

Turkey in Syria After a U.S. Withdrawal A Poisoned Chalice

By Jana Jabbour

Faced with the conflict in Syria, Turkey initially aimed at overthrowing President Bashar al-Assad. However, the increased geopolitical, security, and economic costs to it, and the territorial advances by Syrian Kurdish fighters led to a change. Turkey's objective in Syria shifted to "counterterrorism", making the fight against Kurdish forces and securing the border a top priority. Following the Olive Branch and Euphrates Shield operations, Turkey stated its readiness to make new military moves at the border.

In this context, Turkey welcomed the announcement of U.S. troop withdrawal, believing this would give it a free hand to intervene in Syria and defeat its enemies. In fact, this creates instead intractable policy dilemmas for the country. A U.S. pullout would leave Turkey cornered and squeezed diplomatically, with much less room to maneuver between Russia, Iran, and the Assad regime. While Turkey is seeking to use the announced pullout as an opportunity to set up a safe zone under its control, something it has long wished for, this would not only generate huge costs, but it would also bring it into direct confrontation with Russia and the Assad regime. Instead of emerging as a winner, Turkey might thus well be the major loser of a U.S. withdrawal.

On 19 December 2018, President Donald Trump declared that ISIS was defeated at large and ordered the withdrawal of 2,000 U.S. troops from Syria. President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who has long castigated the United States over its support for Syrian Kurdish forces in the context of the fight against ISIS, immediately welcomed this surprise announcement and underlined Turkey's commitment to boost its counter-terrorism efforts to eradicate what was left of ISIS in Syria.

While Trump's decision marks a turning point in the Syrian conflict as it reconfigures the dynamics on the ground, the repercussions on Turkey's role and policy in Syria remain uncertain. A U.S. withdrawal could represent a window of opportunity for Ankara by allowing it to fill the power void in its neighbor and by removing a major obstacle to new military incursions in northeast Syria against Kurdish forces. Yet, in reality, a pullout complicates the situation on the ground and confronts Turkey with difficult policy choices.

This brief examines Turkey's dilemmas and prospects in Syria. It looks at the costs of the country's involvement in the Syrian quagmire and shows the strong connection between its difficulties there and its domestic political and economic challenges. It then analyzes the recent shifts in Turkey's stance vis-à-vis the regime in Damascus and examines its priorities and national security interests in Syria. Finally, it looks at the implications of a U.S. pullout on the country's options and role in Syria and draws conclusions on the outlook and prospects of its relations with the West in 2019.

An Initial Shortsighted Policy

In September 2011, Turkey's ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) made the decision to support the Syrian opposition with a view to toppling Bashar al-Assad's regime. Two months later, Erdoğan for the first time publicly called for his removal and Minister of Foreign Affairs Ahmet Davutoğlu announced unilateral sanctions against the regime, ranging from freezing Syrian government's assets in Turkey to suspending sales of military equipment.

The AKP government's anti-Assad stance then stood in stark contrast with the honeymoon that had thus far characterized its relations with the Syrian regime. Throughout the 2000s, believing that the regional status quo was sustainable and that Arab autocrats would remain in place, Turkey engaged in diplomacy that was famously dubbed by Davutoğlu as "zero problems with the neighbors," building solid economic and political partnerships with the Arab regimes. Particular attention was given to rapprochement with Syria. Following Davutoğlu's "strategic depth" doctrine, and given the country's central role in the Arab regional system, the AKP government viewed Syria as Turkey's gateway to the Middle East. Therefore, it cozied up to Assad in an attempt to co-opt Syria, thus allowing Turkey to rise as a hegemonic power in the Middle East.

While at the beginning of the Syrian uprising in early 2011, Turkey had stood with Assad in an attempt to rescue him, two major considerations pushed it to change position a few months later. First, the intensification of the repression against the revolutionaries and Assad's onslaught on his own people made support for his regime morally unsustainable. Second, the empowerment of the Kurds in Syria, together with the increased activism of the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD)—an affiliate of the outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK)—and its Peoples Protection Units (YPG) militia, raised the specter of a potential Kurdish autonomous entity in northeast Syria and bordering Turkey. This awakened the country's "Sevres Syndrome", a popular

belief that outside forces are conspiring to weaken and carve up Turkey.¹

Believing in the necessity to intervene swiftly in Syria to prevent the country's territorial disintegration and to safeguard its interests, Turkey shifted from a passive policy of adaptation to change in the Middle East to a proactive policy of driving change in Syria, with the overthrow of Assad a priority. Davutoğlu reflected this new assertive policy in a major statement in January 2012: "A new Middle East is about to be born. We will be the owner, pioneer and the servant of this new Middle East. (...) Turkey will guide the winds of change in the region."²

In order to topple Assad and reconfigure the regional order, Turkey adopted policies from September 2011 that eventually backfired, producing a boomerang effect at home. It provided logistical and military support for the opposition, regardless of the identity and nature of the recipient groups. Hence, gradually, and in a context of prolongation of the crisis and radicalization of the Syrian opposition, Turkey found itself a sponsor of ISIS, which grew out of the radicalized opposition. In fact, with Turkey's authorities unable to fully control the 911 kilometers border, the country gradually became a conduit for foreign fighters in the conflict, including those seeking to join ISIS. In addition, Turkey provided ISIS with logistical support: wounded ISIS fighters received free medical care at hospitals across southeastern Turkey, including ISIS chief Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, who was treated in a private hospital in Sanliurfa in 2014. Assuming that ISIS could be doubly instrumentalized in the fight against Assad and in the containment of the YPG, Turkey turned a blind eye to ISIS, without considering its potential to undermine Turkish national security and regional interests in the future.

1. The Treaty of Sevres of 1920 partitioned the Ottoman empire between the Kurds, Armenia, Greece, Britain, France, and Italy, leaving a small area around Ankara under Turkish rule. The historian Taner Akçam describes the "Sevres syndrome" as an ongoing perception that "there are forces which continually seek to disperse and destroy us, and it is necessary to defend the state against this danger." Taner Akçam, *From Empire to Republic: Turkish Nationalism and the Armenian Genocide*, London: Zed Books, 2005, p. 230.

2. January 2012, speech at the Turkish Parliament.

This policy has proved shortsighted. By 2013, the genie of ISIS had come out of its bottle to pose a national security threat for Turkey. The terrorist attacks and suicide bombings in Reyhanli, Suruç, Ankara, Diyarbakır, Istanbul, and Gaziantep, which cost the lives of hundreds of Turks, proved that Turkish security is inextricably linked to the situation in Syria. Thus, in 2013 Turkey shifted from a policy of tacit support for ISIS to one of officially combating it, multilaterally (by joining efforts with the international coalition against it) and unilaterally (Operation Shield of Euphrates).

“ *Turkey’s policy eventually put in danger its relations with other countries.*”

In addition, Turkey’s Syria policy was politically and economically costly. First, the feeling of insecurity and vulnerability due to the conflict further propelled the authoritarian tendencies of the AKP government: raising the specter of a security danger posed by events in Syria, the AKP tightened its grip on power domestically. The concentration of power and the elimination of the opposition were presented as necessary measures to “protect” the nation and to guarantee the “unity of ranks” against the enemies. Simultaneously, the population—scared of destabilization—demanded strong leadership, capable of guaranteeing peace and security, as revealed by interviews with citizens who traditionally voted for opposition parties but voted for Erdoğan in 2018. They explained their recent support for him by the “absence of an alternative strong leader” and the necessity “to protect our borders,” and stressed that this was “a short-term tactic.”³

Second, the conflict in Syria killed the Kurdish peace process that the Turkish government had initiated in 2008. The AKP government’s early steps to recognize the cultural rights of Kurds (for example, by opening a TRT television channel in the Kurdish language), and to bring an end to the conflict with the PKK by engaging in negotiations with its leader

³ Interviews conducted with a sample of 25 voters in Istanbul, Ankara, and Bursa, in May 2018.

Abdullah Öcalan and by allowing the creation of the first Kurdish-majority political party, the Peoples’ Democratic Party (HDP), were all reversed. In fact, with the prolongation of the Syria crisis, both sides lost the incentive to cooperate: the government and population got haunted once again by the “Sevres syndrome” while the PKK felt emboldened by the success of the PYD/YPG and found in Syria a new rear base from which to revive its armed struggle against the Turkish state.

At the economic level, the influx of 3.6 million Syrian refugees,⁴ on whom Turkey had spent more than \$30 billion by late 2017,⁵ has weighed down the economy and tested the country’s absorption capacity. Additionally, one of the Syria crisis’s collateral damages has been the drop in Turkey’s trade revenues: with the suspension of the free trade agreement with Syria, not only did Turkey lose one of its major economic partners, it was also deprived of access to other Middle Eastern markets as the country was the main export route for Turkish goods to Iraq and Lebanon.

Finally, Turkey’s policy in Syria hurt its regional standing. In the 2000s, the country managed to overcome the Sunni-Shia divide and to rise above sectarian fault lines in the Middle East by resorting to a discourse emphasizing the unity of the Muslim ummah. However, as the Syria crisis unfolded, the AKP government was caught by those same divisions it had sought to overcome. The growing sectarian nature of the conflict, coupled with Turkey’s alignment with the position of Saudi Arabia and Qatar, gave the Arab public the impression that it stood with Sunnis against Shias. Moreover, Turkey’s policy eventually put in danger its relations with other countries. “Zero problems with the neighbors” has gradually evolved into a “zero neighbors without problems” as relations deteriorated not only with Syria, but also with Iran, Iraq, Egypt, and Lebanon’s Hezbollah.

⁴ “Syria Regional Refugee Response”, UNHCR, <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/syria/location/113>

⁵ “Turkey spends \$30 billion on Syrian refugees”, Hurriyet Daily News, November 6, 2017 <http://www.hurriyetaidailynews.com/turkey-to-continue-responding-to-humanitarian-crises-121982>.

Changing Course

By the end of 2015, it became clear that Turkey had reached a dead end in Syria. Its policy, which had been based on overthrowing Assad, containing the YPG/PKK, and fighting ISIS, proved to be a failure since none of these targets were achieved.

Moreover, for the first time in the modern history of the Turkish state, Kurds inside Syria controlled a stretch of the border of more than 60 miles. With such important Kurdish advances on the ground, the government reviewed its priorities as it came to see Kurdish expansionism as a greater threat than the political survival of Assad. Hence, Turkey's objective in Syria changed from regime change to "counterterrorism", which for the Turkish government encompasses both the fight against ISIS and the YPG/PKK forces. At the same time, only the latter still hold ground along the border and are clearly the prime concern.

Following this change of priorities and objectives, Turkey performed a strategic shift and de-escalated its rhetoric toward Assad. The first symptom of this U-turn was the resignation or forced departure of Davutoğlu as prime minister. Having made Assad's overthrow a precondition for any acceptable solution to the conflict, the—first as foreign minister, then as prime minister—had been in the driver seat of Syria policy. In many regards, he was the government's hawk on this issue. Davutoğlu's forced departure can be interpreted as an exit strategy for Turkey from Syria. By blaming the prime minister for mistakes and failures, Erdoğan sought to open a new page in Turkey's Syria policy, one based on more pragmatism and realpolitik.

Today, Turkey aims to achieve the following three objectives in Syria, by order of priority. First, preventing the emergence of a Kurdish autonomous zone at the border by combating Kurdish advances in all border areas (Afrin, Kobane, Tal Abyad, Al Bab, Hasakeh), and preventing the formation of a "Syrian border force" backed by the United States and composed mainly of the PYD/YPG (hence

the operation "Olive Branch" in Afrin).⁶ Second, weakening ISIS and pushing it away from border areas to limit its capacity to cause Turkey harm.⁷ Third, seeking a regional solution for Syria, which means one drafted by non-Western, rising powers that are either insiders to the region (Iran, Turkey) or that have a growing imprint in the region (Russia), as opposed to Western outside powers. Hence, Turkey's commitment to the Russia-initiated Astana process, which represents in the eyes of the government a parallel diplomacy to that of the traditional Western powers.

Turkey's Options in Syria after a U.S. Pullout

When President Trump announced that U.S. troops would pull out from Syria, the Turkish military was already gearing up for a cross-border campaign east of the Euphrates, which would mark its third major endeavor in northeastern Syria following Operation Euphrates Shield and Operation Olive Branch. Turkey interpreted the U.S. president's declaration as a green light for carrying out this new military operation. Its hopes soon vanished, however, as Trump redefined his Syria policy in a volley of tweets, saying Turkey's economy would be "devastated" if it attacked Kurdish forces in Syria. He yielded, though, to the longstanding Turkish request for a safe zone, a 32 kilometers-wide strip of land along the border that would prevent YPG forces from coming into direct contact with PKK forces in Turkey.

While Turkey has demanded the establishment of a safe zone since the earliest days of the Syrian conflict, Trump's acceptance of this request came nevertheless at the wrong time for it. In fact, by December 2018 the establishment of a safe zone had become a "second best" for Ankara, which now favors unilateral action in the form of a direct military incursion in YPG-held areas.

⁶ The operation, launched at the beginning of 2018, defeated PYD forces at the border, all along the Hatay province.

⁷ In August 2016, Turkey launched Operation Euphrates Shield to combat ISIS at its borders, killing some 3,000 ISIS fighters.

The current situation leaves Turkey at a crossroads when it comes to Syria, facing three scenarios.

The Military Scenario

In this scenario, Turkey would take advantage of the delay in establishing a safe zone to act unilaterally and carry out a full-scale military offensive against YPG forces in northeastern

Syria. This option is tempting for the AKP government as it responds to its domestic considerations. In the lead-up to the municipal elections on 31 March, raising the specter of the “Kurdish danger” can serve as an effective tool to create a “rally around the flag” effect and to appeal

to the constituency of its competitor, the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP). By diverting attention from Turkey’s economic and political problems, a military incursion in Syria has the potential to boost electoral support for the AKP party.

Yet, while it may have domestic political benefits for the government, this option is also highly risky and costly. First, if Turkey attacks YPG forces, the United States might respond by imposing sanctions on its economy, which is heavily dependent on foreign trade and direct investments. This would hurt the AKP government and Erdoğan, who has based his electoral successes and popularity since 2002 on economic achievements. Second, any unilateral military operation by Turkey in Syria carries the danger of bringing it into direct confrontation with Russia, thus jeopardizing their relations. These political and economic risks are likely to mitigate the temptation to adopt a hawkish stance and unilaterally launch a new operation in Syria.

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The Diplomatic-Military Scenario

In a second scenario, Turkey would negotiate with Russia the terms and conditions of its military operation in northeastern Syria. The Putin-Erdoğan meeting in Moscow on January 23 focused on cooperation between the two countries in Syria following the announced withdrawal of U.S. troops. More such meetings are expected to take place this year, with Turkey using them as a platform to negotiate the terms of its fight against YPG forces. In particular, it could ask for Russia for a green light to intervene in northeastern Syria, while in return it could offer to cease its support for the Syrian opposition and the jihadists it has leverage over, especially those in Idlib (Jabhat al Nusra, ahrar al sham, Hay’at tahrir al sham).

While this is a strong negotiating card with Russia, which wishes to weaken the Syrian opposition and cut its Turkish lifeline, it is nevertheless highly unlikely that Moscow would give a green light for a military intervention that would boost the presence and influence of Turkey in Syria. Moreover, Russia’s main ally, the Assad regime, has repeatedly stated that any Turkish move into Syrian territory is unwelcome and will be considered a hostile act. Therefore, negotiating with Russia a potential military intervention does not seem to be a viable option for Turkey.

The Diplomatic Scenario

In a third scenario, the status quo on the ground would be maintained, while Turkey improves relations with the United States to negotiate favorable terms for the establishment of a safe zone. Turkey resolutely states that a safe zone must consider its national security. In this regard, it will likely negotiate that a safe zone respects three main criteria that correspond to its following strategic interests.

First, a safe zone must effectively secure Turkey’s borders from any national security threat by neutralizing ISIS as well as YPG/PKK forces. As the U.S. decision to withdraw and the discussions around it, including over a safe zone, came only after Turkey was considering the launch of another

military operation, the establishment of such a zone has to fulfill this objective in order to be acceptable to Ankara. Therefore, Turkey will negotiate a settlement with the United States in which the YPG/PKK forces would have to withdraw to the south of the planned safe zone or face a potential new Turkish military operation that would defeat them. However, negotiating this with the United States will not be an easy task as it is unlikely that the YPG/PKK forces will agree to withdraw to the south of the proposed safe zone, and it is unsure that the Trump administration wants to end the Kurdish presence in northeastern Syria.

Second, for the Turkish government a safe zone must be controlled by Turkey, as made clear by Erdoğan in February: “If there is to be a safe zone along our border then it must be under our control. Because that is my border.”⁸ This will be another point of contention with the United States as it is unlikely that the latter will accept full Turkish control. Ankara might then demand a swift implementation of the U.S.-brokered agreement concerning the withdrawal of YPG forces from Manbij as a condition to rebuild trust with the United States and accept the latter’s control of the safe zone. In addition, other actors share the United States’ reluctance to accept a Turkish-controlled safe zone. Russia’s foreign minister, Sergei Lavrov, made clear that Turkey had no right to set up a zone without Assad’s consent, and suggested that in case such a zone is established, Russian forces could police it.⁹

Third, in order to be acceptable to the Turkish government, the establishment of a safe zone must be the prelude for resettlement of refugees in Syria. In addition to its goal of enabling the voluntary resettlement of refugees to the east of the Euphrates, the AKP government wants to restore what it claims is the “original” demographic balance of the area, meaning ensuring a majority of Arab Sunnis. It

claims it wants to ensure that a safe zone allows for resettlement of the original Arab population, which would prevent YPG forces from establishing an autonomous entity and jeopardizing Turkish interests.

It is likely that Turkey will opt for negotiating a settlement with the United States that accommodates its interest and takes into consideration its security concerns. Erdoğan is likely to continue to threaten to take unilateral actions to secure Turkey’s borders if its interests are not respected, but without these threats materializing, given the costs of a new intervention in Syria.

The diplomatic track, nonetheless, is no easy option for Turkey. It is probable that the Turkish-U.S. discussions around a safe zone will not lead to a deal, but would rather turn into a long process. In fact, if a safe zone is established, it will be a new factor in the final Syrian settlement; hence, different actors

“*Turkey’s strategy has consisted of gaining ground through taking advantage of disagreements between the United States and Russia.*”

with different goals and visions will intervene in the discussions to guarantee their interests (Russia, Iran, France, the EU). Turkey will have a hard time managing and reconciling the positions and interests of its partners in the Astana process on the one hand, and those of its Western partners (NATO, United States, EU), on the other hand, while at the same time meeting its own objectives. A Poisoned Chalice for Turkey

While the announcement by the United States that it will pull out its troops from Syria was welcomed by Turkey as a positive development, if this were to happen it would jeopardize Turkish interests more than it would serve them. In fact, this would weaken its leverage in Syria, while boosting the influence of its rivals. First, a pullout will leave Russia and Iran as the only foreign powers with a real presence on Syrian territory. The latter will seize this opportunity to help

⁸ “Erdoğan says safe zone on Syria border must be under Turkey’s control”, Reuters, February 23, 2019 <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-turkey/erdogan-says-safe-zone-on-syria-border-must-be-under-turkeys-control-idUSKCN1QCOTX>

⁹ “Russia tells Turkey to get Assad’s ‘green light’ for safe zone in Syria”, Arab News, February 14, 2019 <http://www.arabnews.com/node/1452316/middle-east>

Assad's regime retake control of all border areas to the north, at the expense of Turkey. Second, Syrian Kurds, who will be left alone with a vague promise of U.S. air support, will likely engage in a rapprochement with Russia and the Assad regime with the hope of ensuring their survival against ISIS forces and obtaining some concessions from Damascus (such as recognition of their cultural identity and obtaining some degree of autonomy). These developments will significantly weaken Turkey's position in Syria.

Moreover, even if a U.S. withdrawal leads to the establishment of a safe zone that complies with Turkey's demands and is placed under its control, this will not create an ideal situation for it. A safe zone under Turkey's control will incur huge financial and military costs on the country, thus undermining its long-term interests. The border area is vast and keeping it under control would be an exhausting task for the Turkish military, which is already overstretched due to the different operations it is involved in.

Consequently, the announced U.S. pullout from Syria is more of a poisoned chalice than a gift for Turkey. It leaves the country facing complex dilemmas and costly policy options and limits its leverage on developments in Syria while empowering its rivals.

Turkish-U.S. Relations and Syria: What Next?

While Turkey and the United States appear to be focused on their short-term interest and are taking time to agree on the U.S. withdrawal strategy, they seem to be jeopardizing their long-term interest and their capacity to act as key players in determining Syria's future. A U.S. pullout from Syria would have detrimental effects on both. For the United States, it means abandoning a key role while contributing to empowering Russia and Iran and consolidating the Russian-led Astana process. For Turkey, it means

being deprived of any U.S. support in Syria, and being entrapped and squeezed in the country with limited margin for maneuver, as any unilateral move there would put it at odds with Russia and the Assad regime and drive it into trouble.

In the current power configuration, it would be in the best interest of Turkey and the United States to act pragmatically by blurring their differences and coordinating their actions, with the shared goal of countering or at least slowing down, the rise of the Moscow-Tehran-Damascus bloc as the strongest player in Syria. In particular, they should opt for a damage-control policy by agreeing swiftly on the calendar and strategy of a U.S. pullout, and on the conditions for a potential safe zone.

This appears to be the only win-win scenario for both countries. In fact, throughout the Syria crisis, Turkey's strategy has consisted of gaining ground through taking advantage of disagreements between the United States and Russia, and of getting the support of at least one of them. In the current context, it seems more difficult to obtain Moscow's agreement on the establishment of a Turkish-controlled safe zone than to obtain Washington's consent. Similarly, the United States can only balance the rising influence of Russia in Syria, and in the Middle East, through co-opting Turkey and empowering it as Russia's peer competitor in the region.

What is at stake in Syria is the future of the Middle East. Whether it is the UN-backed Geneva process or the Russian-led Astana process that will determine the solution to the crisis and shape the future path of the country will have huge consequences on the geopolitical power balance in the region. Turkey, a key player in both diplomatic processes, has the potential to tip the balance in favor of either of them; hence the necessity for the United States to draw the country into its fold, and for Turkey to coalesce with the United States in order to counter the rise of Russia in the region.

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