

U.S. Safe Zone Deal Can Help Turkey Come to Terms with the PKK and YPG

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Brief Analysis

Checking the YPG's ascendance in Syria could bring the PKK back to the negotiating table, ultimately making Turkey more amenable to Kurdish enclaves across the border.

Earlier today, Ankara and Washington agreed to “stand up a joint operations center in Turkey as soon as possible to coordinate and manage the establishment of a safe zone” in Syria. This development could help realign the relationship between Turkey’s Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) and its Syrian offshoot, the People’s Defense Units (YPG), a group that controls large swaths of Syria’s northern frontier. That in turn could help heal a major sore point in U.S.-Turkish relations.

Since 2014, Washington has relied on the YPG to fight the Islamic State presence in Syria, greatly boosting the Kurdish group’s power and territorial holdings in the process. Yet this policy runs against another U.S. imperative: restarting the collapsed peace talks between NATO ally Turkey and the PKK, a group that Ankara regards as its chief domestic threat. The PKK is unlikely to halt its provocations in Turkey or come back to the table so long as its Syrian offshoot is ascendant. Fortunately, the safe-zone arrangements proposed thus far envision drawing down the YPG presence along the border—a good starting point for reining in the PKK, improving U.S. ties with Ankara, and avoiding a potentially destructive Turkish intervention in Syria.

INVERTING THE YPG-PKK RELATIONSHIP

The YPG is the military wing of the Democratic Union Party (PYD), a group that was spun out of the PKK in 2003.

The PKK has waged war against the Turkish government for decades, leading both Washington and Ankara to designate it as a terrorist entity. Yet only Ankara considers the YPG a terrorist group, viewing it as synonymous with the PKK.

For years, the PKK played the role of the mother organization in its relationship with the PYD, significantly shaping the latter's policies. Likewise, the PKK's military successes in Turkey long animated the PYD's Kurdish base in Syria.

Yet the war in Syria changed these dynamics. In 2012, Ankara threw its support behind rebels opposing the Assad regime, spurring Assad to play the Kurdish card—that is, he withdrew his troops from Kurdish-majority areas of the north, allowing YPG forces to fill the void as leverage against Turkey.

Ankara did not take an actively hostile stance toward the YPG's moves at first, in part because Turkish officials were in the process of entering peace talks with the PKK in 2013. A year later, however, the YPG came to the forefront during the siege of Kobane, where the group not only pushed back Islamic State invaders, but also won the United States as an ally in the broader campaign against the jihadist organization. With U.S. support, the YPG subsequently took vast tracts of territory in the north, including nearly 50 percent of Syria's oil fields and many of its natural gas fields. It then declared "autonomy" in Kobane and other northern towns under its control. These gains, coupled with ongoing U.S. military support and tacit backing from Russia, have given the YPG great confidence regarding its future.

At the same time, the YPG's change in fortune seemingly altered the PKK's calculus on peacemaking and threw a wrench in the U.S.-Turkey relationship. As the YPG built on its military success post-Kobane, the PKK launched a fresh campaign of attacks inside Turkey, causing the talks with Ankara to collapse in July 2015. PKK leaders apparently aimed to import the "Kobane model," hoping to seize Kurdish-majority Turkish towns and declare autonomy there in the same manner the YPG did in north Syria.

This and later developments show the extent to which the YPG's successes have been animating the PKK's policies—a complete reversal of their prewar dynamic. So long as the YPG is soaring in Syria, the PKK is unlikely to end the regular attacks it has been conducting against Turkish security forces since 2015. Put another way, Washington's Syria policy has unwittingly empowered the PKK.

U.S. officials should therefore ensure that their coming efforts on the safe zone agreement and other policy matters serve to dilute rather than strengthen the YPG. In particular, they should follow through on implementing the "Manbij model" in northeastern areas held by the group—that is, transferring governance from the YPG to local communities (including Kurds, who could still hold official posts in safe zone towns, particularly Kurdish-majority communities, so long as they are not formal members of the YPG or PYD).

RECOMMENDATIONS

The safe zone agreement is a positive step, but it comes with formidable challenges. While advancing the idea, Washington and Ankara should prioritize the following goals:

Improve bilateral ties. Today's statement of intent mentioned that authorities will aim to transfer control of communities inside the safe zone to non-YPG elements as a matter of U.S. policy. Such statements can only benefit U.S.-Turkish relations, since the PKK will not deescalate tensions inside Turkey until its Syrian offshoot is taken down a peg. These benefits are important even if the shrinking U.S. military footprint reduces Washington's influence on events in Syria, including potential military intervention by Turkey or the Assad regime.

Ensure Turkey's stability. Renewed talks between Ankara and the PKK could bolster the bilateral interest in minimizing domestic and foreign threats to Turkey. For one, they would jumpstart broader Turkish dialogue on Kurdish issues, providing a much-needed vent for the country's potent ethnic tensions. They would also disarm a potential Russian proxy—Moscow helped establish the PKK during the Cold War and has maintained ties with the group and its offshoots, which it could conceivably use against Ankara. Talks with the PKK could also keep the YPG from falling into the arms of the Assad regime or Iran and becoming their proxy against Turkey.

Create suitable conditions for a Turkish-YPG modus vivendi. Ankara cannot live with the existence of YPG enclaves in Syria unless the PKK is willing to open substantive peace talks with the Turkish government. In other words, if Washington takes the right steps regarding the PKK, it can create suitable conditions for eventual Turkish-YPG coexistence. Even if the latter goal takes longer than some may like, slow detente is preferable to the current state of dire threats and imminent Turkish military intervention against a valuable U.S. partner.

Prevent an Islamic State resurgence. Many YPG-controlled areas cut across Syrian communities where Arabs constitute the majority or plurality. Besides being a Kurdish nationalist organization, the YPG also has a hard leftist pedigree that is at odds with some of the conservative Muslim traditions practiced by most of these rural Arab inhabitants. If the group continues to dominate such communities, it could face anti-leftist, Arab nationalist, and religious backlash, sowing the seeds of another Islamic State-style insurgency. A properly implemented safe zone agreement could help the United States stave off such scenarios.

Meet the refugee challenge. Given the massive number of Syrian refugees in Turkey and the **growing socioeconomic unrest** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/growing-anti-syrian-sentiment-in-turkey>) that has coincided with their presence, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan is eager to use the proposed safe zone as a means of repatriating them into Syria. Yet most of these refugees are Arab, so moving them into Kurdish areas could result in ethnic tensions and violence. Washington and Ankara will therefore need to coordinate their efforts closely to prevent clashes and ensure that Kurdish civilians in northeast Syria are not displaced.

Soner Cagaptay is the Beyer Family Fellow at The Washington Institute and author of the forthcoming book [Erdogan's Empire: Turkey and the Politics of the Middle East](https://www.erdogansempire.com/). ❖

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