Turkish Policy towards the Syrian Crisis: the Kurdish Factor

Muhammad Shoaib

Introduction

The Syrian conflict between government forces and various opposition groups erupted in 2011 following mass protests that were considered part of the Arab Spring wave, which spread across the Middle East. The unrest in Syria significantly impacted the domestic and foreign policies of its neighbours, including the Republic of Turkey, whose border with Syria stretches more than 800 km. The Syrian civil war has become one of the main priorities of the Turkish government’s foreign policy. Since the beginning of the conflict, Turkey supported the opposition forces in the civil war, taking a very critical approach to President Bashar al-Assad’s regime, calling for the Syrian President to resign from office.

However, over the past few years, Turkey’s strategy towards the Syrian conflict has shifted from supporting the overthrow of President Assad and replacing him with a Syrian Muslim Brotherhood-inspired government, to containing and undoing the political and military advances of Syria’s Kurds. The shift in Turkey’s policy can be attributed to its growing fears of increased Kurdish insurgency along its border with Syria as well as inside its territory. Turkey had a somewhat complicated entry into the Syrian Civil war in 2014 when the Turkish government agreed to be a part of a US led coalition to combat Daesh also known as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). However, questions soon arose about the intentions of the Turkish involvement when it was discovered that many of their
air strikes against Daesh were instead hitting Kurdish targets in the autonomous region along the northern border of Syria and Turkey established by the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD). The Erdogan regime has named the PYD and the Kurdish Peoples’ Protection Units (YPG) terrorist organisations as it believes them to be affiliates of the Turkey-based terrorist group - the Kurdistan Worker’s Party (PKK), an organisation which has also been banned by the US and NATO. Although PKK is a proscribed organisation, the US relied heavily on the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) and its military wing, the YPG as part of the Obama Administration’s doctrine to fight the war against Daesh on the ground. Due to this alleged affiliation, and the large presence of the PKK along the southern border of Turkey, there is a real possibility that if not stopped, combined Kurdish (PKK and PYD) forces would create a continuous Kurdish controlled autonomous region throughout the Syrian/Turkish border region. The possibility of strong ties between the PYD and the PKK, are a grave concern for the Erdogan regime. As such, the PYD’s establishment of an autonomous region along the northern border of Syria could be viewed as a national security issue for Turkey and therefore a strong motivating factor for Turkish actions in Syria.

Therefore, Turkey’s new approach consists essentially of the creation of areas of control along the Turkish-Syrian border as a buffer zone against groups such as the YPG, based on the perception that they had become an existential threat to Turkish national security. This study is an attempt to explore the possible explanations for Turkey’s involvement in the Syrian conflict particularly as it relates to the Kurds in both Northern Syria (PYD) and the PKK presence in Southern Turkey. Although, there are a number of factors responsible for Turkey’s policy towards the Syrian crisis, the study only
examines the Kurdish factor in analysing Turkey’s behaviour towards the Syrian civil war. Historically, Kurds with their distinct ethnic identity have been a significant part of the Middle East and it is important to analyse the development of their identity and their relationship with the larger region, especially with Turkey.

**History of Kurds and Turkey (Identity)**

The Kurds with their defined ethnic identity have existed since the 6th century CE. Historic non-state Kurdistan stretches across the Zagros Mountains through modern day Iraq, Syria, Iran, and Turkey, making the Kurds who now number between 25 and 35 million, the fourth largest ethnic group in the Middle East and the largest without a state. Even with a developed language and culture specific to the Kurdish identity, being divided amongst four geographically contiguous states that have different languages, religions and cultures has created a different and fractured culture within the Kurdish people. The contentious relationship between Turkey and the Kurds dates back to the 19th century before the creation of the Modern Republic of Turkey, when the Ottoman Empire was in conflict with the Zagros Mountain peoples who refused the Ottoman insistence on linguistic hegemony and cultural assimilation.

However, a more modern framework for the Turkish and Kurdish relationship began after the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire following World War I with the reign of Mustafa Kemal “Ataturk”, the founder of modern Turkey. He carried on the tradition of the establishment of an all-inclusive Turkish identity, which did not account for cultural differences across various ethnic groups. However, the Kurds were a different case because they were such a large minority, and Ataturk
began a precedent that has continued to this day of using the Kurdish presence to gain the upper hand on political opposition. He did this by promising them autonomy during the Turkish War for independence in return for their support, and like many Turkish political leaders after him, he renounced the promise as soon as the war was won.\(^7\) After that Kurdish/Sunni Muslim revolts began, one of which in the late 1920’s established an independent state in Northern Turkey (Republic of Ararat) which fell after three years due to the failure to achieve Kurdish tribal unity.\(^8\) This pattern of Turkish Kurdish relations repeated itself through World War II until the emergence of Abdullah Ocalan, a Kurdish political activist with a strong Marxist ideology who created the PKK in 1970.

From there onwards, the PKK experienced a series of transformations from the original Marxist movement to a secular democratic nationalist ideology found in the organisation today.\(^9\) The first PKK insurgency took place amidst the Turkish civil conflicts of the late 1970s and was subsequently pacified with the military coup of 1980. This quick failure highlighted the difficulties of the Marxist movement and brought forth a new direction for the PKK, that of a Democratic Socialist party whose aim was that of an independent, Kurdistan. Turkey’s founding ideology did not accommodate the Kurds and as a result they were greatly marginalised. The PKK exploited the Kurdish resentment towards Ankara in an attempt to rally the Kurdish tribes under a common cause.\(^10\) As the PKK grew in stature, and the situation in Turkey became more violent, Arab states including Iran and Syria began to support, harbour, and even fund the terrorist organisation in Turkey. It is important to note that Iran and Syria may not have extended support to the PKK in an act of sympathy, as they were known to be equally hostile to the Kurdish populations in their own
countries, but instead their motive was to support a “proxy war”, by supporting the PKK and therefore supporting insurrection and violence within Turkey.\footnote{Syria supported the PKK in Turkey during the 1980s and 1990s, which enabled it to establish bases and influence mainly to keep check on regional rivals.} The PKK, like many Kurdish parties in Turkey, never gained significant and meaningful political influence. However, through their self-proclaimed status as the sole advocate of both Kurdish independence and unity in the Middle East, they were able to gain a large following outside the Turkish border which aided their guerrilla tactics by adding mobility and depth to their operations. Such a strategy devised by their leader Abdullah Ocalan who was imprisoned in 1999, coupled with the violent retaliatory methods adopted by Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and his predecessors in dealing with the terrorist organisation, claimed some 45,000 lives since the PKK’s inception. However, the PKK embraced a new direction in 2004 for the second time, changing its Marxist nationalist goals to that of “democratic autonomy” for Kurds in southwestern Turkey.\footnote{The current President of Turkey, Recep Tayyip Erdogan initially welcomed this new direction and attempted a series of peace talks with the PKK. Many scholars speculate whether the talks were a genuine attempt at meeting the demands of the Kurds, or whether it was simply the continuation of the tradition of winning the Kurdish vote to increase approval ratings and gain a political advantage. It is likely the latter may be the case, as neither parties put much effort into the peace process, which broke down in 2009. Since then, President Erdogan has continued these on and off peace narratives while simultaneously pursing military options when dealing with the Kurds.}
The fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003, lead to the formation of the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) in northern Iraq as well as the rise of Daesh. In 2012, Daesh exploited the Syrian Civil War to seize large areas of land across several borders, stirring the newly found Kurdish autonomous government, as well as most nations in the Middle East, into action. While the inter-relations of the Kurds in Syria, Iraq, and Turkey are contentious at best, Daesh’s unprecedented cruelty and merciless violence united the Kurds against them. The Kurds emerged not as one unified body, but as a large number of smaller pre-existing militias and organisations, such as the Democratic Union Party (PYD) in north-western Syria. After the successful repelling of Daesh from Kobani in 2015, the PYD and their armed wing, the Peoples Protection Units (YPG), became arguably the most powerful non-state actor opposing the militant group, including the Free Syrian Army (FSA) which is the Turkish-backed opposition group fighting to overthrow the Assad regime.

Turkey views the PYD and the YPG as a branch of the PKK, due to their shared ethnic and ideological ties. In addition, the PKK has sent thousands of fighters into Northern Syria at the beginning of the Syrian War to aid the Kurds in establishing an autonomous region. Turkey initially tried to work with the YPG, urging them to distance themselves from Assad, and cease the establishment of autonomous zones near the Turkish border. However, their conditions did not seem to be in line with the PYD’s agenda and the autonomous regions grew rapidly, creating a new power base for the PKK in southern Turkey. This, in addition to the pre-existing history of conflict between the PKK and the Erdogan regime, could be what has driven clashes between the PKK and Ankara. One such incident in August 2016 saw Turkish Armed Forces crossing the border of
Northwestern Syria and seizing YPG held areas, cities, and towns in the name of combating Daesh. However, this narrative has since been dropped and the Erdogan regime has made clear that their true enemy is the terrorist group, the PKK and its affiliate the PYD. This change occurred in 2016 following the failed coup attempt in Turkey which according to Ankara was planned by Fethullah Gulen and whom President Erdogan blames for military support for the PYD. Moreover, the large presence of Kurdish groups along Turkey’s border may constitute a significant national security risk.

Despite their terrorist designation, the PKK have had a large role to play in the Iraqi and Syrian conflicts. The organisation’s presence in Iraq over the decades has at times supported and destabilised Iraqi Kurdistan, whether it was halting the advance of Daesh on Erbil or provoking Turkish incursions. Meanwhile, their deep-rooted partnerships, e.g., with Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), have been instrumental to the US-led anti-Daesh coalition’s efforts in Syria. Acknowledging their close relationship with the PYD’s armed forces, the YPG, and the YPG-led SDF in Syria is fundamental in order to appreciate their role in the region as well as Turkey’s subsequent responses.

The PKK and PYD in Syria

The PKK’s impact on the Syrian Civil War stems from the close cross-border social and political ties between the Syrian and Turkish Kurds. Between 1980 and 1998, Damascus allowed the PKK to operate training camps in Syria and in Lebanon’s Beqaa Valley. The Syrian government did so, in order to provide the PKK a safe haven from which they could perpetuate attacks against their rival Turkey. The PKK was even granted an
official representative office in the capital. In addition, the Syrian regime actively encouraged its deprived Kurdish populations to join the PKK and to fight abroad.\textsuperscript{22} It is estimated that between seven to ten thousand Syrian Kurds joined the PKK during that period and they currently comprise approximately one third of the PKK’s forces.\textsuperscript{23}

As a result, thousands of Syrians have died fighting for the PKK’s cause.\textsuperscript{24} However, the PKK had to dramatically reshape its operations in Syria following the Adana Agreement of 1998. The organisation decided that in order to retain their influence in Syria, they needed to establish offshoot political parties under different names. One of the most successful was the PYD.\textsuperscript{25} Osman Ocalan, brother of the PKK’s Abdullah Ocalan, as well as one of the senior members of the PKK, claimed that he had created the PYD in 2003. He unequivocally stated that the PYD acts on the PKK’s orders.\textsuperscript{26} In fact, when the Syrian Civil War began in 2011, many members of the PKK leadership, who had operated within Syria prior to 1999, left their hideouts in Qandil and returned to lead the PYD.\textsuperscript{27}

Nevertheless, neither the PYD nor the PKK publicly acknowledge how close their relationship actually is. While the PYD claim that they are proud of their PKK roots, they define their relationship with the organisation as purely ideological rather than institutional. Saleh Muslim, co-president of the PYD, argues that although the PYD has a corresponding ideology to Ocalan, the PYD maintains its own decision-making authority.\textsuperscript{28} Osamah Golpy, a former Kurdish free-lance journalist, said that in order to reinforce that narrative, Saleh Muslim actively encourages media coverage by being, “very welcoming to journalists just to give them access and portray the PYD as Western, democratic,
secular…the kind of image they want to have in the
West” as opposed to the offshoot of a designated
terrorist organisation.29

There is no coincidence that the PYD controlled areas in
the north and east of Syria largely manifests Ocalan’s
vision of a de facto state that strives to decentralise all
social, political, and economic affairs in local councils.30
Their relationship ensures that the PYD’s YPG armed
forces, and the YPG dominated SDF, are principally
guided by PKK priorities. One PKK fighter in Sinjar
province, who was interviewed by the Wall Street
Journal in July 2015, illustrated the fluidity of these
organisations by saying, “Sometimes I’m a PKK,
sometimes I’m a PJAK (a PKK affiliate, active in Iran),
sometimes I’m a YPG. It doesn’t really matter. They are
all members of the PKK.”31 As Bill Park, of the
Department of Defence Studies at King’s College
London, explained, “the Syrian Kurds, PKK, PYD,
whatever you want to call them” are one and the same.32

The PKK and the Fight Against Daesh

According to Michael Gunter, a board member of the
Center for Eurasian Studies and authority on Kurds in
Turkey and Iraq, due to the PKK’s terrorist designation,
Washington has declined to publicly give them praise for
the instrumental role they have played in the US-led
anti-Daesh coalition.33 In fact, their fighters deserve
substantial credit for halting Daesh offensives and
recapturing territory in both Syria and Iraq. The PKK
has integrated themselves, and cooperated with the
KRG’s (Kurdish Regional Government) peshmerga, as
well as the Syrian Kurdish armed forces under the
PYD’s control, the YPG and the SDF.34
When the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan’s (PUK) peshmerga, armed forces representing the two major parties in the KRG, were pushed back to within 20 kilometres of Erbil in August of 2014, the PKK came to their rescue. The ‘guerrillas’ as the peshmerga called them were, by their counterparts’ accounts, excellent fighters. They had refined their skills fighting the Turkish military, NATO’s second largest armed force. Al Monitor reported that a PKK spokesman claimed that their forces are placed throughout Makhmour, Kirkuk, and Sinjar. The KRG’s acting president Massoud Barzani, a friend of Ankara and rival of the PKK for leadership of the Kurdish people, felt so indebted to the PKK fighters after they helped repel Daesh’s advance that he visited one of their camps on August 13th 2015. In addition, the PKK and the YPG, along with US support, played the decisive role in rescuing tens of thousands of Yazidis who were surrounded by Daesh fighters from the top of Sinjar Mountain. The media’s “myth” of the stalwart peshmerga fighter rings hollow if you strip away the support of the PKK.

On the Syrian front, the PKK’s fighters and commanders serve alongside their YPG partners in the fight against Daesh. Between January 2013 and January 2016, 49.24% of the YPG’s casualties were Turkish citizens. In addition to supplying personnel to the YPG, the PKK provide training and, possibly, weapons to their Syrian Kurdish counterparts. It has been reported that fellow Syrian Kurds have noticed an increase in the percentage of fighters and commanders from Turkey. The PYD on its part is unapologetic about the fact that ‘former’ PKK fighters are serving within the YPG ranks. The PKK’s strength was put to the test in Syria when President Erdogan finally permitted the Kurds to cross the Turkish border to aid in the YPG’s defence of Kobane. Golpy
mentioned that the PKK had successfully utilised the sympathetic one and half million strong Kurdish community in Europe\textsuperscript{41}, “to help facilitate international pressure in the media on Turkey…trying to get a lot of attention and support” to the YPG\textsuperscript{42}. Their decisive victory over Daesh in Kobane spurned the recapture of much of northern Syria from the so-called Caliphate, with the help of the anti-Daesh coalition. In fact, the YPG is reliant on the PKK in its fight against Daesh.

\textbf{The YPG led SDF}

To bypass Turkish pressure on Washington to stop backing the PKK linked YPG, and in part to alleviate Arab concerns about the coalition’s reliance on Kurdish ground troops, the Americans helped the YPG create the SDF in October of 2015. It was built on the shoulders of a group the YPG established in September of 2014 called Euphrates Volcano, a joint coalition with several Free Syrian Army (FSA) brigades. The SDF was constructed as a mixed Arab and Kurdish force in order to try to alleviate local Arab fears that the Kurds were controlling their Arab partners while cooperating with the US-led coalition in order to subjugate them to Kurdish rule.\textsuperscript{43} Leaders hoped that Arab units in the SDF would generate more trust with the predominately Arab populations under Daesh control, thus making the SDF more capable of recapturing and holding Daesh territory.\textsuperscript{44} A spokesman for the US-led anti-Daesh coalition, Colonel Steven Warren, once claimed that there were about 5,000 Arab fighters in the SDF.\textsuperscript{45} On January 5, 2015, Brett McGurk described the SDF before a special briefing for the US Department of Defence as an effective, “coalition of Syrian Kurds and Arabs” that had made dramatic gains against Daesh near Al-Hal.\textsuperscript{46}
Unfortunately for the coalition, the Arab components’ role in the SDF is negligible when compared to the PKK dominated YPG. The Arab contingent has simply failed to prove itself on the battlefield when compared to its Kurdish counterpart.\textsuperscript{47} For instance in February of 2016, Brett McGurk claimed that at the time of the YPG-SDF capture of the Daesh controlled town of al-Shadadi in Raqqa province, 60\% of the SDF’s fighters were Kurdish while 40\% were Arabs.\textsuperscript{48} Yet a Kurdish journalist following the SDF advance on al-Shadadi observed that the Arab members of the SDF had next to no impact on the battle and they were simply manning the theatre’s reserve operations. In addition, the journalist found that the YPG fighters on the frontlines were not even affiliated with the SDF. While some members of the Arab component of the SDF, such as the Raqqa Revolutionaries and the Shammar tribe, possess a degree of Sunni Arab support, they appear too weak to recapture Arab territory without rigorous Kurdish backing. Arabs living under Daesh control acknowledge that the SDF fighters, who would liberate the Arab territory, are predominately Kurds, rather than Arabs.\textsuperscript{49}

As a result, the PKK is the most capable fighting force in both Iraq and Syria today. The PKK’s high degree of training, proven leadership, and battle experience is unparalleled amongst the Kurds. Daesh defeats on the outskirts of Erbil, in Sinjar, Kobane, Manbij, and the large Kurdish advances in the north east of Syria were largely dependent upon the PKK’s ground forces under the guise of the SDF and YPG. Nevertheless, the future of the US-led coalition’s efforts to defeat Daesh as well as the prospects of any peace deals in both Iraq and Syria emerging continue to be complicated by the PKK’s designation as a terrorist organisation.
Implications of the PKK’s Terrorist Designation

The PKK’s terrorist label has been a major obstacle to the anti-Daesh campaign as they are integrated with some of most powerful local actors fighting Daesh in the region. This has been particularly challenging to the US as the PYD’s links to the PKK, which makes it difficult for Washington to fully support their armed forces because of the restrictions on providing material and financial support to an FTO. For instance, Gunter described how the PKK’s terrorist designation complicated the US-led coalition’s efforts to aid YPG forces as they fought Daesh in Kobane. The Turkish Military initially prevented Turkish Kurds from crossing into Syria since they feared that if they opened the border they would make the PKK’s presence stronger in Syria after saving their PYD brethren in Kobane. At one point during the siege on October 20, 2014, then US Secretary of State John Kerry even acknowledged that the PYD was an offshoot of the PKK in an effort to win the YPG much needed support. Interestingly, later that same day, another State Department official contradicted the Secretary of State’s earlier claim by stressing that the PYD and PKK were distinct factions under US law.

Another insightful look into the continued issue of whether the US publicly recognises the PKK as being synonymous with the PYD’s armed forces was Secretary of State Rex Tillerson’s March 30, 2017 statement alongside the Turkish Foreign Minister, Mevlut Cavusoglu. After a reporter directly asked Secretary Tillerson to confirm whether he had in fact acknowledged that there was no difference between the YPG and PKK, as Minister Cavusoglu had previously claimed, Tillerson deflected the question.
However, despite the PKK’s terrorist designation and reported links to the Syrian Kurds, the YPG and SDF have continued to succeed on the battlefield since the siege of Kobane was lifted in March 2015. The Obama Administration appeared determined not to stress the PKK and PYD’s commonalities in an attempt to avoid accusations that it was supporting a terrorist organisation. President Erdogan continues to add pressure on the US by repeatedly stating that Washington must choose between either supporting its NATO ally or backing the PYD. Notwithstanding Turkey’s resistance, the US has gradually provided more intelligence sharing and weapons to the PYD’s forces. US military advisors work closely with the YPG and SDF fighters by upholding that they are substantially different from the PKK militants.

The new Administration, despite President Trump’s promises of support for Turkey’s campaign against the PKK, has actually bolstered support for the SDF including sending four hundred Marines to aid in their encirclement of Raqqa. The US government appears to have recognised the value of the PKK and its affiliates in the fight against Daesh and they are willing to damage their relations with Turkey in order support them. Ankara’s response to this threat demonstrates its increasing restlessness.

**Turkey’s actions against Kurds**

As the PKK and its proxies have gathered strength in Syria and Iraq, Ankara has launched a brutal offensive in the predominately Kurdish southeast of Turkey in December of 2015, an armed intervention in northern Syria, and conducted airstrikes in both countries against the YPG, the PYD, and PKK positions. President Erdogan seems to be warring against the Kurds. Even
more concerning for Turkey was that the situation became worse. On May 9th, 2017 President Trump approved a plan to provide the “Kurdish” elements of the SDF with heavy machine guns, mortars, anti-tank weapons, and armoured cars for their assault on Raqqa. The United States received a harsh response from Turkey’s Deputy Prime Minister who said the move was “unacceptable” and served as “support to a terror organisation”. It compounded Ankara’s longstanding fears that weapons supplied by NATO countries to the YPG would continue to be used by PKK militants against their security forces in Turkey. While the United States has tried to reassure the Turks that the weapons will be monitored and not be turned against them, Ankara remains unconvinced. As policy experts prepare for what appears to be a new uncertain chapter in the Syrian and Iraqi conflicts, understanding and anticipating Turkey’s responses to the PKK’s advances is vitally important.

Operation in the Southeast

Turkey’s response to the PKK’s growing strength in Iraq and Syria is underpinned by its own domestic instability. Violence and political repression against the Kurds in Turkey’s predominately Kurdish southeast have only raised the stakes. Following the breakdown of their two-year ceasefire in July of 2015, more than 10,000 Turkish policemen and troops were engaged in an offensive against the PKK throughout the southeast in December of 2015. Hundreds of PKK militants and civilians had reportedly been killed, as urban warfare destroyed cities and towns across the region; Human Rights Watch estimated that between January and May of 2016 alone security operations in southeastern Turkey had displaced over 400,000 people.
Political repression is also rampant. Dozens of members of the pro-Kurdish People’s Democracy Party (HDP) had their parliamentary immunity stripped away so that they could be investigated on terrorism charges. The repeated extension of the state of emergency, which was declared shortly after the failed military coup attempt in July 2016, has restrained attempts to get up to date information about the scale of oppression.67

Turkey’s recent political upheaval with an increasingly authoritarian government68, nearly three million Syrian refugees69, and several brutal terrorist attacks blamed on Daesh and the PKK70, has forced Ankara to monitor the developing conflicts in neighbouring Iraq and Syria extremely closely. Turkey’s struggle against the PKK and their partners in Iraq and Syria should be seen as an extension of the battlegrounds in southeastern Turkey. While the Qandil Mountains in Northern Iraq have long been a base for the PKK,71 Ankara greatly fears an autonomous region developing under their control in northern Syria. They worry that such a zone would provide an unwelcome precedent for their own Kurdish population and would serve as a safe haven for PKK militants in the future. On August 24, 2016, Erdogan announced that Turkish Forces, along with their allied Syrian opposition fighters, had launched ‘Operation Euphrates Shield’ to drive out terrorists in northern Syria, that included both Daesh and Kurdish militants. In reality, the intervention was principally triggered by the SDF’s advance west of the Euphrates River. SDF forces had liberated Manbij and were advancing northwards towards the then Daesh controlled Turkish border town of Jarabulus on the eve of the Turkish operation. In addition, Ankara had repeatedly stated that any YPG or SDF offensive west of the Euphrates would be unacceptable, crossing a ‘red line’ that would provoke Turkish Military intervention.
The ‘Operation Euphrates Shield’ was an attempt to create a secure corridor from the Turkish border to the town of al-Bab. In addition, the Operation sought to impede the establishment of a YPG-controlled area along the Turkish border, by blocking the connection of the YPG-controlled areas of Afrin and Kobani. Since the launch of the Operation, fierce fighting was observed between the SDF, YPG, and the Turkish security forces along with their allied FSA units, which resulted in hundreds of casualties. Turkish backed forces were able to carve out a 2,000 square mile foothold in northern Syria including the strategic cities of Jarabulus and Al-Bab.72

Apart from its military operation, Turkey’s pragmatic actions also became apparent on the diplomatic level. Together with Russia, Ankara sponsored the Astana Peace Talks. The first meeting between Russia, Iran and Turkey, produced a ceasefire agreement on December 28, 2016, which laid the groundwork for further negotiations between the diverse Syrian factions. So far, there have been nine rounds of peace talks in the Kazakh capital, which resulted in an agreement between Russia, Iran and Turkey to create de-escalation zones inside Syria. By bringing Russia, Iran, and the Syrian regime to the table, Ankara was able to gain a seat at the most advanced peace talks and to exclude the YPG from negotiations. Turkey appeared to have achieved its primary aim, which was to prevent the PYD from gaining a territorially unified enclave in northern Syria. Despite these achievements, the Turkish Prime Minister did not rule out future offensives. Skirmishes continued between Turkish security forces and their partners with YPG/SDF forces in northern Syria.73

In 2018, the Turkish Armed Forces and the Turkish-backed FSA launched another significant military action
‘Operation Olive Branch’ - across its southern borders, advancing west, north and northeast into Syrian lands toward the Kurdish-controlled Afrin, in the Aleppo Governorate. The offensive followed an announcement by the Pentagon that it would establish a 30,000 strong border guard in northern Syria as part of its strategy to prevent the resurgence of Daesh. Around half of that force would comprise retrained fighters from the SDF, dominated by YPG militia. Erdogan, who branded Trump’s initiative “unacceptable”, added, “A country we call an ally is insisting on forming a terror army on our borders. What can that terror army target but Turkey? Our mission is to strangle it before it’s even born.” As reported by the Turkish General Staff (2018), on the very first day of its Operation, Turkey flew approximately one–fourth of its whole fighter aircraft arsenal. It constitutes the highest sortie-rates and the most intensive operational tempo in Turkey’s cross–border military record in the last decade.

Compared to Operation Euphrates Shield, Operation Olive Branch has achieved its goals in a much shorter time than expected, taking over the centre of Afrin on March 18, 2018 without harming the facilities or residents. The main combat phase ended on March 24, 2018, when Turkish Forces and Syrian fighters seized the last remaining villages and established full control of the city. Erdogan declared that 3,731 “terrorists” had been neutralised since the beginning of the operation as of March 24, 2018. In the aftermath of the operation, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights revealed it had reliable information that Turkey was carrying on “an orchestrated demographic change” to replace Kurds with displaced Arabs coming from Eastern Ghouta - of which the Syrian regime took control of in April 2018.
Ankara sought to achieve a variety of policy objectives with its Operation Olive Branch. The first aim was domestic. The US support for the PYD generated public pressure at home for a much harsher Turkish response to address the security challenges associated with the expansion of the PYD influence in northern Syria. According to SETA\textsuperscript{80}, a think-tank close to Erdogan’s regime, the Operation Olive Branch was launched “to ensure security and stability in Turkey’s southern border”. PKK’s logistical supplies from northern Syria to its terrorist activities in Turkey, majority of the group’s militant attacks from Afrin into Turkish soil, and the protection of the territorial integrity of Syria are possibly preparing the ground for future military operation.\textsuperscript{81} By eliminating the threat of the PKK-YPG, Turkey aimed to create a safe zone for local populations and restore societal and political stability.

The second goal was to enhance Turkey’s role as a strong actor in the negotiations over Syria’s future order where Turkey intends to limit the territorial ambitions of the Syrian Kurds. According to the UNHCR (2018), Turkey hosts over 3.5 million of Syrian refugees\textsuperscript{82}. The Kurds fear that Ankara plans to displace the returnees and engineer what is technically known as a ‘coercive engineered migration’.\textsuperscript{83} Finally, Turkey aimed to deter the US, its NATO ally, from backing the PYD. On March 28, 2018, the Turkish National Security Council chaired by Erdogan declared: “The terrorists in Manbij should be immediately removed from the region, otherwise Turkey will not hesitate to take initiative there by itself, as it did in other areas...We have the same determination concerning the terrorists nested on Syrian soil east of the Euphrates.”\textsuperscript{84} It clearly emerges that Manbij, where a significant portion of the 2,000 US special forces in Syria is deployed, was to be Ankara’s next target. This expanded scope would have raised the
chance of direct confrontation with the US forces located in and around the Manbij region for the training of and support to the YPG. Eventually, after months of disagreements between the United States and Turkey, the two NATO allies reached a consensus concerning a roadmap to cooperate on security in the area and establish safe zones.\textsuperscript{85}

\textbf{Operation in the Northeast}

Although efforts were being made towards reaching a consensus for establishing safe zones, the YPG continued establishing Kurdish dominance in northeastern region along the Turkish border. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan had repeatedly threatened military action in northeast Syria, where the Kurds and local Arab and Christian allies had established a relatively stable, de facto autonomous region during the Syrian civil war.

In December 2018, Trump announced that the roughly 2,000 US troops in Syria would be withdrawn because Daesh had been “defeated.”\textsuperscript{86} However, he then reversed the decision under pressure from the Pentagon, Congress and European allies.\textsuperscript{87} Even Turkey, caught by surprise due to an unexpected US intention to retreat, was cautious about a hasty US withdrawal. But the announcement paved the way for months of talks between Turkish and US officials that led in August 2019 to an agreement on a joint security mechanism to establish a “safe zone” in northeastern Syria.\textsuperscript{88} Despite the agreement, both the US and Turkey remained at odds over the extent and long-term nature of the “safe zone.” The agreement led to joint US-Turkish patrols inside a limited buffer zone to address Turkey’s concerns over the Syrian Kurds and the SDF dismantling its defences along the border and pulling back heavy weaponry.
President Erdogan had given a deadline of the end of September 2019 for the 30-kilometre-deep (19-mile-deep) zone to be established, warning that if it were not kept, Turkey would be “forced” to take military action for its own security. Turkey accused the US of being too slow in setting up the zone, amid differences between the two about how far it should reach into Syria and who should control it. Ankara has said it wants to use the region to settle up to 2 million Syrian refugees of the 3.6 million it currently hosts.

In October 2019, US President Donald Trump surprisingly announced US troops would pull away from the Turkish-Syrian border, allowing Turkey to carry out an operation against the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). Trump’s apparent green light to Ankara — despite opposition from the Pentagon, State Department and much of Congress — marked a striking abandonment of the SDF. On October 9, 2019, Turkey launched its cross-border offensive, dubbed “Operation Peace Spring”, by Turkish Military and allied Syrian rebel factions, aiming to clear the region of the YPG. President Erdogan said the operation aimed “to prevent the creation of a terror corridor across our southern border, and to bring peace to the area”. The SDF said it was determined to defend its territory “at all costs”, but Turkish-led forces were able to steadily push their way into a sparsely populated, mostly Arab area between the towns of Tal Abyad and Ras al-Ain in the first five days of the assault. Turkish air and artillery strikes affected a much larger area, including predominantly Kurdish towns and villages to the west and east.

The fighting between the Turkish and allied forces and the SDF continued for some 10 days until October 18, 2019 when Mike Pence, the US Vice President,
announced that Washington and Ankara had agreed on a ceasefire over Turkey’s offensive.\textsuperscript{94} The deal, which was reached after a quick meeting between Pence and Erdogan in Ankara, gave the SDF 120 hours to pull its forces 30 kilometres back from a 120 kilometres long strip along the Turkey-Syria border, the planned Turkey-controlled “safe zone” area between the towns of Tal Abyad and Ras al-Ain.

Apparently, Turkey achieved its primary goals through the operation, although it wanted to establish a larger “safe zone” before the move. According to Sinan Ulgen, a political analyst and former Turkish diplomat, Turkey’s priority has not been about who controlled the Syrian side of the border in this process, but it demanded the areas close to the border be freed of threats against its security.\textsuperscript{95} Although Turkey presented the outcome of the operation as a diplomatic and military victory, the country came under fire over alleged human rights violations during the operation, particularly because of the actions of allied Syrian rebel forces.

**Conclusion**

The presence of Kurds on the border is the main motivating factor motivating Turkish intervention in the Syrian conflict. The Turkish conflict with the Kurdish terrorist organisation the PKK, and its connection to the Syrian-based PYD, has generated strong concerns for the Erdogan regime. The increasing acquisition of territories by the PYD along the Syrian border, creates the possibility of a continuous autonomous Kurdish region that could span across both sides of the Turkish-Syrian border. Therefore, in an attempt to prevent the uniting of the Kobani and Afrin cantons, Turkey may well have entered Syria under the pretext of combatting Daesh, while in reality simply trying to seize the Daesh territory
in the Aleppo region before the YPG does. Turkey wants its border clear of the Assad regime, Daesh, and the Kurds. As the Syrian regime pulled back its forces in the face of Daesh, the Kurdish forces backed by the US began to push Daesh out of northern Syria. That largely left the Kurdish presence on the border, roughly at that time Turkey too began to get actively involved in the Syrian conflict. The effectiveness of the Kurds at combatting both Daesh and regime forces, and their strong presence at the Turkish border prompted Turkish intervention across the border. This meant that Ankara was focused more on an agenda of securing the Turkish border security, rather than promoting stability in the region.

Faced with the failure of its original strategy to overthrow the regime of President Assad through the Syrian opposition, Turkey shifted to an approach that focuses on containing and undoing the gains of the Syrian Kurds. The scale and perseverance of Turkey’s reconstruction efforts in the buffer zone it has established in northwest Syria suggests it could also be permanent. It must be noted that Turkey’s reconstruct-the- buffer-zone strategy only covers the border area west of the Euphrates River. There remains unfinished business further to the east and south of the Operation Euphrates Shield and Operation Olive Branch areas, in places like Manbij and Tel-Rifaat. Here, Turkey seeks a political compromise with the US and Russia respectively, which would allow it to deploy military force against the YPG. Moreover, Turkey has emphasised the applicability of its strategy for the area east of the Euphrates River as well. President Erdogan has repeatedly underlined Turkey’s willingness to extend its military operation eastwards. It is also relevant to highlight that Turkey recently made military advances into the Tel-Rifaat area by capturing a few small
villages, which it subsequently withdrew from due to stronger-than-anticipated resistance. Taking control of this area would conclude its operations west of the Euphrates and set the scene for crossing the river.

President Erdogan is unlikely to change his view that the PKK’s growing strength in Iraq and Syria is unacceptable for Turkish national security interests. As Erdogan has struggled to bring the Kurds to heel in southeastern and northeastern Turkey, his regime will likely continue to direct airstrikes against PKK affiliated targets across the region. Given the precedent set by cross border incursions in both Iraq and Syria, future Turkish ground operations cannot be ruled out either.

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