



Prospects for a Deal to Stabilise Syria's North East

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Principal Findings

What's new? In March 2018, President Donald Trump announced his intention to withdraw U.S. forces from north-eastern Syria and suspended stabilisation funding for the area. His senior foreign policy advisers provided somewhat discordant views. These confused messages from Washington have added uncertainty to an already volatile situation.

Why does it matter? A precipitous U.S. pullout from north-eastern Syria could unleash competing forces as they scramble for advantage. These include the U.S.-supported People's Protection Units (YPG), a Kurdish group, the regime of Bashar al-Assad, backed by its allies, and Turkey. Without a prior negotiated agreement, the risk of escalating conflict could rise.

What should be done? The best chance at averting chaos in north-eastern Syria is through decentralisation negotiated among the YPG, Damascus and Ankara, backed by Washington and Moscow. Washington should neither withdraw precipitously nor wed its presence to countering Iran. It should instead provide the YPG the time, space and leverage needed for negotiations.

Executive Summary

The war in Syria's north east is entering a new phase. Offensives against the Islamic State (ISIS) are winding down and tensions among external powers are heating up, as President Bashar al-Assad looks to restore his writ. For much of the last seven years, this region has been among the safest in the country; increasingly, however, it appears combustible, as the U.S. threatens to pull out its military personnel and competing powers prime themselves to take advantage. The best chance for avoiding new conflagration is through an agreement on decentralised governance in Syria's north east that accounts for the security concerns of neighbouring Turkey. Washington and Moscow should help their respective allies in the Syrian war achieve such an arrangement before U.S. troops depart.

Since 2014, various campaigns against ISIS have upended the geopolitical balance in the north east. With U.S. support, a Kurdish organisation called the People's Protection Units (YPG), along with subordinate local allies, captured all but a sliver of what was once a swathe of ISIS-controlled Syrian territory east of the Euphrates river. As a result, the YPG (linked to the Kurdistan Workers' Party or PKK, which continues a decades-long insurgency against the Turkish state), now holds nearly 30 per cent of Syria, including most of its oil, much of its border with Turkey and vast Arab-majority areas. YPG gains since 2015 spurred Turkish military intervention, first against ISIS in border areas abutting YPG control, and earlier this year against the YPG itself in the north-western enclave of Afrin. Meanwhile, the Assad regime, with strong backing from Russia and Iran, seized ISIS-held areas west of the Euphrates.

Among this array of external players in and adjacent to Syria's north east, the U.S. stands out as pivotal. It provides stability, because it helps restore essential services in areas taken from ISIS and deters further Turkish or Assad regime military action. It also introduces volatility, because Washington's messages about its intentions are so ambiguous. Depending on the day and who is talking, the Trump administration may signal that it aims to leave Syria soon or to remain there indefinitely, unless and until Iran dramatically reduces its regional power projection. Or anything in between.

Along that spectrum of potential policies, extremes on either end appear especially risky. Directly applying the U.S. presence in Syria as a tool against Iran may encourage Tehran to support insurgent attacks as a means of pressing the U.S. to withdraw, much as it did in Iraq. On the other hand, exiting precipitously could plunge north-eastern Syria into a new war, with Ankara, Damascus, Tehran's militia allies or some combination thereof attempting to seize territory and resources from a newly exposed YPG. The resulting chaos could prove costly for all of these players and allow ISIS or other jihadists to reassert themselves.

Some U.S. officials quietly hope that recently launched discussions between Damascus and the YPG's political umbrella, the Syrian Democratic Council, will lead to an agreement averting a violent post-withdrawal free-for-all. Yet several factors suggest this outcome is unlikely, at least at present.

First, on the central questions of how and by whom north-eastern Syria should be governed, huge gaps separate the minimum the YPG is willing to accept from the maximum Damascus is prepared to concede. The YPG insists on constitutional revi-

sions that would grant the north east considerable autonomy, including responsibility for local security. Damascus, however, has made clear that it intends to reassert its overall control, including in the security sector. It is willing to discuss smaller-scale reforms but not the substantive local autonomy the YPG demands.

Secondly, Damascus believes time is on its side, thanks to its military gains elsewhere and the prospect of an early, unconditional U.S. withdrawal. So long as it expects a chance to impose all its demands by force, it has little reason to make big, long-term concessions. For its part, the YPG insists it would defend itself against regime attack rather than surrender as opposition forces have elsewhere in Syria. In the meantime, however, it too remains optimistic that Washington's position will ultimately shift in its favour.

Thirdly, even were the YPG and Damascus to reach an agreement, Turkey might see reason to intervene militarily if a swift U.S. withdrawal left north-eastern Syria up for grabs. Ankara strongly dislikes the status quo but also seeks to avoid two alternative scenarios: most crucially a YPG-Damascus deal that cloaks PKK-linked forces in the flag of the Syrian state, but also a military advance by Damascus and its allies that expands the influence of Iran-linked Shiite militias along Turkey's southern border. In theory, Russia, whose influence would increase after a U.S. departure, could deter repeats of the Afrin operation; in practice, as seen in Afrin, Moscow's geopolitical priorities potentially may dissuade it from doing so.

In sum: tying an open-ended U.S. presence to an ambitious counter-Iran agenda is dangerous, while unconditionally withdrawing could set off a mad scramble for dominance. Either scenario presents risks and costs for all concerned.

The surest route to a better outcome is through reaching an agreement between the YPG and Damascus on decentralised governance that is also tolerable to Ankara, prior to a gradual and conditional U.S. withdrawal. It could include a restoration of the Syrian state's control over the northern border; devolution of local security in the north east (apart from the border itself) to the YPG-linked forces currently exercising local control; the official incorporation of those forces within the Syrian state; and a return of the state's civil administrative institutions. Some de facto guarantees from both Washington and Moscow likely would help reach an understanding and avert a new eruption of violence. Proactive U.S. engagement may also be necessary to encourage additional steps by the YPG to assuage Ankara's concerns and thus reduce risk of Turkish military action.

Brussels/Ankara/Washington, 5 September 2018

Prospects for a Deal to Stabilise Syria's North East

I. Introduction

Between 2015 and 2018, the Democratic Union Party (Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat, PYD) and its military wing, the People's Protection Units (Yekîneyên Parastina Gel, YPG), greatly expanded their zone of control in Syria's north east, far beyond the majority-Kurdish areas they have governed since 2012. Harnessing air and special forces support from the U.S., the YPG-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) seized from the Islamic State (ISIS) nearly all the territory the jihadists had controlled east of the Euphrates river, including Syria's most significant oil fields, in addition to the cities of Manbij and Tabqa on the river's western bank.

The YPG/PYD's competitors responded. Turkey launched two successful offensives into northern Syria, in cooperation with Syrian rebel allies: against ISIS in 2016, in order to block the YPG's path to connecting its north-eastern holdings to the north-western enclave of Afrin; and into Afrin itself in early 2018, expelling the YPG and establishing Turkish control. For its part, the Syrian regime accelerated operations against ISIS in 2017. With air support from Russia and help from Iran-backed militias on the ground, the regime raced to seize the territory ISIS controlled west of the Euphrates.

The YPG/PYD's zone of control in north-eastern Syria is large but vulnerable, as seen in the loss of Afrin. The presence of U.S. forces deters attacks from Ankara or Damascus. But with U.S.-backed offensives against ISIS winding down and amid conflicting signals from Washington about the objectives and duration of its role in Syria, the future appears uncertain – and potentially bloody.

This report analyses a new phase of the conflict in north-eastern Syria. It addresses the rising danger of violent escalation and concludes with recommendations for structuring negotiations to avert it. It is based primarily on research conducted in Syria and Turkey, including eight visits to north-eastern Syria between December 2015 and July 2018. It also incorporates research conducted in Washington, Moscow and Beirut, and builds on Crisis Group's five previous reports and briefings on Syria's north east.

II. The (De)Stabilisation Phase

A. U.S. Policy Before and After Trump's Announced Shift

In unscripted remarks during a 30 March 2018 speech, to the effect that the U.S. would leave Syria “like, very soon”, and in subsequent meetings with his national security staff, President Donald Trump signalled a departure from the Syria policy his administration had announced just two months prior. Though its continuing applicability is uncertain, that policy's core elements represented points of relative consensus among key officials before recent staffing changes in the U.S. administration. These points may continue to be pillars of U.S. policy if the president decides to change tack once more.¹

1. Balancing priorities

As outlined in a 17 January speech by then-Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, the Syria policy rolled out in early 2018 centred on a U.S. intention to remain indefinitely in areas it helped the Kurdish-led SDF take from ISIS in northern and eastern Syria. It depicted this presence as aimed primarily at enabling operations against what remains of ISIS and at stabilising the captured areas so as to prevent the jihadists' return. Toward those ends, the U.S. would continue to train local forces (now with a focus on holding territory and policing) and would increase other forms of “stabilisation” assistance – including removal of explosives and rubble, restoration of basic services and coordination with local governance bodies. Notably, however, the policy also called for applying the U.S. presence toward other objectives: achieving a broader political transition in Syria, including Bashar al-Assad's departure, and containing Iranian influence.²

The administration's policy rollout was complicated by clumsy messaging and heightened anger in both Ankara and the pro-regime camp – for distinct reasons.³

¹ At time of publication, it was still unclear how the replacements of Secretary of State Rex Tillerson with Mike Pompeo and of National Security Advisor H. R. McMaster with John Bolton, as well as the appointment of new State Department officials handling the Syria portfolio, would affect the U.S. approach to the war.

² Tillerson's speech is available at www.youtube.com/watch?v=8BTnSluteEA. See also Acting Assistant Secretary of State David Satterfield's 11 January 2018 testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. Crisis Group interviews and communications, U.S. and YPG/PYD officials, Washington and northern Syria, January–March 2018. The policy's public rollout was preceded by months of discussion inside the administration; senior U.S. officials articulated key points in preceding weeks. The policy conveyed the administration's approach to a new phase following the conclusion of major operations against ISIS, including some of the challenges outlined in Crisis Group's Middle East Briefing N°53, *Fighting ISIS: The Road to and beyond Raqqa*, 28 April 2017. One month after his speech, Tillerson announced an additional \$200 million in U.S. support to help stabilise areas in Syria captured from ISIS; this funding was frozen by President Trump in March 2018. See Felicia Schwartz, “Trump freezes funds for Syrian recovery, signaling pullback”, *Wall Street Journal*, 30 March 2018.

³ On 13 January 2018, a U.S. military spokesperson used the term “Border Security Force” in reference to SDF personnel and local recruits receiving training and other support from the U.S.-led coalition to secure SDF-held areas in the Euphrates river valley and along the Turkish and Iraqi borders. Given Ankara's continuing anger over Washington's support for the YPG and SDF, the suggestion

The SDF's core component – the People's Protection Units (YPG) – retains deep organisational, personal and ideological links to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which continues a decades-long insurgency against the Turkish state; Turkey, the U.S. and European Union (EU) designate it a terrorist organisation. Ankara had hoped Washington would wind down support for the SDF after capturing Raqqa and other towns held by ISIS.⁴ For their part, Damascus and its key backers, Iran and Russia, view an indefinite U.S. military presence as a strategic threat, given the stated aims of achieving Assad's departure and containing Iranian influence.⁵ Just three days after Tillerson's speech, Turkish and allied Syrian rebel forces launched an offensive against the YPG in Afrin (see below); both Turkey and Russia described the attack as a consequence of the newly announced U.S. policy.⁶ Notably, since the U.S. announcement, north-eastern Syria has also witnessed an escalation in unattributed assassination attempts against figures within and allied to the SDF; the most significant of these killed a key official responsible for building local governance bodies in Raqqa and other Arab-majority areas captured from ISIS.⁷

that the U.S. would now enable and legitimise these groups' control of the Turkey-Syria border added insult to injury. See Joanne Stocker, "Coalition retraining 15,000 veteran SDF fighters to serve as Syrian border force", *Defense Post*, 13 January 2018. See also "New U.S.-backed 'border force' in Syria infuriates Ankara, Damascus", Reuters, 15 January 2018. The Trump administration later clarified that its support aimed to enhance the capacity of local forces to secure areas captured from ISIS, not to establish a "new 'army' or conventional 'border guard' force". See U.S. Department of Defense, press release No: NR-013-18, 17 January 2018. See also Liz Sly, "U.S. backpedals on new Kurdish force as Turkey prepares for war", *Washington Post*, 18 January 2018.

⁴ For background on the PKK and YPG, and Turkey's policy toward the latter's role in Syria, see Crisis Group Middle East Report N° 176, *The PKK's Fateful Choice in Northern Syria*, 4 May 2017, and Crisis Group Middle East Briefing N° 49, *Steps Toward Stabilising Syria's Northern Border*, 8 April 2016.

⁵ As Iranian President Hassan Rouhani put it: "The new plan that the Americans have in mind for Syria is a violation of international laws and a plot against the sovereignty and security of Syria and the region". Reuters, 16 January 2018. See also the 18 January statement from the Syrian foreign ministry, available at sana.sy/en/?p=124718; and "Exclusive: US special forces 'operating illegally in Syria', Sergey Lavrov tells Euronews", Euronews, 16 February 2018.

⁶ The messy U.S. policy rollout was not the primary factor motivating the Turkish attack, but may have helped catalyse it. Turkey's threats and preparations to attack Afrin began prior to the aforementioned 13 January "border security force" comment, but escalated and accelerated immediately thereafter. Tillerson's 17 January speech outlining broader U.S. Syria policy, a meeting with his Turkish counterpart and public statements released by the Trump administration walking back the border force reference failed to appease Ankara, which sent the Turkish military chief of staff and head of intelligence to Moscow on 18 January to secure its acquiescence in an offensive. See Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's comments on Afrin on 15 January and 20 February 2018, available at <http://tass.com/politics/985100> and www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/3086927. See also "Erdogan says Turkey must clear Syria's Afrin of YPG militia", Reuters, 17 November 2017.

⁷ That official, Omar Alloush, played a central role in establishing the local governing councils in Tel Abyadh, Manbij and Raqqa, serving as a critical link between the YPG/PYD power structure and local council members and notables. Crisis Group observations, north-eastern Syria, March 2017-January 2018. He was assassinated in his home in Tel Abyadh the night of 14 March 2018. Other local and SDF officials targeted in 2018 by assassination attempts in Arab-majority areas controlled by the SDF include Ibrahim Hassan, a prominent member of the Raqqa civil council seriously injured in an assassination attempt on 11 January; and Shervan Derwish, spokesperson for the

As Turkey gained ground against the YPG in Afrin, it ratcheted up pressure on Washington by threatening to expand its operations to Manbij, a contested SDF-held city west of the Euphrates which the U.S. helped capture from ISIS in 2016 and where it continues to maintain a military presence. A Turkish attack on Manbij would take the crisis between NATO allies to new heights and could create major humanitarian, political and security problems inside the U.S. zone of influence in Syria.⁸

Rather than allow tensions to spiral, Washington took steps to improve its relations with Turkey, or at least mitigate damage. Its reaction to the Afrin offensive was muted: statements of concern and criticism, but no real pressure.⁹ Instead, the U.S. focused on preventing a follow-up Turkish offensive against Manbij; it emphasised its military presence in the city as a deterrent, but also launched negotiations with Ankara to address some of Turkey's concerns in Manbij, including an unmet 2016 U.S. commitment that the YPG would withdraw from the city following ISIS's defeat there.¹⁰ On 4 June 2018, the two sides announced a "roadmap" for defining and implementing agreed-upon governance and security arrangements in Manbij, though at the time of publication key details remained unresolved.¹¹

Manbij Military Council wounded in an assassination attempt in March. The parties responsible for these attempts remain unclear; local officials and analysts active in north-eastern Syria suspect they may be connected to destabilisation efforts backed (separately) by Ankara and Damascus; ISIS cells are another possible culprit. Crisis Group interviews and communications, January-May 2018. For additional background, see Ammar Hamou, Mohammad Abdulsattar Ibrahim and Tariq Adely, "Leading Raqqa official dies amidst string of assassinations", *Syria Direct*, 2 May 2018.

⁸ The U.S. sphere of influence encompasses SDF-held territory in north-eastern and eastern Syria; U.S. support and assurances never extended to SDF-held Afrin in Syria's north west. Along much of this territory, the Euphrates serves as the dividing "de-confliction" line between areas where the U.S. military and air force are active (east of the river) and those where Russia maintains a presence and controls the skies (west of the river). Turkey also emphasises the importance of the Euphrates as a dividing line; prior to its direct military interventions, it looked to Washington to contain the YPG east of the river, fearing that westward gains would eventually enable the YPG to establish a contiguous belt of control along the border linking the north east to Afrin. In that context, Ankara initially opposed Washington's decision to support the SDF offensive against ISIS-controlled Manbij, a diverse Arab-majority city west of the river. Turkey eventually reluctantly acquiesced, however, and received in return assurances from the Obama administration that the YPG would withdraw to the eastern bank and leave Manbij under local control following ISIS's defeat there. That pledge was never fully nor meaningfully implemented, and the YPG has maintained control in cooperation with local partners. The Manbij question has remained a sore spot in Turkey-U.S. relations ever since, with the former periodically threatening to attack and the latter deploying U.S. personnel to deter Turkish military action. For background, see Crisis Group Briefing, *Fighting ISIS: The Road to and beyond Raqqa* and Crisis Group Report, *The PKK's Fateful Choice in Northern Syria*, both op. cit. See also Colin Kahl, "The United States and Turkey are on a collision course in Syria", *Foreign Policy*, 12 May 2017.

⁹ Crisis Group interviews, U.S. officials, Washington, February 2018. See, for example, State Department spokesperson Heather Nauert's statement on 21 January 2018.

¹⁰ See Karen DeYoung, "Biden warns Kurds not to seek separate enclave on Turkish-Syrian border", *Washington Post*, 24 August 2016.

¹¹ The roadmap lays out several phases, to be negotiated in detail and implemented step by step. It includes a tentative timeline for doing so, but it stipulates (at U.S. insistence) that actual implementation be subject to conditions on the ground. Crucial details concerning the ultimate shape of local governance have yet to be determined, but the most likely result is that Manbij's military and civil councils will be modified (and potentially rebranded) to exclude YPG/PYD cadres (especially those

The initial reasoning behind Washington's measured approach to Afrin and Manbij was clear: achieving the administration's goals in Syria (as laid out in Tillerson's speech) would require both continued support for the SDF and a rehabilitation of U.S. relations with Ankara. Washington sees partnership with the SDF as necessary for pursuing operations against ISIS remnants, guarding against jihadist resurgence in "liberated" areas, and maintaining control over resources and territory east of the Euphrates in order to prevent Iran-backed gains there and thus keep leverage in eventual negotiations with the pro-regime camp.¹²

At the same time, Washington considers cooperation with Ankara imperative. Tensions between the two soared in August 2018, as Trump raised economic pressure on Ankara after a round of negotiations failed to win the release of a U.S. pastor imprisoned in Turkey.¹³ While the outcome of that multifaceted spat was unclear at the time of publication, both sides should have ample incentives to avoid a vicious cycle and resume efforts to repair ties. For Washington, these include the fact that Turkey's influence in northern Syria makes its cooperation essential to containing (let alone resolving) the Syrian conflict, and to weakening the strong jihadist pres-

not from Manbij) and incorporate some of Turkey's allies from Manbij currently residing elsewhere. The roadmap's first phases focused on establishing a joint U.S.-Turkey patrol mechanism; at the time of publication, Turkish and U.S. forces had begun parallel, coordinated patrols on either side of the line separating Turkey-backed Euphrates Shield forces from SDF-controlled Manbij, and were preparing for eventual combined patrols. Next on the agenda is a vetting process defining who from the YPG/PYD camp will be excluded from local governance bodies and security forces, and which of Turkey's allies from Manbij will be permitted to join. At the time of publication all sides (Turkey, the U.S. and the YPG/PYD, which is not directly involved in negotiations) appeared reasonably comfortable with how talks were progressing. But major stumbling blocks remain, as the YPG/PYD expects to retain more influence upon and access to Manbij than Turkey may accept. Crisis Group interviews, U.S., Turkish and YPG/PYD officials, Washington, Ankara and northern Syria, June-July 2018.

¹² YPG/PYD leaders and some Trump administration officials view the SDF's control over a majority of Syria's oil as significant leverage over cash-strapped Damascus, especially when combined with the U.S. and EU's current insistence on conditioning reconstruction funding on the implementation of a political resolution in accordance with UN Security Council Resolution 2254. Crisis Group interviews, north-east Syria and Washington, September 2017-February 2018. For background on thinking within some quarters of the U.S. administration, see Michael Weiss and Hassan Hassan, "Here's what the Trump administration is really plotting in Syria", *The Daily Beast*, 3 April 2018. The UN Security Council adopted Resolution 2254 in December 2015. It is the primary document defining the mandate of the UN special envoy's efforts to facilitate a negotiated end to the conflict. It calls for establishment of a transitional governing body, drafting of a new constitution and UN-supervised elections (including diaspora voting); in practice, however, emphasis on a transitional governing body faded as the regime gained a military upper hand. The special envoy's current focus is on initiating negotiations on the constitution. Notably, Turkey has been successful thus far in blocking the YPG/PYD/SDF from participating in the UN-led process. The resolution is available at <https://www.un.org/press/en/2015/sc12171.doc.htm>.

¹³ On 1 August, the Trump administration sanctioned and froze the assets of the Turkish justice and interior ministers, citing their roles in the arrest and detention of American pastor Andrew Brunson. On 10 August, Trump increased tariffs on Turkish aluminium and steel products to 20 and 50 per cent, respectively. These actions exacerbated existing Turkish economic problems. The Turkish Lira plummeted, losing nearly 40 per cent of its value between January and August 2018. See Natasha Turka, "Turkish lira recovers sharply against the dollar after record nosedive", CNBC, 14 August 2018.

ence in Idlib in a manner that averts a surge of refugees, including fighters, toward Europe.¹⁴ Turkey also remains important to U.S. geopolitical interests; Washington seeks its cooperation in containing Iranian influence, and wants to avoid a Turkish drift toward Moscow.¹⁵ Addressing those U.S. interests in theory would require improved U.S.-Turkish cooperation, while further deterioration in relations present opportunities for additional Iranian and Russian gains, including by driving a stake into NATO's internal cohesion.

2. The Trump factor

Following Trump's repeated assertions that U.S. forces should withdraw from Syria and amid significant turnover in the administration's national security staff, it has become difficult to determine how much of the policy approach outlined above remains relevant.¹⁶ Trump's 30 March suggestion that the U.S. would quickly leave Syria raised alarm throughout his administration; key officials who have sparred on other aspects of Syria policy appear united in viewing an accelerated withdrawal as unwise, and have advised Trump to reconsider.¹⁷

¹⁴ Syria's northern border with Turkey is the country's longest; transit across it is vital to the Syrian economy and – before Turkey tightened controls in 2016 – was central to refugee flows toward Europe and jihadist movement to and from Syria. Turkey now holds some contiguous Syrian territory through its interventions in Afrin and the area northeast of Aleppo, and (in cooperation with Russia) has helped deter regime attack on adjacent rebel-held areas through its deployment of military observers ringing rebel-held Idlib (see below); within these territories and in Turkey itself live nearly one third of the Syrian population. (An estimated 2.9 million people live in rebel-held greater Idlib, and more than 796,000 live in the Turkish-dominated Afrin and Euphrates Shield areas. Ankara reports that more than 3.5 million Syrian refugees currently reside in Turkey. Together, these add up to roughly 7.2 million, compared to an estimated pre-war Syrian population of 22 million.) See figures from Mercy Corps' Humanitarian Access Team, <https://humanitarianaccessteam.org/population-data>; refugee figures from the Turkish government are available at www.goc.gov.tr/icerik6/temporary-protection_915_1024_4748_icerik.

¹⁵ See "Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America", U.S. Department of Defense, available at www.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf.

¹⁶ Trump fired Tillerson on 13 March 2018; Pompeo replaced him on 26 April. Trump replaced H. R. McMaster with John Bolton as national security advisor on 22 March. Openings in key State Department positions relevant to Syria have added to the uncertainty and further constrained U.S. policy; at the time of publication, the State Department did not have a confirmed assistant secretary for Near East affairs or an ambassador to Turkey. In August 2018, James Jeffrey was appointed to the newly created position of "representative for Syria engagement", and Joel Rayburn began as the new special envoy for Syria and deputy assistant secretary for the Levant. Jeffrey, Rayburn and David Schenker, the administration's unconfirmed nominee for assistant secretary for Near East affairs, appear to share the Trump administration's expressed priority of containing Iranian influence in the region. Jeffrey has publicly advocated maintaining the U.S. presence in the north east while improving cooperation with Ankara, as a means to obstruct potential Iranian reinforcement routes to Syria and raise pressure on Damascus and its allies to negotiate. See James Jeffrey, "The 2011 U.S. Withdrawal from Iraq: Relevance for Syria Today", The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 8 May 2018.

¹⁷ Crisis Group interviews, U.S. officials, Washington, April 2018. See also Elise Labott and Kevin Liptak, "Trump gets testy as national security team warns of risks of Syria withdrawal", CNN, 5 April 2018.

According to U.S. officials, in a 3 April meeting with his top national security staff Trump stopped short of ordering an explicit timeline for U.S. withdrawal. But he made clear that he wants the U.S. to leave Syria as soon as ISIS is defeated; that his primary metric for that defeat is seizure of the group's remaining territory; that he would like to see this goal reached within the next six months; and that the Pentagon should outline plans accordingly.¹⁸ Trump also has repeatedly emphasised his desire to limit U.S. spending in Syria; toward that end, he froze \$200 million originally earmarked for a year of stabilisation funding.¹⁹ The president also urged other countries (in particular Gulf allies) to foot more of the stabilisation bill, and directed his administration to explore the possibility that a multinational Arab force could substitute for the U.S. military presence in areas captured from ISIS.²⁰

In practice, there arguably are insurmountable political and logistical barriers to completely replacing U.S. forces on the ground; the U.S. military provides the deterrent umbrella and infrastructure that enable the counter-ISIS coalition's military and stabilisation activities, and no other country appears willing and/or able to assume those roles in the event of a full U.S. military withdrawal. Convincing allies to send more money and troops to supplement (and subsidise) the U.S. role appears achievable; some coalition members have already increased their support.²¹ But it is unclear if (or how long) these contributions will suffice to convince Trump to extend the U.S. presence.

In short, Washington's Syria policy has lurched into the unknown, rendering the range of possible policy outcomes very broad: at one end of the spectrum, Trump may insist upon – and eventually order – a withdrawal of forces and end to U.S. stabilisation programming. Alternatively, advocacy by key national security and military officials, increased support from Gulf countries and other allies, and White House prioritisation of other objectives (in particular, countering Iran) could combine to push the policy back toward much of what Tillerson articulated in his January speech. At the time of publication, such a shift appeared underway: for the moment at least, U.S. officials are publicly linking the U.S. presence to the goal of reducing Iran's role in Syria, though they have de-emphasised insistence on Assad's depar-

¹⁸ Crisis Group interviews, U.S. officials, Washington, April 2018. See Karen DeYoung and Shane Harris, "Trump instructs military to begin planning for withdrawal from Syria", *Washington Post*, 4 April 2018.

¹⁹ See Schwartz, "Trump freezes funds", *op. cit.*

²⁰ Crisis Group interview, U.S. official, Washington, April 2018. See Michael Gordon, "U.S. seeks Arab force and funding for Syria", *Wall Street Journal*, 16 April 2018. Small numbers of British and French special forces are also deployed in north-eastern Syria as part of the U.S.-led anti-ISIS coalition; the French role has become increasingly public since May. See Kyle Rempfer, "US, French troops seen conducting joint patrol in Manbij, Syria", *Military Times*, 3 May 2018.

²¹ On 17 August, the State Department announced that \$300 million in contributions from fellow members of the counter-ISIS coalition for stabilisation in Syria had allowed the U.S. to redirect the frozen funding toward priorities elsewhere. Saudi Arabia contributed \$100 million and the United Arab Emirates added \$50 million; several coalition members pledged smaller amounts. See the 17 August 2018 briefing by Heather Nauert, Brett McGurk and David Satterfield, available at <https://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2018/08/285202.htm>. Crisis Group interviews, U.S. diplomats and officials, July 2018.

ture.²² Yet plenty of ambiguity remains, as does the potential for abrupt reversals. And so long as the wrangling in Washington continues, stakeholders in north-eastern Syria will remain on tenterhooks.

B. *U.S. Impact on the Ground*

It is highly questionable whether the U.S. can achieve the policy objectives that Tillerson laid out. For one thing, the Trump administration is probably overestimating the influence the U.S. has gained from its presence. To be sure, the U.S.-backed SDF's control of more than one quarter of Syria's territory, oil fields accounting for more than 80 per cent of the country's pre-war production and farmland growing most of its wheat is a source of leverage over Damascus, which is strapped for cash and eager to restore the state's writ throughout Syria.²³ But given the depth of support Damascus receives from Russia and Iran and the military gains they have achieved together since 2016, that leverage appears insufficient to accomplish Assad's departure (indeed years of more intense military pressure from rebel forces failed to produce that), and it is unclear how it could be applied to effect any meaningful form of political transition in areas already under regime control. Trump's expressed preference for withdrawal likely reduces Washington's capacity to employ its presence as leverage, as it suggests a U.S. exit may occur even without concessions from Damascus or its allies.

²² In a joint press conference following his 24 April 2018 meeting with French President Emmanuel Macron, President Trump hinted that the goal of containing Iranian influence weighed against his desire to withdraw: "As far as Syria is concerned, I would love to get out. I'd love to bring our incredible warriors back home. They've done a great job. We've essentially just absolutely obliterated ISIS in Iraq and in Syria. ... With that being said, Emmanuel and myself have discussed the fact that we don't want to give Iran open season to the Mediterranean". Transcript available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-president-macron-france-joint-press-conference>. Months later, speaking on the eve of Trump's 16 July summit with Russian President Vladimir Putin in Helsinki, National Security Advisor Bolton was more explicit: "[T]he whole situation in Syria will be a discussion that the two leaders will have in large part because it's getting more serious. But I think the president has made it clear that we are there until the ISIS territorial caliphate is removed and as long as the Iranian menace continues throughout the Middle East". Interview on "This Week with George Stephanopoulos", ABC News, 15 July 2018. While the details of Trump and Putin's Helsinki discussion are unknown, Secretary of State Pompeo told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee nine days later that the U.S. had not changed its policy on its troop presence in Syria. See Julie Hirschfeld Davis, "Pompeo defends Trump with 'proof' of administration's actions vs. Russia", *The New York Times*, 25 July 2018. In subsequent statements, the State Department has explicitly tied the U.S. presence to ISIS's defeat, while employing more ambiguity as to how the presence relates to other U.S. objectives: "The President has made clear that we are prepared to remain in Syria until the enduring defeat of ISIS, and we remain focused on ensuring the withdrawal of Iranian forces and their proxies. We believe that neither of these events will happen without irreversible progress toward a political resolution of the conflict in accordance with [UN Security Council Resolution] 2254". Department Spokesperson Heather Nauert, 17 August 2018. See also Nauert's 17 August briefing with McGurk and Satterfield, *op. cit.*

²³ See Fabrice Balanche, "Assad needs 'useless Syria' too", *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, 4 January 2017; and "The race for Deir al-Zour province", *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, 17 August 2017.

Moreover, by explicitly linking the U.S. presence in Syria to Assad's fate and containment of Iran's regional influence, the policy risks encouraging the regime and its backers to use violence as a means of pressing Washington to withdraw. Tehran and Damascus supported insurgents against U.S. forces in Iraq following the 2003 invasion, and officials in both capitals have hinted at the prospect of applying similar force as a means of driving the U.S. from Syria.²⁴

And yet, as viewed from the ground in northern and eastern Syria, the U.S. role remains critical for the area's stabilisation. Three reasons stand out, two relating to benefits accruing from the U.S. military presence, and the third to the dangers that would follow a hasty retreat.

First, there is the sheer volume of the local population's need. The scale of destruction in some areas captured from ISIS is enormous, most notably in Raqqa. U.S. airstrikes destroyed or severely damaged many of the city's homes, businesses and facilities. Moreover, much of the city remains inaccessible or highly dangerous due to ISIS's extensive emplacement of concealed explosives before it withdrew in October 2017, as well as unexploded bombs dropped by the U.S.-led coalition.²⁵ Even in post-ISIS areas that suffered less damage, the cumulative toll of recent battles, jihadist rule and years of drought and government neglect prior to the current conflict has left communities in dire straits.²⁶ Local leaders and U.S. officials alike acknowledge that U.S. support was far too little to meet local needs even before Trump froze stabilisation funding in March 2018. Still, the support it has provided is essential. In addition to the funding itself, the security umbrella provided by the U.S. military presence (see below) and the programming infrastructure the U.S. has established make it possible to channel contributions from other donors. If stabilisation programming is reduced or halted, whether due to funding cuts or removal of U.S.

²⁴ As an adviser to Assad put it: "We don't want to use lethal methods, which we know how to use [against the Kurds and the foreign occupiers] We have tools we can use but haven't used while there is still room to negotiate. But the Kurds need to be aware that they are just one of the issues, not the only issue, and the [Syrian] government is dealing with them as such. If they allow themselves to be used by the U.S. as a force against the Syrian government and its allies, we will exercise our other tools". Crisis Group interviews, Damascus, February 2018. In a 13 June 2018 interview with Iran's Al-Alam news channel, Assad expressed support for "resistance activity" against the U.S. "occupier". Transcript available at <https://www.sana.sy/?p=767411>. Ali Akbar Velayati, a senior foreign policy adviser to the Iranian supreme leader, in April 2018 voiced hope "that big and important steps will be taken in order to liberate this area [east of the Euphrates] and expel the occupying Americans", and in June said that "Syria and the eastern Euphrates will be another Vietnam for the U.S.". Reuters, 12 April 2018, and "Iranian leader's top aide: US to experience 2nd Vietnam war in Syria", Fars News Agency, 20 June 2018. YPG/PYD officials perceive an increase in regime and Iranian efforts to invigorate their alliance networks in north-east Syria, including within particular tribes and among individuals with longstanding ties to regime security services; they warn that these networks could eventually wage an insurgency against the SDF and U.S.-led coalition. Crisis Group interviews, YPG/PYD security officials, north-eastern Syria, July 2018.

²⁵ For background, see "War of annihilation': devastating toll on civilians, Raqqa", Amnesty International, 5 June 2018.

²⁶ See Khaled Yacoub Oweis, "Eastern Syria grapples with drought, poverty", Reuters, 27 January 2010. See also Colin Kelley, Shahrzad Mohtadi, et al., "Climate change in the Fertile Crescent and implications of the recent Syrian drought", Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America, 17 March 2015.

protection and infrastructure (including oversight provided by U.S. staff), it could derail recovery in some areas and precipitate a dramatic worsening of conditions in others – a scenario that in turn could encourage ISIS fighters to return.²⁷

Secondly, the U.S.'s presence and provision of resources in areas captured from ISIS enable Washington to encourage positive (albeit still marginal) shifts in how north-eastern Syria's dominant authorities – the YPG and its political wing, PYD – handle local governance.²⁸ While the YPG/PYD's cadres maintain ultimate control and decision-making authority (in both recently captured Arab-majority and longer-held Kurdish areas), U.S. prodding and their own capacity to learn from mistakes have combined to gradually expand the scope and quality of local representation in the civil councils that administer day-to-day governance in "liberated" areas.²⁹ It is, to be clear, representation without empowerment; local officials still answer to the YPG/PYD power structure, and the marginal improvement in representation does not sufficiently address local complaints about Kurdish dominance (including anger at the YPG's enforcement of compulsory conscription into forces under its command), nor Turkey's concerns that cadres with roots in the PKK wield ultimate control.³⁰ But it is a necessary step in the right direction, and one the U.S. is capable of building upon.

Thirdly, and most importantly, the U.S. presence on the ground deters Turkey and pro-regime forces from attacking SDF-held areas. Turkey's Afrin offensive (discussed below) and the 7 February pro-regime attack on SDF-held oil fields highlighted the risk; the former was made possible by the absence of a U.S. security umbrella, while the latter failed because U.S. forces countered it with force.³¹ If the U.S. precipitously

²⁷ At the time of publication, it appeared that aforementioned funds pledged by Saudi Arabia (\$100 million) and the United Arab Emirates (\$50 million) in mid-2018 would indeed be channelled through existing U.S.-backed infrastructure and programming in the north east, thus enabling current stabilisation efforts to continue despite the U.S. cut in funding. In addition to the use of U.S.-supplied infrastructure, this funding was secured through extensive advocacy by U.S. officials; it should be viewed as a supplement to and result of Washington's commitment to stabilisation, and not a substitute for it. Crisis Group interviews, U.S. diplomats and officials, July 2018.

²⁸ In this regard, growing engagement by civilian officials (alongside the military presence) has been important, enabling the U.S. to better understand the YPG/PYD's power structure, modus operandi and the challenges of local governance, and to directly convey U.S. preferences and advice to multiple levels of the YPG/PYD leadership and local governance implementers. Crisis Group observations, north-eastern Syria and Washington, September 2017-June 2018.

²⁹ For background on the YPG/PYD power structure and the role of PKK-trained cadres within it, see Crisis Group Report, *The PKK's Fateful Choice*; and Crisis Group Briefing, *Steps Toward Stabilising Syria's Northern Border*, both op. cit.

³⁰ Since 2015, the YPG/PYD has imposed mandatory conscription on males aged 18-30 in the cantons governed by its "Autonomous Administration": al-Jazeera, Kobane and (until March 2018) Afrin. It initially did not impose conscription in Arab-majority territory captured from ISIS, but it began doing so in some of those areas in 2017. The late Omar Alloush, discussed in footnote 7 above, privately argued for ending compulsory conscription in these areas. And in July 2018, a senior YPG/PYD official said he now agreed that the costs of forced conscription outweigh the benefits. Crisis Group observations and interviews, local residents and officials and senior YPG/PYD officials, north-east Syria, December 2015-July 2018.

³¹ Some 200-300 pro-regime fighters and Russian military contractors were killed in the failed attack. See Thomas Gibbons-Neff, "How a 4-hour battle between Russian mercenaries and U.S. commandos unfolded in Syria", *The New York Times*, 24 May 2018.

withdraws its security assurance without prior agreement on who or what will fill the void, then Turkey and the regime (perhaps with help from its allies) would each have powerful incentives to launch attacks aimed at crippling the YPG, seizing territory and resources for themselves and, in the process, gaining leverage vis-à-vis each other.

The YPG has vowed to defend itself in such a scenario. Although its lack of an air force places it at a disadvantage, the tens of thousands of fighters it commands could mount a significant resistance.³² And, even if it quickly lost ground, the YPG could apply its capacity for guerrilla warfare against attacking forces or, potentially, behind enemy lines.³³ Details and specific scenarios aside, the evolving situation holds the potential for a new round of war that would wreak havoc on what is now a relatively stable part of the country and could reverberate far beyond.

C. *A Pandora's Box of Violent Conflict*

For north-eastern Syria's protagonists – including the local population, the SDF/YPG/PYD, Washington, Ankara, Damascus, Moscow and Tehran – the risks and costs of a violent struggle for territory and resources may turn out to be high. The stakes for the region's residents are obvious, given the destruction and bloodshed military escalation would likely entail. So, too, for the SDF/YPG/PYD, which could lose most of the territory it now controls, as well as its military capacity and political weight.

There are also costs for the U.S. and its international coalition partners. The disorder resulting from escalating violence and/or an unravelling of SDF control would present opportunities for jihadist resurgence. This danger is especially apparent in Deir al-Zour, where the Euphrates separates regime-held territory (west of the river) from SDF control (east of the river). The eastern bank's population swelled when residents west of the river fled as pro-regime forces seized their towns from ISIS in October and November 2017. In these areas, fear of pro-regime forces runs high, fuelled by perceptions (difficult to verify) of brutality during the regime's offensive and ongoing predatory behaviour and security crackdowns by these forces west of the Euphrates; there is also wariness of Iran-backed Shiite militias that have played a significant role in some areas along the Euphrates.³⁴ ISIS, which maintains pockets

³² As a Syrian analyst close to YPG/PYD leadership put it: "We have military and guerrilla capacity. We won't just hand everything over to the regime if the U.S. leaves. The SDF has 50,000-60,000 fighters and the Asayesh [security forces] have around 20,000. The regime can't simply get rid of them, and can't afford to turn them and their families into enemies". Crisis Group interview, north-eastern Syria, July 2018.

³³ A senior YPG/SDF military official warned: "A war between Kurds [YPG] and the regime wouldn't be smaller than the war we've seen since 2011. It would take place not only in Hasaka and Qamishli, but also in Aleppo and Damascus". Crisis Group interview, north-eastern Syria, September 2017.

³⁴ Crisis Group interviews and communications, local officials and residents, north-eastern Syria, December 2017-June 2018. A resident of a regime-held village west of the Euphrates offered an explanation for why most local residents have yet to return since regime forces seized the area from ISIS: "The main problem in the government-held areas is the security crackdown, in addition to looting and bribes. If anyone needs an official document, he has to go to the Military Intelligence centre and obtain 'security approval'; to get this paper requires a security check for all family members, including children. The crackdown also uses the pretext of [targeting] those who have supposedly evaded conscription or 'joined terrorist groups', which is an easy charge to apply to any young man". Crisis Group interview, Raqqa province, June 2018.

of territory and (by U.S. estimates) hundreds of fighters in eastern Syria, may once again find itself well-placed to exploit such fears if a U.S. withdrawal opens space for a regime advance.³⁵ Such an advance could also, arguably, expand Iran's capacity to move fighters and weapons between Iraq and Syria – a concern in Israel and among some U.S. officials.³⁶

For Ankara and Damascus, operating from opposite sides, a U.S. withdrawal would present opportunities to push back the SDF/YPG/PYD and seize valuable territory. If free to employ air power, their capacity to gain ground against the SDF is not in doubt. Indeed, the two might race to do so, with Turkey's wariness of increased Iranian influence on its border and the regime's fear of expanding, indefinite Turkish occupation of parts of Syria contributing to a mutually reinforcing sense of urgency.

And yet each might find that the costs of a violent free-for-all would outweigh the initial benefits. For Damascus, a fight for north-eastern Syria might become costly. The YPG is better organised and more proficient than the rebel opponents the regime has vanquished elsewhere to date (with the help of Russian air power and Iran-backed militias); through defence and counter-attack, it could cause many casualties in pro-regime ranks. And, even as it progressed, the regime would need to maintain a force presence sufficient to protect its gains in potentially hostile territory, amid significant threat of ISIS (and perhaps YPG) insurgent attacks.³⁷ For a pro-regime camp that already struggles to secure its eastern holdings from ISIS and whose shortage of reliable manpower limits its capacity for simultaneous combat on multiple fronts,³⁸ there is a real risk of overstretch that would leave it vulnerable elsewhere, particularly if some of its rebel opponents, recognising their own inability to hold territory, eventually regroup and stage guerrilla attacks.³⁹ In the meantime, Turkey might well

³⁵ In 2018, U.S. government estimates of remaining ISIS fighters have varied significantly. At the low end, from 1,000-3,000 fighters in all of Syria; at the high end, 4,000-6,000 fighters in the north east alone, and as many as 14,500 in the country as a whole. See Jack Detsch, "Watchdog: Islamic State fighter numbers increase in Syria", *Al-Monitor*, 8 August 2018.

³⁶ See Sune Engel Rasmussen and Felicia Schwartz, "Israel broadens fight against Iran", *Wall Street Journal*, 15 July 2018.

³⁷ A Syrian analyst close to the YPG/PYD leadership argued: "The YPG will surely resist if the regime attacks and is certainly capable of waging an insurgency against it. Keep in mind that the regime remains weak militarily, and that other anti-regime forces would likely seize on the opportunity to launch attacks of their own". Crisis Group interview, Qamishli, July 2018.

³⁸ ISIS insurgent attacks in Syria's eastern desert frequently cause casualties among pro-regime forces, and occasionally yield the group temporary territorial gains. And in southern Syria, ISIS forces carried out a wave of brutal attacks primarily targeting civilians in government-held Sweida province on 25 July 2018, killing more than 200 people. See Kareem Shaheen, "Sweida province: Isis knocked on doors then slaughtered families", *The Guardian*, 27 July 2018. Crisis Group research in regime-held areas along the Euphrates suggests a chaotic security situation in which Iran-backed militias continue to play a significant role in maintaining control. Crisis Group interviews and observations, eastern Syria, December 2017–June 2018. See also Ibrahim al-Amin, "روسيا والحلفاء في سوريا: تباين لا افتراق", *Al-Akhar*, 11 June 2018.

³⁹ Prominent jihadists such as al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri (outside Syria) and former senior Jabhat al-Nusra figure Sami al-Areidi (inside Syria) have publicly urged jihadists and other rebels in Syria to shift their focus from seizing and holding territory toward a guerrilla war of attrition. While some non-jihadist rebels have occasionally made similar arguments, influential factions have not adopted this thinking to date. See, for example, al-Zawahiri's April 2017 audio message, "Syria only submits to God", 23 April 2017 (<https://videopress.com/v/fOXrEFx6>); and the Telegram

expand its foothold inside Syrian territory; its much more powerful military, as well as its proximity and conducive topography, give it major advantages in any race for territory along the Syria-Turkey border.

At present Damascus seems to be waiting for a U.S. withdrawal to expand its military options.⁴⁰ But it could calculate it would be better served by negotiating a mutually tolerable arrangement with the SDF on substantive decentralisation within the framework of the Syrian state. Section V lays out the potential outlines of such a deal.

For different reasons, Turkey might similarly come to regret eliminating the YPG's territorial foothold in the north east. Turkish officials express confidence that military and intelligence operations have significantly weakened the PKK's capacity in Turkey and established Turkish control in Afrin at acceptable cost.⁴¹ These perceived successes may burnish the appeal of further military options in the event of a U.S. withdrawal from Syria. Yet while Turkey may hold on indefinitely to whatever territory its forces seize amid a scramble, the burdens it bears to support local governance would increase.⁴² Perhaps more important, however, is the impact that a YPG defeat might have on the security situation in Turkey. Since January 2017, the PKK has refrained from conducting major bombings in Turkish cities, apparently after U.S. entreaties relayed via the YPG convinced the PKK to halt such attacks.⁴³ A U.S. withdrawal (and the resulting removal of security assurances for the YPG) would diminish the PKK's incentives for restraint, and a Turkish attack on north-east Syria could remove them entirely.

channel, "Supporters of Dr. Sami al-Uraydi", 29 December 2017 (https://t.me/ahmad_ahmad_12/2552).

⁴⁰ The Syrian leadership's current approach appears to assume that a U.S. withdrawal will leave the YPG/PYD vulnerable, thus expanding Damascus's options and increasing its leverage. As an adviser to Assad put it: "The government plan is to take the entire [SDF-held] area. Kurds compose around 25 per cent of those areas' population; they're a minority in most of the areas they control. The majority in those areas are Arabs, and so the Kurds have had a huge problem: most of these Arabs are very much involved in the government; they are part of the authority, part of the regime. ... [The government] is just waiting for the right time [to retake these areas]; it's a very long game". He added: "The American occupation will stay for two, three years. What would the Americans do in a landlocked area that is very sensitive for their Iraqi ally, their Kurdish ally [Masoud] Barzani and their Turkish ally, and that will sooner or later rely financially on them because it cannot support itself?" Crisis Group interview, Damascus, February 2018.

⁴¹ Crisis Group interviews, Turkish officials, Ankara, April-July 2018.

⁴² For a snapshot of how Turkey is administering areas under its control, see Sarah El Deeb, "Blurring the border, Turkey deepens roots in northern Syria", *Washington Post*, 19 June 2018.

⁴³ The last major suspected PKK bombing in a western Turkish city occurred outside a football stadium in Istanbul on 10 December 2016, killing 46. The last such bombing outside the south east occurred in Kayseri seven days later. Those attacks, like several others after 2015, were claimed by the Kurdistan Freedom Falcons, a PKK offshoot widely perceived to retain ties to the organisation. A senior YPG official told Crisis Group he believes that subsequent U.S. entreaties to halt such attacks were a main factor convincing the PKK to do so. Crisis Group interview, north-eastern Syria, September 2017. U.S. officials have confirmed to Crisis Group that such requests have been conveyed directly to the YPG, since at least early 2017. Crisis Group interviews, Washington, May 2017-February 2018. Turkish officials downplay the impact of any U.S. request, and assert that the success of Turkish security operations is the main factor preventing major PKK attacks. Crisis Group interviews, Ankara, July 2018. See also "PKK offshoot claims Kayseri bus bombing that killed 13 soldiers: Hurriyet", Reuters, 20 December 2016.

Moreover, if a combination of Turkish and regime gains ended the YPG's control of territory in Syria, many YPG fighters (and in particular PKK-trained cadres) wishing to continue the fight would likely seek refuge in PKK camps in northern Iraq's mountains, which have proved impregnable. From there, they could turn to renewed insurgency inside Turkey, this time without the constraints resulting from their role and alliances in Syria.⁴⁴

Rather than pushing the YPG back to its guerrilla roots, Turkey might benefit from allowing it to remain an important player in north-eastern Syria, within the context of an internationally backed decentralisation agreement with Damascus that entails at a minimum removal of YPG forces from the Turkish border (as discussed below). So long as the YPG has significant (yet difficult to defend) equities in north-eastern Syria, Turkey can use the threat of retaliatory attack there as a means to deter PKK escalation inside Turkey.

⁴⁴ As a Syrian expert on the PKK explained: "If Turkey crushes the YPG in Syria, many fighters would shift their focus to Turkey, whether its forces in Syria or within Turkey itself. Ankara knows this, and I think for a similar reason it has always held back from attempting to crush the PKK in Qandil. It doesn't want to push fighters into the mountains inside Turkey". He added: "Keep in mind that the Turkish economy is very weak; tourism is a key sector, and a couple of bombs could quickly cripple it. The PKK has held back on such attacks in the last couple of years, but they are not difficult to carry out". Crisis Group interview, north-eastern Syria, July 2018.

III. Lessons from Afrin

Four key lessons from Turkey's early 2018 Afrin offensive shed light on the risk of military escalation in the wake of a precipitous U.S. troop withdrawal from north-eastern Syria, and the difficulty of reaching a mutually tolerable negotiated arrangement to avert a spike in violence.

A. Turkey's Power Projection in Northern Syria

With its intervention in Afrin and its deployment of observers deep along the de-escalation line in Idlib, Turkey has greatly expanded its role inside Syria, taking on significant new costs and risks in pursuit of two core policy concerns: weakening the YPG's political hand and military foothold, and preventing a new wave of displaced persons from surging toward – and potentially across – its border.⁴⁵ In the process, Ankara is expanding a sphere of influence in Syria's north and consolidating it with boots on the ground, infrastructure and governing arrangements. This sphere also helps Turkey address a secondary, undeclared objective: limiting the presence of Iran-linked pro-regime forces along the border.⁴⁶ And, in the event of a viable political process for settling the Syrian war, Turkey may attempt to apply its leverage on the ground to secure a place for its Syrian opposition allies in a post-war order.⁴⁷

The Afrin offensive was a gamble for Ankara. Among YPG-controlled areas, Afrin was Turkey's most viable target because it, unlike towns in north-eastern Syria, was not sheltered by a U.S. security umbrella.⁴⁸ Yet in some respects it presented the

⁴⁵ Since February 2018, Turkish military personnel have established twelve monitoring checkpoints ringing rebel-held Idlib as part of a "de-escalation" agreement negotiated with Russia and (to a lesser extent) Iran. For background, see Crisis Group Middle East Report N°56, *Averting Disaster in Syria's Idlib Province*, 8 February 2018.

⁴⁶ Crisis Group interviews, Turkish official, February-April 2018.

⁴⁷ Ankara's policy since 2016 has striven to protect its rebel allies (and use them to its advantage) where it can. But it has made this effort subordinate to its core objectives with regard to the YPG and refugee flows. This order of concerns can be deduced from its decision to prioritise its Euphrates Shield operation aimed at blocking YPG expansion over helping allied rebels avert defeat in eastern Aleppo in late 2016. Ankara has also de-prioritised its objective of ending Bashar al-Assad's rule; yet Erdoğan continues to call for his exit and Turkish officials still emphasise the necessity of a political transition in accordance with UN Security Council Resolution 2254 and say they are using their influence in the Astana talks with Russia and Iran to prevent a full departure from the UN-led Geneva process. Crisis Group interviews, Turkish security and foreign ministry officials, Ankara and Istanbul, February 2017-April 2018.

⁴⁸ While the U.S. military presence in north-eastern Syria (east of the Euphrates river, in addition to Manbij and Tabqa west of the river) serves as a deterrent to external attack targeting these areas, the U.S. never deployed personnel to YPG-held Afrin, in Syria's north west. The U.S. also repeatedly made clear, prior to and throughout the offensive, that it did not consider Afrin part of the U.S.-led coalition's war against ISIS, as that group never entered the district. Insofar as Afrin enjoyed external security assurances, those came from Russia, which dominates the airspace west of the Euphrates and which (until the Turkish offensive) maintained a small military presence in Afrin. Crisis Group interviews, U.S. and YPG/PYD officials, Washington and northern Syria, January-February 2018. See also Safvan Allahverdi, "Afrin not part of Syria coalition mission: US spokesman", Anadolu Agency, 16 January 2018; and Umut Uras and Tamila Varshalomidze, "What is Russia's end game in Afrin?", Al Jazeera, 23 January 2018.

tallest hurdles of any YPG-held territory: hilly, wooded terrain along the Turkish border, dense urban areas in Afrin's centre and YPG roots within the local population. And the YPG is no easy foe: its ranks include fighters well-versed in guerrilla tactics (thanks to the organisational link with the PKK) and hardened veterans of tough battles with ISIS.⁴⁹

Yet these factors – and some help from pro-regime forces, as described below – ultimately proved little obstacle to a Turkish and allied Syrian rebel advance once Russia opened Syrian airspace to Turkish strikes. In Operation Olive Branch, Turkish forces took complete control of Afrin district, forcing the YPG to withdraw on 18 March.

The intervention was costly. More than 50 Turkish soldiers died, as did hundreds of allied rebel fighters.⁵⁰ Turkish officials emphasise that the operation took care to avert civilian casualties, but the civilian toll nevertheless appears heart-wrenching: an estimated 300 killed and more than 130,000 displaced to areas outside Afrin district.⁵¹ Some saw their property looted as Turkey-backed Syrian rebels asserted control, and reports of property seizures, arbitrary detention and other abuses by Turkey-backed forces have persisted in subsequent months. While some Kurds have returned, such abuses and public statements about resettling refugees now living in Turkey have exposed Ankara to accusations of demographic engineering, even if the YPG also appears to be blocking some Kurdish civilians from returning.⁵² The YPG, which lost hundreds of its fighters, is waging a low-level insurgency in Afrin against Turkey and its local allies.⁵³

For now, at least, Turkish officials regard the political and military gains they have achieved as well worth the price. Polls conducted during the offensive suggest a

⁴⁹ See Noah Bonsey, "No Winners in Turkey's New Offensive into Syria", Crisis Group Commentary, 26 January 2018.

⁵⁰ Ankara has acknowledged the deaths of at least 54 Turkish soldiers and more than 300 allied Syrian fighters since the Afrin offensive began. See Kemal Karadag and Baris Gundogan, "Turkey neutralizes over 4,500 terrorists in Afrin: Army", Anadolu Agency, 7 June 2018; and Nilay Kar Onum, "Erdogan says 3,747 terrorists 'neutralized' in Afrin op", Anadolu Agency, 25 March 2018.

⁵¹ It is difficult to assess with confidence the number of civilian casualties in Afrin; the independent Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (which is generally perceived as anti-regime but reports on alleged abuses by all sides) estimates around 300 civilians killed, while the YPG/PYD-backed Afrin local governance body puts the number at 500. See "As a part of the ongoing violations by the 'Olive Branch' in Afrin ... about 20 persons were arrested in Jendires Township", Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, 26 July 2018; and "Afrin administration: The war has moved to another stage", ANF News, 18 March 2018. For displacement figures, see UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, "Syrian Arab Republic: Humanitarian Situation Update in Afrin District and for IDPs in Surrounding Communities", 15 June 2018. For the Turkish government's perspective, see the article by presidential spokesman Ibrahim Kalin, "Afrin: Victory for peace, defeat for terrorism", *Daily Sabah*, 24 March 2018.

⁵² For reporting on human rights abuses by all sides in Afrin, see "Syria: Turkey must stop serious violations by allied groups and its own forces in Afrin", Amnesty International, 2 August 2018. See also Martin Chulov and Kareem Shaheen, "Nothing is ours anymore: Kurds forced out of Afrin after Turkish assault", *The Guardian*, 7 June 2018.

⁵³ The YPG/PYD acknowledged the death of 820 SDF fighters during Turkey's Afrin offensive. See "Afrin administration: The war has moved to another stage", op. cit. Crisis Group interview, senior YPG/SDF military official, northern Syria, July 2018. The YPG regularly claims responsibility for insurgent attacks in Afrin. See, for example, "YPG: Six terrorists killed in Afrin", ANF News, 9 August 2018.

strong majority of the Turkish public views the operation favourably.⁵⁴ And, in addition to asserting control over a YPG stronghold, Turkey has greatly expanded (and physically connected) its sphere of influence in northern Syria. Afrin abuts (to its north east) the “Euphrates Shield” zone held by Turkish and allied rebel forces since late 2016, and (to its south) rebel-held territory in Idlib and the western Aleppo countryside that depend on Turkey for resources and protection (see below).⁵⁵ Sensing momentum, Ankara has threatened to take the fight with the YPG further east, and beginning in April it escalated separate attacks on the PKK inside Iraq (as it has done on several occasions in past decades).⁵⁶

Meanwhile, Turkey has established twelve military “observation posts” deep within north-western Syria, along the de-escalation line that separates rebel-held Idlib and adjacent areas of Aleppo and Hama provinces from territory controlled by the Syrian regime and its allies. It has done so in close cooperation with Russia and with the acquiescence of Iran, its two partners in de-escalation efforts launched in the Kazakh capital of Astana in January 2017. It is taking on new headaches and risks in the process.⁵⁷ But the gains, thus far at least, have been significant. First and foremost, Ankara has averted (or at least delayed) a pro-regime offensive into Syria’s most densely populated area (including with IDPs), and the massive displacement toward the Turkish border that would surely ensue.⁵⁸ And, if it can continue to stave off such an offensive while also expanding its influence over (and introducing order within) the north west’s fractured rebel scene, its zone of hegemony in Syria could extend south from parts of Aleppo’s northern and western countrysides through Idlib to the edge of Lattakia province. At the time of publication, however, the danger of a pro-regime offensive was rising as Damascus threatens to ride its military momentum into Idlib; it is unclear whether increased Turkey-Russia diplomacy will be sufficient to avert that.

⁵⁴ For example, a February 2018 poll found 89 per cent support. See “Nearly 90 percent of Turkish citizens support cross-border military operation in Syria: Survey”, *Hürriyet Daily News*, 19 February 2018.

⁵⁵ See Crisis Group Report, *Averting Disaster in Syria's Idlib Province*, op. cit.

⁵⁶ See Ece Toksabay and Mehmet Emin Caliskan, “Erdogan says Turkey may extend Afrin campaign along whole Syrian border”, Reuters, 19 March 2018. Rhetoric aside, the risk of Turkish attack upon remaining YPG/SDF-controlled areas appears low due to the presence of U.S. forces, and is further mitigated by ongoing negotiations between Ankara and Washington over security and governance arrangements in the contested area of Manbij. On Turkey’s operations inside northern Iraq, see Metin Gurcan, “Stymied in Syria, Turkey quietly ups actions against PKK in Iraq”, *Al-Monitor*, 24 April 2018.

⁵⁷ Chief among them: coordinating with a jihadist group (Hei’at Tahrir al-Sham, HTS) that dominates much of Idlib and was previously affiliated with al-Qaeda; operating in a chaotic environment riven by rebel rivalries (including factions close to Ankara that intermittently battle HTS); and dealing with the threat of attack by jihadist spoilers (whether outside or within HTS) who oppose the de-escalation. See Crisis Group Report, *Averting Disaster in Syria's Idlib Province*, op. cit.; and the Crisis Group illustrated commentary, “Voices of Idlib”, 11 July 2018.

⁵⁸ Nearly three million Syrians (roughly half of them already displaced by the conflict) live in the rebel-held north west. In the event of a major pro-regime offensive, hundreds of thousands would likely be displaced toward the Turkish border and Turkish-controlled territory in northern Syria (Afrin and the “Euphrates Shield” areas). For updated population estimates, see Mercy Corps’ Humanitarian Access Team, <https://humanitarianaccesssteam.org/population-data>.

Uncertainty in Idlib notwithstanding, Turkey has found relative success in assuming the risks of proactive military engagement in northern Syria. In the event of a U.S. withdrawal, Ankara may consider a similar approach toward additional SDF-held areas.

B. *The YPG's Dilemma*

The fall of Afrin underlined a reality Crisis Group has addressed in previous reports and briefings, and in conversations with YPG/PYD officials: Turkey poses an existential threat to the YPG/PYD in northern Syria. For at least as long as the YPG remains deeply tied to the PKK and the latter is in violent conflict with the Turkish state, that threat will remain.

As noted above, Afrin was the portion of YPG-held territory in which the organisation arguably was best situated to defend itself. The mostly flat, open terrain of north-eastern Syria would prove an easier target, in particular for Turkey but also, eventually, for pro-regime forces (or both simultaneously). These potential adversaries have air forces, while the YPG does not; it could resist a major offensive but probably not stop it. The main factor protecting the YPG from crippling losses has been the deterrent presence of U.S. forces in north-eastern Syria. That protection may not last much longer. And it is clear that the YPG lacks a reliable alternative to Washington's security umbrella.

Crisis Group's conversations with YPG/PYD officials since the Afrin offensive suggest that the organisation has become cognizant of its vulnerabilities in the aftermath of Trump's call for a U.S. withdrawal, and is less inclined to take continuing U.S. support for granted. But the April 2018 U.S. airstrikes in Syria in retaliation for a suspected regime chemical attack; reassurances from U.S. military personnel on the ground; Washington's withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal and escalating tensions with Tehran; and statements from within and outside U.S. government on the risk that withdrawal will redound to Iran's advantage together have raised hopes among YPG/PYD officials that the U.S. will eventually revert to something resembling the policy articulated by Tillerson.⁵⁹ Still, those same officials have tended to underestimate the threat from Ankara and overestimate the willingness and capacity of Washington and Moscow to shield them.⁶⁰ Insofar as optimism discourages them from making difficult choices, it could leave them exposed.

C. *No Easy Answers from Damascus*

In theory, negotiated arrangements between the YPG/PYD and the Assad regime might provide a means of pre-empting Turkish military action. Some international analysts, Western diplomats and Syrian regime officials argue that a deal incorporating YPG/PYD structures within "the Syrian state" – though not necessarily restoring the full control of regime security and military forces – could be sufficient to placate

⁵⁹ Crisis Group interviews and communications, YPG/PYD officials and Syrian analyst close to YPG/PYD leadership, northern Syria and Europe, January-July 2018.

⁶⁰ Crisis Group interviews, senior YPG/PYD and PKK officials, northern Syria and Qandil, December 2016-January 2018. See below for more on Russia's handling of Turkey's Afrin offensive.

or deter Turkey.⁶¹ Afrin offered an early – somewhat but not entirely dissimilar – test as to whether and how this approach might be applied in practice, as YPG/PYD leaders strived to forge a deal with Damascus that would block Turkey's advance.⁶²

Their attempts failed, as competing interests between the YPG and Damascus slowed negotiations and narrowed grounds for coordination, resulting in a deal that shifted neither Turkish calculations nor the offensive's trajectory. Likewise, it may prove quite difficult for the YPG and the regime to reach negotiated outcomes acceptable to them as well as to Ankara when it concerns YPG-controlled areas east of the Euphrates.

In Afrin as elsewhere, the most important gap between the YPG and regime negotiating positions was about physical control: whose armed forces, security and intelligence services would dominate the area, and thus guarantee hegemony over governance. During the build-up to the offensive, Russia relayed a clear message to YPG leaders: the only way to avert an attack was to hand Afrin over to the regime, including the army and security services. The YPG rejected that proposal, preferring to take its chances fighting Ankara rather than surrender pre-emptively to Damascus.⁶³

The YPG also made a counter-offer: for Damascus to send a small force, such as "border guards", to take up positions along Afrin's border with Turkey, under the official authority and flag of the Syrian state, but without restoring the regime's security control within Afrin (including its urban areas). YPG officials described this approach as an assertion of the Syrian state's sovereignty over the border and territory Turkey was attacking, and expressed hope that this limited, largely symbolic government deployment would raise the international stakes sufficiently to halt Turkish attacks, without threatening the YPG's local dominance.⁶⁴

Damascus initially rebuffed the YPG's offer. While it repeatedly condemned the Turkish offensive as an assault on Syrian sovereignty, it was reluctant to deploy its own forces in defence of that sovereignty so long as the YPG stood as the primary beneficiary. As an adviser to Assad put it, speaking two weeks into the offensive:

It cannot work the way they [the YPG] want it. We cannot cover an unlawful situation with our forces. The return of the state would have to be a complete return, with all its institutions, security and full army. There's nothing [possible] such as a state return [that includes only] border police [and] the continuation of an insurgency within the area, under the cover of the state.

Damascus's calculations on this issue were complex. Regime decision-makers needed to balance their objective of reasserting full control (and thus the temptation to hold out for YPG capitulation) with concerns that a YPG defeat in Afrin would lead to an indefinite, and potentially long-term, Turkish occupation.⁶⁵

⁶¹ Crisis Group discussions, north-eastern Syria, Brussels and Washington, June 2017-June 2018. See, for example, Aaron Stein, "Turkey's Afrin Offensive and America's Future in Syria", *Foreign Affairs*, 23 January 2018.

⁶² Crisis Group interviews, senior YPG/PYD officials, north-eastern Syria, January 2018.

⁶³ Crisis Group interviews, senior YPG/PYD officials and figures engaged in discussions between YPG and Damascus, northern Syria, January 2018.

⁶⁴ Crisis Group interviews, senior YPG/PYD officials, northern Syria, January-February 2018.

⁶⁵ Crisis Group interviews, adviser to Assad, Damascus, February 2018.

This choice bore much in common with one Damascus faced in 2012, when the regime's fear of then-expanding control by Turkey-backed rebels in northern Syria drove it to hand large chunks of majority-Kurdish territory to the YPG.⁶⁶ Despite the weakening of Turkey's opposition allies in the years since, Damascus continues to view Ankara as a threat. It is determined not to pursue rapprochement with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan,⁶⁷ and has signalled its objection to Russia's facilitating Turkish influence in northern Syria.⁶⁸ Notably, Iran appears to share the regime's concerns about Turkey's expanding role on the ground, and its clear opposition to the Afrin offensive stands in contrast to Russia's enabling of it.⁶⁹

As a result, and despite Damascus's initial rejection of the YPG's border guard offer, the regime and Iranian positions steadily shifted in the YPG's favour as the Turkish offensive continued inside Afrin. Regime and Iran-backed militia forces allowed passage through territory they control in and around Aleppo to YPG personnel from the north east into Afrin.⁷⁰ And following weeks of negotiation, they reached an agreement with the YPG to deploy forces: beginning on 20 February, hundreds of pro-regime fighters entered Afrin, bedecked in Syrian flags and shouting pro-government slogans.

In announcing the deployment, official Syrian state media referred to these fighters as "popular forces" (*al-quwat al-shaabiya*). In practice, the fighters consisted primarily of militiamen from Aleppo and the Shiite-majority towns of Nubl and Zahraa (adjacent to Afrin), who have been fighting on the government's behalf with backing from pro-regime businessmen and Iran (in addition to whatever support they receive from official Syrian military and security structures).⁷¹ In a series of videos posted online and covered extensively by pro-regime and local media, they documented

⁶⁶ Ibid. See also Crisis Group Middle East Report N°151, *Flight of Icarus? The PYD's Precarious Rise in Syria*, 8 May 2014.

⁶⁷ An adviser to Assad explained: "There is no room for a reconciliation between the [Syrian] state and the Turkish government in Erdoğan's presence. This is a Muslim Brotherhood government that considers it has the natural and legal right to establish Islamic rule in the region". Crisis Group interview, Damascus, February 2018.

⁶⁸ For example, on 30 and 31 January 2018, pro-regime forces shelled Turkish forces during their initial attempt to deploy military observers along the Idlib de-escalation line, temporarily thwarting the deployment; Turkey's subsequent (ultimately successful) convoy on 5 February was also shelled. See Crisis Group Report, *Averting Disaster in Syria's Idlib Province*, op. cit. Syrian government officials have also repeatedly denounced Turkey's presence in the north west. As Assad said in a May 2018 interview: "First of all, this [Turkish attack on Afrin] is an aggression, this is an occupation. Any single Turkish soldier on Syrian soil represents occupation". Quoted in Alexis Papachelas, "Chemical attack accusations 'fake,' Assad tells Kathimerini in exclusive interview", *Kathimerini*, 10 May 2018.

⁶⁹ See "Iran's Rouhani urges Turkey to halt Afrin operation", Al Jazeera, 6 February 2018.

⁷⁰ Crisis Group interview, YPG official, north-eastern Syria, January 2018. The YPG/PYD perceives Iran as having attempted to help the group defend Afrin, citing Iran-backed militias' facilitation of supplies bound for the YPG in Afrin passing through areas under their control in greater Aleppo, as well as the eventual deployment of militiamen to Afrin itself. Crisis Group communications, former YPG/PYD official, April 2018.

⁷¹ Crisis Group interviews, Syrian analyst close to YPG/PYD leadership, April 2018; senior Hizbollah official, Beirut, March 2018. For details on the reported origins of pro-regime militiamen killed during the Afrin offensive, see social media tracking by independent researcher Gregory Waters, available at twitter.com/GregoryPWaters/status/980863148231073794?s=09.

their presence in Afrin city and deployment to key fronts along Afrin's border with Turkey.⁷²

In other words, the arrangement occurred much along the lines of what the YPG had originally sought: forces affiliated with the Syrian government and bearing its flag entered Afrin in an effort to deter Turkish attack, but without sufficient force to threaten the YPG's overall dominance in the canton. For its part, by deploying militiamen rather than the army, Damascus attempted to balance between its desire to stop the Turkish offensive and its reluctance to risk overstretched army forces or provide cover for the YPG.⁷³

The result failed to deter or even slow the Turkish offensive. Unable to stop the deployment of pro-regime forces, Turkey decided to treat them as "legitimate targets", ie, it continued to strike and advance without regard for their presence, targeting them just as it did YPG fighters.⁷⁴ Turkey and allied rebels quickly captured territory in which pro-regime forces deployed, and ultimately seized the entire district by 18 March. In the process, they reportedly killed dozens of pro-government fighters.⁷⁵

This episode suggests that the assertion of Syrian government sovereignty and deployment of pro-regime forces may not, in and of themselves, deter Turkey from striking an organisation it views as part and parcel of the PKK. Moreover, Ankara's response would not necessarily have differed if these fighters had entered under the official banner of the Syrian army rather than as "popular forces". As a Turkish official explained, Ankara's treatment of pro-government forces in this case was influenced by its perception of the regime's weakness, and by its wariness of growing influence for its regional rival, Iran, in northern Syria. Turkish officials doubt Damascus's willingness and ability to control the YPG on its own; they view Iran-backed militias as essential to the regime's military capacity in the north, and do not want to see an expansion of their role along the Syria-Turkey border.⁷⁶

Events in the north east could play out differently. The defeat it suffered in Afrin may render the YPG more open to pre-emptive compromise with the regime in hope of forestalling a Turkish offensive in the future; the regime's military gains elsewhere may increase its bargaining leverage over the YPG as well as its credibility in Turkish

⁷² For examples of footage and coverage in Syrian state and Russia-backed media, see www.youtube.com/watch?v=tFSpEFwhjzE and www.youtube.com/watch?v=rP2k26P-SPQ.

⁷³ Crisis Group interviews, Syrian official, Damascus, February 2018; Crisis Group communications, international analyst familiar with details of YPG-Damascus negotiations, March 2018; Crisis Group interview, senior Hizbollah official, Beirut, March 2018. The Hizbollah official explained: "The regime had wanted the Syrian Arab Army to enter Afrin. But Turkey refused, and the regime didn't want to get in a direct fight with Turkey, so it sent the popular forces instead".

⁷⁴ Crisis Group interviews, Turkish official, February and April 2018. As pro-regime forces entered Afrin, Erdoğan's foreign policy adviser, Ibrahim Kalın, warned: "Any step by the [Syrian] regime or other elements in this direction will surely have serious consequences". Quoted in Ellen Francis and Ece Toksabay, "Stakes rise in Turkey's Afrin assault as pro-Assad militia arrive", Reuters, 21 February 2018.

⁷⁵ At least 36 were reportedly killed in a single strike on 3 March. See AFP, 3 March 2018. For a partial count of casualties drawing from death announcements on social media, see tracking by Gregory Waters, available at twitter.com/GregoryPWaters/status/980863148231073794?s=09. A Syrian analyst close to YPG/PYD leadership estimated that 100-150 pro-regime militiamen were killed in Afrin. Crisis Group communication, April 2018.

⁷⁶ Crisis Group interviews, Turkish officials, Ankara and Istanbul, October 2017-April 2018.

eyes as a force willing and able to police the YPG along Syria's northern border; most importantly, Russia may take steps to deter Turkish action, after refraining from doing so in Afrin.

At a minimum, however, the events of Afrin suggest that deals over the north east between the YPG/PYD and Damascus may be difficult to attain, and not necessarily sufficient to avert or halt Turkish attack.

D. *A Russian Question Mark*

One actor within the pro-regime camp that clearly could have taken steps to halt (or severely hamper) Turkey's offensive is Russia, which dominates north-west Syria's airspace. A red light from Moscow at any point would have made it very risky for Turkey to launch or continue its attack. Yet none came, leaving Ankara free to push on as it pleased. In the event of a U.S. withdrawal, Russia's role would be essential for deterring further Turkish offensives in north-eastern Syria. Yet Moscow's geopolitical priorities may discourage it from doing so.

It was Moscow's decision not to block Ankara from attacking Afrin that allowed the offensive to commence in the first place, over Damascus's strenuous objections. Following a visit to Moscow by Turkey's military and intelligence heads, Russia removed the de facto security umbrella its small military presence in Afrin and control of the north-western skies provided.⁷⁷ And it was Moscow's decision to leave the skies open for Turkish airstrikes – despite the subsequent deal deploying pro-regime militiamen – that enabled the offensive to continue until the complete capture of Afrin district.

While details of Kremlin decision-making on Afrin remain unclear, several likely factors stand out:

First, Moscow was unhappy with Washington's announcement that it would extend its military presence and apply it toward achieving Assad's departure.⁷⁸ It may therefore have been partly motivated by a desire to punish the YPG for its alliance with Washington, and to demonstrate the limits thereof. Second, Turkey's gains in Afrin, achieved at great price to the YPG and the local population, may in the future encourage the YPG to accept elsewhere a Russian offer it refused prior to the offensive: to surrender areas it controls to the regime as a means of averting a Turkish attack.⁷⁹

Third, Turkish officials believe that Russia may view an expansion of Turkish influence in the north west as conducive to its approach to managing the Syrian conflict, which relies heavily on cooperation with both Tehran and Ankara (via the Astana process).⁸⁰

⁷⁷ See Bonsey, "No Winners in Turkey's New Offensive into Syria", *op. cit.*

⁷⁸ See Foreign Minister Lavrov's comments on Afrin on 15 January and 20 February 2018, *op. cit.*

⁷⁹ A Russian diplomat suggested that a combination of these motivations was likely central to Moscow's decision, ie, an attempt to teach the YPG a lesson about the risks of relying on Washington, rather than deepening links with Damascus and its allies. Crisis Group interview, June 2018.

⁸⁰ Turkish officials estimate that expanding cooperation with Ankara was a key motivation, noting the importance Moscow has attributed to Turkey's role in the Astana process generally and in managing the conflict in the north in particular, where it at times appears to prefer coordinating with Ankara to working with Tehran. Crisis Group interviews, Turkish officials, January-April 2018.

Fourth, and perhaps most important: Russia appears keen to sow divisions within NATO. Enabling Turkey to pound the YPG serves the dual purpose of currying favour with Ankara while further complicating Washington's efforts to balance its relations with antagonistic allies.

Whatever the precise combination (and prioritisation) of motivations, in Afrin they convinced Russia to allow Turkey to deal the YPG/PYD the most damaging blow it has suffered to date – one all the more staggering because the YPG has worked strenuously over the last few years to maintain constructive (and generally friendly) relations with Russia.⁸¹

There are lessons here, potentially applicable to north-eastern Syria. First, Moscow's relations with Ankara, Tehran and Damascus will probably always take precedence over those with the YPG. Combined with Russia's propensity for dramatic tactical shifts, this limits the extent to which YPG leadership can ever trust Moscow to protect it from Turkey or the Syrian regime; in the event of a U.S. withdrawal, Russia might potentially green-light offensives by either, or both. Second, in some cases Moscow may – as it did in Afrin – place broader strategic objectives above immediate concerns about Syrian sovereignty and above the preferences of its allies in Damascus and Tehran.

Indeed, a closer look at incentives illustrates why Moscow arguably may eventually see reason to tolerate additional Turkish offensives against the YPG, if and when the U.S. removes its own deterrent umbrella from the north east. Given Turkey's geopolitical weight and position, improved relations with it offer Russia potential benefits extending far beyond (and more strategically important than) the Syrian battlefield.⁸² If and when Moscow believes it can elicit significant Turkish steps in its favour by acquiescing to additional offensives against the YPG, it may be very tempted to do so. And it can probably continue to provide Ankara green or yellow lights without fear of serious damage to its relations with the Assad regime and Tehran; the former depends on Moscow for its survival, while Iran remains far more reliant on Russia to address its core strategic concerns than vice versa. Indeed, further demonstrating its willingness to grant Turkey concessions could improve Moscow's leverage over Damascus (and perhaps Tehran).

This outcome is not pre-determined, of course. Russia would weigh all of these factors against other ramifications of ceding Turkey additional border territory, including a potential increase in Ankara's influence over any eventual political process and the further undermining of Syria's sovereignty.

⁸¹ Crisis Group interviews, YPG/PYD officials, northern Syria, January 2018.

⁸² On some of these strategic calculations, see Crisis Group Europe Report N°250, *Russia and Turkey in the Black Sea and the South Caucasus*, 28 June 2018.

IV. Between Damascus and Qamishli: A Security Dilemma

On Afrin, the YPG/PYD and Damascus failed to reach a deal that was both acceptable to each of them and sufficient to dissuade Ankara from attacking. If discussions in coming months fail to produce an arrangement fulfilling both of those conditions for north-east Syria, military escalation – by Turkey, the regime or both – is likely to follow a U.S. withdrawal. Russia's support will be essential to the success of any negotiated arrangement, given its capacity to deter (or enable) attack; yet YPG understandings with Moscow may prove insufficient in the absence of buy-in from Ankara and Damascus. Given current levels of hostility between Ankara and the YPG/PYD, talks between the YPG/PYD and Damascus present the logical starting point for pursuing a negotiated arrangement for the north east.

A. Decentralisation and the Security Sector

Relations between the YPG/PYD and the Syrian regime have been defined since 2012 by an uneasy mix of competition and cooperation.⁸³ While the former has intensified over the past year, incentives for coordination remain, as seen in Afrin. Communication between the two is limited but continues; Russia has at times attempted to facilitate engagement. Room also exists, in principle, for negotiating a compromise arrangement between the YPG/PYD's call for a highly decentralised system of governance (which it sometimes describes as "federalism") and the Syrian regime's expressed willingness to pursue administrative decentralisation. In practice – as seen in Afrin – high-stakes, largely zero-sum questions of security dominance constrain areas of potential agreement, as a review of YPG/PYD and regime positions illustrates.

1. The YPG/PYD's vision for a post-war Syria

The YPG/PYD's political objectives are centred around Abdullah Öcalan's notion of "democratic confederalism", a concept the PKK leader developed during his imprisonment in Turkey.⁸⁴ It is best understood as a form of deep decentralisation, in which a high degree of local self-rule, including the right and capacity for self-defence, provides the means through which Kurds (and other religious and ethnic communities) can secure their rights within the state borders of Turkey, Iraq, Iran and Syria.

The concept serves as the central organising principle of the YPG/PYD's governance in northern Syria and its strategy for consolidating its military achievements politically.⁸⁵ YPG/PYD officials say the organisation does not seek Bashar al-Assad's removal, despite its opposition to his authoritarian rule; instead, it aims to secure a degree of autonomy sufficient to block whomever rules in Damascus from imposing

⁸³ For background, see Crisis Group Report, *Flight of Icarus?*, op. cit.

⁸⁴ See Abdullah Öcalan, *Democratic Confederalism*. While the YPG/PYD publicly downplays its links to the PKK, it embraces Öcalan in both practical and symbolic terms, taking guidance from his ideas and adorning countless offices and intersections with his likeness.

⁸⁵ For background on YPG/PYD governance, see Crisis Group Reports, *Flight of Icarus* and *The PKK's Fateful Choice*, both op. cit.

security dominance and political agendas.⁸⁶ The YPG/PYD has largely achieved this objective on a temporary basis in the north east, through the strength of its armed forces and the deterrent umbrella provided by the U.S. military presence. Now it is looking for ways to cement this local autonomy beyond a potential U.S. withdrawal, and within Syria's eventual post-war order.

To achieve that end, the YPG/PYD advocates a transition to a decentralised system that would guarantee for the north east – and, ideally, all of Syria – a high degree of local autonomy consistent with Öcalan's ideology. Since March 2016, the YPG/PYD has primarily referred to the system it envisions as “federalism”, but in 2018 it has de-emphasised that word in favour of the more general (and less inflammatory) “decentralisation”.⁸⁷ The YPG/PYD has treated its military gains and consolidation of governance structures as a means of strengthening its hand, with an eye to eventual negotiations. And in July 2018 it officially opened talks with Damascus, to test the waters with regard to service provision and other tangential areas of potential agreement, in the hope of building toward substantive negotiations on the future of Syrian governance.⁸⁸

YPG/PYD officials understand that successful negotiations would require compromise, and they may ultimately treat some of their territory, resources, governance structures and political demands as cards worth trading for reciprocal conces-

⁸⁶ Crisis Group interviews, senior YPG/PYD officials, northern Syria, November 2015–July 2018.

⁸⁷ Though Öcalan's ideas are a main source of inspiration, the YPG/PYD has not mirrored his use of the term “confederalism”. Beginning in July 2017, the YPG/PYD gradually – though only partially – carried out a plan to transform its existing governance bodies (the Democratic Autonomous Administrations) in the self-declared cantons of al-Jazeera, Kobane and [until March 2018] Afrin – ie, the heavily Kurdish core of YPG-controlled territory along Syria's northern border – into a unified Democratic Federation of Northern Syria. YPG/PYD officials privately acknowledge that many Syrians and officials in Damascus, Tehran and Ankara view the term “federalism” as provocative, because they fear that foreign-backed federal regions may give way to de facto (and eventually de jure) partition (as highlighted by the September 2017 independence referendum in Iraqi Kurdistan). The YPG/PYD froze implementation of its Federation transition when it postponed a third phase of elections planned for January 2018, and since then has deliberately shifted emphasis to advocating “decentralisation” rather than “federalism” per se. Crisis Group interviews, senior YPG/PYD officials, northern Syria, November 2015–July 2018.

⁸⁸ In 2017 and early 2018, YPG/PYD officials expressed willingness to negotiate with Damascus to address core issues of Syria's political future, including the constitution and the YPG/PYD's call for federalism. They distinguished between such strategic negotiations and ongoing tactical communications on issues of lower import. Their perception was that Damascus hoped to win significant concessions from the YPG/PYD in return for minor or temporary steps of its own, and emphasised that they had no interest in such transactions and would reserve their most valuable cards, including control of Deir al-Zour oil fields seized from ISIS in 2017, for negotiations on core issues. Crisis Group interviews, senior YPG/PYD officials, northern Syria, September 2017 and January 2018. Yet amid uncertainty over the future of the U.S. position, the YPG/PYD's interest in talks has increased. In July 2018, it negotiated with government representatives on a coordinated approach to operating (and replacing a turbine at) Tabqa dam; and on 27 July, a delegation representing the SDF's political umbrella, the Syrian Democratic Council, travelled to Damascus for talks with government officials (see below). YPG/PYD officials continue to doubt, however, that Damascus will negotiate on substantive political issues at this stage, and emphasise that they will maintain their own bottom-line position on decentralisation affording a significant degree of local autonomy. Crisis Group interviews, senior YPG/PYD officials, northern Syria, July 2018.

sions from the war's other protagonists.⁸⁹ They make clear, however, that maintaining a high degree of local autonomy in their core areas of control is a bottom-line demand they will not willingly concede, and they view the security sector as the most important component of that autonomy.⁹⁰

Thus, as seen in Afrin, the YPG/PYD signals willingness to place its military and security forces under the Syrian state's official auspices.⁹¹ But it rejects a return of the regime's security apparatus (which it and other regime opponents recognise as the primary tool of Assad's autocratic rule), and may choose to fight rather than allow Damascus to restore its security writ in SDF-held areas.⁹²

Moreover, the YPG/PYD's expressed openness to incorporating its forces within the framework of the Syrian state does not mean it is prepared to cede operational control thereof. YPG/PYD-affiliated military, security, political and governance bodies are dominated by a superstructure of PKK-trained cadres. Their power often far exceeds that suggested by their official titles, and in some cases they exercise real authority superseding that of nominally more senior non-cadre officials.⁹³ Thus, as both Damascus and Ankara recognise, placing these structures under the Syrian state's de jure command will not necessarily end the YPG's de facto control over them.

2. Damascus: central rule, beyond the law

The Syrian leadership has repeatedly declared its intention to reassert control over "every inch" of Syrian territory, including areas currently held by the SDF.⁹⁴ It holds out the possibility of accomplishing this goal via negotiations, while emphasising that, as elsewhere in Syria, it will resort to military force if necessary.⁹⁵

⁸⁹ Crisis Group interviews, YPG/PYD officials and advisers, northern Syria, June 2017-January 2018.

⁹⁰ Crisis Group interviews, senior YPG/PYD officials, northern Syria, January-July 2018.

⁹¹ YPG/PYD officials have expressed openness to incorporating YPG and SDF forces within the framework of the Syrian state as part of a negotiated political settlement. This flexibility was also incorporated within Article 15 of the Autonomous Administration's charter, available at <https://tinyurl.com/y7eyahp9>.

⁹² Crisis Group interviews, senior YPG/PYD officials, northern Syria, September 2017-January 2018. As a senior official put it during the Afrin negotiations in January 2018: "The red line in Afrin is a return of the regime's security services. Beyond Afrin [ie, the north east], in addition to the security service red line, there also needs to be a broader agreement on the future of Syria and the structure of the state".

⁹³ See Crisis Group Report, *The PKK's Fateful Choice* and Crisis Group Briefing, *Fighting ISIS: The Road to and beyond Raqqa*, op. cit.

⁹⁴ For example, responding to a question from French media about Raqqa (then controlled by ISIS) on 9 January 2017, Assad said, "of course it's our mission, according to the constitution and according to the laws, that we have to liberate every inch of Syrian land. There's no question about that. It's not to be discussed. But it's about when, what are our priorities But nationally, there's no priority; every inch is a Syrian inch, it should be within the purview of the government". See full transcript at <https://sana.sy/en/?p=97969>.

⁹⁵ As Assad said in a 31 May 2018 interview with *Russia Today*: "[T]he only problem left in Syria is the SDF. We're going to deal with it by two options: the first one, we started now opening doors for negotiations, because the majority of them are Syrians, and supposedly they like their country, they don't like to be puppets to any foreigners If not, we're going to resort to liberating by force, to liberating those areas by force. We don't have any other options, with the Americans or without the Americans". Full transcript available at <https://sana.sy/en/?p=139186>.

The leadership in Damascus has also repeatedly dismissed the prospect of federalism.⁹⁶ Assad describes federalism as “an introduction to partition”; citing Iraq as an example, he suggests that those advocating it aim “to produce a weak state, a weak government, a weak people and a weak homeland”.⁹⁷ From Damascus’s perspective, the fact that YPG control has enabled one foreign “occupation” (the U.S. presence in the north east) and precipitated another (Turkish intervention in Afrin) serves as case in point.⁹⁸ Regime officials also express frustration at what they describe as the YPG’s repeated refusal to acknowledge support it has received from Damascus.⁹⁹

Though its rejection of federalism is clear, the regime’s position on lighter forms of decentralisation is more ambiguous. In September 2017, Syria’s foreign minister, Walid al-Moallem, publicly suggested that the Kurdish desire for “some form of autonomous administration within the borders of the Syrian Arab Republic is a subject open to negotiation and discussion”.¹⁰⁰ That statement remains something of an outlier, however; Buthaina Shaaban, an adviser to Assad, walked it back in a subsequent interview, adding: “There cannot be any dialogue on, God forbid, partitioning or cutting off part of the country, or on what they call federalism”.¹⁰¹

Those statements leave space for a middle ground, at least in theory: between the highly centralised system of pre-2011 Assad rule and the YPG’s preference for a system so decentralised that it would arguably enable the regions to act as autonomous entities with de facto independence from the capital.¹⁰² The regime itself has trod tenta-

⁹⁶ See, for example, Assad’s 4 March 2017 interview with *Večernji List*, his 12 October 2016 interview with *Komsomolskaya Pravda* and his 30 March 2016 interview with *Ria Novosti*. While he describes the question of federalism as ultimately determined by the will of the people and subject to a constitutional referendum, he makes clear his rejection of the concept and says that the majority of the Syrian people, including Kurds, agree with him. As he explains in his 12 October 2016 interview: “Most Kurds want to live in a unified Syria, under a central system, not in a federal system. ... There might be other very small constituencies, not only the Kurds, who seek federalism. But the idea of federalism is not a general proposition in Syria; and I don’t believe that if it were put to the vote, it would be endorsed by the Syrian people”.

⁹⁷ See Assad’s 4 March 2017 interview with *Večernji List*, op. cit.

⁹⁸ Crisis Group interview, adviser to Assad, Damascus, February 2018.

⁹⁹ While YPG/PYD officials acknowledge that state employees in SDF-held areas still receiving salaries from the central government play a role in enabling governance in the north east, they generally deny or downplay – even in private – Damascus’s provision of military support (aside from the aforementioned developments in Afrin). For their part, Syrian officials describe military support from Damascus as essential in enabling the YPG/PYD to defeat jihadist and rebel forces prior to the U.S. intervention in Kobane in 2014. Crisis Group interviews, YPG/PYD officials, northern Syria, November 2015 to January 2018. Crisis Group interview, adviser to Assad, Damascus, February 2018.

¹⁰⁰ See Moallem’s 25 September 2017 interview with *Russia Today*, www.youtube.com/watch?v=SSRQ82O8ybI.

¹⁰¹ Shaaban also reiterated that the regime “will work to liberate every part of the Syrian Arab Republic”, and warned that “what happened in Iraq” – ie, the central government’s military response to the Kurdistan regional government’s September 2017 independence referendum – “should serve as a lesson to the SDF, and to all those who bet that the U.S. can perpetually support them in destroying [the country]”. See Shaaban’s 7 November 2017 interview with *Al-Mayadeen*, available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u8_FoWn_KMU.

¹⁰² While the regime (prior to 2011 and throughout the war) devolved some governance and service provision responsibilities to local officials, allied local notables and (since 2013) regime-approved

tively – and noncommittally – on the margins of that middle ground: in August 2011, it issued a new local administration law, Legislative Decree 107, as part of a package of ostensible reforms introduced before the uprising gave way to war. Though much of its meaningful content was never implemented, Decree 107 is notable for its rhetorical emphasis on decentralisation and its devolution of some administrative responsibilities to local bodies, albeit only on paper and even then under the authority of centrally appointed governors.¹⁰³

Yet in practice, the regime's structure and modus operandi pose major obstacles to exploration of a middle-ground solution. Syria under Hafez and Bashar al-Assad has been ruled via the internal intelligence services, which have the authority and capacity to interfere in matters big and small, including in seemingly mundane aspects of day-to-day local governance. The intelligence services not only wield power superseding that of other state institutions (including the judiciary and police), but indeed exercise authority over and through them, working both within the state's civil and military institutions and parallel to them. They can use the law as a tool, but have the prerogative to operate above and outside it. Within the Syrian system, their authority is constrained only by the presidential palace itself, the lone body to which they all answer, and which uses their overlapping jurisdictions as a means of checking and balancing among them.¹⁰⁴ The course of the war has complicated this system in ways that further limit the writ of the state's other institutions: Iran and Russia now play direct roles as additional power centres; an array of local and foreign militias have become key players on the ground; and the presidency's supervision of and capacity to rein in these bodies is not clear.

The absence of rule of law, a political reality that predates and was exacerbated by the conflict, further limits the utility of legal or even constitutional reform. It highlights to regime opponents the unreliability of Damascus's commitments and assurances, and the importance of maintaining military capacity and external alliances to protect themselves. The regime's handling of local truces during the war has underlined that point: while it agreed to deals in some places enabling opposition forces to maintain varying degrees of local control, it then often refrained from implementing key aspects of those agreements, and in some cases renewed threats and

NGOs, it has not devolved power as such, maintaining a high degree of central control over these subordinate actors via its security services and business-cum-militia networks. For background, see Kheder Khaddour, "I, the Supreme", Carnegie Middle East Center, 22 March 2017.

¹⁰³ For analysis of the law, its implementation in regime and opposition-held areas, and its potential ramifications in political negotiations, see Samer Araabi, "Syria's decentralization roadmap", Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 23 March 2017. Full text of the law is available at www.discover-syria.com/news/12167. A Syrian official acknowledged that Decree 107 has not been meaningfully implemented, citing the war as the main obstacle. Crisis Group interview, Damascus, February 2018.

¹⁰⁴ For more on Syria's rule by security services, see Volker Perthes, *The Political Economy of Syria Under Asad* (London, 1995) and "Syria under Bashar al-Asad: modernisation and the limits of change", The International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2004; and Maen Tallaa, "The Syrian security services and the need for structural and functional change", Omran Center for Strategic Studies, 14 July 2016.

attacks in order to improve terms (pushing toward surrender and the reassertion of full regime control) once it was in a position to do so.¹⁰⁵

3. Narrow ground for negotiation

The most significant gap between the YPG and regime positions can be boiled down to the fundamental question of the security sector: whose forces would exercise local control.¹⁰⁶ Other issues, while important and tricky to address, are secondary.¹⁰⁷ The YPG, for example, seeks to limit the regime's display of its symbols (including the Syrian flag), influence over service provision and the civil bureaucracy, and the use of its education curriculum in areas under SDF control; but the YPG has nonetheless accepted each of these in some locations and to certain degrees.¹⁰⁸ By the same token, Damascus seeks to restore these where it can, but does not view that as sufficient to fulfil its demand for a return of state sovereignty.¹⁰⁹

While security is the key issue, both sides largely treat it as zero-sum due to low trust and its centrality to governance. For the most part, areas of north east Syria are controlled either by the regime or by the YPG and its SDF allies, divided by a de facto internal border. Where there are exceptions – most notably in Qamishli – power is

¹⁰⁵ For specific examples in neighbourhoods within and adjacent to Damascus, see Siege Watch: "Fifth Quarterly Report on Besieged Areas in Syria" (and subsequent quarterly reports), Pax and the Syria Institute, March 2017.

¹⁰⁶ Crisis Group interviews, senior YPG/PYD officials, northern Syria, September 2017-January 2018. As noted above, a senior YPG/PYD official described the return of regime security services as a "red line". An adviser to Assad characterised the YPG/PYD's objective as de facto confederalism (though the YPG/PYD itself avoids that term), and as such completely unacceptable to Damascus. He highlighted the importance of the security sector in that context: "If we let the Kurds have their own security system, then it's a confederation". He suggested that allowing them to maintain local police might be acceptable. Crisis Group interview, Damascus, February 2018. In the Syrian system, local police enjoy minimal authority, as their role is dwarfed by that of the intelligence services.

¹⁰⁷ As a Kurdish analyst close to YPG/PYD leadership put it: "If the issue was just about ethnic rights, it would have been easier to work things out with the regime. They could have just given us rights to Kurdish language and education [and other acknowledgements of the Kurdish people], and it would have been settled. The regime even floated this, and said: 'What do you care about these other ethnic and religious groups?' But it's not just an ethnic issue. It's a democratic one, which makes it much harder to reach an understanding with Damascus". Crisis Group interview, Qamishli, July 2018. An adviser to Assad said: "Those within [Syrian] state security believe the Kurds should have full language rights. This includes education as long as it remains under the official Syrian curriculum. Syrian Kurdish political parties could also participate in the political system. This would eventually lessen their reliance on Kurdish militias and armed groups for empowerment". Crisis Group interview, Damascus, February 2018. Given that the current Syrian system entails highly centralised, authoritarian, single-party rule in which even state-approved "opposition" parties cannot meaningfully compete, such concessions fall far below what YPG/PYD officials describe as their bottom line.

¹⁰⁸ For example, Syrian flags and posters praising Assad's rule are prevalent in areas of Qamishli that, while nominally under government control, in practice are subject to the YPG's overall local dominance (see above). And even as the YPG/PYD has developed its own institutions and services parallel to those provided by the state, it has allowed some state services and civil institutions to continue to function in al-Jazeera canton [Hasaka province], and is negotiating with Damascus co-operation on managing electricity generation at Tabqa dam. Crisis Group observations and interviews, YPG/PYD officials and allied local officials, northern Syria, September 2017-July 2018.

¹⁰⁹ Crisis Group interview, adviser to Assad, Damascus, February 2018.

not so much shared as it is divided into geographic spheres of influence. For example, the regime's security presence in downtown Qamishli is largely symbolic, with both sides (and local residents) recognising that the YPG's overall dominance in the area essentially precludes regime forces from independent action. In contrast, the regime exercises real control over the Qamishli airport; those who fear its writ avoid the area.¹¹⁰

The importance of (and zero-sum approaches to) the security sector poses one major barrier to fruitful YPG-regime talks. Another, related, challenge concerns the content and timing of negotiations. Having seized most of Syria's oil and benefiting from significant yet likely temporary U.S. support, the YPG wants talks with Damascus to build toward serious negotiations on a political settlement's core components; seeks a combination of constitutional and external, in particular U.S., guarantees to protect against the regime reneging on its commitments; and wants to avoid squandering any of its leverage on temporary agreements or cooperation.¹¹¹

Damascus's preferences are the opposite: it has an interest in temporary deals and immediate cooperation, for example in resisting Turkish intervention and sharing benefits from SDF-held oil. But the regime wishes to delay negotiations on core, final-status issues, because it believes that its position relative to the YPG's will improve over time – due both to its own advances and the prospect of diminishing U.S. support and protection for the YPG.¹¹² Trump's expressed desire for a quick U.S. withdrawal – and apparent disregard for the military and political ramifications thereof – reinforces this regime preference and weakens the YPG's negotiating leverage.

Initial talks between the YPG/PYD/SDF and the regime have yielded only modest results. On 27 July 2018, a delegation representing the SDF's political umbrella, the Syrian Democratic Council, travelled to Damascus for discussions with government officials. While this visit represented increased direct contact between the sides, discussion focused on the service sector rather than on political and security portfolios.¹¹³

¹¹⁰ Crisis Group observations and interviews, local residents and YPG/PYD security officials, November 2015–July 2018.

¹¹¹ Crisis Group interviews, senior YPG/PYD officials, northern Syria, September 2017–January 2018. The YPG's intent to withhold significant concessions (particularly those that would be difficult to reverse) and insistence on external guarantees highlight the “problems of credible commitment” defined by U.S. political scientist Barbara Walter, “The Critical Barrier to Civil War Settlement”, *International Organization*, Summer 1997. The regime's own track record, and the incentives present in civil wars generally, both suggest that Damascus cannot be trusted to adhere to any compromise if and when a shift in the power balance enables it to take more by force. It would thus be risky for the YPG to agree to surrender significant leverage or military capacity, unless the agreement is backed by credible external guarantees that reneging (by either side) will be heavily penalised.

¹¹² Crisis Group interview, adviser to Assad, Damascus, February 2018.

¹¹³ The 27 July visit followed a low-profile round of local talks focused on the service sector in SDF-held Tabqa, site of an important Euphrates river dam which generates electricity for use in both SDF and regime-held areas. Discussions on a coordinated approach to replacing a turbine and operating the dam had foundered on the YPG/PYD's rejection of the Syrian government's demand that its own security forces be present at the dam, ostensibly to protect state employees who would be working there. Syrian officials reportedly withdrew that demand during the Damascus talks, opening the door to a mutually-beneficial arrangement at Tabqa. YPG/PYD officials say they will use the outcome and follow-through of these talks as a test of the regime's sincerity. See Ibrahim Hamidi, “دمشق والأكراد... وهم الرهان على موسكو وواشنطن”, *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 2 August 2018. Crisis Group interviews, senior YPG/PYD officials, northern Syria, July 2018.

A subsequent meeting in August delved into politics but revealed the breadth of the divide, with Damascus floating minor adjustments to local civil administration within the regime's current structure (including via holding the government's planned September local elections in SDF-held areas), while the YPG/PYD continued to insist on negotiations on Syria's constitution and more substantive decentralisation.¹¹⁴

Negotiating an arrangement meeting the bottom-line demands of the YPG (on local autonomy) and Damascus (on restoring state sovereignty and regime authority) will likely founder on the crucial issue of security control. Without heavy involvement of external actors, in particular Russia and the U.S., it appears unlikely that the two parties will be able to strike a viable deal addressing core issues of control and governance.

B. As in Afrin, Turkey Might Still Attack

Even if some accommodation is reached between the YPG/PYD and Damascus that averts a pro-regime offensive in the wake of a U.S. withdrawal from north-eastern Syria, it may be insufficient to convince Turkey to refrain from attacking. As suggested by events in Afrin, Turkey might not accept the return of the "Syrian state" as a sufficient outcome so long as the YPG's PKK-trained cadres maintain their strength on the ground; Turkey might take military action against the YPG without regard for the presence of pro-regime forces, so long as neither the U.S. nor Russia takes steps to deter it.

To Ankara, the YPG/PYD's subordination to the PKK leadership's command-and-control implicates it in attacks inside Turkey, and renders it a legitimate target of ongoing Turkish "counter-terrorism" operations.¹¹⁵ In conversations with Crisis Group, officials in Ankara have outlined two ways for the YPG/PYD to exit Turkey's crosshairs: sever ties and communications with the PKK, or persuade the PKK to cease its armed insurgency in (and withdraw its forces from) Turkey.¹¹⁶

A deal between Damascus and the YPG could provide a third option if it entailed a return of regime forces sufficient to suppress the YPG's capacity to operate along Turkey's border.¹¹⁷ But even in that scenario, lack of trust could still throw a spanner in the wheel. Hafez al-Assad provided shelter and support to Abdullah Öcalan and the PKK during the 1980s and 1990s, employing the organisation as a lever against

¹¹⁴ Crisis Group interviews, YPG/PYD officials, north-eastern Syria, August 2018. See also "Syrian Kurdish-led council visits Damascus for new talks: co-chair", Reuters, 13 August 2018.

¹¹⁵ Turkey also charges that the PKK has used weapons and fighters emanating from YPG-held areas of Syria in attacks in Turkey. The YPG/PYD dismisses these accusations, denies it has participated in military activity in Turkey and describes its conflict with Ankara as contained exclusively within Syria's borders. Crisis Group cannot confirm or rebut either side's claims, which are further clouded by the YPG/PYD's practice of shifting cadres between Syria and the northern Iraqi mountain base of Qandil, and the PKK's doing the same between Qandil and Turkey. Crisis Group interviews, YPG/PYD and Turkish officials, northern Syria and Ankara, November 2015-July 2018.

¹¹⁶ Crisis Group interviews, Turkish officials, Ankara, April 2015-July 2018. These officials note, however, that even if the YPG/PYD were to meet one of these conditions, the Turkish leadership's response would depend partly on domestic political calculations.

¹¹⁷ As noted above, Turkey does not believe the regime is strong enough to accomplish that on its own, and wants to prevent Iran-backed pro-regime forces from approaching its border. Crisis Group interviews, Turkish official, February and April 2018.

Turkey in their disputes over territory and water; this practice continued until Turkey threatened the regime with military action in 1998.¹¹⁸ Given the continued enmity between Damascus and Ankara, the latter would have reason to be wary that a new YPG-Damascus deal may once more turn PKK-aligned forces into a tool that the Syrian regime could wield against its neighbour.¹¹⁹ Russian backing for a YPG-Damascus deal might assuage Ankara, or at least deter it; but, as addressed in Section III, Moscow's competing priorities on this issue render its decision-making difficult to predict.

In declaring victory in Afrin, Erdoğan referred to a series of YPG-controlled cities along the border as potential targets: "After this, we will continue now to Manbij, Ayn al-Arab [Kobane], Tel Abyadh, Ras al-Ain and Qamishli, until this corridor is fully removed".¹²⁰ These words may have been a boast rather than a vow, but today's hyperbole may become tomorrow's credible threat if the U.S. withdraws its forces from north-east Syria in the absence of a viable negotiated arrangement. In that scenario, the YPG-held, Arab-majority cities of Manbij and Tel Abyadh appear especially vulnerable to Turkish attack, given their political and strategic value and Ankara's rhetorical emphasis on ending YPG control of non-Kurdish areas.¹²¹

¹¹⁸ See Soner Cagaptay and Tyler Evens, "The end of Pax Adana", *Hürriyet Daily News*, 25 August 2012; and Mahmut Bali Aykan, "The Turkish-Syrian Crisis of October 1998: A Turkish View", *Middle East Policy*, vol. 6, no. 4 (June 1999).

¹¹⁹ As noted above, the Syrian leadership continues to view Ankara as an opponent. Damascus also recognises the YPG as a potential asset to be deployed against Turkey, even as it asserts its own potential role in addressing Turkish concerns. An adviser to Assad said: "We are dealing with two occupations – by the U.S. and by Turkey – and the Kurds are a natural force, or resistance, against the Turkish occupation. At the same time, it is also in Turkey's interest for Syrian government control to be reinstated in the area, at least to defuse PKK aspirations". Crisis Group interview, Damascus, February 2018.

¹²⁰ Quoted by Reuters, 19 March 2018.

¹²¹ Crisis Group interview, Turkish official, April 2018. Turkish officials often cite the YPG/PYD's control of non-Kurdish areas as a top concern. See, for example, "Turkey will 'hand Manbij to Arab owners' after expelling YPG: Erdoğan", *Hürriyet Daily News*, 6 February 2018. While ethnic rivalry makes for an effective talking point, it is difficult to determine to what extent it is an actual priority. In any case, Ankara's focus on Manbij can be viewed in the context of Turkey's foothold in adjacent Euphrates Shield areas and rejection of YPG control west of the Euphrates; Tel Abyadh's importance lies in the potential for a Turkish advance through the city (toward Raqqa) to eventually cut off Kobane and adjacent areas from the core of YPG control in Syria's north east.

V. Averting New War

A precipitous U.S. withdrawal could ignite a violent struggle over Syria's north east. That fighting would likely be a boon for remaining jihadists seeking a comeback but a danger for all other stakeholders – because of the jihadist threat but also because of the perils inherent in escalating conflict among competing forces. The best chance to avoid such an outcome is through negotiated arrangements mutually tolerable to Damascus, the YPG/PYD and Ankara prior to a U.S. exit, with Washington and Moscow serving as co-guarantors.

A. *Charting a Way Forward*

The U.S. can and should take the first step. The Trump administration should apply the president's March 2018 comments (and the resulting uncertainty) constructively, by resetting its policy in north-eastern Syria based on a set of clearly communicated pillars. The U.S. should signal that:

- ❑ It is committed to Syria's territorial integrity, and its military presence in the country's north east is a temporary measure aiming only to achieve stability and prevent a jihadist resurgence. U.S. forces in Syria will not be used against Iran or Russia, and will direct fire at pro-regime forces only in instances of self-defence (of U.S. and partner forces). The U.S. does not want to see north-eastern Syria turned into a theatre of confrontation with Iran.
- ❑ The U.S. is committed to ending its military presence in Syria, and will begin doing so as conditions stabilise. It is prepared to initiate a troop withdrawal upon attainment of a negotiated arrangement mutually tolerable to the SDF, Damascus, Moscow and Ankara that addresses key questions of control and governance following its withdrawal. A U.S. troop withdrawal and removal of security guarantees would then be gradual and conditional, subject to that agreement's implementation.
- ❑ Through its engagement in north east Syria, the U.S. will enable and encourage local governance that is sufficiently capable and representative to win broad local buy-in (and thus better positioned to withstand destabilisation campaigns). Toward that end, the U.S. will work with the YPG/PYD, SDF, civil governance councils and local communities to define a clear process for shifting decision-making authority in local governance from the YPG/PYD's cadre power structure to civil councils led and staffed by capable residents reflecting the diversity of their locales. The U.S. (and allies channelling assistance through U.S.-backed programming) will condition a significant portion of its stabilisation support on the implementation of this local empowerment process.

Russia's role will also be essential, as its military power in Syria and alliance with Damascus position it to serve alongside the U.S. as a co-guarantor capable of both influencing the Syrian leadership and addressing its concerns. By helping negotiate and guarantee such a settlement, Moscow could avoid a potentially costly, destabilising free-for-all in the north east, while enhancing its international stature and establishing a vehicle (and momentum) toward improved relations with the U.S.

For their part, Damascus and Tehran should resist the temptation to use military force or insurgent proxies to press the U.S. toward withdrawal. Such attacks would

likely backfire by strengthening hawkish voices in Washington and/or eliciting U.S. counter-escalation. Negotiations along the lines outlined here offer better prospects for achieving an eventual withdrawal of U.S. forces at lower risk and cost.

Members of the U.S.-led anti-ISIS coalition, in particular Gulf and European countries, should continue to increase support for the stabilisation mission. Stepping up their investment in demining, health, education and the restoration of critical services in areas the SDF has captured from ISIS will save lives and improve countless others. It may also prove crucial in convincing Trump that Washington's allies will share in the burdens of ensuring that north-eastern Syria's future is not hijacked by renewed warfare or jihadists now lying low. These donor states should also coordinate with Washington and among themselves to define and implement the conditionality described above.

A U.S. decision to condition withdrawal on the achievement and implementation of a mutually tolerable arrangement might tempt the YPG/PYD to stall in arriving at one, in an effort to extend U.S. protection without making the concessions such an arrangement would entail. That would be a mistake: the YPG/PYD should recognise the White House's limited patience and avoid providing cause for Washington to revert to an unconditional, precipitous withdrawal.

In the meantime, the SDF (and its YPG command) should end compulsory conscription that, particularly in Arab-majority areas, fuels local grievances and could ultimately prove destabilising.

B. *Potential Pillars of a Mutually Tolerable Arrangement for North-east Syria*

Achieving a negotiated arrangement that would minimise risks of a violent eruption in north-east Syria may ultimately require progress on two distinct tracks: between the YPG/PYD (along with allied components of the SDF) and Damascus, and between the Öcalanists (YPG/PYD and/or PKK) and Ankara.

A YPG/PYD deal with Damascus should focus on decentralisation within the framework of the Syrian state. Prospects for sustaining it would improve significantly if the U.S. and Russia serve as formal or informal guarantors. It could include:

- ❑ Restoration of the state's flag and civil institutions to SDF-held areas, and delineation of authorities between Damascus and local governments. Decree 107 could serve as a starting point, but would require adjustments (such as shifting authority from centrally appointed governors to local elected institutions).
- ❑ Restoration of state control over international borders, via the deployment of border guards and crossing personnel under Damascus's command.
- ❑ Official incorporation of SDF military structures and allied local security bodies within the framework of the Syrian state, perhaps under the title of national guard or internal security forces. These would fall under Damascus's sovereignty, but retain their existing command-and-control structures within north-eastern Syria. In return for incorporation of these structures within the state, Damascus would commit to refraining from deploying the regime's internal intelligence bodies, other army units and militias to these areas.

- Sharing of revenue from oil and gas extraction. Ideally, revenue would be distributed among Syria's provinces proportionate to population (and as part of a whole-of-Syria political resolution).¹²² At a minimum, revenue should be shared between local governing authorities (in areas currently held by the SDF) and Damascus, reflecting the balance between the former's local control (in accordance with the decentralised security arrangement described above) and Damascus's capacity to refine fuel and access external markets.
- Russia and the U.S. should serve as the agreement's de facto co-guarantors, enabling both Syrian sides to overcome low trust. The prospect that Moscow or Washington might react to a violation of the deal could provide some reassurance to the parties.

Separately, the U.S. and Russia should encourage a gradual accommodation between the Öcalanists (YPG/PYD and PKK) and Ankara. Prospects for a breakthrough currently appear dim, but Washington could help improve them by encouraging its YPG/PYD ally to proactively consider a key decision point looming in its future.

As Crisis Group has previously argued, it will be difficult for the YPG/PYD to retain its dominant role in north-east Syria and deeply intertwined linkage with the PKK while the latter continues its insurgency against the Turkish state. U.S. protection of the YPG has enabled this for the time being, but the realities of Turkey's military power and Washington's strategic imperative to maintain its alliance with Ankara suggest the situation could be difficult to sustain.

To reduce risk of a costly fight that could endanger all it has built in Syria, the YPG/PYD should consider how it prioritises those three current aspects of Öcalanist activity (its foothold in north-east Syria; ties to the PKK; and the current confrontation with the Turkish state). In the event of a U.S. withdrawal in particular, attempting to maintain all three carries high risk.

But pursuing two may be feasible. If the YPG/PYD is willing to submit to Damascus's control in north-eastern Syria, the risk of Turkish attack would drop even if PKK attacks and the YPG-PKK linkage continue. Alternatively, the YPG/PYD could attempt to maintain a lead role in the north east while reducing risk of Turkish attack by either severing its ties to the PKK (including an end to the movement of cadres between Syria and Qandil) or convincing the PKK itself to halt attacks in Turkey.

None of these steps would be easy or fool-proof. Allowing Damascus to assert control could ultimately cost the YPG/PYD/SDF the autonomy it has achieved, and might conceivably still prove insufficient to deter Turkish attack if Moscow withheld or removed its backing. That said, if successful, it might allow the YPG to preserve some gains, albeit subject to the approval of Damascus and its backers. Likewise, for the YPG/PYD to cut its ties with the PKK would be very tricky, given the depth of organisational, personal and ideological links, and the difficulty of demonstrating that these have been severed. And a PKK decision to halt armed insurgency in Turkey appears unpalatable to PKK leaders and cadres unless matched by reciprocal steps from Ankara demonstrating that broadly held priorities among Turkey's Kurdish population (including official recognition of cultural rights) and the PKK's demand

¹²² For additional discussion, see Jihad Yazigi, "No going back: why decentralization is the future for Syria", European Council on Foreign Relations, September 2016.

for decentralisation can and will be addressed at the negotiating table and via the Turkish political process. That is difficult to imagine under current political conditions in Turkey, though the Turkish leadership could encourage mutually beneficial steps by clarifying that it is prepared to respond favourably to a cut of YPG/PKK ties or a halt in PKK attacks, and by quickly following through once the YPG/PYD and/or PKK begin to implement either of them.

The U.S. has gained significant influence over YPG/PYD leaders from its presence and security guarantees, and from the trust and relationships built through close cooperation in the fight against ISIS. Washington should employ that influence to push the YPG/PYD to confront this difficult decision. Depending on the path the YPG/PYD chooses, the U.S. could have an important role to play in mediating with Ankara and in helping both sides overcome mutual lack of trust.

VI. Conclusion

The recommendations outlined here will not be easy to put into practice. They ask north-eastern Syria's protagonists to jolt themselves out of their current political (and, in some cases, military) inertia, in a violent, highly complex and competitive environment. But if they fail to do so, the alternatives could be bleak. The Syrian war – and the U.S.-backed SDF campaign in the north east in particular – has dramatically altered the region's social fabric and political geography, while stoking trans-border and local tensions along old and new fault lines. No one should entertain the illusion that the disputes described above will simply sort themselves out, or that the costs of attempting to resolve them by force can be safely predicted, much less contained or absorbed.

There is real potential for an explosion of violence in north-eastern Syria. The best chance to defuse it lies in negotiating mutually tolerable arrangements prior to a U.S. withdrawal.

Brussels/Ankara/Washington, 5 September 2018

Appendix A: Map of SDF-controlled Areas in Syria



Appendix B: About the International Crisis Group

The International Crisis Group (Crisis Group) is an independent, non-profit, non-governmental organisation, with some 120 staff members on five continents, working through field-based analysis and high-level advocacy to prevent and resolve deadly conflict.

Crisis Group's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts are located within or close by countries or regions at risk of outbreak, escalation or recurrence of violent conflict. Based on information and assessments from the field, it produces analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international, regional and national decision-takers. Crisis Group also publishes *CrisisWatch*, a monthly early-warning bulletin, providing a succinct regular update on the state of play in up to 70 situations of conflict or potential conflict around the world.

Crisis Group's reports are distributed widely by email and made available simultaneously on its website, www.crisisgroup.org. Crisis Group works closely with governments and those who influence them, including the media, to highlight its crisis analyses and to generate support for its policy prescriptions.

The Crisis Group Board of Trustees – which includes prominent figures from the fields of politics, diplomacy, business and the media – is directly involved in helping to bring the reports and recommendations to the attention of senior policymakers around the world. Crisis Group is chaired by former UN Deputy Secretary-General and Administrator of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Lord (Mark) Malloch-Brown.

Crisis Group's President & CEO, Robert Malley, took up the post on 1 January 2018. Malley was formerly Crisis Group's Middle East and North Africa Program Director and most recently was a Special Assistant to former U.S. President Barack Obama as well as Senior Adviser to the President for the Counter-ISIL Campaign, and White House Coordinator for the Middle East, North Africa and the Gulf region. Previously, he served as President Bill Clinton's Special Assistant for Israeli-Palestinian Affairs.

Crisis Group's international headquarters is in Brussels, and the organisation has offices in seven other locations: Bogotá, Dakar, Istanbul, Nairobi, London, New York, and Washington, DC. It has presences in the following locations: Abuja, Algiers, Bangkok, Beirut, Caracas, Gaza City, Guatemala City, Hong Kong, Jerusalem, Johannesburg, Juba, Mexico City, New Delhi, Rabat, Tbilisi, Toronto, Tripoli, Tunis, and Yangon.

Crisis Group receives financial support from a wide range of governments, foundations, and private sources. Currently Crisis Group holds relationships with the following governmental departments and agencies: Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Austrian Development Agency, Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, European Union Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace, European Commission, Directorate General for Neighbourhood Enlargement Negotiations, Finnish Ministry for Foreign Affairs, French Development Agency, French Ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs, Irish Aid, Japan International Cooperation Agency, Principality of Liechtenstein, Luxembourg Ministry of Foreign Affairs, New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs.

Crisis Group also holds relationships with the following foundations: Carnegie Corporation of New York, Heinrich Böll Stiftung, Henry Luce Foundation, John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, Korea Foundation, Oak Foundation, Omidyar Network Fund, Open Society Foundations, Ploughshares Fund, Robert Bosch Stiftung, Rockefeller Brothers Fund, and Wellspring Philanthropic Fund.

September 2018

Appendix C: Reports and Briefings on the Middle East and North Africa since 2015

Special Reports

Exploiting Disorder: al-Qaeda and the Islamic State, Special Report N°1, 14 March 2016 (also available in Arabic and French).

Seizing the Moment: From Early Warning to Early Action, Special Report N°2, 22 June 2016.

Counter-terrorism Pitfalls: What the U.S. Fight against ISIS and al-Qaeda Should Avoid, Special Report N°3, 22 March 2017.

Israel/Palestine

The Status of the Status Quo at Jerusalem's Holy Esplanade, Middle East Report N°159, 30 June 2015 (also available in Arabic and Hebrew).

No Exit? Gaza & Israel Between Wars, Middle East Report N°162, 26 August 2015 (also available in Arabic).

How to Preserve the Fragile Calm at Jerusalem's Holy Esplanade, Middle East Briefing N°48, 7 April 2016 (also available in Arabic and Hebrew).

Israel/Palestine: Parameters for a Two-State Settlement, Middle East Report N°172, 28 November 2016 (also available in Arabic).

Israel, Hizbollah and Iran: Preventing Another War in Syria, Middle East Report N°182, 8 February 2018 (also available in Arabic).

Averting War in Gaza, Middle East Briefing N°60, 20 July 2018 (also available in Arabic).

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Arming Iraq's Kurds: Fighting IS, Inviting Conflict, Middle East Report N°158, 12 May 2015 (also available in Arabic).

Lebanon's Self-Defeating Survival Strategies, Middle East Report N°160, 20 July 2015 (also available in Arabic).

New Approach in Southern Syria, Middle East Report N°163, 2 September 2015 (also available in Arabic).

Arsal in the Crosshairs: The Predicament of a Small Lebanese Border Town, Middle East Briefing N°46, 23 February 2016 (also available in Arabic).

Russia's Choice in Syria, Middle East Briefing N°47, 29 March 2016 (also available in Arabic).

Steps Toward Stabilising Syria's Northern Border, Middle East Briefing N°49, 8 April 2016 (also available in Arabic).

Fight or Flight: The Desperate Plight of Iraq's "Generation 2000", Middle East Report N°169, 8 August 2016 (also available in Arabic).

Hizbollah's Syria Conundrum, Middle East Report N°175, 14 March 2017 (also available in Arabic and Farsi).

Fighting ISIS: The Road to and beyond Raqqa, Middle East Briefing N°53, 28 April 2017 (also available in Arabic).

The PKK's Fateful Choice in Northern Syria, Middle East Report N°176, 4 May 2017 (also available in Arabic).

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Iraq's Paramilitary Groups: The Challenge of Rebuilding a Functioning State, Middle East Report N°188, 30 July 2018 (also available in Arabic).

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Libya: Getting Geneva Right, Middle East and North Africa Report N°157, 26 February 2015 (also available in Arabic).

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Algeria and Its Neighbours, Middle East and North Africa Report N°164, 12 October 2015 (also available in French and Arabic).

The Prize: Fighting for Libya's Energy Wealth, Middle East and North Africa Report N°165, 3 December 2015 (also available in Arabic).

Tunisia: Transitional Justice and the Fight Against Corruption, Middle East and North Africa Report N°168, 3 May 2016 (also available in Arabic and French).

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The Libyan Political Agreement: Time for a Reset, Middle East and North Africa Report N°170, 4 November 2016 (also available in Arabic).

Algeria's South: Trouble's Bellwether, Middle East and North Africa Report N°171, 21 November 2016 (also available in Arabic and French).

Blocked Transition: Corruption and Regionalism in Tunisia, Middle East and North Africa Report N°177, 10 May 2017 (only available in French and Arabic).

How the Islamic State Rose, Fell and Could Rise Again in the Maghreb, Middle East and North Africa Report N°178, 24 July 2017 (also available in Arabic and French).

How Libya's Fezzan Became Europe's New Border, Middle East and North Africa Report N°179, 31 July 2017 (also available in Arabic).

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Yemen at War, Middle East Briefing N°45, 27 March 2015 (also available in Arabic).

Iran After the Nuclear Deal, Middle East Report N°166, 15 December 2015 (also available in Arabic).

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The Iran Nuclear Deal at Two: A Status Report, Middle East Report N°181, 16 January 2018 (also available in Arabic and Farsi).

Iran's Priorities in a Turbulent Middle East, Middle East Report N°184, 13 April 2018 (also available in Arabic).

How Europe Can Save the Iran Nuclear Deal, Middle East Report N°185, 2 May 2018 (also available in Persian and Arabic).

Yemen: Averting a Destructive Battle for Hodeida, Middle East Briefing N°59, 11 June 2018.

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