



# Turkey's Options for Northeastern Syria: Some Conditional Insights

*By Şaban Kardaş*

The scramble between international actors for northeastern Syria has dominated the regional agenda since the announcement of by the U.S. President Donald Trump in December 2018 that the United States would withdraw its troops from the country. At the center of the discussions on who will exert greater control in the region, Turkey has been engaged in busy diplomatic activity to realize its stated objective of clearing its border with Syria from the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG), the affiliate of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). Mirroring the direct communication channels he has with the U.S. president, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has maintained a dialogue with President Vladimir Putin, including a trip to Moscow in late January. Contacts at various levels between Turkish foreign policy and security officials and their Russian and U.S. counterparts have abounded, as well as back-channel initiatives. There seems to be no clear sign, however, as to how Turkey will proceed with regard to its options for partnership in northeastern Syria. It is important therefore to understand the main parameters affecting its eventual decision.

## Turkey's Bargaining Power, Motivations and Preferences

First, one has to look at the motivations behind Turkey's strategic calculations, along with its relative capabilities and bargaining power vis-à-vis its counterparts. Its proximity, conventional military capabilities, experience in irregular warfare, and troops and local proxies on the ground form its power

base. Given its critical involvement in several political initiatives and the deals it entered with other key players – ranging from the Geneva process to the Astana process, the Sochi deal with Russia, or the refugee agreement with the EU – Turkey also enjoys certain bargaining power vis-à-vis other actors in Syria.

Turkey's main objective remains fighting the PKK's separatist agenda in Syria and the region. Eventually, its options boil down to two sets of choices available to realize the same outcome. To maximize its leverage against the PKK, it could either crystallize the idea of a "safe zone" with the United States, or it could delve deeper into Putin's proposal to revive the Adana protocol, which may eventually result in the normalization of relations with the regime of President Bashar al-Assad. Signed in 1998 between Damascus and Ankara, the protocol forced Syria to end its support to the PKK, lest it faced Turkey's military action.

Either choice will effectively bind Turkey into separate sets of relationships. Once it commits to either, the arrangements will constrain its future behavior. Those relationships will create myriad vicious or virtuous cycles. They will also lead to different outcomes for Turkey's security, its place in Syria and the region, and its fight against the PKK, which will entail different distributions of power, control, and authority between Ankara and the other protagonists.

The key point affecting Turkey's preferences over these options, which escapes attention in the current debate, is the time horizon where the dynamic effects (i.e. based on based on future parameters) rather than static effects



(i.e. based on current parameters) of an impending decision is more relevant. The country finds itself at such a critical juncture that the choice ahead will not just settle the question of under what formula to create a safe zone to thwart the PKK in the short term, it will also have far-reaching implications for the mid-to-long-term. This argument is further strengthened by an underlying assumption that the Syrian crisis is far from over, which necessitates taking every step with extreme caution and consideration of subsequent contingencies. On the broader picture, moreover, the other protagonists in the scramble for northeast Syria are making similar calculations, so that they can get the best deal now to strengthen their position for the next stages and eventually for the final showdown in the conflict.

In this long game, several factors are likely to set the boundaries of Turkey's preferences. It will not interact with friendly counterparts in either choice; hence, it will have to engage in competitive bargaining in a zero-sum setting. In either choice, it will have to make major concessions and trade-offs, and incur opportunity costs. And in either one differences in bargaining power vis-à-vis its preferred interlocutor creates unique challenges and opportunities for Turkey as it seeks to maximize its leverage. What is more, in either choice patterns of violence vary so much that Turkey may find itself embroiled in various forms of conflict against the PKK and other actors with variable time horizons. Thus ending the conflict spiral in Syria for good or perpetuating protracted conflicts of the civil war are both potential outcomes. Either choice by Turkey, therefore, may trigger different path-dependent trajectories that may create unwanted consequences for its regional interests or for the Kurdish question at home.

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## Weighing the Options: Between a Rock and a Hard Place

Cooperation with the United States is centered on the notion of a “safe zone,” the meaning of which is far from clear. As it did with its earlier incursions into Syria, Turkey seeks to interpret this notion in line with its new doctrine of forward posture, which claims a right to strike the PKK/PYD at will and to return Syrian refugees in these areas. The United States, in contrast, sees a safe zone as a way to constrain Turkey and to secure the gains made by these groups in northeastern Syria. Agreeing to a safe zone on Washington's terms is likely to set into motion a path-dependent process that may eventually replicate the experience of an embryonic Kurdish state in northern Iraq, something that awakens fears in Ankara.

As this is a no-go proposition for Turkey, its differences with the United States remain unbridged. It is intent on driving a hard bargain to twist its ally's arm by reserving a right to – and effectively threatening – unilateral action. However, since U.S. troops will leave sooner rather than later and the withdrawal decision has already mobilized other actors to search for new alignments, there is a great time pressure on both countries to reach a workable settlement. Neither Turkey nor the United States can afford to engage in open-ended negotiations, as in the Manbij process. In that instance, although the two countries agreed in June 2018 on a roadmap under which YPG militants would have withdrawn from the city of Manbij to be replaced by local elements, the withdrawal has not been realized.

Turkey, thus, has to look at the other course of action: partnership with Russia, which is now framed around the Adana protocol. The contours of this prospective partnership, however, are obscure. Russia perhaps hopes to use it to steer Turkey towards normalization with the Assad regime, which fits with its overall strategy in Syria. Moreover, despite expressing support for Turkey's fight against terrorism, Russia has been ambiguous about its views toward the Kurds' gains in Syria in general, and more specifically regarding the

PKK-PYD connection. Refraining from recognizing the PYD as a terror entity, Russia maintained ties to it and undertook efforts to integrate it into political processes or to propose federalism for Syria. Given this background, it is highly unlikely Putin meant to satisfy Turkey's expectations by referring during his meeting with Erdoğan in Moscow to the Adana protocol as the basis of ensuring Turkey's security concerns in northeastern Syria.

As much as Turkey's objective of reversing the PKK/PYD gains overlaps with that of the Assad regime, a meeting of minds on what this exactly entails is far from certain to convince Ankara about a normalization agenda. There are further reasons Turkey will find it difficult to restore relations on an equal footing. It will aspire to interpret the Adana protocol in line with its current policy of claiming an expanded notion of self-defense whereby it reserves a right to cross-border incursion and a forward posture. On the other hand, Turkey will continue to question the legitimacy of the Assad regime, because, when the U.S. military presence is over, its own military actions inside Syria will increasingly come under scrutiny. In an ideal scenario, a political settlement to the Syrian crisis on Turkey's terms may also help manage this issue. Confronted with the likely failure to reach a comprehensive political settlement covering issues ranging from Syria's new political system, power sharing among local actors, reconstruction of the war-torn economy and cities to settling the status of foreign forces, it will need to justify its forward posture and support to the Syrian opposition. Unless it compromises on its Syria policy, the continuation of current strained relations with the Assad regime is a political necessity for Turkey, because this is the basis on which the legitimacy of its military incursions is built. Hence, Ankara will accept references by Russia or the regime to the Adana protocol, as long as it is meant to place responsibilities on the regime and to recognize Turkey's right to intervene and to scuttle the PKK/PYD's gains altogether, which may not sit well with Russia or the regime.

The relative merits of the two options facing Turkey and the trade-offs involved in the scramble over

northeastern Syria – as examined above – should not be looked at in isolation from the broader dynamics of the Syrian crisis. It should not ignore issue linkages resulting from other items in Turkey's relations with the United States and Russia, ranging from Ankara's controversial

deal to procure Russian S400 air defense systems to its participation in the production of US-led joint strike fighter jet F35 program which came under Congress's scrutiny. Finding an equilibrium will not be easy for Turkey in either option. Hence,

all the conditions are there to expect the derailment of negotiations with both sides. Since Turkey feels whichever deal it eventually reaches will be decisive for its objectives in Syria, it will not commit to either option before it feels it extracted the best bargaining outcome in an environment of strategic uncertainty.

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## Credible Future U.S. Commitment

Turkey's choice will eventually come down to whether its preferred partner – the United States or Russia – can make a credible commitment for the future, as much as to what it is being offered. While judging the merits of the alternatives, three components are critical: intent, capability, and trust. Regarding intent, Turkey is likely to gauge the United States and Russia's views towards itself, the Kurds, the PKK, the future of Syria, and the Middle East. As for trust, rather than acting within formal alliance relationships, the recent track record of the United States and Russia in the region will likely be more decisive. As for capability, factors affecting the ability to deliver on promises – ranging from willingness to sustain military, political and economic engagement to decision-making processes or the overall foreign policy orientation of either partner – will be taken into account.

Even if eventually Turkey manages to find common ground with the United States on favorable terms,

the question of credible future commitment cannot be overlooked. If the United States fails to put forth a model of sustained engagement in northeastern Syria beyond its withdrawal of troops, eventually agreeing with Washington may not deliver for Ankara what it so deeply wants for gaining a foothold in the region to eliminate the PKK/PYD threat. Given the United States' fickle decision-making, divided government, ambivalence about the future of its military presence, and track record of undermining allies' trust, it hardly fares better than Russia when it comes to making a credible future commitment to Turkey at this critical juncture.

With its centralized decision-making and strategic application of coercive instruments, Russia so far has proven a more reliable counterpart to many countries, including Turkey.

Moreover, the regional vision offered by Russia resonates more with Turkey's new foreign policy orientation than a U.S. grand strategy in transition. The United States is in no better situation than Russia to convince Turkey that it harbors benign intentions regarding the future of the Kurds in the region.

If the issue of credible commitment arises, by default Turkey may be left with – as its only realistic option – an accommodation with the axis of Russia, Iran, and the Assad regime to deepen security cooperation. This will perpetuate and deepen the path-dependent trajectory created by the United States' earlier failures to respond to Turkey's security needs in Syria, which has put major strains on the alliance between the two countries.

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## About the Author

Saban Kardas is a faculty member at the Department of International Relations at TOBB ETU. He has published scholarly articles, and book chapters on Turkish domestic and foreign policies, human rights, energy policies, and international security, and he is an occasional contributor to Turkish and international media. He has taught classes at the Diplomacy Academy, Sakarya University, the Police Academy and the Turkish Military Academy. He received his Doctoral Degree in Political Science from the University of Utah. He also holds a Master's Degree in International Relations from the METU in Ankara, and a second Master's Degree in European Studies from the Center for European Integration Studies in Bonn, Germany.

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1744 R Street NW  
Washington, DC 20009  
T 1 202 683 2650 | F 1 202 265 1662 | E [info@gmfus.org](mailto:info@gmfus.org)  
<http://www.gmfus.org/>