

# A Turkish ‘Safe Zone’ in Syria: Prospects and Policy Implications

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Brief Analysis

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**Establishing such a zone in the northeast would give Ankara and the United States a unique opportunity to work together, provided Washington can convince its European allies to participate as well.**

**A** U.S. delegation is currently in Ankara to iron out the details of Turkey’s proposed “safe zone” along the northeast Syrian frontier. These discussions come after President Trump first announced that the United States would withdraw its 2,000 troops from Syria, then later agreed to leave 200 troops in the northeast and 200 in the south. How might this announced drawdown affect the prospects for establishing and maintaining the proposed buffer zone? And what implications does the zone hold for U.S. interests in Syria and beyond?

## AMERICAN PROMISES, TURKISH CONCERNS

**A** lthough President Trump was following through on an oft-repeated campaign pledge when he announced a full withdrawal in December, the decision was still viewed by many as a hasty move that could upset the fragile equilibrium created by the U.S. military presence in Syria. In carrying out their mission to defeat the Islamic State (IS), American forces have long relied on the Syrian Kurdish People’s Defense Units (YPG)—an effective local ally, but also an offshoot of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), a U.S.-designated terrorist organization that has been at war with the Turkish government for decades.

At first, Ankara grudgingly tolerated U.S.-YPG cooperation because Washington insisted it was necessary to defeat IS. Yet Turkey's patience wore thin as major conventional military operations against IS wound down. President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and other officials adopted more bellicose rhetoric against the YPG, threatening to launch further incursions into northeast Syria in order to curb what they regard as a terrorist presence on their border. The warnings were not taken lightly given Turkey's previous interventions further west in Syria in 2016 and 2018, intended to prevent the emergence of a contiguous YPG-controlled zone along the entire northern frontier.

Over time, the American military presence catalyzed two important developments. First, it was key to the creation of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), a YPG-led umbrella group that includes various Arab tribal militias. Despite the uneasy nature of their alliance with the Kurds, these Arab fighters played a significant role in dismantling the IS "caliphate," and this partnership could be vital in keeping the jihadist organization at bay. Second, the U.S. presence prevented Iran and its proxies from establishing a northern land route through Syria to the Mediterranean Sea. Washington now faces the difficult task of threading the needle there: alleviating the security concerns of its ally Turkey while ensuring that events in north Syria do not pave the way for the return of IS or wider regional instability.

## **TURKEY'S SAFE ZONE CONCEPT**

**A**nkara first floated the idea of a safe/buffer zone in 2014, then revived it following President Trump's withdrawal announcement, warning that it would establish the zone unilaterally if Washington did not help. To this end, it reportedly amassed 16,000 Turkish troops and 10,000 Arab rebel fighters adjacent to YPG-controlled areas of the border. If carried forward, Turkey's plan would involve pushing the YPG away from the frontier, creating a civil administration and local security forces under its control, and using territory within the zone to resettle some of the 3.5 million Syrian refugees currently in Turkey. Such a zone would also give Ankara more leverage over the Assad regime.

Yet Turkey is acutely aware that it would face serious political, economic, and military challenges if it took such action unilaterally, not least because the United States, Russia, Syria, and Iran have all warned against it. President Trump threatened to "devastate" Turkey's economy if the Syrian Kurds are attacked. For its part, the Assad regime is still intent on retaking the rest of the country, so it might try to undermine Turkey's position by encouraging proxy attacks inside a unilaterally established zone.

The demographic and geopolitical complexity of northeast Syria could cause problems for Turkey as well. According to Fabrice Balanche, around 850,000 people currently reside in the proposed twenty-mile-deep zone, bounded by the Euphrates River on the west and the Tigris River on the east. They include 650,000 Kurds (76%), 180,000 Sunni Arabs (21%), 10,000 Turkmens (1%), and 10,000 Christians (1%). Only one of the five districts that overlap the zone (Tal Abyad) has an Arab majority.

In other words, most of affected inhabitants would be Kurds, despite the zone's presumed exclusion of Qamishli (a large Kurdish-majority city under partial Syrian army control) and Kobane (a Kurdish-majority border town that would likely remain a YPG-controlled enclave). Many of these Kurds no doubt prefer the status quo and would view Turkey as a hostile occupying power, favoring Syrian rule if they had to choose between the two. Anecdotal reports indicate that many Arab residents prefer the status quo as well, though they seem more willing to align with Turkey if it intervened.

In short, a unilateral Turkish safe zone could become an arena of contention between the Assad regime and Ankara, between Turkish-sponsored Arab groups and the YPG, and between Kurds and returning Arab refugees. This could in turn provide a favorable environment for IS to reemerge. None of these scenarios is in Turkey or Washington's interests, which is why Ankara has tried so hard to convince the U.S. to work with it on a zone that is not predicated on Turkish intervention.

## WASHINGTON'S PITCH TO ALLIES

In light of such concerns, President Trump recently agreed to retain a residual military presence in Syria and has since asked European allies to send troops of their own, both to backfill for departing U.S. forces and to patrol the prospective safe zone. As an inducement, Washington pledged to provide intelligence and logistics support while offering to position a quick-reaction force in Iraq. Yet Baghdad rejected the latter idea, and many European nations have thus far rebuffed the appeals for help—due to the administration's penchant for unpredictable unilateral decisions, as well as concerns that it will prove unreliable if challenges proliferate in the proposed zone, or that it will transform the anti-IS mission into an anti-Iran mission, which they would not support.

The reported U.S. offer to keep 200 U.S. troops in northeast Syria and another 200 in the southern enclave of al-Tanf does not seem to have changed their minds. While this reduced presence could allow the United States to continue certain mission-essential tasks (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/options-for-a-lighter-u.s.-footprint-in-syria>) (e.g., directing airstrikes) and prevent the SDF from unraveling, it might also embolden America's enemies to launch proxy attacks against coalition forces in order to undermine the mission, as they have done elsewhere in the past.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR U.S.-TURKISH TIES

Both Washington and Ankara reportedly see the safe zone talks as a confidence-building measure after a long rough patch in bilateral relations. The proposal also gives President Trump leverage over President Erdogan at a time when the latter is preparing his party for nationwide local elections on March 31. A U.S.-created safe zone that pushes the YPG away from much of the border would burnish Erdogan's nationalist credentials and boost his party's chances at the ballot box.

In return, Ankara might be more flexible on other issues, including its decision to purchase Russia's advanced S-400 air-defense system (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/erdogans-victory-could-actually-improve-u.s.-turkish-relations>). For instance, Erdogan could kill the sale indirectly by suggesting that Turkey might provide U.S. intelligence with access to transferred S-400s, which would probably cause Moscow to halt delivery. President Trump could also reasonably expect Ankara to release some of the U.S. citizens and local embassy staff it has imprisoned since the failed 2016 coup.

In all likelihood, however, the White House will need to do more if it wants to bring both Turkey and the Europeans along while ensuring that the resultant safe zone is viable. In particular, it may have to keep more than 200 U.S. troops in northeast Syria, and extend their presence indefinitely in order to deal with a nascent IS insurgency.

## IF EFFORTS TO CREATE A ZONE FAIL

In the event that the safe zone discussions come to naught and President Trump decides to continue with his withdrawal plan, Turkey will have to find other ways to deal with the YPG presence on its border. The widespread foreign opposition to unilateral Turkish intervention in the northeast may have foreclosed that approach, but Ankara could still use Arab rebel proxies to undermine YPG forces in vulnerable areas such as Tal Abyad, the Arab-majority border district that divides the YPG's Kobane and Qamishli cantons.

If Erdogan disregards the risks and takes broader military action anyway, it could have destabilizing consequences. In Turkey, such a campaign might prompt the PKK to unleash a fresh wave of domestic terrorist attacks. In Syria, it could force the YPG to pull back from the border while reinforcing its frontline with fighters currently stationed deeper inside east Syria, enabling IS remnants there to regroup. Alternatively, the YPG could leverage its longstanding transactional ties with the Assad regime into a wider deal that enables government forces to return to the northeast in larger numbers—another development that could facilitate the return of IS given widespread Sunni

Arab enmity toward the central government.

In the end, President Trump will have to reconcile two incompatible campaign promises—disengaging from the Middle East or defeating IS. Doing so means making hard choices that may not align with his preferences, but could go far toward safeguarding U.S. interests in the region.

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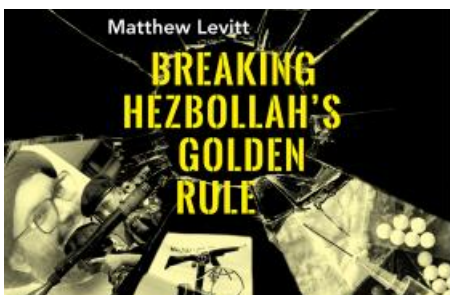
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