

Steps Toward Stabilising Syria's Northern Border

Crisis Group Middle East Briefing N°49

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I. Overview

On both sides of the Syria-Turkey border, uncompromising strategies are propelling further escalation and spillover of a dangerous conflict. Turkey is confronting both an ever-more implacable insurgency of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) as well as advances in Syria of PKK affiliates like the People's Protection Units (YPG). Should this continue, likely results include intensified bloodshed in south-east Turkey, a significant blow to the Turkish economy and expansion of violent instability into currently calm areas of western Turkey and north-east Syria. The Islamic State (IS), always keen to seize opportunity from chaos, has both incentive and capacity to help engineer it. What is especially troubling is not only the potential for greater upheaval in a suffering region, but also the extent to which the immediate calculations of each local protagonist (Ankara, the PKK and its affiliates and IS) lead it willingly to this abyss. Avoiding the dangerous unravelling this would entail may require immediate adjustments by the U.S., the lone actor with significant influence over both Ankara and the PKK-YPG camp.

To maximise its leverage over those parties and incentivise them to turn away from escalation and toward the negotiating table, Washington should shift its priority from "degrading and destroying" IS toward the broader, related goal of preventing further destabilisation (while continuing its fight against IS); make clear that PKK actions in Turkey will affect how the U.S. views its relationship with the YPG in Syria; and signal to Ankara that returning to a program of rights-based reforms and preparing the way for new talks with the PKK would enable the U.S. to strengthen its efforts to address Turkey's transborder security concerns.

The war's key protagonists seem to agree on one thing only: that their interests are best served by intensifying rather than de-escalating the fighting. This is true across conflict theatres, as seen in the approaches of Ankara and the PKK in Turkey; Ankara and the YPG in Syria and IS in both Syria and Turkey.

II. Escalation Ahead?

A. Turkey and the PKK

Nine months into a round of violence between Turkish security forces and the PKK that has killed at least 1,200 and displaced up to 400,000, both sides appear to view the war as heading in their favour.¹ Ankara assesses that its operations to drive PKK-linked militia forces out of their urban footholds in south-east Turkey, combined with its airstrikes against PKK bases in the Qandil mountain range in northern Iraq, are significantly weakening the organisation militarily. Turkish officials also believe that the violence in the south east is diminishing popular support for the PKK among local Kurds, because, in their estimation, some of the group's sympathisers fault it for dragging them into a destructive fight after the relative stability achieved during the cessation of violence from March 2013 to July 2015.

Turkish officials thus view continuing security and military operations as further strengthening the state's hand relative to the PKK, in contrast, as they tell it, to the collapsed peace talks, which they accuse the PKK of having exploited to quietly expand the military entrenchment it now profits from. Not surprisingly, therefore, Ankara's pre-conditions for a return to negotiations appear prohibitive. Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu recently suggested the PKK must disarm or withdraw all armed elements prior to resumption of talks; President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has struck an even less compromising tone, suggesting that PKK fighters must either surrender or be "neutralised".²

Turkey, reeling from a series of suicide bomb attacks since July last year for which both the Islamic State and an apparent PKK faction have appeared responsible, equates the PKK and IS as terrorist organisations. The U.S. and the EU also designate both organisations as terrorist. Turkey's Justice and Development Party (AKP)

¹ The Kurdistan Workers' Party (Partiya Karkarane Kurdistan, PKK), founded by Abdullah Öcalan in 1978, has (in the words of a 2012 Crisis Group report) "spawned a bewildering alphabet soup of entities". Between 2005 and 2007, it created an umbrella organisation, the Union of Communities in Kurdistan (Koma Ciwakên Kürdistan, KCK), containing its affiliates in Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria; the term PKK now technically denotes the Turkey affiliate but in practice is often used to refer to the transnational organisation as a whole (a practice applied in this briefing). The Syrian affiliate technically has several entities (and acronyms), the most important of which are its principal political body, the Democratic Union Party (Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat, PYD), and armed wing, the People's Protection Units (Yekîneyên Parastina Gel, YPG). Officially, the PYD and YPG operate under the leadership of and take ideological inspiration from Öcalan (imprisoned in Turkey since 1999), but are organisationally independent; in practice, Syrian Kurdish PKK cadres with years of service in Qandil (the organisation's northern Iraqi mountain base) dominate the YPG leadership and are the decision-makers within the self-proclaimed "autonomous administration", the broader organisation established to govern areas under its control in November 2013. In short: while PYD and YPG leaders clearly enjoy a degree of tactical autonomy, on strategic matters the integration of PKK, PYD and YPG leadership structures – and the intense discipline and ideological commitment among Qandil-trained cadres – suggest they will continue to function as a single, multi-faceted organisation for the foreseeable future. In any case, because this briefing focuses primarily on military dynamics, it uses YPG as shorthand to refer to the broader organisation's Syria affiliate. Crisis Group interviews and observations, Qamishli, Syria, December 2015, March 2016; see also Crisis Group Middle East Report N°151, *Flight of Icarus? The PYD's Precarious Rise in Syria*, 8 May 2014; and Europe Report N°219, *Turkey: The PKK and a Kurdish Settlement*, 11 September 2012; also Alev Erhan and Aaron Stein, "Mapping 'the Kurds': an Interactive Chart", 15 March 2016, www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/mapping-the-kurds-an-interactive-chart#.

² "Turkish President Erdoğan rules out 'negotiation' with PKK", *Hurriyet Daily News*, 4 April 2016.

governments pursued a policy of rights reforms to help mitigate Kurdish grievances from 2005 onwards, and as recently as one year ago were in a process of on-off negotiations with PKK leader Öcalan and the PKK. Critical reforms such as mother-tongue education and decentralisation have been shelved, elected members of the Kurdish movement have been arrested for making autonomy calls, while security forces in south-eastern Turkey have been accused of human rights violations and operating with impunity.

Ankara's uncompromising stance and Erdoğan's aggressive slide in turn are boosting the PKK's ambition, since it believes they are consolidating its base and reducing Western states' appetite to come to Turkey's aid. The PKK thus shows no sign of acceding to Ankara's demands and indeed, like its opponent, has come to view the conflict as working in its favour. Crisis Group discussions in Syria with Qandil-trained cadres with years of experience in the broader organisation (and who now serve as senior officials in the YPG and its various political fronts) suggest that the PKK and YPG view the current moment as an historic opportunity to advance Kurdish interests. They base this on the YPG's success in asserting control and establishing governance within growing swaths of northern Syria; the U.S.-backing and Western acclaim it has garnered through its fight against IS; and the declining state authority and expanding instability in other parts of Syria.³

Given that assessment, it is no surprise that the PKK is signalling maximalist intentions. A top PKK commander in Qandil, Cemil Bayık, recently told a visiting journalist:

Until recently the war with the Turkish army occurred just in the mountains. Then it moved to towns and cities. Now there will be fighting everywhere. ... At this moment in the struggle, anything our guerillas are ordered to do will be legitimate. ... Our main aim now is the fall of Erdoğan and the AKP [Justice and Development party, the ruling party in Turkey]. We want to bring them down. Unless they fall, Turkey can never be democratic.⁴

When asked about the war in Turkey, a Qandil-trained fighter, currently a senior official in Syria, replied: "The fight will escalate in spring as the mountain snows around Qandil melt and more [PKK] fighters are able to join the battle in [south-east] Turkey. Either that will be sufficient to bring Erdoğan back to the negotiating table, or we will see the fight expand to other regions within Turkey".⁵

B. *Turkey and the YPG*

This same sense of opportunity also encourages the YPG to escalate selectively within Syria, as part of a strategy that balances strengthening its political and military hand with maintaining advantageous relations with the U.S. and Russia. Its top strategic priority – seizing a roughly 90km stretch between two of its enclaves, Afrin, north west of Aleppo, and its holdings east of the Euphrates – is perceived in Ankara as a threat to Turkish interests south of its border with Syria, even though most of that territory now is controlled by IS, a mutual foe. Capturing it would leave Afrin less vulnerable to pressure from the forces that currently surround it: Turkey to its north

³ For an explanation on the role of Qandil-trained cadres in Syria, see fn. 1 above.

⁴ Anthony Lloyd, "Revenge will be ours, pledges Turkey's most wanted man", *The Times* (London), 15 March 2016. Cemil Bayık, a PKK founder, is part of its three-member executive committee.

⁵ Crisis Group interview, Qamishli, March 2016.

and west, opposition factions and IS to the east and pro-regime forces to the south. It would also render YPG holdings in Syria contiguous, removing a key obstacle to the northern federal region it envisions and generally improving its hand at any eventual Syria negotiating table.

Turkey considers this eventuality unacceptable. It fears that additional YPG empowerment and capacity in Syria could further embolden affiliated PKK forces in Turkey and enable the former to expand logistical support to the latter.⁶ It has signalled that any concerted effort toward connecting Afrin with YPG-held territory to the east would cross a “red line” warranting military response. The YPG took a small step in that direction by seizing rebel-held towns north of Aleppo in February 2016, but the U.S. has urged it to refrain from further advance – advice the YPG, for now at least, appears to be heeding.

The roles here of the U.S. and, to a lesser extent, Russia are crucial, as YPG officials appear more concerned with how any step may affect their geopolitical backing than they are by the threat of Turkish escalation. In their view, support from Washington is a game-changer: U.S. military backing reversed IS's momentum just as it was on the verge of capturing the Kurdish town of Kobane in late 2014 and has enabled the YPG to consolidate and expand control throughout much of Syria's north east. A comparable increase in U.S. political support, their thinking goes, would go a long way toward securing a haven for their party and fighters in northern Syria and so be a critical step toward their larger goal of Kurdish autonomy in a decentralised Syria, whether in the context of a broader political resolution or otherwise.

Washington's objection to YPG designs on the territory between Afrin and the Euphrates, however, conflicts with immediate YPG priorities, as does U.S. support for rebel groups around Aleppo with whom the YPG often clashes.⁷ That has opened space for Moscow, whose relations with Turkey have been adversarial since Ankara downed a Russian jet that it accused of violating its airspace on 24 November 2015.⁸ Moscow has taken advantage and developed its own cooperation with Kurdish forces via airstrikes that aid intermittent YPG advances against U.S.- and Turkey-backed rebels north of Aleppo. According to YPG officials, it has floated the prospect of additional military support to help the YPG seize further ground to the east.⁹

Those officials, however, describe the current military support and prospective political backing from Washington as more valuable than what Moscow can offer. As a result, the YPG is aiming for a balance: using Moscow's overtures as leverage with Washington and benefitting from Russian support around Aleppo in fights against

⁶ Crisis Group interview, senior Turkish security official, January 2016; for more on apparent logistical support from YPG-held areas of Syria to PKK operations in Turkey, see Katrin Kuntz, Onur Burçak Belli and Emin Oezmen, “Children of the PKK: the growing intensity of Turkey's civil war”, *Der Spiegel*, 12 February 2016.

⁷ For background on rebel factions in Aleppo and the U.S. role in supporting them, see Crisis Group Middle East Report N°155, *Rigged Cars and Barrel Bombs: Aleppo and the State of the Syrian War*, 9 September 2014. For more on clashes between the YPG, its allies and Aleppo rebel factions, see Sam Heller, “Are CIA-backed Syrian rebels really fighting Pentagon-backed Syrian rebels?”, *War on the Rocks*, 28 March 2016.

⁸ See “An alarming new escalation in the Syria war”, Crisis Group In Pursuit of Peace Blog, 24 November 2015.

⁹ Crisis Group interviews, Qamishli, March 2016.

rebels the U.S. would prefer it avoid, while refraining from a full push across any redline, Ankara's or Washington's, that might jeopardise its diplomatic backing.¹⁰

That balance is delicate. On this front as elsewhere in the transborder conflict, there is real potential for the YPG or PKK to miscalculate – eliciting Turkish escalation, burning bridges with Washington or both. In this context, the relationship between the PKK and YPG deserves emphasis: Turkey views their efforts as strategically and logistically integrated. This means both that escalations in Syria influence Ankara's domestic threat assessment and that it may respond in Syria to operations against it at home. Though Russia's role in northern Syrian skies constrains military options, Ankara still has viable means of escalating against its Kurdish adversaries, including artillery strikes on YPG assets and territory in currently stable areas of Syria's north east.

In its overtures to the YPG, Russia appears to be attempting to outbid the U.S. for influence; insofar as Russian airstrikes and offers of additional support encourage the YPG to escalate against Turkey-backed rebels in Aleppo or to advance between Afrin and the Euphrates, they increase the risk of spiralling violence. More broadly, however, Moscow's partnership with Washington in implementing the "cessation of hostilities" (which has reduced violence in much of the country since 27 February 2016) raises the hope that confluences of interest between the two big powers can contribute toward developing a framework for a viable political settlement.¹¹

In that context, there is some promising overlap between Washington's and Moscow's positions on the YPG and its political front, the PYD (Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat, Democratic Union Party). Both agree that the PYD must ultimately play an integral role in attaining a negotiated settlement in Syria (for now, Turkish objections are blocking it from participating in Geneva talks), and both view some degree of decentralisation within Syria's current borders as a potential means of resolving political and security dilemmas, in Kurdish-majority areas and elsewhere. If Moscow and Ankara avoid further brinkmanship, and Washington can convince Ankara to adjust its approach to its transborder security concerns as discussed below, building upon that political common ground will prove valuable.

C. *The Islamic State Factor*

IS has a clear stake in worsening conflict between Turkey (on one hand) and the PKK and YPG (on the other) and in instability in the region more generally. It moreover has demonstrated the capacity to exacerbate both, by provoking escalation between the PKK and Ankara and carrying out significant attacks in Turkey.

¹⁰ While the "cessation of hostilities" agreement – negotiated by Washington and Moscow and partially observed, with notable breeches daily, by the regime and non-jihadist rebel groups – has significantly reduced violence in much of Syria since 27 February 2016, intermittent clashes between the YPG (and allies in the YPG-dominated Syrian Democratic Forces, SDF) and rebel factions in Aleppo have remained a dangerous flashpoint. YPG forces are within reach of severing the lone remaining supply line to rebel-held areas in the city. YPG sniper-fire along the road has produced civilian casualties; rebels have countered with indiscriminate shelling on the YPG-held neighbourhood of Sheikh Maqsud, resulting in significant civilian casualties, including a reported eighteen killed on 6 April. See "Turkey | Syria: Flash Update – Eastern Aleppo City", UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 25 February 2016, reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/final_aleppo_update_feb._25.pdf; also "18 dead in Syrian rebel shelling on Kurdish area: monitor", Agence France-Presse, 6 April 2016.

¹¹ See Crisis Group Middle East Briefing N°47, *Russia's Choice in Syria*, 29 March 2016.

The group has multiple interests in doing so. The YPG and Turkey are active participants in the fight against it (the former directly on the battlefield, the latter via artillery fire in support of allied rebel groups and enabling U.S. airstrikes from Turkish territory). Insofar as they focus on each other, they divert resources that might be deployed against IS and forego collaboration (if only indirectly) against it: an important advantage, as that cooperation among pro-Turkey rebels, the YPG, and Arab forces allied with the YPG would offer the best prospect of driving IS from territory between Afrin and the Euphrates. IS also views upheaval and erosion of central authorities in the Muslim world generally as an opportunity to broaden and deepen its presence. It has reason to prioritise this in Turkey: geographic proximity and logistical ties to holdings in Syria; a network of operatives there (including Turkish IS members); and the prospect of undermining Erdoğan and the AKP, whose pragmatic, Islamist-inspired politics (whatever their shortcomings) are a more popular alternative to IS's Salafi-jihadism.

These factors suggest IS may seek to further expand and escalate its attacks in Turkey. It may continue attacks that appear aimed at undermining the economy, such as the 12 January 2016 bombing near the heart of Istanbul's tourist attractions and the 19 March 2016 bombing along the city's busiest pedestrian shopping street. It may also carry out attacks designed to exacerbate polarisation by raising tensions along Turkey's ethnic (Turk-Kurd), sectarian (Sunni-Alevi) and cultural fault lines – a tactic the organisation's predecessor employed in Iraq – and thus catalyse a deadly eruption of violence. The IS bombing in Süruç last year already provoked fighting between the PKK and Turkey, though whether by design is unclear;¹² further attacks could lead to more escalation, however, with IS perhaps seeing itself as well positioned to exploit the ensuing chaos.¹³

III. The Danger of Excessive Optimism

If each of these actors – Turkey, the PKK, the YPG and IS – simply follows through on what it already appears inclined to do, violence seems likely to further escalate on multiple fronts. That would entail higher civilian casualties, more destruction in Kurdish areas of Turkey's south east, a significant blow to the Turkish economy and, possibly, instability in areas of western Turkey and north-east Syria that thus far have (mostly) escaped direct armed conflict.

There are many reasons to doubt the optimistic escalation assessments of Ankara and the PKK and YPG camp. Escalation is more likely to bolster support for each among its base than to undermine its opponent among its own; hopes that expanding violence will turn PKK sympathisers against the group or weaken Erdoğan's political dominance are likely vain. What it would do is present opportunities for their mutual foe, IS, which has proven deft at exploiting instability.

¹² PKK-Turkey dynamics had been heading toward escalation during spring and early summer 2015, but an IS attack, perhaps inadvertently, was the spark to the powder keg. The PKK held Ankara responsible for the 20 July 2015 IS bombing targeting Kurdish activists in Süruç and retaliated two days later, claiming responsibility for killing two Turkish policemen. The Turkish military responded against PKK facilities in Qandil, resulting in the collapse of the de facto ceasefire, as PKK-linked militants escalated attacks within Turkey in turn.

¹³ Crisis Group Special Report N°1, *Exploiting Disorder: al-Qaeda and the Islamic State*, 14 March 2016.

Herein lies the challenge for outsiders: Turkish, PKK and YPG officials all believe worsening violence could lift their side's fortunes, at least in the intermediate term. Rising nationalist sentiment among a segment of the Turkish population – an outcome of intensified conflict with the PKK – could bolster Erdoğan's bid for a new constitution strengthening the presidency. By the same token, given the extent to which the YPG has benefitted from the breakdown of central authority in Syria, it is hardly surprising that at least some within the broader organisation's leadership structure view destabilisation in Turkey as advantageous. As a senior official in Syria trained in Qandil put it:

I think Turkey's future will be what Syria looks like now, except [the civil war] will be bigger, more intense. The war could be between Turkey and the PKK, or Turkey and IS, or both. There as elsewhere in the region, if the government doesn't give minorities full rights and allow them to administer themselves, there will be broad revolution. Like in Syria, this will work to the advantage of Kurds.¹⁴

So long as Ankara, the PKK and YPG prefer escalation to concessions, hope that further unravelling can be avoided depends on the lone actor enjoying positive relations and significant potential leverage with both: the U.S.

Washington's task is as unenviable as the trade-offs it faces are substantial. It has had to balance its agenda to "degrade and destroy" IS against dynamics that threaten to further destabilise the broader region – an eventuality that would present new opportunities to IS and other violent groups. Perhaps most salient is the PKK-YPG-Turkey nexus. With the YPG an indispensable partner in the fight against IS, Washington has turned a blind eye to its inconvenient connections and affiliations. It is not surprising that YPG officials deny Turkish charges that they logistically support the PKK, but the public U.S. denial of their links, despite overwhelming evidence, coupled with deepening military support, has heightened Ankara's mistrust of Washington and raised the ceiling of YPG aspirations.¹⁵ Turkish-U.S. tensions are costly, since improved cooperation is a pre-requisite for achieving sustainable gains against IS in much of north-east Syria. But YPG maximalism may prove even more dangerous.

Treating the YPG as independent of the PKK has encouraged the former to believe that it can achieve its dual goal of U.S. military support and political backing even as the latter escalates in Turkey. The broader organisation, therefore, sees an opening to pursue a bigger opportunity – an upheaval that could undermine central authority in Turkey and reshuffle the regional order in the Kurds' favour – without endangering YPG achievements in Syria, and indeed advancing these as well. This assessment appears to misinterpret Washington's position, but mixed messages from the U.S. administration have encouraged that misreading.

Avoiding the perilous escalation that the conflict's current trajectory entails will require a U.S. effort to change calculations both in Ankara and within the PKK-YPG camp regarding the balance of costs and benefits that would result from turning toward an Ankara-PKK political track as compared with those of the status quo. Two

¹⁴ Crisis Group interview, Qamishli, March 2016.

¹⁵ As State Department Deputy Spokesman Mark Toner put it on 22 February 2016, "[w]hat we've said, and we've said this last week as well and our policy has not changed, is that we believe the YPG is not affiliated with the PKK". www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/dpb/2016/02/253123.htm. For a summary of publicly available evidence, see Sam Heller, "PKK Links, Nusra Parallels Make Syrian Kurds a Troubling U.S. Partner", *World Politics Review*, 14 March 2016.

policy adjustments by Washington could open a path to accomplish that: first, shifting emphasis from combating IS toward the broader goal of avoiding further destabilisation from which IS benefits; and secondly, sending unambiguous and consistent signals to the PKK and YPG – whose unity, or at least the likelihood of their close cooperation and coordination, it should acknowledge – that Washington will stand by its NATO partner and strategic ally as long as the PKK maintains an armed struggle against it.

Doing so would have costs, particularly constraining U.S. ability to work with the YPG, a potent tactical ally against IS, but the advantages for the region's stability could be significant.¹⁶ To start, it could enhance influence with both sides. Signalling to the YPG that Washington prioritises regional stability above immediate gains against IS could encourage the organisation not to take its preferred backer's support for granted; that would give Washington more leverage, since the YPG views the U.S. as key to guaranteeing its long-term political role in Syria. It would also send an important signal to Ankara: that Washington is prepared to take its transborder security concerns seriously. But the U.S. should link that message with a firm indication that its capacity to do so effectively is contingent upon Ankara initiating a meaningful push to return to negotiations.

IV. Conclusion

The current approaches of Turkey, the PKK and the YPG seem to entail higher risks and lower prospects of reward than their officials appear to assess, as well as grave potential costs for civilians. Each would be better served by refraining from further escalation and opening space for resuming talks. The U.S., which enjoys unique, significant leverage and working relations with both sides, albeit via the YPG, rather than PKK leaders in Qandil, has a clear interest in nudging them toward that path. Doing so could open new avenues for coordination against IS and, perhaps more importantly, reduce danger of added destabilisation.

Ultimately a durable solution should include an end to hostilities between the PKK and Turkey, constitutional reforms ensuring full democratic rights for Turkey's Kurdish population and a negotiated settlement of the broader Syrian war, including some sort of decentralised political and security arrangements. Progress down those long roads could begin with immediate steps:

- The PKK and Turkey should refrain from further escalation and reopen communication, quietly if necessary. At minimum, both should refrain from increasing violence. The PKK should not expand trenches in the south east, make autonomy declarations or conduct attacks elsewhere, including bombings in western cities. That would remove the need for Turkey to declare additional curfews in Kurdish areas; Ankara should also refrain from escalating in Syria or areas of Turkey already under curfew and should take additional measures to ensure humanitarian protection of and provision for civilians.¹⁷ Simultaneously, it should quietly reopen communication with Abdullah Öcalan, who despite his imprisonment

¹⁶ Crisis Group has argued for slowing the U.S.-led coalition's military operations against IS to allow political preparations for the day-after to catch up. Crisis Group Report, *Exploiting Disorder*, op. cit.

¹⁷ For more on curfews and associated Crisis Group recommendations, see Crisis Group Europe Briefing N°80, *The Human Cost of the PKK Conflict in Turkey: The Case of Sur*, 17 March 2016.

wields potentially decisive influence within the PKK's transnational organisation. Once it has initiated contact, Turkey should also enable resumed communication between Öcalan, Qandil and representatives of the HDP (the Kurdish movement's legal political party), which will be necessary if Öcalan is to push the organisation back to a political track.

- The U.S. should use its influence and leverage to shape expectations, temper hubris and address fears on both sides. At least in private, it should unify and clarify its messaging, which has not been understood by many actors in the field, in part because it has not been consistent: that regardless of how the PKK and YPG leaderships portray their relationship, the U.S. will hold both accountable for the actions of either on both sides of the Syrian-Turkish border. The U.S. reluctance to publicly affirm the unity of the two is understandable in light of its domestic constraints, since linking the YPG to a group listed as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) would mean the loss of a valued partner against IS. But political hoops the U.S. has to jump through at home have policy consequences in northern Syria and Turkey, where many still hold out hope – and others fear – that the U.S. will invest more and more deeply in its alliance with the YPG, its ties to the PKK notwithstanding, enabling both to achieve their objectives without the necessary compromise.
- The U.S. should emphasise its commitment to the security of Turkey's border, including the principle that YPG-held territory should not be used in support of PKK insurgent activity within Turkey. It should also stress to the YPG that it, and its allies within the YPG-dominated Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), should avoid further confrontation with Turkey-backed, anti-IS rebels in Aleppo and refrain from any further advance west of the Euphrates until a framework for seizing and administering that area is agreed with Turkey and its rebel allies (see below). Concomitantly the US should reaffirm its support for a role for the YPG and its political front, the PYD, within a united, pluralistic Syria.
- Turkey should formulate a concrete reform agenda to address Kurdish demands on rights and enable free public debate on controversial issues such as decentralisation, so that confidence in the viability of political solutions is restored among the constituencies of the Kurdish movement in Turkey

These steps, vital to the region's security in the short term, could have long-term benefits. Though challenges are substantial, stabilising the Syria-Turkish border region would ultimately help the protagonists mount a more effective campaign against IS. They all agree on the ultimate necessity of driving IS from its territory between Marea (east of Afrin) and the Euphrates, but at present a cooperative division of labour – among YPG/SDF, Turkey-backed rebels, Turkey and the U.S. – is impossible, since each, except perhaps the U.S., at present is more afraid of one of its potential partners than of IS. An alliance could be consolidated only if each came to believe that its broader interests were likely to be secured in the day-after dispensation. That could include arrangements for a corridor enabling secure YPG transport between Afrin and YPG-held areas east of the Euphrates, while handing control of the surrounding territory to a combination of Turkey-backed rebels (which could control the border with Turkey) and SDF components allied with the YPG (which could secure the YPG's transport corridor).

Such a deal could deliver a significant blow to IS and establish a model for positive-sum arrangements in sensitive, contested parts of northern Syria. But it will not happen unless the YPG, PKK and Turkey, with U.S. help, first adjust course to stabilise their own relations.

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Appendix A: Map of Syria



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