

To Avoid a Syrian Quagmire: Turkish-American Compromise and Cooperation

Written by Michael Goodyear

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2018/06/01/to-avoid-a-syrian-quagmire-turkish-american-compromise-and-cooperation/>

MICHAEL GOODYEAR, JUN 1 2018

On May 5, Polat Urundul responded to my earlier piece on the “Subaltern States” blog in which I argued that Afrin served as a catalyst for Turkish expansion in Syria, an attack on Syrian Kurds, and necessitated negotiations between the United States, Turkey, and the Kurds to rectify the conflict. Mr. Urundul contended that Operation Olive Branch (*Zeytin Dalı Harekati*), the Turkish campaign against the mostly Kurdish Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in northern Syria, is about protecting the security of Turkey and Turkish interests in Syria, and that American and Turkish interests are similarly aligned in the Syrian Civil War. This current piece will demonstrate that (1) Operation Olive Branch does not actually protect Turkish interests; (2) occupying Syrian land creates more issues than it solves; and (3) while the current situation undermines American-Turkish relations, a partnership is the best option for both countries and the SDF.

Turkey launched Operation Euphrates Shield (*Fırat Kalkanı Harekati*) against the Islamic State in 2016, Urundul notes, in part because of an Islamic State terrorist attack at a Kurdish wedding in Turkey. Ironically, the brunt of Turkish military intervention has shifted in the past few months against the mostly Kurdish People’s Protection Units (YPG), which makes up a significant portion of the SDF. The latter controls most of northern Syria. This move on Turkey’s part culminated in the Turkish-backed capture of the SDF stronghold of Afrin.

As Mr. Urundul points out, there are connections between the YPG and the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) in Turkey. However, this isn’t as a military or terrorist threat to Turkey itself. It seems likely that Turkey’s main fear in this regard is any sort of Kurdish independence in the Middle East, which could embolden its own sizeable Kurdish minority. Kurds comprise 20% of the population of Turkey. This same concern is likely the reason Turkey strongly denounced the Iraqi Kurds’ independence referendum in September 2017. The Kurds also serve as a scapegoat for Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who appears to be using a “rally ‘round the flag” tactic to bolster support.

However, Turkey’s fight against the Syrian Kurds actually undermines its other objectives in Syria. Erdoğan has explicitly said that Bashar al-Assad must go, yet by weakening the SDF, the largest power in Syria after Assad, Turkey is removing any serious counterweight against the Assad regime. In addition, by weakening the SDF and forcing SDF forces on the defensive, the Islamic State, or another radical group, gains an opportunity to enter into the breach. Turkey is backing groups that make up the anti-government forces in Syria, but these groups are weakened and divided and have been repeatedly pushed back by Assad. At this point, it is extremely unlikely that they could succeed against Assad. Turkish backing of the anti-government forces while destroying the SDF foreshadows a long and bitter endgame where Turkish support will keep the anti-government forces alive, but they will never be strong enough to overthrow Assad. Turkey is likely using its position to leverage its own influence when the Syrian Civil War finally ends. In fact, one side effect of the Turkish intervention in Syria may be greater regional authority for Turkey. However, by undermining its own goals against Assad and the Islamic State, Turkey may leave itself with few real options in Syria in the end.

Turkey has now carved out a sizeable bridgehead in northern Syria that is occupied by Turkish forces. Turkey can certainly use its weight to gain an important seat at the table once the dust settles, but it also needs to be able to extricate itself. Territorial conquest is problematic under current international law, and it is unclear how others would

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respond if Turkey were to stay in Syria. As Mr. Urundul noted, Turkey can resettle some of its 3.5 million refugees in northern Syria. However, that raises questions about whether Turkey violates its international law obligation of non-refoulement, not sending refugees back to their country of origin where they face persecution. On the other hand, if Turkish forces retreat from Syria, Assad or Islamic State troops can reoccupy the territory, the exact opposite of what Turkey wants for Syria.

Perhaps the best route would be for Turkey to cease its onslaught against the YPG and instead focus on meeting its objectives against Assad. Mr. Urundul argued that Turkish interests are aligned with the United States, and at least in terms of removing Assad and defeating the Islamic State, this is true. However, while Afrin was the catalyst for worsening American-Turkish relations, Manbij may very well prove to be the final breaking point. American and allied troops have remained in Manbij, despite Turkey making it clear that Manbij is its next target. Unlike previous flashpoints between the United States and Turkey, the current leaders of both countries tend to be much more obstinate.

The American-Turkish relationship has generally been a positive one since the early 19th century, when the United States established diplomatic relations with Turkey's predecessor, the Ottoman Empire. The structure is in place for continued collaboration and goodwill between the two countries. Both countries have an interest in maintaining good relations with the other. If Syria is to not become a long-lasting quagmire for Turkey, the Turkish government must create a convincing argument for the removal of Assad; a joint-proposal by the United States and Turkey and a strong SDF counterweight to Assad are essential for this, especially considering that Assad is backed by Russia and Iran. The United States, meanwhile, needs a powerful ally in the region, and Turkey is one of the states that has traditionally held this spot. Although the Syrian Kurds are a thorn in American-Turkish relations, negotiation and compromise between both governments and the SDF is the best path forward for the United States, Turkey, and anti-Assad forces.

About the author:

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