

U.S.-Turkish Cooperation Is Key for Lasting Stability in Northern Syria

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Brief Analysis

Conflicting priorities in the Syrian war have strained the U.S.-Turkish relationship since 2014, shaping Turkey's foreign policy in the country and the structure of its alliances. Turkey's geopolitical identity and long-standing alliance with the United States, as well as its status in NATO, have come into question due to its budding alliance with Iran and Russia and for allowing extremist militants to cross Turkish **borders into Syria**

(<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/Syria-Idlib-border-crossing-Turkey-Assad-refugees>). Yet in spite of their mounting disagreements, it remains in the best interests of Turkey and the United States to salvage their bilateral relationship.

The current crisis in northern Syria demands close cooperation between Turkey and the United States; without this cooperation the Assad regime and ISIS sleeper cells could return. Moreover, the region's resources—especially oil and agricultural products—will remain in the hands of regime-aligned forces and Iranian and Russian backed militias. In this same vein, the Kurdish-Arab rift in the region could also widen—a rift that has led to a lack of trust among the different ethnic groups who call this area home.

Mending a Rift Between NATO Allies

For both the United States and Turkey, the Syrian war has become less and less about a regime change. While overthrowing Assad was a top priority for Turkey when the armed conflict initially broke out, it has reevaluated its position towards Syria and concentrated more on securing its borders while targeting Kurdish factions that it classifies as terrorist organizations. On the U.S. side, the focus has been mostly concentrated on combating terrorism from the outbreak of the armed conflict nine years ago. Given the current scenario, the two countries may be able to build on this common ground by working with local allies and middlemen to achieve their goals. However, if the two parties do not trust their allies on the ground—and especially if either labels the other's allies as terrorists—it is likely that tensions in bilateral relations will only worsen.

Despite a number of thorny issues that have affected relations between the two countries and have hampered closer cooperation in Syria, U.S.-Turkish relations have actually appeared to be on the mend in the past half year. The agreement reached by both countries last October stipulating a ceasefire, the suspension of the "Operation Spring of Piece," and the withdrawal of **Syrian Democratic Forces (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/how-will-the-sdf-react-to-turkeys-invasion>)** (SDF) from a "safe zone" established by the Turkish army did much to mend ties.

However, the supportive stance that the United States took following Assad forces' assault on Turkish forces in Idlib last February should be seen as the real breakthrough in U.S.-Turkish relations. Because of this attack, the United States announced that Turkey has the right to defend itself and that it would provide Turkey with necessary arms to use in its Idlib

operations. The announcement also indicated that the United States is assessing Turkey's request to deploy Patriot missiles on its borders. Hence, despite Erdogan's foreign policy stances that have sometimes provoked the United States, it seems that Turkey's role as an important trade partner and NATO ally could help smooth over coordination in Syria.

On Turkey's side, Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan has already displayed efforts to reduce tensions with the United States by delaying the implementation of the S-400 Russian air defense missile system purchased last year and by preventing the Russians from participating in other operations. Erdogan also wrote a letter to his American counterpart accompanying Turkish medical aid to the United States in response to the global coronavirus pandemic. In the letter, Erdogan characterized Turkey as a: "**reliable and strong partner of the United States [that] will continue to demonstrate solidarity in every way possible.**" (<https://www.shorouknews.com/news/view.aspx?cdate=29042020&id=1c24445d-3348-4b59-a791-3b4ef3ca2b2a>) The letter further emphasized that "**recent developments in the region have demonstrated the importance of continuing the Turkish-American alliance and cooperating to the greatest extent possible.**" (<https://www.shorouknews.com/news/view.aspx?cdate=29042020&id=1c24445d-3348-4b59-a791-3b4ef3ca2b2a>)

In response, U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo likewise stated that "**during times of crisis, NATO allies must stand together.**" (<https://arabi21.com/story/1266068/%D9%85%D8%B3%D8%A7%D8%B9%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%AA%D8%B1%D9%83%D9%8A%D8%A7-%D8%AA%D8%B5%D9%84-%D8%A3%D9%85%D8%B1%D9%8A%D9%83%D8%A7-%D9%88%D8%B1%D8%B3%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A9-%D9%85%D9%86-%D8%A3%D8%B1%D8%AF%D9%88%D8%BA%D8%A7%D9%86-%D9%84%D8%AA%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%85%D8%A8-%D8%B4%D8%A7%D9%87%D8%AF>) And in a telephone call between Erdogan's spokesperson Ibrahim Kalin And the U.S. National Security Advisor Robert O'Brien, the two affirmed the "**importance of solidarity among NATO allies during this critical time.**" (<https://www.aa.com.tr/ar/%D8%AA%D8%B1%D9%83%D9%8A%D8%A7/%D9%85%D8%AA%D8%AD%D8%AF%D8%AB-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B1%D8%A6%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AA%D8%B1%D9%83%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%8A%D8%AA%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%AD%D8%AB-%D9%85%D8%B9-%D9%85%D8%B3%D8%AA%D8%B4%D8%A7%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D9%85%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%82%D9%88%D9%85%D9%8A-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D9%85%D8%B1%D9%8A%D9%83%D9%8A-/1850164>) This reassuring exchange between leaders from Turkey and the United States reflect a solid foundation upon which the two countries could continue to rebuild and grow their relationship.

The Importance of Promoting Shared Interests in Northern Syria

This cooperation is perhaps most important in Syria. Closer cooperation between the United States and Turkey would recognize the country's geopolitical reality; the map of influence in northern Syria has become increasingly differentiated, with fewer areas of overlap between the competing powers. This is partly because the Syrian opposition is no longer part of the political or military equation in northern Syria. Most of the military opposition factions have gradually joined together under one of the two main forces present in northern Syria: either by aligning with Turkey through Operation Olive Branch, Euphrates Shield, and Peace Spring or by aligning with the United States through factions included in the SDF.

There are also a variety of militias that operate under the control of the Russians and Iranians in areas east of the Euphrates River, though their presence in northern Syria is currently receding. Iranian-backed militias have nevertheless sought to expand their influence by building *Hussainiyas* and shrines to spread a version of Shia Islam linked to fealty to Iran in those areas. There is also a Russian presence that patrols alongside Turkish forces to oversee the implementation of the extant agreements between the two parties in Northern Syria. Russia has also made an effort to establish a stronger military presence around Kobani, Ayn al-Arab, Ain Issa—including the 93rd Brigade base—Hazima, and Qamishli Airport.

As such, the geopolitical conflict in Syria is already divided between two sides, with the victor potentially decided by each side's ability to coordinate. One side looks to try to recreate the Assad regime as it was when it controlled all of Syria, while the other believes that such an outcome is untenable while still acknowledging the fragility of the opposition and its inability to produce political and military structures.

This latter side is primarily centered in northern Syria and is attempting to gain control over eastern Syria to connect the areas it currently controls—Al-Tanf and the western Euphrates. Connecting these territories would have the added benefit of cutting off Iranian supply routes. Meanwhile, the pro-Assad side seeks to expand connections between its areas of influence in the rest of Syria and remove opposition forces from these areas. The pro-Assad forces are also working to secure a land route that connects Beirut and Damascus to Tehran through Iraq.

Considering the many interests beyond Syria that unite the United States and Turkey, and to eliminate any risks that the two countries may face in continuing to work towards a common goal in Syria separately, the two powers must work together. Turkey and the United States must pool efforts and find a new avenues for cooperation to manage the areas under their control, which comprise more than thirty percent of the total area of Syria. This can be achieved through developing common points of coordination in northern Syria under UN humanitarian supervision.

At the same time, Saudi, Emirati, Qatari, and European groups that have halted aid projects should restore these projects. Whatever the limitations on aid in Syria, this money is vital to supporting the Syrian people living in the region and their demands for a dignified life, as well as any opportunities for development. Forming local committees, establishing professional administrative and security entities responsible for protecting citizens, and ensuring the safe return of displaced people to their homes and jobs will ensure that these aid projects support the long-suffering Syrian people.

Additional measures that the United States and Turkey can take to help promote stability include removing the Russian and Iranian forces in the governorates of Deir ez-Zor and Raqqa, and halting the illegal smuggling of oil and agricultural products by any side. Establishing control over oil and agricultural products, which are the main sources of finance for terrorist groups in Syria, will help eliminate the prospect of resurgence in those areas. Similarly, working in coordination with UN agencies, the United States and Turkey can help deliver education, health, and food services.

It remains in both United States and Turkey's best interests to work together to achieve a more lasting stability in the region. The first step is to turn away from the illusions of some separatist elements, who exaggerate the scope of ISIS and have been accused of discriminatory practices that have strained international alliances. Together, the United States and Turkey can stop the Assad regime and prevent an ISIS resurgence; greater cooperation will protect populations from falling into the trap of extremists that have prolonged the current situation. History has shown that in northern Syria, stability is best produced through working together rather than in smaller groups. When each group is pursuing their own agenda, the outcome is less likely to align with needs of ordinary Syrians. ❖

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