

In Brief: The latest in a brutal series of attacks in Turkey demonstrated the growing terrorist threat that country faces — but it also highlighted the discord between Ankara and its important ally in Washington over the leading Kurdish political party in northern Syria (PYD). While Turkey views the PYD as an extension of the terrorist Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), the United States relies on PYD forces fighting against the self-proclaimed Islamic State group (ISIS) in Syria. This discord is increasingly creating greater concern in Turkey.

It is time for Ankara to shift its paradigm toward the PYD, but it will need U.S. support to do so. Turkey needs to realize that it cannot ask Washington to choose between Turkey and the PYD, and that it does not need to. Turkey needs to offer normalization with the PYD in exchange for that organization's changing some of its policies that attract international criticism. And the United States should back Turkey's conditions, both in Ankara's interests, and its own.

Turkey Needs to Shift its Policy Toward Syria's Kurds — and the United States Should Help

by *Özgür Ünlühisarcıklı*

The terrorist attack against military service buses carrying ranked and civilian staff on February 17 in Ankara — the fourth major attack in less than a year — once again demonstrated Turkey's vulnerability to terrorism. But the February attack also manifested the poisonous effect of Turkish-U.S. divisions over the Democratic Union Party (PYD), the dominant Kurdish political party in the north of Syria. According to Ankara, the PYD is an extension of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), which is classified as a terrorist organization by the United States and the European Union. The United States considers the PKK and the PYD to be separate organizations and sees the latter, crucially, as its main partner against the self-proclaimed Islamic State group (ISIS) on the ground in Syria. This U.S.-Turkey division over the PYD is increasingly a problem on the ground in Syria and as well as causing tension between the allies. Ankara needs to move beyond asking Washington to side with it against the PYD, and instead suggest a path toward normalization, and the United States — an important partner to both — can help.

Turkey has been rocked with several terrorist attacks by both ISIS and a new wave of terrorist insurgency by the PKK during the last year. In July 2015, 32

pro-Kurdish and socialist youth activists were killed in a bomb attack in Suruç, a Turkish town close to the Syrian border. In October 2015, 102 people were killed in a suicide bomb attack against a peace rally in Ankara mainly attended by pro-Kurdish and socialist youth. While these attacks went unclaimed, ISIS was the main suspect in both cases. In January 2016, ISIS conducted another suicide bombing in İstanbul's popular Sultanahmet Square, claiming the lives of 11 German and 1 Peruvian tourists. Meanwhile the ceasefire between Turkey and the PKK, which had been announced in 2013 and was accompanied by peace negotiations between the two sides, ended in August 2015 after two police officers were killed by the PKK while asleep in their homes. Turkey responded by targeting PKK positions in Turkey and Iraq, and the PKK then started waging low intensity urban warfare. This has resulted in hundreds of casualties on both sides since August and the destruction of civilian infrastructure and historic buildings in southeastern Turkey.

Immediately after the attack in Ankara on February 17, Turkish authorities pointed to the PYD and People's Protection Units (YPG), the armed branch of the PYD. According to media reports, the perpetrator of the attack was identified as Salih Najjar, a Syrian citizen who had entered Turkey as a refugee during the siege of Kobani. One day after the attack, Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu told journalists that "it has been determined with certainty that this attack was carried out by members of the separatist terror organization PKK, together with a member of the YPG who infiltrated from Syria."¹ When the following day the Kurdistan Freedom Falcons (TAK), another terrorist organization from Turkey linked to the PKK, claimed the attack, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan responded by telling journalists in İstanbul that the perpetrator of

the incident had not claimed responsibility, but it was the PYD and YPG.²

The Turkish leaders' degree of certainty about the PYD's responsibility for the attack was not shared by the United States. After Erdoğan's statement, U.S. State Department Spokesperson John Kirby said "We're in no position to confirm or deny the assertions made by the Turkish government with respect to responsibility."³ While the Turkish government claimed to have submitted evidence of the PYD involvement in the attack to allies, including the United States, the evidence were never shared with the public or acknowledged by the United States. This lack of support was noted, and Turkish government representatives and Erdoğan increased their criticism of the United States for not recognizing the PYD as a terrorist organization. Turkey meanwhile continued to shell YPG positions close to the Turkish border in Syria.

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On February 23, it was formally announced that a DNA test revealed that the perpetrator of the attack was not a Syrian citizen affiliated with the PYD, but a Turkish citizen affiliated with the TAK. Abdülbaki Sömer, who had gone to Syria and returned to Turkey disguised as a Syrian refugee using the fake identity of Salih Najjar. However, the Turkish government still insists on the PYD link in the attack and Govern-

¹ <http://www.dailysabah.com/war-on-terror/2016/02/18/syrian-pydygp-terrorists-directly-responsible-for-ankara-attack-pm-davutoglu-says>

² <http://aa.com.tr/en/turkey/erdogan-insists-ankara-attack-was-work-of-ygp-pyd/524092>

³ <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/us-says-cannot-confirm-or-deny-ygp-responsibility-in-ankara-blast.aspx?pageID=238&nID=95409&NewsCatID=510>

ment Spokesperson Nuıman Kurtulmuş said “The name [of the perpetrator] may be different but it does not change the reality of this matter. This person has entered Turkey from the PYD region and there is record of him assuming the given identity.”⁴

Syria: Different Priorities, Different Allies

The divergence between the U.S. and Turkish approaches to the PYD is a result of their different priorities in Syria. Turkey’s priority is the success of the opposition and eventual removal of Assad from power; the top U.S. priority is defeating ISIS.

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This divergence is also a side-effect of mutual suspicion between “strategic allies.” Turkey and the United States generally share broad strategic aims, but their policies and priorities in individual cases may part, as they very clearly do in this case. Allies can have different priorities, but problems arise when they step on each other’s toes; and this is what the United States and Turkey are doing in Syria. The two allies are working through different partners on the ground to achieve their different goals. Turkey and the United States are supporting groups that have at times attacked each other in pursuit of their conflicting interests, and Turkey directly targets Washington’s most important partner on the ground in Syria, the YPG. As the fighting in Syria enters its sixth year, having wrought horrendous human costs and large-scale international destabilization, these two allies cannot afford to be working at cross purposes. Failure

4 Merve Aydođan, “PYD Involvement in the Ankara Bombing not Questionable,” *Daily Sabah*, February 24, 2016, <http://www.dailysabah.com/politics/2016/02/24/pyd-involvement-in-ankara-bombing-unquestionable>

to find common ground will mean more chaos and bloodshed in Syria, and more insecurity in Turkey.

Coming to an Agreement on the PYD

Turkey needs to make a paradigm shift in its approach to the PYD, and it needs the United States to encourage the PYD to make this possible.

Stop Making Washington Choose

The first step for a paradigm shift in Turkey’s approach should be to stop asking the United States to choose between Turkey and the PYD, which vastly undersells Turkey in the first place. Turkey is a long-term U.S. ally. The PYD is a temporary, albeit very important, partner for the United States in one specific engagement. Ankara should recognize that while it is an indispensable ally for the United States in general, the PYD is, in the ground fight against ISIS, also currently indispensable for the United States.

Stop Drawing Ineffective Lines

Turkey should stop drawing geographic red lines for the PYD to cross such as “west of the Euphrates River.” This approach is ineffective and even counterproductive. Instead, as Galip Dalay has said in an interview with the Turkish daily *Star*, “Turkey should problematize the administrative and political structure of Rojava.”⁵ That is, Ankara should focus on the policies of Syria’s de facto autonomous Kurdish region, rather than on its borders. More specifically, Turkey should offer to normalize relations with the PYD and offer cooperation in return for a set of conditions (outlined below), and the United States should use its leverage over the PYD to support Turkey’s conditions.

What the PYD Needs to Offer

The PYD needs to stop making human rights violations and attempting to change the demographic structure in the territories it takes under control. The

5 Fadime Özkan, “Galip Dalay: Bölgedeki ittifaklar geçici, birleşik Kürdistan imkânsız,” *Star*, January 11, 2016, <http://haber.star.com.tr/yazar/galip-dalay-bolgedeki-ittifaklar-gecici-birlesik-kurdistan-imkansiz/yazi-1081555#.Vs1Xb-BvG4qM.twitter>

PYD, and in particular its military wing, the YPG, has displaced thousands of civilians in northern Syria, most often Arabs or Turkmen, in some cases “razing entire villages” in areas it captures in retaliation for “perceived sympathies with, or ties to” ISIS or similar groups. PYD already faces international criticism on these issues, including from Amnesty International, whose fact-finding mission found “a wave of forced displacement and home demolitions amounting to war crimes carried out by the Autonomous Administration led by the Syrian Kurdish political party, the PYD, controlling the area.”⁶ Washington should work with Ankara to press this point.

The PYD should be pushed to adopt a more inclusive governance style in the territories it controls.

The PYD should be pushed to adopt a more inclusive governance style in the territories it controls. The International Crisis Group (ICG) argues that the PYD is pursuing dominance over would-be allies and forsaking “natural allies,” including the president of the Kurdish Regional Government in Iraq, for short-sighted partnerships of expedience. This competitive posture does little for Kurdish rights or longer-term stability. Thus the PYD, the ICG concludes, “should decrease its heavy reliance on its own military and the regime and instead broaden its support base among both Kurdish and non-Kurdish populations, as well as the more pragmatic strands of the Syrian opposition.”⁷ As both Ankara and Washington have good relations with some of the PYD’s would-be allies, both should

6 <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2015/10/syria-us-allys-razing-of-villages-amounts-to-war-crimes/>

7 “Flight of Icarus? The PYD’s Precarious Rise in Syria,” May 8, 2014, [http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/Middle%20East%20North%20Africa/Iraq%20Syria%20Lebanon/Syria/151-flight-of-icarus-the-pyd-s-precarious-rise-in-syria.pdf](http://www.crisisgroup.org/~/media/Files/Middle%20East%20North%20Africa/Iraq%20Syria%20Lebanon/Syria/151-flight-of-icarus-the-pyd-s-precarious-rise-in-syria.pdf)

be interested in pushing the PYD to pursue better partnerships.

Third, the PYD should be asked to limit its offensive targets to ISIS and other terrorist groups and refrain from attacking moderate opposition groups supported by the United States and Turkey. The PYD/YPG has been targeting moderate opposition groups particularly during their recent offensive around Aleppo. As reporter Mike Giglio notes: “as Assad and his Russian allies have routed rebels around Aleppo in recent weeks — rolling back Islamist factions and moderate U.S. allies alike, as aid groups warn of a humanitarian catastrophe — the YPG has seized the opportunity to take ground from these groups, too.”⁸ U.S. support of the YPG must be conditional on it not fighting against other U.S. allies; Ankara and Washington can push this point together.

Fourth, Turkey will naturally ask the PYD not to allow the territories it controls in the north of Syria to be used as a safe harbor by the PKK. This condition is unfortunately both complicated and difficult to monitor. To be fair, there are no recent reports of the PKK directly operating against Turkey from territories controlled by the PYD. On the other hand, the PYD is one of the subdivisions of the Group of Communities in Kurdistan (KCK), which is an organization founded by the PKK to implement the Democratic Confederation of Abdullah Öcalan, jailed leader of the PKK. Moreover, the PKK and the PYD/YPG share resources, including human resources. The PYD should make a commitment to transfer no resources to the PKK, including militants, money, and weaponry. Both the United States and Turkey should keep a close eye on the fulfillment of this commitment.

What Turkey Needs to Offer

Turkey should offer the normalization of relations with the PYD, and even cooperation in the medium and

8 Mike Giglio, “America is in a Proxy War with Itself in Syria,” BuzzFeed News Middle East, February 20, 2016. See also Charles Lister, <http://www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2016/02/24/are-kurds-allies-or-obstacles-in-syria/us-must-tell-kurds-to-stop-attacking-syrian-rebels>

long term, in exchange for the resolution of the above-mentioned concerns, most of which are also raised by the international community.

Is it naïve to think that the PYD will come anywhere near to fixing these problems? On one hand, the PYD increasingly appears to be a proxy of the Russian Federation, and even has an office in Moscow.⁹ On the other, it should not be forgotten that the PYD owes most of its gains in the north of Syria, including the defense of Kobani, to U.S. support, and could lose these gains if the United States changed its approach. Moreover, as international criticism on at least some of the above-mentioned issues is increasing, the PYD risks being isolated in the long run once its role against ISIS has been made irrelevant unless it changes its policies.

The United States and Turkey both need a longer-term vision toward the PYD, together helping the PYD choose the West over Russia, a choice their brothers in Northern Iraq have already made. It was not long ago when the U.S.-Turkey relationship was poisoned over the U.S. support to Iraqi Kurds and the creation of the Kurdistan Regional Government. Over time, Turkey has built a close relationship with the Iraqi Kurds even at the expense of rising concerns from Bagdad. While the context in Syria is clearly different from that in Iraq, the lessons are similar. Turkey has the capacity to build a normal relationship with Syrian Kurds, which would also have positive implications for its relationship with its own Kurds. This is clearly a better option for Turkey, but also for the United States. It is time for the two allies to bridge their differences over the PYD and work together toward a better deal with Syrian Kurds. If they do not, Turkey will find itself neighbors with a hostile PYD under Russian protection and influence.

⁹ Damien Sharkov, "Syrian Kurds Open Office in Moscow, as Russia-Turkey Row Continues," February 10, 2016, *Newsweek*, <http://europe.newsweek.com/syrian-kurds-open-office-moscow-russia-turkey-row-continues-425177?rm=eu>

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