

Whither the Syrian Kurds?

by Spyridon Plakoudas and Wojciech Michnik

On October 9, 2019, the Turkish army and its proxy Syrian National Army (SNA) invaded the autonomous Kurdish region in northeastern Syria, or Rojava as it is known to Kurds.¹ Accompanied by a White House clarification that U.S. forces in the area would not resist the Turkish incursion and would be shortly withdrawn from Syria, Operation Peace Spring, as the Turkish invasion was codenamed, kindled immediate accusations of Washington's betrayal of its loyal Kurdish ally.²



The Turkish invasion into the autonomous Kurdish region in northeastern Syria, October 9, 2019, kindled immediate accusations of Washington's betrayal of its loyal Kurdish ally.

In reality, this move by the Trump administration was a corollary of the incoherent and contradictory policy vis-à-vis the Syrian civil war in general, and the fight against the self-proclaimed Islamic State (ISIS) in particular, bequeathed by the Obama administration to its successor. This culminated in a narrow counterterrorism strategy that relied heavily on the Kurds for fighting the Islamist terror organization while giving little thought to the implications of this strategy for Kurdish relations with the Assad regime and Turkey.³ As a result, Operation Peace Spring threw the most stable and

1 Metin Gurcan, "Turkey has multiphase game plan for Syria operation," *Al-Monitor* (Washington, D.C.), Oct. 10, 2019; Voice of America (VOA), Sept. 11, 2019.

2 Associated Press, Oct. 7, 2019; Steven A. Cook, "There's Always a Next Time to Betray the Kurds," *Foreign Policy*, Oct. 11, 2019; Peter Wehner, "Trump Betrayed the Kurds. He Couldn't Help Himself," *The Atlantic*, Oct. 15, 2019; Amberin Zaman, "Who Betrayed Syria's Kurds?" *Al-Monitor*, Oct. 21, 2019.

3 Aaron Stein, "The Roadmap to Nowhere: Manbij, Turkey and America's Dilemma in Syria," *War on the Rocks*, June 29, 2018.

peaceful corner of Syria into disarray and set in train a “scramble for the Syrian Kurdistan” that seems to have closed the lid on Kurdish hopes for autonomous, if not independent existence.

Some Trump advisors viewed support for the Syrian Kurds as within the strategy of “maximum pressure” against Tehran.

A Tangled Web

On the face of it, President Trump’s withdrawal decision should not have come as a surprise given his electoral campaign pledge to reduce substantially the nearly 200,000 U.S. military personnel stationed overseas, of which the roughly 2,000 troops in northern Syria were but a tiny fraction.⁴ Predominantly involved in training the allied Kurdish militias, this force was of little military significance, as Rojava’s landlocked position rendered it captive to the surrounding local powers (Turkey, Iraq, and Syria) and made its defense dependent on large-scale external support.⁵

Oscillating between supporting its recent non-state, anti-ISIS collaborators, the Kurds, or backing Turkey, its longstanding NATO ally, the Trump administration opted for the latter. Eager to make good on his electoral promise, the president was ready to implement the Syria withdrawal as early as October 2017 after the fall of ISIS’s “capital city” of Raqqa to the Kurdish People’s Protection Units (YPG) militia, the military arm of the Democratic Union Party (PYD), but he was dissuaded by senior members of

his administration. Opposition to the idea intensified in subsequent months following John Bolton’s appointment as national security advisor and Mike Pompeo’s appointment as secretary

of state. Both viewed support for the Syrian Kurds as fitting neatly within the strategy of “maximum pressure” against Tehran by blocking its efforts to establish a land corridor from the Iranian border to the Mediterranean Sea and denying its client, the Assad regime, the oil and wheat necessary for its successful recovery.⁶

This view, however, failed to grasp the intensity of Turkey’s resentment of the nascent Kurdish entity on its southern border. Ruled by the PYD, which Ankara viewed as the Syrian offshoot of the PKK (Kurdistan Workers’ Party), a U.S.-designated terrorist organization that had been fighting the Turkish government for decades, the Turks feared that the autonomous Rojava entity would further radicalize their own restive Kurdish minority:⁷ hence their repeated incursions into northern Syria and their determination to establish a 300-mile-long buffer zone (euphemized as “peace corridor”) along their southern border from Afrin in the west to the Turkish-Syrian-Iraqi border in the east. This corridor was to be subsequently colonized by Sunni Arab settlers who would

⁴ *The Washington Post*, June 21, 2020; *The Guardian* (London), Nov. 24, 2017.

⁵ Bryan R. Gibson, “The Secret Origins of the U.S. Kurdish Relationship Explain Today’s Disaster,” *Foreign Policy*, Oct. 14, 2019.

⁶ “Operation Inherent Resolve: Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress, July 1, 2019–October 25, 2019,” U.S. Department of Defense, Washington, D.C., Nov. 19, 2019, p. 27; Lara Seligman, “How the Iran Hawks Botched Trump’s Syria Withdrawal,” *Foreign Policy*, Oct. 30, 2019.

⁷ Can Acun and Bünyamin Keskin, “The PKK’s Branch in Northern Syria: PYD-YPG,” SETA Ankara, 2017.

gradually displace the ethnic Kurds in this territory.⁸

While Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan repeatedly signaled the depth of his Kurdish concerns to Washington, going so far as to flirt occasionally with Russian president Vladimir Putin,⁹ both the Obama and Trump administrations failed to adopt a coherent policy that reconciled their military reliance on the Syrian Kurds with Ankara's concerns. Matters got to a head in August 2016 when, in contrast to Secretary of State John Kerry's promises, Kurdish YPG forces failed to leave the key northeastern city of Manbij, which they had taken from ISIS a couple of months earlier. This resulted in clashes between the Kurdish militia and Turkish forces that had invaded Syria as part of Operation Euphrates Shield (August 2016-March 2017). And while a ceasefire was quickly reached, tensions in the region remained unabated as the Trump administration sustained its predecessor's close relationship with the PYD/YPG, even strengthening the Kurdish militia ahead of



On December 18, 2018, Trump reportedly agreed, during a phone conversation with Turkey's Erdoğan (left) to withdraw all U.S. forces from northern Syria. Aides convinced Trump, instead, to cut the U.S. presence in Syria to a few hundred troops.

the Raqqa offensive.¹⁰

In these circumstances, it was hardly surprising that Erdoğan interpreted Washington's aloofness toward yet another large-scale Turkish incursion into northern Syria (Operation Olive Branch, January-March 2018) as a green light to change the Manbij status quo. This culminated in June 2018 in the "Manbij roadmap" that envisaged the Kurdish YPG's withdrawal from the city, whose security was to be protected against ISIS's return through U.S.-Turkish collaboration backed by trusted local forces.¹¹

As the roadmap failed to end control of Manbij by the Kurdish Democratic Union Party, Ankara kept pressuring Washington to curb the perceived strengthening of

8 Asli Aydintaşbaş, "A New Gaza: Turkey's Border Policy in Northern Syria," European Council for Foreign Relations, London, 2020; Spyridon Plakoudas, "The Syrian Kurds and the Democratic Union Party: The Outsider in the Syrian War," *Mediterranean Quarterly*, Mar. 2017, pp. 111-2.

9 Maxim Suchkov, "Russia and Turkey: Flexible Rivals," Carnegie Moscow Center, Mar. 20, 2020.

10 Kilic Bugra Kanat and Jackson Hanon, "The Manbij Roadmap and the Future of U.S.-Turkey Relations," Middle East Policy Council, Washington, D.C., Fall 2018, pp. 111-23.

11 Patrick Cockburn, *War in the Age of Trump: The Defeat of ISIS, the Fall of the Kurds, the Conflict with Iran* (London: Verso, 2020), p. 26; Reuters, June 4, 2018.

the Rojava Kurdish autonomy. These efforts seemed to have borne the desired fruit on December 18, 2018, when Trump reportedly agreed, during a phone conversation with Erdoğan, to withdraw U.S. forces from northern Syria. “We have defeated ISIS in Syria, my only reason for being there during the Trump presidency,” Trump tweeted the next day.¹²

Just as in October 2017, the president’s withdrawal decision took his advisors by surprise, and as in the previous instance, they managed to dissuade him from this move, albeit not from slashing the U.S. presence in Syria to a few hundred troops. This proved to be the worst of all worlds, leading to the angry resignation of Secretary of Defense James Mattis and alienating the Kurds, who feared that the diluted U.S. presence would invite Turkish and/or ISIS aggression, without mending the fences with Ankara.¹³ The administration’s attempt to appease Turkey by acceding to a buffer zone to be jointly patrolled by Turkish-U.S. forces was interpreted by Erdoğan as acquiescence in his planned invasion of Rojava,¹⁴ and on October 6, 2019, he phoned Trump, who acquiesced in the imminent Turkish move and agreed to withdraw the remaining U.S. forces from northern Syria.¹⁵

Whether Trump just “went off script” now that Bolton was not by his side (having been fired via Twitter the previous month) as a “well-placed senior U.S. military source”

In a desperate bid to save face, Trump leaked his infamous “don’t be a tough guy” letter to Erdoğan.

told Fox News,¹⁶ or sought to avoid a new Syrian entanglement at a time when a major crisis was brewing on the Russian-Ukrainian border, the withdrawal decision represented his clear preference

for Washington’s longtime Turkish ally over the ad hoc U.S.-Kurdish partnership. As James Jeffrey, the U.S. special representative for Syria engagement, told a Senate hearing, Washington’s relationship with the Syrian Kurds had always been “temporary, tactical, and transactional” and under no circumstances had the administration offered guarantees of “indefinite protection” from Turkey, Russia, or the Assad regime.¹⁷

Winners and Losers

While the withdrawal decision seemed a matter of time given Trump’s electoral promises and “America First” approach, its timing, lack of contingency planning, and manner of execution created a perfect storm. As news spread about war crimes committed by the Turkish army and its proxy Syrian National Army as well as the displacement of thousands of Kurds, an international media outcry ensued. Some European Union and NATO members imposed an arms embargo on Turkey, and even the U.S. administration succumbed to congressional pressure and decreed minor sanctions against Ankara. In a desperate bid to save face, on October 16, Trump leaked his infamous “don’t be a tough guy” letter to Erdoğan, and the following day the Turkish president and Vice President

¹² *The Guardian*, Dec. 20, 2018.

¹³ *The New York Times*, Dec. 20, 2018.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, Aug. 9, 2019; Seligman: “How the Iran Hawks Botched Trump’s Syria Withdrawal.”

¹⁵ *The New York Times*, Oct. 7, 2019, Oct. 13, 2019.

¹⁶ Fox News, Oct. 9, 2019; Graeme Wood, “John Bolton Will Hold This Grudge,” *The Atlantic*, Sept. 10, 2019.

¹⁷ *The Wall Street Journal*, Oct. 18, 2019.

Mike Pence ended a 6-hour meeting with a joint announcement of a ceasefire.¹⁸

That this was more of a face-saving exercise than a genuine deal was evidenced by the ceasefire's expiry on October 22, the day Erdoğan met Putin in the Russian Black Sea city of Sochi to agree to a deal on Rojava in the absence of the U.S. administration and the Democratic Union Party. This stipulated for the award to Turkey of the enclave of Tel Abyad (a 75-mile-long and 15-mile-wide "peace corridor") and the organization of joint Turkish-Russian military patrols between Qamishli and Kobani. And while Ankara failed to win the two prized cities of Manbij and Kobani on which it had long set its sights, the Kurds were forced to withdraw behind a 15-mile-wide zone from Qamishli and Kobani.¹⁹

Moscow thus emerged as the main beneficiary of the Turkish invasion though Trump eventually succumbed to domestic criticism and kept the U.S. troops in northern Syria, redeploying them near the strategic Deir az-Zor oilfield.²⁰ Capitalizing on Washington's tarnished regional credibility and the rupture within NATO, Putin projected himself as arbiter between Assad and the Kurds as well as between Assad and Erdoğan, expanding Russian influence to territories east of the Euphrates River that had



Russian president Vladimir Putin (left) embraces Syria's president Bashar Assad. Following the Turkish invasion, Putin projected himself as arbiter between Assad, the Kurds and Erdoğan while expanding Russian power into former U.S. zones of influence.

hitherto been in the U.S. zone of influence. He also used the new development to promote Moscow's agenda within the framework of the "Astana forum," established in January 2017 to formalize a Russian-Turkish-Iranian dialogue over the resolution of the Syrian civil war and which convened a trilateral meeting in April 2020 to discuss an end to the conflict.²¹ Finally, the Kremlin exploited the Turkish invasion to consolidate its newfound ties with Ankara, notably by selling Turkey the advanced S-400 air defense system despite strenuous warnings of NATO and Washington, which also suspended the planned sale of

¹⁸ *The Huffington Post* (New York), Oct. 16, 2019.

¹⁹ *The New York Times*, Oct. 24, 2019; *The Wall Street Journal*, Oct. 29, 2019; Ozlem Kahyan Pusane, "Turkish Public Diplomacy and Operation Peace Spring," *War on the Rocks*, Jan. 13, 2020.

²⁰ *The Guardian*, Nov. 8, 2019.

²¹ Charles Thépaut, "The Astana Process: A Flexible but Fragile Showcase for Russia," *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, Washington, D.C., Apr. 28, 2020.

F-35 fighter jets to Ankara.²²

Another clear winner of Operation Peace Spring was Syrian president Bashar Assad. Not only was he spared of the nightmarish scenario of a prospective independent Kurdish entity in the northern part of his country, but he was transformed overnight from a tyrant into a savior in the eyes of the Kurdish minority. Concretely, the Syrian regime recaptured without a single shot the two Arab-majority strategic cities of Manbij and Taqba, as well as the M4 Highway east of the Euphrates, as the Kurds sought its protection against the invading Turks. And the “price tag” for these invaluable assets was negligible: the deployment of a few thousand troops in Rojava and periodic skirmishes with the Turkish army and its proxy SNA militia along the M4 Highway.²³

Even ISIS benefitted from the chaos in northeastern Syria. Just as the Islamist terror group had exploited the anarchy created by the November 2017 ill-fated Kurdish separatist referendum to rebound in northern Iraq, so it used the chaotic Syrian situation to recuperate from its latest setbacks. The invasion disrupted the U.S.-backed Kurdish anti-ISIS campaign along the Euphrates and allowed a large number of imprisoned ISIS terrorists and sympathizers to escape the Kurdish prison camps (notably al-Hol camp with over 70,000 inmates). Even the killing of

Turkey gained legitimization to interfere in Syria’s affairs under the guise of counterterrorism.

ISIS leader Abu Bakr Baghdadi in October 2019 did not prevent the organization’s rebound in Syria.²⁴

For its part, Turkey made a number of important gains, notably the attainment of effective legitimization to interfere in its neighbor’s affairs under the counterterrorism guise, including the capture and temporary retention of territory to this end. Yet while these gains boosted Erdoğan’s domestic prestige and political clout, they could well prove transient. Moscow, Ankara’s partner in monitoring the security zone, may not only block Erdoğan’s vision of ethnically cleansing Rojava as he had done in Afrin, but may also pressure him to return the newly-occupied territories to Syria, something that was implied by the invocation of the 1998 Syrian-Turkish Adana treaty in the buffer zone deal. This agreement, which had ended Damascus’s longstanding support for the PKK, was overtaken by the events of the civil war and the attendant Syrian-Turkish hostility. Yet as Assad became increasingly victorious, he implied his readiness to return to the deal in exchange for Turkey’s withdrawal from its occupied territories in Syria.²⁵

22 Lara Seligman: “U.S. Lawmakers Move to Punish Turkey for Buying Russian Missile System,” *Foreign Policy*, Dec. 10, 2019; Michael Reynolds, “Turkey and Russia: A Remarkable Rapprochement,” *War on the Rocks*, Oct. 24, 2019.

23 Metin Gurcan, “Turkey’s Operation Peace Spring effectively divides Syria into five sectors,” *Al-Monitor*, Nov. 11, 2020.

24 “ISIS Exploited Turkey’s Operation ‘Peace Spring’: Pentagon’s Report,” *Duvar English* (Istanbul), Nov. 20, 2019; Wojciech Michnik and Spyridon Plakoudas, “The U.S. Withdrawal and the Scramble for Syria,” *Wild Blue Yonder*, Jan. 2020, p. 35; Hasan Hasan, “Islamic State is back and this time the west is ill-prepared to take it on,” *The Guardian*, May 24, 2020.

25 Michnik and Plakoudas: “The U.S. Withdrawal,” p. 35; “Operation Peace Spring: Delusion in Turkey’s Objectives,” Brussels International Center for Research and Human Rights, 2020; Ali Younes, “Analysis: What does the Adana deal mean for Turkey and Syria?” *Aljazeera* (Doha), Oct. 23, 2019.

The Syrian Kurds, the PYD/YPG in particular, were the clear losers of the Turkish invasion. Abandoned by their U.S. patron, they had to shelve their dream of an independent entity (at least for the foreseeable future) and to ink an ad hoc alliance with their old oppressor—the Assad regime—which Moscow was all too happy to mediate.²⁶

The End of Kurdish Dreams?

Operation Peace Spring was a wakeup call for the PYD/YPG. Yet, the Trump administration's effective acquiescence in the invasion did not lead to an improvement in U.S.-Turkish relations, which ebbed still further following the Senate's recognition (in December 2019) of the Armenian genocide and the legislation of additional anti-Turkish sanctions.²⁷ But neither did it restore U.S. support for the Rojava autonomous region. Nor did the Europeans step into the fray to fill the vacuum left by Washington, for fear of alienating Erdoğan who had been holding the unleashing of migratory waves into the continent as a Damocles Sword over their heads.²⁸ And while a special December 2019 meeting of NATO leaders on the occasion of the organization's seventieth anniversary ignored the Turkish president's demand that the YPG be designated



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a terrorist organization, neither did it offer any help to the beleaguered Kurds.²⁹

This made the Syrian Kurds captive to the budding Turkish-Russian relationship. To be sure, this adversarial collaboration was not without its problems. Yet, Putin and Erdoğan's desire to exploit the U.S. retreat in Syria enabled them to weather the crisis attending the Syrian offensive, launched in mid-December 2019, in the northwestern province of Idlib. Backed by Iranian ground forces and Russian air support, the offensive managed to make substantial gains in the face of stiff resistance by the anti-regime rebels and terrorist groups, driving hundreds of thousands of terrified civilians to flee their homes northward. Enraged by the killing of several Turkish soldiers and bent on stemming the influx of refugees into its territory, in early February 2020 Ankara launched Operation Spring

26 *The Telegraph* (London), Oct. 14, 2019.

27 NBC News, Dec. 13, 2019.

28 "Turkey's military operation in Syria and its impact on relations with the EU," European Parliament, Brussels, 2019.

29 Bulent Alriza, "Erdoğan and Trump at the NATO Summit: Another Display of Solidarity," *Commentary*, Dec. 5, 2019.

Shield, which for the first time was directed against the Assad regime's armed forces. Yet while this development disrupted Putin's attempt to mediate a Turkish-Syrian rapprochement and raised the specter of Turkish-Russian clashes, Erdoğan's conscious effort to avoid such confrontation (despite the killing of thirty-seven Turkish troops by a Russian air strike on February 27) allowed the two leaders to reach a ceasefire agreement on March 5, 2020, which dramatically reduced the level of violence in Idlib.³⁰

Reflecting Moscow's rising preeminence in Syria, the ceasefire confirmed Assad's latest territorial gains, most notably the recapture of the northern part of the M5 highway, thus reasserting the regime's control for the first time since 2012 of Syria's foremost transportation artery connecting the Jordanian border in the south with the Turkish border in the north. At the same time, the ceasefire reaffirmed the joint Russian-Turkish patrols along the east-west M4 highway demarcating the southern bounds of Turkish-occupied Syria, vesting Ankara (yet again) with the task of disarming and disbanding the jihadists in the territories under its control.³¹

The conflict in Idlib underlined once again the predicament of the Syrian Kurds. On the one hand, the Kurd's Democratic Union Party was pressured by Damascus and

Washington sought to mediate a rapprochement between the Kurdish factions and Turkey, but the goal proved unattainable.

Moscow to participate in the Idlib offensive in return for vague promises of autonomy.³² On the other hand, it was courted by Washington, which sought to regain its northern Syria foothold by at-

tempting to unify the rival Kurdish factions and to mediate a rapprochement between them and the Turkish government. Yet, while the first effort culminated in an intra-Kurdish unity agreement in mid-June 2020,³³ the second goal proved unattainable as Ankara remained reluctant to initiate any dialogue with the PYD. Keenly aware of this position, and eager to ensure U.S. backing, in July 2020 the PYD inked a deal with Delta Crescent Energy LLC, a private American oil company, for the exploitation of the oilfields under its control, in a move that was promptly condemned by Turkey, Syria, Iran, and Russia as a "theft of Syria's national wealth."³⁴

Conclusion

An autonomous or semi-independent Kurdish entity in northern Syria (and Iraq for that matter) has been in the best interest of Washington at least since the Arab turbulence of the early 2010s, especially, but not exclusively, as a buffer to the expansion of militant Islam in both its Sunni (al-Qaeda, ISIS, and their likes) and Shiite (the Islamic

30 Kirill Semenov, "Intel: Turkish demands on Idlib complicate Russia's pursuit of compromise," *Al-Monitor*, Feb. 11, 2020; Gregory Waters, "The Syrian Regime's Combat Losses in Spring 2020, and What Lies Ahead," Middle East Institute, Washington, D.C., June 2020, p. 6.

31 Cengiz Candar, "Erdoğan's Dance with Putin: Humiliating, but Face-Saving," *Al-Monitor*, Mar. 6, 2020.

32 Fehim Tastekin, "How Idlib's Escalation Could Affect Syria's Kurds," *Al-Monitor*, Feb. 10, 2020; *Al-Monitor*, Jan. 29, 2017; Stefan de Sakutin, "Will the Syrian Kurds strike a deal with Moscow?" Middle East Institute, Feb. 1, 2019.

33 Amberin Zaman, "Turkey mum as Syrian Kurds take 'historical step' in unity talks," *Al-Monitor*, June 17, 2020.

34 *Al-Monitor*, July 30, 2020.

Republic of Iran, Hezbollah) forms. Yet, in line with a longstanding betrayal of the Kurds to their local oppressors (from eschewing the promised post-World War I independence due to Atatürk's pressure, to the 1975 surrender of the Iraqi Kurds to the Baath regime, to ignoring decades of Turkey's repression of its Kurdish minority), the Obama and the Trump administrations used the Syrian Kurds for fighting ISIS (and the Assad regime), only to betray them to Ankara once their usefulness had been exhausted.

It remains to be seen whether and to what extent the Biden administration will maintain this policy or, instead, seek to redress the

damage done to U.S.-Kurdish relations over the past decade.

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