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How to Stop the War Between Turkey and the Syrian Kurds

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Articles & Testimony

Fighting between two vital U.S. allies will only strengthen Assad and Iran.

As the U.S. government shut down last weekend, two key American allies started fighting against each other: Turkey and the Kurds in Syria. Earlier this week, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson attempted an exquisite balancing act around this dilemma, nodding to "Turkey's legitimate security concerns" but also to the "multiethnic group of fighters who are defending their home territory" inside Syria. What is the real U.S. policy here, and what should it be?

Just as the Turks have long urged, the United States now has a coherent policy in Syria. Furthermore, those goals are shared by Turkey. First, the underlying conflict between the Syrian people and the Bashar al-Assad regime should be resolved through a United Nations-led political process leading to a unitary post-Assad state. And second, Iranian influence in Syria should be diminished, and Syria's neighbors should be kept secure from all threats emanating from Syria. The first goal satisfies Turkey's two key objectives since 2011: getting rid of Assad, and a unified Syria, with no independent Syrian Kurdistan under the possible rule of the erstwhile allies of Turkey's enemy, the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) movement. The second goal, reducing Iran's influence in Syria and ensuring that threats do not emanate from there, meets Turkey's longstanding diplomatic interest (dating back to the Ottoman-

Persian Empire conflicts) in containing, as President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has recently said publicly, "Persian expansionism."

Despite Erdogan's strident anti-Western rhetoric and domestic authoritarianism, Turkey shares a basic orientation with the United States and Europe. Like those of the Arab states and Israel, Turkey's interests are threatened by an expansionist Iran enabled by Russia, the two traditional foes of both the Ottoman Empire and modern Turkey.

But this convergence of interests does not mean that all is well between Washington and Ankara. Erdogan and most of the Turkish population have major problems with the United States supporting the Syrian Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) and its military wing, the People's Protection Units (YPG), as well as the joint Kurd-Arab military force it dominates, the Syrian Democratic Forces. Turkey has been stuck in a stalemated battle with the PKK, a listed terrorist group, and cannot afford the presence of the PYD, a PKK "offshoot," as Erdogan's spokesman recently termed it, all along its southern border.

The United States has had difficulties convincing Turkey that its support for the PYD and SDF was, in U.S. officials' words, transactional and solely based on its utility against the Islamic State, in part because of the strong personal links forged between U.S. forces on the ground and the Kurdish fighters, who have been highly effective against Islamic State forces. A series of U.S. blunders at every level has made things worse, including former Vice President Joe Biden promising the Turks publicly that the PYD would retreat back across the Euphrates, President Donald Trump's promise to Erdogan to immediately cease weapons shipments to the Kurds, and a clumsy Pentagon announcement this month that it would train SDF elements as a border force—on the Turkish border. Washington thus has a very big hole to dig itself out of.

It has started doing so by announcing that it has no ties to another PYD force in the isolated enclave of Afrin, in northwestern Syria along the Turkish border. Turkish forces have now attacked that enclave, and the United States has urged restraint but has not stopped them. Tillerson was also at pains to praise Turkey's role in Syria, commit to cooperation with Ankara, and implicitly criticize the SDF and thus the PYD for not allowing enough local self-rule and democracy and for "threatening" neighboring states (i.e., Turkey).

The larger question is, how will long-term American interests in Turkey fit with Washington's highly successful three-year battlefield partnership with the PYD against the Islamic State? The United States will have to triangulate its vital alliance with Ankara and its new public promise to maintain the PYD partnership (including around 2,000 U.S. military advisors) for at least the coming two years. There is a way forward, tricky but essential, to reconcile American interests with both their Turkish and Syrian Kurdish allies.

The first step is to encourage the PYD to further distance itself from the PKK, while reminding Turkey privately that the PYD has largely kept its 2012 commitment not to provide material support to the PKK inside Turkey. It is useful to recall that as recently as 2015, Turkey and the PYD worked well together in facilitating the successful military operations against the Islamic State in Kobane, right on the Turkish border, and then-PYD leader Salih Muslim was an honored official guest of the Turkish government. This fragile entente fell victim to the collapse of the PKK-Turkish ceasefire and peace talks later that year—which made U.S. military support for the PYD a constant irritant in ties with Turkey.

The second step should be to set up direct channels for resumed discussions between the PYD and Turkey, and between the PYD and what remains of the mainstream, moderate Syrian Arab opposition that Turkey still supports. Through our unofficial, quiet contacts over the past several months with all sides, it appears that they may all be grudgingly open to this option. After Tillerson's remarks, the PYD's former European spokesman, Nawaf Khalil, went to so far as to publicly welcome this statement of a "balanced" U.S. commitment to all its allies in and around Syria. All these parties share a strong interest in opposing Assad and Iran, avoiding major armed conflict with each other,

and maintaining their bilateral security and diplomatic ties with Washington.

The third step is tougher, yet urgently necessary. That is to reassure Turkey, even more explicitly than Tillerson just did, that the United States will actively oppose any Kurdish secessionism or territorial expansion in Syria, and any future attempts by the PYD to collaborate with the PKK inside Turkey. In return, the United States must credibly reassure its Syrian Kurdish friends that Washington will work with Turkey to forestall Turkish incursions or other military operations into the existing PYD-controlled enclaves in eastern Syria. The continued small U.S. military presence in those enclaves will make that commitment more credible. In the longer term, it may even be possible to forge a positive, informal coalition among these currently hostile regional parties, one that would consolidate pro-American and anti-Iranian, anti-Assad influence beyond Syria's northeast corner. Without such cooperation, including the PYD's, the U.S. presence in northeastern Syria and thus Washington's entire Syria policy will be difficult to sustain. That would not be in Turkey's interest, especially as it would result in either Turkey occupying all of northeast Syria in the face of fierce resistance, or allowing that region (and the pro-Kurdish military forces there) to fall under the sway of the Assad regime and Iran.

This may seem utopian right now, but it is worth recalling that Turkey and the Iraqi Kurds were enemies less than a decade ago—and today they are friends, with oil from Iraqi Kurdistan flowing daily through Turkey.

The "ancient ethnic conflict" between Turks and Kurds is not an insurmountable barrier to common strategic and economic interests—especially in the face of common enemies. The key is for the Kurds to renounce pan-Kurdish dreams the lure of the PKK and its leader, Abdullah Ocalan. And the Turks must accept some degree of local Kurdish autonomy in neighboring states in exchange for the larger prize of containing Iran, Assad, and Russia—all of which pose a greater threat to Turkey than the PYD. Such a compromise would serve Turkish, Kurdish, and American interests.

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