strikes initially focused on the middle 140km stretch between the border cities of Tel Abyad and Ras al-Ayn, from which the YPG had removed its fortifications and at least some of its fighters as part of an earlier agreement between the U.S. and Turkey designed to address Turkish security concerns.⁶ But it quickly expanded to include other towns and cities. YPG forces, for their part, began shelling Turkish territory. Exchanges of artillery fire continued across the border in subsequent days, endangering civilian lives. The UN reported in early November that, as a result of the fighting, a total of 92 civilians had died and close to 200,000 had been displaced (of whom more than half had since returned to their homes).⁷

By 18 October, the offensive had advanced along the front between Tel Abyad and Ras al-Ayn, in some areas pushing some 30km south toward the M4 highway linking Aleppo, Syria's second city, to the country's north-eastern corner, cutting that road.⁸ Meanwhile, the U.S. announced on 13 October that it would withdraw its roughly 1,000 troops from northern Syria, present there in shifting numbers since 2015 as part of an international coalition to counter ISIS.⁹ This statement generated further uncertainty and heightened local fears that the offensive could broaden elsewhere along the border. As a first stage, the U.S. promptly redeployed its forces away from the front lines.

As the U.S. started withdrawing its troops, a YPG delegation that had travelled to Russia's Hmeimim air base in Latakia reached an agreement with the regime on 14 October pursuant to which a limited number of Syrian soldiers would deploy to the border to, as the YPG described it, jointly defend the country from the Turkish offensive.¹⁰ While the arrangement's terms were not entirely clear, YPG officials and pro-government sources have indicated that it was a military deal only, leaving unaddressed the two sides' key longstanding differences over governance and security provision in the north east.¹¹ The regime insists on a full return of the state and its institutions,

⁵ Crisis Group interview, senior Turkish official, Istanbul, October 2019.

⁶ “U.S. and partner forces implement security mechanism in northeast Syria”, U.S. Central Command, 28 August 2019. A U.S. official claimed that the Pentagon had undercut the security mechanism from the start by allowing the YPG to remain in the area despite the latter's pledge to withdraw as part of the Turkish-U.S. agreement. Crisis Group interview, Washington, October 2019.

⁷ On casualties, Crisis Group WhatsApp interview, UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) official, 8 November 2019. On displacement, Crisis Group WhatsApp interview, UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) official, 8 November 2019. The UNOCHA official reported that 115,882 people have returned to their areas of origin and that 73,631 remain displaced.

⁸ Crisis Group telephone interviews, YPG officials in Tel Abyad, 18 October 2019.

⁹ U.S. Secretary of Defense Mark Esper said “the deliberate U.S. withdrawal began with the removal of the less than 50 troops or so from the immediate zone of attack”. “Press Conference by Secretary Esper at NATO Ministerial”, U.S. Department of Defense, 25 October 2019.

¹⁰ Crisis Group telephone interview, YPG official, October 2019.

¹¹ Crisis Group telephone interviews, YPG official and pro-government media sources, October 2019.

including its security agencies, whereas the YPG seeks to preserve its autonomous administration and retain the right to police the area.¹²

Meanwhile, amid intense criticism of his decision to greenlight the Turkish offensive, including from his Republican congressional allies, the U.S. president reversed himself, calling on Turkey to stop its incursion. On 14 October, he signed an executive order doubling tariffs on Turkish steel and threatening “to swiftly destroy Turkey’s economy if Turkish leaders continue down this dangerous and destructive path”.¹³ Members of Congress prepared additional sanctions packages.

A high-level U.S. delegation headed by Vice President Mike Pence visited Ankara on 17 October to meet Erdoğan. Following a five-hour meeting, the Turkish leadership and the U.S. announced agreement on a thirteen-point deal whereby Ankara would halt its operation for 120 hours to allow YPG elements to pull out of the area with their heavy weapons in tow. Turkey was to terminate its offensive if the YPG had fully withdrawn by then. In turn, the U.S. agreed to refrain from imposing further sanctions on Turkey and to lift newly imposed sanctions once the offensive ended.¹⁴

On 22 October, only two hours before the U.S.-brokered five-day ceasefire was to expire, the Erdoğan-Pence deal appeared overtaken by events. That day, the Turkish president met with his Russian counterpart, Vladimir Putin, in the Russian resort town of Sochi, where they reached an understanding of their own.¹⁵

This Russian-Turkish deal likewise imposed a ceasefire, but one that put Russia in place as guarantor and extended along the rest of the north-eastern border, ie, beyond the area of Turkey’s initial incursion (the stretch between Tel Abyad and Ras al-Ayn that is now under Turkish control). It entrusted Russian military police and Syrian regime border guards, which had already started returning to the north, with the task of removing YPG elements and their weapons from a zone extending 30km south from the Turkish-Syrian border (excluding the area of Turkey’s operation) in a 150-hour time frame. It was the first time since 2012 that the Syrian Arab Army had entered the border area, which it had vacated early during the crisis in the rest of the country. The deal reaffirmed the 1998 Adana Agreement between Turkey and Syria, which gave Ankara the right to conduct “hot pursuit” counter-terrorism operations 5km inside Syria.¹⁶ It also authorised joint Turkish-Russian patrols along the entire border, to a depth of 10km inside Syria, with the exception of the border city and de facto Syrian Kurdish capital, Qamishli.

¹² Syrian President Bashar al-Assad asserted that the Syrian army’s deployment was not only for security or military purposes: “The deployment of the Syrian army is an expression of the presence of the Syrian state, which means the presence of all the services that should be provided by the state”. Interview given to Al-Souriya and Al-Ikhbariya TV, 1 November 2019. For the YPG’s position, see Mike Giglio’s interview with Syrian Democratic Council (SDC) leader Ilham al-Ahmed, “The U.S. should have committed to its promises”, *The Atlantic*, 26 October 2019. See also Crisis Group interview, SDC leader, Washington, October 2019.

¹³ “Trump authorizes sanctions on Turkey over actions in Syria”, Politico, 14 October 2019.

¹⁴ “The United States and Turkey agree to ceasefire in northeast Syria”, White House, 17 October 2019.

¹⁵ The morning after the Putin-Erdoğan talks, President Assad visited the front lines in Idlib, where he slammed his Turkish counterpart as “a thief”. “Syrian President Assad tours Idlib, calls Erdogan a ‘thief’”, CGTN, 22 October 2019.

¹⁶ The 1998 Adana Agreement – the outcome of mediation efforts by Egypt and Iran – stipulated that Syria would end its support for the PKK, declare the group a “terrorist” organisation and expel its leader Abdullah Öcalan from the country.

Beyond the 30km border strip, the deal appeared to also include the removal of YPG elements from the predominantly Arab towns of Manbij, on whose western outskirts regime and Russian forces have been stationed for almost two years, and Tel Rifaat north of Aleppo, where the autonomous administration has operated alongside regime forces since 2018. The agreement refers specifically to these two towns, because they are situated outside the border strip. The deal, however, seemed to leave unclear the fate of the military and civil councils the YPG has set up in the north east since 2015 under the banner of the SDF and its political arm, the Syrian Democratic Council (SDC).¹⁷ (The SDF is a YPG-led force that comprises many Arab fighters and has been at the forefront of the international campaign against ISIS in Arab-majority areas.) Nor did the deal spell out what would happen to the SDF's internal security forces in the 30km border strip from which the YPG is supposed to withdraw.

President Trump sought to have the last word, announcing on 21 October that the U.S. would leave an unspecified residual military force in eastern Syria to protect the oil and gas fields there from the threat of ISIS predation. It was another about-face, following the outcry in Congress and the U.S. media, as well as other political pressure on the administration to stand by its ally in the fight against ISIS. On 28 October, U.S. Defense Secretary Mark Esper confirmed that the remaining U.S. troops in Syria would carry out counter-terrorism operations, in addition to denying ISIS access to the oil fields.¹⁸ On 9 November, Mark Milley, chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, announced that the troops staying in Syria would number as many as 600 but fewer than 1,000.¹⁹

III. The Emerging Dispensation in the North East

With the Sochi deal, Russia appears to have emerged as a winner in the north east, cementing its predominant role in the Syrian conflict overall. It may have preferred a complete U.S. troop withdrawal, but it seized the opportunity in the wake of Trump's 6 October announcement and the pullout of U.S. troops from the area between Tel Abyad and Ras al-Ayn to insert itself as the main power broker in the north. Unlike the U.S., it has relatively good working relations with all three main actors in the conflict: Ankara, Damascus and, to a lesser degree, the YPG.²⁰ If it plays its cards well, it might now use this advantage to help Damascus incrementally restore its sovereignty in the north east, potentially without further violence or displacement, all the while addressing Turkish security concerns.

Turkey, for its part, achieved at least some of its strategic objectives with the offensive: tipping the balance of power in north-eastern Syria against the YPG; breaking

¹⁷ "Full text of Turkey, Russia agreement on northeast Syria", Al Jazeera, 22 October 2019.

¹⁸ "Press Conference by Secretary Esper at NATO Ministerial", U.S. Department of Defense, 25 October 2019.

¹⁹ See Karen DeYoung, "U.S. will leave up to 600 troops in northeastern Syria to prevent ISIS resurgence, top general says", *Washington Post*, 10 November 2019.

²⁰ The YPG's relationship with Moscow was badly affected by the latter's greenlighting of the Turkish incursion in Afrin in early 2018. Crisis Group interviews, YPG officials, Qamishli, October 2019. Also see SDF leader Mazloum Kobani's statement, "We don't trust Russia or Damascus", Al-Hurra TV, 2 November 2019 (Arabic).

the YPG's hegemony over the area; and undermining the U.S.-YPG alliance. It also cut the vital supply route between the Kurdish towns of Kobane and Qamishli. Turkey has not, however, accomplished two other goals. The deal did not give its forces control over a 30km-deep "safe zone" along the entire 400km border, which it had wanted as a place to repatriate Syrian refugees. Ankara also was forced to forgo the kind of military presence inside Syria that would have allowed it to force and monitor the departure of YPG fighters. Previously, Erdoğan had stated his intention to establish twelve Turkish outposts in north-eastern Syria to oversee the pullout of YPG personnel.²¹

Turkey faces other constraints: the agreement gives it the right to patrol designated areas only when accompanied by Russian military police. Moreover, the 1998 Adana Agreement both limits Turkey's reach into Syria to 5km and requires it to recognise and work with the Syrian government – a condition Turkey appears disinclined to honour for now.²² For this reason, it is at least possible that Turkey will end up viewing Russia's proposed mechanisms for monitoring YPG withdrawal as inadequate, similar to past U.S. assurances that went mostly unfulfilled.²³

For the YPG, the outcome clearly was a major setback. It lost control over a 30km-wide border strip from Tel Abyad to Ras al-Ayn and was forced to withdraw from Kurdish-majority to predominantly Arab areas, where U.S. forces remain present. It is an open question whether it will be able to retain the autonomous administration its civilian partners have built, or its own physical presence in Syria. The sense of betrayal by a U.S. administration whose officials only days prior had assured Kurdish leaders of their continued presence is palpable.²⁴

That said, the YPG escaped total defeat. The Russian-brokered ceasefire froze an assault that could have obliterated its ranks and displaced the Kurdish population *en masse* from the north east. Because the deal mentions pulling out YPG rather than SDF fighters, the group hopes it can preserve some of the institutions it has built with its political arm, the SDC, such as the autonomous administration, and its internal security forces, the Asayish, at least for a transitional period. Finally, the Trump administration's decision to maintain a several-hundred strong force in the north east (at least for now) provides the YPG with some protection.²⁵

²¹ Orhan Coskun, "Turkey plans presence across northeast Syria, Erdogan says", Reuters, 18 October 2019.

²² Turkey's foreign minister, Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, said Assad's regime "has no capacity" to implement the 1998 Adana Agreement between Turkey and Syria. See "Turkish FM Mevlut Cavusoglu talks about Turkey's Operation Peace Spring in Syria", Anadolu Agency, 23 October 2019.

²³ Çavuşoğlu said at the end of October that YPG units had not withdrawn fully from the border strip covered by the Russian-brokered ceasefire. See Ece Toksabay and Jonathan Spicer, "Turkey says Kurdish YPG has not fully withdrawn from Syria border area", Reuters, 28 October 2019. In early November, this situation remained unchanged. A Turkish official said the YPG had yet to withdraw in a way satisfactory to Turkey. Crisis Group telephone interview, November 2019.

²⁴ Crisis Group interview, SDC leader, Washington, October 2019.

²⁵ The YPG claims that Washington relayed this change in position to its leadership before the announcement of the Russian-Turkish agreement. This allegedly led the YPG to exercise restraint in the face of the subsequent Turkish incursion, which it did not resist violently. It also could explain why it did not agree to sign a lopsided deal with Damascus. Crisis Group interview, senior YPG official, Qamishli, October 2019.

As a result, it can now contemplate holding on at least for some time to Syria's oil and gas fields, which fund its administration. The YPG intends to reposition its fighters in eastern Syria – possibly in a stretch of territory from the oil fields in Deir al-Zour to those in al-Hasaka up to the Semalka border crossing with Iraq.²⁶ YPG leaders believe that a continued U.S. presence at the Rumaylan oil field in al-Hasaka will compel Washington to keep a land supply route open through the Semalka-Faysh Khabour border crossing with northern Iraq.

This is no small matter. For Washington, control of the crossing would ensure a steady supply line from U.S. military depots in Iraq, while northern Iraq is the YPG's sole outlet to the world.²⁷ All humanitarian and stabilisation aid enters north-eastern Syria through it. Loss of the crossing would severely harm the local economy, end foreign stabilisation and humanitarian funding, and render the YPG more dependent on Damascus. Keeping the supply route open, by contrast, could allow the YPG to use its patronage to ensure the ongoing loyalty of the over 200,000 Syrians working for its civil and military arms, a main reason – fear of the regime aside – why the tactical alliance between Arabs and Kurds within the SDF has survived the Turkish incursion until now: many Arab and Kurdish families working for the autonomous administration depend on regular SDF salaries.

Controlling oil and gas facilities also could bolster the YPG's position in negotiating with Russia and Damascus.²⁸ According to a senior YPG official: "The U.S. will need to rely on us for force protection, so our presence will be crucial in eastern Syria from Deir al-Zour to the border crossing with northern Iraq. Our ongoing control over territory could strengthen our negotiating position with Russia".²⁹

The Syrian regime sought to take advantage of circumstances. During the week of 21 October, the Syrian army sent over 100 vehicles carrying 1,300 soldiers, along with weapons and supplies, to border posts, particularly around the Kurdish town of Kobane north east of Aleppo, which has been under YPG control since 2012 (and survived an ISIS siege in 2014), and to active fronts where, deploying alongside the YPG, it fought the Turkish-backed Syrian factions.³⁰ So far, however, these soldiers

²⁶ SDF commander Mazloum Abdi claimed in early November that U.S. troops would stay in a zone from Deir al-Zour to Shaddadi, al-Hasaka, Qamishli, Dêrik and Semalka. See the interview with SDF commander Mazloum Abdi, *Xeber24*, 10 November 2019.

²⁷ Crisis Group interview, YPG official, Qamishli, October 2019; Crisis Group telephone interview, U.S. official, October 2019.

²⁸ Crisis Group interview, YPG official, Qamishli, October 2019. A U.S. official said: "northern areas like Kobane may be more emotional and symbolic for the SDF, but it's not what allows them to remain on their feet autonomously – that's [control over] the oil fields and the border areas". Crisis Group interview, Washington, October 2019.

²⁹ Crisis Group interview, senior YPG official, Qamishli, October 2019. Control of the oil fields was a main reason behind the YPG's agreement to join the international campaign against ISIS in Deir al-Zour in 2017 to begin with. At the time, regime forces were less than 5km away from the oil fields, and the U.S. raced to hand these to the YPG. This is also a reason why the YPG did not lash out at the U.S. over the Turkish incursion; instead, it made great efforts to convince the Trump administration to stay on the oil fields. Yet there may be no consensus among YPG leaders as to the utility controlling the oil fields going forward. An SDC leader challenged its effectiveness as leverage, insofar as the regime would not be interested in negotiating the oil fields' final disposition while the U.S. was there; instead, it would prompt Damascus to continue seeing the YPG as allied with a hostile, occupying force. Crisis Group interview, Washington, October 2019.

³⁰ Crisis Group WhatsApp interview, researcher, Rojava Information Centre, October 2019.

have not tried to establish control over YPG-held populated areas. Their seeming restraint suggests that, for now at least, the YPG-protected autonomous administration will continue to govern areas in the majority of the north east held neither by Turkey nor its Syrian allies.

After the 22 October Russian-Turkish agreement, the regime and YPG began laying out their positions for the immediate future. Damascus has made clear that it intends to reassert full state control over the north east, saying individual SDF members could join the Syrian army.³¹ By contrast, the YPG has indicated that it tolerates and even welcomes the presence of regime forces to defend the border with Turkey but insists that otherwise Damascus should stay out of majority-Kurdish cities. While the YPG suggests that it could agree to integrate its forces under the Syrian army's umbrella, it wants to preserve their unity as well as command and control. YPG officials describe their bottom-line demand as "preserving the unique status of the SDF" through its becoming a stand-alone army battalion.³²

For now, both parties are sticking to their stances. Since the beginning of the Turkish offensive, talks between the regime and YPG in the presence of Russian and at times Iranian officials, held in Qamishli, al-Hasaka as well as in Damascus and Hmeimim, have yielded no agreement beyond the initial understanding on regime participation in border defence.

The resulting picture of regime/YPG interaction is a confusing patchwork. The SDF/YPG so far retains a significant security role in the north east away from the Tel Abyad-Ras al-Ayn border zone. The Asayish has remained in place throughout the area even as the YPG withdrew, and it has accompanied Russian military police on its patrols in parts of the area at Moscow's request. The first such joint patrol, on 24 October, covered the border area between the towns of Amouda and Qamishli in the central north east, and then entered the latter. The following week, joint patrols also were held in Manbij, Kobane and Dirbasiya further west.³³

The regime's intentions in deploying border guards to the north east remain unclear. So far, it has sent units only to some of those zones, including Kobane and parts of Manbij, with no clear areas of responsibility; nor did the YPG-Damascus deal establish rules of engagement. To extend its reach, the regime reportedly has tried to break up the SDF by reaching out separately to the force's various factions, including Arab tribes that inhabit large areas of the north east.³⁴ To date, the YPG has been able to block these attempts and maintain the SDF's unity.³⁵ It also has postponed

³¹ See "The Ministry of Defence calls on SDF elements to join the army to face the Turkish aggression", SANA, 30 October 2019. See also "President al-Assad's interview given to al-Souriya and al-Ikhbariya TV", SANA, 31 October 2019. In his interview, Assad referred to the "pre-2011" status quo and explained that the SDF would be gradually dismantled, with its individual fighters placed under Syrian army command.

³² See interview with SDF commander Mazloum Abdi, *Rudaw*, 7 November 2019. The SDF commander rebuffed the regime's proposal to integrate SDF fighters as individual soldiers into the Syrian army.

³³ Crisis Group WhatsApp interview, researcher, Rojava Information Centre, October 2019.

³⁴ Crisis Group interview, SDC official, Qamishli, October 2019; Crisis Group phone interviews local activists, Manbij and Deir al-Zour, October 2019. In Raqqa, local tribes claimed that the regime has been intensifying its outreach in order to recruit Arab fighters to facilitate a comeback. Crisis Group telephone interview, November 2019.

³⁵ No large-scale defections from the SDF-SDC to the regime have been noted in predominantly Arab areas, including Deir al-Zour. Crisis Group observations and interviews, north east Syria, October 2019.

talks with the regime on future governance arrangements in the north east, banking on a residual U.S. force for the foreseeable future to gain time.³⁶

Ultimately, the YPG seeks a longer-term understanding on “coexistence” with the regime under which they would jointly administer the north east.³⁷ It believes that because it controls significant sources of income at a time when the regime lacks resources, Damascus might be compelled to climb down from its current stance and accept mutually beneficial arrangements, at least during a transitional phase.³⁸ As the YPG sees it, its continued access to income would enable it to offer the regime larger shares of oil or allow state employees to return to their jobs at oil refineries (similar to an agreement it reached over the Tabqa dam) in exchange for regime concessions.³⁹ For now, it sees an admittedly shaky U.S. military presence as a means of consolidating its civil and military institutions, thereby strengthening its hand in negotiations with Damascus.

Whether Russia can serve as an effective mediator between the regime and the YPG remains uncertain. The Kurdish leadership has every reason to suspect that Russia will not push the regime to accept anything that Turkey might interpret as protecting the YPG, given the priority the Kremlin appears to give to its relations with Ankara over those with the Kurdish movement.⁴⁰ Besides seeking to help the regime restore control over all of Syria, Russia also has been keen to sow divisions within NATO; tilting toward Turkey in its tug of war with the YPG could serve the dual purpose of winning favour with Ankara while further complicating Washington's efforts to balance relations between antagonistic partners.

The YPG has more immediate concerns, namely the risk of Turkish or Turkish-backed attacks. Ankara's offensive is still ongoing on the eastern edge of areas its forces captured. While the presence of Russian forces in other places could serve as a deterrent, that of regime forces alone almost certainly does not.⁴¹ Turkish rules of engagement reportedly allow for the possibility of attacking regime personnel.⁴² Indeed, a similar deal between the YPG and the regime during Turkey's January 2018 Afrin

³⁶ Crisis Group interviews, YPG officials, Qamishli, October 2019.

³⁷ Crisis Group interview, senior YPG official, Qamishli, October 2019.

³⁸ The SDF controls Syria's largest oil and gas fields (Al-Omar and Conoco in Deir al-Zour), as well as the Rumaylan oil field in al-Hasaka, amounting to 95 per cent of Syria's pre-conflict oil and 50 per cent of its pre-conflict gas extraction. It also controls the waters of the Euphrates inside Syria by holding the Tabqa dam. See “America's damaging flip-flops in Syria”, *The Economist*, 7 January 2019. On the YPG's interpretation of these facts: Crisis Group interview, senior YPG official, Qamishli, October 2019. See also the interview with SDF commander Mazloum Abdi, *Xeber24*, 10 November 2019. He pointed out that the focus of talks with Damascus was on the autonomous administration's institutions, SDF/Asayish integration and education. He said he wants the Syrian government to officially recognise the region's educational curriculum, including education in the mother tongue, and that the two sides could discuss any constitutional changes later.

³⁹ A mid-2018 deal between the YPG and Damascus allowed for the return of state employees to the dam.

⁴⁰ A senior YPG official said: “Washington's greenlighting of the Turkish offensive shook our trust in the U.S., but we trust Russia even less. We would prefer to have a residual U.S. troop presence over having Russia control the airspace”. Crisis Group interview, Qamishli, October 2019; Crisis Group interview, SDC leader, October 2019.

⁴¹ Turkish-supported groups transferred captured Syrian soldiers to Turkey, which then handed them over to Russia. Tweet by Elizabeth Tsurkov, @Elizrael, analyst, 3:02pm, 31 October 2019.

⁴² Crisis Group telephone interview, Turkish official, October 2019.

offensive (which involved the deployment of auxiliary militias rather than Syrian border guards or regular army units) failed to halt Turkey, and Moscow did not use its own leverage to press Ankara to end its incursion.⁴³

When Putin and Erdoğan first discussed the Turkish offensive in a telephone call on 15 October, they emphasised the need to prevent clashes between Turkish and Syrian regime forces.⁴⁴ In Tel Tamr, a historically Christian town south of Tel Abyad, for instance, the regime pulled back its forces in the face of a Turkish advance during the week of 21 October, and Syrian army units exchanged fire with Turkish-backed opposition fighters near Ras al-Ayn around the same time, prompting regime units to retreat from these areas.⁴⁵

IV. Stabilising the North East

The U.S. withdrawal announcement and subsequent Turkish incursion shattered a status quo that, though it lasted for years, had always been tenuous. Yet the Russian-brokered ceasefire and partial U.S. reversal regarding its troop presence have given rise to a situation that, if anything, is even more unstable. The challenge is to turn this standoff into a more sustainable arrangement while minimising loss of life and humanitarian fallout.

If, for now, the YPG and Damascus both seem to be clinging to zero-sum positions, one can nonetheless envision a more sustainable order in the long term. This order could entail an arrangement between the two parties, pursuant to which the north east would be integrated into the Syrian state but with the SDF/YPG preserving many of its gains. Preparations for such an outcome preferably would have occurred in the past two or three years, when the U.S. still appeared to be a reliable guarantor and the YPG was not as vulnerable as it is now. Throughout this time, however, the Syrian regime showed little if any flexibility, and U.S. officials discouraged the SDF/YPG from reaching such an arrangement.⁴⁶ They intimated that the U.S. would maintain an indefinite military presence in the region, notwithstanding Trump's repeated assertions to the contrary.⁴⁷

Instead, Washington's erratic policy has severely undermined its military umbrella and political credibility. Its decision to retain a residual force could still be reversed, and its justification for the decision in terms of protecting oil fields – which Presi-

⁴³ See also Noah Bonsey, "No Winners in Turkey's New Offensive into Syria", Crisis Group Commentary, 26 January 2018.

⁴⁴ "Putin invites Erdogan to Russia as Turkey advances in Syria", Reuters, 15 October 2019.

⁴⁵ Crisis Group telephone interview, media source near Tel Abyad, October 2019.

⁴⁶ According to YPG officials, the U.S. did not explicitly tell YPG leaders not to talk to the regime, but it did warn them that if they struck a deal with Damascus enabling the regime to return, U.S. troops would leave the north east. On that basis, the YPG decided to stick with the U.S. instead. Crisis Group interviews, YPG officials, Qamishli, March-October 2019.

⁴⁷ On the eve of Trump's withdrawal announcement, a senior U.S. official told Crisis Group that U.S. troops would remain and expressed optimism regarding a U.S.-Turkish agreement that would protect the YPG. While this official did not entirely dismiss the possibility of a presidential tweet reversing the situation, he did not appear to view it as likely, while the U.S. administration was not preparing for such an eventuality. Crisis Group interview, September 2019. See also Crisis Group interviews, White House and State Department officials, Washington, September-October 2019.

dent Trump touts as a principal reason for the troop presence – is extremely controversial. Still, for now its military presence limits risks of a more far-reaching Turkish attack or regime offensive; gives the YPG more time and ability to negotiate with Damascus as well as access to income from oil sales; and enables the SDF to continue its counter-ISIS operations.

To maximise prospects that its presence is an asset rather than a burden to its YPG/SDF partners, the U.S. could buttress their negotiations with Damascus with bilateral discussions with both Russia and Turkey in pursuit of a mutually tolerable settlement for the north east that would protect the local population from reprisal and/or flight. The U.S. is conducting talks with Russia on Syria that focus on finding a settlement to the Syrian conflict; and with Turkey over a number of issues concerning Syria and beyond, including Turkey's purchase of Russian-manufactured S-400 missiles. Through these talks Washington in theory could explore ways to address the minimum core concerns of all primary actors: a YPG withdrawal from the immediate border area; a gradual return by Syrian government institutions; preservation of a degree of SDF control over north-eastern Syria; and a largely symbolic U.S. troop presence that would still deter other actors from entering new conflict.

Should it wish to, Moscow could play an important role in midwifing an agreement between the SDF/YPG and Damascus on the north east's gradual reintegration into the Syrian state on the basis of decentralised governance – something between the latter's insistence on a return to the pre-2011 status quo and the former's insistence on retaining virtually all of its post-2011 gains. Persuading the regime to display flexibility likely will require a clear message that Russia is committed to a negotiated solution for the north east and will not back a regime offensive, even once the U.S. fully withdraws. In so doing, Moscow could accomplish several goals: helping the regime assert its sovereignty over the area; preserving the country's territorial integrity; and – by constraining the YPG/SDF's role – limiting risks of further Turkish attacks.

For the SDF/YPG leadership, unfolding events provide yet another reason to question the wisdom of exclusively relying on U.S. military protection. That protection has been inconstant and failed to generate local, regional or international acceptance of SDF rule in the north east. The alternative – arrangements with Damascus – will be hard to achieve. In addition, any eventual agreement could itself be fragile as, over time, the regime might well seek to extend its role in the north east regardless of the deal's terms.

But today an understanding with the Assad regime appears to be the most realistic way to defend important SDF gains while averting another confrontation with Ankara or Damascus. Under such a deal, SDF military units and allied local police might be incorporated into the Syrian state apparatus yet retain their existing command-and-control structures. Even as the state restored its sovereignty over the Turkish border by deploying guards, it would not dispatch the regime's internal intelligence organs, other army units or militias to the north east. Damascus could also meet some of the Kurdish population's demands, including mother-tongue education. In return, the YPG could agree to fly the state's flag and to share oil and gas revenue. Ideally, revenue would be distributed among Syria's provinces in accordance with population (and as part of a whole-of-Syria settlement). At least, revenue should be split between the SDF and Damascus, reflecting the balance between the former's local control (per

the security arrangement described above) and the central state's capacity to refine fuel and reach external markets.

Turkey, too, should have an interest in upholding the ceasefire it reached with Russia and suspending its military operations in northern Syria. Turkey has achieved its primary goal of breaking YPG hegemony over north-eastern Syria and moving the group's military structures away from its border. Further incursions are unlikely to achieve greater gains, given Moscow's alliance with the Syrian regime and its desire to see the regime regain full control over its territory. Additionally, broader Turkish territorial control would leave Turkish army units exposed to insurgent attacks. These already take place in Afrin, al-Bab and Tel Abyad, and could recur, in stronger form, in Kurdish cities further east. Turkey also risks further reputational and diplomatic damage. Its offensive has caused alarming civilian casualties and mass displacement, and triggered a strong international outcry, straining already tense relations with Washington. It may therefore have reached the point of diminishing returns on its venture to protect its core interests.

V. Conclusion

The new status quo is shaky and could be upended at any time. The fundamental contradictions that bedevilled the U.S. mission have now become, in a different guise, Russia's burden. Prior to Trump's withdrawal announcement, Washington was engaged in a delicate balancing act between two partners that are violently opposed to each other: a NATO ally and an organisation with which it closely partnered in fighting ISIS. To that end, it sought to reassure Ankara without forcing the YPG to relinquish the territories it controlled. Today, Moscow is walking its own tightrope between two partners that are viscerally hostile toward one another: a regime with which it is closely allied and a country with which it wishes to strengthen relations for a range of geopolitical reasons.⁴⁸ To that end, it seeks to help Damascus reassert control over all of Syrian territory while addressing Ankara's security concerns in the border area. In this scenario, the YPG has become an expendable bargaining chip: to the U.S., which is reducing its presence, and to Russia, which places higher priority on its relations with the two relevant states.

The YPG might have a short window during which it can exploit Ankara and Damascus' mutual hostility and attempts to box each other out. It could also take advantage of the residual U.S. force, which limits the risk of more wide-ranging Turkish or regime attacks. But the U.S. presence is unreliable, and the YPG would be mistaken in overestimating its durability or value; some YPG leaders have already expressed doubt about the value of a residual force in strengthening their position. Instead, the YPG should see if it can reach a deal with the regime that preserves its institutions as much as possible and protects its Arab partners in north-eastern Syria, who are fearful of regime retaliation that could cause additional suffering and displacement.

⁴⁸ See, for instance, Crisis Group Europe Report N°250, *Russia and Turkey in the Black Sea and the South Caucasus*, 28 June 2018.

A series of chaotic and costly decisions has resulted in civilian casualties and the uprooting of hundreds of families. This outcome could and should have been avoided. The priority today is to ensure respect for the ceasefire and to engage in a serious effort to achieve more viable, sustainable, long-term arrangements for this contested region.

Ankara/Qamishli/Brussels, 27 November 2019

[illegible]

Appendix B: About the International Crisis Group

The International Crisis Group (Crisis Group) is an independent, non-profit, non-governmental organisation, with some 120 staff members on five continents, working through field-based analysis and high-level advocacy to prevent and resolve deadly conflict.

Crisis Group's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts are located within or close by countries or regions at risk of outbreak, escalation or recurrence of violent conflict. Based on information and assessments from the field, it produces analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international, regional and national decision-takers. Crisis Group also publishes *CrisisWatch*, a monthly early-warning bulletin, providing a succinct regular update on the state of play in up to 70 situations of conflict or potential conflict around the world.

Crisis Group's reports are distributed widely by email and made available simultaneously on its website, www.crisisgroup.org. Crisis Group works closely with governments and those who influence them, including the media, to highlight its crisis analyses and to generate support for its policy prescriptions.

The Crisis Group Board of Trustees – which includes prominent figures from the fields of politics, diplomacy, business and the media – is directly involved in helping to bring the reports and recommendations to the attention of senior policymakers around the world. Crisis Group is chaired by former UN Deputy Secretary-General and Administrator of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Lord (Mark) Malloch-Brown.

Crisis Group's President & CEO, Robert Malley, took up the post on 1 January 2018. Malley was formerly Crisis Group's Middle East and North Africa Program Director and most recently was a Special Assistant to former U.S. President Barack Obama as well as Senior Adviser to the President for the Counter-ISIL Campaign, and White House Coordinator for the Middle East, North Africa and the Gulf region. Previously, he served as President Bill Clinton's Special Assistant for Israeli-Palestinian Affairs.

Crisis Group's international headquarters is in Brussels, and the organisation has offices in seven other locations: Bogotá, Dakar, Istanbul, Nairobi, London, New York, and Washington, DC. It has presences in the following locations: Abuja, Algiers, Bangkok, Beirut, Caracas, Gaza City, Guatemala City, Hong Kong, Jerusalem, Johannesburg, Juba, Mexico City, New Delhi, Rabat, Tbilisi, Toronto, Tripoli, Tunis, and Yangon.

Crisis Group receives financial support from a wide range of governments, foundations, and private sources. Currently Crisis Group holds relationships with the following governmental departments and agencies: Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Austrian Development Agency, Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, European Union Emergency Trust Fund for Africa, European Union Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace, French Development Agency, French Ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs, German Federal Foreign Office, Global Affairs Canada, Irish Aid, Iceland Ministry for Foreign Affairs, Japan International Cooperation Agency, Principality of Liechtenstein, Luxembourg Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs, New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Qatar Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, the UK Department for International Development, and the United Arab Emirates Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation.

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November 2019



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