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Syrian Kurdish Concerns over Russian-Turkish Compromise in Syria

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Brief Analysis

Russian-Turkish compromise in Syria puts Syrian Kurds in a dangerous position.

For years, analysts predicted that Turkey's and Russia's conflicting positions might lead the two countries into a direct military clash inside Syria. Yet throughout the Syrian conflict, these two powers have demonstrated an ability to find successful compromises through common interests, despite their conflicting agendas of expanding influence in the region.

This trend bodes poorly for Syria's Kurds, who often have openly confrontational relations with both countries and their regional allies. As such, as the Biden administration formulates its Syria policy, the United States' Kurdish allies are hopeful that the administration will prevent Turkey and Russia from controlling the terms of a political solution in Syria.

The trend of Russia's and Turkey's ability to compromise in Syria is surprising given their supposedly conflicting roles in the Syrian conflict. Whereas Russia backs the ruling Assad regime, Turkey backs mainly Islamist opposition forces. Indeed, back in November 2015, the Turkish-Russian relationship in Syria reached its lowest point when [Turkey shot down a Russian fighter](#) plane near the Turkish-Syrian border. But with the 2016 coup attempt in Turkey, Erdogan subsequently refocused on conciliatory measures, demonstrating how domestic concerns have spurred his efforts to reduce tension in other areas of Turkish policy.

Since then, Russia and Turkey have exercised a surprising ability to avoid conflict with one another. Idlib—a jihadist rebel stronghold with a significant civilian population that represents the border of Turkish-backed forces' area of

control—is a clear example of how compromises between Russia and Turkey can unfold. In early 2020, Syrian regime forces with Russian support advanced on Idlib, and Russian and Syrian warplanes bombed the Turkish forces there, killing **33 Turkish military personnel**. Nonetheless, the next month saw a Turkish-Russian ceasefire, and Putin and Erdogan have since consistently navigated away from an escalation in Idlib, demonstrating a shared interest in pursuing negotiations based on the Astana-Sochi agreements with Iran.

As a part of this pursuit of shared interests, Russia has certainly benefited from the rift between Turkey and other NATO powers, which Russia sees as direct adversaries. Russia has also benefited from lucrative business deals with Turkey, including sales of **military equipment and gas pipelines**, as well as a contract for the **construction of a nuclear reactor**.

The Power of Parallel Ambitions

In large part, Moscow's and Ankara's mutual interest in maintaining their partnership and cooperation in Syria comes from a shared opposition to the United States' influence in northeastern Syria and its cooperation with Syrian Kurdish groups. For the Kurdish-led Autonomous Administration in northeastern Syria, this ongoing cooperation is therefore particularly concerning. Neither Putin nor Erdogan wish to see an autonomous Kurdish region in northeast Syria with U.S. and Western support—especially if it allows for a small but permanent U.S. military and diplomatic presence there.

Moreover, many Syrian Kurds see the competing Russian and Turkish influences in their country as longstanding attempts by both countries to consolidate regional power on a historical model of empires. Putin understands Erdogan's personality and his ambitions to expand and restore the Ottoman identity, and Putin considers Erdogan a fellow strongman with whom he can cooperate in Syria, despite the differences on other regional and international issues.

Given the damage Russian-Turkish coordination has already wreaked on Kurdish towns in Syria, Syrian Kurds are especially concerned about the two countries' perceived expansionist designs. For Kurdish groups, Russia's unexplained withdrawal of forces and acquiescence to Turkey's Operation Olive Branch in 2018 demonstrated the disturbing degree to which the two sides can effectively build off each other's ambitions for mutually beneficial outcomes. After Kurdish leadership resisted significant Russian pressure to accept an alliance with the Assad regime and hand over Kurdish territory to the Syrian army, Russia withdrew its regional forces and allowed Turkey and extremist Syrian factions to occupy of the key Kurdish cities Tal Rifaat and Afrin.

In the same year, Turkey has likewise forced the Turkish-backed Jaysh al-Islam militia to hand over territory in eastern part of the Ghouta area outside Damascus to the Assad regime and Russia. Turkey also ceded Aleppo to Russia and the Assad regime in the same year, allowing Russia and the regime to control seventy percent of Syria.

Such policies appear to still be in effect. Today, Russian forces studiously avoid strikes on Turkish-backed opposition militias when those militias are holding Kurdish cities, allowing for Turkey and its allies to maintain control over Kurdish territory without threat. Even more concerning for Kurdish leaders, Russia and Turkey agreed to conduct **joint military patrols** in those areas in March 2020, with Kurds responding by throwing stones at the patrolling soldiers.

Impacts of Russian-Turkish Cooperation on the Syrian Conflict

In Idlib, the last province under Turkey's influence, which it controls through Syrian Islamist factions, a stand-off is currently taking place that could easily devolve into a brutal conflict if pressure is exerted. Yet such a conflict is in

neither Putin's nor Erdogan's interests. Instead, both leaders view Idlib as a pressure card against Europe and the United States.

Accordingly, it is more likely that Russia and Turkey will work together towards a stalemate in Idlib. Especially given Erdogan's serious domestic concerns and Turkey's current economic woes, Russia would be likely to take the lead on a Russian-Turkish deal. In such a deal, Russia would likely control Idlib, and this arrangement could give Russia and Turkey leverage in UN-led talks about political solutions for the Syrian conflict. In the case of such an agreement over Idlib, Putin and Erdogan could project the narrative that both countries are running the war in Syria, even if Russia takes the lead in their arrangement.

The March 11, 2021 a tripartite meeting between Russia, Turkey, and Qatar, Turkey's ally, suggests that such a framework could materialize. Though the talks emphasized that the participants would adhere to the "[Astana platform](#)" established by Russia, Turkey, and Iran in May 2017, they also solidified a new set of shared interests that fall especially under the Russian-Turkish relationship. This new Russian-Turkish "platform" emphasizes a focus on humanitarian aid and the creation of a new constitution that provides a "political solution" for Syria, all under the understanding that Bashar al-Assad remains in power. Indirectly, on a political-military dimension, the platform also serves to confront the Kurds, Washington's allies, and imposes a fait accompli on the Biden administration and its policy in Syria.

Realistic Solutions and Recommendations

Any deepening of cooperation between Turkey and Russia in Syria is of deep concern for the United States' Kurdish allies in the northeast, and it serves against U.S. strategic interests—both in Syria and more broadly. While committing war crimes against the Kurds in northern Syria, Erdogan has also continued to purchase Russian weapons and support armed terrorist groups. Erdogan has also demonstrated his willingness—along with that of Putin and Khamenei—to use the Syrian war as a means of advancing his regional interests. In this sense, Erdogan attempts to use negotiations for a political solution in Syria in order to sidestep international calls for democratic governance and representation in the country.

All these factors put the Biden administration in a difficult situation as it works to formulate a new policy on Syria. With the Biden administration already pursuing a more aggressive stance towards Erdogan than was seen under the Trump administration, a further Turkish tilt towards cooperation with Russia in Syria could turn U.S.-Turkish relations into a diplomatic minefield. Erdogan's past actions, both in Syria and his own country, demonstrate the difficulty of both mitigating his increasingly authoritarian tendencies and repairing relations with the troublesome NATO ally.

As such, the United States' Kurdish allies are looking for the State Department to take a clear and firm stance towards Turkey in addressing cooperation with Russia and Iran in Syria, forcing it to choose between its alliances in NATO and its shared interests with those regimes. This stance could be particularly effective if U.S. diplomats can persuade Arab countries, in cooperation with the international coalition and the United Nations, to send joint forces to Idlib and the border areas with Turkey and Iraq to keep peace and prevent fighting until the end of the Geneva negotiations on Syria.

In addition, the Syrian people are looking to the United States for strong diplomatic action in addressing human rights violations committed by Russia, Turkey, Iran, and the Syrian opposition militias in Syria. The Biden administration has already emphasized a renewed U.S. focus on human rights violations, but there is certainly more the administration could do when it comes to Syria. One step would be to work with allies and the United Nations to form an international investigation committee to investigate these violations and other war crimes committed

during the Syrian conflict. This committee would be a tool of diplomatic pressure on all parties in the conflict in Syria.

Furthermore, the United States should focus on rearranging peaceful, democratic Syrian opposition groups in an effort to make the Syrian opposition more qualified for political dialogue with the Assad regime through the Geneva negotiations. In order to reach that goal, the United States and Kurdish leaders need to expel armed groups and Islamists who have committed war crimes from the U.S.-backed opposition forces. These actors and their violent behavior only serve to strengthen Turkey's agenda.

More than anything, however, U.S. efforts in the region need to help establish a more effective military presence in northeastern Syria. The return of a greater U.S. military presence in Syria, and particularly a presence that forces the withdrawal of Turkish forces from Kurdish-held areas would help restore confidence with Kurdish allies, prevent the return of ISIS, and allow Kurdish, Christian and Muslim Arab civilians to return to their homes.

If, after the completion of all these steps, Turkey does not back down from its stance against the interests of the United States and NATO in Syria, it should serve as an indication that the United States needs to re-think its relationship with Turkey in a serious way. ❖



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