

TURKISH-KURDISH RELATIONS AND THE CONFLICTS IN SYRIA:
THE KURDISH INFLUENCE ON TURKISH
INVOLVEMENT IN SYRIA

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ABSTRACT

Since the outbreak of the Syrian Civil War, the Erdogan Regime in Turkey has been harshly criticized by its allies, and has been questioned by the international community with respect to its intentions for the region. Specifically, in regard to Turkish relations with the recently autonomous Democratic Union Party (PYD), a Kurdish organization based in northern Syria. The Erdogan regime has equated the PYD with that of the Turkey-based terrorist group the Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK), and as a result has begun military operations against them. This paper will attempt to explore the possible explanations for the Turkish involvement in the Syrian Conflict, especially as it relates to the PYD in Northern Syria and their relationship to the PKK in Southern Turkey. The geographically contiguous nature of these two Kurdish organizations has resulted in a border crisis for Turkey, assuming that the autonomy of the Syrian Kurds continues post-war.

1) INTRODUCTION

The Syrian Civil War began in 2011 when pro-democracy demonstrators were fired upon in the Syrian town of Deraa, driving hundreds of thousands of protesters into the streets throughout the country demanding the resignation of Syria's president Bashar Assad. As supporters began to take up arms and expel governmental forces, what began as a civil war developed into a long, bloody conflict that has lasted nearly 7 years. As more supporters and non-state organizations joined the conflict, sectarian divides quickly became clear between the Shia pro-Assad forces and the predominantly Sunni opposition. However, as this dichotomy often does, the Sunni-Shia conflict lit fire to the region and the jihadist narrative of opposing forces soon drew foreign fighters and militant groups from all over the world. One group in particular, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) seized upon the opportunity presented by such instability and established a self-proclaimed caliphate throughout much of Iraq and Syria. This brought in the participation of several international players such as: The United States, Russia, Iran, Lebanon, and Turkey. However, as the conflict dragged on and the international involvement increased, the fight has seemingly consolidated down to five main players: The pro-governmental forces, The Free Syrian Army (FSA)¹, ISIS, Turkey, and the Kurds.

¹ The Free Syrian Army is the Syrian opposition forces initially comprised of the previous officers in the Syrian army pre-conflict. However, now it has grown into a larger body

Turkey had a somewhat complicated entry into the Syrian Civil war in 2014 when the Turkish government agreed to be a part of a U.S led coalition to combat ISIS. However, questions soon arose as to the intentions of the Turkish involvement when it was discovered that many of their airstrikes to “target ISIS” were instead hitting Kurdish targets in the autonomous region along the northern border of Syria and Turkey established by the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD). The Erdogan regime² has named the PYD a terrorist organization and affiliate of the Turkey-based terrorist group the Kurdistan Worker’s Party (PKK). Due to this alleged affiliation, and the large presence of the PKK along the southern border of Turkey, there is a real possibility that if not stopped, combined Kurdish (PKK and PYD) forces will create a continuous Kurdish controlled autonomous region spanning the entire Syrian/Turkish border. The strong possible ties between the PYD and the PKK, have created a great concern for the Erdogan regime. As such, the PYD’s establishment of an autonomous region along the northern border of Syria could be viewed as a national security issue for Turkey and therefore may be a strong motivating factor for Turkish actions in Syria.

This paper will attempt to explore the possible explanations for the Turkish involvement in the Syrian conflicts especially as it relates to the Kurds in both Northern Syria (PYD) and the PKK presence in Southern Turkey. To do so I will

composed of a myriad of opposition groups including Iranian backed Hezbollah, various religious militant groups, and Syrian rebel forces

² Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has served as the President of Turkey since 2014.

analyze the potential ramifications of Kurdish autonomous regions in Syria, which appears to be a primary focus of Turkish participation in the conflict. I will also explore the connection between the PYD and the PKK to assess whether the PKK is the main source of contention with the Syrian Kurds. Finally, I will examine the behavior of the Turkish forces in Syria to demonstrate that the Kurdish question in the conflicts may be the sole agenda of the Erdogan regime in the Syrian Civil War.

2) DEVELOPMENT OF KURDISH IDENTITY

The Kurds, as a defined ethnicity may be as old as the 5th century BCE, and their identity was clear by the 6th century CE. Historic non-state Kurdistan stretches across the Zagros Mountains through modern day Iraq, Syria, Iran, and Turkey, making the Kurds who now number between 25 and 35 million, the 4th largest ethnic group in the Middle East and the largest without a state. Even with a developed language and culture specific to the Kurdish identity, being divided amongst four geographically contiguous states that have different languages, religions and cultures has created a disparate and fractured culture within the Kurdish people. The contentious relationship between Turkey and the Kurds goes back to before the founding of the Modern Republic of Turkey, when the Ottoman Empire was in conflict with the Zagros Mountain peoples who refused

the Ottoman insistence on linguistic hegemony and cultural assimilation³.

However, a more modern framework for the Turkish and Kurdish relationship begins after the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire following World War I with the reign of Mustafa Kemal “Ataturk”, the founder of modern Turkey. He carried on the tradition of the establishment of an all encompassing Turkish nationality, which did not acknowledge the separate cultures of various ethnic groups.

However, the Kurds were a different case because they were such a large minority, and Ataturk began a precedent that has continued to this day of using the Kurdish presence to gain the upper hand on political opposition. He promised them autonomy during the Turkish War for independence for their support, and like many Turkish political leaders after him, reneged as soon as the war was won.⁴ What followed was a slew of Kurdish/Sunni Muslim revolts, one of which in the late 1920’s established an independent state in Northern Turkey (Republic of Ararat) which fell after three years due to the failure to achieve Kurdish tribal unity.⁵ This pattern of Turkish Kurdish relations repeated itself through World War II until the emergence of Abdullah Ocalan, a Kurdish political activist with a

³ E. Parlar Dal, “Impact of the Transnationalization of the Syrian Civil War on Turkey: Conflict Spillover Cases of ISIS and PYD-YPG/PKK,” *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 29, no. 4 (01 2016): 1396–1420, <http://doi.org/10.1080/09557571.2016.1256948>.

⁴ Kerim Yildiz, *The Kurds in Syria : The Forgotten People* (London ; Ann Arbor, MI : Pluto Press in association with Kurdish Human Rights Project, 2005., 2005), <http://libproxy.txstate.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=cat00022a&AN=txi.b3154959&site=eds-live&scope=site>.

⁵ It should be noted however that the Kurdish identity is one various religions and cultures which has been the source of disunity in any thoughts of a single Kurdish state.

strong Marxist ideology who would create the PKK in 1970, an organization recognized as terrorist throughout the international community.

The PKK from 1970 onwards, experienced a series of transformations from the original Marxist movement to the secular democratic nationalist one it has become today.⁶ The first PKK insurgency took place amidst the Turkish civil conflicts of the late 1970's and was subsequently pacified with the military coup of 1980. This quick and succinct failure highlighted the difficulties of the Marxist movement and brought forth a new direction for the PKK, that of a Democratic Socialist party whose aim is that of an independent, Kurdistan. Turkey's founding ideology left no room for the Kurds and as a result they were greatly marginalized. The PKK exploited the Kurdish resentment towards Ankara in an attempt to rally the Kurdish tribes under a common cause.⁷ As the PKK grew in stature, and the situation in Turkey became more violent, Arab states such as Iran and Syria began to support, harbor, and even fund the terrorist organization in Turkey. It is important to note at this point that Iran and Syria may not have been doing such as an indication of sympathy, as they are known to be equally as hostile to the Kurdish populations in their own countries, but instead as Spyridon would suggest, "a war by proxy", by supporting the PKK and therefore supporting insurrection and violence within Turkey.⁸

⁶ Spyridon A. Plakoudas, "The Pkk and the Guerrilla Tradition of Turkey's Kurds," *MERIA Journal* 18, no. 4 (Winter 2014): 1–10.

⁷ Plakoudas.

⁸ Spyridon Plakoudas, "The Syrian Kurds and the Democratic Union Party: The Outsider in the Syrian War," no. 1 (2017): 99.

The PKK like many Kurdish parties in Turkey never gained significant and meaningful political clout. However, through their self-proclaimed status as the sole advocate of both Kurdish independence and unity in the Middle East, they were able to gain a large following outside the Turkish border which aided their guerilla tactics by adding mobility and depth to their operations. Such a strategy from their leader Ocalan who was imprisoned in 1999, as well as the vicious reprisals adopted by Erdogan and his predecessors in dealing with the terrorist organization, have claimed some 45000 lives since the PKK's inception. However, the PKK after Ocalan embraced new direction in 2004, changing its Marxist nationalist goals for that of "democratic autonomy" for Kurds in southwestern Turkey.⁹ The current president of Turkey, Recep Tayyip Erdogan initially welcomed this new direction and attempted a series of peace talks with the PKK. Many scholars speculate whether this was simply continuation of the tradition of winning the Kurdish vote to increase approval ratings and gain a political advantage. This might not be too far off, as neither parties put much effort into the peace process which broke down in 2009. Since which, possibly due to the complexities produced with the conflict in Syria, Erdogan has continued these on and off peace narratives to no avail while at the same time relying heavily on the military option when dealing with the Kurds.

⁹ Michael Chittenden, "Turkey and the Kurds: Conflict with the Kurdistan Workers' Party and Implications for Turkey-United States Relations," *Global Security Studies* 7, no. 3 (Summer 2016): 31–40.

The fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003, opened up the opportunity for the formation of the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) in northern Iraq as well as the rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS).¹⁰ In 2012, ISIS used the chaos of the Syrian Civil War to seize large areas of land across several borders, stirring the newly found Kurdish autonomous government, as well as most nations in the Middle East, into action. While the inter-relations of the Syrian, Iraqi, and Turkish Kurds are contentious at best, ISIS's unprecedented cruelty and propensity for merciless violence united the Kurds against them. Not as one unified body, but as a myriad of smaller preexisting militias and organizations, such as the Democratic Union Party (PYD) in northwestern Syria. After the successful repelling of ISIS from Kobani in 2015, the PYD and their armed wing, the Peoples Protection Units (YPG), became arguably the most powerful non-state actor opposing the Islamic State, including the Free Syrian Army (FSA) which is the Turkish-backed opposition group fighting to overthrow the Assad regime.

Turkey deems the PYD and the YPG as no more than a branch of the PKK, which is a well-founded claim due to strong ethnic and ideological ties that they share.¹¹ As well as the fact that the PKK flooded thousands of fighters into Northern Syria at the beginning of the Syrian War to aid the Kurds in establishing an autonomous canton. Turkey at first tried to work with the YPG, telling them to

¹⁰ Michael M. Gunter, "Iraq, Syria, ISIS and the Kurds: Geostrategic Concerns for the U.S. and Turkey," *Middle East Policy* 22, no. i (2015): 102–11.

¹¹ Plakoudas, "The Pkk and the Guerrilla Tradition of Turkey's Kurds."

keep distance from Assad, and cease the establishment of autonomous zones near the Turkish border. However, this did not seem to play to the PYD's agenda and the autonomous regions grew rapidly, creating a new empowerment of the PKK in southern Turkey. This in addition to the preexisting history of conflict between the PKK and the Erdogan regime, could be what has driven recent events such as the crossing of the border of Turkish armed forces and seizing of YPG held areas, cities, and towns in the name of combating ISIS. However, this narrative has since been dropped and the Erdogan regime has made clear that their true enemy is the terrorist group, the PKK and their affiliate the PYD.¹² To which the large presence of such groups along their border may constitute a significant national security risk.

3) A POTENTIAL BORDER CRISIS

Since the outbreak of the Syrian Civil War and ensuing conflicts in Syria, the Erdogan Regime in Turkey has been harshly criticized by its allies, and has been questioned by the international community with respect to its intentions for the region. Throughout the conflict, Ankara's objectives have been obscure at best. The Turkish government allowed jihadists to travel through Turkey into Syria to combat the Assad regime in 2012, and then bashed the other international

¹² Gunter, "Iraq, Syria, ISIS and the Kurds."

players for not doing enough to combat the rise of Islamic militancy in Syria.¹³ In 2016, Turkish forces crossed the border during the Euphrates Shield Operation which was to support the Free Syria Army (FSA) against ISIS. However, Turkey's stated objectives of pushing back ISIS came under more scrutiny when it was discovered that most air attacks had been targeting YPG positions rather than ISIS.¹⁴ This contradiction of attacking what the United States has considered to be the best military force inside Syria that is fighting against ISIS, has led many experts to consider the possibility that the true endgame of the Erdogan regime has to do with the Kurds on their border, not ISIS or even Assad.

The strong correlations that appears to exist between the relations of Erdogan and the Kurdish People's Worker Party (PKK), and the current situation unfolding between Turkish forces in Syria and the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD), is hard to ignore and is debated by many scholars. Emel Parlar Dal categorizes this as a possible "spillover effect" in which the Turkish/YPG conflicts were caused by Assad, essentially allowing the Kurds to seize large areas in northern Syria as an attempt to preoccupy the Turkish forces. He suggests instead that the PKK empowerment resulting from the formation of these autonomous regions, is possibly a concession made by the Assad regime to create a more immediate threat to Turkey.¹⁵ This concession also took precedent

¹³ Kılıç Kanat and Kadir Üstün, "U.S.-Turkey Realignment on Syria," *Middle East Policy* 22, no. iv (2015): 73–87.

¹⁴ Gunter, "Iraq, Syria, ISIS and the Kurds."

¹⁵ Parlar Dal, "Impact of the Transnationalization of the Syrian Civil War on Turkey."

over the fight against ISIS, in which the Erdogan regime was even hesitant to allow PKK and KRG Peshmerga forces to aid the YPG at the siege of Kobani¹⁶. An action which may have back fired on Erdogan when the YPG were nonetheless victorious in 2015, and were considered to be the best chance at a Middle Eastern based solution to the ISIS threat. Parlar Dal also notes that there were a large number of bloody insurgencies in major Turkish cities during, and following the siege of Kobani. These were protests of Turkish reluctance to support the YPG, or possibly in recognition of an empowerment of identity of Kurds themselves. In any case, the PKK fighters who returned to Southern Turkey following the siege of Kobani seemed to have adopted many of the YPG tactics in their conflicts with Turkish authorities.

Alternatively, there are also those who see the Assad regime, and even ISIS, as non-factors in the role of Turkey in Syria. While there is a certain enmity between the Assad and Erdogan regimes, Burak Bilgehan Özpek would argue that the sole reason behind the Turkish entry into Syria was to prevent the establishment of the corridor between the Kurdish Rajava and Afrin cantons.¹⁷ This would have created a unified Kurdish autonomous sphere of control across the majority of the Turkish/Syrian border, which would constitute a significant national security issue for Turkey. Due to the strong ties existing between the

¹⁶ It should be noted here that they did eventually allow the forces to pass through.

¹⁷ B.b. Özpek, "Paradigm Shift between Turkey and the Kurds: From 'Clash of the Titans' to 'Game of Thrones,'" *Middle East Critique* 27, no. 1 (02 2018): 43–60, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19436149.2017.1415513>.

PYD and the PKK, a unified PYD autonomous region creates a possibly large PKK controlled area that potentially erases Turkey's established southern border with Syria. Özpek also argues that this is what is behind the Turkish cooperation with the Masoud Barzani-led Kurdish National Council (KNC)¹⁸, which opposes the radical leftist and nationalist ideologies of both the PKK and PYD.¹⁹

The PKK/PYD variable in the Syrian conflicts is a constant question in most scholarly circles when discussing the actions of Turkish forces in the Syria. Particularly, is the PKK the source of Turkish wariness of a strong Kurdish autonomous region in northern Syria? Chittenden would argue yes, Turkey's behavior towards the PYD "would be significantly different without the threat of the PKK".²⁰ While this might hold some weight, it might be more specific to go even further and say that the behavior might be different without the "legacy" of the PKK. The PKK struggle inside Turkey with all it entails, has lasted 40 years and has resulted in the deaths of tens of thousands, creating animosity among nationalistic Kurds in Turkey and along its borders. Furthermore, regardless of the PKK/PYD connection, the success of the Syrian and Iraqi Kurds in establishing autonomous zones has seen an increased desire of Turkish Kurds to identify as "Kurdish". This would seem to detriment the narrative of the Erdogan regime in a possible desire to create a homogenized, mono-linguistic

¹⁸ Masoud Barzani was the President of the Iraqi Kurdish region dating from 2005-2017

¹⁹ Özpek, "Paradigm Shift between Turkey and the Kurds."

²⁰ Chittenden, "Turkey and the Kurds."

Islamic state.²¹ This narrative is something which has been a significant source of radicalization among Kurds in Turkey for decades. Therefore, one could argue that rise of the PYD along the Syrian/Turkish border, regardless of the terrorist label employed by the Turkish government, indeed constitutes a significant national security issue for Turkey.

4) TURKEY AND THE DEMOCRATIC UNION PARTY

The position of the PYD (Democratic Union Party) of being both the strongest non-state actor opposing ISIS and the Assad regime, as well as being the alleged Syrian based affiliate of the People's Workers Party (PKK), makes them both a potential ally and potential threat of Turkey in the Syrian conflict. While not confirmed within the party itself, the Turkish government has deemed the PYD a branch of the PKK, an internationally recognized Kurdish terrorist organization that is based in Turkey. However, they also pose as the best defense turkey has at keeping the conflict back from their borders, in addition to efficiently ousting Assad from power. Therein lies the problem for Turkey, for the support of the PYD would be to support the coalition fighting both the Syrian governmental forces, as well as the Islamic State. While this falls in line with Turkey's agenda, it would also create a powerful Kurdish autonomous foundation along the

²¹ Chittenden.

Turkish/Syrian border, while at the same time empowering the PKK in southern Turkey.

Due to the manpower sent by the PKK to aid the PYD in driving back ISIS, the Kurdish forces were able to seize control of large amounts of territory in northern Syria.²² This created a significant continuous Kurdish sphere of control spanning across much of Syria, and Iraq's northern borders, which allows for Kurdish groups such as the PKK to have increased mobility and sustainability. In 2012, a confident PKK bolstered by the success of the PYD in Syria, attempted to create a popular uprising in Southeastern Turkey. This prompted the Erdogan regime to instead open negotiations with the imprisoned PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan.²³ This shows the extent to which the influence of Kurdish success in Syria correlates with a greater balance of power for the PKK at the negotiation table.

The PYD's prominence amongst the numerous Kurdish militias operating in Syria arises not only from the prowess of their military branch, the People's Protection Units (YPG), but also their seemingly liberal ideologies in regard to civil rights. In relation to their Arab neighbors and even other more conservative Kurdish bodies such as the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) in northern Iraq, the PYD is attempting to push the message of civil rights for women and minority groups amongst an increasingly sectarian climate. Due to the

²² Verena Gruber, "Kurds: An Intersection of Unusual Alliances," *Conflict Studies Quarterly*, no. 13 (October 2015): 3–16.

²³ Plakoudas, "The Pkk and the Guerrilla Tradition of Turkey's Kurds."

increasingly sectarian stances and alignments, as well as a possibly hostile attitude towards its affiliate the PKK, the Erdogan regime has become extremely averse towards this particular Kurdish organization.²⁴ This affiliation seems to be the reasoning behind Erdogan engagement of military operations against the PYD since 2015. Similarly, since negotiations with the PKK broke down, and the ceasefire between the organization and the Turkish government ended in that same year, Erdogan has now refused any option beside military operations in dealing with the both the PKK and the PYD.²⁵

The difficult position of the Turkish regime in relation to the PYD question comes from the Kurdish organization's efficient resistance to the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS). Since the flair up of ISIS in 2014, Syrian Kurds found themselves directly in the cross hairs of the ISIS presence in Syria. Initially, the Islamic State had great success in sweeping aside both the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and the PYD in northern Syria, which hit a tipping point with their siege of Kobani lasting from September 2014 through March 2015.²⁶ However, when a united pan-Kurdish, European, and Middle Eastern coalition defeated ISIS in Kobani, the YPG took control of the city and gained the attention of the international community as a promising tool against ISIS. After which the YPG's momentum continued, and they took back immense swaths of land and cities

²⁴ M.m. Gunter, "Erdogan and the Decline of Turkey," *Middle East Policy* 23, no. 4 (01 2016): 123–35, <https://doi.org/10.1111/mepo.12238>.

²⁵ Gunter, "Iraq, Syria, ISIS and the Kurds."

²⁶ Spyridon Plakoudas, "The Syrian Kurds and the Democratic Union Party."

from the Islamic State.²⁷ This puts Turkey in a unique and precarious position, since the Erdogan regime is clear in wanting both ISIS and the Kurds away from the border, and the U.S backed YPG could be the best chance of achieving this aim.

The large areas of territory acquired by the YPG as a part of the Syrian Defense Force (SDF)²⁸ across northern Syria has resulted in more mobility as well as sustainability for the PKK, thus granting them a better position in possible future negotiations with the Erdogan regime, and empowered operational capabilities should those fail once again. This is in addition to the simple bolstering of international support for an autonomous Kurdish state/region, which would potentially fall across the Turkish border. However, with the Islamic State's ability to thrive within the disorder created by the Syrian Civil war, the PYD's ability to resist, and even frequently push back advances of ISIS in Northern Syria make them the ideal choice in keeping away the threat of the Islamic State away from the borders of Turkey.²⁹ Also, Erdogan's opposition to the Assad regime is no secret, and the "make no peace" policy of the YPG of in terms of Assad, allows for an alignment of Kurdish/Turkish agendas in Syria. The PYD under the umbrella of the SDF have taken control of lands not only formerly held

²⁷ Spyridon Plakoudas.

²⁸ The Syrian Defense Force is a YPG led coalition of Kurds, Turkmen, Armenians, and Arabs combatting ISIS and Assad

²⁹ Seda Altug, "The Syrian Uprising and Turkey's Ordeal with the Kurds : THE QUESTION OF KURDISTAN," *Le Soulèvement Syrien et l'épreuve de La Turquie Avec Les Kurdes : LA QUESTION DU KURDISTAN*, no. 1 (2013): 123.

by ISIS, but have also claimed areas previously held by pro-governmental forces. These attributes make the PYD a useful variable for Turkey in the Syrian crisis, but a menace to Turkey if their autonomous regions continue post-war.

5) POTENTIAL MOTIVATIONS FOR TURKISH INVOLVEMENT

The Erdogan regime's agenda in Syria does not seem to be based on regional stability, rather Turkish internal and border security. When Turkish Prime Minister Davutoglu stated, "We do not want to see the regime, ISIS, or the Kurds on our border" (2015), it prompted the question; who does the Erdogan regime want on their border? This question not only relates to Erdogan's endgame in the Syrian conflict, but also to what variables may have initiated the need for Turkish intervention back in 2016.³⁰ While the bombings linked to ISIS in major Turkish cities seems to be the spark that ignited their official participation in the conflict, the enmity between the Erdogan and Assad regimes, as well as Turkish support for the rebel forces in Syria, predates any direct intervention. Also, in 2012 there were statements released by Erdogan warning of military action against the PYD in Syria should they continue to increase their autonomous territories in the border regions³¹. Therefore, there seems to be many potential sources of Turkish interest in the Syrian conflict. However, the behavior and nature of Turkish military operations in Syria point towards a focus primarily set on eliminating the

³⁰ Kanat and Üstün, "U.S.-Turkey Realignment on Syria."

³¹ News article from the London *Times* 2012

PYD presence on the Turkish/Syrian border region.

The desire for Assad to be ousted from the Syrian presidency is something which the Erdogan regime has expressed on multiple occasions. However, the intensity of Turkish involvement towards this particular agenda has dulled significantly throughout the Syrian conflict. The early blind eye taken by Erdogan of jihadist passing through Turkey seemed to be aimed at indirect support for the opposition forces facing Assad in Syria. Although, once Turkey was fully involved in the conflict, they began to aid the Free Syrian Army (FSA) in pushing out ISIS from northern parts of Syria.³² This by itself appears to be aimed at combating ISIS, but any aiding of the FSA could be considered a detriment to the Assad regime. In any case, could this lack of any direct or substantial opposition to Assad's forces indicate that the Assad question in Syria is not one of Ankara's³³ priorities? Possibly, because whatever stated objections the Erdogan regime had to Assad retaining power in Syria, Turkish military actions do not point to this as an agenda they will directly pursue. On the other hand, another possibility lies in the existence of a more prominent situation within the Syrian conflict. Specifically, that of the northern half of Syria being in the midst of a territorial tug-of-war between ISIS and the PYD after the withdraw of Assad forces from those regions in 2014. As mentioned previously in this paper, this move by Assad has been suspected by some as an attempt to create difficulties

³² Parlar Dal, "Impact of the Transnationalization of the Syrian Civil War on Turkey."

³³ Capital city of Turkey

on the Turkish border.³⁴ If so, this seems to have been an effective strategy as Erdogan then had to make the decision on whether to allow the PYD-led Syrian Defense Force (SDF) coalition to push back ISIS, which would increase the magnitude of Kurdish autonomous cantons, or enter the struggle and aid the FSA in pushing back ISIS.

Due to the efforts of the SDF, as well as the Turkish and FSA military operations, ISIS's prominence in Syria has been greatly diminished. However, while continued Turkish involvement after the fact would indicate that the elimination of ISIS is not Erdogan's endgame in the conflict, the argument for ISIS being the reason for initial involvement carries some weight. The bombing in Istanbul on January 12th of 2016, was the first in a string of 8 bombings within Turkish cities carried out by ISIS that year.³⁵ By August 2016, the Euphrates Shield Operation involving Turkish and FSA forces was underway, aimed at driving ISIS out of the town of Jarablus in northern Syria³⁶. The proximity of an ISIS controlled town directly on their border, and during a period of escalation between ISIS and Turkey, could be a possible motivator for the initial Turkish movement into Syria. The Euphrates Shield Operation was ultimately a success in the clearing of ISIS from Jarablus, and together the Turkish military along with the FSA continued strikes against ISIS targets. However, the argument could be

³⁴ Parlar Dal, "Impact of the Transnationalization of the Syrian Civil War on Turkey."

³⁵ Gunter, "Erdogan and the Decline of Turkey."

³⁶ Jarablus is a Syrian town located on the western banks of the Euphrates River, which lies on the border between Syria and Turkey.

made for a Kurdish dimension into these operations against ISIS.

While the Erdogan regime made clear their commitment to drive ISIS out of northern Syria, many airstrikes against “ISIS targets” were found to have landed instead on YPG³⁷ positions as mentioned earlier. Also, In the fall of 2016 the YPG was moving forward towards the ISIS held city of al Bab³⁸ at the same time as the FSA was approaching. However, the FSA was able to advance more rapidly as Spyridon notes “thanks to the overwhelming fire power of the Turkish Armed Forces” (Spyridon 2017, p.16), and the YPG stopped their advance in the face of a faster, better equipped Turkish/FSA force. Erdogan’s bolstering of FSA forces falls in line with the anti-ISIS directive of Turkish foreign policy, but could also be a possible attempt to prevent the U.S backed YPG from liberating the ISIS held territories themselves. The Kurdish autonomous regions of Syria span the majority of the Turkish border, and are split into three individual cantons³⁹; Jazira, Kobani, and Afrin. However, there exist a corridor between the Jazira/Kobani cantons and the Afrin canton, where the towns of Jarablus and al-Bab are located. Erdogan’s motivation for the intervention alongside the FSA could very well have been to seize these towns before the YPG had the chance to take control of the area, thereby linking the cantons into a single continuous

³⁷ The People’s Protection Units (YPG) is the armed wing of the Democratic Union Party (PYD)

³⁸ al Bab is a north Syrian town 30km south of the Turkish border.

³⁹ The Kurdish Cantons in Syria were established by the constitution of Rojava in January 2014.

autonomous area across the entirety of the Turkish/Syrian border.⁴⁰

As stated above, the Erdogan regime has no intention of allowing the Kurds to remain autonomously along their border. The close ties between the Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK) and the PYD create too great a threat to the border integrity for Turkey. Should the PKK begin to start seizing towns or claim autonomy themselves, it is possible that there could be a continuous Kurdish autonomous region spanning over and across the Turkish/Syrian border.

Therefore, in answering the question of who the Erdogan regime does want to see on their post crisis border, it comes down to a preference of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) as the only possible option. The FSA, while not a necessarily ideal ally of the Erdogan regime ideologically, is the only force operating in Syria in alignment with Erdogan's agenda. Regardless of its lack of direct action towards the Assad regime, Erdogan has not budged on its opposition to Assad remaining in power, and the bolstering of the FSA supports that objective. In addition, the FSA who aim for a united Syria also view the autonomous Kurdish cantons as a separatist movement. To this end, they are fully behind the Erdogan regime's goals of removing the PYD presence who are attempting to carve out "an independent state".⁴¹ Due to this possible alignment in goals for the border region, it would seem that the FSA is the necessary solution to the Turkish border security crisis.

⁴⁰ "Erdogan's War Game; Turkey's Intervention in Syria and Iraq," *The Economist*, 2016.

⁴¹ Carlotta Gall, "Turkey Gets Help in Syria From Rebels Once Backed by U.S.," *The New York Times*, 2018.

6) CONCLUSION

The available evidence points towards the presence of the Kurds on the border as the main motivating factor driving Turkish intervention into the Syrian Conflicts. The Turkish conflict with the Kurdish terrorist organization the PKK, and its connection to the Syrian-based PYD, has generated strong concerns for the Erdogan regime. The increasing acquisition of territories by the PYD along the Syrian border, creates the possibility for a continuous autonomous Kurdish region that could span across both sides of the Turkish-Syrian border. Therefore, in an attempt to prevent the uniting of the Kobani and Afrin cantons, Turkey may have entered Syria under the cause of combatting ISIS, while in reality simply trying to seize the ISIS territory in the Aleppo region before the YPG could. Turkey wants their border clear of the Assad regime, ISIS, and the Kurds. As Assad pulled back his forces in the face of ISIS, the Kurdish forces backed by the United States began to push ISIS out of northern Syria. That largely just left the Kurdish presence on the border. Which is roughly the time that Turkey began to finally actively get involved into the Syrian conflict. The effectiveness of the Kurds at combatting both ISIS and regime forces point to a prioritization of the Kurdish border regions for Turkish intervention. This points to an agenda of securing the Turkish border security, rather than promoting stability in the region.

As the conflicts in Syria continue to develop, so too does the need for further analysis to be done on this subject. While this paper focuses mainly on the time period ranging from the precipice of the Syrian conflict to May of 2017, much has happened since. The question of what Erdogan's endgame in Syria might be holds profound implications for the future. If the Assad regime succeeds to retain power, would he uphold the newly established Kurdish cantons in the north, and would Turkey honor such a move regardless of which side of the border it was on? 2018 has seen an increased Turkish role in Syria, with the capture of the YPG stronghold in Afrin, and subsequent promise to continue northeast, there seems little chance of a Turkish-Kurdish resolution that involves autonomy. However, with the recent bombing of suspected chemical weapons instillation held by Assad on behalf of the U.S, France and the United Kingdom, there might be an increased U.S presence in Syria, particularly amongst their non-state allies the PYD. Possible United States troops on the ground supporting the PYD, raises the serious question of: How far is the Erdogan regime willing to pursue the Kurdish agenda in Syria if they are to cross paths with their NATO ally, the United States.

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