



TURKEY: THE KURDISH FACTOR AND THE IMPERATIVE OF SECURITY

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When Turkey decided to join the US-led coalition against the Islamic State (IS) in Syria and Iraq in July 2015, Ankara's real target were not IS militants, but the Syrian Kurdish forces. Turkey aimed at avoiding the establishment of Kurdish self-ruled areas in northern Syria, close to its southern border. After almost four years, this remains its main objective in Syria. Indeed, for Ankara such Kurdish autonomy represents a major threat to its national security, as it considers the Democratic Union Party (PYD) and its militias, the People's Protection Units (YPG), as a branch of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), the separatist organisation that has conducted terrorist activity in Turkey for more than thirty years.

From Ankara's point of view, the creation of Kurdish self-ruled regions, both in Syria and northern Iraq, would represent "safe zones" from which terrorists could carry out attacks against the Turkish territory and a potential catalyst for Turkish Kurds' demands for autonomy. Therefore, it is not surprising that the Kurdish factor has dominated Turkey's policy in Syria, and in northern Iraq, over the past few years. However, it has also been a major issue of contention with the United States, due to their logistic and financial support to the YPG, which has been Washington's primary ally in the fight against IS in Syria. These differing views on the YPG have deeply affected relations between the two NATO allies in the past few years.

At the same time, in an attempt to preserve its own vital interests in a deteriorating regional environment, Ankara has gotten closer to Russia, which has emerged as the main power broker in the Syrian conflict. Only with Moscow's blessing, was Turkey able to launch two different military operations – Euphrates Shield in 2016 and Olive Branch in the Syrian Kurdish canton of Afrin in 2018 – in order to

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establish two buffer zones in northern Syria and to impede the territorial contiguity of Kurdish areas. In this context, the presence of US troops in the north-eastern part of the country has been considered an obstacle to Turkey's plan to completely clear the Kurdish militias from its border with Syria. Turkish President Recep Erdogan warned the US on multiple occasions to stop supporting the YPG and cooperate with Turkey. However, while in June 2018 Ankara and Washington had reached an agreement on a roadmap for the withdrawal of YPG troops from the Syrian city of Manbij, this has not been implemented yet.

Against this backdrop, Ankara hailed President Donald Trump's announcement of US troops' withdrawal from Syria last December. Indeed, this was perceived as an opportunity to have free hand and to fill the vacuum left by Washington in order to establish a safe zone extending 32 kilometres from the Turkish border on the east of Euphrates. This would serve not only to secure Turkey from the YPG, but also to settle millions of Syrian refugees that live in Turkey in this zone. However, as Turkey is not the only external player aiming at taking advantage of the US' departure, its ambition soon clashed with other, conflicting, interests. In this context, the United States' declared withdrawal is turning out to be more of a risk rather than an opportunity for Ankara. First, Washington has not acceded the Turkish plans for the establishment of a safe zone, on which there is no common understanding, and has asked for guarantees for its Kurdish allies. Furthermore, while opposition to the US presence was a common interest within the Astana process between Turkey, on one side, and Russia and Iran, on the other, the removal of this unifying factor has opened a Pandora's box, allowing further divergences to emerge.

However, while on one side Turkish authorities would like to coordinate the withdrawal of US troops with Washington, on the other Turkey's actions in Syria cannot overlook Russia. Even in this case, Turkey needs Moscow's imprimatur to establish a buffer zone in the area to the east of Euphrates, which has become a very contentious issue. Over the past few months, dialogue and diplomatic activity between Ankara and Moscow have intensified, and included Erdogan's visit to Russia to meet with President Vladimir Putin. However, Russia's green light is unlikely to arrive this time. While in several occasions Moscow indulged Ankara's moves, the two players' interests are currently too far to converge in the Syrian scenario. Kremlin's ultimate goal in Syria is to reinstate Bashar al-Assad regime's control of all Syrian territory, including the Kurdish controlled areas in the north-east of the country. In mid-January, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov clearly asserted that this part of the country should return under the regime's control and that the Kurds in the region should find a sort of accommodation with Damascus, without explaining what this would entail. Differently from Turkey, the Kremlin has never considered the PYD, and YPG, as terrorist organisations.

In addition, Russia's statement warning that the establishment of a safe zone has to be agreed with the Assad regime further complicates Turkey's position. Indeed, this does not seem to be an option on the table for Erdogan, as Ankara has supported regime change in Damascus, as well as a plethora of opposition forces. In view of a future post-conflict settlement, Russia's move may be seen as an attempt to press Turkey to soften its stance towards Damascus, whose main sponsor remains Moscow, and to curb Turkish aspirations. On its side, Turkey is aware of the



fact that eventually it has to come to a compromise with the Assad regime, but the time for compromise is not ripe yet. Ankara wants a security zone in Syria to be under its exclusive control, but is facing increasing difficulties in achieving its goal. Furthermore, recent developments in

Syria, including the rapprochement of some Sunni countries (mainly United Arab Emirates and Egypt) with Bashar al-Assad, do not play in Turkey's favour and its influence in the Syrian scenario seems to be at stake.