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Trump Has—Inadvertently—Provided a Fix to America’s Kurdish Problem with Turkey

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Brief Analysis

Since 2014, Washington has relied on the Syrian Kurdish People’s Protection Units (YPG) to defeat ISIS in Syria. Yet Washington’s policy of working with the YPG in Syria, where U.S. support has helped the group soar, has concurrently undermined American policy regarding the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) in Turkey, the YPG’s “mother organization,” whose wings Washington ought to see clipped. As the Syrian offshoot of the Turkey-based PKK, a U.S.-designated terrorist group that Ankara has been fighting for decades, U.S. aid to the YPG has helped embolden the PKK.

However, President Trump’s recent decision to withdraw from Syria, notwithstanding his later decision to leave some troops behind for now, has had the indirect effect of realigning the U.S. relationship with the two Kurdish groups—along with Ankara.

There is near-universal opposition in Turkey to U.S. policy regarding the YPG. Consequently, many Turks view the potential weakening of the U.S.-YPG relationship favorably, a shift that may help stem the tide of rising anti-Americanism in Turkey.

Stability along Turkey’s southern border is a major concern for Erdogan. Yet Ankara does not have the resources to occupy and hold onto large areas of Syria or fight ISIS. Trump’s decision to withdraw from Syria leaves Turkey with an unstable neighbor across the border that it cannot control itself.

And the YPG has a problem, as well. Trump’s decision to withdraw from Syria has—inadvertently—realigned the PKK-YPG relationship, pushing the YPG into a position where they are also more likely to negotiate. Without U.S. support, the YPG risks being overrun by either the Assad regime or Turkey, and consequently losing its territorial gains. In other words, the YPG is no longer the exciting success story in the PKK family.

Almost a decade before the Syrian war, the YPG spun out of the PKK as the military wing of the Party for Democratic Unity (PYD) in Syria in 2003. For years, the military strength of the PKK had been what animated the YPG units. Since 2014, however, U.S. cooperation with the YPG inverted this relationship. It is in part the American-supported successes of the YPG that emboldened the PKK and made negotiations between either group and Turkey unlikely.

Washington, which relied on the YPG ground forces as part of its strategy to ISIS, ignored the ties between the YPG and the PKK for reasons of expediency. Due in part to this support, the YPG achieved a string of military successes: in 2014, the YPG, with U.S. help, captured the Syrian city of Kobane from ISIS, declaring autonomy there. It subsequently took control of nearly a third of Syria's territory—an area roughly comparable to the size of the U.S. state of West Virginia. The YPG declared autonomy in this region, following the “Kobane Model” of liberating cities from ISIS, and established Kurdish civil administration.

Buoyed by these gains, the YPG was suddenly the successful military wing of an independently administered region, reversing the group's historic relationship with the PKK. These successes in turn emboldened the PKK, which at the time had been engaged in the ongoing peace talks with the Turkish government that Erdogan had initiated in 2012, aimed at bringing closure to four decades of war with Ankara.

The talks collapsed in 2015 as the PKK changed course. That summer, it launched an aggressive war against Ankara, attempting to take over cities in Turkey's southeast near Syria in an attempt to import the YPG's "Kobane Model" from Syria into Turkey.

Needless to say, this attempt has failed. Ankara, which has NATO's second largest active military, has overwhelmed the PKK. Yet the YPG's gains in Syria have continued to animate the PKK despite its own failures. The latter's Syrian 'daughter' controls a significant portion of the country's oil fields, and could—until recently—rely on complete U.S. support to protect these assets.

Now, the YPG, lacking the promise of full U.S. support in the future, has lost its ability to inspire the PKK in the long term. The latter should now be more eager to enter negotiations with Ankara in return for Turkey's recognition of the YPG's gains in Syria. The PKK will come to the peace table with Ankara only if it believes that the YPG is weak in Syria.

Domestic political changes within Ankara also suggest a concurrent potential shift on Turkey's position regarding the YPG. During elections, Erdogan thrives on a Turkish nationalist base and banks on his projected image as the 'tough guy' against Kurdish nationalist PKK paying dividends at the ballot box.

Once the dispute over Istanbul's mayorship is over, Erdogan faces no new elections until 2023, suggesting he now may be more willing to negotiate with the PKK now his 'tough guy' image is no longer so important. Erdogan is a pragmatist before he is a nationalist—after all, he launched Turkey's first-ever peace talks with the PKK in 2012, before the six years of elections, referendums, and attempted coup. With the most recent elections behind him, he will be in a position to re-embrace his previous strategy of peace talks with the PKK—and deal with the YPG—because the two are necessary to help fix Erdogan's “Syria problem.”

Washington can play a further role at this stage to fully realign the PKK-YPG relationship with Turkey. U.S. officials have been engaged in ongoing talks with their counterparts to make a safe zone a reality. If implemented, this “safe zone” would help push the YPG away from Turkey's border.

Thus, a *modus vivendi* to govern eastern Syria, where Turkey has a “safe zone”, the YPG exercises control beyond the “safe zone”, the U.S. maintains a military presence in these areas, Ankara provides money and public services necessary for Syria's stabilization—and Erdogan's friendly conservative face for local Arabs—may be an increasingly likely option for Northeastern Syria.

This model has a number of benefits, including economic opportunities and a chance for eastern Syria's stabilization. Large areas of Syria, such as Raqqa, lie devastated after the U.S. campaign against ISIS, and Turkey's dynamic business sector, suffering from its recent economic slump, is looking for new market prospects for growth. The window for Washington to fix its Kurdish problem with Ankara could open soon as Turkey closes the page regarding Istanbul's mayoral race, entering a period of no new elections for the next 5 years. ❖



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