



Turkey and United States in Syria: Allies, Frenemies, or Worse?

By Ahmet K. Han and Behlül Özkan

President Trump outlined Cold War-era bilateral relations between the United States and Turkey after a meeting with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan at the White House in May. Trump's remarks are a striking reminder of how much has changed over the quarter-century since the fall of the Soviet Union. "Turkey was a pillar in the Cold War against communism. It was a bastion against Soviet expansion. And Turkish courage in war is legendary," said Trump. However, today, the Cold War and the Soviet Union are becoming a distant memory, and U.S.–Turkish bilateral relations are no longer based on the struggle against a shared enemy.

Though the United States and Turkey have cooperated in many geopolitical flashpoints from Central Asia to Libya, Somalia to Bosnia, the prevailing discourses of the Cold War have been replaced by entirely new dynamics. Chief among these, especially relevant after 9/11, is the belief that regime change in authoritarian Middle Eastern states is best achieved by backing moderate Islamist political actors who have embraced market economics and electoral democracy. The United States and Turkey's efforts to overthrow the Assad regime following 2011, albeit derived from different motivations and priorities and certainly by different — if not competing — methods, so far became the ultimate test of this belief. Six years later, both American and Turkish foreign policy elites have candidly admitted that their respective methods have failed. In July of this year, the United States put an end to its programs to arm and train the Syrian opposition. This covert action by

the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency, coming at a price tag of \$1 billion, was the largest operation of its kind since the arming of the Afghan Mujahideen.

About a year earlier, in an act of almost total reversal of its policies, Turkey reached an agreement with Russia that kicked off the military campaign known as Euphrates Shield. In this, Turkey gained control of a strategic buffer zone: the Azaz-Jarablus-Al Bab triangle, between two areas in northern Syria controlled by the Democratic Union Party (PYD) and People's Protection Units (YPG), groups affiliated with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) — a terrorist group designated by the United States and European Union. This and the recent diplomatic crisis between Saudi Arabia and Qatar has all but officially disbanded the post-2011 anti-Assad coalition between the United States, Turkey, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia.

Following Trump's May meeting with Erdoğan, he declared that the United States supported Turkey against "terror groups like ISIS and the PKK." Yet, Ankara never misses an opportunity to point out that U.S. support for the PYD and Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) — a hybrid, anti-ISIS coalition group dominated by the PYD/YPG — is undermining Turkey's struggle against terror. U.S. military aid to the SDF is stoking Ankara's fears that the United States may see the PYD as a legitimate political actor, and that the weaponry it receives may one day be used against Turkey. Turkey is now exploring various options, such as expanding its



areas of joint action with Russia in Syria and conducting joint military operations with Iran against the PKK — even though Iran does not seem to be readily disposed for that.

President Putin had complicated such efforts in a speech to the UN immediately prior to Russia's military intervention in Syria in 2015, labeling all armed groups in Syria as terrorists except for "Assad's armed forces and Kurdish militias." Erdogan expressed his concerns about the PYD opening an office in Moscow when he met with Putin last year. But Putin merely replied that it was the first he had heard of it and that he would monitor the situation closely. A former KGB agent, he undoubtedly gets wind of any important developments in Russia, and this denial signals a mutual mistrust lying behind the current Turkish-Russian partnership.

The events on the ground in Syria following the failure of the U.S.-Turkish-Saudi-Qatari project indicate that new long-term alliances are not in the cards. Given the confined space, short-term cooperation and joint operations born of necessity are the order of the day. Above all, there is an implicit agreement between Russia and the United States that Assad's forces will control the area to the west of the Euphrates River. The exceptions, for the time being, are the PYD-controlled districts of Afrin and Manbij, and the Turkish-controlled area in between. What happens east of the Euphrates will depend on the outcome of the fight against ISIS by the SDF and U.S.-backed Arab tribes. The SDF will likely capture Raqqa, while the Euphrates town of Deir ez-Zor and the al-Omar oilfield (accounting for half of Syria's oil production) to its immediate north will be taken by the Syrian Army. ISIS will put up a months-long resistance in in these areas, but its days in eastern Syria are numbered.

The future of eastern Syria will also affect the future of the northwestern areas of Syria, including Idlib, Afrin, and the Turkish-controlled areas. In talks with Moscow, Ankara signaled that it would be possible to work together with Russia in Idlib. Despite having serious reservations about the PYD, Russia also views the group as a potential partner. Moscow regards U.S. air bases, special forces, and the 909 truckloads of weaponry supplied to the PYD as a Trojan horse, and hopes to draw the PYD into its own orbit once the

fight against ISIS in Syria is finished. Russia effectively secured a politico-military environment to align the PYD with itself by using the Turkish military presence as a veiled threat after green-lighting Euphrates Shield. Once ISIS is defeated, Russia could surely compel the PYD to downgrade its ties with the United States or sever them completely depending on relations with the Assad regime.

The state of Russian-PYD-U.S. relations will determine the future of the Turkish buffer zone in Syria. If the PYD acts counter to Russia's interests, there is a chance that Moscow and Ankara could join forces and put pressure on the Afrin district, which is practically the political power base of the PYD controlled areas. In the event of a Turkish operation from the north and east, the only current escape route from Afrin is a narrow corridor leading to Aleppo controlled by the Assad regime — rendering a potential disaster for the militants. As it did in the Caucasus, Russia is taking advantage of the intricate balance of power in northern Syria in order to create dependent local actors, guaranteeing its own influence over the region as a balancer of unpredictability, possibly for decades to come.

Idlib is the last piece in this complex geopolitical puzzle. Al-Qaeda's Syrian branch known as the Nusra Front is quite powerful in Idlib, where jihadis numbering in the thousands. Turkey in particular has a strong interest in Idlib's future and is anxious about where these combatants will go if the region is cleansed of fundamentalist elements. Though not confirmed, it is believed that the police officer who killed the Russian ambassador to Turkey in December 2016 had ties to the Nusra Front. As a response, Assad forces allegedly used chemical weapons in Idlib where the Nusra Front practically ruled in its different incarnations, latest of which is Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS).

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An offensive to capture the entire Idlib region is a geopolitical and strategic imperative for the regime to secure total and unhindered control over the Syrian coast, starting from Turkish border at Hatay and extending from Idlib to Aleppo-Hama-Homs and extending to Golan Heights over Damascus. Thus, the future of the Idlib region may have a great impact not only on Turkey's Syria policy, but also on its internal security. Such a move against Idlib, harboring 50,000 armed militants mostly affiliated with HTS, could even enjoy a degree of U.S. support. The advance of the defecting militants could take two routes: northwest to Turkey and/or north to Afrin, creating disturbances in the Azaz-Jarablus-Al Bab triangle.

PYD in Afrin might try to take advantage of this situation by playing the Russian and U.S. favors against each other. The already existing coordination between PYD/YPG and Assad regime and its Russian ally might serve as one pillar of this two-sided game. If the United States sees Assad and Russians marching toward Idlib, it may decide to hit Idlib as well in order to prevent a strong wave of Nusra's plight potentially smashing YPG in Afrin, furthering the Pentagon's plan to provide arms to the YPG.

For Turkey, it is worse to let a renewed refugee flow through the border rather than the hard choice of closing the border. From a purely strategic security perspective and taking humanitarian considerations aside, the flight of groups in Idlib, including elements of HTS, toward Afrin would be the most preferable result for Turkey. However, the level and ease of the management of this act depends also on who has the upper hand in the intra-Idlib Civil War at that point. Within the framework of a very cold, Machiavellian logic, Turkey might consider it a hap in its interest if the Idlib fractions overrun PYD/YPG in Afrin. Even in that case there would be more than a couple of questions hanging in the air: Would Afrin's new masters try to irritate Turkey and how? Could a strong jihadist presence in Afrin influence the grueling stability in the Azaz-Jarablus-Al Bab triangle?

To be sure, Turkey does have its military highly prepared for an intervention in Afrin. Yet, this option is still questionable given the practical implications of such a move and the exhaustion it will create on military capabilities. Even Euphrates Shield, executed under

more favorable political and military conditions for Turkey, lasted for 216 days. What is more, that operation was carried out in consensus with Russia, effectively guaranteeing inaction on the side of the Syrian regime, and had the implicit consent of the United States — something a possible Afrin operation may not possess. The nominal enemy in that case was ISIS. In Afrin Turkey's opponent effectively enjoys an alliance with the United States and support from Russia. In another plausible scenario, Turkey may not be able to concur to such a development and might decide to hit the PYD/YPG on the East, close to the Iraqi border. It is also possible for Turkey and Russia to reach an accord on burden-sharing and, as a result, while Russia is enjoying a free hand in Idlib, Turkey neutralizes Afrin — a very similar arrangement to the one that made Euphrates Shield possible.

Faced with the reality that large areas of Syria are now run by the PYD, ISIS, and the HST, the United States and Turkey can appreciate how spectacularly wrong their predictions about Syria were and try to incorporate a new approach for coordinating their efforts. For such an outcome, the two NATO Allies should rebuild mutual trust and agree that the burden and benefits will be shared on an equitable basis. Such an approach is perennial for the future of bilateral relations, even though they have become stale through repetition. Transferring the burden and pursuing self-interest has produced no results for any party — with the exception possibly of Russia. At this stage Turkey alone can not be justifiably held responsible for the problems that may occur in the future. The present state of U.S.–Turkish relations is perhaps best explained through the Turkish proverb “eski dost düşman olmaz,” or “an old friend cannot become an enemy.” Still, in the sphere of international relations, it is self-interest, not friendship, that counts in the end. And there is no denying that U.S. and Turkish interests diverge when it comes to Syria.

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