



Syria Transition Challenges Project

Discussion Paper (25)

Turkish Strategic Alternatives for the North East of Syria

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The Geneva Centre for Security Policy (GCSP)

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Syria Transition Challenges Project

A multilateral dialogue and research project that aims to build bridges between the EU, Russia, Turkey, and the US on the three issues of Reform, Refugees Return, and Reconstruction. The project is run by the GCSP in collaboration with European University Institute (EUI), Syrian Centre for Policy Research (SCPR), and swisspeace.

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Introduction:

Turkey's Syrian policy has been under significant transformation since the Syrian uprising erupted in the Spring of 2011. In the early stage of the crisis, Turkey's main objective was to peacefully support the democratic transition in Syria. However, with heightened competition between regional and international actors over the Syrian crisis and intensifying militarisation of the uprising, Turkey had to adopt a security-oriented strategy to prevent potential spill-over effects of the civil war into its borders. In the post-2016 security and strategic landscape, Turkey has been following a two-dimensional military strategy. On the one hand, while Turkey has been trying to minimize the terrorist threat in northeast Syria (NES), on the other hand it has been calibrating its military strategy in NES by supporting the Syrian National Army (SNA) and the Syrian Interim Government to establish a sustainable local order. This paper aims to make sense of Turkey's strategic alternatives in northeast Syria by presenting four different scenarios.

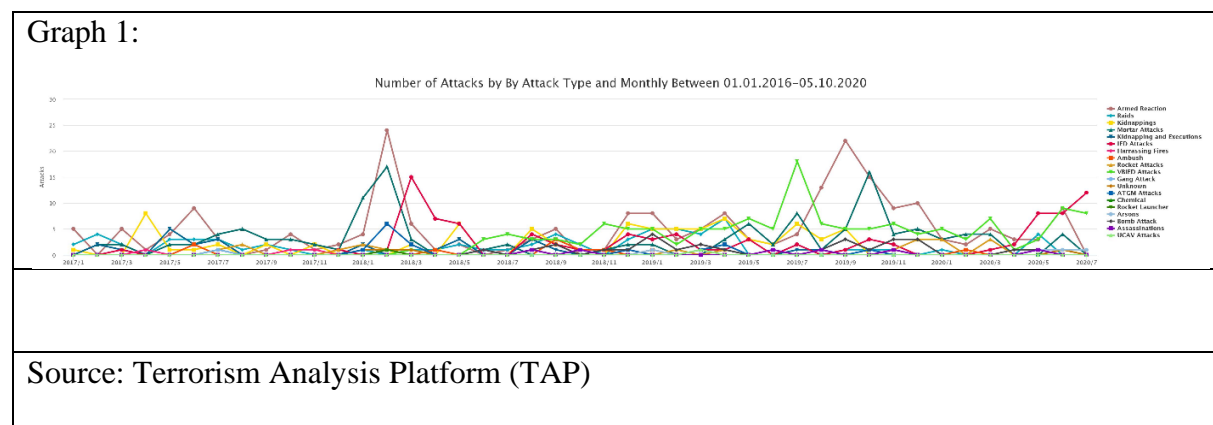
1) Turkey's concerns over the NES:

The main Turkish concerns in NES are border security, terrorism/counter-terrorism, geopolitical challenges from other regional and international actors, and the preservation of Syria's territorial integrity.

Although Peace Spring Operation (PSO) has fulfilled a substantial chunk of its aims, it did not reach the intended full-length territorial control in the NES yet. Thanks to four Turkish cross-border operations in Syria, the Turkish-Syrian border has become safe except for the area around Ayn al-Arab (Kobane) and the area from the Iraqi border to Ras al-Ayn (Rasulayn). Turkey has showed its capability and willingness to fight against terrorism posed by the Kurdistan Workers' Party (known by its Kurdish acronym PKK). Turkey has sought to demolish the terrorists' hotbeds along its border by securing deals with Russia and the US which foresees the withdrawal of the PKK-affiliated People's Protection Units (known by its Kurdish acronym YPG) and its political front, the PKK-affiliated Democratic Union Party (known by its Kurdish acronym PYD) from 32 km from the Turkish border. The YPG constitutes the backbone of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and the PYD constitutes the pillar of the Syrian Democratic Council (SDC), both of which are fronts for the PKK. Even though current dynamics and arrangements with Russia and the US prevent Turkey from launching another wave of military operations, the signed deals (with Russia and the U.S.) enable Turkey to put up pressure and maintain its right to act whenever necessary.

Border Security: Turkey’s initial objective in the NES is to maintain its border security. First, it initiated a project based on constructing a portable wall to prevent foreign terrorist fighters’ (FTFs) mobilisation, irregular and illegal flow of refugees, and cross-border terrorist attacks. Following the two successful military operations in the western part of the Euphrates River against the Islamic State (IS) and PYD-YPG, Turkey backed the SNA, enabling the latter to gain territorial control and secure the border between Afrin and Azaz. These two military operations enabled Turkey and SNA to push back IS (2016 August) from the Azaz-Jarabulus-al-Bab line, as well as liberate the Afrin region by forcing the PYD-YPG to leave the region (2018). In 2019, Turkey conducted another military operation against the YPG in the eastern part of NES to force the PYD-YPG to withdraw 32 km from Turkey’s border. Following the 9-day military operation, Turkey took control on the Tal Abyad-Ras al-Ayn line, from which the original operational plan aimed to control all of the border. In the post-operation security landscape, in terms of protecting its border security and removing the YPG element from its border, it seems that Turkey was partly successful. However, while the Afrin operation and OES have succeeded in terms of achieving border security, the geographic vicinity of the Tal Abyad-Ras al-Ayn line in the NES is not fully secure which consequently raises a high security risk for Turkey.

Terrorism and Counterterrorism: Turkey’s main objective is to fight against the terrorism posed by the YPG in NES. Turkey has defeated IS in the Azaz-Jarabulus-al-Bab triangle and the PYD-YPG in Afrin and the Tal Abyad-Ras al-Ayn line. However, the threat of terrorism from the PYD-YPG is still posing the largest challenge for Turkey. The PYD-YPG has been regularly targeting the SNA, civilians, and Turkish military personnel in Afrin, OES, and OPS areas, which ultimately undermines Turkey’s endeavour to create a sustainable local order in the liberated areas. On the other side, the IS resurgence in Syria is risking Turkey’s ongoing stabilisation efforts in the liberated areas.



Territorial Integrity: Turkey's ultimate objective in Syria is to maintain Syrian territorial integrity. The Turkish strategic community perceives the PYD-YPG as the main threat for the future of Syrian territorial integrity and political unity. The main challenge for Turkey is to create a stable local order to prevent a resurgence of the PYD-YPG's influence in the areas currently under the SNA's control. Establishing and consolidating local governance protected by an effective security system has been strongly supported by Turkey. Consolidating the local order might pose a challenge for Syrian territorial integrity in the near future because this further multiplies governance systems in the country. Therefore, the duration of the conflict will be the primary variable for Turkey to shape its strategy toward the NES. The continuing uncertainty of the political process and the ambiguity of the external actors (particularly Russia and the US) further complicate complex local conflict dynamics on the ground. The uncertainty pushes Turkey to develop a long-term comprehensive governance model which the idea is gradually becoming a dominant narrative among the Turkish strategic community.

Geopolitical Risk: There is a constant geopolitical risk for Turkey in the NES Syria as the US and Russia are playing a vital role in shaping the future of the region. The more the PYD-YPG entrenches its governance structures in the region, the more it increases the potential for Turkey's military intervention, Turkish military intervention would ultimately pave the way to a major political conflict between Turkey and the other two powerful actors. The first potential risk could be a major disagreement between Turkey and the US under the incoming Biden administration. The Biden administration will likely reveal a new Syrian strategy which will be composed of three pillars: countering terrorism posed by IS, containing Iranian and Russian influences, and shaping the future of the Syrian political process and territorial makeup. Fighting against IS in Syria with the US' local Kurdish partner is very likely to be the cornerstone strategy that the new administration will adopt. Consolidating the PYD-YPG's territorial control and augmenting its political legitimacy under the conception and practices of the autonomous region would further deepen the conflict between Turkey and the US over Syria, which ultimately may undermine the ongoing constitutional process. The same potential risk is valid for the Turkish-Russian balance in Syria. Any continuing attempts by Russia to consolidate the PYD-YPG's territorial order in the regions under Russian control would unnecessarily risk jeopardising Turkish-Russian relations.

Scenarios for Turkey in the North East of Syria

First Scenario: An anti-Turkish (i.e., PKK) run security and governance structure in the NES

In the mid-term, there is no possible scenario in which a PYD-YPG-run entity can survive in NES. Neither the local demographics nor the Turkish state will allow such an entity to become sustainable. The pursuit of this scenario will only guarantee new Turkish military operations against the PYD-YPG in other regions dominated by the latter such as Kobane. More importantly, the US' initiative to create a PYD-YPG-dominated "autonomous political structure" in the non-Kurdish led areas in the south would also allow Turkey to play a potential "spoiler role." Therefore, the PYD-YPG-led political process is neither acceptable nor realistic in the future of the region.

Second Scenario: A dominated Kurdish (mix of pro- and anti-Turkish) security and governance structure in the NES

Turkey does not have an issue with Kurdish-led governance and security structures, as the current cooperation with the Kurdish Regional Government against the PKK in northern Iraq shows. However, the Turkish experience with Manbij, as well as the attitude by CENTCOM and the US Senate, has left Turkey with very little trust in the current US efforts regarding the inter-Kurdish negotiations. The leading role of Ferhat Abdi Şahin (more known by his *nom de guerre* Mazloun Kobane) in this process, in which it speaks volumes of how the US significantly de-prioritizes Turkish national security interests. Instead of reducing the PYD-YPG influence, the US wants to legitimise these two entities in Syria. The lack of trust between Turkey and the US is the main obstacle for both sides. In order to transform the PYD-YPG in NES, Turkey has two conditions. The first one is to separate the fighters coming from Iraq and push them to leave Syria; the second one is to extradite PYD-YPG-affiliated terrorists of Turkish-origin who are fighting in Syria. More importantly, a dominated Kurdish security governance structure is not acceptable for Turkey not because of the demographic/ethnic nature of the governance structure but because of the lack of inclusivity of other demographic entities within its structure. The problem is about the idea of alternative governance model which an idea that directly undermines the Syrian territorial and political integrity.

Third Scenario: An inclusive security and governance structure that is representative of Kurds and Arabs

The areas currently controlled by the PYD-YPG in Syria are predominantly Arab except for Ayn al Arab (Kobane) and the al-Malikiyah region. As Turkey-backed SNA forces control the area from Tal Abyad to Ras al-Ayn, there is a direct link from Turkey to the Arab tribal main lands in Raqqa and Deir Ezzor. Turkey would welcome a new security and governance structure in Arab-populated areas in which the Arab elements of the SDC-SDF act independent of the PYD-YPG, instead of the current situation of full PYD-YPG control of governance and security structures.

In such a scenario, Turkey and the U.S. could work together in building bridges between the legitimate Syrian opposition and the Arab elements supported by the US. Over time, the Arab elements could be integrated into the structure of the Syrian opposition and thereby both NATO partners could combine their forces in Syria. In such a scenario, the PYD-YPG would be limited to two tiny mainly Kurdish-populated areas along the Turkish border. Ankara and Washington would be able to work out ways to solve this problem as the much-needed trust between both countries would be re-established. However, there is little hope this will happen as the American side lacks any interest in such a model.

Fourth Scenario: The NES return to the Syrian government with Russian presence after the US withdrawal

The return of NES under the authority of the Assad regime after a possible US withdrawal is a scenario that Turkey wishes to avoid in order to enable a real political transition in Syria. However, if the US prevents a workable *modus operandi* for Turkish-American cooperation and decides to depart from Syria due to domestic political consideration, Damascus's takeover will become unavoidable regardless of Turkish desires. The Assad regime's return into Arab tribal mainland will result in destabilising guerrilla warfare, but it will also cause much attrition for the regime. The current insurgency in Deraa will become a less problematic issue for the Assad regime compared to this scenario which could unfold in NES.

Table 1: The Potential for Scenarios to Materialise

Scenario	Turkey's potential move	Possibility
1 st Scenario	Military Intervention	Unlikely, not acceptable and not achievable
2 nd Scenario	Turkey's political intervention	Less likely and not acceptable, partly achievable
3 rd Scenario	Limited Political Support	Likely, acceptable with conditions
4 th Scenario	Not supportive	Less likely

The Turkish strategic alternatives

For Turkey, there is no perfect solution as the four scenarios have varying repercussions for Turkish national security calculations. However, the third one is more acceptable compared to the others. An inclusive security and governance system requires a stable region that is fairly representative for the region's Kurdish and Arab inhabitants. To create a stable region, the PYD-YPG and their affiliated bodies must stop targeting civilians. Turkey will also be required to improve local conditions, restructure the security sector in the region, and provide safe and properly equipped venues for the refugees.

In the mid-term, Turkey has two options.

1. *De-territorialisation of the PYD-YPG and the establishment of a local order*: Turkey's long-term strategic objective is to eliminate the PYD-YPG territorial presence in Syria and create an all-inclusive local order. The strategy of elimination has three sub-objectives: de-territorialisation of the PYD-YPG, reducing the PYD-YPG's mobilisation and military capacity, and reducing the PYD-YPG's political influence over local politics. In the long-term, Turkey will adopt a zero-tolerance policy (political and military) against the PYD-YPG. However, the local conditions on the ground, regional developments in the context of the Syrian crisis, and the external actors' involvement in the process may change Turkey's attitude against the PYD-YPG. Turkey's second strategic objective is to establish a local order under the control of the Syrian Interim Government.

2. *Transformation of the YPG and the Kurds in the region:* Turkey also has an option to transform the PYD-YPG presence in Syria. The transformation has two important pillars: military and political. In the context of political transformation, the PYD-YPG's political motivation and its connection with the PKK's ideology should be changed completely. Any ideological and political commonalities between the PYD-YPG and the PKK will not be accepted by Turkey. To achieve this objective, Turkey expects removing the PKK-affiliated figures from the PYD (and therefore the SDC) would be necessary. In the context of military transformation, the YPG's military capacity should be diminished. However, this option is not prioritised at this stage.

Conclusion:

Turkey's strategic alternative in NES has many dimensions. The first is about the local dynamics related to Turkey's ongoing efforts to stabilize the region. Turkey's aim is to create a stable region to provide a safe zone for refugees and to establish sustainable local order. The second dimension relates to the national dynamics related to the post-conflict reconciliation process in Syria. A stable transition would bring a stable Turkish strategy towards NES. The third dimension is the nexus between regional and international dynamics. Overall, Turkey's strategy towards NES in the near future will be shaped mostly by its threat perception vis-à-vis the PKK's Syrian branches. This threat perception will also shape Turkey's overall policy towards the Syrian crisis.