



Squaring the Circles in Syria's North East

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Headquarters

International Crisis Group

Avenue Louise 149 • 1050 Brussels, Belgium

Tel: +32 2 502 90 38 • Fax: +32 2 502 50 38

brussels@crisisgroup.org

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Table of Contents

Executive Summary.....	i
I. Introduction	1
II. The Search for Middle Ground.....	3
A. The U.S.: Caught between Turkey and the YPG	3
1. Turkey: The alienated ally	4
2. “Safe zone” or dead end? The buffer debate	8
B. Moscow’s Missed Opportunity?.....	11
C. The YPG and Damascus: Playing for Time.....	13
III. A War of Attrition with ISIS Remnants	16
A. The SDF’s Approach to ISIS Detainees	16
B. Deteriorating Relations between the SDF and Local Tribes	19
C. A Shrinking U.S. Footprint	20
IV. Looking Ahead.....	23
A. Avoiding a New War	23
B. Avoiding an ISIS Resurgence	26
V. Conclusion	28
APPENDICES	
A. Map of North East Syria	29
B. List of Acronyms.....	30
C. About the International Crisis Group	31
D. Crisis Group Reports and Briefings on Middle East and North Africa since 2016.....	32
E. Crisis Group Board of Trustees	34

Principal Findings

What's new? After President Donald Trump announced a full U.S. withdrawal from Syria, his administration decided to leave a residual force there. All parties – the U.S., Turkey, the Syrian regime, Russia and the PKK-affiliated People's Protection Units (YPG) that control the north east – are adjusting their stance to the resulting uncertainty.

Why does it matter? The withdrawal reprieve provides an opportunity to prevent a violent free-for-all in the north east. Had U.S. troops left precipitously, Damascus might have tried to recover the territory and Ankara to exploit the vacuum to destroy the YPG. A resurgent Islamic State could have filled the void.

What should be done? Washington should use its remaining influence to address Turkish concerns about the PKK's role in the north east while protecting the YPG; and Moscow should help the YPG and Damascus reach agreement on the north east's gradual reintegration into the Syrian state on the basis of decentralised governance.

Executive Summary

The U.S. flip-flop on Syria – from President Donald Trump’s announcement of an immediate withdrawal to the subsequent decision to maintain a limited troop presence in the north east for an unspecified period – offers an opportunity to set the area on a path to greater stability. A precipitous withdrawal carried a major risk: that the Syrian regime, Turkey or both would have sought to advance their interests by attacking the People’s Protection Forces (YPG), which is linked to the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), which Turkey, the U.S. and the EU consider a terrorist organisation. With its reversal, the U.S. retains leverage to mediate an arrangement in the north east that could survive an eventual U.S. troop departure. It will need to use its influence wisely. In particular, it should now press the YPG to reduce its monopoly on governance and loosen its PKK ties in exchange for U.S. protection from a possible Turkish military incursion. And it should stop discouraging the YPG from negotiating a Russian-backed deal with Damascus that could enable the north east’s gradual reintegration into the Syrian state on the basis of decentralised governance.

President Trump’s 19 December 2018 surprise announcement that the U.S. would withdraw its troops from Syria stunned allies and adversaries alike. The YPG, which dominates the U.S.-allied Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) controlling the north east, suddenly faced the prospect of being left without its powerful protector. Turkey, the YPG’s adversary, saw an opportunity to intervene militarily in northern Syria and deal the PKK affiliate a blow. Trump’s announcement likewise reinforced Damascus’ belief that it might soon recover territory lost to the YPG. And the Islamic State (ISIS), on the verge of battlefield defeat, may have sensed a chance to stage a comeback.

As U.S. officials scrambled to devise a formula that would save the north east from chaos, Trump’s foreign policy team and the military first stretched and then partially walked back the initial withdrawal plan. This approach can buy precious time but, on its own, it cannot resolve Washington’s basic dilemma: the president is determined to withdraw from Syria, yet so far is unable to reconcile the incompatible demands of two allies – the YPG and Turkey – and remains deeply opposed to the Syrian state’s return to the area so long as the current regime is in place.

To date, the administration has focused on finding middle ground between Turkey and the YPG. The gap is still wide. Whereas Ankara demands full control over a strip of territory inside Syria to limit YPG hegemony over the north east and keep the group from its border, the YPG requests an internationally enforced zone in roughly the same area, from which Turkish forces would be excluded and from only parts of which the YPG might agree to withdraw some of its fighters.

Absent a compromise, the contradiction that has been at the heart of U.S. policy for the past five years will remain – Washington can protect the YPG or strengthen its ties with Turkey, but it cannot do both. If it prioritises the former, Ankara likely will seek to destabilise YPG-controlled territory or conduct a war of attrition along its border with Syria. If it prioritises the latter, it risks losing a key partner in the fight against ISIS. Should the YPG feel threatened, it likely would redeploy its forces from the Euphrates valley in Deir al-Zour province to protect predominantly Kurdish

towns in the north. This would leave the southerly areas, which the U.S.-backed SDF retook from ISIS in early 2019, unprotected from an ISIS resurgence.

The U.S. is not alone in facing a dilemma. Russia, too, must balance twin objectives that are in tension: helping Damascus reassert its sovereignty throughout the country, on the one hand, and maintaining strong relations with Ankara, on the other. To date, its attempts to broker an understanding between Turkey and Syria and mediate between the YPG and Damascus have come up empty; the presence of a residual U.S. force in the north east further reduces Moscow's leverage.

Meanwhile, amid this uncertainty, worrying trends are emerging on the ground. Shortly after losing its last pockets of territory to the SDF at the end of February, ISIS shifted its strategy to an increasingly robust insurgency, which by now threatens to undermine the security situation in a significant part of north-eastern Syria. As long as the YPG feels unsure about its future, it will be less likely to conduct an effective counter-insurgency; each time it has felt Turkish pressure or less than full U.S. commitment on its behalf, it has paused its anti-ISIS operations and reinforced its fighting strength near the Turkish border. The YPG also faces an almost insurmountable challenge in the form of thousands of detained Syrians as well as foreign ISIS fighters and their families.

Washington's extension of a troop presence in the north east is not a sustainable solution. It rests on shaky legal ground, lies at the mercy of another Trump change of heart and – sooner or later – will come to an end. What matters is what happens in the meantime. Even as it deters a Turkish attack, Washington should use the prospect of its eventual withdrawal to press the YPG to address Ankara's concerns regarding the group's growing influence in Syria's north east. The YPG should take steps including diminishing its hegemony over the area and distancing itself from the PKK's command and control. Alternatively, the U.S. should use its leverage over the YPG to encourage de-escalation between Turkey and the PKK.

The U.S. also should avoid standing in the way of a putative understanding between the Syrian regime and the YPG. Today, such a deal appears unlikely. The regime has expressed hostility to genuine decentralisation and its record of breaking agreements reached with other opposition groups hardly inspires confidence. But should that change, the north east's gradual reintegration into the Syrian state on the basis of decentralised governance would seem the most viable, longer-term outcome. In the meantime, the Trump administration should neither obstruct dialogue between the two nor use the YPG as a tool to pressure the regime, which would only heighten the likelihood of an eventual showdown with Damascus.

Amid the YPG-Turkish conundrum, one ought not to lose sight of ISIS. It may have suffered a territorial defeat, but it is a re-emerging threat in predominantly Arab areas under SDF/YPG control. The next phase in the fight against ISIS will require the YPG to devolve authority to local partners who then take the lead on governance and security in their home districts. A measure of stability has been achieved in Syria's north east. But the area is home to a dizzying array of local, regional and international actors whose competition needs management, lest the stability prove short-lived. The consequences of chaos would be deadly.

Squaring the Circles in North East Syria

I. Introduction

After the questions and confusion following President Donald Trump's December 2018 announcement of a quick U.S. troop withdrawal from north-eastern Syria, the administration gradually walked the decision back. The continued presence of several hundred U.S. forces has deterred Ankara and Damascus from attacking the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), a 60,000-strong military formation dominated by the Yekîneyên Parastina Gel (YPG, Kurdish for "People's Protection Units"). It also has ensured that the SDF/YPG continue to conduct counter-insurgency campaigns against remaining cells of the Islamic State, or ISIS.¹ Still, conflicting U.S. signals about the duration and objectives of its role are creating a volatile situation.

President Trump triggered the uncertainty about U.S. intentions when he told Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in a December 2018 phone call that he would pull the 2,000 U.S. troops out of Syria.² He pointed to ISIS's territorial defeat as the rationale for bringing the troops home, something he had vowed to do since his presidency began.³ The announcement nonetheless took Trump's senior advisers and generals by surprise and left them scrambling to carry out his orders.⁴

A broad range of officials within the Trump administration and the U.S. military feared the consequences of a precipitous, unconditional withdrawal.⁵ While the specifics (and prioritisation) of their concerns vary sharply, they share a common belief: were the U.S. to abruptly remove its deterrent umbrella, military capacity and stabi-

¹ In October 2015, the YPG created the SDF, a military alliance of Kurdish, Arab and Assyrian/Syriac militias, to fight ISIS. In December 2015, the SDF established the Syrian Democratic Council (SDC) as its political wing. Members of the Global Coalition to Counter ISIS direct their support to the SDF, but they generally accept that the YPG is its core fighting force, which maintains command and control. This report points to the YPG when referring to the alliance's power structure and decision makers, and to the SDF and SDC when discussing the broader coalition and its political representation.

² Trump told Erdoğan in the 14 December call: "You know what? It's yours. I'm leaving". Quoted in Karen DeYoung, Missy Ryan, Josh Dawsey and Greg Jaffe, "A tumultuous week began with a phone call between Trump and the Turkish president", *Washington Post*, 21 December 2018. See also Orhan Coskun and Lesley Wroughton, "Syrian surprise: How Trump's phone call changed the war", Reuters, 28 December 2018. President Trump has repeatedly indicated his desire to pull U.S. troops out of Syria. At a rally in Ohio in March 2018, Trump announced: "We'll be coming out of Syria, like, very soon. Let the other people take care of it now". Quoted in Ryan Browne and Barbara Starr, "Trump says US will withdraw from Syria very soon", CNN, 29 March 2018.

³ "We have won against ISIS", Trump announced on Twitter on 19 December. "Our boys, our young women, our men – they're all coming back, and they're coming back now". Tweet by Donald J. Trump, @realDonaldTrump, U.S. president, 3:10pm, 19 December 2018.

⁴ Crisis Group interview, U.S. official, Washington, January 2019.

⁵ The decision also drew criticism from Republicans generally supportive of the president. See "Lindsey Graham warns rapid U.S. withdrawal could create 'Iraq on steroids'", *Global News*, 19 January 2019. Matthew Levitt and Aaron Zelin of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy called the decision "reckless". See "Mission unaccomplished: the tweet that upended Trump's counterterrorism and Iran policies", *War on the Rocks*, 25 December 2018.

lisation support (with fellow members of the Global Coalition to Counter ISIS likely to follow), north-eastern Syria might plunge into a multiparty melee over territory and resources.⁶ This turmoil, in turn, could give ISIS a new lease on life. In the days and weeks following Trump's withdrawal announcement, two of these officials – Defense Secretary James Mattis and Brett McGurk, U.S. special envoy for the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS – stepped down in protest.⁷ Others, including James Jeffrey, the special representative for Syria engagement, pressed from inside the administration to amend the president's decision.⁸ Ultimately, they achieved a partial success: two months after declaring that all U.S. troops would leave Syria, Trump agreed to keep 200 soldiers in the north east.⁹

Amid this confusion, the risk of Turkish escalation and destabilisation activity backed by Ankara or the Syrian regime and its supporters appeared to increase. Security in areas taken from ISIS is eroding and swathes of north-eastern Syria are becoming hubs for renewed jihadist insurgency. The SDF has signalled that its willingness and ability to continue counter-insurgency operations and stabilise areas captured from ISIS is contingent upon continued U.S. military support, as well as the reduction of threats from both Turkey and the Syrian regime.

This report analyses the latest developments in north-eastern Syria. It addresses the danger of violent escalation and concludes with recommendations for averting it. In outlining the entanglement of local and external players and interests, it argues that what the U.S. does next will play an important role in shaping where the region is headed: a gradual reintegration into the Syrian state, on the basis of decentralised governance, or a slide into fresh mayhem. It is based on more than 100 interviews conducted in Syria, Turkey, Washington and Moscow, including during six field visits to north-eastern Syria between 2017 and 2019. It also builds upon Crisis Group's previous reports and briefings on Syria's north east.¹⁰

⁶ The U.S. created the Global Coalition to Counter ISIS in 2014. It comprises 79 countries, 32 of which have contributed troops to the effort in Iraq and Syria.

⁷ In his resignation letter, Mattis criticised Trump's failure to consult with U.S. allies on the decision and his vague stances toward U.S. adversaries. See "Defense secretary James Mattis resigns and points to differences with Trump", *The Guardian*, 21 December 2018; "US envoy Brett McGurk quits over Trump Syria pull-out", BBC, 23 December 2018.

⁸ Crisis Group interviews, U.S. officials, Washington, January-April 2019.

⁹ In February, Trump approved gradually reducing the number of U.S. troops to 400. This total would include 200 in a multinational force in the north east and another 200 at al-Tanf, a small military outpost in south-eastern Syria. In March, the Pentagon announced that it would cut its combat force in north-eastern Syria roughly in half to around 1,000, then pause to assess conditions on the ground, and further reduce the number of troops periodically until reaching the 400-person level that Trump approved in February. U.S. officials stated that the withdrawal timetable remained fluid and that final force levels were subject to change given a range of factors, from allied troop contributions to new decisions from Trump. See Eric Schmitt, "U.S. troops leaving Syria, but some may stay longer than expected", *The New York Times*, 20 March 2019. A bipartisan group of U.S. senators and representatives wrote to Trump on 22 February, applauding his decision to keep a small residual force in Syria. Trump wrote back saying he now agreed "100%" with keeping a military presence in Syria. "Trump says he agrees '100%' with keeping U.S. troops in Syria", NBC, 5 March 2019.

¹⁰ See Crisis Group Middle East Briefing N°66, *Avoiding a Free-for-all in Syria's North East*, 21 December 2018; Crisis Group Middle East Report N°190, *Prospects for a Deal to Stabilise Syria's*

II. The Search for Middle Ground

Both Washington and Moscow – the two powers with the greatest ability to shape the course of events in Syria's north east – face the challenge of finding middle ground between the mostly incompatible demands of allies at odds with one another. The U.S. is caught between Turkey and the YPG, who are outright enemies, while Moscow is stuck between rivals Ankara and Damascus. As it stands, talks on north-eastern Syria's future are proceeding along three separate tracks: U.S.-Turkey-YPG, Russia-Turkey and Russia-Syria-YPG. (Iran mediated talks on the north east in mid-2018, but it has played no visible role since then.)

A. *The U.S.: Caught between Turkey and the YPG*

Whether the U.S. fully withdraws from Syria, settles on a partial withdrawal or stays at current force levels, it will need to de-escalate tensions between Turkey and the YPG, two of its allies who are also mortal adversaries.¹¹ While Turkey complains bitterly that the U.S. chose the YPG – which it considers a terrorist group, inseparable from the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) – as its main partner against ISIS ever since the battle for the Syrian town of Kobane in October 2014, the U.S. contends that Ankara left it with little choice, having repeatedly come up short after vowing to set up an alternative anti-ISIS force.¹²

Insofar as the YPG could not wield control over north-eastern Syria without U.S. support, the local and geopolitical complications triggered by YPG dominance are now also a U.S. problem. With the U.S. operating mostly from the air, the YPG, representing the core fighting force within the SDF, was the indispensable partner on the ground in the war against ISIS. The SDF lost around 11,000 fighters while helping retake almost all of Syria's north east from the jihadist group.¹³ Its military victories and U.S. backing – including a constant stream of weapon supplies as well as an advisory role by U.S. special forces – allowed the group to seize large swathes of Syrian territory and the majority of its natural resources.¹⁴

The YPG's gains created agony and anger in Ankara. They see the organisation as a manifestation of the PKK's growing threat, now not just inside Turkey and from bases in northern Iraq, but also from Syria. Damascus shares the concern to a degree. It wishes to regain control throughout the country and has shown little tolerance for

North East, 5 September 2018; and Crisis Group Middle East Report N°176, *The PKK's Fateful Choice in Northern Syria*, 4 May 2017.

¹¹ U.S. officials distinguish between their ties to the SDF, whom they refer to as "partners", and Turkey, which is a U.S. "ally" and member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO).

¹² The PKK has waged an insurgency in south-eastern Turkey since 1984; the conflict has cost over 40,000 lives to date. See Crisis Group's regularly updated tracker of the conflict fatalities, "Turkey's PKK Conflict: A Visual Explainer". On competing U.S. and Turkish views, see Anne Barnard and Ben Hubbard, "Allies or terrorists: who are the Kurdish fighters in Syria", *The New York Times*, 25 January 2018.

¹³ Crisis Group interview, SDF spokesperson, Qamishli, March 2019.

¹⁴ The YPG controls all areas east of the Euphrates that were previously in ISIS's grip, in addition to the city of Manbij west of the river. North-eastern Syria is rich in oil, gas and other natural resources, including water and wheat.

any form of local autonomy; it has expressly accused the YPG of inviting foreign (U.S.) occupiers to Syria.¹⁵ These sentiments render YPG fighters highly vulnerable to attack if and when U.S. troops depart and, in the meantime, makes them a prime target of destabilisation attempts.

How the U.S. should handle the north east was a subject of debate within the administration. Some, highly sceptical of Turkish intentions and persuaded that the region's long-term future lies within a decentralised Syrian state, argued for using U.S. leverage to help the YPG reach an understanding with the regime and for working with Russia to that end. Others felt that, under current conditions, a return of the Syrian regime to the north east would be intolerable. The latter view prevailed. As a result, the U.S. all but rules out the prospect of the regime and its Iranian backers regaining control over the country's sole oil-rich area.¹⁶ Both publicly and privately, officials allude to the importance of keeping Iran-affiliated forces from expanding north of the Euphrates, and of using the regime's lack of access to the north east's natural resources to pressure it to make political concessions.¹⁷

1. Turkey: The alienated ally

Turkey's determination to shift the status quo in north-eastern Syria is rooted in strategic and national security concerns that it feels Washington has done little to assuage. From Ankara's perspective, U.S. support and protection offered to the YPG throughout the last four years has increased the PKK's political clout and military capabilities.¹⁸ A senior Turkish official said, "Unconditional U.S. support for the YPG in Syria emboldened the PKK and drove it away from the negotiation table".¹⁹ Anka-

¹⁵ Crisis Group interview, Syrian official, Moscow, February 2019.

¹⁶ Speaking at the Munich Security Conference in February 2019, Jeffrey said, "Our goals in the north east involve first of all maintaining security in the region, which means we are not at all in favour of the regime coming back in because the regime doesn't promote stability, as we see in other areas". Quoted in "US not in favor of Syrian gov't coming back to SDF-held area: official", *Al-Masdar News*, 17 February 2019.

¹⁷ "Trump accuses Syria's Kurds of selling oil to Iran then vows to protect them", Reuters, 3 January 2019. It is uncertain whether a YPG-Damascus arrangement that leaves the YPG in place, even integrated into the Syrian army, in return for it relinquishing some of the territories it now controls, would be sufficient to address Turkish security concerns. Turkish officials say Ankara opposes any regime-YPG deal that would keep the YPG intact, as such a deal could entail renewed regime protection for PKK operatives in Syria, as was the case in the 1990s. Crisis Group interviews, Ankara, December 2018-March 2019. For details of YPG-Damascus talks, see Section II.C below.

¹⁸ Crisis Group interviews, Turkish officials, Ankara, March 2019. They referenced the authority the PKK cadres have over the SDF (including internal security forces), and its political wing the SDC, which administers oil and gas wells in north-eastern Syria. In 2017 the U.S. said it would give Turkey a monthly list of weapons handed to the YPG, all of which it would collect after the defeat of ISIS. "US will take weapons from Kurds after Islamic State defeat", Reuters, 22 June 2017. To date, however, the U.S. has not attempted to take back weapons from the YPG. Crisis Group interviews, YPG leaders, northern Syria, March 2019.

¹⁹ Crisis Group interview, Turkish official, Istanbul, June 2019. The YPG contests these claims: it argues that the Turkish leadership never intended to reach an agreement with the PKK and was instead using the process to swing nationalist and conservative Kurdish votes. Once the government concluded that nationalists were souring on the process, and that conservative Kurds were gravitating toward a pro-Kurdish opposition party, it purportedly changed tack. Crisis Group interview, YPG official, Qamishli, March 2019. Ankara officials argue to the contrary that the PKK never really

ra perceives U.S. arms supplies and air cover for the YPG as a tacit green light for the creation of a YPG statelet in north-eastern Syria, which it fears would give the PKK strategic depth for its guerrilla warfare against Turkey.²⁰

Realities on the ground at least partially validate Turkish concerns: while the YPG and its political manifestation, the Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat (PYD, or Democratic Union Party) have created an array of local administrative and political bodies, most of these entities hold little authority themselves. They provide avenues for local participation but not local empowerment; they are best understood as the YPG/PYD's way of rebranding and facilitating the decisive influence of its senior PKK-trained cadres, some of whom rotate between Syria and PKK headquarters in the Qandil mountains of northern Iraq.²¹

The U.S. may not have intended to contribute to the creation of an autonomous YPG-run statelet in Syria. Still, in the course of its war against ISIS it ended up midwifing one – a territory five times the size of Lebanon that is home to millions of Syrians and that sprawls well beyond the majority-Kurdish areas from which it sprang. This territory shares a 400km border with Turkey and is the locus of 80 per cent of Syria's natural resources, chiefly oil and gas but also water and wheat.²² The PYD-run "autonomous administration" (*idara dhatiya*) pays salaries to 60,000 fighters of the YPG-led SDF, many of whom are involved in mopping up ISIS remnants and

intended to withdraw its militants and lay down its arms. During the peace process, they say, the PKK built an armed presence in majority-Kurdish towns in the south east. They blame the PKK for sabotaging the process by killing two police officers in Şanlıurfa's Ceylanpınar district on 22 July 2015, right after an ISIS-attributed suicide attack on 20 July killed 33 Kurdish and left-leaning activists in the district of Suruç across the border from Kobane. For more analysis of reasons for the breakdown of talks, see Crisis Group Europe Briefing N°77, *A Sisyphean Task? Resuming Turkey-PKK Peace Talks*, 17 December 2015.

²⁰ Crisis Group interviews, Turkish officials, Istanbul, December 2018, January-March 2019. The U.S. Department of Defense Lead Inspector General quarterly report (prepared in cooperation with the State Department and USAID) to the U.S. Congress on Operation Inherent Resolve (countering ISIS operations in Syria) reported that the U.S. obligated nearly \$46.7 million to the SDF, including \$24.7 million in weapons, ammunition and military equipment. Also see "Syrian Kurds are now armed with sensitive US weaponry, and the Pentagon denies supplying it", *Military Times*, 17 May 2017. The Pentagon reportedly rerouted millions of dollars' worth of weapons and vehicles from Iraq to Syria in the second half of 2018. "US shifts weapons from Iraq to Syria", *Al-Monitor*, 4 March 2019. The Pentagon itself reported that, in addition to training, it continued to provide stipends to several groups in the north east, including the SDF-led Raqqa Internal Security Forces and the Manbij Military Council, which received the largest stipends of \$1.7 million and \$1.2 million, respectively, during the first quarter of 2019. U.S. Department of Defense, "Operation Inherent Resolve: Lead IG Report to the U.S. Congress, January-March 2019", op. cit.

²¹ See Crisis Group Report, *Prospects for a Deal to Stabilise Syria's North East*, op. cit.; and Crisis Group Report, *The PKK's Fateful Choice in Northern Syria*, op. cit.

²² The SDF controls Syria's largest oil and gas fields (Al-Omar and Conoco), amounting to 95 per cent of Syria's oil and 50 per cent of its pre-conflict gas extraction, as well as the waters of the Euphrates downriver from the Tabqa dam, which it seized in 2017. The bulk of Syria's wheat is grown in the northern provinces, with the north-eastern province of al-Hasaka continuing to earn its distinction as the country's breadbasket, producing almost 40 per cent of its wheat. "America's damaging flip-flops in Syria", *The Economist*, 7 January 2019.

other counter-insurgency operations, as well as 30,000 police officers and 140,000 civil servants who provide rudimentary government services.²³

As Ankara sees it, Washington's broken promises and its failure to condition military support to the SDF on fulfilment of political commitments regarding the YPG's intentions in northern Syria exacerbated tensions and eroded trust.²⁴ U.S. officials take a different view. They argue that Turkey dragged its feet in the fight against ISIS, prioritising its struggle against both the PKK/YPG and the Syrian regime, and often treating the counter-ISIS campaign at best as an afterthought. They likewise emphasise that Washington went to great lengths to appease Ankara, and seriously probed the option of partnering with Turkey-supported groups instead of the YPG, before deeming the plan unworkable due to what they saw as insufficient capabilities of the Turkish-allied opposition fighters that Ankara intended to deploy. In the end, Obama officials say, the U.S. had no choice but to cooperate with the YPG, the only local force willing to take on the terrorist group.²⁵

Competing versions aside, Turkish officials point to the YPG's failure to honour U.S. requests in 2014-2015 to curtail ties with the PKK in Syria, reach out to the Syrian opposition and devolve more power to local Arabs in areas it controlled.²⁶ Yet U.S. support steadily increased, signalling that as long as the fight against ISIS was ongoing, Washington would find it virtually impossible to hold the YPG accountable or to effectively press it to distance itself from the PKK.

Likewise, despite the U.S. telling Turkey that the YPG would withdraw to areas east of the Euphrates, the YPG still holds areas west of the river, most importantly the town of Manbij.²⁷ Lethal assistance, which Turkish officials say President Trump

²³ Crisis Group interviews, SDC officials, Qamishli and Raqqa, November 2018-March 2019. The area ruled by the "autonomous administration" is a de facto autonomous region in Syria's north east, which the PKK has historically referred to as Rojava, or Western Kurdistan. It consists of seven nominally self-governing sub-regions in the areas of Jazira, Afrin, Kobane, Raqqa, Tabqa, Manbij and Deir al-Zour. (Turkish proxies have administered Afrin since Turkey seized the area in early 2018.) The local governance model in these areas is heavily based on PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan's writings on federal autonomy, a concept which is influenced by his interpretation of Maoism.

²⁴ Crisis Group interview, Turkish officials, Ankara, March 2019.

²⁵ Colin Kahl, former U.S. National Security Advisor to Vice President Joe Biden, argued that Turkey prioritised fighting the regime over fighting ISIS, and subsequently was unable to assemble a vetted Arab force to fight ISIS, notably in Raqqa. In the absence of a U.S.-Turkey agreement, the U.S. thus backed the YPG, as it was the only force willing and able to take on ISIS in north-eastern Syria. See Colin Kahl, "The U.S. and Turkey are on a collision course in Syria", *Foreign Policy*, 12 May 2017. According to McGurk, "the joint plan with Turkey [to take Raqqa] would have required as many as 20,000 U.S. troops on the ground, and was rejected by both Obama and Trump". See Brett McGurk, "Hard truths in Syria: America can't do more with less, and it shouldn't try", *Foreign Affairs*, 16 April 2019. In May 2017, Trump instead decided to directly arm the YPG.

²⁶ Crisis Group phone interviews, U.S. and YPG officials, February 2019.

²⁷ In 2016, U.S. Vice President Joe Biden and Secretary of State John Kerry both announced that the YPG would be retreating east of the Euphrates, and U.S. officials continued to describe the relationship with the YPG as "temporary, transactional and tactical". For Biden's statements, see "Turkey wants more pressure on Syrian Kurdish YPG", Reuters, 2 September 2016. On the U.S. qualifying U.S.-YPG relations, see Statement of Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Jonathan Cohen before the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, 15 November 2017. In May 2018, Turkey and the U.S. reached an agreement by which the YPG was to withdraw its fighters from Manbij. Yet

committed to stop in November 2017, increased in 2018.²⁸ U.S. officials argue that the YPG has been responsive to their demands to pull its cadres out of Manbij and that the group has devolved governance to non-YPG-dominated local civil councils.²⁹ But PKK cadres still dominate governance in north-eastern Syria and PKK insignia, including large portraits of imprisoned PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan, remain ubiquitous in public facilities and along roadsides.³⁰ From the Turkish perspective, Trump's December 2018 withdrawal announcement was only the latest in a series of broken U.S. promises.³¹

Convinced that the U.S. would not address its concerns, Turkey repeatedly acted on its own (often with an apparent Russian green light), and moved militarily into two parts of northern Syria to undo or contain YPG gains.³² In October 2018, it took further action, deploying troops to its southern border and shelling YPG-controlled locations in Kobane, Tal Abyad and neighbouring towns.³³ It thus signalled that it found the status quo intolerable.³⁴ It also escalated its rhetoric and enlisted Turkish media to suggest that a major incursion might be imminent. At the time, the YPG took the threat extremely seriously, pausing an offensive against ISIS in north-eastern Deir al-Zour.³⁵ In response, the U.S. established observation posts along the Syria-Turkey border.³⁶ This move further antagonised Turkey, which – rightly – saw the posts as buffers designed to protect the YPG.³⁷ The YPG later acknowledged this point.³⁸

the YPG still controls these areas de facto via subordinate military and civil bodies drawn from the local population. Crisis Group interviews, civil society representatives, Manbij, March 2019.

²⁸ Foreign Minister Mevlut Çavuşoğlu claimed in November 2017 that the U.S. made an explicit promise to Turkey to stop its arms supply to the YPG. U.S. officials disputed this claim at the time, suggesting that Washington was aiming for gradual arms reductions, not an immediate cutoff. Quoted in Bilal Wahab and Jackson Doering, “Managing the shifts in U.S. relations with Syria's Kurds”, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 8 December 2017. On the 2018 increase, see fn 20 above.

²⁹ Crisis Group interview, U.S. official, Washington, July 2019.

³⁰ Crisis Group observations, north-eastern Syria, 2019.

³¹ Crisis Group interview, Turkish officials, Ankara, March 2019.

³² To fight ISIS and contain YPG gains, Turkey launched operation Euphrates Shield on 24 August 2016, less than two weeks after the YPG captured Manbij, taking control of an area north of Aleppo that effectively blocked the Kurds from advancing further west to connect its holdings in eastern Syria to the Afrin enclave. In mid-January 2018, Turkey then moved on Afrin itself, capturing the city on 18 March. See “Turkey launches Olive Branch operation against PKK threat in Syria”, *Hürriyet Daily News*, 20 January 2018.

³³ Turkish officials relate this escalation to three factors: alleged YPG military involvement in a 4 October 2018 attack in the Turkish city of Batman that caused the deaths of eight soldiers; Turkey's perception of an impasse in its negotiations with the U.S. over Manbij; and what they saw as a U.S. policy shift toward an open-ended presence in Syria. Crisis Group interviews, Istanbul, November 2018.

³⁴ “Turkish forces shell northern Syria, Kurdish-led force responds”, Reuters, 31 October 2018.

³⁵ Crisis Group interview, SDF commander, Qamishli, November 2018.

³⁶ U.S. officials stated that the observation posts were intended to alert Turkey to potential threats and to allow the YPG to remain focused on the fight with ISIS. “U.S. setting up observation posts along Turkey-Syria border”, Reuters, 21 November 2018.

³⁷ Defence Minister Hulusi Akar demanded that the U.S. “back down on the observation posts”. Quoted in “Minister Akar receives James Jeffrey, US Special Representative in Syria”, Turkish Republic, Ministry of National Defence, 7 December 2018 (Turkish).

³⁸ Crisis Group interview, Qamishli, November 2018.

In early December 2018, Turkey once more dispatched troops to its border with Syria and announced that it would conduct a cross-border operation in northern Syria, targeting YPG forces east of the Euphrates. It was this announcement that precipitated the telephone conversation between the U.S. and Turkish presidents on 14 December.³⁹

The current trajectory points toward a repeat of what happened in late 2018: as its frustration rises with negotiations it perceives as both endless and fruitless, Turkey may once again escalate. In July 2019, Turkey started bolstering its military deployment on the Turkish-Syrian border, sending heavy weapons to an area near the Syrian town of Tal Abyad.⁴⁰ The U.S. responded by expressing concern over a potential unilateral Turkish military operation in north-eastern Syria.⁴¹ The heavy weapons movements could be a bluff: Ankara might well be loath to target an area that still hosts U.S. troops, and it cannot predict how President Trump would react. But the risk of miscalculation is ever-present, especially as relations with Washington further sour over Ankara's decision to purchase the Russian S-400 air defence system.⁴² Should Turkey decide to try to destabilise the YPG-controlled area, the U.S. arguably would have less political capital and possibly fewer troops on the ground to help dissuade it – and certainly less credibility with Ankara to advocate a new round of talks.⁴³

2. “Safe zone” or dead end? The buffer debate

U.S. officials have prioritised efforts to avert Turkish military action in Syria, but their approach risks leaving the crux of the Turkey-YPG conundrum unaddressed. It is at best a way to buy time – and, should the U.S. withdraw soon, perhaps not much of it.⁴⁴

Since President Trump's withdrawal announcement, senior U.S. officials have travelled multiple times to Ankara and north-eastern Syria to fashion an arrangement that would avoid a direct confrontation between Turkey and their YPG partner.⁴⁵ On 14 January, Trump went so far as to announce via Twitter that he might endorse Turkish ideas for a 32km-deep safe zone inside Syria.⁴⁶

³⁹ “Why is Turkey launching another operation against US-backed YPG in Syria?”, TRT World, 13 December 2018.

⁴⁰ See “Turkey's huge deployment signals extensive offensive east of Euphrates”, *Daily Sabah*, 12 July 2019.

⁴¹ Commander Sean Robertson, a Pentagon spokesman, said in a statement: “Unilateral military action into northeast Syria by any party, particularly as U.S. personnel may be present or in the vicinity, is of grave concern. We would find any such actions unacceptable”. Quoted in “Turkey appears poised to retaliate against the U.S., prompting Pentagon warning”, *US News & World Report*, 17 July 2019.

⁴² See Semih Deiz, “Will Erdogan risk an operation in Syria?”, *Al-Monitor*, 18 July 2019.

⁴³ On 22 July, Turkish forces bombed seven YPG targets in northern Syria, purportedly in response to a rocket fired from north-eastern Syria at the Turkish city of Ceylanpınar. Tweet from the Turkish National Defence Ministry, @tcsavunma, 2:15pm, 22 July 2019.

⁴⁴ U.S. officials have privately stated that talks over the safe zone have been successful in mitigating a Turkish attack on the north east. Still, they acknowledge that negotiations might not go far enough to address core Turkish concerns. Crisis Group interviews, U.S. officials, Washington, July 2019.

⁴⁵ On 22 July, James Jeffrey arrived in Turkey to discuss the safe zone with his Turkish counterparts. The visit came after Turkey increased its military fortifications along the Syria-Turkey border, increasing the fear of a Turkish cross-border attack. See Metin Gurcan, “Syria safe zone: can

Yet reaching agreement on a safe zone acceptable to both Turkey and the YPG has proved difficult. Their central demands appear irreconcilable: each insists that such a zone should be under its de facto control. Ankara is demanding that Turkish forces wield ultimate authority, potentially in cooperation with local proxies, much as Turkey has done in Euphrates Shield areas and Afrin.⁴⁷ For its part, the YPG calls for an internationally enforced buffer zone that could deter a Turkish incursion, and thus in essence preserve its own hegemony over Syria's north east.⁴⁸

U.S. negotiators have floated a number of ideas that they hope will prove mutually tolerable to Ankara and the YPG. These include removing all YPG heavy weapons from the zone, boosting local groups to replace the YPG there and monitoring the situation with a mix of U.S. and allied European soldiers.⁴⁹ But this package of ideas has gained neither Turkish blessing nor genuine YPG buy-in.⁵⁰ Additionally, Washington's European allies have made clear that they will not fill the gap in the event of a significant U.S. drawdown and evinced scepticism about the safe zone idea.⁵¹ France, a major player in the Global Coalition to Counter ISIS, conveyed to the U.S. that it would not be part of any internationally enforced buffer zone and would keep its troops in Syria far from the Turkish border to ward off an angry response from Ankara.⁵²

US reconcile conflicting demands of Turkey, YPG", *Al-Monitor*, 22 July 2019. According to YPG leaders, Jeffrey had previously travelled to north-eastern Syria three times after Trump's December 2018 withdrawal announcement (and his deputy Joel Rayburn had travelled there twice) to meet with the YPG leadership and discuss the contours of an arrangement to appease Turkey. In addition, U.S. National Security Advisor John Bolton, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Joseph Dunford and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo visited Ankara in January 2019 to discuss a U.S. withdrawal from Syria. Julian Borger, "John Bolton expected to hold tense talks with Turkey over Syria policy", *The Guardian*, 7 January 2019. Pompeo and Jeffrey visited Ankara again in April to continue the talks. "Turkey says US distorted meeting, but Pompeo stands by it", France 24, 4 April 2019.

⁴⁶ Tweet by Donald J. Trump, @realDonaldTrump, U.S. president, 2:12pm, 14 January 2019. See also "Erdogan says discussed Turkey setting up safe zone in Syria with Trump", Reuters, 15 January 2019.

⁴⁷ Crisis Group interviews, Turkish officials, Ankara, February-March 2019.

⁴⁸ The SDF has indicated that it might be willing to pull out YPG cadres and allow local forces connected to them to police an internationally enforced buffer zone. Crisis Group interviews, SDF officials, Qamishli and Deir al-Zour, March 2019.

⁴⁹ Crisis Group interview, U.S. official, Washington, January 2019. In January, the U.S. raised the possibility of bringing in some Arab and Kurdish forces, including the Peshmerga Rojava, a Syrian Kurdish force trained by the Kurdistan Democratic Party in Iraq, a rival of the PKK. The YPG categorically rejected the idea. At the time of publication, discussions appeared to be focused on boosting the local groups in the SDF while pulling back the YPG from the border areas. Crisis Group interview, U.S. official, Washington, July 2019.

⁵⁰ Crisis Group interviews, Turkish officials, Ankara, March 2019; YPG officials, Deir al-Zour, March 2019.

⁵¹ A U.S. official suggested in mid-2019 that France and the UK agreed to a 10-15 per cent increase of their troops in Syria to help partially backfill withdrawing U.S. troops. See Lara Seligman, "Britain and France agree to send additional troops to Syria", *Foreign Policy*, 9 July 2019.

⁵² Washington's European allies rejected a Trump administration request to fill the gap with their own troops. See Karen DeYoung and Missy Ryan, "Allies decline request to stay in Syria after U.S. troops withdraw", *Washington Post*, 20 February 2019. France objected to the initial U.S. proposal, stating that its position was "in together, out together", tying its military presence to that of U.S. forces. Crisis Group phone interview, French official, March 2019. Jeffrey later declared that that European states would not be part of the safe zone. Jack Detsch, "US Syria envoy says 'no role for Europe in proposed safe zone'", *Al-Monitor*, 6 June 2019. Germany is reportedly in talks with the

Thus far, Turkey has shown no readiness to compromise on its demand for exclusive control throughout a 30-40km zone (which would stretch to predominantly Kurdish areas), while the YPG has offered no concession that might placate Ankara in the course of discussions about U.S. ideas for a buffer zone. From the YPG's viewpoint, the presence of Turkey or Turkey-supported groups in north-eastern Syria would mean a direct threat to the YPG's presence and control.

The YPG proposal is just as unappetising for Turkey. According to SDF commander Mazloum Kobani, the YPG proposed pulling back its uniformed officers from a 5km border strip – excepting Kurdish-majority towns right on the border, such as Qamishli – while maintaining a nominally self-governing local force connected to the “autonomous administration” that would act as a border guard alongside Coalition forces.⁵³ The flaw in this offering from Turkey's perspective is that any local force tied to the “autonomous administration” would be an extension of the YPG. In other words, while the YPG might consider these proposals to be big concessions, they would not dilute the YPG's monopoly over strategic territory or assets. Nor do they address Turkey's core concerns that the PKK is gaining political legitimacy, military capacity and financial resources through its hegemony in Syria's north east while persisting with its insurgency in Turkey.⁵⁴ With both sides firm in their positions, U.S. efforts risk becoming stuck in endless haggling over details that fail to resolve the question of who is to wield direct authority where.

Without a compromise, Washington may end up imposing a *fait accompli* on Turkey by maintaining its military protection of the YPG to avoid war. Even without an explicit commitment, a residual U.S. presence almost certainly would deter an all-out Turkish offensive. That said, it would not necessarily discourage or prevent Turkey from destabilising the area or launching a war of attrition against the YPG. Such Turkish actions would have significant ramifications for the YPG's capacity to contain a deteriorating security situation in swathes of eastern Syria. They might prompt the YPG to pull its troops out of the Euphrates valley to protect northern Kurdish cities. Such a move would leave areas retaken from ISIS unprotected from the group as it tries to make a comeback.

In short, the current U.S. approach does not seem to be moving Syria's north east closer to a sustainable solution. Even if the U.S. succeeds in narrowing the gaps sufficiently to enforce a safe zone, it would not address the core of the Turkey-PKK/YPG conundrum. Besides, the idea that residual U.S. forces will stay in Syria indefinitely appears at odds with Trump's stated preference for an eventual full withdrawal and thus is vulnerable to yet another reversal.

U.S. to provide military aircraft to patrol the safe zone in north-eastern Syria. See remarks by Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas, joint press conference, 31 May 2019. See also “Netherlands hesitant about US request for Dutch troops in Syrian safe zone: report”, *Kurdistan* 24, 18 May 2019.

⁵³ Crisis Group interview, SDF commander Mazloum Kobani, Deir al-Zour, March 2019.

⁵⁴ Crisis Group interview, Turkish official, Ankara, March 2019.

B. *Moscow's Missed Opportunity?*

Russia is seeking to balance its desire for a low-cost Syrian regime takeover of areas remaining out of its control against its wish to deepen valuable relations with Turkey. In response to Trump's December withdrawal announcement, Turkish and YPG officials separately rushed to Moscow to try to reach an arrangement with Russia.⁵⁵ They understood that if the U.S. were to pull all its forces out of the north east, Russia could become the dominant military presence there, especially if the U.S. were to also reduce the role of its airpower.

YPG leaders sought Russian mediation for talks with Damascus, hoping to safeguard their autonomous region if and when U.S. troops departed. The YPG presented its positions to Moscow in a "roadmap" outlining its vision for constitutionally guaranteed local autonomy within the framework of the Syrian state that would leave security and governance in local hands and enable regional governance bodies such as the "autonomous administration" to resist interference from the capital.⁵⁶ In essence, the YPG roadmap asked that Damascus recognise the group's self-rule in all the north east and send reinforcements to the Syria-Turkey border to prevent a Turkish incursion. It also requested the presence of Russian military police to guarantee the agreement. In return, the YPG would formally recognise Bashar al-Assad as the legitimate president of Syria and the integrity of the Syrian state, its borders, flag and the army.⁵⁷

As Moscow saw it, the high ceiling of these demands suggested that the group remained confident about some degree of continued U.S. protection, at least for the time being.⁵⁸ In response, Russia proposed to the YPG a full return of regime forces to the city of Manbij first, followed by their deployment along the Syria-Turkey border. Russia also requested that the SDF hand over the entire southern (non-Kurdish) flank of SDF-controlled areas, including Deir al-Zour and Raqqa, and conveyed the regime's insistence that it reacquire full control, albeit gradually, over the security

⁵⁵ The SDC made four official visits to Moscow between December 2018 and March 2019. Crisis Group interviews, Moscow, February 2019; Qamishli, March 2019.

⁵⁶ See Ibrahim Hamidi, "Kurdish document asks Moscow to guarantee Damascus' recognition of the 'autonomous administration'", *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 18 January 2019. (Arabic) YPG officials said the leaked version on which the article was based had slight variations from the original one they submitted to Russia in January 2019. They said the original roadmap affirms Syria's territorial integrity and would grant the central government a larger role in the north east than it currently enjoys, for example through placing border security primarily in the hands of the Syrian army, restoring civil state institutions and affirming a lead role for Damascus in ensuring just distribution of natural resources (the most lucrative of which are currently under YPG control). But they said it also preserves core elements of the group's self-rule throughout the north east, including control over local security. Crisis Group interviews, YPG officials, Qamishli, March 2019; and Crisis Group phone interview, SDC official, January 2019.

⁵⁷ Crisis Group interviews, Russian officials, Moscow, February 2019; Crisis Group interview, SDC official, Qamishli, March 2019.

⁵⁸ Crisis Group interviews, Russian officials, Moscow, February 2019. An SDC official said the demands in the roadmap reflect the local population's basic rights, for which the group is willing to fight. Crisis Group interview, SDC official, Qamishli, March 2019.

sector in all SDF-held areas.⁵⁹ With a gap that wide, the talks failed to reach concrete results and have since fizzled out.⁶⁰

Russia hurt its own credibility as guarantor of a deal between the YPG and Damascus with its inability or unwillingness to uphold its promises in other areas of Syria, where opposition groups agreed to reconciliation deals under Moscow's auspices.⁶¹ As a result, the SDF has refused to negotiate any military arrangement or temporary power-sharing formula prior to an agreement on the core components of a final settlement that would recognise the "autonomous administration" and preserve their military capabilities.⁶² Russia's prefers the reverse: temporary deals and immediate cooperation (specifically on revenue-sharing from SDF-held oil resources) while postponing talks over a final settlement knowing the width of the gap between the respective bottom lines of the YPG and the regime.⁶³

Moscow likewise has found no middle ground between Ankara and Damascus. On 23 January, Russian President Vladimir Putin suggested, in a meeting with his Turkish counterpart Erdoğan, that Ankara invoke a secret protocol attached to the 1998 Adana Agreement between Turkey and Syria, giving it the right to conduct "hot pursuit" counter-terrorism operations inside Syria.⁶⁴ Since the protocol requires bilateral cooperation, the Russian proposal appeared aimed at fostering broader rapprochement through a common fight with terrorists. Yet each side appears to spurn the idea of dealing with the other, leaving the Russian proposal with neither party's buy-in. Erdoğan reiterated that Ankara would eschew high-level contacts with the regime; Damascus accused Turkey of violating the Adana accord since 2011 by "supporting terrorists and occupying Syrian territory", and conditioned its future validity on withdrawal of all Turkish troops from Syria.⁶⁵ An informal regime adviser said,

⁵⁹ Crisis Group interview, Moscow, December 2018. Confirmed in a Crisis Group phone interview, senior SDC official, January 2019.

⁶⁰ According to the SDC, the last official high-level YPG attempt to negotiate with the help of Russian mediation took place in February 2019. Crisis Group interviews, SDC leaders, Qamishli, March 2019.

⁶¹ To highlight the unreliability of Russian commitments, YPG interlocutors cite in particular the recurring arrests and forced disappearances in Daraa, a province in south-western Syria. Crisis Group phone interview, YPG official, February 2019. See also Crisis Group Middle East Report N°196, *Lessons Learned from the Syrian State's Return to the South*, 25 February 2019.

⁶² Crisis Group interview, SDF commander Mazloum Kobani, Deir al-Zour, March 2019.

⁶³ Crisis Group interviews, Russian officials, Moscow, February 2019.

⁶⁴ The Adana Agreement is based on Damascus considering the PKK a terrorist organisation and prohibiting its presence, activities and affiliates on Syrian soil. In accordance with the deal, Damascus shut down the PKK's bases in Syria and expelled its leader, Öcalan, which paved the way for his eventual capture by Turkey in 1999. See "Proposed Russian control of Syria border unlikely to appeal to Turkey", *The New Arab*, 25 January 2019.

⁶⁵ Asked how Turkey could invoke the protocol now, Erdoğan said he refused high-level contacts with a government led by someone "who forced the migration of millions and carried out the killing of nearly one million". Quoted in "Erdoğan highlights deal with Syria on terror fight", *Hürriyet Daily News*, 25 January 2019. In turn, the official Syrian news agency SANA stated that the agreement awaits reactivation pending a Turkish withdrawal from Syria and a halt to its support of "terrorists". "Foreign Ministry: activating Adana Agreement can be done when situation in the borders returns the way it used to be and when Turkish regime stops supporting terrorism and its forces withdraw", SANA, 26 January 2019.

“There is no room for a reconciliation between the Syrian state and the Turkish government during Erdoğan’s presidency”.⁶⁶

A residual U.S. force in north-eastern Syria will make it more difficult for Moscow to arrange deals on behalf of the regime with either Ankara or the YPG. The presence of U.S. troops in vital locations poses a potentially prohibitive impediment to regime return to the north east under any agreement. Similarly, it will prevent (or render irrelevant) a Russian green light to Turkey’s use of Syria’s airspace, as Washington will retain de facto control over north-eastern Syrian skies for at least as long as it keeps troops on the ground.⁶⁷

Russia remains keen on preserving its good relationship with Turkey and on mediating between the YPG and Damascus. But the wide gap between the parties’ demands and the lingering U.S. presence are leading Moscow to prioritise its talks with Turkey about the de-escalation zone in Idlib, rather than attempting to press any of the three protagonists to accept a non-satisfactory deal for the north east.⁶⁸

C. The YPG and Damascus: Playing for Time

Both the YPG and the regime appear to believe that time is on their side. Damascus is patiently waiting for an eventual U.S. withdrawal, confident that once the U.S. removes its military umbrella, the YPG will have to accept the regime’s terms. An informal regime adviser said:

We are in no rush to solve the Kurdish problem. In the meantime, the Kurds are driving a wedge between the two foreign occupiers [Turkey and the U.S.], which is beneficial to us.⁶⁹

The YPG, in turn, hopes to benefit from U.S. air cover for an extended period of time to strengthen its grip over the north east and create facts on the ground that would make the autonomy to which it aspires hard to reverse. Its ultimate aim is that Damascus recognise the autonomous region – or at least accommodate it.⁷⁰

Relations between the YPG and Damascus have been defined by limited security and governance cooperation, economic transactions and stumbling political talks. Damascus maintains a limited security presence in north-eastern Syria (including in the cities of Qamishli and al-Hasaka) and engages in security coordination with the YPG in a Kurdish neighbourhood of regime-held Aleppo. Tensions periodically arise between regime and YPG security personnel in Qamishli, but the regime retains a symbolic presence in the town centre and controls the airport. It continues to pay the salaries of some civil servants, and the two main government bakeries in al-Hasaka still

⁶⁶ Crisis Group interview, adviser to Bashar al-Assad, Beirut, February 2018.

⁶⁷ In 2017, U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff chair Dunford and his Russian counterpart Valery Gerasimov created a deconfliction channel between U.S. and Russian forces to ensure that neither side’s military activities pose a threat to the other and that neither country trespasses on the other’s zone of influence.

⁶⁸ Crisis Group phone interview, Russian official, April 2019. Russian officials suggested that as long as U.S. forces are present in north-eastern Syria, Moscow would play a waiting game. If and when the U.S. withdraws its troops, or it becomes clear that it will, they believe, Russian intercession might work. Crisis Group interviews, Moscow, February 2019.

⁶⁹ Crisis Group interviews, Geneva, June 2019; Moscow, February 2019.

⁷⁰ Crisis Group interviews, YPG officials, Qamishli, November 2018.

receive subsidies from the central government, which also operates some public schools. In Tal Rifaat and the Sheikh Maksoud neighbourhood of Aleppo, the YPG coordinates with the regime and regime-affiliated groups on security matters. A senior YPG official said: “The regime is our guest in Qamishli, while we are their guests in Aleppo”.⁷¹

On political matters, however, there has been little progress. Senior YPG officials say the last direct political talks occurred in mid-2018, when the regime twice hosted the SDC in Damascus.⁷² These talks quickly stalled over fundamentally divergent views of the north east’s future.⁷³ SDC representatives put forward an agenda to discuss constitutional changes aimed at securing a degree of autonomy sufficient to block the regime from reasserting dominance over local governance. Regime representatives refused to discuss any governance arrangements that went beyond existing legislation on decentralisation (Legislative Decree 107 of 2011), focusing instead on SDF disarmament and reintegration into the Syrian Arab Army.⁷⁴

While the YPG at times has used conciliatory rhetoric vis-à-vis Damascus, its actual positions remain relatively uncompromising. Its leadership has repeatedly and publicly expressed its desire to find a tolerable arrangement with Damascus.⁷⁵ It has also maintained a moderate diplomatic tone toward the regime, to both distance itself from the opposition and leave the door open for a peaceful settlement.⁷⁶ This politesse, however, should not to be mistaken for a willingness to capitulate to regime demands.⁷⁷ A senior YPG official said: “We never pursued regime change, but we have legitimate rights that we are willing to die for. We will not accept to surrender”.⁷⁸ The YPG insists on preserving both its civil and military structures to guard

⁷¹ Crisis Group interview, Qamishli, November 2019. The two sides also maintain commercial contacts through smuggling networks by which the regime procures oil and wheat from the north east. See Benoit Faucon and Nazih Osseiran, “U.S.’s Syria ally supplies oil to Assad’s brokers”, *The Wall Street Journal*, 9 February 2019.

⁷² YPG officials say the U.S. officials leading Syria policy have thus far dissuaded the SDF from striking deals with Damascus. Crisis Group interviews, YPG officials, eastern Syria, March 2019. See also Amberin Zaman, “Turkish intervention could trigger Syria’s ‘second great war’”, *Al-Monitor*, 20 March 2019.

⁷³ Crisis Group interviews, Syrian officials, Geneva, October 2018 and Moscow, February 2019; and SDC officials, Raqqa, August 2018. For the SDC’s perspective, see also “SDC spokesperson says negotiations with Damascus stalled”, *Kurdistan 24*, 3 October 2018. For the regime’s position, see “Al-Moallem: US presence in Syria illegal and must leave”, *SANA*, 30 September 2019.

⁷⁴ The Syrian parliament promulgated Decree 107 on decentralisation in August 2011 as part of a package of legislative reforms to quell the popular protests that had spread across the country. The full text is available [here](#). The decree attracted interest for its rhetorical emphasis on decentralisation and the devolution of some administrative responsibilities to local bodies, albeit under the authority of governors appointed by the central government. A Syrian official acknowledged that Decree 107 is not operative in any region of Syria, citing the war as the main obstacle. Crisis Group interview, Damascus, February 2018.

⁷⁵ Crisis Groups interview, senior YPG commander, Qamishli, November 2018. See also “Syrian Kurdish officials say group ready to talk to Damascus”, *Associated Press*, 6 June 2018.

⁷⁶ By contrast, the regime has employed harsh rhetoric against the YPG, accusing it of inviting U.S. occupation by working with Washington and enabling Turkey’s occupation of Afrin by refusing to hand the district back to the regime. Crisis Group interview, senior adviser to Bashar al-Assad, Moscow, February 2019.

⁷⁷ Crisis Group interviews, senior YPG commanders, north-eastern Syria, November 2018–March 2019.

⁷⁸ Crisis Group interview, YPG official, Derbasiya, north-eastern Syria, November 2018.

against the possibility of the regime reneging on any future agreements.⁷⁹ “Our red lines in talks with Damascus are preserving the SDF and recognition of the autonomous administration”, said SDF commander Mazloum Kobani.⁸⁰

The YPG says it also refuses partial arrangements that would entail ceding control over non-Kurdish areas to Damascus. When the YPG seized Raqqa from ISIS in 2017 and later took over the oil and gas fields in Deir al-Zour, regime opponents in these areas were concerned that the YPG would offer to hand the predominantly Arab regions of Manbij, Raqqa and Deir al-Zour back to Damascus in return for federal autonomy in al-Hasaka, Kobane and Afrin.⁸¹ But the YPG has been adamant that it seeks to include all territories currently under its control in its autonomous administration.⁸²

For its part, Damascus has not budged from its desire to regain every inch of the country and reinstate regime institutions (including security and military agencies). It considers anything short of that a step toward partitioning Syria.⁸³ The north east is no exception. While the leadership in Damascus has often shown willingness to discuss limited concessions on administrative decentralisation based on Decree 107, it has not compromised on wanting to assert full central authority over security services.⁸⁴ Regime representatives also emphasise that U.S. support will not give the YPG leverage in its relationship with Damascus, and that its reliance on this support only serves to sour Damascus’ attitude. A regime adviser said:

We have attempted to negotiate with the Kurds, but they have committed a strategic mistake by using their alliance with the U.S., thinking it would enhance their negotiating position with us. The longer this continues, the more difficult it will be for them to renegotiate with the Syrian government.⁸⁵

An eventual agreement between the YPG and Damascus remains essential for the north east’s longer-term stability and sustainability as part of Syria. It also will be important in order to avoid a clash between the two parties when the U.S. eventually removes not only its remaining ground troops but also its air protection – an undeclared but distinct possibility. Without Russian and/or U.S. involvement, however, both parties seem to be holding on to their zero-sum views, relying on their international backers and playing a waiting game.

⁷⁹ According to an SDF adviser, “the SDC is still open to dialogue, but not ready for ‘reconciliation deals’ like in Ghouta and Daraa”. Crisis Group interview, Derbasiya, March 2019. SDC official Ilham Ahmed reiterated this position. Crisis Group interview, Raqqa, November 2018.

⁸⁰ Crisis Group interview, SDF commander Mazloum Kobani, Deir al-Zour, March 2019. He later publicly reiterated his red lines with Damascus. “SDF commander lays out conditions for reconciliation with Damascus”, *Al-Monitor*, 22 March 2019.

⁸¹ While there are no reliable statistics on the demographic balance between Kurds and Arabs in these areas, Syrian Kurds generally perceive them to be core Kurdish territories with an historical Kurdish majority. Crisis Group conversations, north-eastern Syria, 2017-2019.

⁸² Crisis Group interviews, YPG leaders, Qamishli, November 2018.

⁸³ See “Interview: Buthaina Shaaban, political and media adviser to the Syrian presidency”, *Al-Mayadin*, 7 November 2017.

⁸⁴ Crisis Group Report, *Prospects for a Deal to Stabilise Syria's North East*, op. cit.

⁸⁵ Crisis Group phone interview, regime adviser, May 2019.

III. A War of Attrition with ISIS Remnants

Amid stalemate on the three negotiation tracks, worrying dynamics are emerging on the ground: Shortly after losing its last pockets of territory to the SDF at the end of February, ISIS shifted its strategy to an increasingly robust insurgency, which by now threatens to undermine the security situation in a significant part of north-eastern Syria.⁸⁶ Its operations have taken the form of hit-and-run attacks, often by fighters embedded in tribal communities.⁸⁷ Some tribes tolerate the presence of ISIS operatives in their midst out of fear of retaliation in areas where SDF forces are virtually absent.⁸⁸ The SDF and the Global Coalition to Counter ISIS have been unable to fully address this growing problem; worse, some of their policies in dealing with ISIS detainees and remaining ISIS cells exacerbate the risk that the terrorist group will mount a resurgence. More broadly, the SDF's willingness and ability to continue the counter-ISIS campaign for now is likely contingent on continued U.S. support, even at reduced levels and on there being no increase in the perception it has of threats emanating from Turkey and the Syrian regime.⁸⁹

⁸⁶ The head of the SDF's internal security reported increased ISIS attacks on local SDF forces in the first months of 2019. Crisis Group interview, eastern Syria, March 2019. The Pentagon reported in March that ISIS continues to have well-equipped clandestine cells in the north east and might be capable of conducting large-scale attacks. U.S. Department of Defense, "Operation Inherent Resolve", op. cit. In addition to hit-and-run attacks, ISIS carried out two high-profile operations: on 16 January, a suicide bomber detonated explosives at a restaurant in Manbij, killing nineteen people, including four Americans; and around midnight on 25 March, gunmen opened fire in Manbij, killing seven SDF fighters manning a checkpoint at the city entrance. ISIS claimed both attacks. Crisis Group interview, SDF official, eastern Syria, March 2019. On 29 April, ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi re-emerged in an eighteen-minute video circulated on jihadist social media channels, declaring: "Our battle today is a war of attrition to harm the enemy. They should know that jihad will continue until doomsday". Video, YouTube, 29 April 2019.

⁸⁷ ISIS reportedly killed over 150 local SDF fighters reportedly in February and March 2019. The Pentagon report on Operation Inherent Resolve assessed that ISIS is moving into IDP camps and major cities in Syria, and will likely continue to undertake high-profile attacks, particularly in Syrian cities, where they maintain well-supplied clandestine networks. U.S. Department of Defense, "Operation Inherent Resolve", op. cit. In May, ISIS militants claimed responsibility for burning crops, stating in their weekly newsletter, *al-Naba'*, that they had targeted farms belonging to senior officials in six Iraqi provinces and in eastern Syria. "Deliberate crop burning blamed on ISIS remnants compounds misery in war-torn Iraq and Syria", CBS News, 30 May 2019.

⁸⁸ There is a perception among Arab tribes in eastern Syria and locals in Deir al-Zour that the YPG leadership deliberately allowed ISIS remnants to operate in order to put pressure on the Global Coalition to stay in Syria and solicit continued Coalition support for fighting ISIS "sleeper cells". Crisis Group interviews, tribal leaders, eastern Syria, November 2018-March 2019.

⁸⁹ Tribal figures and YPG leaders said they interpreted the regime's efforts to reach out to tribes, buy loyalty and spread propaganda about its impending return as attempts to destabilise YPG rule. Crisis Group interviews, eastern Syria, March 2019.

A. The SDF's Approach to ISIS Detainees

The SDF holds approximately 7,000 ISIS fighters, including around 2,000 foreign militants, in prisons or refitted public buildings. It also holds thousands of family members in ill-supplied makeshift camps.⁹⁰ The “autonomous administration” has repeatedly called upon Western countries to repatriate their citizens.⁹¹ It says its detention capacities are overextended.⁹² During the last round of anti-ISIS operations in the Hajin area in December 2018, an exodus of more than 50,000 people poured out of then-ISIS-held territory, sparking a humanitarian crisis in the SDF-run camps for the internally displaced to which the SDF transported civilians. These camps now comprise a mix of displaced civilians along with ISIS-affiliated women and children (both local and foreign), guarded by under-equipped SDF forces.⁹³

Unable to handle the challenge, the SDF has released a large number of Syrian ISIS fighters as well as their followers and families. In so doing, it continued the approach it adopted since it pushed into predominantly Arab areas of Syria's north east in 2015.⁹⁴ At the time, the YPG took the strategic decision to defer to the tribes and show leniency in dealing with Arab communities – where it does not have the benefit of long-standing social or political ties – by pardoning hundreds of ISIS detainees as part of reconciliation deals with tribal figures.⁹⁵ The YPG also realised that the large number of Arabs entangled in the ISIS bureaucracy made it impossible to deal

⁹⁰ Crisis Group telephone interview, SDC official, May 2019.

⁹¹ The SDC estimates that al-Houl camp holds around 10,000 foreign women and children, not including Iraqi families. Crisis Group telephone interview, SDC official, July 2019.

⁹² Crisis Group interview, SDC official, Qamishli, March 2019. The SDF holds ISIS fighters from around fifty nations. Only Macedonia, Kosovo, Kazakhstan and Morocco have thus far confirmed repatriation of fighters. Some countries, such as France and the Netherlands, have confirmed repatriating orphans only. See “Syrian Kurds transfer orphans from jihadist families to France for repatriation”, France 24, 10 June 2019. On 14 June, six Belgian children of ISIS members returned to Belgium from Syria. “Belgium takes back children of ISIS fighters”, *The Guardian*, 15 June 2019. Earlier that month, the U.S. confirmed the repatriation of two women and six children – all U.S. citizens – from families with suspected ISIS connections. See “Two American women, six children repatriated to the US from Syria”, Reuters, 5 June 2019. Denmark, Finland and Sweden have introduced, or are in the process of introducing, legislation that would permit denaturalisation of ISIS fighters who have dual citizenship. These governments are increasingly concerned about how they would prosecute these fighters and the domestic backlash repatriation might trigger. Cited in U.S. Department of Defense, “Operation Inherent Resolve”, op. cit.

⁹³ The intense fighting against ISIS in Hajin in the final months of 2018 prompted large-scale population displacement. Women and children were directed to the al-Houl camp in al-Hasaka province, where foreigners are kept in a separate annex. According to the SDC, the scope of displacement from Hajin was much higher than expected, stretching the capacity of a camp that was designed to accommodate around 10,000 people. Crisis Group interview, SDC official, Qamishli, March 2019.

⁹⁴ It is unclear how many ISIS members the YPG has released as part of agreements with local tribes because there are no official records. In some areas, however, such as Karama (Raqqqa), the YPG released all Syrian ISIS detainees as part of a single deal between the YPG and al-Baryaj tribe. It involved hundreds of ISIS members. Crisis Group interviews, Raqqqa, November 2018. YPG officials claimed that they do not release senior ISIS figures or ISIS fighters who committed crimes against the YPG or the local population. Crisis Group interview, Asayish head, Qamishli, November 2018.

⁹⁵ Crisis Group observations and interviews, Manbij, Raqqqa and Deir al-Zour, 2017-2019.

with all those directly or indirectly associated with ISIS with a purely coercive policy of arrests and detentions.⁹⁶

Upon releasing ISIS followers, the YPG/SDF relied primarily on communal leaders to reintegrate them into Syrian society. In Raqqa and Manbij, where Kurds had long lived and the SDF had a good understanding of local dynamics, they identified tribal interlocutors whom they could trust to provide intelligence in return for pardons of low-ranking ISIS fighters and supporters from the tribe. Despite the fragility of the deals they struck with tribes and the clear lack of proper policies for reintegrating ISIS members in the long term, they quickly secured lands they had captured from ISIS while avoiding feuds with local Arabs over detaining large numbers of local men, especially tribal members.⁹⁷

But such policies are less effective in the north-eastern parts of Deir al-Zour, an area that has become a hub for ISIS activities across Syria's north east. Because the YPG lacks sufficient local knowledge in the area, it struggles to find interlocutors who can help them locate ISIS affiliates. Several other factors complicate the SDF's task. First is the large number of IDPs in the SDF-controlled parts of Deir al-Zour province – some 300,000 out of a total population of 1.5 million.⁹⁸ Many of these displaced fled the regime advance on the Euphrates' western bank in late 2017. Local notables and tribal elders have found it difficult to act effectively as brokers with many of these people, who are strangers to the area.⁹⁹

Secondly, the area's size militates against the SDF fully using its network of neighbourhood committees to maintain security, as it lacks the fighters and resources it would need to saturate the territory. This deficiency and its lack of local knowledge has led it to often rely on pre-existing structures that ISIS created to co-opt tribes as informants for the group's security branches.¹⁰⁰ Today, the SDF uses them for the exact same purpose. Thus, in Deir al-Zour some of the SDF's local intermediaries, who once similarly cooperated with ISIS, today turn a profit by securing the release of ISIS followers in exchange for money and (not necessarily reliable) information.¹⁰¹ Acting on such undependable intelligence, the YPG has frequently mistakenly di-

⁹⁶ ISIS recruited thousands of civilians for administrative jobs unrelated to combat. These people joined ISIS primarily because of intimidation or to earn a living. Even if it had wished to detain them all, the YPG would have lacked the capacity to incarcerate such large numbers; it also has been keen to avoid tensions with Arab tribes who regularly ask for the release of their tribal and family members. Crisis Group interviews, YPG officials, Qamishli, November 2018-March 2019; local groups in north-eastern Syria, August-November 2018.

⁹⁷ Crisis Group interview, Asayish head, Qamishli, November 2018. He claimed that not a single released ISIS detainee in the north east had taken part in an attack against the SDF after being pardoned.

⁹⁸ Crisis Group telephone interview, Ghassan Youssef, president of Deir al-Zour civil council, May 2019.

⁹⁹ An SDF official asserted that tribes provide conflicting reports about ISIS members, and that even tribal notables were unable to identify a large number of the IDPs. Crisis Group interview, Raqqa, November 2018.

¹⁰⁰ ISIS established an office called the "external relations bureau", tasking it with keeping a close eye on residents and reporting any activities it found suspicious. Crisis Group interview, head of Deir al-Zour internal security, Deir al-Zour, March 2019.

¹⁰¹ Some of the SDF's local interlocutors allegedly gave the SDF false intelligence, accusing people from other tribes of coordinating with or protecting ISIS elements as a way to settle inter-tribal vendettas. Crisis Group interview, SDC official, Raqqa, March 2019.

rected resources to fighting ISIS in areas where it was not present, while missing actual ISIS activity.¹⁰² On a number of occasions, these misbegotten operations have led to civilian casualties; such incidents, in turn, have fuelled tensions with locals.¹⁰³

In addition to those who were released or never apprehended, many former militants escaped detention. Local security structures in eastern Syria are decentralised and dominated by tribes within the SDF that run detention centres and often feud.¹⁰⁴ The loose supervision of these detention centres and frequent corruption among local SDF groups allowed a number of detained fighters to escape with outside help.¹⁰⁵ During a series of hiatuses in the fight against ISIS in Deir al-Zour between November 2017 and December 2018, smuggling networks facilitated such escapes and sold off captured weapons at rock-bottom prices.¹⁰⁶

B. Deteriorating Relations between the SDF and Local Tribes

A widening rift with tribes in eastern Syria is undermining the SDF's ability to wage counter-insurgency.¹⁰⁷ It also often leads the SDF to respond to growing local protests with heavy-handed tactics that cause civilian casualties and fuel grievances.¹⁰⁸ Residents are angered by poor service provision and often abusive and corrupt SDF security agents; these factors contribute to tensions with some tribes, which increasingly refuse to cooperate in anti-ISIS actions and are pulling out of SDF security

¹⁰² Crisis Group interviews, tribal notables, eastern Deir al-Zour, November 2018-March 2019.

¹⁰³ Such raids led to the wrongful deaths of 111 people in eastern Deir al-Zour during March 2019 alone. Following tribal logic, the SDF paid blood money (*daya*) for some of those it had mistakenly killed during anti-ISIS raids. Crisis Group interviews, tribal notables, eastern Syria, March 2019; head of Deir al-Zour internal security, Deir al-Zour, March 2019. A YPG official stated that the SDF had to halt all anti-ISIS raids in Deir al-Zour as a result of these wrongful killings in order to appease the tribes. He asserted that most were killed unintentionally during night raids. Crisis Group interview, Syria, May 2019.

¹⁰⁴ ISIS fighters are kept in these detention centres prior to being transferred to the YPG's terrorism court (also known as the "People's Court"). The YPG established this court in 2015 to prosecute those it accused of being implicated in ISIS's crimes. Run by five judges, it has two branches in north-eastern Syria, in Qamishli and Kobane. One of these judges said the court had handled 800 cases in 2017 and 1,200 in 2018; it has 7,000 pending. While one current judge is a career jurist, the others are officials who have not completed full judicial training. Crisis Group interview, judge, Qamishli, May 2019.

¹⁰⁵ Crisis Group interviews, locals in Deir al-Zour, March 2019. They alleged that prison guards would smuggle out ISIS detainees for a bribe of around \$3,000.

¹⁰⁶ Black markets in weapons have sprung up next to farmers' markets in eastern Syria, where a Dushka heavy machine gun cost around \$200 in early 2019. Crisis Group interviews, eastern Deir al-Zour, March 2019.

¹⁰⁷ In April 2019, tribes in eastern Syria began protesting poor service provision and arbitrary detentions during anti-ISIS raids, holding the SDF responsible. Crisis Group telephone interview, civil society activist, Deir al-Zour, May 2019.

¹⁰⁸ Crisis Group interviews, tribal notables, Deir al-Zour, March 2019. They referred in particular to the increasing number of people mistakenly killed during anti-ISIS raids in February, as acknowledged by the SDF. A Western official disputed the tribal perception that the YPG has indiscriminately killed civilians. He said, "the SDF is pursuing ISIS facilitators, though the raids have on occasion resulted in firefights that killed those associated with the facilitators as well". Crisis Group telephone interview, May 2019.

structures.¹⁰⁹ Some prominent tribal figures in eastern Syria are vexed by what they describe as lax SDF security measures, which they blame for enabling ISIS to step up its hit-and-run attacks on local Arabs.¹¹⁰ Some tribes fear that cooperation with the SDF puts them at risk of being targeted by ISIS, at a time when they feel the SDF neglects security.¹¹¹ It was not always so: in the weeks following ISIS's territorial defeat, the Baggara and Ageidat, eastern Syria's largest tribe and tribal confederation, respectively, worked closely with the SDF, volunteering many of their youth and providing intelligence on ISIS supporters.¹¹²

Tensions with the SDF coupled with uncertainty regarding continued U.S. protection has led some tribes to pursue alternative alliances in order to feel safe. In addition to procuring light and medium-range arms, some sought a rapprochement with Damascus.¹¹³ For example, the "public relations office" of the Sheaitat, a tribe in eastern Syria, went to Damascus to obtain pardons for their members.¹¹⁴ Members of other tribes quietly revived their allegiance to ISIS to protect themselves from the group.¹¹⁵

To some degree, growing local defiance vis-à-vis the SDF explains the level of protection ISIS cells enjoy in eastern Syria, where they are semi-structured, sometimes visible and invariably embedded in the population. These cells often have mutual "non-aggression" pacts with tribes, arranged through a mix of intimidation and persuasion, playing on the lack of trust between locals and SDF authorities.¹¹⁶

C. *A Shrinking U.S. Footprint*

Uncertainty prompted by Washington's confused messaging on the future of the U.S. presence in Syria inevitably undermines the YPG's willingness and ability to stabilise the area. With questions looming about its future and potential vulnerability to Turkish and regime attacks, the Kurdish-dominated force risks being distracted from the task of dismantling remaining ISIS networks.¹¹⁷ Abrupt decisions and flip-flopping

¹⁰⁹ Crisis Group interviews, leaders of the Baggara and Ageidat tribes, Deir al-Zour, November 2018-March 2019. For examples of tribal frustration with corruption and poor service provision, see "Arabs in Syria's Deir al-Zour protest against Kurdish militia", Reuters, 28 April 2019.

¹¹⁰ Crisis Group interviews, tribal members, Deir al-Zour, March 2019.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Crisis Group interviews, leaders of the Baggara and Ageidat tribes, Deir al-Zour, November 2018-March 2019.

¹¹³ Crisis Group interviews, tribal figures and civil society representatives, eastern Syria, March 2019.

¹¹⁴ Crisis Group interviews, eastern Syria, March 2019. In 2014, ISIS allegedly killed up to a thousand men of the Sheaitat tribe; in response, a significant section of the Sheaitat, which originally supported the Free Syrian Army (anti-Assad rebels), changed sides and aligned with the regime. Proximity to the regime made it easier for these Sheaitat members to reach out to Damascus after Trump's withdrawal announcement and undertake this visit. "Islamic State executed 700 people from Syrian tribe", Reuters, 17 August 2014.

¹¹⁵ Crisis Group interviews, tribal members and civil society activists, eastern Deir al-Zour, March 2019.

¹¹⁶ Crisis Group interviews, Deir al Zour, March 2019.

¹¹⁷ Both YPG and U.S. officials have expressed concerns about the impact of potential Turkish or regime escalation on the group's ability to contain a deteriorating security situation. A senior SDF commander explained that the Turkish attacks on Kobane and Tel Abyad in November 2018 temporarily stopped the SDF operation against ISIS in Hajin. He said, "The U.S. knows that the YPG fighters, who constitute the SDF's core, will not continue to fight in Deir al-Zour when Kobane or Qamishli come under threat". Crisis Group interview, Qamishli, November 2018. The U.S. Defense

policies, including cuts in stabilisation aid, have also jeopardised the safety of local groups working on U.S.-funded programming and undermined local perceptions of the U.S. as a security guarantor.¹¹⁸

Doubt about the future has particularly hindered the SDC's ability to respond to local needs in areas that suffered massive destruction. Until December 2018, the SDF had been collaborating with dozens of USAID and State Department officials and contractors (under the protection of U.S. troops) in demining and rubble removal, restoring services such as water and electricity, and getting schools and hospitals running again – in short, in making damaged areas liveable.¹¹⁹ The SDF also coordinated with U.S. diplomats on sensitive political issues, such as the repatriation of foreign ISIS fighters, Arab-Kurdish relations and governance in the predominantly Arab areas under SDF control.¹²⁰ This cooperation was part of a longer-term strategy to prevent these areas from becoming an insurgent breeding ground once more. Yet, in the aftermath of Trump's December 2018 withdrawal announcement, the administration told its diplomats and civilian advisers to evacuate within 24 hours, and counselled diplomats from allied Western nations, who had depended on U.S. military protection, to do the same.¹²¹

As the U.S. posture veers back and forth, European governments have been reluctant to support YPG-led governance in the north east out of fear of antagonising Turkey, though some have continued to fund early recovery and stabilisation programs.¹²²

As a result, the SDC is struggling even harder than before to address the overwhelming needs in areas its controls.¹²³ Its difficulties can only heighten local discontent

Department believes that the YPG's past responses to Turkey's actions in north-eastern Syria suggest that the SDF's YPG elements would freeze their efforts against ISIS in case of a Turkish offensive. U.S. Department of Defense, "Operation Inherent Resolve", op. cit.

¹¹⁸ In March 2018, President Trump ordered a freeze on \$230 million in U.S. stabilisation aid to Syria. That November, the U.S. State Department reported that more than ten Coalition members had provided \$300 million in "very hard contributions", including Saudi Arabia with \$100 million and the UAE with \$50 million, as well as Germany and the UK. See "Trump freezes \$200 million in aid promised to Syria", ABC News, 31 March 2019. Local groups expressed concern about both the lack of security in areas where stabilisation projects were under way and uncertainty over whether funding would continue. The projects included clearing unexploded ordnance, renovating schools and buying supplies for local clinics. Crisis Group interviews, civil society activists, Raqqa, March 2019.

¹¹⁹ U.S. Embassy in Syria, "Briefing on the status of Syria stabilization assistance and ongoing efforts to achieve an enduring defeat of ISIS", 17 August 2018.

¹²⁰ The U.S. State Department has defined stabilisation as "a political endeavour to create conditions where locally legitimate authorities can peaceably manage conflict". U.S. Department of State, "Stabilization assistance review: A framework for maximizing the effectiveness of U.S. government efforts to stabilize conflict-affected areas", 19 June 2018.

¹²¹ Some U.S. diplomats nonetheless remained in the north east or swiftly returned. Officials responsible for stabilisation assistance have likewise gone back, after a period of exclusively administering projects remotely through local partners. The U.S. has not restored its own funding for stabilisation assistance, but Saudi Arabia and the UAE have made large financial contributions to temporarily cover the cost of U.S. programming. Crisis Group phone interview, U.S. official, January 2019. The U.S. State Department is considering sending back more of its diplomats to north-eastern Syria under strict security conditions. Crisis Group interview, U.S. official, Washington, July 2019.

¹²² Turkey continues to oppose most outside stabilisation assistance to north-eastern Syria, perceiving it as an attempt by Western countries to lend legitimacy to the PYD/YPG. Crisis Group interview, Ankara, February 2019.

over poor service provision and foster instability.¹²⁴ The situation could deteriorate further because the autonomous authority's legitimacy, which derived from the SDF's military victory over ISIS, will likely erode as the local population shifts to assessing the SDC on its ability to provide basic services while maintaining security.

Within the Trump administration, some have tried to push back against the cuts. They have sought to frame stabilisation of Syria's north east as a national security imperative, highlighting the challenges the SDF would face holding thousands of detained ISIS members and policing areas taken from ISIS without continued financial support and military cover.¹²⁵ Yet so far they seem to be having little success at convincing their own government or most coalition members to invest additional resources to stabilise areas recaptured from ISIS.

¹²³ The SDC pays \$35 million in monthly salaries to civil servants and security personnel. Crisis Group interview, senior SDC official, Raqqa, November 2018.

¹²⁴ Research in Manbij, Raqqa and Deir al-Zour shows increasing levels of popular discontent over poor service provision. Crisis Group interviews, residents of these areas, August-November 2018, March 2019.

¹²⁵ The U.S. Department of Defense report, "Operation Inherent Resolve", *op. cit.*, highlights the significance of governance and stabilisation assistance in preventing an ISIS resurgence.

IV. Looking Ahead

A. Avoiding a New War

The U.S. and the Global Coalition to Counter ISIS have made great strides. Making their success stick, however, requires stabilising areas taken from ISIS and preventing further military escalation there. For now, the initiative lies with the U.S., as other actors are making their calculations based on what they expect will be the Trump administration's next move. The U.S. should use the time provided by the president's about-face to ensure that its withdrawal, when it occurs, does not invite chaos.

The immediate priority should be for the U.S. to secure an arrangement with the YPG and Turkey that dissuades Ankara from attacking or otherwise destabilising the north east in an effort to defeat or degrade the YPG. Military escalation would propel new waves of refugees toward the border and divert YPG forces from fighting ISIS remnants in the Euphrates valley, potentially enabling them to regain their potency and expand to other areas. Past U.S. efforts to assuage Ankara's strategic concerns since 2015 gained little traction, in part because U.S. officials were reluctant to twist YPG leaders' arms as long as they depended on the group to conduct major counter-ISIS offensives, particularly in territory far from the YPG's core majority-Kurdish areas of control; the threat of withholding support rang hollow when the YPG knew how critical it was to the administration's success. With major ground operations now complete and President Trump clearly keen on eventually withdrawing U.S. troops, Washington arguably is in a stronger position to press the YPG to take steps to address the heart of Turkish concerns.

To date, the U.S. has directed the bulk of its efforts at bridging the gap between the two sides' conflicting demands for a buffer zone along the Turkey-Syria border. But even should these efforts succeed – and there is no sign that they will – the underlying source of tension will remain and with it, the potential for a Turkish military response to the perceived YPG threat. Accordingly, and regardless of the future of talks over a buffer zone or other stopgap measures, the U.S. should reorient its diplomacy, and leverage its diminishing military presence, toward reaching a political agreement between Turkey and the YPG/PKK. Prospects for a return to the negotiating table seem remote. But the parties might be able to agree on de-escalation that paves the way for an eventual return to talks.

Turkey ought to be receptive to the notion of finding a non-military solution to its dilemma in Syria's north east. Its capacity to defeat the YPG in open battle is not in doubt; the region's flat topography strongly favours conventional mechanised warfare. But a Turkish incursion would likely push the YPG back to guerrilla tactics and could fuel the PKK insurgency in Turkey. In addition, a Turkey-YPG conflict in north-eastern Syria would further strain Ankara's already tense relations with Washington; it could backfire, persuading the U.S. to prolong its military presence in the north east in order to defend the YPG.

As noted, the YPG likewise should see recent developments as reasons to reach an understanding with Ankara. The main factor that currently protects the YPG from both Turkey and Russian-backed regime forces is the U.S. military presence. That umbrella is far from secure or guaranteed, however. Concessions on governance and security control the U.S. might demand in exchange of a deal with Turkey, while

hard to accept, likely would serve the YPG's longer-term interests in protecting its hard-fought gains.

Any U.S.-mediated agreement would need to address Turkey's two major concerns: preventing the emergence of a PKK-affiliated statelet south of its border and blocking YPG involvement in an insurgency against Turkish personnel in Afrin or – via the PKK – inside Turkey. It also would need to offer the YPG protection from a battle it would surely lose and give it the kind of international legitimacy that it yearns for but lacks. Under such an understanding:

- The YPG would lessen its control over governance, resources and security in Syria's north east; in particular, it would need to phase out the parallel control it now wields over governance and security structures through its PKK-trained cadres, which Turkey regards as steps toward the creation of a PKK-affiliated statelet. It should devolve authority to bodies that are efficient and enjoy local buy-in rather than evince loyalty to the YPG/PKK.

True, PKK-trained cadres played a crucial role in stabilising areas newly captured from ISIS. But their presence now comes at a high political cost and makes these areas a military target for Ankara. At the same time, the YPG should remove all its non-Syrian cadres from governing positions, replacing them with local technocrats, and remove all PKK insignia from north-eastern Syria.¹²⁶

There is reason to believe the PKK leadership might be ripe for such gestures. In May 2019, PKK leader Öcalan called on the SDF to pursue solutions in Syria through means other than armed conflict.¹²⁷ This seeming willingness to de-escalate tensions with Turkey and push for a political arrangement that would include Syria's north east – while still unproven – merits being tested by Ankara and Washington. To be sure, PKK concessions might appear unpalatable to its leaders and cadres unless matched by reciprocal steps from Ankara demonstrating that it embraces priorities broadly held among Turkey's Kurdish population, including reinstating local and national politicians who were removed from office, releasing those imprisoned, providing mother-tongue education and enabling a form of decentralisation. Ultimately, however, as Crisis Group has previously argued, the YPG will find it increasingly difficult to both maintain its control over north-eastern Syria and preserve its ties to the PKK while the latter maintains its insurgency in Turkey.¹²⁸

¹²⁶ Non-Syrian Kurds affiliated with the PKK hold key positions in north-eastern Syria, including in border and oil management. Crisis Group interviews and observations, north-eastern Syria, 2017-2019.

¹²⁷ See Ali Kucukgocmen, "Jailed Kurdish militant exhorts SDF to avoid conflict in Syria", Reuters, 7 May 2019.

¹²⁸ As Crisis Group previously argued, it will be difficult for the YPG/PYD to retain its dominant role in north-eastern Syria and its deeply intertwined linkage with the PKK while the latter continues its insurgency against the Turkish state. The YPG/PYD should consider how to rank its three main priorities – its foothold in north-eastern Syria; its ties to the PKK; and, by association with the PKK, its confrontation with the Turkish state. For more details on options for delinking the YPG from the PKK in Syria, see Crisis Group Report, *The PKK's Fateful Choice in Northern Syria*, op. cit. For more details on mutually beneficial steps, see Crisis Group Report, *Prospects for a Deal to Stabilise Syria's North East*, op. cit.

- ❑ Through U.S.-Turkish joint patrols and other mechanisms along the Syria-Turkey border, Turkey could monitor the removal of all YPG heavy weaponry to, say, 20km from the border and deter smuggling, including via tunnels, between Syria and Turkey and between Syria and Iraq.¹²⁹
- ❑ The YPG should cease its insurgency against Turkish personnel and proxies in Afrin.¹³⁰ In return, Turkey should address the property and security concerns of Afrin's native inhabitants by ending violations perpetrated by the armed groups it supports there.¹³¹ Turkey should also allow the return of those who have been displaced from Afrin as a result of its military operations in the district.
- ❑ Turkey should drop its veto over SDC inclusion in the UN-led political process. Enabling the SDC to participate could encourage the organisation's Syria focus and help cement its commitment to settling the status of the north east through the framework of a multilateral nationwide agreement that preserves Syria's territorial integrity. Ankara wields significant influence within the political process, thanks to its leverage over the Syrian opposition and role in northern Syria. It is well positioned to ensure that any eventual agreement takes into account Turkish national security concerns.
- ❑ The U.S. should cease discouraging the YPG from reaching arrangements with Damascus, recognising that the north east's future rests in its reintegration in the Syrian state.¹³² In the same spirit, it should refrain from using YPG control over natural resources as a tool to pressure and weaken Damascus. Pursuing the current approach would diminish odds of a sustainable political settlement for the north east and render SDF-controlled territory more vulnerable to regime attacks or destabilisation attempts through local proxies.

The primary obstacle to a broader agreement between Damascus and the YPG has been both parties' tendency to cling to maximalist positions, in the belief that waiting out their opponent would yield better results than compromising. The U.S. and broader coalition in principle could help loosen that knot by signalling to the regime

¹²⁹ A senior YPG official indicated that the group may be prepared to accept some form of conditional, temporary Turkish presence on the border through joint Turkish-U.S. patrols. Crisis Group telephone interview, May 2019.

¹³⁰ According to the investigative outfit Bellingcat, the YPG and affiliated groups have claimed responsibility for almost 220 attacks in Afrin between late March 2018 and the end of January 2019. See Alexander Mckeever, "Wrath of the olives: tracking the Afrin insurgency through social media", Bellingcat, 1 March 2019.

¹³¹ According to Amnesty International, residents of Afrin are enduring a range of violations, mostly at the hands of Turkish-backed Syrian armed groups. These violations include arbitrary detention, property confiscation and looting. See "Syria: Turkey must stop violations by allied forces in Afrin", Amnesty International, 2 August 2018.

¹³² Such arrangements could include 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). They could also include the restoration of state control over international borders and incorporation of SDF military structures and allied local security bodies within the framework of the Syrian state. But medium-term arrangements could also be pursued. For more details on potential parameters for such arrangements, see Crisis Group Report, *Prospects for a Deal to Stabilise Syria's North East*, op. cit.

that it will not recover the resource-rich north east without offering substantial concessions on local autonomy (or substantive decentralisation) to the YPG; and by making clear to the YPG that U.S. protection is not permanent.

Persuading the regime to display flexibility likely will require an equally clear message from Russia that it is committed to a negotiated solution for the north east and will not back a regime offensive, even after a U.S. withdrawal. In so doing, Moscow could accomplish its goals of helping the regime assert its control over the area and preserving the state's territorial integrity. What is more, if Russia wishes to see the end of the U.S. presence, it is more likely to occur if the YPG and Damascus reach agreement on the future of areas currently outside of regime control in a manner that both is acceptable to Turkey and keeps Iran-affiliated groups out of the north east. By contrast, a contrary approach – ie, an effort by the regime and its backers, whether Iran or Russia, to press the U.S. to withdraw via escalation and/or destabilisation – could provoke U.S. counter-escalation and reinforce in Washington's eyes the strategic importance of eastern Syria and thus of its continued presence there.

B. Avoiding an ISIS Resurgence

The Global Coalition should revitalise its approach to stabilising the north east by supporting an integrated civilian-military process in which local Arab authorities play a central role. Such a process, which would help consolidate security gains in ISIS-affected areas, likely will require external pressure on the YPG to devolve authority to local governing bodies, including local security actors, to avoid backlash from which ISIS would benefit. Local forces are less likely than the YPG to alienate and anger tribes when conducting counter-insurgency operations; the YPG – which locals view as a band of outsiders – is also prone to using heavy-handed methods and causing civilian casualties, thereby fuelling additional grievances. The YPG will have to establish strong oversight over these local actors, impose strict accountability and follow up quickly on claims of abuse.

An answer is also needed to the challenge posed by ISIS prisons and IDP camps where ISIS families are held. Managing these facilities is stretching the SDF's capacity beyond breaking point, despite its best efforts. The coalition is rightly concerned about escapes and/or riots that could turn into prison breaks.¹³³

Western governments ought to accept responsibility for their own nationals present in these camps. They should urgently repatriate orphaned children and investigate the possibility of returning whole family units. No matter the crimes their parents may have committed, the more than 3,000 foreign children who are in makeshift camps in north-eastern Syria are innocent victims of the conflict. They should be repatriated to their countries of origin.

Coalition partners also need to contribute additional funding and protection to help preserve SDF detention centres that hold foreign fighters. At the same time, they should offer technical and financial assistance to the SDF to enhance its capacity to prosecute Syrian ISIS members in its custody or under its control, including by setting up courts and acceptable detention facilities. Finally, they should aid SDF ef-

¹³³ Crisis Group interviews, U.S. officials, Washington, April 2019.

forts to reintegrate these former fighters into Syria society.¹³⁴ The YPG cannot and should not be expected to address this problem on its own.

¹³⁴ See Section III.A above.

V. Conclusion

Ever since Syria descended into chaos, the country's north east has experienced varying degrees of turbulence. In the north, along the border with Turkey, the YPG has provided a degree of stability in majority-Kurdish areas, even as some of the local population contested its rule. By contrast, majority-Arab areas in the Euphrates valley to the south saw major fighting, including the YPG's successful campaign, backed by the U.S.-led Global Coalition to Counter ISIS, to defeat the Islamic State as it withdrew eastward before making its last stand near the Iraqi border.

Yet ISIS's territorial defeat did not put an end to the north east's misery. U.S. support for the SDF was intended to promise quiet through well-funded stabilisation, but the Trump administration's decision to scale back the U.S. troop presence and freeze stabilisation funds has raised questions about the area's immediate future. Seeing its enemy exposed, Turkey threatened to enter Syria to fight the YPG as part of its struggle against the PKK; its negotiations with the U.S. to create a buffer zone inside northern Syria to remove the YPG from the border have yet to bear fruit. Impatience in Ankara is visibly mounting. The Syrian regime for its part has made no secret of its ambition to reclaim every inch of Syrian territory, including the north east, now that its confrontation with various rebels has wound down in the rest of Syria minus Idlib.

Trump's revision of his own decision offers a reprieve, but one of unknown duration. At some point, the U.S. presence will come to an end, and the SDF will be vulnerable to attack in the area it dominates from foes to the north and south. Added to this picture, ISIS remnants are rearing their heads, carrying out assassinations in Arab villages and making the roads unsafe again at night.

The key now is to use the opening created by the prolonged U.S. presence to work on a longer-term, more sustainable arrangement. This task will require both mediating a deal between Turkey and the YPG that addresses the former's core interests while continuing to protect the latter. And it will require working on an understanding between Damascus and the YPG that re-establishes the state's presence in the north east while preserving a degree of local autonomy that would protect both Arabs and Kurds living in the area from a coercive regime return. Failure to move on these two fronts could undo the victory over ISIS and reduce an area that appeared to have turned the corner on conflict into violently contested terrain yet again.

Istanbul/Brussels/Deir al-Zour, 31 July 2019

Appendix A: Map of North East Syria



Appendix B: List of Acronyms

ISIS	Islamic State in Syria
PKK	Kurdistan Workers' Party
PYD	Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat (Democratic Union Party)
SDC	Syrian Democratic Council
SDF	Syrian Democratic Forces
YPG	Yekîneyên Parastina Gel (People's Protection Units)

Appendix C: 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 Emergency Trust Fund for Africa, European Union Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace, French Development Agency, French Ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs, German Federal Foreign Office, Global Affairs Canada, Irish Aid, Iceland Ministry for Foreign Affairs, Japan International Cooperation Agency, Principality of Liechtenstein, Luxembourg Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs, New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Qatar Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, the UK Department for International Development, and the United Arab Emirates Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation.

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July 2019

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