

# The New Status Quo in Northeast Syria: Humanitarian and Security Implications

by [Wladimir van Wilgenburg \(/experts/wladimir-van-wilgenburg\)](/experts/wladimir-van-wilgenburg), [Gonul Tol \(/experts/gonul-tol\)](/experts/gonul-tol), [Dana Stroul \(/experts/dana-stroul\)](/experts/dana-stroul)

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



### [Wladimir van Wilgenburg \(/experts/wladimir-van-wilgenburg\)](/experts/wladimir-van-wilgenburg)

Wladimir van Wilgenburg is the coauthor of the recently published book *The Kurds of Northern Syria: Governance, Diversity and Conflicts*. He is a contributor to *Fikra Forum*.



### [Gonul Tol \(/experts/gonul-tol\)](/experts/gonul-tol)

Gonul Tol is founding director of the Middle East Institute's Turkish Studies Program and an adjunct professor at George Washington University's Institute for Middle East Studies.



### [Dana Stroul \(/experts/dana-stroul\)](/experts/dana-stroul)

Dana Stroul was the Shelly and Michael Kassen Fellow in The Washington Institute's Beth and David Geduld Program on Arab Politics.



Brief Analysis

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**Three leading experts assess the current balance of power and its potential effects on counterterrorism, refugee resettlement, governance, economics, and other crucial issues.**

*On January 23, Wladimir van Wilgenburg, Gonul Tol, and Dana Stroul addressed a Policy Forum at The Washington Institute. Van Wilgenburg is a political analyst and coauthor of the 2019 book *The Kurds of Northern Syria: Governance, Diversity and Conflicts*. Tol is founding director of the Middle East Institute's Turkish Studies Program and an adjunct professor at George Washington University. Stroul is the Kassen Fellow in The Washington Institute's Geduld Program on Arab Politics; she also served as co-chair of last year's bipartisan Syria Study Group. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.*

# WLADIMIR VAN WILGENBURG

The situation in northeast Syria remains tense, with armed contingents from the United States, Russia, Turkey, and the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) operating in close proximity. Since President Recep Tayyip Erdogan launched his incursion last October, Turkey has established control over a small strip of land between Tal Abyad and Ras al-Ain along the northern border. For their part, the SDF and the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (NES) still control most territory in the northeast, and the NES continues to operate efficiently despite the grave economic and security situation in contested areas.

At the same time, however, SDF leaders have been seeking recognition from the Assad regime in Damascus. Specifically, they have expressed support for the idea of integrating their 80,000-plus fighters into the Syrian army in return for the regime according special status to the SDF and NES. The regime has refused this request, however, instead calling on Arab tribes to stop supporting the mixed Kurdish/Arab SDF.

Militarily, the regime does not have enough forces to retake the autonomous region, even with air support from Russia. Despite President Trump's decision to partially withdraw troops from Syria, U.S. forces are still present in the northeast, especially in Hasaka province and Deir al-Zour. The SDF benefits from U.S. support, not only in continuing the fight against the Islamic State, but also in counterbalancing Russian pressure. In addition, the U.S. presence helps the SDF maintain the Faysh Khabur crossing near the Iraqi border; this allows them to trade medical supplies, food, and oil while enabling international organizations and journalists to enter the autonomous region. As a result, SDF-controlled areas continue to outperform regime-controlled areas economically.

Going forward, many are concerned that Turkey's efforts to return millions of refugees to Syria will cause significant demographic changes in the northeast, since the majority of these displaced people originally came from other parts of the country. The Assad regime may force such returnees to stay in a safe zone established in the northeast, despite the dearth of international support for this resettlement plan. Moreover, according to the SDF, some individuals who have returned to Turkish-controlled areas of northeast Syria are former Islamic State elements.

## GONUL TOL

The status quo in the northeast has not changed drastically for Turkey since last year's military incursion. That campaign's goal was threefold: to establish a safe zone that stretches all the way to the Iraqi border, to resettle millions of Syrian refugees in this zone, and to eliminate the presence of the Kurdish People's Defense Units (YPG) on Turkey's border. Thus far, Ankara has failed to achieve these objectives, and its room for maneuver in the northeast is limited. Its most recent incursion drew a strong reaction from the United States, and it is reluctant to resume operations for fear of triggering American sanctions.

Further to the west, the Assad regime's Idlib offensive remains another security priority for Ankara. Any Turkish decisions on that front have to be coordinated with Russia, but their relationship has become increasingly strained, as both parties blame each other for failing to deliver on promises.

Apart from Idlib, Erdogan does not talk about Syria as much as he used to, since Turkey is tightly squeezed there at present. Leading up to the October incursion, he was facing a nationalist backlash over the protracted presence of more than 4 million Syrian refugees in Turkey. He was also threatened by the rising political agency of Turkish Kurds, especially after their support for the opposition cost his party dearly in the March local elections. These pressures and vulnerabilities led him to focus on foreign policy as a way to galvanize his base—indeed, the incursion was widely supported by the Turkish public when first launched. After his options in Syria became limited, he turned to Libya (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/turkey-pivots-to-tripoli-implications-for-libyas-civil-war-and-u.s.-policy>) as another front for intervening abroad while stoking nationalist sentiment at home.

# DANA STROUL

When the [report of the congressionally mandated Syria Study Group](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/syria-study-group-2019) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/syria-study-group-2019>) was published last September, it affirmed the country's importance to the United States as a geostrategic nexus of various regional threats—namely, Iranian expansionism, the persistent presence of the Islamic State and al-Qaeda, and emboldened Russian involvement in the Middle East. The study group's core recommendations then called for using American leverage to facilitate a political process in Syria. This leverage includes several potential measures: denying much-needed reconstruction aid and diplomatic recognition to the Assad regime; implementing tough economic sanctions; and using the SDF and U.S. military presence in the northeast to pressure the regime. Despite Washington's complicated relations with Ankara and Moscow, it can still play an important role in shaping the future of Syria.

The SDF remains the core U.S. partner in Syria. The limited American military presence in the northeast succeeded by offering critical guidance and support to the SDF in fighting the Islamic State, but at a relatively low human and financial cost. The United States must now use this relationship to help the SDF transition from fighting to governing. Yet the decision to reduce the U.S. presence has eroded local trust in America's ability to protect its regional allies. This in turn threatens to undermine Washington's leverage and inspire malign actors to expand their influence across Syria.

Meanwhile, Russia has sought to convince the Persian Gulf states to restore diplomatic and commercial relations with the Assad regime. The prospect of lucrative reconstruction projects is appealing to these governments, who appear to be moving toward full normalization with Damascus. Given the breadth of U.S. sanctions on individuals and entities associated with Iran, Russia, and Turkey, Washington needs to determine whether it will punish Gulf entities and individuals who decide to conduct business in Syria.

*This summary was prepared by Zied Bouchlaghem. The Policy Forum series is made possible through the generosity of the Florence and Robert Kaufman Family.* ❖

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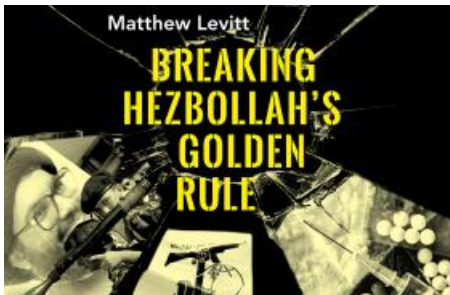
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