

# Reaching a U.S.-Turkish Deal in Syria: Four Steps

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Brief Analysis

## Erdogan may be willing to give President Trump a free hand in Raqqa, but only if Washington supports Turkish action against the PKK in Sinjar and continues the conversation on Fethullah Gulen.

On May 16, Turkish leader Recep Tayyip Erdogan will meet with President Trump in the White House to discuss a variety of interconnected issues, including the U.S. campaign to liberate the Syrian city of Raqqa with Kurdish help and the Turkish campaign against the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK). Can Washington and Ankara reach an understanding on taking Raqqa, the unofficial capital of the so-called Islamic State (IS)? The answer lies in Turkey's complicated views regarding the various Kurdish factions fighting in Syria and Iraq, among other issues. To move the conversation forward with Erdogan and strike a viable deal, the Trump administration should focus on the following four steps.

### FIRST STEP: RAQQA

In gearing up for the Raqqa campaign, Washington has reportedly picked the Syrian Kurds (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/trumps-plan-to-arm-kurds-lays-bare-the-strategic-vacuum-in-syria>) as its main ally on the ground -- specifically the People's Defense Units (YPG) and the broader umbrella group it dominates, the Syrian Democratic Forces. The mainly Kurdish SDF appear to be the only local rebel faction capable of fielding the roughly 10,000-12,000 troops needed to take Raqqa from IS.

Yet Ankara objects to this alliance, arguing that the YPG and its political arm, the Democratic Union Party (PYD), are closely tied with the PKK, the U.S.-designated terrorist group that has waged war against the Turkish government for decades. This long-running conflict broke out into active hostilities once again after the last ceasefire collapsed in July 2015. More recently, President Erdogan sought to secure a yes vote in a close constitutional referendum last month by boosting his nationalist image, which meant further hardening his stance against Kurdish nationalism. Going

forward, he will no doubt continue that strategy in order to peel off voters from the Nationalist Action Party (MHP) and increase support for the Justice and Development Party (AKP), which he rejoined on May 2. The referendum switched Turkey from a parliamentary political system headed by a prime minister to an executive system headed by a partisan president, allowing Erdogan to formalize the paramount authority that he had already been wielding in practice. Now he hopes to defeat the PKK in order to prepare the ground for an AKP victory in the 2019 parliamentary elections, which would give him de facto power over the legislative branch as well.

These considerations are deeply relevant to President Trump's calculus in Syria. While the United States can launch a YPG campaign on Raqqa without securing Turkey's blessing, Ankara might decide to play the spoiler by targeting the YPG through its Arab rebel proxies elsewhere in northern Syria. Moreover, the U.S. military likely plans on using Turkish bases, including Incirlik, to provide crucial air, logistical, and intelligence support to the YPG; losing access to these bases would force Washington to consider other, more complicated options.

## **SECOND STEP: SINJAR**

**T**rumpp could convince Erdogan to make a deal on Raqqa by agreeing to support a potential Turkish campaign against Sinjar, an emerging PKK base that straddles the Iraq-Syria border. The PKK has long used Qandil on the Iraq-Iran border as its main base, but lately the group has been moving leadership and infrastructure to Sinjar. It is unclear whether this transfer is temporary or permanent, but it is clearly driven by events in Syria. Sinjar is much closer to Rojava, the self-declared Kurdish autonomous region in northern Syria, giving the PKK excellent lines of communication and logistics into YPG-controlled territory. And while much of Rojava is flat and therefore exposed to Turkish military action, the mountainous Sinjar area gives the PKK the advantage of rugged terrain more suited to its traditional guerrilla tactics.

Even so, Ankara has already signaled that it will not allow the PKK to establish permanent headquarters in Sinjar. Turkish forces unilaterally struck the area on April 25 and seem ready to take further action if necessary. In contrast, hitting PKK forces in Qandil would require Ankara to obtain Iran's blessing, which seems unlikely given Tehran's close ties with the PKK. Moreover, Turkey and Iran's relations have deteriorated due to their opposing stances next door: Ankara has put its muscle behind the rebels in Syria and the Kurds and Sunni Arabs in Iraq, while Tehran supports the Assad regime in Syria and the Shiite-dominated central government in Baghdad.

The Turks are also likely to opt for a Sinjar operation because of the strong support they have received from Iraq's Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), which dominates the Kurdistan Regional Government and controls the area around the Sinjar Mountains. The PKK first began moving into Sinjar in 2014 to help liberate it from IS, and the group has maintained a presence through its proxy Sinjar Resistance Units (YBS), organized among the area's original Yazidi Kurdish inhabitants. The KDP has asked the PKK to withdraw from Sinjar, invoking the example of Kobane, Syria -- KDP fighters entered that city in October 2015 to help the YPG stave off an IS assault, but they promptly left after completing their mission. To back up its stance on Sinjar, the KDP skirmished with YBS forces there in March.

During his White House visit, Erdogan will likely seek U.S. backing for a potential Turkish-KDP operation to drive the YBS and PKK out. This may mean pledging to help Ankara allay Iraqi objections to Turkish operations in Sinjar, one of several areas under dispute between Baghdad and the KRG. Such a promise could convince Erdogan to avoid actively opposing a U.S.-YPG campaign against Raqqa (though he, or his proxies, would likely still criticize the campaign in public). Overall, increased U.S. assistance against the PKK, including in the intelligence realm, would show Erdogan that he has secured a good deal with President Trump.

## **THIRD STEP: GULEN**

**F**or nearly a decade, Erdogan was close allies with Fethullah Gulen, a man who controls a powerful religious-political movement in Turkey and furthered the AKP's efforts to dismantle the country's secular political system.

He also **helped Erdogan consolidate power** (<https://www.newsultan.info/>) -- for instance, Gulen-aligned judges and police officers have locked up many political opponents, journalists, and secular military figures over the years.

Yet once the two men eliminated the military's domestic political power and took over the high courts, a raw power struggle ensued. Erdogan believes that Gulen-aligned officers formed the core of the failed 2016 coup, and the two sides have viewed each other as enemy number one ever since. Although Ankara has yet to give the United States evidence that Gulen personally ordered the coup, Erdogan is coming to Washington with this animus in mind -- particularly given Gulen's continued residence on U.S. soil. Demonstrating empathy toward Erdogan's concerns on this issue would help President Trump conclude a fruitful meeting with him, including a potential deal on Raqqa and Sinjar.

## FOURTH STEP: DEMOCRACY IN TURKEY

**E**ven if the two leaders reach an understanding on near-term military action in Syria, Turkey's deep societal polarization may prevent Erdogan from delivering on any wider bilateral bargains. After a decade-and-a-half in office, Erdogan has become the most unassailable Turkish leader since Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, but half of the country still loathes him. The April 16 constitutional referendum **gave him unprecedented powers** (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/turkey-in-crisis>), but the unfairness of the campaign and the ballot irregularities in a very narrow vote have called into question just how much of a mandate he has to rule as omnipotent president. Erdogan has decided to push ahead regardless, and his self-declared mandate will only exacerbate Turkey's polarization. In the best-case scenario, the country is entering a permanent state of crisis, making it a less than ideal partner for the United States. Therefore, President Trump should privately encourage Erdogan to recognize Turkey's diversity and allow for broader freedoms to alleviate social tensions.

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