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The SDF Seeks a Path Toward Durable Stability in North East Syria

A sudden U.S. troop pull-out from north east Syria could prompt a humanitarian crisis, an Islamic State resurgence and renewed conflict between Turkey and the Syrian Democratic Forces, especially its Kurdish component. The U.S. should commit to an eventual, gradual and conditional withdrawal that protects civilians.

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As fighting in Syria has dissipated and COVID-19 and U.S. presidential elections have gripped audiences abroad, the Syrian war has largely disappeared from the international news cycle and foreign policymakers' lists of priorities. Yet the lull may turn out to be a calm before the storm, which is why the residents of north-eastern Syria, where the U.S. still has several hundred troops on the ground, are watching the current U.S. transition with particular trepidation. A new shift in U.S. policy resulting in a precipitous troop pull-out from the area, they fear, could unleash another round of conflict, as competing forces scramble for advantage, causing a new humanitarian crisis of displacement and potentially breathing life into the Islamic State's (ISIS) insurgency. In particular, it could provoke renewed conflict between the U.S.'s local partner in the fight against ISIS, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), and Turkey. Ankara sees the Kurdish component of the SDF (known as the People's Protection Units, or YPG) as a Syrian extension of its mortal enemy, the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), and has become increasingly bitter about continued U.S. support for the group. One way forward would be for the U.S. to seek to broker an arrangement that addresses Turkish security concerns, protects the over three million Syrians residing in north east Syria and minimises risks of an ISIS resurgence.

To ward off the threats to the area and its own existence, the SDF claims it is seeking a path to just such an arrangement. In mid-September, Crisis Group conducted a conversation with the head of the SDF, Mazloum Kobani (also known as Mazloum Abdi), which covered many of the points of contention that would have to be addressed for a mutually tolerable arrangement between the SDF and Turkey to come to pass. It was the latest in a series of discussions Crisis Group has held with Kobani since 2015, and is part of Crisis Group's approach to engage with political and military leaders on all sides in Syria. The conversation touched upon key issues, including the group's evolution, its relations with Damascus and how it sees a potential détente with Turkey.

A Treacherous Calm

Fears of renewed conflict are warranted. They are fuelled by precedent, as north and east Syria has seen repeated military operations, armed conflict and population displacement over the past few years, with external actors playing an enabling role. Turkey in particular has used military force to end what it perceives as the PKK's presence at its southern border. In January 2018, Ankara launched a military incursion into YPG-controlled Afrin, north west of Aleppo. Russia indirectly contributed, reversing its earlier position not to allow Ankara access to Syrian airspace. The operation displaced over 150,000, the majority of them Kurds. Then, in October 2019, President Donald Trump's abrupt announcement that he would withdraw U.S. troops from north east Syria made possible a Turkish ground incursion in the areas of Tel Abyad and Ras al Ayn, majority-Arab towns in the SDF-held border area. While Trump subsequently partly reversed his decision, the events still led to a massive population displacement from those two areas; it did not dislodge the SDF from north east Syria, however. Another precipitous U.S. withdrawal, or perhaps the mere announcement that one is imminent, could once again upset the precarious balance that has prevailed since early 2020.

That uncertainty about U.S. policy in Syria may prevail for a while still. For years, Washington's Syria policy has been contested between different currents in successive U.S. administrations, and north east Syria has increasingly taken centre-stage in that debate. Trump administration officials repeatedly battled the president's aversion to an open-ended engagement in Syria and were successful in convincing him to walk back his decisions to withdraw U.S. forces. The scope of the U.S. presence could still change in the remaining months of Trump's presidency. In mid-November, for instance, just after the U.S. elections, Washington announced partial troop withdrawals from Afghanistan and Iraq.

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Though Biden appears less inclined than Trump to wash his hands of Syria, his administration could still decide to withdraw troops. A broader sense of Syria fatigue, combined with fears of being stuck in “forever wars” in the Middle East, cuts across party lines in Washington. Many Democrats focus exclusively on ISIS's territorial defeat and either have little interest in pursuing or doubt the U.S.'s capacity to achieve larger objectives, such as reforming the Syrian state or curbing Iran's influence in Syria. Some also see an indefinite U.S. presence as contravening international law by violating Syrian sovereignty, a concern exacerbated by President Trump's late 2019 announcement that the U.S. would be staying in north east Syria to “protect the oil”.

A similarly bipartisan range of current administration officials (including those leading U.S. Syria policy) and Biden advisers believe that maintaining an indefinite military presence is necessary to avert violent tumult that would threaten local U.S. allies and potentially enable an ISIS resurgence. Some in this camp also argue that pushing back against the Syrian regime's brutal and uncompromising behaviour should remain a principal U.S. objective. In this view, maintaining a residual U.S. force in north east Syria and imposing significant sanctions on Damascus could provide effective levers to press the regime for meaningful behavioural change, or even, in the eyes of some, toward a political transition. It remains to be seen which of these broad views, both of which appear to have advocates among Biden advisers, will prevail as the president-elect formulates his Syria strategy. Eventually, questions surrounding a U.S. eventual troop exit may revolve around the manner in which it would take place – under which conditions and with what sort of timeline.

The Threat of Further Conflict between Turkey and the SDF

The north east Syria conundrum originated in Washington's choice of partners in its fight against ISIS in 2014. Turkey considers the YPG – the SDF's core component – a terrorist group, inseparable from the PKK, which since 1984 has waged an insurgency in Turkey and has also been designated as a terrorist organisation by the U.S. and EU. The YPG, which the PKK established as its Syrian affiliate, denies current institutional links between the two organisations, emphasising that while it sympathises with the PKK's fight for Kurdish rights in Turkey, it does not participate in it – a stance which, unsurprisingly, has failed to placate or convince Turkey, or alleviate its concern that northern Syria is turning into a PKK-led statelet. Regardless of the precise nature of the link between the YPG and the PKK, and despite the U.S.'s terrorist designation of the PKK, the YPG has been a staunch and indispensable partner in the U.S.-led international coalition confronting ISIS. This has led Washington to consistently overrule Ankara's concerns about the YPG in its own dealings with the group.

That said, both the U.S. and Russia have, on separate occasions, acquiesced in Ankara's moves to advance its security interests on the border by tolerating Turkish incursions – dashing the YPG's hopes that external alliances could fully protect the Kurdish-populated areas under its control from Turkish attack. In Afrin, the YPG's strategic calculation depended on Russia deterring Turkey, but Moscow ended up prioritising its geopolitical interest in improving relations with Ankara over offering protection to an organisation that it saw as a U.S. proxy. Likewise, the U.S. presence in the north east and talks about creating a “safe zone” free of YPG presence along the border, both intended to dissuade Ankara from sending Turkish troops across the border, were only effective for so long. When President Trump essentially green-lighted a Turkish advance, Ankara acted to tackle what in its view remained the crux of the YPG-Turkey conundrum. Indeed, on 6 October 2019, after a telephone call with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Trump acquiesced to a long-threatened Turkish offensive. On both occasions, last-minute deals between the SDF and Damascus aimed at deterring the Turkish incursion by establishing a limited Syrian military presence near the border shifted neither Turkish calculations nor the offensive's trajectory.

The rapid fall of Afrin, Tel Abyad and Ras al Ayn to a combination of Turkish and Turkish-affiliated Syrian forces has underlined a reality Crisis Group has addressed in previous reports and briefings: as long as the YPG remains tied to the PKK through its “party cadres”, and as long as the latter remains in violent conflict with the Turkish state, fighting in northern Syria is unlikely to end. In the past, over-reliance on the prospect of military protection from the U.S. or Russia allowed the YPG to avoid making difficult choices, and this has left it exposed. Today, the group seems cognisant of its inherent vulnerabilities and more inclined to propose arrangements that could stabilise the area.

In his conversation with Crisis Group, Kobani addressed the presence and role of PKK-trained non-Syrian figures in north east Syria more explicitly than ever before in a public setting, while placing it squarely in the context of battlefield necessities against ISIS. He pointed out that before the U.S.-led international coalition launched its operations in Syria, the YPG was already fighting the jihadists:

“ We, a small group of Syrian [PKK members], returned to Syria at the start of the war. When al-Qaeda and ISIS started advancing towards Kurdish towns, we called on our comrades from everywhere to come help us defend against their advance.

According to Kobani, thousands of PKK-trained Kurdish fighters, alongside volunteers, descended into Syria to join the battle. “Hundreds were killed in the fight, some left, others stayed and many pursued a civilian life”.

The matter of PKK-trained figures, who are locally referred to as party cadres (*kadros*, in the Kurdish inflection), remains highly controversial in north east Syria. Crisis Group has written extensively about the issue, drawing criticism from SDF officials, who state that highlighting the PKK link relative to other matters serves (however inadvertently) to justify Turkish hostilities. But denying the link has never made for a convincing argument, either.

Some locals in the north east see the cadres as representing a shadow power structure with ultimate decision-making authority behind and beyond local governing entities, especially when it concerns security. The cadres include non-Syrian Kurds from across the region, as well as Syrian Kurds who served in the PKK’s ranks before returning to Syria after 2011. While they currently serve within the YPG and affiliated local, political, security and administrative bodies, Ankara perceives at least some of them as maintaining links with the PKK. In the first few years of the fight against ISIS, a great deal of secrecy surrounded the cadres’ identity and role. Their background and to whom they reported was not clear to local Arabs or even Kurds. Over time,locals came to realise that these individuals tended to call the shots. It became even harder to maintain this clandestine streak in exclusively Arab areas, where the cadres’ accent, their dress code and the way they conduct themselves appear foreign.

Privately, some senior SDF figures admit that while the PKK-trained cadres play a notable role in the fight against ISIS and in stabilising newly captured areas, their organisational background and significant presence in Syria exacerbate tensions with Turkey. Ankara has repeatedly and angrily pointed out these cadres’ leading role and clout to their U.S. counterparts and in meetings with Crisis Group. Commenting on this issue in the interview, Kobani said:

Through U.S. mediation and as part of our talks with the other Kurdish groups, including the Kurdish National Council [or KNC, a gamut of Syrian Kurdish opposition groups backed by the Kurdistan regional government in Iraq and, indirectly, Turkey] we agreed to gradually pull out all these non-Syrian cadres from their current positions, and ultimately from Syria. Today, we have over two hundred thousand Syrians enrolled in our civil and military institutions, and there is no real need for regional Kurdish support [referring to non-Syrian PKK members]. We have not committed to a timeline for their full withdrawal but the process has already started and will continue.

Committing to pulling out all non-Syrian cadres from the entirety of the north east would be a new development, and highly significant if implemented. Still, whether such a move would be sufficient to assuage Ankara’s concerns remains unclear, since for Turkey the main issue is party affiliation (and operational ties to Qandil) rather than citizenship. Ankara is also sceptical as to whether Kobani is actually willing and capable of implementing such a move.

“ Another major potential source of instability has been insurgent attacks in Turkish-controlled areas in Syria. ”



Another major potential source of instability has been insurgent attacks in Turkish-controlled areas in Syria. Although the SDF has publicly endorsed UN Secretary-General António Guterres’ call for a global ceasefire in the face of COVID-19, attacks against Turkey-backed forces from SDF-controlled areas have continued. Turkish officials have repeatedly referred to these attacks as deliberate provocations. “Whether or not the SDF leadership are directly giving the orders for these attacks, they are responsible for any military activities emanating from areas under their control”, a Turkish official told Crisis Group. Since the beginning of the year, tens of attacks have occurred in areas under Turkish-backed Syrian forces’ control. The targets of most of these attacks may have been military, but the victims include dozens of Syrian civilians. Kobani acknowledged the problem:

We promised the U.S. that we would de-escalate and we are ready for a full unilateral ceasefire, including along the lines of separation with Turkish-controlled areas, if the U.S. or Russia could also elicit a commitment from Turkey to address the violations committed against civilians in Afrin and allow for the return of the displaced to their homes.

Asymmetrical attacks across lines of control in the north east are unlikely to effect a significant change in the balance of power, much less force Turkey to withdraw from these areas. By contrast, the likelihood of these attacks triggering an escalatory cycle of violence, including a potentially forceful Turkish military response, remains high.

The SDF is clearly seeking U.S. mediation to reach a détente with Ankara. According to Kobani:

We understand that beyond rhetoric, U.S.-Turkey relations are strategic. We realise that we need to de-escalate with Ankara if we want continued U.S. air protection. Our position remains the same: we are open to any understanding with Turkey on security and beyond, despite Turkish aggression against us. And we want the U.S. to be the mediator and guarantor of that.

Yet it remains difficult to imagine that Ankara would see an interest in striking tactical agreements with the SDF aimed at preventing escalation with its longstanding enemy absent a clear endgame that would prevent the north east from becoming a PKK-led or aligned statelet.

Likewise, whether the U.S. is capable of playing a mediator role remains unclear. For the time being, the U.S. has limited itself to encouraging talks between the SDF/YPG and the KNC. But Ankara’s anti-U.S. rhetoric, its purchase of the Russian S-400 air defence system and the hard line it has been pushing in north east Syria have left it with few allies in Washington.

Turkey might well be reluctant to accept the U.S. as mediator. It rebuffed U.S. offers in the past, and is bitter about how Washington has handled the situation in north east Syria. From Ankara’s perspective, U.S. support and protection offered to the SDF throughout the last six years has amounted to a tacit green light to the existence of a YPG-led autonomous administration, providing strategic depth to the PKK’s guerrilla warfare against Turkey. Then-candidate Joe Biden caused consternation in Ankara when, in a [video recording](#) released in January 2020, he harshly criticised President Erdoğan and said that the U.S. should “embolden” elements of the Turkish opposition “to be able to take on and defeat” him. That has sparked concern about what the president-elect would do once in the White House, despite Biden’s longstanding relations with the Turkish president.

No Road to Damascus

The SDF leadership’s apparently growing desire to de-escalate with Turkey is likely a result of vanishing hope for a modus vivendi with Damascus. Despite its six-year partnership with the U.S., the SDF has generally maintained a (mostly unrequited) conciliatory tone toward the Syrian government. Moreover, throughout the Syrian war, the Kurdish leadership has kept an arrangement with Damascus that allows regime forces a symbolic presence in a few blocks in the centre of Qamishli and part of Hasakeh city, as well as full control over Qamishli airport. The two parties have also maintained security and economic cooperation arrangements that have been mutually beneficial.

However, the local balance of power throughout the north east has been firmly tilted in the SDF’s favour. In the aftermath of the U.S. drawdown and subsequent Turkish incursion into the north east in October 2019, the SDF signed a border defence agreement with Damascus that allowed the return of hundreds of regime forces to areas in which U.S.-led coalition forces had formerly been present. While this small Russian-midwifed deployment proved insufficient to block a Turkish military advance, it arguably showed that a mutually tolerable arrangement between the SDF and Damascus is not impossible.

Yet Kobani stressed that the prospect of a continued U.S. military presence was essential to securing the deal, and expressed pessimism toward further bilateral talks with Damascus:

When Turkey attacked Tel Abyad, I went to Damascus to try to reach a deal with the leadership there, but they were not willing to compromise or provide any guarantees. It was not until it became clear to them that the U.S. was partially walking back its withdrawal decision and would be keeping a residual force that Damascus agreed to a stopgap military arrangement to defend against Turkey’s advance. We have been unsuccessfully trying for years to find a middle ground with Damascus. Today, we don’t think that a bilateral agreement is possible, and we believe that the status of the north east should be settled as part of an internationally guaranteed deal that would include all of Syria.

Kobani’s current pessimism regarding the potential for negotiations with the regime contrasts with prior periods, when the SDF openly hoped that further arrangements with Damascus might be possible. It reflects the regime’s inability to effectively protect the area from Turkish incursions as much as its unwillingness to compromise. The fundamental gap between the YPG and regime’s negotiating positions remains the question of physical control: whose armed forces, security and intelligence services would dominate the area? In other words, who would determine the fate of the SDF-led autonomous administration?

The Unfinished Fight against ISIS

Meanwhile, the residual ISIS presence in north east Syria presents a continuing challenge. Dozens of interviews with local officials and residents in north east Syria indicate that while ISIS insurgent capabilities remain limited and no major breakdown in security has occurred, the group's members are now able to coalesce, set up checkpoints and extort protection money from local oil traders crossing through Syria's eastern desert (*badiya*). ISIS militants routinely threaten shop owners, heads of factories, directors and major suppliers of non-governmental organisations, doctors, landowners and others perceived to be well-off to pay it *zakat* (notionally, gifts to charity). More worrisome is the group's apparent ability to train new recruits in desert areas west of the Euphrates that are nominally controlled by pro-regime forces. Kobani called for continued U.S. help in addressing these challenges:

We partnered with the U.S. on a mission: the enduring defeat of ISIS. That mission has not been fully achieved. It will require time and resources to contain the ISIS threat and reverse some of the drivers that led thousands of Syrians to join the group. The lack of local confidence in the sustainability of coalition efforts has led locals to tolerate ISIS operatives among them.

Crisis Group interviews with local tribal figures in eastern Syria confirm that U.S. withdrawal announcements led to a growing sense of the SDF as a lame duck. ISIS operatives have exploited this perception by penetrating local communities in the rural parts of eastern Syria, acting with growing impunity.

In addition to ongoing raids against ISIS cells, the SDF has been guarding tens of thousands of ISIS prisoners and associated family members with no clear strategy for how to reintegrate them. It claims that the number of prisoners is increasing with daily arrests of ISIS members, and that this is straining its ability to guard them, in the absence of any meaningful external support for justice and de-radicalisation programs that might allow the release of some prisoners. The SDF says it has foiled over fifteen attempted prison breaks since October 2019. To ease pressure, the SDF announced plans in October 2020 to grant amnesty to thousands of Syrians held at the al-Hol detention camp, placing the burden on local communities to integrate deeply traumatised and often radicalised women and children.

A Way Forward

The U.S. continues to play an important role in stabilising the area and deterring further military actions by local and regional actors. But it has undermined this role through ambiguous and often contradictory messaging about its intentions in Syria. Pledging to remain in the country for an unknown period without a clear, viable diplomatic roadmap could keep the area at constant risk of destabilisation attempts and violence. Yet exiting precipitously could trigger a violent scramble for dominance, with Ankara, Damascus, Tehran's militia allies or some combination thereof attempting to seize territory and resources from the SDF. The U.S. might not be insulated from the resulting chaos should it allow ISIS or other jihadists to reassert themselves.

“A safer route would be for the U.S. to commit to an eventual gradual withdrawal.”
Between those two ends of the policy spectrum, a safer route would be for the U.S. to commit to an eventual gradual withdrawal, conditioned on attainment of a negotiated arrangement that would protect the millions of civilians residing under SDF control from a violent free-for-all that ISIS elements could exploit. Maintaining the north east as part of the Syrian state is necessary to ensure a sustainable solution. However, an agreement between the YPG and Damascus may not occur anytime soon. Even if they reach one, it may not suffice to avert a violent post-withdrawal scramble for control of territory and resources. A considerable gap separates the minimum the YPG is willing to accept from the maximum Damascus is prepared to concede. Further, Damascus appears to believe that time is on its side, owing to its military gains elsewhere and the expectation that the U.S. will withdraw its troops sometime not too far down the road.

Given that reality, minimising risks of a violent eruption in north east Syria following a U.S. troop withdrawal almost certainly will require active U.S. shuttle diplomacy between the YPG and Ankara. Washington should use its remaining influence and presence in Syria to address Turkish and SDF concerns about an end state for north east Syria. Any U.S.-mediated arrangement would need to address Ankara's two major priorities: preventing a PKK armed presence and activity south of its border, including attacks in Turkey or Turkish-controlled parts of Syria emanating from SDF-controlled areas; and ending any YPG arms supplies to the PKK, as Turkey claims exist. Under such an arrangement, the U.S. would need to offer the SDF effective protection from a battle with Turkish and pro-Turkish forces in the form of a continued military presence until above conditions are met – a battle that would come at a grave human cost to north east Syria's residents. The U.S. might also need to help bring the SDF into internationally backed political talks on Syria.

Focusing diplomatic efforts on immediate tactical details while leaving core differences over the endgame unaddressed risks doing little to assuage Turkey's concerns, and could encourage Ankara to pocket such tactical concessions without lowering its own demands or foregoing military options. Instead, the U.S. should work with Ankara and the SDF to define a mutually tolerable endgame, then seek to reach agreements on tactical steps toward that end. These could include the YPG lessening its control over governance, resources and security in Syria's north east and allowing for meaningful participation by Arab and Kurdish opposition forces in the local administration and civil society organisations.

For its part, Turkey should consider dropping its veto over SDF inclusion in the UN-led political process on Syria. Enabling the SDF to participate could encourage the UN's Syria focus and help cement its commitment to settling the status of the north east through the framework of a multilateral nationwide agreement that preserves Syria's territorial integrity. Ankara should also address the property and security concerns of the indigenous population of areas it seized from the YPG by ending violations perpetrated by the armed groups it supports there, and allow the return of those who have been displaced as a result of its military operations.