



Northern Syria Security Dynamics and the Refugee Crisis

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Introduction and summary

The Syrian conflict, now entering its second decade, has cost more than 500,000 lives and forced 13 million Syrian civilians to flee their homes—more than half the pre-war population—including 6.6 million who are refugees outside the country.¹ This profound humanitarian crisis also threatens the stability of Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey. Moreover, the out-migration has contributed to the growth of right-wing populism across Europe and severely affected the project of European unity.

This decadelong conflict has shredded the already threadbare idea that the international community can come together—even at the level of the lowest common denominator—to manage cataclysms of this sort. It has precipitated Russia’s violent return to the region, as part of a wider internationalization of the conflict that has sharpened sectarian divides. This, in turn, has made U.N. activities—and the wider provision of humanitarian assistance—into yet another front in the core struggle between the illegitimacy and durability of the Bashar Assad regime. The international community has a political and moral imperative to address this crisis.

What started in 2011 as peaceful protests of the Assad regime’s authoritarianism and corruption morphed into civil conflict in the face of the regime’s brutal repression. By 2012, Syria was gripped by full-scale civil war. The internationalization of the conflict proceeded apace from 2013 to 2015, with regional actors such as Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar pouring in money and war materiel to support the rebels; Russia and Iran escalating direct military support for Assad; and the United States and its key European allies cautiously vetting and arming small opposition groups. The rise of the Islamic State group (IS) prompted a more forceful U.S. and European response from the end of 2014, sparking an aerial campaign in support of mainly Kurdish partner forces fighting IS on the ground in a largely separate campaign in northern and eastern Syria. The ascendance of these Kurdish forces in 2015 and 2016—along with the arrival of millions of Syrian refugees into Turkey—in turn prompted a more forceful Turkish line from late 2016, with a series of direct military interventions carving out Turkish-controlled areas in northern Syria. The war has now settled into an uneasy stasis, with Syria divided broadly into three spheres of influence: regime-controlled, Turkish-controlled, and Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)-controlled. The complexities of these zones are considered in detail in subsequent sections.

Defined narrowly, the United States has limited interests in Syria, which for some extend only to preventing the country from being a base for international terrorist activity. But as U.S. military, diplomatic, and intelligence officials—not to mention people from the region—consistently underline, even this basic interest is not secured without some broader stability. A more expansive view, incorporating a more values-driven approach, would therefore extend to alleviating human suffering where possible and de-escalating the conflict to allow for basic stabilization. For some, this values-driven approach further demands continued solidarity with the local partners who fought and died to destroy IS. Equally, European states can choose to define their interests narrowly—to focus exclusively on counterterrorism and preventing out-migration from Syria. But this desire to limit European involvement and exposure will run into the same reality: These limited goals are not likely to be realized without broader de-escalation and stabilization.

The Biden administration, in concert with European allies, should seek to address this crisis as part of a broader effort to de-escalate regional conflicts and reconstitute some semblance of international cooperation. This interest should go beyond the laser-like focus on counterterrorism that dominated the Obama administration's approach. Still less should the new team embrace the confused *realpolitik*—punctuated by chaotic presidential actions—and disinvestment that characterized the Trump administration. Nor should American interests be framed solely by a hackneyed conception of great power competition wherein rivals' every commitment must be matched by counter-commitments. U.S. involvement in Syria is important not only because Russia is there, nor simply as a way to check Iran's malign influence in the region; it is primarily important because the conflict is causing massive humanitarian suffering, crippling U.S. allies and partners, and eroding the international system. The United States can, working with partners on the ground and mobilizing international support, make a meaningful difference in the conflict at minimal cost—it is both the right and the strategic thing to do.

In northeast Syria, where American partners hold sway, the situation on the ground is hugely complicated, but the assessment of U.S. interests is simpler: If narrowly defined, the United States could potentially pull out and rely on airstrikes on terrorist targets, leaving Syria to fester as a source of continued suffering and instability. Defined more broadly, the United States should stay. Counterterrorism, humanitarian conditions, stabilization, solidarity with partners, and the prospects for reconciliation are all best advanced by a continued American presence, one that can be sustained with manageable risks and limited costs. Besides Turkey, the United States is the only Western power playing a meaningful role shaping security dynamics in Syria. Despite the leverage squandered by President Donald Trump's partial withdrawal, the United States

remains indispensable for the influence it wields over Kurdish forces; the intelligence and surveillance assets it brings to bear; and the deterrent effect it can have on the Assad regime, Russia, and Iran. Indeed, the United States is perhaps the only Western power capable of stopping a new phase of fighting in Syria and precluding a resurgent IS insurgency. For Europe, the smart policy would be to support expanded stabilization under the security umbrella provided primarily by the United States, with France and the United Kingdom's assistance.

In the Turkish-controlled zones, the form of U.S. and European engagement is different, bringing important values and principles into conflict. As this report details, Turkey has asserted de facto sovereignty over its zones of control to undermine Syrian Kurdish autonomy, prevent further refugee outflows, and allow for the resettlement of refugees from Turkey itself. Turkey is not likely to leave in the foreseeable future, and its actions effectively end prospects that Syria will reemerge as a unitary state in the near term. Of course, Syria was already effectively divided, and sovereignty is not absolute; Assad sacrificed any legitimacy when he barrel-bombed, tortured, and gassed his own people. Nonetheless, the United States and Europe must weigh whether to effectively endorse the potentially permanent occupation of between 2,800 and 4,000 square miles, if Idlib is included, of Syrian territory by Turkey. Internationalizing the management of this area might offer a promising path if it were possible, but it is a distant prospect; Russia has paralyzed the U.N. system on Syria, and Turkey wants to maintain its control.

The long-term risks inherent in Turkey's efforts to create refugee resettlement zones by force—massive demographic change, radicalization, and long-term instability—are of profound interest to both Turkey and Europe and of serious interest to the United States. Yet Europe is largely absent on this front. Given the scale of the challenge in providing basic services and humanitarian assistance to displaced Syrians—both within Syria and beyond, including in Turkey—let alone the problem of reconstruction, Turkey will need the support of both the United States and the European Union. Turkey is a front-line state dealing with the spillover from the conflict and has deemed EU and U.S. support insufficient. Despite years of sharp disagreement on the right response in Syria, without question, Turkey, the European Union, and the United States would benefit from each other's support.

For Europe, the interests are not just humanitarian, nor just the sometimes-cynical approach to migration and associated political fear of right-wing populism at home. Europe's interest is in a stable, democratic Turkey with which it can trade and manage shared challenges. Turkey has decided—to the chagrin of some in the West—

that it cannot insulate itself against the spillover from the Syrian war, nor manage its domestic Kurdish problem, without becoming an active combatant. Given this reality, to be a meaningful player in this space, the European Union needs a credible, well-financed, and politically realistic approach that goes beyond its current assistance in and to Turkey. The European Union and Turkey share vital moral, political, and strategic interests in ensuring that Turkey manages this challenge effectively and humanely. Like Europe, the United States has an interest in a stable, democratic Turkey with which it can manage shared security challenges. However distant that goal is today, Turkey's long-term stability—likely beyond President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's rule—will be severely undermined if it cannot manage its integration challenge at home or if the refugee zones it has created along its border remain volatile exporters of insecurity and entrenched sources of human misery.

Yet Turkey's unilateral military actions have not been purely humanitarian. Ankara has sought to weaken Syrian Kurdish actors and change the demographic balance of northern Syria, and Turkish interventions have caused additional suffering and displacement in some places, though the Assad regime's eventual return would have done likewise. Ankara's Syrian rebel proxies in these actions include ill-disciplined radical groups credibly accused of human rights abuses. In Afrin and in the Turkish-controlled area from Tel Abyad to Ras al-Ayn, the future need not have been Assad or Turkey—there, Ankara's actions are a net-negative. In Idlib and in parts of northern Aleppo known as the Euphrates Shield zone (ESZ), Turkey has improved the situation. Conditions in the Turkish areas therefore raise complicated questions about core humanitarian principles. Overall, as a fait accompli, Turkey's continued presence likely offers better humanitarian conditions and basic security for residents than would the likely alternative of Assad's return. This reality argues for international humanitarian and stabilization support to these areas, without acquiescence to a permanent Turkish occupation. But the humanitarian considerations are not clear-cut. Working with the de facto Turkish authorities in these areas could help innocent civilians but also requires humanitarian actors to subject their activities and aid delivery to Ankara's politicized parameters and, at a basic level, legitimizes Turkey's seizure of these areas and its effective expulsion of hundreds of thousands of Kurds. This reality requires strict conditional engagement, and the conditions under which engagement in the Turkish-controlled zones could make moral and political sense are a throughline of this study.

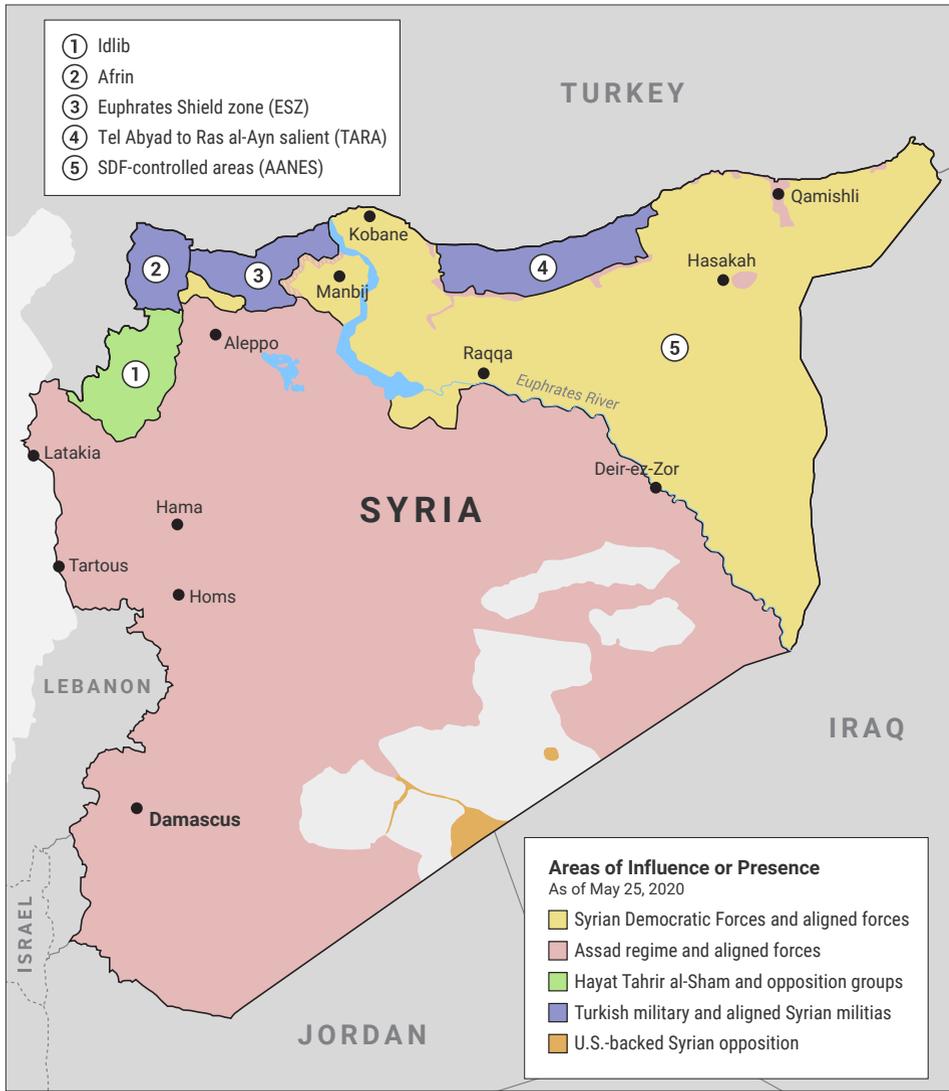
This report is based on extensive primary and secondary source research as well as interviews and conversations with nearly 60 experts, current and former officials, and Syrians knowledgeable on its subject. It examines the connections between the security situation in northern Syria and the refugee and humanitarian crisis,

particularly as it plays out in Turkey and adjacent areas; while these challenges are often conceptualized separately and are addressed by different policy communities with differing priorities, they are inextricably linked in northern Syria. In a direct sense, further displacement and refugee outflows will be driven by military developments. Security dynamics will likewise determine humanitarian access, the limits of stabilization activities, and the likelihood of significant resettlement or further displacement in northern Syria. The report examines the interests of the key outside actors before proceeding geographically to consider the humanitarian and security conditions in each of five zones outside the Assad regime's control—Idlib, Afrin, the Euphrates Shield zone, the Tel Abyad to Ras al-Ayn salient, and the SDF-controlled east—as well as how those security conditions could affect further population movements. The report then discusses some external factors influencing this picture: developments in Turkey, including perceptions of and among the Syrian refugees in Turkey; the border regime; and the U.N. cross-border aid mechanism. Finally, the report offers recommendations for greater U.S., EU, and Turkish engagement on this complex problem and points to some areas of possible—if fraught—cooperation.

Building upon previous proposals² from the Center for American Progress, these recommendations focus on four broad goals:

1. Preventing a new stage of the conflict
2. Ensuring adequate humanitarian assistance
3. Exploring conditional engagement options with Turkey
4. Addressing external refugee issues

The report does not cover regime-controlled areas, where the United States, European Union, and Turkey cannot operate and where the issues at stake are fundamentally different.³



The current situation on the ground

Syria is presently divided into three general spheres of influence, controlled by mutually hostile forces, among which the movement of people and goods is often disrupted. The Assad regime, backed by Russia and Iran, has fought the once-ascendant rebellion to a bloody stalemate and loosely holds more than 60 percent of the country, including the populous western cities it values most, encompassing some 13.6 million people.⁴ These areas fall largely outside the scope of this report.

Turkey has created four zones of effective control or influence in northern Syria, through extensive support for armed proxies and four direct military interventions since 2016. These areas encompass some 4,000 square miles—roughly the size of Lebanon—and contain 4 million people, equivalent to the population of Croatia. Turkey’s administration of these areas varies according to the underlying demographics and the way in which they were taken. The Turkish military and its proxies took the area between Jarabulus and Azaz from IS in 2016–2017; it is now known as the ESZ, after the Turkish military’s name for the operation. The Afrin region was taken from the Syrian Kurdish People’s Protection Units (YPG) in 2018 by the Turkish military and its proxies. Turkey also controls a salient in northeast Syria from Tel Abyad to Ras al-Ayn as far south as the M4 highway, seized from the SDF—the U.S.-backed umbrella group including the YPG and Syrian Arab elements—in late 2019 after President Trump, at Turkish President Erdoğan’s behest, pulled U.S. troops from parts of northern Syria where they had served as a buffer between the Turks and the SDF. In Idlib in northwest Syria, thousands of Turkish forces punctuate the perimeter of a pocket controlled primarily by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), the Syrian jihadi rebel group. Turkish and rebel forces fell back again in early 2020 in the face of a Russian and Syrian regime offensive, with Turkey and Russia establishing a security corridor and conducting joint patrols along a western stretch of the M4 highway, the main route traversing the entirety of northern Syria. Some 3.6 million Syrian refugees also live within Turkey itself, where many have integrated into Turkish society, and most show little inclination to return to Syria.

For its part, Turkey describes the areas of its occupation as operation areas—or “harekat alanları,” in Turkish. According to Turkish officials, that terminology is used to emphasize the temporariness of the Turkish presence—only meant to last until a Syrian government based on U.N. Security Council Resolution 2254 is established, when Turkey will hand over the territories it controls. Turkey claims its presence in Syria is legally justified, since it was invited in by the Syrian Opposition Coalition, which it describes as the internationally recognized legitimate representative of the Syrian people.⁵ President Erdoğan has sometimes been less precise, saying Turkish forces will remain until all other countries’ forces depart.⁶ Few observers, however, expect the Turkish occupation to be short-lived. With the exception of Idlib, the Turkish-controlled regions are largely administered by Turkish civil servants and are being integrated into Turkey economically and, to some extent, linguistically. Moreover, the stated rationale for Turkey’s presence—obstructing Syrian Kurdish autonomy and creating an area for the return of Syrian refugees now living in Turkey—is likely to remain a Turkish strategic imperative for some time. Finally, the fundamental political dispute at the heart of the Syrian war—Assad’s rule—is unresolved, making a resolution in line with U.N. Security Council Resolution 2254 a distant prospect.

Aside from a Turkish-controlled area between Tel Abyad and Ras al-Ayn, the U.S.-backed SDF holds uneasy sway east of the Euphrates River, though the picture is complicated in the north along a different section of the M4 highway that divides the Turkish and SDF areas. Here, then-President Trump’s abrupt withdrawal and Turkey’s subsequent incursion caused the SDF to invite Syrian regime and Russian forces to move in to contain the Turkish offensive, leaving a patchwork of effective control in northeast Syria. The SDF is broadly in control, with some Syrian regime and Russian presence as well as periodic patrols by both remaining American troops and Russian forces.

In each of these areas—regime-controlled, Turkish-controlled, and SDF-controlled—there are further security complexities brought about by ongoing IS terror attacks and assassinations, Kurdish insurgents, competing armed rebel groups, tribal rivalries, and ethnic and sectarian tensions. And across all of Syria, the economic situation is dire; a decade of war has left infrastructure in ruins, and reconstruction and recovery efforts are still hostage to the ongoing political-military impasse. In many parts of the country, the humanitarian situation is desperate, with food and water shortages, lack of shelter, and little in the way of health care and other basic services.

The varied humanitarian and security conditions in each of the zones mentioned above will be considered in more depth below, but certain conditions prevail across Syria, regardless of the dominant power in an area. After a decade of war, Syria's economy is in shambles, exacerbated by the impact of COVID-19 and sanctions on the Assad regime for its atrocities.

A record 12.4 million Syrians—60 percent of the population—are food insecure, with 4.5 million joining the ranks of the food insecure in the past year.⁷ Food prices have soared over the past year, with the price of basic items increasing by 236 percent.⁸ The collapse of Lebanon's economy and COVID-19 have worsened this situation, and food prices are now 29 times higher than the five-year pre-crisis average.⁹ The rapid devaluation has left many Syrians to “cut out meat, poultry, and fruit from their diets ... [and] forego eggs and vegetables, ... [relying] on cheap carbs, mainly bread.”¹⁰ Some 90 percent of the population now lives below the poverty line of \$1.90 per day,¹¹ and most have no savings and have seen their economic prospects worsen in the past year.¹² Turkey's own economic crisis and the rapid devaluation of the Turkish lira has also contributed to Syrians' misery.¹³ In the Turkish-controlled zones, residents are reliant on imports and assistance from Turkey, both of which have been affected by the downturn, while fighters in the Turkish-backed opposition and police and local administrators are paid salaries in lira that have seen their value plummet amid the currency crisis.¹⁴ Exacerbating these economic challenges, many parts of Syria face persistent water issues; early 2021 saw the return of drought conditions to eastern Syria,¹⁵ harkening back to the devastating droughts that helped spark the conflict a decade ago.¹⁶

Meanwhile, COVID-19 is spreading widely in the often crowded housing and shelters used by Syrians in the north. In northwest Syria, for example, there were 19,447 confirmed cases as of December 2020, but that number is based on just 68,436 tests conducted; in internally displaced persons (IDP) camps, the positivity rate is an astonishing 28 percent.¹⁷ The pandemic is yet another strain on an already devastated health care sector; most health care workers have fled the fighting, and regime and Russian airstrikes have systematically targeted hospitals in opposition areas.¹⁸

Security dynamics and the refugee crisis

The vast majority of displaced Syrians fled their homes due to fighting, fear of violence, or an unwillingness to live under the brutal rule of Assad, IS while its so-called caliphate lasted, or the various armed groups that now hold sway in the rest of the country. While Syria's crippled economy continues to drive people to migrate, the refugee and displacement crisis is fundamentally driven by security dynamics. Military actions

continue to be the primary driver of displacement in and from Syria. In July 2020, for example, the international humanitarian organization CARE interviewed 501 people in IDP camps across Idlib; 99 percent said they were fleeing violence or fighting.¹⁹ Unresolved political-military issues in Idlib, Afrin, and east of the Euphrates hold the potential for further displacement. The Assad regime's last offensive in Idlib displaced some 1.4 million people,²⁰ about half of whom remain displaced, and of the nearly 3 million people taking refuge in the province, half were already internally displaced from other parts of Syria by previous phases of the war. The resumption of this offensive could send millions more fleeing toward the currently sealed Turkish border or into neighboring Turkish-occupied Afrin and northern Aleppo, sparking a profound humanitarian and security crisis. Likewise, Turkey's October 2019 military offensive to seize the Ras al-Ayn to Tel Abyad salient displaced some 200,000 civilians, about half of whom are unwilling to return to a Turkish-controlled zone due to ongoing Turkish-Kurdish hostilities. And in Afrin, Turkey has sought to resettle people displaced from other parts of Syria into the once predominantly Kurdish area, an effort at demographic engineering that has fed a persistent insurgency. Insecurity and violence are at the heart of the refugee and displacement crisis.

The influx of 3.6 million Syrians fleeing the civil war into Turkey is the country's most significant demographic change in decades, and the scale of the challenge of integration continues to grow—almost 300 Syrians are born each day in Turkey.²¹ Turkey must reckon with the reality that most of the Syrian refugees will remain in Turkey and figure out how to fully incorporate them into society. Already, this issue is reshaping Turkish politics and society, not to mention the impact that migration has had on EU-Turkish relations and the European Union's internal dynamics, creating considerable tensions between member states. The long-term implications for Turkish stability are profound. The European Union's desperate attempts to stop the 2015–2016 migration crisis also led Brussels to check its values at the door in dealing with Turkey, adopting a transactional approach that has seeped into other aspects of EU policy and allowed Erdoğan to repeatedly outmaneuver the divided European bloc.

Since 2016, the gravity of this situation—as well as domestic developments around the failed coup attempt and Erdoğan's political imperatives—helped prod Turkey to adopt a more assertive, unilateral, securitized approach to shape conditions beyond its border. Essentially, Turkey's aim—alongside stifling Kurdish autonomy—was to try to externalize the refugee problem and insulate its already strained domestic environment. This strategic shift has created a new set of problems for Turkey; having created de facto client states in northern Syria, it must sustain them. The range of issues to manage is daunting: new humanitarian and refugee concerns, long-term

economic prospects, ethnic tensions, radicalization, and the military engagement of major powers. Turkey has had to set up and manage governance structures, schools, and hospitals as well as provide basic municipal services.

The security situation varies across these suzerainties but remains very volatile due in part to the violent, ill-disciplined proxies that Turkey used to take and hold the areas. In Idlib, for example, HTS—a U.N.- and Turkish-designated terrorist group²²—is the de facto governing authority. Turkey did not favor HTS' consolidation of power and has tried to curb its worst jihadi impulses, but Ankara has also closely coordinated with the group in the face of regime and Russian offensives and, in effect, offered border protection. Beyond Idlib, Turkey has actively empowered armed factions with a litany of human rights abuses to their names. In addition, these areas have seen massive population shifts due to activities of the Assad regime, Turkey and its proxies, and Kurdish armed groups—some areas of Afrin have almost entirely new populations—with the changes primarily occurring along ethnic lines; for example, Afrin, 90 percent Kurdish before the war, is now majority-Arab. Examples from history of such demographic engineering—such as the partition of India or the breakup of the former Yugoslavia—offer stark warnings of the long-term risks involved.

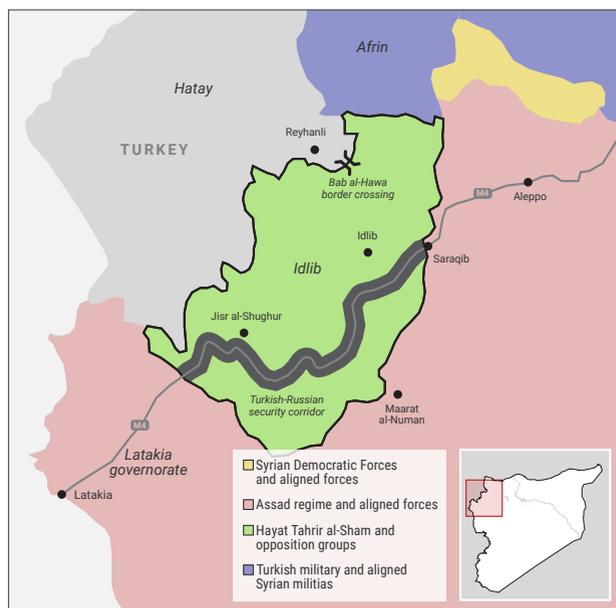
Beyond the status of those Syrians already in the Turkish-controlled zones, President Erdoğan has also consistently stated his desire to resettle millions of refugees from Turkey into the northern Syrian areas held by Turkish forces. Despite the legal, moral, financial, and logistical hurdles facing such a plan, Erdoğan is unlikely to give up on this monumental ambition, given his domestic political calculus. The areas held by Turkey are therefore likely to see both voluntary and forced resettlement of refugees moving forward. The shape of Turkey's long-term commitment to these areas—as well as the security dynamics among Turkey, the Assad regime, and Russia—will therefore be essential to the refugee picture moving forward. Humanitarian access, the possibility and extent of stabilization activities, and refugees' willingness to resettle are all tied to basic security conditions. The refugee crisis in northern Syria is therefore primarily shaped by hard security considerations.

Idlib

Idlib is in many ways the last redoubt of the rebellion against Assad and the clearest humanitarian risk in Syria today. A series of regime and Russian offensives over the last three years have pushed back rebel positions and forced millions of people to flee, squeezing the displaced into an ever-smaller refuge against the Turkish border. After the latest offensive, rebels hold fewer than 1,200 square miles of Idlib, where some 2.6 million Syrians—half of whom are displaced from other parts of Syria—live in increasingly desperate circumstances.²³

Demography and humanitarian conditions

In terms of humanitarian concerns and basic living conditions, Idlib shares much with adjacent Afrin—indeed, the United Nations considers the two areas together as “northwest Syria.” There are good reasons for this, despite major political differences, with people and goods passing between the two; some 400,000 people fled the regime’s offensive in Idlib into Afrin early in 2020,²⁴ though about half of that number had returned to their homes—mostly along the M4 and M5 highways—by November 2020.²⁵ This movement of people—particularly the efforts to resettle displaced people in Afrin—is potentially fraught due to the differing security dynamics in the two areas. Idlib also hosts Bab al-Hawa, the last remaining formal border gate authorized for the United Nations’ cross-border humanitarian assistance program following the closure of additional crossings under Russian pressure. While assistance can be delivered outside of the U.N. framework, there are substantial technical and logistical drawbacks to operating outside the mandate.²⁶ The cross-border mechanism, due to expire in July 2021, is discussed in more detail later in this report. The province is therefore instrumental in the wider humanitarian support of nearly 3 million needy people in northwest Syria and the broader commercial exchange between Turkey and northern Syria.²⁷



Humanitarian conditions in Idlib are dire. More than 1.4 million displaced people—overwhelmingly women and children—live in IDP camps or in overcrowded settlements in the region. Malnutrition is on the rise, and residents report a lack of shelter, shortages of food and fresh water, and inadequate sanitation and hygiene.²⁸ Interviews with IDPs in Idlib reveal a constant struggle to make enough money to meet the high prices demanded for basic food staples; exposure to cold and flooding in easily damaged tents that offer little security; and reliance on inadequate cash assistance to secure fuel, shoes and clothing, and hygiene products.²⁹ Most IDP camps in the area lack adequate sewage systems, while most drinking water is trucked in—making it hugely vulnerable to disruption.³⁰ The United Nations reported in February 2021 that humanitarian assistance to northwest Syria—all delivered across the Turkish border, the majority by the United Nations—sustains 2.4 million people on a monthly basis.³¹

At present, access to humanitarian assistance in Idlib is at an acceptable level, with a CARE assessment in July 2020 reporting few constraints on humanitarian access to camps and displaced people.³² The Syrian Salvation Government—the governing arm of the dominant armed group in the area, HTS—has in the past tried to levy taxes or bribes to allow some humanitarian assistance to flow but has removed restrictions when deliveries have been temporarily frozen in response to this interference.³³ Provision of humanitarian assistance nevertheless falls short in Idlib, particularly outside Jisr al-Shughur, with substantial numbers of both residents and IDPs reporting that assistance was unavailable or was insufficient to meet their needs.³⁴ The collapse of the Syrian pound prompted the Salvation Government to encourage a transition to using Turkish lira, demonstrating both the dire overall economic picture and the region’s increasing reliance on Turkey.³⁵ Given the region’s reliance on aid, the potential expiration of the U.N. cross-border mandate in July 2021 likewise hangs over the already dire picture.

Security dynamics and governance

Idlib is among the most complex security environments in the world. Some 10,000 to 15,000 Turkish troops are deployed in the region alongside an array of armed rebel groups with which they coordinate militarily.³⁶ These rebels numbered around 50,000 in 2019, though it is unclear how many remain after the latest Assad regime and Russian offensives.³⁷

HTS—designated a terrorist group by the United Nations, the United States, and Turkey—is the dominant group in Idlib and dictates general security and governance in the area.³⁸ HTS has some 12,000 to 15,000 fighters according to a January 2020 U.N. estimate.³⁹ The jihadi group has controlled most of the province since it forced

out or subordinated an array of rival Turkish-backed rebel groups organized as the National Liberation Front in early 2019, though it later allowed some groups to return, at Turkey's request, to help oppose the latest regime offensive.⁴⁰ HTS is likewise supported by an array of jihadi and Islamist rebel groups that vary in their relations with Turkey, overall radicalism, and ties to international terrorist groups. These radical armed groups include Hurras al-Din, Ansar al-Tawhid, and the Turkistan Islamic Party—each of which acts with some autonomy in certain parts of Idlib.⁴¹

Alongside the consolidation of military control from rival armed groups, HTS also established an administrative structure, the Salvation Government, complete with sharia courts and local councils designed to partially replace the interim local authorities supported by Turkey and other Western countries in earlier phases of the war.⁴² This administrative structure varies, however; in some areas, local councils predating HTS' takeover continue to deliver services, while in others, the old councils have been disbanded or been rolled into the Salvation Government's new structures. The Salvation Government has some 5,000 personnel but largely leaves local administration to district committees drawn from prominent local families to earn legitimacy; nonetheless, HTS' armed forces will intervene to detain or remove officials deemed a threat to HTS' overall influence.⁴³ Besides this uneven local legitimacy and limited accountability, the Salvation Government is overwhelmed by the enormity of the population's needs and its own limited ability to collect revenues and provide services.⁴⁴

Despite HTS' dominance, the group knows it is outgunned by the Assad regime and the Russians and that its only hope for survival lies with pragmatic cooperation with Turkey and the rebel groups it supports. This has allowed Turkey to exert increasing influence over the overall security situation in Idlib, despite HTS' control, though Turkey has not made the kinds of state-building investments in Idlib that it has made in the areas of northern Syria it controls more directly. Indeed, the fight for survival against Assad is the primary factor unifying these disparate armed factions. This pragmatism has increased as the regime and the Russians have gained ground; faced with a renewed regime offensive in early 2020, HTS permitted the return of Turkish-backed rebels it had previously expelled.⁴⁵ Despite the ambiguity of Turkish-HTS relations, there is evidence that the balance of power has shifted somewhat toward Ankara.⁴⁶ Still, Turkey does not want a costly direct clash with HTS, making for a form of mutual dependency in Idlib; HTS relies on Turkey's protection to stave off the Assad regime, while Turkey relies on the Salvation Government to provide a modicum of governance to prevent further refugee outflows and avoid making Idlib into yet another stabilization effort that Ankara must directly manage.

The 2020 offensive that created this situation was the latest in a series of violations of previous Turkish-Russian deals struck in Astana and Sochi from 2017 to 2019. Russia and Turkey had agreed to make Idlib a demilitarized zone from which heavy weapons, armed groups, and terrorists would be removed; these conditions were to be monitored through observation posts, including 12 Turkish posts along the provincial border.⁴⁷ Each iteration of this fundamental bargain broke down due to the Assad regime's desire to reclaim territory from the rebels; Turkey's inability or unwillingness to rein in HTS; and Russia's desire to target HTS and other rebel groups as well as to maintain its relative leverage over Assad. The deals usually secured a period of relative calm, before escalating clashes between the regime and the rebels would eventually prompt Russia and the regime to launch a new offensive, seizing upon Turkey's failure to meet its pledge to corral armed jihadi groups. The most recent assault began in late 2019 and ended with a March 5, 2020, cease-fire agreement that saw the broad retrenchment of Turkish forces and rebel groups. The Assad regime gained control of one-third of Idlib, while through late 2020, Turkey withdrew from observation posts at Morek,⁴⁸ Sher Mogher near the M5 highway,⁴⁹ a handful of additional positions at Sienna and Khan Tuman,⁵⁰ as well as Tal al-Tuqan and al-Eis.⁵¹ Turkey and Russia also established a security corridor and agreed to conduct joint patrols—now suspended in the face of HTS spoiling actions⁵²—along a western stretch of the M4 highway in Idlib.⁵³

In truth, both Russia and Turkey likely always viewed the Astana and Sochi deals in instrumental terms, rather than as real commitments they intended to uphold over the long term. Russia, confident that Assad was secure, was content to play the long game, doing just enough to maintain its relative leverage over Assad vis-a-vis Iran and testing out new weaponry and tactics. Meanwhile, Moscow could hold the threat of further attacks on Idlib over Turkey, useful as leverage on other emerging fronts such as Libya and in driving Ankara further from its traditional Western allies. Turkey, meanwhile, straining to accommodate 3.6 million refugees, was desperate for any way to at least delay the collapse of Idlib and associated displacement. The Sochi and Astana deals allowed for the hardening of rebel defenses, the consolidation of rebel groups under Turkish control, and the creation of adjacent “safe zones”⁵⁴ in which to resettle people displaced from Idlib. It also allowed more time for Turkey to try to bolster the rebel proxies it closely controls and attempt to sideline HTS without sparking a direct conflict neither side could afford.⁵⁵

The most recent chapters of this crisis center on the humanitarian challenges, exacerbated by Russian pressure on the U.N.-mandated process, as well as the regular clashes along the line of control and fears of a new offensive. The March 5 cease-fire is regularly tested with shelling and armed clashes across the boundaries of rebel control.⁵⁶

In addition to these regular regime-rebel exchanges, Russia has continued to target Idlib with airstrikes. This aerial campaign escalated in late 2020, with strikes against HTS⁵⁷ and a major October 26 airstrike that killed more than 75 fighters from Faylaq al-Sham, “Turkey’s closest and most dependable proxy in Idlib.”⁵⁸ A recent series of attacks on Turkish and Turkish-Russian patrols—some claimed by al-Qaida affiliates and others by little-known groups that some observers suspect are cutouts of the Assad regime⁵⁹—have complicated recent Turkish-Russian attempts to implement the March 5 agreement. Both HTS and other rebel groups have tightened security in response, underlining Turkey’s reliance on HTS for operational security and HTS’ reliance on Turkey to prevent a new offensive.⁶⁰

These signs of reescalation point to the fundamental clash of interests. Russia and the regime have little reason to reduce the pressure over the long term—their interest is in regaining territory on a timeline of their choosing—and Russia can exploit the actual dominance of HTS to try to portray the campaign as focused on fighting terrorism. Despite this ambiguity, no observer can dispute, ignore, or excuse the regime and Russia’s consistent, brutal targeting of civilians and peaceful infrastructure, including schools and hospitals.⁶¹ This record of extraordinary brutality makes a durable political settlement in which regime control returns to Idlib but residents remain nearly impossible. Half of Idlib’s population is IDPs forced there by the regime following deals in Eastern Ghouta and Aleppo; they are already marked as enemies of the regime, and most residents would see it is a choice between death, flight, or resistance.

Future prospects and potential for further population movements

The fate of Idlib’s 2.6 million residents therefore depends on the intentions and military capabilities of the warring parties. In the midterm, there seem to be three broad trajectories for Idlib: a lengthy continuation of the status quo; a renewed regime and Russian offensive to reclaim control of the M4 highway, leaving a small Turkish-controlled pocket for displaced people; or a decisive final offensive that pushes to the border itself and collapses the Idlib pocket, pushing its residents elsewhere. An extended status quo is Turkey’s preferred option and potentially acceptable to Russia but is complicated by the Assad regime’s determination to reclaim the M4 highway, which connects its stronghold of Latakia with the now-devastated commercial hub of Aleppo.

The second option—a partial offensive—would continue the pattern in Idlib since 2017; the push and pull between Assad and his Russian backers, as well as broader Turkish-Russian relations, would likely determine the timing of such an offensive.

Russia has many interests at stake vis-a-vis Turkey and, as mentioned, sees no urgency in reclaiming Idlib. The Assad regime might want to move more quickly, but Turkey's strikes in early 2020 demonstrated the regime's vulnerability to Turkish drones without Russian protection, thereby strengthening Moscow's hand vis-a-vis Damascus in dictating the course of events in Idlib.

The third option—a final offensive to collapse the pocket—presents much greater risks to the regime and Russia. Both rebel and Turkish forces are deeply entrenched in Idlib, including in difficult terrain around Jisr al-Shughur. Ankara had some 80 military outposts across Idlib in October 2020,⁶² though Turkish forces withdrew from a handful in November and December. Turkey has a capable, NATO-equipped military; the key determining factor in assessing this third potential trajectory is therefore whether—or to what extent—Turkey is willing to directly defend Idlib.

Some analysts argue Turkey's artillery and airstrikes against the Assad regime in early 2020—attacks ended by the March 5 cease-fire agreement with Russia—signaled a durable shift to direct military resistance after years of being outmaneuvered in stages by Russian and regime pressure. In this understanding, Turkey has its back against the wall and is unwilling to take another step back. Some argue that Turkey has always been primarily concerned with the M4 and was willing to relinquish areas to the south,⁶³ though Ankara's reinforcement of its southern positions shortly before its subsequent retrenchment is hard to explain in this telling. On the other hand, Turkey's strikes focused on the regime and carefully avoided direct confrontation with Russia. Ankara may have viewed these as tactical adjustments to exact a cost from the regime and slow its advances, rather than a strategic shift in its posture; in this telling, it was only when Turkey began to take casualties in Russian and regime strikes—including 33 Turkish troops killed in a Russian airstrike on February 27, 2020⁶⁴—that Ankara responded more forcefully to save face both at home and abroad. Throughout its response, Turkey blamed the deadly strike on the Assad regime rather than on Russia, signaling again its desire to avoid a direct showdown with Moscow.⁶⁵ Russia, in turn, having sent a clear signal with the strike that it still held escalation dominance, was probably content to let Turkey exact revenge against regime targets—strikes that had the effect of strengthening Moscow's leverage over its client in Damascus.

Whatever the intentions in Ankara and Moscow, the stakes are very high for Turkey. The last Assad regime offensive displaced 1 million people in just a few months. While most people fled to adjacent parts of Idlib and northern Aleppo, Ankara fears a further, sudden buildup at the border; that nightmare scenario would leave Turkish authorities with an untenable choice of intervening directly to stop the attack; opening the border to allow hundreds of thousands of unvetted Syrians into Turkey,

including many from armed groups, with profound domestic political consequences for the governing party; or, to the extent possible, keeping the border sealed in the face of a humanitarian catastrophe unfolding on Turkey's doorstep. Avoiding this situation has been the focus of Turkey's policy in Idlib since 2017; this severe risk explains Ankara's substantial commitments to the region, including the deployment of 10,000 to 15,000 Turkish troops, indirect support for HTS, and the casualties incurred in early 2020 trying to slow the regime offensive. If the regime and Russia force Turkey into the choice outlined above, it is possible that Ankara would go to war to break out of this impossible situation. For Erdoğan, such a denouement would be a matter of regime security as well as national interest. On the other hand, Ankara might be able to accept a future in which further incremental concessions are made at a pace that allows Turkey to manage the process and accommodate displaced Syrians in neighboring Afrin and north Aleppo. Likewise, the United States and Europe do not wish to see a humanitarian catastrophe in Idlib but have utterly failed to develop a coherent response in the face of regime and Russian attacks.

While the Assad regime might be willing to push things to a bloody conclusion, Russia and Turkey see Idlib in the context of wider interests. For Ankara, this wider context is about the other zones of Syria that it occupies and their long-term status as—Turkey hopes—zones for the resettlement of refugees. For Ankara and Moscow, this wider context includes opposing interests in Libya, Nagorno-Karabakh, and Ukraine, as well as negotiations over arms and energy sales. In addition to these broader interests with Turkey and its desire to drive a wedge in NATO, Russia is also weighing its relative leverage over the Assad regime in comparison to Iran, and its relative leverage over the YPG and the Democratic Union Party (PYD) in comparison with the United States. Russia may therefore be reluctant to entirely corner Turkey, risking escalation on other fronts and, potentially, outright war, and will more likely seek to continue exploiting the ambiguity of the proxy conflict in Idlib. The likelihood therefore is that the Assad regime has the desire but not the capability to prosecute a decisive campaign, while Russia has the capability but not the desire.

Still, this ambiguous proxy war—or a more limited offensive to test Turkey's resolve—can nonetheless cause substantial suffering and further displacement. The 2019–2020 offensive displaced approximately 1.4 million people, driven out by persistent shelling and airstrikes on civilian infrastructure, including schools, hospitals, and markets, which made life untenable for residents.⁶⁶ In just three months, from January to March 2020, some 1 million residents were driven out of the densely populated stretch along the M5 highway including Maarat al-Numan, Saraqib, and Khan Sheikhoun by indiscriminate Russian and regime attacks.⁶⁷ Most of these IDPs moved short distances and, as of December 2020, the United Nations estimated that

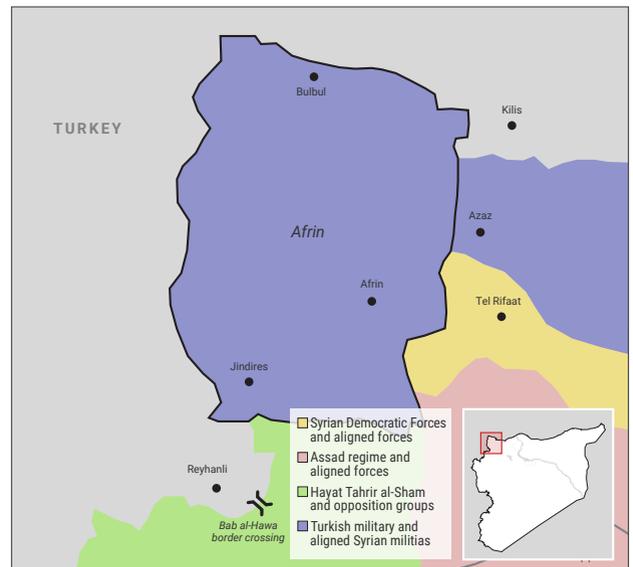
some 400,000 people were living along the M4 and M5 highways in areas that the Assad regime could seek to reclaim.⁶⁸ There are also approximately 1.2 million people living in camps and settlements along the Turkish border in areas that are at or near capacity, with limited shelters and unaffordable rents. Those along the Turkish border would be safe from all but a decisive offensive, but the 400,000—likely increased somewhat by IDPs returning to their homes in this at-risk area—would have to flee should another large-scale offensive take shape.

Turkey's efforts to prepare for additional displacement—and the prospects of international assistance—are hamstrung by the dominance of HTS, a designated terrorist organization, which prevents investment in stabilization activities in Idlib.⁶⁹ Turkey does not want to directly force the issue with HTS—the primary ground force opposing the Assad regime—as an internal conflict could prompt the collapse of the pocket. In addition, Turkey likely values the Salvation Government's management of local administration; as one close observer notes, "In Idlib, when services aren't delivered, people don't blame Turkey."⁷⁰ Finally, Turkish casualties in a fight with HTS could spark a serious political backlash at home against the overall Syria policy, increasing intercommunal tensions and perhaps even prompting attacks on Syrians in Turkey.⁷¹ As analyst Asli Aydintaşbaş writes, "Turkey's preferred option for Idlib is to tolerate and work with an autonomous but contained zone managed by HTS – so long as the group complies with its requests."⁷² Taken together, Turkey's notable lack of investment in Idlib—compared with neighboring Afrin or areas of north Aleppo—points to the limits imposed by HTS' control and, perhaps, the limits of Turkey's capacity and its strategic intentions. Turkey has put down roots in other areas, but not in Idlib. It may be that Turkey will be willing to trade away more of Idlib in exchange for regime and Russian border guarantees and acquiescence to a long-term Turkish presence in other areas. Indeed, Turkey's primary long-term response to the intractable problem of Idlib and the possibility of further mass displacement has been to try to prepare the ground in neighboring Afrin and north Aleppo.

Afrin

To the north of Idlib, the Afrin region—part of the Aleppo governorate on the Syrian regime’s administrative map—shares many of the humanitarian challenges visible in Idlib but is distinct in terms of its ethnic composition, recent history, and prevailing security conditions. Unlike in Idlib, Turkey takes a very active role in governance of Afrin—as in the neighboring ESZ of northern Aleppo—with civilian services largely organized by the governors of adjacent Turkish provinces, in this case Hatay.

Turkey has made significant investments in Afrin, trying to deliver basic services and ensure that it is at least minimally habitable in service of Turkey’s goal of creating an area in which to settle those displaced from elsewhere in Syria. Turkish companies and utilities have moved into these areas. But these efforts to provide services and basic human security are substantially undermined by the legacy of the area’s violent seizure from the YPG by Turkey and its proxies in a 2018 military operation dubbed Operation Olive Branch. The area is historically majority-Kurdish and was held and administered by the YPG from 2014 until the 2018 Turkish offensive, which aimed at crippling Kurdish prospects of autonomy in Syria alongside the refugee interests mentioned above. This violent takeover led to human rights abuses and massive displacement of Kurdish residents—demographic changes that continue to cast a shadow over the region’s stability. The feeling that Turkey has taken and changed a majority-Kurdish region has fed a violent insurgency and made it impossible for international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and humanitarian groups to engage in Afrin, leaving Turkey to manage its newly seized protectorate on its own.



Demography and humanitarian conditions

The primarily Kurdish population of Afrin has been profoundly affected by the displacement of the YPG and subsequent occupation by Turkish forces and their proxies. Western Afrin was previously almost entirely Kurdish, though the population was more mixed Arab and Kurdish to the east toward Azaz and Tel Rifaat.⁷³ In an email to the authors, Fabrice Balanche, associate professor and research director at the University of Lyon 2—and an expert on Syria—says the area’s 2011 prewar population was about 200,000, of whom 90 percent were Kurdish; but by January 2018, on the verge of the Turkish invasion, it had grown to some 500,000—80 percent Kurdish—as 300,000 Syrians of all ethnicities, primarily from Aleppo, fled to Afrin’s relative stability.⁷⁴ Turkey’s operation changed this picture dramatically. After two months of active offensive operations by Turkey and its proxies, the United Nations estimated some 134,000 remained displaced from Afrin,⁷⁵ though observers such as Balanche put the total at more than 200,000, many of whom fled to areas such as Kobane, Manbij, and Hasakah still held by the YPG and, in those areas, the SDF.⁷⁶ One local group says the Kurdish population has fallen by some 60 percent, leaving slightly less than 300,000 Kurds and more than 450,000 displaced people from elsewhere in Syria.⁷⁷ In addition to this displacement of Kurds, Turkey has allowed IDPs from other areas to flee to Afrin, further changing the demographic picture.⁷⁸ Access to the area is limited by the Turkish authorities, and the issue is politically fraught, making figures difficult to verify, but the scale of displacement is staggering, whether or not one labels it ethnic cleansing.⁷⁹

As in Idlib, the humanitarian situation in Afrin is poor despite the more direct efforts of Turkish authorities. Turkey’s Disaster and Emergency Management Presidency (AFAD) administers camps housing 7,100 people in Afrin, provides some food aid, and has coordinated the provision of water and health services with the relevant Turkish ministries.⁸⁰ The Humanitarian Relief Foundation (İHH), the Turkish Red Crescent, and other Turkish NGOs close to the government are active in the region.⁸¹ U.N. Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs efforts under the cross-border mechanism help house nearly 50,000 IDPs and deliver assistance to many more.⁸² Across northwest Syria—encompassing Idlib and Afrin—the World Food Program distributed general food assistance to 4.7 million people in its December 2020 cycle, with residents increasingly reliant on assistance as the collapse of the Syrian pound and the decline of the Turkish lira have undermined already limited purchasing power.⁸³ The humanitarian organization REACH’s monitoring network reports uneven humanitarian access across Afrin, with limited access outside districts such as Jindires or Bulbul.⁸⁴

However, these efforts have not alleviated the profound human insecurity in the area. Across Afrin, residents and IDPs alike report a lack of income and employment. With the primary agricultural economy devastated, many people in the area cannot afford essential food items.⁸⁵ This is mainly due to the limitations placed on overall humanitarian support by the Assad regime and Russia, as well as the grim overall reality of the war and the economic crisis. But Turkey's violent seizure of Afrin has also made many humanitarian organizations wary of operating in the region for fear of legitimizing the Turkish-backed occupation and the displacement of former residents.⁸⁶ The Turkish AFAD oversees humanitarian aid work in Afrin, and international organizations require its approval to distribute aid.⁸⁷ The United Nations has also criticized Turkish-backed groups for restricting access to IDPs in Afrin.⁸⁸

Security dynamics and governance

By the time of Operation Olive Branch, Turkey had refined its tactical cooperation with its rebel proxies—coordination that had been lackluster in the earlier Operation Euphrates Shield, leaving Turkish troops to do more direct fighting than desired. From 2017, Turkey cobbled together a patchwork of rebel groups—ranging from the remnants of the U.S.-backed train-and-equip program to committed Salafists—into a new force it named the Syrian National Army (SNA). The SNA now holds sway in Afrin, with Turkey holding a loose rein on the armed groups. The composition of the SNA has continued to evolve, but in December 2018, Syria analyst Aron Lund outlined the most prominent of the four dozen factions, including the Sultan Murad Brigade, a largely Turkmen group that is one of Turkey's closest proxies; the formerly U.S.-backed Moutassem Brigade; Ahrar al-Sharqiya, committed Salafists from eastern Syria accused of many human rights abuses; and the Shamiya Front, Islamists from northern Aleppo.⁸⁹ Turkey has struggled to corral the many groups into a coherent chain of command but has asserted greater control as the SNA has become more of a mercenary Turkish proxy force and less of a rebel group targeting the Assad regime. According to Elizabeth Tsurkov, an analyst closely following the Turkish proxy groups, the SNA numbers about 35,000 across northern Syria, and “the fighters’ salaries, training, and supervision in battle are ... provided by Turkey.”⁹⁰ One of Tsurkov's sources in the Levant Front, a Turkish-backed faction, recounts, “All decisions, big and small, in the ‘National Army’ are made by the operations room run by Turkish intelligence.”⁹¹

But while Turkey's military command and control of its proxies has improved, Ankara has done little to prevent abuses, improve the behavior of these factions, or address the litany of human rights abuses and war crimes committed by the proxies during

the Turkish-backed move into Afrin or their continuing misconduct. Human Rights Watch reports that Turkish-backed forces “seized, looted, and destroyed property of Kurdish civilians” in Afrin and “installed fighters and their families in residents’ homes and destroyed and looted civilian properties without compensating the owners.”⁹² The Turkish proxies—perhaps emboldened by anti-Kurdish rhetoric from Ankara—tore down Kurdish cultural icons, reinforcing a widespread sense among observers that the conflict was as much about ethnic dominance as political affiliation.⁹³

Even as Afrin has settled into Turkish administration, the proxies’ abuses have continued, severely undermining the prospects of stability. Human Rights Watch has thoroughly documented reports of the Turkish-constituted Free Syrian Army police and the Sultan Murad Brigade, one of Turkey’s most trusted proxies, seizing homes and apartments in Afrin and busing in Syrians from other parts of the country to occupy those formerly Kurdish residences.⁹⁴ Continuing reports in 2019 confirm that many Turkish-backed groups refuse to allow the return of Kurdish families.⁹⁵ Amnesty International has likewise confirmed the reports of detention, torture, and disappearances as well as widespread looting, seizure of property, and displacement with few returns, noting that the YPG is also responsible for preventing some former residents from returning to Afrin.⁹⁶

These challenges to basic human security continued in 2020. The monitoring group Syrians for Truth and Justice (STJ) reported hundreds of arbitrary arrests and ongoing detention of Kurdish civilians in Afrin carried out by Turkish-backed groups.⁹⁷ Turkish operatives and proxies have even arrested members of the new, Turkish-backed local councils suspected of having ties to the former YPG administration as well as those who have spoken out against the abuses of the Turkish-supported opposition or demanded the return of property to former owners.⁹⁸ Reports also emerged in 2020 of Turkish-backed armed groups levying high taxes on—mainly Kurdish—farmers or requiring bribes at checkpoints to allow them to bring their crops to market. Once at market, Afrin farmers are required to sell their crops to the Turkish-supported opposition or representatives of Turkey’s Agricultural Credit Cooperatives, according to residents interviewed by Voice of America.⁹⁹

The evidence of demographic engineering and forcible displacement and resettlement is overwhelming, raising fears of long-term radicalization and ongoing conflict. The volatile security situation and manifest hostility of the Turkish-backed groups has made many displaced Kurds reluctant to return, cementing massive demographic changes as formerly Kurdish homes are rented to Arabs displaced from further south, businesses are seized or shut down, and ethnic and political pressure continues. That volatile security environment is two-sided, as the Turkish occupation has fed a YPG-led insurgency likely responsible for many of the ongoing vehicle-borne improvised

explosive device (VBIED) and other attacks on the SNA and civilian representatives of the Turkish occupation.¹⁰⁰ The Institute for the Study of War concluded that both “ISIS and the PKK [Kurdistan Workers’ Party] are Likely Conducting Separate VBIED Campaigns in Northern Syria.” Though no group claimed a recent VBIED attack that killed four people, including a Turkish-trained Syrian police officer, in Jindires on December 5, 2020, the Institute for the Study of War sees the PKK—meaning, in this case, the YPG or affiliates—as the most likely culprit.¹⁰¹ Some 40 SNA members have been assassinated since the invasion of Afrin, some of which have been claimed by the Kurdish so-called Olive Anger operations room that, according to Khayrallah al-Hilu, a researcher at the European University Institute, is affiliated with the YPG.¹⁰² SDF commander Gen. Mazloum Kobani Abdi has implicitly acknowledged that the YPG is staging raids on Turkish and SNA forces in Afrin, saying he would welcome a cease-fire with the Turks and their proxies, provided they cease abuse of Afrin civilians and allow IDPs to return to their homes—something that is unlikely to happen in the near term.¹⁰³

In part, this volatility reflects the limitations of Turkey’s military approach; while the Olive Branch operation did secure Syrian territory on which displaced Syrians could be resettled, it equally displaced hundreds of thousands of Kurds, at risk to its international reputation, and fed an ongoing insurgency. And while the loss of Afrin was undoubtedly a major setback to the YPG, Turkey, in effect, merely moved its border with the group further into Syria to a porous line of control without the established border wall and surveillance it possesses at the formal Turkish-Syrian border. Since Turkey could not push further into Syria without risking direct conflict with the Assad regime, the YPG maintains control of a sliver of Afrin around Tel Rifaat, where there are regular border clashes, allowing it to easily infiltrate people and material to feed the Afrin insurgency.¹⁰⁴ Operation Olive Branch moved Turkey’s border with the YPG south but stirred up a security nightmare in Afrin.

While Turkey has shown little interest in redressing the abuse of Kurdish civilians, it has demonstrated a serious desire to make Afrin livable for other displaced Syrians. The provision of basic stability and essential services is essential if Turkey is to realize its goal of turning Afrin into a “safe zone” for refugees, thus alleviating some pressure on its domestic scene. In service of this goal, as Aron Lund writes, in Afrin, “Turkey appears to be digging in for a long stay” and has set up local councils that “effectively serve ... as a Turkish puppet body.”¹⁰⁵ Turkey administers Afrin out of Hatay, with representatives of the Turkish governor directly managing local councils that theoretically report to the Syrian Interim Government.¹⁰⁶

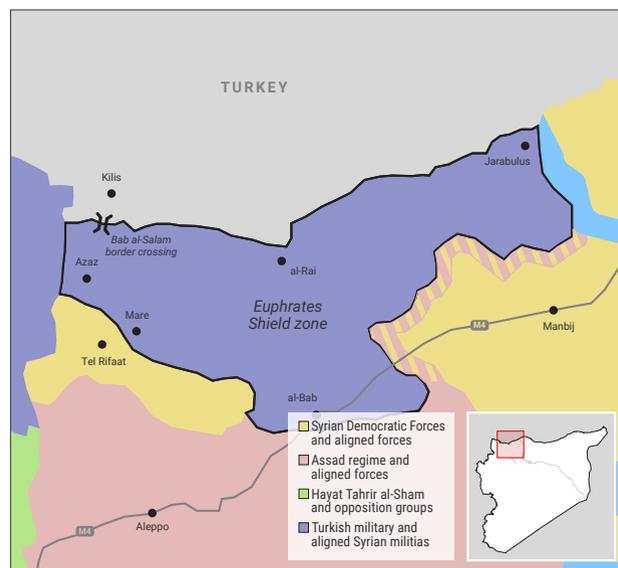
Khayrallah al-Hilu has perhaps the most comprehensive study of Turkey's administration of Afrin. Turkish utility companies provide water and regular electricity supply and have sought to repair the grid. The Turkish Provincial Directorate of Health in Hatay oversees medical care, and Turkey repaired and operates Afrin's main hospital.¹⁰⁷ Turkish authorities have replaced the old Kurdish curriculum with bilingual instruction in Turkish and Kurdish, paid teachers in Turkish lira, repaired schools, and provided opportunities for admission into Turkish universities.¹⁰⁸ The Turkish government has financed and opened a school of education to train teachers in Afrin, though resources and the number of students are understandably limited.¹⁰⁹ Policing is overseen by the local councils, including the collection of fees imposed on agricultural yields, a major source of funding for the councils. Criminal matters are handled by civilian courts staffed and administered by Turkey.¹¹⁰ These state-building efforts are financed by a combination of revenues from transit fees collected at Turkish-Syrian border crossings and allocations from Turkish state coffers, which help finance the local councils, cover infrastructure repairs, and pay SNA fighters.¹¹¹ These Turkish investments are beginning to shape a "new Kurdish political elite oriented around clientelism" with Turkey, according to al-Hilu.¹¹²

Future prospects and potential for further population movements

Turkey is undoubtedly committed to Afrin and has made significant investments to stabilize the area, though stark ethnic tensions and an ongoing insurgency cloud its future stability. The United Nations estimates that the Turkish offensive in Afrin in January 2018 displaced an estimated 183,500 people, nearly 20 percent of its pre-Olive Branch population, though a limited number have since returned.¹¹³ Turkey has also encouraged major Arab resettlement efforts since then; an Afrin local council reported that, as of the end of May 2019, some 87,936 IDPs had been resettled in Afrin, largely from Eastern Ghouta and Aleppo—scenes of some of the Assad regime's most brutal bombing campaigns.¹¹⁴ Economic and humanitarian conditions in Afrin remain poor, despite Turkey's efforts, in part because the violent seizure of the region makes it morally and physically hazardous for international humanitarian organizations. But while basic conditions are difficult and the security situation is volatile, the region's overall security is less tenuous than that of neighboring Idlib—here, there is little imminent threat of Russian or regime attack. Turkey appears committed to protecting the area, and this strategic assurance will likely lead to an ongoing trickle of resettlement of Syrians displaced from other areas. In the event of stepped-up regime or Russian attacks on Idlib—let alone a major offensive—that trickle would likely turn into a flood. The long-term implications of the effective Turkish annexation of Afrin—along with the areas considered in the following sections—demand further study.

The Euphrates Shield zone

Stretching from Azaz in the west through al-Bab to Jarabulus on the Euphrates River, the ESZ was seized from IS in an operation that began in August 2016, with active operations concluded in March 2017. It was Turkey’s first major direct military intervention in Syria, aimed at displacing IS and providing for defense in depth of the border at a time when there were regular IS terror attacks within Turkey. But the operation also aimed to prevent the YPG from linking Afrin—which it then still held—and its eastern cantons, from which the Kurdish force was advancing, having recently liberated Manbij from IS. In the Euphrates Shield operation, Ankara sought to use the rebel factions it would later roll into the SNA as its shock troops, but their ineffectiveness meant Turkish forces assumed a more substantial role than intended, taking 69 casualties, primarily at the hands of IS anti-tank missiles and VBIEDs.¹¹⁵



The roughly 800-square-mile¹¹⁶ ESZ is the most stable Syrian territory held by Turkey, though security conditions have eroded somewhat in the past year. At the most basic level, Turkey has been there the longest, allowing it to build out its presence and pursue stabilization efforts. The area is also heavily Arab, easing the ethnic tension that plagues the occupations of Afrin and Ras al-Ayn. The zone was also seized from IS, whose brutality few residents miss. Finally, the relatively larger role of Turkish forces in seizing the region—rather than the ill-disciplined Turkish-backed rebel groups—may have prevented more widespread human rights abuses, as occurred in later operations in Afrin and the Tal Abyad to Ras al-Ayn area, reducing communal tensions in the subsequent administration. This relative—though far from complete—stability has meant that, while the initial intervention was aimed at IS and the YPG, Ankara has increasingly come to see the area as a potential “safe zone” for refugee resettlement and has made significant investments toward that end.

Demography and humanitarian conditions

Until the Turkish intervention and occupation, control of what became the ESZ changed hands between the regime, Syrian rebels, and jihadi groups, including IS. This instability, along with the massive waves of displacement caused by the wider conflict and, in the earlier stages of the war, hundreds of thousands crossing the border into Turkey, makes it very difficult to establish an exact demographic picture of the area. The Turkish occupation brought some stability, but population movements into and out of the ESZ—particularly from Afrin, Idlib, and Turkey itself—mean it is still difficult to pin down population figures. These fluid exchanges across the ESZ, Afrin, and Idlib include both permanent displacement and temporary displacement and returns, but the ESZ’s population is likely between 700,000 and 800,000 individuals.¹¹⁷

Like Afrin, the ESZ absorbed many people displaced by the regime’s offensive in Idlib from late 2019 into 2020, though some of those people have subsequently returned. As of July 2020, according to U.N. figures, almost 240,000 IDPs resided in the Azaz, al-Bab, and Jarabulus areas of the ESZ, of whom more than three-quarters have found residence in the community or are in informal settlements, with slightly less than 50,000 in planned camps.¹¹⁸ Azaz and Jarabulus, for example, are now likely twice their prewar population.¹¹⁹ And IDPs continue to arrive in Azaz, a popular destination due to its close access to the Turkish border and it being outside HTS-controlled Idlib and far from both the front lines with the regime and the YPG.¹²⁰ Humanitarian conditions in the ESZ are better than in Idlib or Afrin but remain poor. Shelter is more widely available than in desperately overcrowded Idlib or the area around the Bab al-Hawa crossing, but high rents remain an issue for locals, as does a lack of formal shelter and winterization needs for IDPs in camps and informal settlements. High prices for fuel and food are major issues, contributing to increasing malnutrition rates. Still, the relative safety of the area means the U.N. organizations can engage more fully, subject to their limited access through Bab al-Hawa, allowing for a range of efforts including agricultural support and cash for work programs in Azaz, Mare, and al-Bab.¹²¹ Al-Bab and the surrounding area face water shortages affecting 185,000 people, in part because while electricity is more regular than in much of Syria, interruptions have prevented sufficient pumping at local wells to meet demand.¹²²

Security dynamics and governance

Turkey, as the governing authority in the ESZ, has made major investments to try to address these shortcomings. The Center for Operational Analysis and Research’s (COAR) detailed study of the ESZ found that Turkey dominates “politics, economy and society. . . . Turkish officials serve on municipal council bodies, Turkish businesses

operate widely, and Turkish goods flood local markets.”¹²³ The Turkish governors of Kilis and Gaziantep have authority over the ESZ, governing the delivery of assistance, stabilization efforts, and economic investments in conjunction with the AFAD and the relevant Turkish ministries. The international community is limited in its ability to help Turkey confront the substantial needs in the ESZ, as Ankara has cracked down on cross-border NGO operations and forced humanitarian groups to abide by onerous regulations meant to ensure Turkish government control of aid delivery, causing hundreds to end their operations in the area.¹²⁴

The Turkish authorities work with and through local councils nominally under the control of the opposition Syrian Interim Government, though Ankara largely controls the council’s membership. These councils organize and coordinate projects in the ESZ, including with international organizations allowed to operate there, and seek to raise funds through their activities and levies on some economic activity to supplement Turkish financing. Turkey maintains final authority through its control of funding—and of the armed groups that dominate the area—but generally allows the councils a level of independence.¹²⁵

Still, the councils are almost wholly reliant on Turkey. Turkey pays the salaries of local councilors, teachers, and doctors as well as those of the local police, military police, and armed factions.¹²⁶ The councils partner with Turkish companies to deliver and distribute gas for cooking and heating at more stable prices than are normally available in Syria.¹²⁷ Turkey’s State Electricity Generating Co. struck a deal with the al-Bab Council to repair the local electrical grid and deliver subsequent supplies, financed by the Turkish government; regular electrical supply is rare in many parts of Syria but essential for refrigeration and to make many businesses viable, given the high cost of fuel for generators.¹²⁸ Turkey’s inroads in the ESZ had stoked economic activity and provided some relief, with better availability of commodities, more stable prices, and some recovery in employment at the end of 2019, though unemployment was still estimated at 60 percent.¹²⁹ The collapse of the Syrian pound and the struggles of the Turkish lira, and the economic downturn driven by COVID-19, has undermined this halting recovery, making the area even more reliant on Turkey. The collapse of the Syrian pound led the Syrian Interim Government and the councils—as well as the Turkish-backed business chambers—to push the adoption of the Turkish lira, distributed into circulation through Turkish postal branches established in the area.¹³⁰

Journalist Fehim Taştekin has tracked these Turkish efforts closely, reporting how the Turkish Ministry of Health “has opened five hospitals in al-Rai, Jarablus, Azaz, al-Bab and Marea, while the Religious Affairs Directorate has renovated more than 450 mosques.”¹³¹ In a much-publicized move, Turkey commissioned a new medical school

in al-Rai, adding to the previously opened “vocational school in Jarablus, a school of economics and administrative sciences in al-Bab, an Islamic theology school in Azaz . . . all affiliated with Gaziantep University in the Turkish border province.”¹³² While the prospects of these institutions are highly uncertain and enrollment is limited, the schools and hospitals are signs of Turkey’s intent to remain deeply involved in the region. Indeed, the COAR assessment concludes that, given these investments and ESZ residents’ unwillingness to live under Assad, “It is difficult to foresee a reversal in the current trend towards the ‘Turkification’ of all aspects of civic life. At present, the [ESZ] must be viewed as a Turkish-administered proto-state which is now all but officially part of Turkey.”¹³³

Unsurprisingly, given these investments and its goals in the ESZ, Turkey dominates the security of the zone, working through the SNA, as in Afrin and the Tel Abyad to Ras al-Ayn salient. Turkey pays the salaries of the two police forces it has established—a local police force for daily order and a separate military police to patrol the armed factions—and the armed factions themselves, under the banner of the SNA.¹³⁴ Turkey has worked to build the SNA into a more cohesive force, but it remains “more of an umbrella designation for Turkish backed armed groups, and each individual group answers directly to Turkey.”¹³⁵ COAR counts some 25 armed groups within the SNA, listing the most powerful in ESZ as including: “The Sultan Muhammad Al-Fatih Brigade and the Muntasir Billah Brigade (both based in Jarablus); Jaish Al-Islam (based in Jarablus and Al Bab); Sultan Murad (based in Al Bab); Fariq Hamza (based in Azaz); the Al-Mutassim [Moutassem] Brigade (based in Azaz and Al Bab); and Jabhat Shamiya (based in [Al-Rai]).”¹³⁶

Criminality and abuses are rampant in SNA areas, driven primarily by financial motives and worsened by the lack of community ties for fighters relocated or displaced to the ESZ from other parts of Syria.¹³⁷ The SNA groups are widely unpopular and “regularly involve themselves in the local war economy, often engage in both open and clandestine military actions against each other, and are largely unaccountable to any actor other than Turkey itself.”¹³⁸ And while there remain more conventional security problems—including occasional shelling, bombings, and assassinations—it is the SNA that is the main threat to basic human security in the ESZ.¹³⁹ According to Tsurkov’s sources and numerous others, extortion at checkpoints is rampant, and armed groups fight to control trade routes, particularly those that link the ESZ to non-SNA-controlled areas, and demand protection money from businesses.¹⁴⁰ There are also reports of the armed groups targeting Kurdish homes and businesses or trying to enforce ultraconservative norms on the public.¹⁴¹

Turkey has sought to build up local police forces to address SNA abuses, training locals and establishing police stations.¹⁴² But while these police units are more popular than the SNA, they cannot control the armed factions¹⁴³ and “have effectively become just another armed group themselves. . . . ultimately, the only actor which is capable of controlling armed groups . . . is Turkey.”¹⁴⁴ One of Tsurkov’s sources comments on the lawlessness, saying that “it’s impossible. . . . The factions are stronger than the military police.”¹⁴⁵ The SNA armed groups also operate prisons where detainees are tortured, with horror stories conveyed on “Popular channels on the messaging app Telegram, such as ‘Al-Bab, the Nightmare’ and ‘Jarablus, the Nightmare.’”¹⁴⁶

Future prospects and potential for further population movements

Turkey seized the ESZ from IS both to stop the jihadi infiltration that had caused a scourge of terror attacks on Turkish soil as well as to prevent the YPG from linking its cantons and, Ankara feared, constituting a viable autonomous Kurdish region across nearly the entirety of its Syrian border. But while this initial intervention was driven by counterterrorism and political concerns, Turkey’s continuing assistance and stabilization activities have had meaningful humanitarian benefits. Even if there may be cynical ulterior motives—perhaps to secure Turkish commercial access or build a Sunni belt of settlement¹⁴⁷ to expand influence in the Levant and insulate against any potential autonomous Kurdish entity—Turkey has sought to make life more livable for residents of the ESZ.

These humanitarian actions may also be intended to prepare ground for anticipated further displacement from Idlib. That remains the largest demographic scenario hanging over ESZ—that some of the 2.4 million people at risk in Idlib, particularly the 400,000 people living along the M4¹⁴⁸ in the regime’s immediate crosshairs—will be forced to flee en masse to Afrin and the ESZ. Despite its efforts, Turkey and the local councils in ESZ are not prepared for such a calamity, nor is the international community.

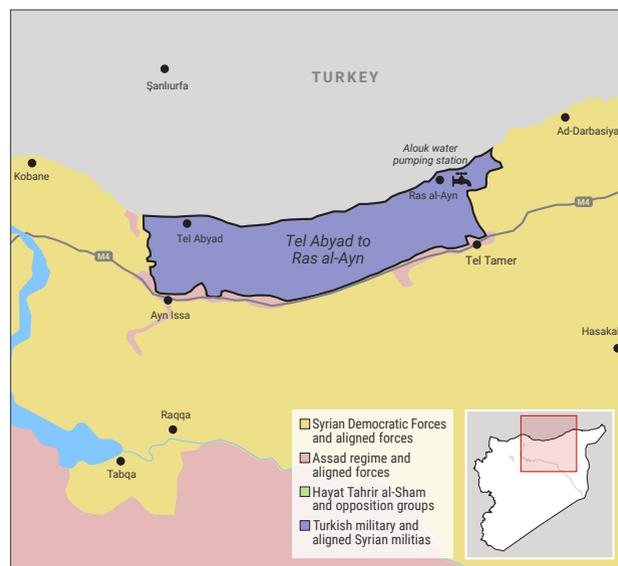
Part of that lack of international preparation results from Turkey’s unilateral approach in the ESZ and its other zones of control. President Erdoğan has been vocal about his hopes to resettle significant numbers of Syrian refugees from Turkey in the ESZ.¹⁴⁹ Humanitarian and economic conditions are a major part of that effort, certainly, and one where Turkey has made strides. Those efforts are complicated at the best of times, let alone when Turkey is struggling to accommodate 3.6 million Syrians within its borders, administering several other unstable zones, and facing a deep economic downturn and empty state coffers. But evidence shows most Syrian refugees wish to remain in Turkey, raising fears among many humanitarian actors and potential international sponsors that Erdoğan’s effort will lead to state-sponsored refolement.

More immediately, Turkey's tight control of relief activities in the ESZ and the politicized constraints placed on assistance activities—as well as Ankara's general policy toward the Kurds—similarly give pause to potential outside supporters and are likely counterproductive.

These limitations threaten Turkey's chances of fashioning the ESZ into a viable economy and society capable of attracting large-scale voluntary resettlement of Syrian refugees from Turkey, much less its prospects for winning international support for that effort. Ankara has made significant investments and, based on that evidence, seems willing to defend the zone from outside attack. But it is hard to imagine Erdoğan's grandest resettlement plans coming to fruition. Financing is a major challenge, of course, complicated by the factors outlined above. But most of all, it is Turkey's unwillingness to control the SNA that undermines the endeavor; without real steps to rein in the armed groups and establish responsive civilian government and courts or other means for redress, Syrians in Turkey will remain reluctant to move to these volatile protectorates. To constitute a “safe zone,” the area must be safe.

The Tel Abyad to Ras al-Ayn salient

In October 2019, Turkey and its SNA proxies moved into northeastern Syria, attacking SDF positions along a line from Tel Abyad to Ras al-Ayn (which, for convenience, will subsequently be called TARA). The Turkish operation, dubbed Peace Spring, was the third major Turkish intervention in Syria, following Euphrates Shield and Olive Branch in Afrin, and the first to take place east of the Euphrates River. Like these earlier interventions, Turkey justified the invasion as a necessary step to fight alleged terrorism by the YPG as well as IS; facilitate the return of Syrian refugees from Turkey; and stabilize the region.¹⁵⁰ There is little doubt, however, that a primary purpose was to push the SDF back from the Turkish border, weaken the group's prospects for political autonomy, drive a wedge in the U.S.-SDF partnership, and dilute the Kurdish population on the border to disrupt communications between Syrian and Turkish Kurds. These latter goals have been largely accomplished.



The move was prompted by President Trump's abrupt announcement—after a phone call with President Erdoğan—that American troops would withdraw from the border, where they had been deployed with the SDF to prevent a Turkish attack. Prior to the withdrawal, the United States had been attempting to mediate Turkish-SDF tensions, overseeing the removal of SDF border fortifications to address Turkish security concerns. Trump's withdrawal announcement was the green light for Turkey's move, which displaced some 200,000 residents¹⁵¹ and led to widespread human rights abuses¹⁵² and, despite significant SDF resistance and international condemnation, to the eventual seizure of some 1,800 square miles¹⁵³ of formerly SDF-controlled territory.

Abandoned by the United States and outmatched by Turkey and its proxies, the SDF cut a deal with the Assad regime and Russia, whose forces raced into contested areas to contain the Turkish offensive. Their presence acted as a political trip wire, with Ankara unwilling to risk a direct confrontation with Syria or Russia.¹⁵⁴ Boxed in by the regime

and the Russians, Turkey signed separate agreements with the United States—which had in fact squandered much of its leverage when it withdrew from the border areas—and Russia to codify an uneasy status quo in which the YPG would withdraw 22 miles from the border, to be monitored by joint Turkish-Russian patrols.¹⁵⁵ The terms of the Russian-Turkish deal—which took on greater importance than the American deal that Washington could do little to implement—largely corresponded with the terms of the safety mechanism the United States and Turkey had been negotiating prior to the Turkish incursion.¹⁵⁶

Turkey's stated border concerns should thus be seen as pro forma justification for its broader political goals. Ankara claimed that the YPG had launched numerous cross-border attacks against Turkish territory prior to Turkey's Operation Peace Spring invasion.¹⁵⁷ U.S. officials contest Turkey's accounts of regular cross-border attacks from northeastern Syria, asserting that the YPG "never attacked Turkey" and pointing out that, in fact, Turkey or its proxies had initiated many exchanges of fire.¹⁵⁸ American officials also argue that they had made clear to the SDF that support from the United States was itself contingent on restraint vis-a-vis Turkey; the SDF thus had an incentive to toe the line and had gone to great lengths to placate Turkey at the border, calling for a negotiated settlement.¹⁵⁹ Turkey's attack replaced a relatively stable border situation with a chaotic military conflict and weakened U.S. leverage over the SDF. The SDF knew it was vulnerable to Turkish attack and did not want a conflict, so it had every incentive not to provoke one. When the attack came, the result was to undermine the counter-IS campaign, severely weaken the SDF's hold in northern Syria, and diminish the SDF's long-term prospects of political autonomy within an eventual postwar Syria.

These outcomes, then, likely represented Ankara's true goals for the operation. The displaced civilians, international opprobrium, delay in the campaign further south against IS, and the casualties on both sides were acceptable costs for Ankara. As discussed in the section on the SDF-controlled Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES), Turkey and its proxies have used their position in TARA to keep pressure on the AANES, shelling towns on the strategically sensitive M4 highway and thus complicating communications across the AANES and weakening the SDF's position vis-a-vis Russia and the regime.

Demography and humanitarian conditions

More than 200,000 people fled the immediate Turkish invasion in October 2019,¹⁶⁰ including almost all Kurds and Christians.¹⁶¹ Over the following months, as major fighting subsided, about 115,000 returned.¹⁶² Some 70,000 people from the TARA

area remain displaced, mainly Kurds from Ras al-Ayn, many of whom have not been allowed to return. The remaining population in TARA is virtually all Sunni Arab, with some Turkmen as well. According to Fabrice Balanche, prior to the Turkish invasion, the population of TARA was roughly 300,000—70 percent Arab, 25 percent Kurdish, 5 percent Turkmen, and a small number of Christians.¹⁶³ In November 2020, Abdullah Erin, the governor of neighboring Şanlıurfa (Urfa) province in Turkey, with effective responsibility for TARA, said there were currently 210,000 Syrians living in the roughly 1,800-square-mile area—making it the least populated of the Syrian areas occupied by Turkey.¹⁶⁴ Moreover, Erin said that up to 20,000 Syrians from the region then living as refugees in Turkey had applied to return to their home area in TARA and would do so as soon as procedures were completed.¹⁶⁵

The governor is attempting to help carry out President Erdoğan’s sweeping plan to resettle 1 million Syrians in the TARA area, including in new purpose-built towns to be financed, Erdoğan hopes, by some \$26 billion in international funds.¹⁶⁶ The vision calls for Turkish-built houses, schools, hospitals, mosques, and industrial facilities,¹⁶⁷ matching some of the steps Turkey has already taken in the ESZ and Afrin, though on a much larger scale and with the international community picking up the tab. President Erdoğan’s ambitions extend further; speaking to the U.N. General Assembly in September 2019, he said, “If we can manage to stretch the depth of the safe zone to Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor, we can increase the number of Syrians,” referring to an even more extensive plan to settle up to 3 million Syrians.¹⁶⁸ For this massive effort, Turkey hopes to secure European and U.N. support, though the proposal has met with a chilly response amid concerns of forced resettlement and Turkey’s ulterior political motives.¹⁶⁹ A senior U.S. official described the plan to Reuters as “probably the craziest idea I’ve ever heard.”¹⁷⁰

On a smaller scale than in Afrin, the process of resettling Arabs apparently to replace displaced Kurds began shortly after Operation Peace Spring ended. On November 22, 2019, 70 Syrian refugees entered Ras al-Ayn from Turkey, and 600 families entered Tel Abyad two days later. A convoy of 151 vehicles, including 14 buses, entered Tel Abyad on April 20, 2020. The Turkish government maintained that these were refugees who had fled SDF rule and were simply returning home. But local testimony and video evidence established that most of the returnees were actually the families of SNA fighters deployed in TARA; rather than returning from Turkey to their original homes, they were mainly IDPs from elsewhere in Syria being moved from the ESZ across Turkey to TARA.¹⁷¹ This appears to violate Turkey’s October 29, 2019, commitment that refugees would only return to their original places of residence.¹⁷²

Surrounded by the AANES on three sides and the Turkish border on its fourth, the area is fully dependent on Turkey and increasingly integrated into its economy. Turkey coordinates all humanitarian aid, including food and clothing provided by Turkish agencies and NGOs.¹⁷³ Turkey has reopened its Tel Abyad customs gate—closed by Turkey when the SDF was in control—and established a new gate in Ras al-Ayn to strengthen trade links with the region. Gov. Erin boasts of the scale of Turkish aid, which he claims provides all basic needs and helps support needy families and boost economic development. Turkey's Agriculture and Forestry Ministry has spent millions on local crops, seeking to support the region's agricultural economy and set up a system of guaranteed payment.¹⁷⁴ While Erin and other Turkish officials naturally present the most optimistic case, Turkey has undoubtedly made significant investments in TARA, which it hopes can attract Syrian refugees from Turkey.

Occupied more recently, TARA's integration into Turkey is less far along than that in the ESZ and Afrin. In part, this is because Turkey's military operation forced the evacuation of international humanitarian staff from northeast Syria; even outside the eventual TARA zone, many international NGOs had to cease, scale back, or hide their activities due to the fighting and the return of Syrian regime forces nearby, invited by the SDF in response to Turkey's move.¹⁷⁵ Only a few aid organizations have returned, as most are unwilling to legitimize Turkey's seizure of the zone or comply with Turkish requirements, which international NGOs feel could politicize aid delivery. As a result, the Turkish AFAD and government-linked NGOs such as İHH manage the delivery of assistance. Turkish media report that Turkish authorities have cleared mines and IEDs; reconstructed hospitals, schools, mosques, and roads; and provided free health services to residents of both Tel Abyad and Ras al-Ayn.¹⁷⁶ Turkey has not allowed foreign access to the region, making it difficult to independently verify these claims.

The Alouk water station in TARA—examined in more depth in the following section on the AANES—has been another issue. The station provides water for some 800,000 people, mainly in SDF-controlled areas, but was damaged in the Turkish incursion. Efforts to repair the facility were at one point interrupted by the abduction of the workers by an SNA faction.¹⁷⁷ The Turkish authorities or the SNA have periodically reduced or interrupted service as well, prompting SDF, Russian, and U.N. complaints.¹⁷⁸ The situation remains uneasy, though service has been intermittently restored to AANES areas, which in turn provide electricity to Alouk and other areas in the TARA region from a power station in AANES-controlled al-Darbasiyah, east of Ras al-Ayn.¹⁷⁹

International humanitarian engagement in TARA is also limited by the negative human rights picture and volatile security environment. The U.N. Human Rights Council Commission of Inquiry on Syria reported in 2020, “All parties in Syria detain civilians without a scintilla of evidence or due process,” but it reserved some of its harshest criticism for the Turkish-backed SNA. According to the commission, in “Afrin and Ra’s al-Ayn region, civilians suffer at the hands of the Syrian National Army – who arbitrarily detain, ill-treat, torture and rape civilians, and loot civilian property.”¹⁸⁰ One Kurdish-owned home was converted into a Quranic studies institute run by the Turkish NGO İHH, with Gov. Erin presiding over its ceremonial opening. The report directly implicates Turkey, claiming that the Turkish Armed Forces appropriated homes for military purposes.¹⁸¹ In many cases, Kurdish homes and stores were occupied by Syrians from outside the TARA area, often the families of SNA fighters.

The commission is critical of Turkey and the SNA as well as of the former SDF authorities, asserting that all parties have used forced detention to suppress dissent or extort money.¹⁸² The cases of unlawful detention by the SNA in TARA are mostly of people accused of links to the AANES or YPG. In some cases, “civilians – primarily of Kurdish origin – were beaten, tortured, denied food or water, and interrogated about their faith and ethnicity.”¹⁸³ The investigators directly implicate Turkey: Some Syrian detainees were turned over to Turkish forces by the SNA, taken to Turkey, and charged under Turkish law with crimes allegedly committed in Syria, including murder; terrorism, presumably referring to membership in the YPG; and, remarkably, undermining the territorial integrity of the state. Human Rights Watch claims that at least 63 Syrians, and perhaps as many as 200, have been deported to Turkey for trial, with at least five sentenced by Turkish courts to life without parole. The commission claims that removing Syrians to Turkey for trial and imprisonment may be a war crime.¹⁸⁴ Thirty women were reportedly raped by SNA members in February 2020 alone, according to the U.N. commission. One woman was reportedly stopped at a Turkish Armed Forces/SNA checkpoint and beaten and raped by SNA members in the presence of Turkish officials.¹⁸⁵

There are also accusations of war crimes committed by Turkish and SNA forces during the initial October 2019 assault. During the Turkish offensive itself, medical facilities in Ras al-Ayn and Tel Abyad and residential neighborhoods in Qamishli city were shelled indiscriminately, killing civilians.¹⁸⁶ Video evidence of civilians with characteristic burns suggest the use of white phosphorus in the attack on Ras al-Ayn. There were also summary executions, including the murder of Kurdish

politician Hevrin Khalaf and eight others.¹⁸⁷ Three aid workers from the Kurdish Red Crescent disappeared. Numerous Kurds who tried to return to the area were denied entry; three are alleged to have been murdered.¹⁸⁸ Ambassador James Jeffrey, then-U.S. special envoy for Syria, said American forces witnessed “several incidents which we consider war crimes” during the attack.¹⁸⁹ No international body has taken up any of these potential war crimes.

There has been little public effort by the de facto Turkish authorities to provide redress for the victims of these incidents or prevent further abuses by the SNA. In a rare exception, one SNA member was sentenced by a Syrian Interim Government military court for the killing of Khalaf, according to a U.N. report.¹⁹⁰ However, the report gives no details of the purported sentence, and the AANES disputes the claim that anyone was sentenced. Turkish Defense Minister Hulusi Akar says Turkey has established two military tribunals in TARA for the express purpose of investigating war crimes allegations, but little information has emerged about their activities.¹⁹¹ More positively, in May 2020, the Syrian Interim Government said it had banned recruitment of children for the military.¹⁹² Despite these steps, the proxies that Turkey relies on to theoretically secure the TARA area are violent, ill-disciplined, economically desperate, and routinely and credibly accused of human rights abuses, murder, rape, extortion, kidnapping, and petty theft.¹⁹³

As in the ESZ and Afrin, the TARA area is administered by the governor of the adjoining Turkish province—in this case Urfa—currently the aforementioned Erin, assisted by fellow civil servants from Urfa province.¹⁹⁴ As in the ESZ, these Turkish officials oversee an administration under the formal control of the Syrian Interim Government, the theoretical opposition government-in-waiting, and assisted by appointed local councils in both Tel Abyad and Ras al-Ayn. According to local Syrian sources, the Syrian Interim Government is dominated by Turkmen. The local councils officially were appointed by the Syrian Interim Government, presumably with vetting by Ankara; it is not clear on what basis members were chosen, although Syrian Interim Government leader Abdurrahman Mustafa—the former head of the Syrian Turkmen Council and former Syrian Interim Government president, now prime minister—claims that Tel Abyad’s 23-member council and Ras al-Ayn’s 25-member council represent all local ethnic and religious groups. Mustafa has promised to hold elections after all displaced locals return home.¹⁹⁵ Thus far, no elections have been held or scheduled. Despite this apparatus, local sources say the Turkish National Intelligence Organization is actually the dominant authority in the region.¹⁹⁶

In November 2020, Urfa Gov. Erin outlined the progress made in the year since the Turkish invasion, lauding repairs to public buildings and infrastructure; restored public services, especially health and education; and reopened mosques. Turkey says that Syrians now run all public services, with the support of Turkish civil servants. All costs, including salaries, are borne by Turkey.¹⁹⁷ As in the other areas of Turkish control, analyst Asli Aydintaşbaş reports that Turkish “authorities have connected local infrastructure to the Turkish electricity grid and . . . opened branches of the Turkish postal service to provide wire transfers and pay salaries. The areas import most of their food supplies from Turkey, delivering some of it through bakeries and stores built with Turkish aid. Turkish-backed local administrations issue identity papers and title deeds.”¹⁹⁸

A judicial system of sorts, both civilian and military, has emerged within the Turkish-occupied, Syrian Interim Government-administered area, including TARA. Overseen by the Turkish government, it exists side by side with an informal, traditional reconciliation mechanism in which residents and armed groups often resolve disputes without involving the courts. For the most part, the civilian courts apply Syrian law, except where those laws “contradict the objectives of the [anti-Assad] revolution.” They have adopted Syria’s first 1950 constitution—a fairly liberal, pre-Baathist document that enshrines judicial independence—as their point of reference. The military justice system handles violations by members of the armed groups, but there is little information on its operations. Most likely, the SNA armed militias have significant influence on judicial decisions, with the Turkish government having the final say when it so desires.¹⁹⁹ The situation closely mirrors Turkey’s mode of control in the ESZ and Afrin: working through appointed local councils and seeking to build their capacity but tying their activities closely to the neighboring Turkish provincial government; excluding most critical voices and Kurds; and maintaining final authority on all important political matters.

The TARA area remains highly insecure, despite Turkish claims of stability, for three main reasons: infighting among the SNA factions and the general insecurity they cause; frequent border clashes along the line of control with the SDF, Russia, and the Assad regime; and internal insurgent attacks likely attributable to YPG-affiliated cells and IS remnants. As in Afrin, ESZ, and, indeed, Idlib, in the TARA area, Turkey relies on a limited direct deployment of Turkish forces to support a large and chaotic proxy force. In relative terms, the situation in Tel Abyad is more stable than in Ras al-Ayn.

Turkey has forces deployed to bases in and near Tel Abyad and Ras al-Ayn as well as observation posts near the M4 highway that serves as the rough boundary of the TARA area, although the precise number of Turkish troops is not publicized.²⁰⁰ The dominant SNA faction in Ras al-Ayn is the mainly Turkmen Sultan Murad Brigade, whose leader, Fahim Issa, is considered particularly close with Turkish intelligence.

The Sultan Murad Brigade and the Hamza Division are the two main SNA militias that joined the Turkish Armed Forces in carrying out Operation Peace Spring.²⁰¹ Researcher Khayrallah al-Hilu reports that few of the Sultan Murad Brigade or Hamza Division fighters are from the area, which “has emboldened them to act as they please, facing neither deterrence nor local resistance as they seize civilian homes and prevent the return of the displaced.”²⁰² Turkish-backed faction Ahrar al-Sharqiya is also known to be active in Tal Abyad, where it has repeatedly and credibly been accused of human rights abuses and theft.²⁰³ But the other SNA factions in Tal Abyad tend to include more locals, while the area was also historically predominantly Arab, reducing some of the ethnic tensions caused by the forced displacement of Kurds by the SNA in Ras al-Ayn.²⁰⁴

Turkey has tried to stabilize the area by drafting more locals into the SNA and local police forces. Turkey pays salaries and provides equipment as well as training for the local security forces.²⁰⁵ Ankara also selects the commanders of the military courts and police forces as well as provides weapons, vehicles, and other support. The SNA factions, however, select the rank-and-file police members, limiting their ability to stop SNA abuses.²⁰⁶ Turkish officials say more than 2,000 locals serve in the police force, with training from the Turkish Armed Forces, Jandarma, and Turkish police. Absent objective outside observers, it is difficult to gauge the veracity of these claims. As of late 2020, Urfa Gov. Erin was seeking to recruit 1,500 more locals, urging TARA youth living in Urfa to apply. Erin’s remarks contain hints, however, that all is not well, referencing past shortcomings in maintaining public order. Moreover, he urged Syrian religious leaders to “set the local youth, confused by ten years under the terrorists, on the correct path.”²⁰⁷

Tension clearly persists in the TARA salient as a result of ongoing fighting among SNA factions. SNA factions have fought pitched battles over control of checkpoints and the division of property appropriated from locals, which the fighters consider “the spoils of war.”²⁰⁸ Indeed, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights reports that these internal disputes worsened in mid-2020, resulting in deadly “clashes in Ras al-Ain between pro-Turkish factions, due to their disagreement over the appointment of the director of the Ras al-Ain border-crossing.”²⁰⁹ Most SNA fighters are poor, and many have been displaced for years and face the dispiriting recognition that they are fighting less to liberate Syria than to protect Turkish interests. Many of these young men, often lacking local ties, take out their frustration and economic desperation on the local populace.²¹⁰ The SNA factions prevent many displaced Kurds from returning to the area, and their behavior makes life difficult for those who remain.

In addition to these challenges inside TARA, the SNA frequently skirmish along the line of control with the SDF and, in places, with the regime. The SNA and Turkish forces have regularly shelled the towns of Ayn Issa and Tel Tamer on the strategic M4 highway in the AANES.²¹¹ According to scholar Amy Austin Holmes, Turkey and its militias committed more than 800 cease-fire violations over the course of the first year following Operation Peace Spring, with 138 of these in the Tel Tamer area, averaging more than two violations per day.²¹² The SDF and the SNA routinely accuse each other of attempting to infiltrate opposing positions, and there are frequent casualties. Anti-IS coalition officers have expressed concern that the attacks on Ayn Issa and Tel Tamer are distracting the SDF from its anti-IS mission.²¹³ The attacks also boost Russian influence; in December 2020, the SDF agreed to have Russian troops deploy in Ayn Issa in an effort to stave off attacks.²¹⁴

An insurgent campaign, including terrorist car bombings, by forces opposed to the Turkish occupation also undermines stability in TARA, as it does in Afrin and the ESZ.²¹⁵ Few of the attacks—mainly hit-and-run assassinations or VBIEDs—are claimed, but the Institute for the Study of War assesses that IS and the PKK are likely both conducting separate campaigns. Among the attacks for which Turkey and the SNA specifically blame the PKK are a January 9, 2020, car bomb that killed four Turkish soldiers in Ras al-Ayn;²¹⁶ a September 2020 bombing that wounded 21 people;²¹⁷ a December 10, 2020, VBIED attack on an SNA checkpoint, which killed up to a dozen people;²¹⁸ and a January 2021 explosion that killed three and wounded 12.²¹⁹ All of these attacks were in or near Ras al-Ayn. Turkey and the SNA's attributions of responsibility have not been backed up by specific evidence but are plausible in light of the displacement of Kurds from Ras al-Ayn.

In an interview with the International Crisis Group, SDF commander Mazloum reserved the right for the Kurds to take action, beyond returning artillery fire, in response to Turkish Armed Forces/SNA attacks. As discussed previously, Mazloum has implicitly acknowledged attacks on Turkish and SNA forces in Afrin, meant to press Turkey to allow Kurdish IDPs to return to their homes—the same dynamics are at play in TARA.²²⁰ In an interview with one of the report's co-authors, Muhammad Hassan, an official with the foreign relations department of the AANES, affirmed the Kurds' right to "resist" in TARA as well.²²¹ In general, then, while the VBIED attacks are unclaimed and it is impossible to know if the perpetrators are IS, PKK cadres, the SDF, or other actors, the signs suggest Kurdish involvement. Given the United States' support for the SDF, these attacks are a source of bilateral tension between the United States and Turkey.

Future prospects and potential for further population movements

At the strategic level, TARA's future will be almost entirely shaped by Turkish policy, particularly whether Ankara will: stay and defend the area; maintain its economic commitment; rein in its proxies; and try to expand the salient. Also playing a role in that future will be the Assad regime and Russia's response to Turkey's de facto annexation, SDF actions, and the attitude of the international community, particularly the United States.

Turkey seems almost certain to maintain its presence and defend the zone if attacked; its goals of refugee resettlement and weakening the YPG are unlikely to change while President Erdoğan remains in charge. Erdoğan's need to be seen to take a hard line on the Kurdish issue and decisive action on the refugee question—largely due to domestic political imperatives—is not likely to fade either. Resettling Syrians in “safe zones” is the approach the Turkish public most favors, and Turkey's humanitarian actions and hawkish policy toward the Kurds—presented uncritically by the Justice and Development Party (AKP)-controlled press—are popular in key segments of the electorate.²²² Erdoğan will find it difficult to give up ground in Syria.

Turkey's commitment to provide basic services and commodities is also likely to last—after all, it is essential to maintain basic humanitarian conditions in order to deter further out-migration—though larger investments may come under pressure due to Turkey's own economic crisis and budget constraints. Erdoğan's grand resettlement plans will likely prove too much for Turkey alone.

Proxy management will remain a major issue for Turkey. Ankara seems to understand it has a problem and has attempted to improve discipline in the SNA and the police forces, but real stability may prove elusive absent a more substantial commitment of direct Turkish force. As the United States has learned in Iraq and Afghanistan, training responsible, professional police and security forces in a war zone is extremely difficult. Turkey has also shown that it finds its unaccountable proxies useful for broader purposes, as in their deployment to Libya and Nagorno-Karabakh as inexpensive ground fighters who can skirt the legal and political limitations placed on direct Turkish deployments.²²³

Regarding expansion, Erdoğan has threatened a new military incursion against the SDF as recently as October 2020.²²⁴ Domestic anger about the killing of 13 Turkish hostages by the PKK during a botched rescue operation in Iraqi Kurdistan in February 2021 increased the pressure, though Turkey's response could come in Iraqi Sinjar or the Qandil Mountains.²²⁵ On the other hand, Ankara may feel it has already effectively

crippled the prospects of Syrian Kurdish autonomy and seized sufficient territory in which to resettle refugees; the strategic rationale for a further incursion is flimsy. Still, the desire to elevate the Kurdish issue domestically, hoping to splinter the opposition's political coalition, could rise in importance ahead of the next Turkish election, currently scheduled for 2023 but possible earlier.²²⁶

Turkey is also limited by the presence of Russian and Syrian regime forces, meaning any major Turkish attack would need to be coordinated with Moscow or risk causing Russian or Syrian regime casualties—and reprisals. Likewise, the United States will want to dissuade Turkey from further advances south of the TARA salient. The October 2019 intervention provoked international outrage and brief U.S. sanctions, even after Trump nominally approved the incursion.²²⁷ The Biden administration is likely to take a clearer line in Syria in defense of the cease-fire with the SDF. In addition to possible congressional action, President Biden could wield executive order 13894 to impose sanctions on any Turkish official or department determined to have disrupted the cease-fire, prevented voluntary returns of displaced people, forcibly repatriated Syrians, or otherwise obstructed reconciliation efforts.²²⁸

Were Turkey to move forward despite these restraints, the most likely targets would be Ayn Issa, Tell Tamer, or Kobane. Taking Ayn Issa or Tell Tamer, important crossroads along the M4, would allow Turkey to impede SDF communications—as well as international humanitarian assistance—across the northeast.²²⁹ Turkey would thus further divide the AANES, isolating western areas around Kobane and Manbij from the rest of SDF-held territory. The loss of Ayn Issa would force all traffic to divert south to the area around Raqqa, greatly complicating the AANES' position. A more dramatic—if highly unlikely—scenario could see Turkey and the SNA press on toward Raqqa, the largest city in the AANES, as Erdoğan has discussed in describing his ideal “safe zone.”²³⁰ A move on Kobane would link Turkey's zones—connecting TARA with the ESZ—and be a huge blow to the morale and credibility of the AANES and the SDF. The town, with its overwhelmingly Kurdish population, was the scene of the YPG's famous 2014 last stand and subsequent 2015 victory over IS, in partnership with coalition forces; the city is of huge symbolic importance to the Syrian Kurdish and AANES narrative. Indeed, a Syrian Kurdish writer recently told a visitor to the region, “Without Kobane, there is no Autonomy [AANES].”²³¹

There are several possible tactical scenarios in these areas. Turkey—or, more likely, the SNA—could try an outright assault to capture Ayn Issa or Tel Tamer. SNA troops tried to capture Tel Tamer on November 15, 2019—shortly after the cease-fire—but were unable to do so.²³² Turkey and the SNA could also seek to make life for residents of Tel Tamer and Ayn Issa sufficiently unbearable that the residents will leave

and Turkey will be able to functionally annex the areas. They could do this through constant shelling, drone attacks, and infiltration attempts as well as other means, such as setting fire to agricultural lands, as the SNA attempted to do in Tel Tamer in spring 2020.²³³ The ongoing shelling fits with this latter approach.

Turkey could also try to dislodge the SDF indirectly, using Russia. The SDF knows it cannot defend against a major Turkish attack and has invited Russian forces into Ayn Issa to prevent that outcome. But this dynamic allows for creeping Russian leverage that can, over time, effectively neutralize SDF autonomy. For example, the Russian forces briefly pulled out of Ayn Issa in December 2020 after the SDF rejected its deployment plan; Turkey and the SNA immediately began shelling the town, killing SDF fighters and necessitating the redeployment of Russian forces and the establishment of observation posts, despite SDF concerns.²³⁴ At least along the line of control, this approach could allow Turkey to achieve its goals of weakening the AANES without direct, large-scale Turkish intervention.

Barring a major Turkish push or a full U.S. withdrawal, which would scramble the picture, it is possible that the current, unstable status quo could persist for some time, with small-scale clashes along the border, moves to undermine the SDF via Russia, continuing terrorist and insurgent attacks in TARA, and halting Turkish attempts to rein in violent, ill-disciplined SNA factions.

It is therefore unlikely that the TARA region will produce another major refugee flow. While the area is unstable and violent, so are the other areas of Syria to which a local might flee. The Turkish border, meanwhile, is tightly controlled, though smuggling continues. Urfa Gov. Erin has hinted at this latter reality, speaking of the need for unregistered Syrians to leave Urfa and calling on registered Syrians to report new arrivals they do not recognize. Bluntly expressing the general Turkish feeling, Erin complained of people fleeing TARA “even though normal life has returned”—crossing to Urfa, he said, is acceptable “only for health and extraordinary humanitarian needs.”²³⁵ For most, however, life in Turkey remains more attractive than life in the Turkish-controlled zones, including TARA.

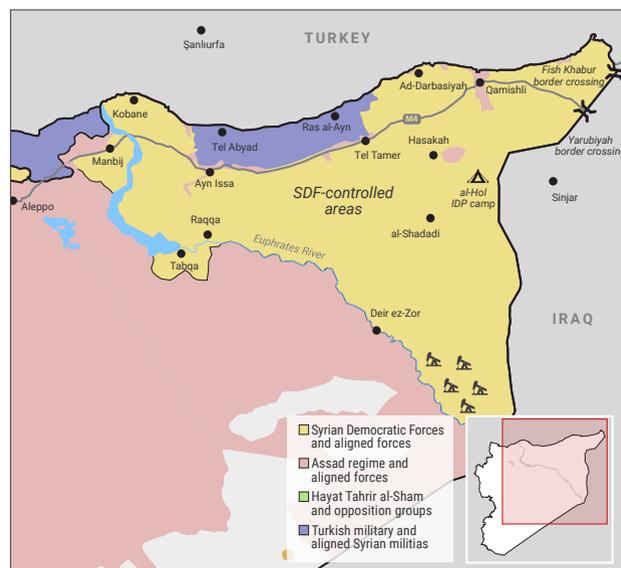
This preference for Turkey likewise limits the prospects of voluntary resettlement of refugees in TARA, despite President Erdoğan’s vision. Most Syrians would rather remain settled in Turkey, where their economic prospects are better and their situation more secure. Beyond small-scale resettlement of families of SNA fighters and those actually from the area, then, Turkey may have to effectively force Syrians to move to

TARA. There have already been some moves in this direction, repatriating Syrians “on the pretext that they lack temporary Turkish residence permits (known as ‘Kimlik’ cards) or that they have broken the law.”²³⁶ There are many anecdotal reports of forced returns, while even official returns are not necessarily to a Syrian’s original home.²³⁷

While there is room for resettlement in TARA—either in new buildings, per Erdoğan’s ambitions, or illegally in the homes of Kurds driven from the region—there is little prospect of major voluntary resettlement.²³⁸ Indeed, the researcher al-Hilu found that “within a year of the [October 2019] operation ending, almost no returns [to TARA] from Turkey have in fact been recorded.”²³⁹ Instead, Turkey has bused Syrians displaced from other parts of the country into the TARA zone, raising concerns among locals.²⁴⁰ Ironically, the fastest route to major resettlement would be to allow—and provide the conditions for—the return of Kurdish civilians displaced in October 2019. But Turkey and the SNA show little desire to enable those returns, hinting at the demographic engineering that lies behind much of the policy.²⁴¹ These well-placed fears of demographic engineering make it impossible for humanitarian NGOs or international donors to morally engage in TARA, further undermining the goal of resettlement.

The Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria

In mid-2012, the Assad regime largely withdrew from Syria's Kurdish-majority areas to focus on fighting elsewhere. The PYD, the Syrian branch of the PKK, emerged as the strongest force among the Syrian Kurds. The PYD's militia, the YPG, soon dominated Kurdish-majority regions in Hasakah in the northeast, called Jazira by Kurds, Afrin in the northwest, and Kobane in the center of the border with Turkey. Syrian forces retained a presence in the northeastern towns of Hasakah and Qamishli, including the airport—and local civil servants continued to receive wages from Damascus—but the PYD held sway. What was later to be known as the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria²⁴² took shape as the region's civilian authority, dominated from the outset by the PYD.



In subsequent years, as the YPG battled IS—at first on its own, then, from autumn 2014 onward, in partnership with the U.S.-led coalition—its writ expanded. The YPG soon held the entirety of the Syrian-Turkish border east of the Euphrates, as well territories to the west, including Tabqa, Manbij, and Afrin. The campaign to destroy IS soon required offensives south into Arab-majority Raqqqa and Deir ez-Zor. To limit ethnic tensions and assuage Turkish concerns, the United States folded the YPG into a multiethnic umbrella group, the SDF, which eventually came to be majority Sunni Arab. Announced in October 2015, with the YPG still its dominant force, the SDF eventually defeated IS' territorial caliphate in March 2019. Following the victory, the coalition troop presence—once numbering 2,000 or more—dwindled to approximately 900.²⁴³ The AANES says the SDF includes 60,000–70,000 troops, the majority of whom are now Arab, while 40,000–50,000 local security forces called Asayish—whose ethnic composition varies by locale—maintain basic internal security.

The AANES lives a precarious existence. Though it is one of the most stable parts of Syria, the Assad regime, Russia, and Turkey and its Syrian proxies all seek its eventual destruction. The Assad regime, supported by Russia, seeks to recapture and centrally govern all of Syria, an outcome the AANES naturally opposes. Despite these antithetical visions, the AANES has at times had to cooperate with the regime and Russia against the more immediate threat from Turkey. Ankara sees the YPG/PYD as an extension of the PKK. Fearing Kurdish autonomy in Syria as the YPG expanded its territory—and especially the ripple effect it seemed to have among Kurds in southeast Turkey—Ankara launched three major military operations, described in previous sections, aimed at preventing that outcome. Turkey has largely driven the SDF from the border and continues to apply military pressure, seeking its disintegration. Meanwhile, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), the dominant force in the adjoining Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), sees the YPG/PYD as a political rival. The KDP controls the border crossing from Iraq into Syria—the AANES’ overland lifeline to the outside world—and often restricts the movement of people and goods into the AANES. Finally, many in the majority-Arab population of eastern Syria resent Kurdish dominance of the AANES, and these ethnic tensions threaten the AANES’ stability. The presence of U.S. troops keeps these enemies at bay for now; a U.S. departure would likely necessitate major concessions in terms of territory or political autonomy by the AANES, under escalating pressure from these adversaries, or result in its outright collapse.

The AANES is significant for several overlapping strategic and political reasons. First, it hosts the only officially acknowledged U.S. troops in Syria, aside from a small deployment at al-Tanf, deployed primarily to prevent any IS resurgence.²⁴⁴ The U.S. deployment also aims to deny Assad a significant part of Syria’s territory. The area holds much of Syria’s oil and good agricultural land; once known as Syria’s breadbasket, some 70 percent of Syrian wheat plantings in 2020 came in SDF-controlled areas.²⁴⁵ Some U.S. officials hope that by supporting the SDF and denying the Assad regime control of the region, the coalition secures leverage to advance a political compromise to the overall Syrian problem. At a minimum, the U.S. presence has thus far helped keep a swath of Syria from being drawn back into full-blown civil conflict. Finally, U.S. officials have also sometimes emphasized the need to deny Iran easy overland access to Syria to supply its proxies, especially Hezbollah, with heavy armaments, although Iran has other means of access for that purpose.

Second, the AANES is important because of its negative impact on U.S.-Turkish relations. Turkey sees the YPG as an organic part of the PKK, labeled a terrorist group by both Turkey and the United States; Ankara thus regularly accuses the United States of supporting terrorists, while the United States denies that the YPG takes orders

from the PKK. Both sides are somewhat disingenuous; the YPG was created by the PKK nearly two decades ago and retains clear PKK links, but Turkey's position lacks critical context. Turkey was itself negotiating with the PKK when the U.S.-YPG partnership began, and Ankara twice hosted then-PYD leader Salih Muslim that very year, and other PYD leaders visited Turkey regularly.²⁴⁶ The YPG—and the SDF—is overwhelmingly a Syrian group with goals focused within Syria.²⁴⁷ Finally, the United States partnered with the YPG only after exploring other options, including a request to Turkey, to save the Syrian Kurdish town of Kobane from IS.

After the Kobane success, the United States expanded its partnership with the YPG to destroy IS; the approach succeeded but vastly complicated U.S.-Turkish relations. Turkey's Kurdish policy abruptly changed in 2015 due in large part to domestic developments, and its subsequent refusal to soften on the Kurdish question has hamstrung U.S. involvement with the AANES, leading the United States to minimize political contact with the PYD and often insist that its cooperation with the YPG is “temporary, tactical, and transactional.”²⁴⁸ This focus on the short term has limited U.S. leverage, while the reluctance to engage with civilian authorities has slowed any shift away from militia control of the SDF areas. Ironically, an end to Turkish military threats might contribute to some demilitarization of politics, perhaps diluting the YPG/PYD's dominance; the conflict itself guarantees that the strongest militia holds sway. For the SDF, a modus vivendi with Turkey would allow for socioeconomic development in the AANES, help prevent the further return of the Assad regime, and allow for deeper cooperation with the international community. This tenuous path, slim though its prospects are, represents the best hope for a durable, positive outcome in the AANES.

Third, the AANES is an experiment in pluralism. Despite the YPG's dominance, AANES territory is majority Sunni Arab, as is the SDF, though most of its officers are Kurdish. The AANES also includes small numbers of Christians, Turkmen, and Yazidis. Because of the AANES' multiethnic character, the PYD often claims the region is a template for a future, decentralized Syria. Still, despite its diversity and proclaimed decentralized system of governance, the Kurdish YPG remains the dominant power in the AANES, and many Arabs chafe under what amounts to Kurdish rule. The Assad regime and Russia try to exploit this discontent to undermine the AANES, but most residents reportedly say that life under the AANES is preferable to a return of the Assad regime. The AANES has an intrinsic identity problem. Its Kurdish leadership and most outsiders see it as an expression of Kurdish autonomy, but its demography dictates pluralism. The success or failure of this multiethnic experiment is therefore important to postwar Syria.

Finally, and most importantly, the AANES is important for the people who live there—its political-military fate will determine whether millions of people will be drawn back into the war or the terror of IS or Assad’s rule.

Demography and humanitarian conditions

Despite its losses to Turkey, today, the AANES remains the largest territory in Syria outside the Assad regime’s control, governing roughly 20 percent of Syria. The precise population is likely between 2.5 million and 4 million people.²⁴⁹ Fabrice Balanche puts the figure at 2.5 million to 3 million, with Kurds making up some 35 percent and Sunni Arabs the majority. If the heavily Arab areas of Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor, the two areas most recently conquered from IS by the SDF, are removed from the equation, the Kurdish percentage rises to an estimated 60 percent. The loss of Afrin in 2018 and TARA in 2019 has increased the Kurdish percentage of the population in the remaining AANES; at least 250,000 Kurdish IDPs from those two areas, including some 75,000 Kurds from TARA, fled to and remain in the AANES. At the same time, the non-Kurdish population of TARA, roughly 225,000, is no longer part of the AANES.²⁵⁰

Humanitarian conditions in the region are uneven. The northeast was historically neglected despite its natural resources; prior to 2011, Hasakah province produced roughly one-third of Syria’s oil, half of its grains, and 80 percent of its cotton.²⁵¹ Agriculture remains the primary source of income for most inhabitants in the region. As in the rest of Syria, the war and the currency crisis have put massive additional stress on the economy, as have the intermittent blockades of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) authorities. With the American presence, the U.S. dollar has come to dominate major transactions, trade in key commodities, and the civil and military administration; but local markets, where the Syrian pound still holds sway, have not followed suit due to a shortage of dollars.²⁵² Thanks in part to this dollarization, the AANES was at least able to raise military and civilian salaries in response to the currency collapse and inflation.²⁵³ Oil, grain, and aid work are now the pillars of the AANES economy—all three of which bring disputes over control, pricing, and politics with the Assad regime. Indeed, COAR argues that the influx of dollars from the U.S. presence and accompanying international NGO activities, as well as the region’s hold on the grain supply, will boost its relative economic power toward the regime, perhaps prompting Damascus to lash out militarily.²⁵⁴

Despite being better off than much of the rest of Syria, households in the AANES face shortages of basic goods, limited electrical and water supplies, and severely inadequate health care. According to REACH, a humanitarian monitoring group, one-third of

communities reported shortages of medicines, and health care is unaffordable for three-quarters of communities.²⁵⁵ COVID-19 has further worsened economic conditions, with 70 percent of communities reporting loss of wages; the World Food Program reported that roughly half of households in Hasakah and Raqqa governates lost a source of income due to the pandemic.²⁵⁶ The loss of income was compounded by the rising cost of living; prices for basic food items and essential fuel for cooking and heating increased in December 2020, though by less than in other parts of Syria, while availability for many items continued to be a problem.²⁵⁷ Some 1.3 million people in northeastern Syria are in need of humanitarian assistance.²⁵⁸

Adding to these economic strains is a large IDP presence. Prior to Turkey's October 2019 invasion, the region hosted about 700,000 IDPs, mainly from Afrin and the Deir ez-Zor region. Turkey's offensive further scrambled the picture, driving some 200,000 people from their homes,²⁵⁹ of whom some 75,000 remain displaced, mainly Kurds who do not feel safe under Turkish rule.²⁶⁰ There has been some economic development in the areas unaffected by the Turkish incursion; for example, reconstruction in the devastated city of Raqqa has facilitated some IDP returns and improved commercial activity.²⁶¹ Still, about 130,000 IDPs reside in formal camps in the northeast, while the vast majority have taken up residence in communities, with relatives, or in informal camps or shelters.²⁶²

Compounding these challenges is the problem of persistent water shortages made worse by a drought in early 2021. One reason for the shortages is the reduction in output from a major pumping station at Alouk, near Ras al-Ayn, that came under Turkish control following the October 2019 invasion. The station supplies water to some 400,000 residents of Hasakah, including IDPs and IS prisoners and their families, but was regularly shut down in the first year of Turkish control.²⁶³ Turkey and the SNA may be using Alouk to pressure the AANES to provide water and electricity to Turkish-controlled areas, as the AANES did before the Turkish occupation.

The cause of the problems at Alouk is disputed and difficult to parse. Turkey claims the AANES has failed to supply the electricity for TARA that it supplied prior to the Turkish operation—when the entire area was under AANES control—and that powered Alouk and the rest of the area. The AANES retorts that it supplies the necessary electricity but that it is siphoned off by SNA “militiamen” before it reaches Alouk.²⁶⁴ In late 2020, U.S., Russian, and U.N. intervention seemed to ensure that electricity from the AANES and water from Alouk would flow in the necessary quantities,²⁶⁵ but an AANES official said in May 2021 that the flow from Alouk is still only intermittent at best. The same official accused Turkey of limiting the flow of the Euphrates River and

thus hampering the operation of two key dams in the AANES, Tishrin, and Euphrates and further aggravating the water shortage.²⁶⁶ A senior AANES official publicly charged Turkey with a “blockade approach,” intended “to undermine our authority and harm our region.” Turkey acknowledges a diminished flow but attributes it to the drought.²⁶⁷

As in many parts of Syria, the AANES has struggled to provide acceptable education, reportedly resulting in diminished attendance at AANES schools. Residents complain about unqualified teachers and curricula too heavy on PKK ideology. Economic needs force many children to work rather than attend school.²⁶⁸ Another major factor is that AANES school certifications are not recognized by Damascus, nor outside Syria. As a result, many families—particularly Arabs—send their children to accredited schools in regime-held territory.²⁶⁹ In Arab-majority areas, protestors have demanded changes to the curricula and improved education more generally.²⁷⁰ A former U.S. official recently lamented that stabilization funds had rebuilt schools without making certain that the curriculum would win accreditation.²⁷¹

Another major challenge is how to deal with accused IS fighters and their families, some 90,000 of whom were being held in the AANES as of June 2020.²⁷² There are roughly 10,000 suspected IS fighters, held in separate SDF prisons.²⁷³ The United Kingdom is funding an expansion to double the size of the prison in Hasakah, which currently holds about 5,000 accused IS fighters, indicating there is no immediate plan for large-scale repatriation or reintegration of the detainees.²⁷⁴ But the bigger problem is the families of these IS suspects; some 90 percent of the overall detainee population are women and children, more than half younger than age 12, held on presumption of IS links. As of March 2021, some 61,000 of this group were being held in al-Hol (Hasakah province) in a camp designed for half that number, with others at facilities in Hasakah town and al-Shadadi. Approximately 31,000 camp occupants are Iraqi, 20,000 Syrian, and 9,000 from elsewhere—mainly Central Asia, Europe, and North America. Due to security concerns, the SDF was initially cautious about releasing people but more recently has stepped up the release of Syrians to tribal or family custody, with more than 6,000 Syrians leaving al-Hol after the SDF eased departure procedures in October 2020.²⁷⁵ Still, Syrians from regime-held territories do not want to return home to face near certain arrest and possible execution, and the Iraqi government will not allow citizens suspected of IS affiliation to return.

Al-Hol presents serious security challenges, bringing together under conditions of severe overcrowding and deprivation a mix of loyal IS supporters and their relatives with those who chafed under IS rule and fled to SDF territory but were placed in camps and viewed with suspicion. According to the Defense Intelligence Agency, IS has “relative freedom of movement and extensive influence” in al-Hol, which it also exploits for recruitment purposes and as a financing node.²⁷⁶ The camp is often violent;

in the first quarter of 2021, there were 47 murders in al-Hol, most believed to be IS-related, for reasons such as punishment for defecting from the group or for violating IS religious doctrine.²⁷⁷ Early 2021 has seen multiple IS attempts to break detainees out of detention facilities, though the SDF has managed to thwart most attempts.²⁷⁸

The October 2020 decision to facilitate the departure of Syrians from al-Hol was partly for internal camp security and partly to satisfy Arabs in Deir ez-Zor and Raqqa who asserted that many residents were IS victims, not sympathizers. The releases raised fears of increased IS attacks, especially among Kurds. Attacks declined in the immediate aftermath, but the long-term impact is unclear.²⁷⁹ Judicial and rehabilitation efforts—as well as repatriation of foreign fighters—remain major challenges; there is little support provided for the reintegration of camp residents into Syrian communities, and many countries refuse to take back citizens accused of IS membership or sympathies.

There are also serious corruption and human rights concerns in the AANES, though international access provides some accountability.²⁸⁰ The most recent report of an independent U.N. commission raised a number of human rights concerns regarding the SDF and related entities, including: torture and cruel treatment, recruitment of child soldiers, denial of judicial proceedings to accused IS members, and the confinement of families to al-Hol with little basis for appeal.²⁸¹ The report tentatively cites eight documented cases of arbitrary detention of political activists and civil society workers during the January–July 2020 period covered by the report. Four individuals claimed they had been interrogated by U.S. officials while detained in SDF facilities, and at least two said they were tortured by SDF military intelligence, which could constitute war crimes.²⁸² The commission also cites ongoing recruitment of children, though it notes efforts to end the practice.²⁸³ In 2019, the SDF signed a U.N. agreement to end child recruitment.²⁸⁴ Journalists Amberin Zaman and Dan Wilkofsky have described how the issue hints at the difficulty of distancing the SDF from the PKK, which has recruited Kurdish youth for decades. According to the authors, SDF commander Mazloun difficulty rooting out the practice may point to lingering PKK influence in the AANES and differences among the YPG, PKK, and affiliated Kurdish groups.²⁸⁵

Security dynamics and governance

Conceptually, the AANES is based on local autonomy, starting at the smallest, commune level and scaling up as needed to larger units.²⁸⁶ The Syrian Democratic Council (SDC) sits atop the pyramid, serving as the civilian arm of the SDF and coordinating across the AANES. The PYD—the political arm of the YPG—dominates the civilian executive of this AANES “federal” government. The councils are meant to be at least

partially elected at each level; some elections were held prior to the Turkish invasion of October 2019, while others had been announced but were subsequently postponed. According to Amy Austin Holmes, a Syria expert and public policy fellow at the Wilson Center, the councils include prominent individuals from major ethnic and religious groups in each area.²⁸⁷ In January 2014, the PYD issued a “Charter of the Social Contract” that committed the AANES to “ethnic, religious, and linguistic pluralism, equality, democracy, and local self-government.”²⁸⁸ Indeed, in a sign of relative autonomy, Arabs and Syrians, as well as Kurds, are all allowed to provide schooling in their own language. And, in at least one case, Syriac Christians reportedly persuaded the federal government to withdraw a major law.²⁸⁹

Yet there is controversy about just how federal and democratic the system really is. For example, the power of taxation seems to rest solely with the federal government, according to a Syriac source.²⁹⁰ Citing the omnipresence of the YPG militia, Syria expert Fabrice Balanche asserts in a monograph that the AANES is “the most centralized [region in Syria], despite the PYD’s official discourse about local democracy and federalism.”²⁹¹ Harriet Allsopp and Wladimir van Wilgenburg, experts on Kurdish politics, largely agree, casting doubt on the fairness of past elections and writing that the governance of the AANES cannot be “untangled from the PYD,” while acknowledging positive developments such as institutionalization of women’s rights.²⁹²

The PKK created the PYD and YPG, but there is also some dispute as to how strong the links are today. Allsopp and van Wilgenburg suggest that the PYD remains accountable to the PKK and the associated Kurdistan Communities Union (KCK).²⁹³ According to Daphne McCurdy, a former U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) official, the YPG-dominated SDF is “a notoriously opaque and undemocratic organization with indisputable ties to the PKK . . . [and its] decision-making authority continued to rest in Qandil,” with the PKK.²⁹⁴ Other U.S. officials familiar with the situation downplay the YPG’s operational ties to the PKK, as does the PYD/YPG itself, admitting that though many senior figures in the YPG, PYD, and SDC were formerly in the PKK, their current relationship is more characterized by “diffuse ideological affiliations.”²⁹⁵ Sociologically, it is clear that the YPG and the SDF are overwhelmingly Syrian groups with Syrian goals.²⁹⁶ SDF commander Mazloum is not said to require consultations with the PKK when making major decisions, indicating operational independence, though equally, there are reports of a parallel structure of PKK-linked cadres in the AANES as well as regular contacts and strategic alignment.

Over the years, the United States has sought to dilute both the appearance and reality of PKK influence in the AANES, especially for the sake of relations with Turkey. That was a primary reason for the establishment in 2015 of a major Arab military component to fight alongside the YPG under the SDF umbrella. Other smaller groups,

including Syriac Christians, joined as well. The addition of the Arab forces, now reportedly a majority of the YPG, was significant both politically and militarily, as the SDF prepared to take on IS in majority-Arab areas. Turkey has dismissed the SDF as a fig leaf for the YPG and the PKK. For Washington, softening Turkey's view of a crucial proxy in the campaign against IS was undoubtedly part of the calculus; but U.S. officials also hoped Arab recruitment would help secure genuine Arab support for the campaign to defeat IS and broaden the legitimacy of the SDF among local Arabs.

More recently, the United States has encouraged a dialogue between a PYD-dominated group of political parties known as the Kurdish National Unity Party (PYNK) and the more conservative, pro-Barzani Kurdish National Council (KNC). The goal of the dialogue, initiated by SDF commander Mazloum with U.S. encouragement, is to bring the KNC into the government in the AANES. There are many obstacles to the success of this attempt, including Turkey's influence over the KNC²⁹⁷ and the long rivalry between Barzani and the PKK's titular leader Abdullah Öcalan. The KNC is now largely in exile in Iraq's KRG—whether by choice or due to YPG pressure is disputed by the groups—but has a limited presence in the AANES. Strategically, Mazloum and the United States hope that a power-sharing arrangement between the PYD and the KNC will broaden support for the AANES and dilute perceptions of PKK influence, perhaps making Kurdish autonomy in northern Syria acceptable to both Turkey and Barzani.²⁹⁸ But the PYD complains that Turkey is blocking these efforts, using its influence with Barzani and the KNC to cripple the reconciliation effort.

Turkey represents the most immediate threat to the AANES.²⁹⁹ President Erdoğan threatened a new offensive as recently as October 2020. Depending on the state of U.S.-Turkish relations and Erdoğan's domestic imperatives, such an operation cannot be ruled out. Turkish troops and SNA proxies launch regular small arms, artillery, and drone attacks from the TARA salient, while periodic infiltration attempts spark heavier fighting. Turkey, in turn, plausibly accuses the YPG of responsibility for VBIED attacks in the TARA area, though the attacks could also be IS cells.³⁰⁰ Turkish military pressure has mainly aimed at Ayn Issa and Tel Tamer, towns on the critical M4 highway—the most important artery in the AANES, providing access for international humanitarian NGOs from the east and trade in both directions. Turkish shelling has shut down the M4 highway for months at a time, disrupting transport in the AANES, with many residents avoiding stretches near Turkish lines. Russia helped reopen the highway recently, but it remains dangerous. Turkey may want to seize Ayn Issa or Tel Tamer to permanently split the AANES. Russia's presence is a deterrent to Turkey but could over time facilitate the return of the Assad regime.

The Assad regime is another major threat. Damascus, formally supported by its Russian patron, demands the return of central government control to the east. The regime wants particularly to reclaim oil fields in Deir ez-Zor and Hasakah and was incensed when northern oil fields were leased to the U.S. company Delta Crescent Energy. Russia, too, was angered, as Assad had already leased those fields to a Russian outfit pending their return to Damascus' control.³⁰¹ The regime is unlikely to launch a full-scale military offensive to retake the east, at least in the near term; Damascus lacks manpower and is occupied holding the front lines in Idlib, managing internal security, and dealing with a growing IS insurgency in rural Damascus, Homs, and the portions of Deir ez-Zor it controls west of the Euphrates. For now, the presence of U.S. troops and the threat of the United States' airpower keeps Syria and Russia at bay, but both will be probing for weaknesses; a string of assassinations of SDF-friendly Arab tribal leaders could be the work of the regime, seeking to destabilize the east and erode SDF control.

Relations between the SDF and the Assad regime have been characterized by intermittent cooperation and conflict. Despite differences, the AANES has had to work with the regime on occasion. Regime troops never fully left parts of Hasakah and Qamishli, requiring awkward coordination. But early 2021 has seen growing tension between those regime forces, known as the National Defense Forces (NDF), and the local Asayish, culminating in several days of clashes in Qamishli in late April 2021 that left 13 dead and raised fears of a wider conflict. The fighting appears to have been caused by a combination of local disputes, AANES efforts to get greater trade access from the regime, and regional rivalries between locals and the NDF (seen as pro-Iranian). Russian intervention has restored an uneasy calm, but the clashes demonstrate the tenuousness of SDF-regime relations.

Syrian and Russian troops are also arrayed along the line of control with the Turkish-controlled TARA, part of a deal struck in October 2019 to head off Turkey's invasion. The arrangement brought Syrian regime troops back to AANES-administered towns such as Tel Tamer, Tabqa, and Ayn Issa—all evacuated by coalition forces following Trump's sudden withdrawal announcement—for the first time in years. Russian troops moved into Manbij. One SDF commander described the choice between inviting Syrian troops back to the region or facing the Turkish forces alone as one between “compromise and genocide.”³⁰² But the return of regime forces was largely nominal, given the regime's manpower constraints and other commitments, and the SDF continues to be the dominant security force in the northeast. The October 2019 arrangement has certainly increased both Russia's and, potentially, the regime's leverage, however.

The new security regime was affirmed in a Turkish-Russian memorandum of understanding (MOU) signed October 22, 2019. The MOU stipulated that Russian military police and Syrian border guards would operate outside the TARA area to “facilitate the removal of YPG elements and their weapons to the depth of 30 km (19 miles) from the Turkish-Syrian border.”³⁰³ Ankara and Moscow also agreed to joint patrols to the west and east of TARA to “a depth of 10 km, except Qamishli city.” Early Turkish-Russian patrols in this zone met with popular protests, including rock throwing, in Kurdish villages. As a result, an AANES official says that Turkey limits patrols to nonpopulated areas.³⁰⁴ Russian forces patrol throughout the zone, coordinating their movements with the Asayish and SDF.³⁰⁵

Russia’s official position is that Assad should regain sovereignty over the entire country, posing another problem for the AANES. The YPG angered Moscow by allying with the United States, perhaps explaining Russia’s willingness to allow Turkey to intervene in the Russian zone west of the Euphrates, especially its acquiescence to the Turkish invasion of then-Kurdish-majority Afrin. On the other hand, Russia has longstanding relations with the Kurds, including Soviet-era ties with the PKK. Moscow intervened on the Syrian Kurds’ behalf to resolve the Alouk water station problem, reopen the M4 highway, and mediate the fighting with regime forces in Hasakah and Qamishli. Moscow has also advocated for Kurdish participation in the Geneva peace process and tabled a draft Syrian constitution in January 2017 that spoke of “Kurdish Cultural Autonomy,” while still stopping short of any Kurdish political autonomy, the core demand of the AANES.³⁰⁶ Still, Russia is likely to push for a deal that brings the east back under Assad’s rule.³⁰⁷ Meanwhile, Turkey can increase Russian leverage over the SDF, at least along the line of control: Through steady shelling and military pressure, Ankara can force the SDF to call for Russian support, shifting *de facto* control toward Moscow and Damascus.³⁰⁸

This complexity is largely the result of President Trump’s October 2019 withdrawal announcement and the subsequent Turkish invasion. In some areas in northeast Syria, the SDF partners with U.S. forces; in others, with Russian and regime forces, separately or together. In other areas, such as Deir ez-Zor, it is at a bare-teethed standoff with regime forces; in some, it comes under Russian pressure; and, in still others, the SDF faces Turkey and its Syrian proxies alone.³⁰⁹

A lingering IS insurgency poses another ongoing threat. From July to September 2020, IS staged up to 90 attacks in the AANES—that is, about one per day. Two-thirds of these were in the Deir ez-Zor area, and most were small-scale. Still, some were in the AANES heartland in Hasakah, and, on one occasion, IS managed to kill four Asayish officers. Coalition forces say that the SDF is increasingly capable of fighting IS on its own—and, indeed, now stages some raids on IS without coalition participation.³¹⁰

The AANES also faces danger on its eastern border with Iraq, at the critical Fish Khabur and Yarubiyah border crossings. The area is politically contested by the PKK, Iraqi security forces, Shia militias, and pro-Barzani KDP troops.³¹¹ Turkey has also threatened an intervention in neighboring Sinjar, which would upend the whole picture. The KDP has at times closed the Iraqi border to the AANES, although food and medicine are always allowed through, according to an AANES source.³¹² Given U.S. troops' own interest in keeping the border open—and the KDP's own reliance on U.S. support—Washington should be able to manage the Fish Khabur issue. The Yarubiyah border crossing from Iraq presents a separate problem, closed to U.N. cross-border assistance in January 2020 due to Russian pressure at the U.N. Security Council. Its blockage has limited the delivery of critical medical supplies, with Moscow unrelenting even in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic.³¹³

In many ways, the thorniest issue for the AANES is the Arab-Kurdish divide. The YPG was formed to secure Kurdish autonomy, but it must now weigh this goal against the reality of governing majority-Arab areas as part of the SDF. Arabs constitute the majority of the SDF rank and file, but some resent Kurdish dominance of the AANES leadership and natural resources, particularly in Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor. According to one NGO leader in Deir ez-Zor, Arabs have no presence in senior decision-making bodies, do not meet with foreign delegations, and are denied their share of Deir ez-Zor's oil revenues.³¹⁴ Some Arabs in Deir ez-Zor also question the AANES leadership's commitment to their region. One member of the local civil council, himself a target of assassination attempts, cited lack of SDF security for the region. He praised the Syrian Kurds but said he feared that the key decisions in the AANES are being made by outsiders, namely the PKK. A U.S.-based Syrian activist asserts that Arabs in the Deir ez-Zor region fear that the AANES sees them as merely a “card” ultimately to be traded to Assad for concessions in the Kurdish heartland further north.³¹⁵ Nevertheless, the NGO leader says most locals believe life would be worse under Assad, IS, or pro-Iranian or pro-Turkish militias.³¹⁶ Even some of those protesting AANES shortcomings have made clear they reject the Assad regime.³¹⁷ The U.S. Central Command shares this assessment, reporting that Arabs in the region prefer the AANES to the alternatives.³¹⁸ Thus far, Arabs in AANES are discontented but not rebellious.

A spate of assassinations of Arab tribal leaders, including a prominent pro-SDF sheikh in August 2020, heightened tensions, provoking protests against inadequate SDF security for the region. The SDF exacerbated the situation by firing into the crowd to disperse them.³¹⁹ The tensions led the powerful Aqidat tribal confederation to demand that the SDF transfer administrative—though not military—control in Deir ez-Zor to “the region's tribes,” though a September 2020 deadline passed without incident.³²⁰

The AANES leadership has not ignored the complaints. In late 2020, the AANES announced a package of reforms, including local elections within a year, anti-corruption measures, guarantees of judicial independence, and “self-management of commodities.”³²¹ The last element refers to oil; control over profits from local oil wells remains a critical issue. The SDF has so far refused to transfer administrative authority to tribal leadership from the Deir ez-Zor Civil Council, which is chaired by two local Arab leaders but reliant on the SDF and AANES for decisions and funding and is distrusted by many locals.³²² It has also struggled to improve the security situation, though it has sought to recruit resident Arabs into local security forces.³²³ Implementation of reforms and the provision of basic security will likely determine whether the AANES can manage Arab grievances.

The Assad regime and Russia have sought to play on these divides, “attempting to influence local populations to sever ties with the SDF.”³²⁴ But the regime, which controls the west bank of the Euphrates in Deir ez-Zor, has so far had limited success in organizing pro-regime tribal militias on the AANES-controlled east bank. Thus far, the most powerful Arab tribal confederations—Aqidat, Baqara, and Shammar—have not broken with the SDF, though divisions persist, and subtribes’ allegiances vary.³²⁵ The regime faces its own problems in west Deir ez-Zor, where it relies on ill-disciplined militias and has struggled to rein in a serious IS insurgency, undermining its own efforts to win over tribal factions from the SDF.³²⁶

The main local demands in the AANES continue to be security, basic services, and local civilian control, especially in Arab-majority areas. Each of these factors relies in large part on coalition military engagement and stabilization funding. Indeed, even in limited numbers, U.S. forces are the bonding element that keeps the AANES relatively stable. Mediation from U.S. officials regularly helps de-escalate tensions between the SDF and Arab tribes in Deir ez-Zor.³²⁷ Were the United States to withdraw, the AANES would likely collapse. A U.S. withdrawal seems unlikely in the near term, based on President Biden’s past comments; he was scathingly critical of Trump’s withdrawal from northeastern Syria.³²⁸ The appointment of Brett McGurk as coordinator for the Middle East and North Africa on the U.S. National Security Council likewise hints at a durable U.S. presence. McGurk is a strong advocate of cooperation with the SDF and resigned in protest following President Trump’s first withdrawal announcement, later reversed, in December 2018; it is unlikely that Biden appointed him to oversee a U.S. departure from Syria. This was further underlined in May 2021 with the publicization of a visit by a senior U.S. delegation to the SDF, which the U.S. Department of State said underscores “the U.S. commitment to cooperation and coordination in the Coalition to Defeat ISIS, continued stability in northeast Syria, and the delivery of stabilization assistance to liberated areas.”³²⁹

Yet the October 2019 partial withdrawal significantly undermined the influence of the remaining U.S. troop presence. Trump's abrupt withdrawal order and Turkey's invasion dramatically complicated the front lines—previously largely corresponding to the Euphrates River—and cast doubt over the durability of the U.S. presence. The SDF no doubt worries that Washington will flinch again and must account for that possibility. The Assad regime seeks to exploit this uncertainty, making the case to both the SDF and Arab tribes in the east that the United States will one day abandon them and that it is better to cut a deal with Damascus.³³⁰ Moreover, the U.S. presence is now geographically limited within the AANES, and other regional powers may be tempted to test Washington's staying power. Little can now be done to reverse the return of Russian and regime forces to the northeast, both in military terms and in their political dealings with the SDF.

Future prospects and potential for further population movements

The midterm future of the AANES depends on four major factors: U.S. troop presence, Turkish assertiveness, Russian and regime probing, and Arab-Kurdish tensions. The Biden administration is likely to maintain the U.S. troop presence and renew stabilization efforts in eastern Syria. That will shape the additional factors, as U.S. troops will help maintain SDF pressure on IS and act as a deterrent to major, direct military moves by both the regime and Turkey.

Ankara could make additional military moves in the northern areas that the United States vacated, aiming to further weaken Kurdish autonomy. But Ankara has already gone a long way toward crippling those prospects. And President Biden would not greenlight such an operation, nor seek to prevent congressional sanctions against any new Turkish move. Still, depending on the state of U.S.-Turkish relations and Erdoğan's domestic imperatives, it cannot be ruled out.

The Assad regime will continue to probe SDF defenses and sow Arab-Kurdish discontent through assassinations and other clandestine tactics. Russia will likely continue its gray zone pressure against the United States—for instance acting aggressively on shared roads in the northeast or harassing U.S. aircraft in the skies over Syria—and against the AANES.

The regime's efforts to undermine the AANES—as well as IS' insurgent attacks and assassinations—will also play a role in Arab-Kurdish relations. The AANES will need to reform to include Arab leaders and share natural resources, while the international

community will need to increase stabilization assistance to return basic services and help manage IS detainees and rehabilitation. It is a tall order, but one made necessary given the unappealing alternatives of an IS resurgence or the return of the brutal Assad regime.

Positive developments are also possible, if unlikely. A U.S.-brokered deal between the PYD-dominated PYNK and the KNC remains a distant prospect but, if achieved, could potentially soften Ankara's hostility. The talks could also help ease tensions at the Iraqi border, offer more international legitimacy to the AANES, and dilute the PKK's influence.³³¹ If political tensions were lowered, the AANES could eventually be a desirable trading partner for Turkey, a useful market for consumer goods as well as energy and construction projects; similar logic came to govern Turkish-KRG relations over time. A modus vivendi that provides some measure of local autonomy in certain areas, including the AANES-controlled Arab east, as well as Kurdish cultural rights, is surely a necessary component of any attempt to solve the wider Syrian conflict. The SDF under Mazloum appears to be grappling with the need for reform, distance from the PKK, and accommodation with Turkey—Mazloum says he is ready to talk with Ankara “without any preconditions.”³³² Turkey may eventually come around, though it would require a shift in its domestic politics—specifically, an end to Erdoğan's reliance on support from hard-right Turkish nationalists—that does not appear imminent.

More likely, the AANES will see a continuation of the current, challenging but perhaps manageable status quo, possibly bolstered by a firmer U.S. military commitment and renewed stabilization efforts. That scenario would mean there is little prospect of major additional displacement or refugee outflows. Turkey maintains a tight hold on the border, preventing civilian crossings. The SNA has denied Kurdish civilians resettlement in the TARA salient and in Afrin, deterring those who fled from those places to the AANES from returning. In Deir ez-Zor, after nearly a decade of war and several years of IS rule, most of those who remain either do not have the resources to flee or are committed to remaining.

There are reportedly some 300,000 to 400,000 Syrian Kurds in Turkey, with many of them no doubt coming from the AANES area. If there is an agreement with the KNC, perhaps some of them will return. Like most Syrian refugees, however, many have now settled into life in Turkey and have little desire to return to difficult and uncertain lives in Syria. There are likewise some 245,000 displaced Syrians in the KRI, mostly in Duhok and Erbil. That population had begun to diminish with slow returns to Syria

but spiked again following Turkey's October 2019 military operation. About 100,000 of these displaced Syrians live in camps, with the remainder absorbed into the community or informal settlements.³³³ Prolonged stability in the AANES, along with some improvement of humanitarian conditions, would likely see some of these displaced people return to Syria; a deal between the PYD and KDP that eases political tensions and expands cross-border commercial exchange could speed such returns.

A major Turkish or regime move would scramble this picture, of course, likely causing Kurds to flee from the targeted towns to adjacent parts of the AANES or to the KRI. A major regime offensive or other form of returning administrative control might prompt a more generalized flight, particularly of those who worked with the AANES, cooperated with the coalition, or would otherwise fear retribution from regime security forces for associations with rebel groups or outlawed NGOs.

In his September 2019 speech at the United Nations, President Erdoğan spoke about resettling up to 3 million Syrian refugees in Syria, including in parts of the AANES area. As he envisions it, Erdoğan's "safe zone" corridor—meant to protrude 30 km into Syria and extend 480 km along virtually the entire length of the Turkish-Syrian border—would include 1 million to 2 million resettled Syrians, with up to 1 million in the TARA salient alone. Erdoğan also said that as many as 3 million refugees could be resettled if the zone were extended south into Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor.³³⁴ Erdoğan reportedly envisions building entirely new towns, implying that refugees would not be returning to their original homes, estimating the cost at \$26.4 billion for the first 1 million resettled and \$53 billion for a further 2 million resettlements, to be paid by the international community.³³⁵ The plan is entirely unrealistic; the local population would reject Turkish rule, and many more Kurds would be displaced by such an intervention. The international community has already balked at what amounts to financing state-driven refoulement,³³⁶ while the Assad regime and Russia would undoubtedly block the attempt. Alternatively, a political compromise that yielded Turkish humanitarian and commercial involvement in the AANES would be beneficial. For now, that remains unlikely.

External factors influencing refugee movements

Turkey is the effective guarantor power across much of northern Syria, host to more than 3.6 million Syrian refugees, and the largest economy in the area; as such, developments in Turkey will have a major influence on the situation in northern Syria and the overall displacement crisis. This section considers these developments, including the politics around Turkey's efforts to integrate Syrians and, subsequently, to "externalize" the refugee crisis and restrict further access; the Turkish-Syrian border regime; and the fate of the U.N. cross-border mechanism.

Developments in Turkey

The Syrian refugee crisis in Turkey is nearly as old as the Syrian civil war. The first group of 252 Syrian refugees arrived in Turkey in April 2011, just weeks after Assad's response to anti-regime demonstrations turned violent. Syrians could then enter Turkey without a visa, and Ankara pursued an open-door policy. Turkey granted the Syrians temporary protection status—a legal category created to avoid recognizing the Syrians as "refugees" in the context of the Geneva agreement—codified by the Turkish government in the Temporary Protection Regulation (TPR, or "Geçici Koruma Yönetmeliği" in Turkish). Turkey won well-deserved international acclaim for welcoming the Syrians. By 2015, Turkey was host to the most refugees in the world; today, some two-thirds of all Syrian refugees are in Turkey, amounting to roughly 15 percent of Syria's prewar population. To illustrate the scale of this influx, in per capita terms, compared with Turkey's nonrefugee population, this would be equivalent to the United States hosting more than 14 million refugees, most of whom arrived in a five-year period.

The influx of Syrians scrambled Turkey's demography. Hatay became Turkey's first Arab-majority province, and Kilis has almost as many Syrian refugees as Turkish citizens.³³⁷ The influx sparked tensions; a 2018 International Crisis Group report noted an uptick in Turkish-Syrian violence.³³⁸ Polling and focus groups show deep Turkish antipathy toward the refugees. The integration of Syrians into Turkish society is fraught;

most Syrians do not want to return to Syria, and many would ideally like to stay and gain Turkish citizenship, while most Turks want the Syrians to leave. This is visible in scholar Murat Erdoğan's annual Syrians Barometer poll; in 2017, only 17 percent of Syrians said "I do not plan to return to Syria under any circumstances," but by 2019, that figure had risen to 52 percent.³³⁹

Turkey's welcoming policy was predicated on the assumption that the refugee flow would be limited and temporary, but the war confounded those expectations. In August 2012, Turkey said it could take no more than 100,000 Syrians; that once-unthinkable mark was surpassed by October. Unprecedented numbers of Syrians would continue to flee to Turkey—by 2015, more than 2.5 million Syrians lived in Turkey under temporary protection.³⁴⁰

The horrors of 2015–2016, with mass violence and displacement in Syria and a series of deadly terrorist attacks in Turkey, prompted the first major efforts to close the border—covered in the border section of this report—and limit the refugee flow. The Turkish public likewise turned decisively against the welcoming policy, angry at the number of Syrians in the cities and the cost of providing essential relief and services to them, and fearful of competition for jobs and of perceived cultural dilution.

Ankara had not yet contemplated expulsions, but it began constructing a border wall, ended visa-free entry at airports and seaports, and worked to block overland arrivals, with reports of Turkish soldiers firing at would-be asylum-seekers to drive them back. The open door through which millions of Syrians had escaped the war was swinging shut.

'Externalizing' the refugee issue

Turkey began to externalize and militarize the refugee issue. In August 2016, the Turkish military staged its first major cross-border operation to occupy parts of northern Syria. There were multiple reasons for the operations—discussed at length elsewhere—but the desire to resettle refugees, linked to the feeling that numbers in Turkey were unmanageable, was a central consideration. Before Operation Euphrates Shield was completed, Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu had announced that 50,000 Syrians had returned from Turkey to the ESZ zone.³⁴¹ Operations to take Afrin and the TARA salient would follow in 2018 and 2019, respectively.

Alongside the moves to clear so-called “safe zones” for resettlement, steps were taken to coax or prod—and sometimes force—some refugees to return to Syria. Turkish officials have offered several resettlement figures. By October 2018, President Erdoğan announced that 320,000 refugees had moved from Turkey to the ESZ and Afrin. In late 2019, the Turkish Ministry of National Defense said that 580,000 Syrian refugees had returned to Syria: 380,000 to the ESZ, 65,000 to Afrin, and 135,000 to TARA.³⁴² More modest, but still significant, figures were announced by other Turkish government officials, as in July 2020, when Çavuşoğlu cited 402,000 returns. Interior Minister Süleyman Soyly cited slightly more than 414,000 as of October 2020.³⁴³

It is not possible to gauge the accuracy of the Turkish figures, nor the extent to which they reflect voluntary returns. Most returning Syrians did not go through the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)-approved process, which requires independent monitoring, certification of voluntariness, and clear understanding of the implications of return. As of January 2021, the UNHCR had certified only 101,530 of these official returnees—one-quarter of even Çavuşoğlu’s lower figure.³⁴⁴ Khayrallah al-Hilu maintains that “these figures do not account for those forcibly repatriated to Syria on the pretext that they lack temporary Turkish residence permits ... or that they have broken the law.”³⁴⁵ This widespread nonnotification raises suspicions that some of the returns may be forced.

More restrictions in Turkey

Since 2017, registration under the TPR—and the accompanying identity card (“kimlik,” in Turkish) that opens the door to benefits, such as free education, health care, and EU cash assistance—has become increasingly restricted. Hatay province stopped registration in 2017.³⁴⁶ In 2018 and 2019, a dozen other provinces followed suit, including 7 of the 10 provinces with the highest concentration of Syrians; exceptions are made for the most vulnerable, such as medical emergencies and unaccompanied children.

Setbacks for the AKP in nationwide local elections in 2019 may have increased pressure on the government to commit to returns and externalize the problem. Anger about the refugee issue contributed to the party’s losses in Istanbul and Ankara, and possibly elsewhere, with the opposition criticizing the government’s management of the policy. Since the elections, senior Turkish officials seem to have stopped defending the refugee policy, and more provinces have halted TPR registration and cut back on the issuance of travel permits that allow rejected asylum-seekers to attempt to register in another province. In July 2019, just weeks after the rerun election in Istanbul, the Provincial Directorate of Migration Management office in Istanbul—

the local representative of the centrally controlled Directorate General of Migration Management (DGMM), therefore under Erdoğan’s authority—announced that Syrians living in Istanbul but registered in other provinces had to return to the province of their registration within 30 days, later extended to three months, or risk deportation. The law requiring Syrian refugees to live and work in the province in which they registered had been ignored for years, but the election had changed that. Because of its employment opportunities, Istanbul had been a magnet for Syrians registered elsewhere; a DGMM-International Organization for Migration (IOM) study in 2019 found that 963,536 Syrians were living in Istanbul, significantly more than the 601,320 counted under official statistics.³⁴⁷

The centrally controlled Istanbul governorate also began a campaign to check workplaces for refugees working without permits—a category that would apply to almost all of the estimated 900,000 to 1 million Syrians working in Turkey. In most cases, the disincentives for acquiring a work permit far outweigh the incentives, but those without permits are liable to deportation. Turkey has also increasingly deported those caught without registration, whereas previously, it had generally just required them to register. In addition to deportations of those lacking registration or work permits, Turkish officials reportedly began detaining refugees and coercing them into signing voluntary departure forms before deporting them to northwest Syria. Amnesty International has documented that Syrians “consistently say they are being misled about the ‘voluntary return’ forms they are being told to sign, or intimidated or beaten in order to make them sign.”³⁴⁸ Human Rights Watch likewise confirms that “in addition to mass summary deportations at the border, where Syrians are captured and turned back shortly after their arrival, Turkish authorities have also deported Syrians from within Turkey after they’ve settled.”³⁴⁹ Some of these practices occurred prior to 2019, but they seem to have accelerated after the election. With tight restrictions on registration and mounting reports of forced returns, a study by the European Council on Refugees and Exiles summed up Turkey’s new policy as “leave people unregistered and thus push them to leave Turkey.”³⁵⁰

These coercive tactics emerged despite Turkey’s commitment to the “safe and voluntary return” of refugees “to their original places of residence in Syria.”³⁵¹ Ankara’s generosity in receiving and caring for Syrian refugees—and the moral imperative to not send people back to a war zone—has worn thin against the clear preponderance of Turkish public opinion and the political reality that creates.

The refugees—and the government’s policy toward Syria and the Syrians—are deeply unpopular in Turkey and becoming more so, based on opinion polls. Whatever the facts, many Turks feel that the refugees contribute to Turkey’s economic woes, that they present a security threat to the Turkish population, and that their presence is diluting Turkish culture.³⁵² Early polls suggest the open-door policy was never popular in Turkey, but unfavorable opinion hardened as more Syrians arrived and their stay lengthened. By 2017, almost 80 percent of Turks said the country “spends too much time and money caring for refugees.”³⁵³ The overwhelming majority of Turks say they want the refugees out of Turkey, and Turkish politicians often echo that unlikely demand.

Syrians likely to remain in Turkey

This public sentiment is set against the fundamental reality that most Syrians refugees are likely to remain in Turkey. Several factors support this idea. Few Syrians say they intend to leave, and that attitude is hardening. According to the Syrians Barometer 2019 survey, among the most definitive studies of the issue, 52 percent of Syrians say they do not plan to return “under any circumstances.”³⁵⁴ Another 30 percent say they would return “if the war in Syria ends and if an administration we want is formed.” Just two years earlier, only 16 percent said they would not return under any circumstances, and 61 percent said they would return only if the war ended and a preferred regime were in place. Those who say they would return at the end of the war, no matter what type of regime is in place, fell from 13 percent in 2017 to 6 percent in 2019. Regarding an option not offered in 2017, in the 2019 survey, 6 percent said they would return “if a safe zone is created in Syria.” When asked about their preferred status in Turkey in 2019, 80 percent of the refugees said they either wanted dual Syrian-Turkish citizenship or Turkish citizenship only; in 2017, that figure was a little more than two-thirds.³⁵⁵ With little prospect for the emergence of a Syrian regime that would tempt most refugees to return, Syrian refugees and their descendants will be a major presence in Turkey for years to come.³⁵⁶

Even with stepped-up deportations, the Syrian population in Turkey is unlikely to decrease very much; in fact, it is likely to grow. According to the UNHCR, there were 3,671,811 registered Syrian refugees in Turkey as of April 21, 2021.³⁵⁷ That is only 150,000 more than there were three years previously. New arrivals tapered off after Turkey sealed the border, but the Syrian population is growing through reproduction. Turkey’s Ministry of Health reports that 535,000 Syrians had been born in Turkey as of January 2020.³⁵⁸ The Syrian refugee birthrate was put by one 2019 study³⁵⁹ at 5.3 children per woman, whereas Turkey’s is barely above replacement level, at 2.3.³⁶⁰

The young Syrian refugee population is likely to have a high birth rate for years to come.³⁶¹ In addition to the Syrian refugees under temporary protection, there are roughly 100,000 Syrians with permanent residence, who mostly immigrated before the outbreak of war in 2011, and approximately 110,000 former Syrian refugees who have been granted Turkish citizenship; presumably, neither of those categories are included in the UNHCR figure above, but they are part of the Syrian emigrant community in Turkey.

Despite Turkey's efforts to entice or force Syrians back to Syria, it is difficult to persuade people to resettle in a war-devastated area. Returnees face daunting prospects in Syria, starting with the challenges of finding a place to live and earn a living. Hospitals, schools, and basic services in much of Syria have been destroyed or are nonfunctional; even in the Turkish-occupied areas, such services are minimal. And there is the likelihood that a postwar Assad regime, if it endures and recoups lost territories, would seek to exact revenge against returnees for past dissent, for involvement in opposition groups, or for fleeing rather than fighting. Already, the regime has passed a law allowing it to seize the property of displaced people and refugees, often without compensation.³⁶² Even without specific fears of political retaliation, the largest disincentive to return is that Syria—including the Turkish-controlled “safe zones”—remains violent and chaotic, with little guarantee of basic security.

Turkish citizens are unhappy about the Syrians' presence, but they may be resigned to it. According to the 2019 Syrians Barometer, 25 percent of Turks said that the Syrians should be “sent back”—an increase from 12 percent two years earlier—and 45 percent said, “They should live in safe zones in Syria.”³⁶³ CAP's own 2018 polling showed similar results, with 33 percent saying, “They should be sent back to Syria no matter what” and 45 percent saying they should be sent only to “safe zones” in Syria.³⁶⁴ Nevertheless, according to the Syrians Barometer polling, 49 percent of Turks say they do not expect any Syrians to return home after the war, and another 30 percent say the majority will remain. There is hostility—and the situation could deteriorate—but for now, outbreaks of violence remain relatively limited.³⁶⁵

There are ongoing tensions, however. In 2019, three-quarters of Turks said they cannot live together in harmony with Syrians. Almost two-thirds said the Syrians are either not at all integrated into Turkish society or are only slightly integrated.³⁶⁶ In Urfa province, where almost one-quarter of the population is Syrian, the governor said last year that “Syrians living in Urfa should behave the way Urfalis want ... you know Urfa sensitivities by now.”³⁶⁷

Most Syrian refugees have built lives in Turkey and manage to earn a living on their own. In 2019, just prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, only 22 percent said they receive outside assistance, and 935,000 Syrians were working in Turkey, though overwhelmingly in the informal economy. Less than 2 percent now live in the camps that housed the initial arrivals, and 55 percent say they no longer have close family in Syria.³⁶⁸ As of late 2017, the average Syrian refugee had already lived in Turkey for 4 1/2 years. Most significantly, more than 750,000 Syrian students are in Turkish public schools. Over time, these youth will be culturally and linguistically integrated, and more Syrians will come to see Turkey as home.

Turkey may not fully honor its pledge to implement only “safe and voluntary return of refugees and internally displaced persons . . . to their original places of residence in Syria,” but Turkey could hardly force millions of Syrians to return against their will. Almost all Syrians willing to return say they are interested in returning only to their original homes, not to a “safe zone.” And only a distinct minority of the refugees are from the areas currently occupied by the Turkish military.³⁶⁹

In sum, the refugees do not want to return; the conditions in Syria that might tempt them back to Syria will not exist for the foreseeable future; and for ethical and logistical reasons, Turkey cannot round them up and send them back. The most likely future is therefore one of slow integration, but risks remain. Turkey’s grinding economic slowdown could continue, and poor Syrians—half the refugees live below the poverty line³⁷⁰—could emerge as a permanent underclass. Over time, this could pose the security threat that many Turks already perceive. Turks unhappy about the Syrians’ presence could lash out, prompting clashes and/or forcing their government to take drastic actions. A better course would see Turkey—with international support—find a way to integrate the Syrians over time and navigate a difficult situation. Ankara has taken a brave and important step by integrating Syrians into the Turkish school system, but that is the beginning of a fraught and uncertain process. For now, Turkish leaders still cannot even use the word “integration” for fear of public backlash, while unquestionably advancing that very policy.

The Turkish-Syrian border regime

The longer-term viability, integration, and development of the Turkish-controlled zones will be heavily influenced by the border regime and the management of the official crossings, irregular movement, and the general flow of people and trade. These issues will shape the economic trajectory through trade, market access, commodity prices, and border revenues for the local councils; social cohesion, family ties,

and likelihood of return; and security. Collectively, these factors will influence the decisions of Syrians on both sides of the border—whether to remain in Syria, seek to enter Turkey, or look to return to resettle in Turkey’s zones of control.

Historically, what is now southern Turkey and northern Syria developed together under the Ottoman Empire, with deep family, cultural, tribal, and religious ties that were only partially weakened by the drawing of modern national borders.³⁷¹ Cold War divisions and tensions over the disputed province of Hatay, water rights, and Syrian support for the PKK-dominated Syrian-Turkish relations in the second half of the 20th century, contributing to a militarization of the border that limited exchange; a modern rapprochement inaugurated by the 1998 Adana Agreement, however, led to a free trade agreement and visa-free travel that restored much of the cross-border exchange.³⁷² When the war broke out, to a remarkable extent, despite intermittent closures and partial hardening in 2013–2014, Turkey’s laissez-faire border policy with Syria lasted until 2015, a major factor in the large number of foreign fighters who traveled to join armed groups in Syria, including IS. The exception to this approach was in the Kurdish areas, where Turkey closed its border gates when the Syrian government pulled out. And it was the further rise of Kurdish autonomy, the scale of the refugee crisis, and a spate of terrorist attacks in Turkey that led the government to crack down at the border more generally in 2015.³⁷³

As Asli Selin Okyay, an expert on migration and border management at the Istituto Affari Internazionali describes, Turkey’s border management was always closely tied to its political-military goals in Syria and the demands of domestic politics.³⁷⁴ The early open-border policy was both humanitarian and intended to boost recruitment and supply for the armed opposition to Assad. Among these armed groups, more extreme jihadi groups came to assume greater influence, including terrorist groups such as al-Qaida affiliates and, eventually, IS. But it was the rise of Kurdish influence in northern Syria under the banner of the PYD that elicited Turkey’s first serious limits on border access in 2013–2014, with Kurds on both sides of the border decrying “what they saw as ethnically discriminatory state border politics.”³⁷⁵ The resumption of the domestic Kurdish conflict—itsself closely tied to developments in Syria³⁷⁶—accelerated the closure of the border, further encouraged by jihadi terror attacks in Turkey as well as rapidly increasing refugee numbers and the associated domestic political blowback.

Barriers and crossings

The Turkish government eventually acted decisively. There were just 13 km of walls and 333 km of ditches in 2014, but by 2015, some 20,000 Turkish military personnel were guarding the Syrian border, and construction of a full-blown border wall began in July—just as the Kurdish conflict flared up again. At a cost of 2 billion Turkish lira,

the wall included “barbed-wire barriers and mobile watchtowers, and the installation of high-tech cameras at the border.”³⁷⁷ By the end of 2017, Turkey had fenced “825 kilometres of the 911-kilometre border.”³⁷⁸ Since the wall’s completion and the accompanying policy shifts to reduce the number of Syrians admitted to Turkey, arrivals have leveled off—roughly steady since late 2017.³⁷⁹ By 2018, Human Rights Watch reported that the Turkish-Syrian border was “effectively closed to new asylum seekers.”³⁸⁰

There are 20 official border crossings on the Turkish-Syrian border. On the Syrian side, eight are presently controlled by Turkish forces or the SNA; seven are controlled by HTS or the Syrian Salvation Government, though Turkey’s undeclared influence may be significant; three are controlled by the SDF or the AANES; and two are controlled by the Assad regime, though its control of the Nusaybin-Qamishli crossing in the SDF-controlled northeast is largely nominal.³⁸¹ Of these 20 crossings, Turkey has entirely closed 11, severely restricted traffic through four others, and left five mostly open.³⁸² Turkish priorities can be seen in the status of these crossings; all of the SDF-controlled crossings are entirely closed; one regime crossing is open to severely restricted traffic, the other is closed; and six of the HTS-controlled crossings are closed, with one open to restricted traffic. Meanwhile, five SNA-controlled crossings are open, two limited to restricted traffic, and just one closed as of February 3, 2021.³⁸³ Control of the Syrian side of these crossings brings with it transit fees and opportunities for influence and enrichment through taxes and extortion on commercial and human traffic; local councils rely on this income, while armed groups, including within the SNA umbrella, frequently fight for control of the crossings.

Outside of the official crossings, the completion of the border wall and Turkey’s shift to a securitized approach has severely reduced the number of people crossing into Turkey but has not stopped illicit transit. One Syrian in Idlib, interviewed by Elizabeth Tsurkov, reported that “the fence along the border and the border police reinforcements on the Turkish side of the border are making smuggling incredibly difficult. There are people who’ve tried six, seven times to cross into Turkey, getting arrested and deported each time. People are expecting death.”³⁸⁴ Refugees and smugglers routinely attempt to bribe border guards or climb or tunnel under the border wall.³⁸⁵ There are many allegations of violence at the border, and guards have opened fire to stop people entering Turkey.³⁸⁶ Hundreds of people have died trying to cross into Turkey.³⁸⁷ In 2018, International Crisis Group sources in Urfa reported that bribes to secure a crossing cost between \$1,500 and \$2,000, a fortune for most Syrians.³⁸⁸ For the most desperate, such as those in Idlib, very few can afford bribes, relying on cheaper smuggling attempts that usually result “in being caught, beaten, and sent back by Turkish border guards.”³⁸⁹

The completion of the border wall led to a massive increase in the number of people caught attempting irregular crossings from Syria. According to a database assembled by Omar Kadkoy, a policy analyst at the Economic Policy Research Foundation of Turkey, and shared with the International Crisis Group, in 2018, the Turkish military caught 224,358 people attempting irregular crossings from Syria.³⁹⁰ Official Turkish statistics likewise show big increases in irregular migrants captured attempting to enter Turkey in 2018, followed by an even bigger spike in captures in 2019, followed by a precipitous fall in 2020, likely due to COVID-19. In 2020, excluding more frequent permitted entries at border gates, just 17,562 irregular migrants were caught at the Syrian border, down from 55,236 in 2019; 1,935 Syrians were caught in the first 40 days of 2021.³⁹¹ IOM's tally of Turkish Armed Forces' reports likewise showed a slow-down in 2020, though numbers increased later in the year as the economic situation worsened. Most irregular crossings were attempted into Hatay, Kilis, and Urfa—crossing from Turkish-dominated areas of Syria—with the lowest number into Mardin from SDF-controlled areas, where the even more heavily securitized border in Kurdish areas increases the risk of being shot trying to cross.³⁹²

Trade, transit fees, and extortion

The complicated questions surrounding the delivery of humanitarian assistance through the U.N. cross-border mechanism are considered in the following section, but in a broader sense, the Turkish-controlled areas are reliant on the crossings to Turkey for almost all their basic requirements, including food, consumer goods, and humanitarian assistance.³⁹³ In May 2020 alone, nearly 1,800 trucks crossed from Turkey, “hauling enough food to sustain 1.3 million people per month.”³⁹⁴

Beyond humanitarian aid, overall trade volumes have increased—though from very low levels due to the war and the closed border—as Turkey has come to control much of northern Syria and made significant investments. As outlined in earlier sections, Turkish companies dominate the Turkish-controlled zones, use of the lira is widespread, and prices are partially pegged to prices in Turkey. These close connections have allowed some recovery in employment and overall economic activity, with more stable prices—though still subject to the lira's volatility—and more widely available goods.³⁹⁵

This traffic is essential to the local councils and the SNA as well as to Turkey's efforts to limit the budget impact of its commitments in Syria. According to Khayrallah al-Hilu, the crossings are the councils' biggest financial resource, as they “receive their budgets every month from the Turkish province overseeing them, which represent their shares of the revenues from border crossings after splitting them with the SNA.

These budgets cover the costs of employee salaries, infrastructure restoration and municipal services.”³⁹⁶ In addition to SNA infighting, the situation lends itself to exploitation and corruption, including of the Turkish officials manning the border crossings. According to the International Crisis Group, from September 2017 to February 2019, Turkish media reported “five operations resulting in the arrest of nearly 100 customs officials and businesspeople on charges of offering or accepting bribes at the gates.”³⁹⁷ HTS even attempted, briefly, to levy taxes on the distribution of humanitarian aid, though it relented under Western threats to freeze assistance³⁹⁸ and Turkish pressure.³⁹⁹

Social ties and long-term prospects

When the northern Syrian enclaves are rightly conceived of as de facto Turkish protectorates, the question of border access becomes a critical factor in their long-term trajectory. It is impossible to predict how these dynamics will develop, shaped as they are by Turkish domestic politics, the military situation in Syria, the course of the pandemic, and the internal stability of the Turkish-controlled areas. But it is safe to assume that domestic political pressure to limit the number of Syrians moving into Turkey and resettling refugees in the “safe zones” will remain a major focus.

The 2014 TPR—with additional regulations and amendments—is the primary law governing Syrians’ rights in and with Turkey, including at the border. Syrians in Turkey are not, technically, refugees. The presidency has the power to declare, end, modify, or geographically limit a TPR designation—essentially, the Turkish government makes the rules. Refugees often travel back to Syria for administrative reasons such as to renew their passports or to see family and then return to Turkey. But Syrians technically lose their temporary protected status if they voluntarily leave Turkey, meaning the Turkish authorities can deny reentry—applications for renewed temporary protections are determined wholly by determination of the DGMM. For years after the outbreak of the war, these temporary returns were fully tolerated; as a result, many Syrians are not fully aware of this reality, resulting in refugees who inadvertently lose their protections.⁴⁰⁰ A number of provisions in the TPR—including exceptions for involvement in terrorism, armed conflict, criminal activity, as well as public order or public health concerns—provide Turkish authorities with additional leeway to control admission as they see fit; convictions are not required for such findings. Given the broad and politicized application of the anti-terror law in Turkey, it is easy to imagine these provisions being used to screen arrivals based on political views or other criteria.⁴⁰¹

This reality outlines the difficult balancing act that Ankara faces. There are Syrians who wish to return to their country. A UNHCR monitoring study of voluntary returnees found that “54% of returnees said the main reason for their return was ‘to join family members’ and the second reason with 8% of returnees was the ‘lack of financial/humanitarian support/assistance in Turkey.’”⁴⁰² But fewer Syrians will risk going back if the decision is seen as potentially final. The TPR makes it risky for a Syrian to return to visit family or pursue a job lead—such a trip could mean permanently losing their legal right to be in Turkey, which for many was a hard-won privilege. Nor are Syrians likely to return in large numbers if there are no jobs and no way to sustain a family; Turkish investments made in the areas they control will suffer if those areas are cut off and economically isolated.

Therein lies the paradox for Turkey. If Ankara heavily restricts border traffic and makes it difficult or legally risky for people to move back and forth, it will hurt the economic prospects of its *de facto* protectorates and limit voluntary resettlement, a primary goal of both the Turkish government and the general public. But a more *laissez faire* approach will anger the public and bring potential security risks. Turkish control over TARA, the ESZ, Afrin, and influence in Idlib mean the formal Turkey-Syria border crossings are functionally a second-level border. The true border is at the often violent frontiers of Turkish effective authority within Syria, such as Aoun al-Dadat in Manbij, intermittently connecting SDF-held areas with the ESZ.⁴⁰³ The Turkish enclaves do not have established border barriers and are patrolled by ill-disciplined SNA factions—they are porous. At a basic level, then, Turkey cannot seal off the borders of its occupied zones and must either seal the formal border, suffering in economic terms and limiting resettlement, or run significant risks of infiltration, raising concerns around counterterrorism, espionage, criminal activity, and trafficking.

The U.N. cross-border mechanism

Turkey’s long-term border management will remain a challenge, but the more pressing risk is the likely July expiration of the U.N. Security Council mandate for the United Nations’ cross-border humanitarian operation. This cross-border mechanism was renewed for one year in July 2020 after a hard-fought negotiation at the Security Council, with the Western powers managing to wrest authorization for just one crossing from an intransigent Russia and China.⁴⁰⁴ U.N. Secretary-General António Guterres said the reauthorization would effectively save assistance for 2.8 million people in dire need in northwestern Syria, but it was clearly only a temporary solution.⁴⁰⁵ Indeed, this was just the latest Russian effort to winnow down the cross-border program; the United Nations is no longer allowed to deliver assistance through previously authorized crossings at Bab al-Salam from Turkey, Yarubiyah from Iraq, and al-Ramtha from Jordan.

Moscow's goal is to squeeze the opposition and strengthen the Assad regime through the control of critical humanitarian assistance, hoping that by forcing the United Nations and international NGOs to work through Damascus, they can legitimize the government, despite its atrocities and severe politicization of aid.⁴⁰⁶

Importance of the cross-border mechanism

The cross-border mechanism has grown in importance as the war has ground on and access has tightened due to the security situation. In particular, over the past year, COVID-19 has taken a toll, food prices have spiked by almost 250 percent amid a crushing economic crisis, and depreciation of the Syrian pound has pushed even more Syrians into desperate poverty—90 percent of the population now lives below the poverty line.⁴⁰⁷ U.N. Emergency Relief Coordinator Mark Lowcock told the Security Council in February 2021 that “around 60 per cent of the Syrian population, that is 12.4 million people, do not have regular access to safe and nutritious food. ... An additional 4.5 million people have fallen into this category over the past year.”⁴⁰⁸

For those outside regime control, the cross-border assistance is essential, providing critical lifesaving aid—including basic food—to millions across northwestern Syria. Before the July 2020 expiration of Bab al-Salam, leaving just Bab al-Hawa, “The number of trucks bringing in assistance from Turkey using the two remaining border crossings ha[d] increased by more than 130 percent since 2019.”⁴⁰⁹ In May 2020, the United Nations set a record for cross-border deliveries, with 1,781 trucks crossing into Syria.⁴¹⁰ In December 2020, 930 trucks crossed through Bab Al-Hawa, the latest of 43,348 trucks through the cross-border mechanism since July 2014.⁴¹¹ Lowcock reported, “Despite the massive operation, needs remain incredibly high throughout north-west Syria, with 2.8 million people in need, including over 1 million people living in camps or informal shelters. Without the necessary cross-border authorizations by the Security Council, civilian suffering will increase to levels unseen in nine years of conflict.”⁴¹²

Beyond the actual provision of assistance, the U.N. mandate is important for other reasons. It is a major conduit for humanitarian funding, including through the Syria Cross-border Humanitarian Fund, which helps solicit and distribute funds for local Syrian NGOs on the front line of the crisis.⁴¹³ The U.N. agencies, such as the World Food Program, are also the logistical backbone of the humanitarian response, with the trucks, personnel, and technical and coordinating expertise required to manage the herculean effort.⁴¹⁴ While NGOs could in theory continue cross-border aid deliveries without the United Nations, the scale of the response would be dramatically insufficient.

Politicization of humanitarian assistance and the possible end of the cross-border mechanism

The United Nations' emergency relief coordinator says that "a failure to extend the cross-border authorization to bring humanitarian assistance through north-west Syria would trigger suffering and loss of life on a massive scale."⁴¹⁵ While the United Nations continues to try to conduct cross-line missions into northwest Syria—that is to say, across the contested line of control between regime-held territory and the zones held by opposition groups—they have not yet been able to do so, and a regular cross-line supply operation remains incredibly unlikely due to the regime's intransigence.⁴¹⁶ Secretary-General Guterres has said that in the northwest, it is "simply impossible to replicate with cross-line assistance what is being delivered through the cross-border operation."⁴¹⁷ Without the cross-border mechanism, U.N. operations would be entirely subject to the Assad regime, bringing certain denial of assistance to opposition areas. Prior to the mechanism's establishment in 2014, international NGOs delivered cross-border assistance unofficially, missing the coordination and official cover that the United Nations provides—though Russia and the regime have sometimes ignored U.N. deconfliction efforts and struck aid workers. If the mandate ends, assistance would have to be delivered outside U.N. auspices, and the humanitarian situation—already dire—would undoubtedly worsen. Some analysts believe even a willing coalition of donor countries would be unable to compensate.⁴¹⁸

The cross-border regime arose in response to the starvation tactics and severe politicization of humanitarian assistance by the Assad regime and Russia. From early in the war, the regime required aid organizations to work through the Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC), prohibiting independent activities, and worked to co-opt the Red Crescent itself, purging its board, infiltrating its ranks with intelligence operatives, and detaining those who complained.⁴¹⁹ The regime channeled aid through loyalists and siphoned off relief funds.⁴²⁰ The United Nations and international humanitarian groups, desperate to get assistance to the millions of Syrians in regime-held areas, have tried to manage these pressures, even as the regime has trampled core principles of impartiality.⁴²¹

The regime and Russia view humanitarian assistance as yet another weapon to use in advancing their political goals, directing aid to allies and denying access to those deemed disloyal.⁴²² As former USAID official Daphne McCurdy and French diplomat and Middle Eastern affairs expert Charles Thépaut write, "The regime has co-opted humanitarian assistance as a weapon of war to punish opponents and reward supporters ... block[ing] humanitarian convoys as part of its siege-and-starve strategy,

while bombing health facilities and humanitarian workers.”⁴²³ The regime has used assistance to bolster patronage networks, prosecute its military campaign, and punish opposition areas. In late 2020, Damascus again forced a humanitarian NGO providing food assistance in northeastern Syria to halt deliveries or risk its staff and operations in government-held areas.⁴²⁴ This is part of a long-running effort to pressure NGOs active outside regime areas by threatening their staff in other parts of Syria or threatening their accreditation; Fabrice Balanche argues it is a potent tool in Assad’s effort to reclaim sovereignty over Syria’s borders, even in the AANES.⁴²⁵ In the final analysis, as Human Rights Watch concludes in a comprehensive report on the subject, “The Syrian government has rigged the system for provision of humanitarian aid, to ensure that the benefit to the state supersedes the needs of the population.”⁴²⁶

Western leverage and how to respond

Perversely, the Western powers opposed to Assad and his atrocities almost entirely fund the humanitarian effort in Syria. Of the \$2.14 billion funding the Syria Humanitarian Response Plan in 2020—meeting just 56 percent of requirements—the Western allies account for an overwhelming share of the donations. The United States covered more than 30 percent of the total, followed by Germany with 19 percent, the United Kingdom with 9 percent, and Norway and the European Commission with 8 percent each. Russia accounted for 1 percent.⁴²⁷ Since 2011, Europe has contributed \$19 billion, and the United States \$11 billion—together providing 90 percent of U.N. funding in Syria.⁴²⁸

On its face, this provides potent leverage to end the regime’s and Russia’s abuse of the U.N. system. In the last round of negotiations, the United Kingdom said it would not renew its donations if the cross-border mechanism is not renewed.⁴²⁹ At the U.N. Security Council, the United States has “disputed that Syria’s consent is required for aid to be delivered through the crossings.”⁴³⁰ But donor countries and humanitarian leaders are understandably concerned about using this leverage, as the victims would be innocent civilians in regime-held areas. The West cannot simply cut off Syrian civilians because they live under Assad’s corrupt and brutal rule.

The possibilities, then, are the renewal of the cross-border mechanism; a shift to reliance on cross-line aid, resulting in the almost certain cutoff of aid to opposition areas; or the provision of cross-border assistance without the United Nations. Renewal of the cross-border mechanism is clearly the best solution from a humanitarian perspective, if unlikely given Moscow’s opposition, and Western donors should bring political pressure to bear to that end, including a loud public campaign to name and shame Russia. The United States and Europe should consider what influence they can wield,

including threatening further sanctions for humanitarian abuses in Syria. Reliance on cross-line assistance is not possible, given the regime's interference. Finally, there is the possibility of providing cross-border assistance without the U.N. mandate, which is suboptimal but the most likely outcome. The Western powers should be quietly working now to build out a parallel cross-border delivery system ahead of the expiration of the U.N. mandate. This would essentially return things to the pre-2014 situation and has severe disadvantages, but it may be the only option left if Russia follows through on its threats. This system would necessarily operate out of Turkey without U.N. coordination, similar to how aid delivery to northeastern Syria already operates separately out of Iraq.⁴³¹

Reconstituting a cross-border delivery system without the United Nations would be very difficult, bringing issues of vetting, monitoring and evaluation, and political interference.⁴³² Despite—and because of—its enforced coziness with the Assad regime, the SARC remains the key player, distributing aid to some 10 million IDPs; “half of overall UN relief in Syria is distributed by SARC, making it the largest provider of humanitarian relief in the country.”⁴³³ Still, the regime's limitations on SARC activities—for instance, the absence of SARC health clinics or mobile health facilities, as well as many other activities, outside of regime-controlled areas—somewhat reduce the potential impact of cutting ties to operate without the United Nations in opposition areas. International humanitarian NGOs manage, with difficulty, to provide basic supplies and services in northeastern Syria outside the U.N. mandate.⁴³⁴ There may also be opportunities in the ongoing shift toward remote programming and deeper reliance on Syrian NGOs to deliver assistance in opposition areas.⁴³⁵ Despite the hurdles, the international community could potentially boost direct funding of Syrian NGOs, assure more regular access from Turkey and northern Iraq, and proactively clear humanitarian actors of any legal risk from the new sanctions regime.⁴³⁶

This effort would require significant multilateral funding and brings downsides in terms of efficiency and capacity. It could also bring new forms of political interference. Instead of relying on the Assad regime, international donors and NGOs would be forced to rely on access through Iraq and Turkey. Iraqi political concerns largely center on the political disputes between the KDP and the PYD, discussed in greater detail in the section on the AANES, and are likely manageable, if potentially subject to Iranian pressure. Turkish political pressure could be more problematic. Ankara has increased pressure on international NGOs to align with onerous registration requirements, provisions that allow the Turkish authorities to largely control their activities. The Turkish government has used this control to direct aid to its favored recipients and away from those it views with suspicion, particularly Kurds it associates with the PYD.

Turkey might use the separate cross-border effort to increase pressure on donors to route financing through state institutions such as the AFAD or pliable NGOs such as IHH. Still, this political landscape is easier to navigate than the Assad regime's interference. Finally, Russia may try to tempt Turkey to cut a separate deal on humanitarian aid outside the U.N. mechanism; while Turkey wants the cross-border mechanism to be renewed, Russia may nonetheless try to pry Turkey from the Western bloc on this issue by offering concessions on other fronts. Despite all these hurdles, the effort is clearly preferable to an outright collapse in aid.

Strategic impact

Russia's pressure on the cross-border mechanism has already hampered provision of assistance, with the uncertainty and short-term renewals complicating budgeting and planning efforts as well as preventing longer-term investments to address root causes of human suffering.⁴³⁷ Some fear the setup of a parallel cross-border regime will prompt a more complete decoupling from the U.N. system, resulting in reduced funding for still-important efforts from Damascus, while even more fully associating the remaining U.N. efforts with Russia and Assad's push for normalization without accountability.⁴³⁸ Still, as Charles Thépaut points out, while the United Nations is required to coordinate with the local government, the Geneva Conventions "forbids denying access to aid for 'arbitrary or capricious' reasons. Sovereignty is not superior to humanitarian protection."⁴³⁹

The possible outcomes are therefore: Russia relents at the Security Council in July, and cross-border operations continue at their present reduced level; Russia shuts down cross-border operations, and the West responds by reestablishing a large-scale parallel cross-border operation; or Russia shuts down cross-border operations, and the West fails to set up parallel cross-border operation, resulting in humanitarian cataclysm. The regime might also attempt a move on the Bab al-Hawa crossing, just 18 km from its forward outposts,⁴⁴⁰ but Turkey would likely respond militarily.

In essence, then, it comes down to Moscow. The analysts at COAR note that "Moscow's strategic partnership with Ankara limits its willingness to push to end UN cross-border convoys, which Turkey views as a buffer against a refugee crisis on its southern border."⁴⁴¹ The international community has to hope that Moscow will not want to hang Turkey—not to mention millions of Syrian civilians—out to dry, thereby undermining its effort to coax Turkey further from its NATO allies. But at another level, there is no choice at all: Western pressure on Russia will be made more credible if active preparations are made to try to replicate the cross-border mechanism outside U.N. auspices; of course, these preparations will be essential if Russia is

not bluffing and vetoes the renewal of the mechanism. The Western allies are funding the aid operation in either case; the U.N. auspices simply offer Moscow a measure of leverage. In any case, the utter politicization of humanitarian assistance in Syria will also have a broader effect on the survival of the multilateral legal regime and crucial norms; Russia, China, and the Assad regime's hardball approach forces those committed to a true humanitarian response to play by their rules.

Recommendations

The United States, Europe, and Turkey share an interest in de-escalating the Syrian war, improving humanitarian conditions, preventing further displacement, and facilitating refugee returns. But, beyond those baseline shared interests, these powers have several divergent goals, different capabilities and resources, and varying appetites for risk.

The United States is primarily focused on counterterrorism, humanitarian relief, and de-escalation as a prerequisite for any lasting political resolution—ideally one that checks Russian and Iranian influence in Syria. Washington will presumably wish to preserve some measure of local—if not exclusively Kurdish—autonomy, both in the interest of representative government and in solidarity for the sacrifices made by the SDF against IS. The United States values Turkey’s protection of civilians in Idlib but is uncertain about its close relationship with jihadi groups and decries the abuses of the SNA and the displacement Turkey’s actions have caused elsewhere. Washington brings preponderant military force, when there is political will, and is likely to marshal more financial and humanitarian support under Biden but has limited appetite for risk.

The European Union and its primary member states want de-escalation in Syria and seek to externalize the refugee problem, largely to Turkey. The European Union is not a coherent actor, and differences between member states limit its effectiveness in pursuit of these goals; but, broadly, Europe is unwilling to incur much risk and is unable to bring much political or military weight to bear, though it has substantial financial resources and a willingness to direct them toward humanitarian aims and toward limiting migration to Europe. France, the United Kingdom, and Denmark have also deployed force in Syria against IS, but other powers have shown no such willingness. Still, Europe’s financial and stabilization influence could be substantial, should it adopt a more assertive policy, offering significant soft power and leverage with Turkey.

Turkey aims to cripple Kurdish autonomy in any postwar Syria, a goal the United States and Europe do not share. Ankara is desperate to return Syrians to Syria and is willing to forcibly remove many of them, under certain circumstances. To advance these goals,

it has carved out by force a buffer zone in northern Syria and resettled Sunni Arabs and Turkmen perceived to be friendlier to Turkish interests, both a goal and a tactical approach that the West does not condone. And, for political and economic reasons, Turkey wishes to maintain close control over humanitarian and reconstruction activities in its areas of control. Ankara brings military force, substantial state capacity, and a huge appetite for risk to the table.

Surveying these differences, the United States and Europe are largely on the same page—and there is some overlap with Turkey. But the differences are sharp, making it hard to cobble together a coherent, unified strategy; this patchwork almost inevitably leads to a form of compartmentalization—a strategy of strict conditional engagement. Turkey is the key player in grappling with northern Syria and the refugee crisis, so Europe and the United States must do what they can on their own and, with Turkey, try for the best while preparing for the worst.

Overall, the United States and Europe should focus on preventing a new stage in the Syrian conflict, ensuring the delivery of adequate humanitarian assistance to areas outside regime control, exploring conditional engagement with Turkey to improve conditions in their areas of control, and working to address external refugee issues, including by taking more refugees themselves.

1. Prevent a new stage of conflict

Preventing a new stage of the conflict will require renewed U.S. commitment to effectively freeze the current front lines. This, in turn, requires the United States to bolster the SDF relationship and, likely, slightly expand its direct presence. It will also require clear warnings: to Turkey that further expansion in the east is unacceptable and will be met with sanctions under executive order 13894, and to Russia and the regime that military probing along the deconfliction line will be met in kind. In the northwest, the prospects of a new phase of conflict are in the hands of Russia, as the predominant aggressor, and Turkey, as the primary military deterrent and security guarantor. But the United States and Europe can add the threat of additional sanctions on Russia if a new offensive is attempted. The United States could also consider supporting steps through NATO to bolster Turkey's deterrence along the border, beyond the rotational Patriot missile deployments, but such an initiative would require conciliatory Turkish steps in other areas as well as a request from Ankara.

In terms of improving the immediate security situation, the United States and Europe have limited options, within the bounds of political possibility. But in eastern Syria, the Western powers can make a difference. To make its deterrent message more credible, the Biden administration should increase troop levels in the AANES, from the current 900 to the range of 1,500 to 2,000 troops. This deployment would allow for closer coordination with the SDF and Arab tribal components in Deir ez-Zor and provide presence along the line of contact on the Euphrates and in the north. It would also help the SDF keep on top of the IS insurgency as well as reinforce the overall political cohesion of the AANES and protect humanitarian access. Without a continued or even stepped-up U.S. presence, it is possible that SDF-tribal relations will break down in Deir ez-Zor, opening the door to the regime or IS or both. A scaled-up deployment could also help cajole the European Union and regional partners into increasing humanitarian and stabilization assistance in the northeast, which would be important to delivering basic services—improving the AANES’ legitimacy and therefore security—as well as reintegrating and rehabilitating those caught up with IS.⁴⁴²

There is no simple response to the gray-zone challenge posed by probing in places such as Ayn Issa, where the SDF could slowly lose control as it is squeezed among Turkey, Russia, and the regime, undermining its autonomy. These forced tactical concessions may, over time, bring slow-motion submission to the regime, unless the United States can change Turkey’s stance. For that and many other reasons, the United States should continue its efforts to push the SDF to be more inclusive and to distance itself from the PKK. This political evolution offers the best chance to ensure the stability of the AANES, protect humanitarian access through the KRG, maintain international support for stabilization in the east, and inch toward a political modus vivendi with Turkey. The YPG/PYD knows its dream of security and autonomy relies on U.S. support, and that gives Washington leverage. This leverage has been apparent at earlier stages of the war, repeatedly acting as a restraining influence on YPG/SDF behavior.⁴⁴³ Ensuring trust in local authorities and security forces will be critical to any continued stability; for this reason, the SDF should respond publicly and consistently to accusations of abuse and rein in its forces when they are seen as overly aggressive. It should credibly respond to accusations made by human rights NGOs such as Syrians for Truth and Justice and credible international agencies and respond to the recommendations that such groups provide.⁴⁴⁴ Transitional and informal justice should over time segue into more established and transparent courts or other forms of judicial review, freely sharing information with families and tribal leaders when people are detained.

Preventing a new stage of the conflict will also require steps to improve internal security in each of the respective zones. The United States and Europe should try to incentivize Turkey to rein in the abuses of its SNA proxies and establish forms of redress for civilians, including Kurds—as explored below. The United States should continue to push the SDF to include non-YPG figures, including Arabs, in the civilian and military leadership of the AANES and encourage a moderate line toward the tribes in Deir Ez-Zor, while keeping up the pressure on IS remnants with increased troop presence and operational tempo. Turkish steps to allow Kurdish return and redress for crimes committed—along with U.S. pressure—might likewise secure a reduction in insurgent attacks in the Turkish-controlled zone.

As the Syria Study Group recommends, the United States should continue to push the SDF to remove PKK trappings and operatives from the civilian and military administration; allow civil society to operate freely; ensure that councils and the autonomous government itself reasonably reflect the local population; continue reintegration efforts from the IDP camps and prisons; and set up a transparent and equitable system for the distribution of natural resource revenues.⁴⁴⁵ The United States can help act as a mediator and backer in most of these efforts, with EU support. Given its influence in Erbil, Washington can also continue supporting the SDF's effort to reach a political compromise with the KDP and its Syrian affiliates, essential in securing humanitarian operations and, again, potentially reassuring Turkey that the AANES is not a PKK statelet.

These political reforms—and the stabilization assistance described below—are needed to promote longer-term security and prevent radicalization. Gen. Kenneth F. McKenzie, commander of U.S. Central Command, described the implications in late 2020: “Unless the international community finds a way to repatriate, reintegrate into home communities, and support locally grown reconciliation programming of these people [IS members and their families], ... we are buying ourselves a strategic problem 10 years down the road when these children grow up radicalized. If we don't address this now, we're never really going to defeat ISIS.”⁴⁴⁶ The AANES, besieged on all sides and trying to govern a multiethnic space, faces a daunting challenge balancing the need for legitimate local representation with the security imperatives of guarding against IS and the regime. The international community owes the AANES support in finding a just way to try, free, or repatriate those held in detention and navigate the tension between the victims and remnants of IS.

But Turkey faces perhaps an even bigger challenge in preventing long-term radicalization in its areas. Parts of the Turkish-backed SNA are completely out of control, credibly accused of murder, looting, rape, seizing homes and property, rampant extortion, and preventing the return of displaced civilians.⁴⁴⁷ Turkey is complicit in these actions,

arming and paying the factions and even busing in IDPs to replace residents forcibly ejected from their homes. Turkey has military dominance and effective local control, and the SNA is financially dependent on Ankara. Turkey therefore has the leverage to rein in these proxies but has chosen not to do so in any meaningful way.

By refusing to do so, Ankara is creating a major long-term security problem, contributing to radicalization, and undermining its own hopes of resettlement. The SNA's abuses are sowing the seeds of future conflict, as is visible in the persistent Kurdish insurgency in Afrin and TARA. Until displaced families—particularly Kurds—can safely return and freely conduct their personal and business affairs, it is hard to envision stability in those Turkish-controlled zones. And, beyond the Kurdish issue, civilians of all backgrounds are regularly harassed by the SNA—there is a serious need for trusted police who can stand up to the armed factions as well as venues for judicial redress, investigations, and compensation for victims.

The Office of the U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights has urged Turkey to launch an independent investigation into violations and abuses committed in parts of Syria under the control of its forces and affiliated armed groups.⁴⁴⁸ Ankara should heed the call, as Turkish Defense Minister Hulusi Akar has claimed it would.⁴⁴⁹ Just as the United States should press the SDF to open up, respond to criticism with positive action, and establish just venues for redress and the distribution of resources, so should Turkey rein in and seek to legitimize the SNA. Ankara could begin an effort to return property to its previous owners and allow for safe return to occupied areas. This will necessarily require rehousing those who settled in properties abandoned by people fleeing Turkish forces and the SNA, but Turkey has already shown its willingness to undertake large-scale construction. Turkish intelligence and military forces should press the SNA and the local councils to improve transparency and due process as well as provide means for redress. If armed groups refuse to heed these calls, Turkey should cut funding and military supplies—in the mercenary environment of the SNA, this would lead many fighters to defect to other groups that maintain Turkish support.

Finally, Turkey badly needs to improve transparency in its zones. The Turkish government cannot reasonably expect Syrians to voluntarily return to an area of tenuous security with a teetering economy, nor can the international community be expected to help stabilize an area where journalists are barely allowed to travel. Turkish authorities should allow wide access for outside journalists and human rights groups—not just government-guided propaganda junkets—to allow for the investigations necessary to account for abuses and reassure people that the zones are safe.

Making these reforms would improve stability in the zones of Turkish control and increase the odds of voluntary resettlement as well as the climate for Turkish business investments in the zone. But these improvements in the human rights environment would also, over time, possibly allow for more Western engagement in and financing of stabilization efforts in these areas.

2. Ensure adequate humanitarian assistance

The second major focus—ensuring the delivery of adequate humanitarian assistance to areas outside regime control—is shaped by the security steps mentioned above. A more durable U.S. presence in the east would allow for longer-term humanitarian planning and more consistent delivery in SDF-controlled areas as well as for a ramp-up in stabilization activities to restore basic services and begin to address the issues likely to feed long-term radicalization and instability.

The fate of the U.N.-mandated cross-border mechanism is another major component of this second line of effort. There is no alternative to cross-border aid from Turkey and Iraq; Damascus will not allow meaningful cross-line aid to rebellious areas, as Assad has repeatedly shown his determination to use humanitarian assistance as a weapon of war. Several former Western officials have outlined the urgency of preparing for the end of the U.N. mechanism by establishing a parallel system immune to Russia's U.N. Security Council veto.⁴⁵⁰ Ideally, this separate system will not be needed, and the U.N. mandate will be extended, but even in this best-case scenario, the preparations themselves strengthen the West's hand.

Idlib and Afrin

In northwest Syria, the United States and European donors should continue to support the U.N. cross-border mechanism, by means of which donors and NGOs are admirably attempting to meet pressing humanitarian needs. But this will be ground zero should the mandate expire, and Western governments should begin discussions with Turkey to formulate a mutually acceptable framework to begin transitioning assistance delivered through the U.N. Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs to a separate mechanism, in case the cross-border mandate ends. Western donors should continue shifting to direct funding of local NGOs, both for the double impact such donations can have—delivering assistance and injecting cash into the local economy—and to build redundancy to the U.N. system.

The best humanitarian protection provided to Idlib comes from Turkey's military deployment, which deters, and may prevent, a regime or Russian campaign of annihilation. The single strongest move the West could make to protect civilians in Idlib would be to bolster that military deterrent, but that is a political impossibility. On the much safer humanitarian ground of preparing for a regime assault, the United States and Europe could help preemptively prepare shelters and the logistical network for emergency relief in northern Aleppo and Afrin, or in Turkey if permitted, as Refugees International has recommended.⁴⁵¹

The Euphrates Shield zone

The ESZ, seized from IS and with limited forced displacement or demographic engineering, is theoretically a more promising prospect for international support. The United States, Germany, the Netherlands, and other European and outside donors already support limited stabilization projects in the ESZ area through the Syria Recovery Trust Fund (SRTF), though on a limited scale—as of February 2021, the total contributions to the SRTF amounted to 283 million euros, or \$336 million.⁴⁵² These projects—aimed at improving food security or repairing water and sanitation infrastructure, for example—offer a proof of concept that stabilization in the ESZ is possible and that the instability and the SNA dominance can be managed. But even here, Turkey limits outside activity and demands alignment with its own onerous framework, effectively cracking down on cross-border international activities and causing hundreds of organizations to cease operations.⁴⁵³ As COAR summarizes, the Turkish aid system is competent but wholly unable to meet demand, yet the Turkish authorities still require programming to be conducted with the relevant ministry. “These requirements are . . . subject to strong Turkish influence . . . [and] littered with several practical restrictions and ethical concerns. Most notably, organizations are obliged to work within sectors and projects determined and approved by the Turkish authorities.”⁴⁵⁴

The European Union might explore pragmatic financial support for Turkish activities in the ESZ, drawing lessons from the EU Facility for Refugees in Turkey (FRIT). The FRIT brought major ethical concerns, as parts were directed by and to Turkish ministries, in addition to efforts through the United Nations and NGOs, though the European Union shifted toward more direct management over time.⁴⁵⁵ But the European Union and most member states crossed this ethical threshold with migration agreement with Turkey, and Brussels' experience with the FRIT also shows the leverage that such pragmatic support can supply and the flexible ways in which aid can navigate political constraints. The European Union should consider a trial program of comparable cash transfers to Syrians in the ESZ in exchange for an easing of

humanitarian hurdles by the Turkish authorities—this might sway Ankara, as the vast majority of those payments would circulate in a Turkish-dominated microeconomy. If such a strictly conditioned trial program managed to secure improvements in access, the European Union could consider leveraging further support for bigger improvements in Turkey’s administrative approach.

American financing for Turkish government entities is more difficult: Washington never had the accession framework, as did Turkey and the European Union, nor the profound integration and legal and financing instruments that process has brought. At present, it is a political nonstarter; independent projects undertaken by Western NGOs and financed by the United States might be possible, but Congress will not finance Turkish efforts. Even NGO efforts are a tall order; the United States is already the largest donor to the United Nations’ Syria Humanitarian Response Plan, and there are finite resources for assistance and stabilization. Any resources provided to Turkish-controlled zones would likely have to be diverted from elsewhere, potentially coming at the expense of activities in eastern Syria, where needs are deep and resources are limited. The United States is also wary that Turkey would co-opt any support offered and not deliver on promised reforms. As discussed below, the advantage of U.S.-European coordination is the ability to collectively work around these respective limitations.

Eastern Syria

The situation is more straightforward in SDF-controlled eastern Syria. The contours of what is needed have been known for some time: ongoing humanitarian assistance; stabilization aid aimed at restoring basic services, improving governance, and training local security forces; political pressure on the SDF to open up leadership to non-Kurds and share natural resource wealth; and pressure on the AANES’ neighbors to open up access and work toward political compromise.

The path to a better outcome has narrowed significantly since Trump’s withdrawal announcement jumbled the front lines and undercut U.S. deterrent credibility. Several projects had to be relocated following Turkey’s invasion and the subsequent movement of Syrian and Russian troops into some parts of the AANES.⁴⁵⁶ This disruption was compounded by Trump’s decision to freeze roughly \$200 million in stabilization assistance to eastern Syria. Some of the slack was taken up by other coalition countries, including Germany, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and the United Kingdom. As of 2019, the United States had raised pledges of \$189 million in stabilization funds from 14 coalition partners.⁴⁵⁷ Still, increased funding would meaningfully help address the problems facing the AANES.

Basic humanitarian support has largely continued, adding to the more than \$12 billion in assistance the U.S. State Department and USAID have provided over the course of the conflict, including food rations, health and hygiene necessities, counseling, and shelter and winterization essentials.⁴⁵⁸ But beyond this basic humanitarian support, spread across Syria and neighboring countries, the State Department had to cut numerous stabilization programs due to funding constraints. The casualties of this funding shortfall include efforts to address key issues outlined in this report, such as improving education and the services provided by local councils as well as training for local security forces.⁴⁵⁹ Some programs for transitional justice, accountability, and reconciliation have continued, though additional funding would allow for the scaling up of these badly needed efforts. USAID has likewise helped establish community isolation centers and provide personal protective equipment and other medical equipment to grapple with COVID-19, but the AANES will need far more in order to meet essential medical needs.⁴⁶⁰ As of March 2020, USAID was funding approximately 240 agricultural projects in the AANES area, but programming was beginning to wind down pending new funding allocations.⁴⁶¹ The recent announcement of \$596 million in new humanitarian assistance to respond to the Syrian crisis—albeit spread across the entire country and the regional response—should allow these programs to get back on a firmer footing.⁴⁶²

With a more durable military and financial commitment, the United States should scale up these activities; the scale of the challenge is manageable, with some 2.5 million to 4 million people in the AANES, and the SDF is a willing and capable partner. The Syria Study Group outlined some ways to improve the situation. The Syria Transition Assistance Response Team – Forward personnel should return to Syria. Political representatives should be included in the military’s engagements with local civic partners.⁴⁶³ This commitment—as well as the broadening of U.S. engagement at the political level—would help convince the SDF that the United States will stay, providing leverage to push the group to open up politically and include Arabs, particularly tribal leaders in Deir ez-Zor, in the administration of the region.

The majority of U.S. stabilization assistance has gone to Arab-populated Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor, areas that were heavily damaged by the campaign to defeat IS. The more heavily Kurdish areas to the north have not received as much assistance. The lion’s share of the funding has gone to badly needed demining efforts and essential services, such as water networks, irrigation canals, and rebuilding schools. A smaller portion went to promotion of economic growth and development—primarily, agricultural projects—and to promotion of local governance and civil society.⁴⁶⁴

The adjustment to longer-term stabilization, including economic revitalization and reintegration efforts for people caught up in the IS maelstrom, should now accelerate. But some funding should likewise be directed to the Kurdish-majority areas, according to needs-based assessments;⁴⁶⁵ Turkish concerns should not be relevant to this determination.

Finally, Europe should provide more funding in the east. Some coalition partners stepped up assistance when Trump froze American funds, but the United States should escalate its effort to cajole greater European investment. Some European aid has been heavily conditioned, but the United States should seek to coordinate with European funders to navigate political sensitivities—potentially routing support through U.S. or other entities as needed. Just as Europe can take on certain activities in the Turkish-controlled zones that the United States cannot, so can the United States do things in the east that Europe can best support indirectly. The United States and Europe can together lean on regional actors such as the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait to continue or expand financing. It is possible that clear U.S. messaging and commitment could help raise others' commitments.

Cross-border aid

Russia may kill the U.N. mandate in July 2021—there is little time to prepare its replacement. Due to the regime's abhorrent politicization of humanitarian assistance, however, a separate cross-border program into the AANES via Iraq has already been created, though it should be bolstered, offering a proof of concept. For northwest Syria, assistance must come via Turkey. Meaningful cross-line assistance from regime-held areas is extremely unlikely; as one humanitarian aid specialist says, "They're starving them out."⁴⁶⁶

Of course, the United States and Europe should try to save the cross-border mandate, mobilizing allies to bring pressure to bear on Russia at the United Nations. But this should not distract from the necessity of contingency preparations. The United States could preemptively convene a donor conference to begin pooling funds for such a parallel cross-border operation, either through the badly eroded Friends of Syria framework or another more flexible grouping. This group could, as Charles Thépaut has argued, redirect funds that would have gone to the U.N. cross-border operation,⁴⁶⁷ while also making new pledges to close existing funding gaps.⁴⁶⁸ They could also reiterate that if the cross-border mechanism ends, they will not reallocate those funds to the regime-controlled efforts.⁴⁶⁹ As numerous experts have argued, more funds could be routed to local organizations in Idlib to build capacity in advance of a more acute crisis.⁴⁷⁰

In the broader context of a conditional engagement strategy, explored below, it would be tempting to push for concessions from Turkey on the SDF in exchange for this support. But this is badly needed humanitarian support and should not become a political token. The conditionality from outside donors financing a parallel cross-border operation should focus on consistent access, fewer restrictions on cross-border operations based in Turkey, and complete needs-based impartiality in allocating aid. Turkey could easily pass emergency legislation aimed at easing the most onerous requirements for local staffing, permitting, and snap auditing—or improve the situation through de facto changes in enforcement.⁴⁷¹ The international community should want to help Turkey, and Turkey should want that help—these are possible terms for that cooperation.

Navigating political snags with Turkey will take concerted attention and coordination from the United States and Europe, but the bigger immediate issue will be one of capacity. The United Nations and the SARC remain the critical players in aid delivery but must operate across regions controlled by all sides in the war. Spinning off operations in the northwest will not be neat or easy, but it has been done in the northeast. The donor community, pooling their resources, can fund an effort to transfer the local staff, expertise, equipment, files, and other necessities from the SARC and U.N. bodies to organizations that can operate independently, and can fund new acquisitions to replace those items or personnel who are unable or unwilling to be transferred to the parallel effort.

There may be secondary benefits to this process, alongside the many drawbacks of this disruption. Humanitarian practitioners could be freed from some U.N. restrictions, potentially providing more flexibility. The use of additional border crossings from Turkey would ease access; the trip to northern Aleppo from the sole U.N.-authorized crossing at Bab al-Hawa takes 8–12 hours each way, compared with one hour each way from Bab al-Salama, for example.⁴⁷² But in all likelihood, humanitarian delivery will still be unnecessarily disrupted. If Russia and the regime kill the U.N. cross-border regime, it will be yet another step in the same twisted logic that leads Moscow and Assad to intentionally target hospitals—subordinating everything to the goal of maintaining Assad’s shattered sovereignty. In an effort to sway Moscow’s decision, Western powers could publicly hint that they are considering ramping up already substantial sanctions on Russia if the U.N. operation is shut down, though there is little reason to believe it would change Moscow’s calculus.

3. Explore conditional engagement options with Turkey

The humanitarian efforts outlined above will require close cooperation with Turkey, which ties into the third focus—exploring conditional engagement with Turkey to improve conditions in their areas of control. The essence of this conditional engagement would be to offer additional humanitarian and, potentially, stabilization support in the areas occupied by Turkey, as well as Idlib, in exchange for a softened approach to the SDF-controlled east; commitments on humanitarian access, neutrality, and impartiality in line with U.N. principles;⁴⁷³ renewed commitment to nonrefoulement; restraint of the SNA proxies; and steps to provide for the return of IDPs, redress for wronged parties, and improved human rights monitoring by NGOs.

There is every chance this effort at conditional engagement would fail; Turkey has jealously guarded its sovereignty and, for many reasons discussed in this report, may not be willing to relinquish total control of its zones, open up access, or rein in its proxies. Engagement could easily fall victim to the broader crisis of U.S.-Turkey and EU-Turkey relations. A grand bargain to resolve the macro-issues among the United States, European Union, and Turkey—particularly one that protects Western interests—is highly unlikely with President Erdoğan in control.⁴⁷⁴ But this broader deadlock should not prevent an effort to explore what is possible on the security and displacement challenge in Syria and Turkey, where interests somewhat align.

Indeed, while Turkey has agitated for a broader deal with the United States mainly to earn concessions and avoid sanctions, it has shown that it is quite happy to compartmentalize relations, as it has in its dealings with Iran and Russia. The better option for the United States and Europe—both for navigating relations with Turkey and for improving the lot of Syrians—is to accept this compartmentalization and explore cooperation under strict parameters on the refugee issue.

A strategy of conditional engagement with Turkey in northern Syria

While the logic of this approach is simple, its implementation would be incredibly complex. Looking at the Syrian conflict, if current commitments are maintained, outright victory is not possible for any side; taking a human security and humanitarian perspective, then, the problem for the West becomes one of harm reduction. Beyond the laser focus on IS, this was somewhat the U.S. approach before Trump complicated and corrupted it with inconsistent messaging—“we’re getting out”⁴⁷⁵ and “we’re keeping the oil”⁴⁷⁶—and the partial withdrawal from the northeast; that is, support for de-escalation on humanitarian grounds. Europe’s complementary role has been to do what it can to help address the world’s largest humanitarian crisis, albeit largely reliant on American security decisions.

For the West, regime-controlled areas are off limits and are serviced by the UN—already funded by the Western powers—which will do what it can under difficult circumstances. The situation in the SDF-controlled east would become clearer—if no less difficult or complex—with a U.S. commitment to remaining on the ground, the unfreezing of basic stabilization assistance, potentially more effort to mobilize non-U.S. funding, and redlines communicated to Turkey, Russia, and the regime.

The biggest outstanding question is therefore what to do in and with the Turkish-controlled areas. Turkey has taken on tremendous responsibilities with its sprawling commitment in northern Syria and hosting Syrians at home. Integrating 3.6 million Syrians would be a herculean undertaking even without a concurrent economic downturn and domestic political pressures that limit the government's options. With the addition of the Syrians under Turkey's protection in Syria, as Asli Aydıntaşbaş points out, Ankara has “direct responsibility for the welfare of almost 8 million Syrians.”⁴⁷⁷ Despite its major efforts—both laudable and destructive—Turkey may be approaching the limits of its overall fiscal, military, and civilian capacity.

Turkey needs help. The European Union has established a modus operandi for helping Turkey with its domestic integration challenge, though the question of how to extend this assistance once current funding runs out looms large. But in the Turkish-controlled zones in northern Syria, it is not presently safe for outsiders—let alone substantial outside commitments—either in security terms, due to the unbridled SNA, or in moral or political terms, due to Turkey's policy toward the Kurds, widely reported incidence of refolement, its prickly sovereigntist approach, demographic engineering, and well-placed fears of Ankara's revanchist goals. Yet despite all of this, it should be in the United States' and Europe's interests to help make sure these Turkish-controlled border areas do not become long-term, entrenched sources of misery and instability. This must be balanced against the need to avoid legitimizing unilateral military occupation and demographic engineering.

Strict conditional engagement offers a way to explore the contours of what is possible in supporting Turkish stabilization efforts in exchange for guarantees on human rights and proxy management; paired with a clear line in support of the SDF in eastern Syria and a major push to erect a parallel cross-border regime, this offers the best chance to help the most people. Perhaps Turkey would not go for it—refusing to make meaningful concessions—but little is lost in the effort, and being caught trying has its own value in the wider context of the relationship with Turkey, demonstrating that the West is not reflexively anti-Turkish and recasting the divisions among the United States, European Union, and Turkey.

Asli Aydintaşbaş has proposed a version of this approach, encouraging the European Union to exchange reconstruction assistance in the ESZ for humanitarian access to SDF areas via Turkey.⁴⁷⁸ The concept is sound, though the balance of the exchange could be improved; the United States and Europe can provide assistance to the SDF-held northeast via Iraq—what is needed is political softening toward the SDF and governance improvements within the Turkish-controlled zones. The European Union could therefore offer a trial cash transfer program in the ESZ, conditioned upon meaningful efforts by Turkey to ease access for international humanitarian and human rights NGOs in its areas, guarantees on rule of law and right to return, and tangible steps such as an end to disruptions of water supplies. If initial engagement along these lines worked, the European Union could consider expanding its efforts, either in scale or in scope, to other Turkish-controlled areas, pushing Turkey to allow the return of displaced Kurds and, potentially, demobilize or redeploy the worst-behaved SNA factions.

There are legitimate concerns about this engagement. Researcher Sinem Adar, for example, argues that Europe should not support Turkey's efforts to resettle refugees in northern Syria, though the argument focuses primarily on TARA, not the ESZ.⁴⁷⁹ Adar says the European Union should condition its support for the FRIT—its 6 billion euro humanitarian and integration effort—on Turkish adherence to the principle of nonrefoulement. Based purely on international legal principles, the argument is persuasive. Certainly, the European Union should not legitimize the seizure of TARA or Afrin. But EU engagement in the ESZ could itself be a means to improve the chances of meaningful adherence to the principle of nonrefoulement. Further, there is no reason for the European Union to oppose voluntary returns, unless they are to the homes of forcibly displaced people, and engagement in northern Syria could improve the lives of those still there, marginally improve the odds of voluntary returns, and secure greater visibility into any forced returns as well as earn some leverage to counteract them. Indeed, Turkey is already sending Syrians back against their will and demographically reengineering Afrin and TARA—the worst case on the principle of refoulement is at hand. EU engagement—if conditional and reversible—need not legitimize or bolster these Turkish moves but might temper them and secure better access to monitor resettlement.

As it is, the United States or Europe are unlikely to go beyond basic humanitarian assistance in Afrin, Idlib, or TARA absent meaningful reforms from Turkey, the SNA, and HTS to allow impartial delivery and the return of displaced civilians. Turkey is likely most interested in longer-term stabilization and reconstruction, but its desire to route all assistance through its institutions is a major limitation, with Western providers understandably reluctant to submit to Turkey's politicized delivery criteria. In essence,

Turkey wants all aid delivered through its government bodies or biddable NGOs such as İHH. In Afrin and Idlib, outside humanitarian support is severely hamstrung by these restrictions; in TARA, it is nearly nonexistent. Turkey makes it very difficult for Western NGOs and even limits U.N. access in some areas. For the United States—and many international humanitarian organizations and relief agencies—there is no flexibility, with legal restrictions preventing them from routing assistance as Turkey demands, even if there were political will.

4. Address external refugee issues

There are several steps the United States and Europe could take outside of northern Syria to ease the refugee and displacement crisis there as well as reduce the odds of refolement.

Most obviously, as the Biden administration has already begun to do, the United States and Europe should take more refugees themselves. The United States has traditionally been the largest, most consistent refugee recipient country in the world, but the Trump administration intentionally decimated the program, and just 11,814 refugees were resettled in fiscal year 2020, before resettlements were halted entirely due to COVID-19.⁴⁸⁰ President Biden announced in February 2021 that he would raise the annual cap on refugee admissions to 125,000 for the fiscal year beginning in October 2021.⁴⁸¹ For the current fiscal year, ending in September, Biden has committed to a goal of 62,500—after a brief and controversial step back from that promise—but has admitted that the United States will likely fall short due to a lack of capacity.⁴⁸² Indeed, even beyond 2021, funding and staff will have to be devoted to refill the pipeline with vetted candidates, who undergo extraordinary scrutiny including background checks and interviews that take time and resources, as well as to the charities that resettle refugees and find them housing, schools, and employers.⁴⁸³

The credibility that this will offer the Biden administration should be used to cajole Europe to do more; Washington should impress upon the European Union and its member states that they cannot focus entirely on externalizing the refugee and migration issue. The European Union should take more refugees, of course, but also should not ignore the root causes; the European Union cannot wash its hands of the Syrian security situation and expect others to protect it from the spillover. Aside from Germany, which hosts some 1.1 million refugees, most of Europe has not stepped up to the plate.⁴⁸⁴ In fact, Europe has focused mainly on border enforcement, even engaging in violent pushbacks of irregular migrants, while failing to meet its resettlement obligations under the EU-Turkey migration deal and doing too little to address the conditions in refugee camps in Greece.⁴⁸⁵

Still, the European Union has done more than most—whatever the motivations—to support Turkey in dealing with the influx of Syrians, primarily through the FRIT. The facility was largely the product of the acute crisis of 2015–2016, rather than reflecting any strategic alignment among member states on supporting Turkey’s effort to integrate and care for refugees.⁴⁸⁶ The first two tranches of funding—some 6 billion euros, or \$7–8 billion—have been almost entirely contracted to projects to integrate and educate Syrians in Turkey. Ankara will need follow-on funding, particularly the billions of direct cash transfers that sustain many Syrians and boost Turkey’s economy. The European Union has been reluctant to commit to another multiyear program, allocating an additional 485 million euros—almost \$600 million—in 2020 to top up the fund through the end of 2021. The European Union is understandably concerned about President Erdoğan’s willingness to negotiate at the border and his separate pressure on the sovereignty of EU member states Greece and Cyprus. Brussels should certainly convey its redlines on these unrelated issues, but Europe should no more use Syrians as bargaining chips than Erdoğan should. The funding—or particular aspects of it—can always be frozen, but the FRIT should be extended for another multiyear funding period as a humanitarian gesture and an interest-based move by the European Union to secure its periphery; if Turkey fails to manage the integration challenge, Europe will suffer as well. This funding provides monthly cash allowances to more than 1.5 million Syrians, primarily in Turkey’s major cities, and pays Syrian families to enroll their children in school. Cutting these efforts would not secure leverage with Erdoğan nor improve Europe’s security or ease its migration pressures.⁴⁸⁷

Finally, the United States and Europe should push Turkey to allow the UNHCR to freely monitor removal centers to ensure that all returns to Syria are voluntary, as stipulated by Turkish law and promised in Ankara’s public commitments.⁴⁸⁸ If this pressure is brought to bear in a manner respectful of Turkey’s sovereignty—perhaps by European interlocutors perceived to be friendlier, such as Spain or the United Kingdom—and in conjunction with a broader push to provide assistance in northern Syria, it may have the desired effect.

Conclusion

There is no putting Syria back together again, nor is there any way to undo the catastrophic damage the war has dealt to millions of lives and to the international system. This has been evident for years. The United States and Europe cannot avoid or reconcile the core illegitimacy and durability of the Assad regime but should focus now on harm reduction. This effort is important because the conflict is not going away—it will continue to cause human suffering, political instability, and radicalization until a measure of de-escalation and stabilization is achieved. Left to fester, perhaps sliding into a new phase of conflict following a U.S. withdrawal, the war will likely seed yet more regional conflict and a new generation of radicals. The United States and Europe cannot stabilize all of Syria, but, working with partners on the ground, they can make a meaningful difference for millions of people at an acceptable cost, improving the strategic picture at the same time. Through active engagement, the West can prevent a new stage in the conflict—political leaders should not focus exclusively on the costs of action and ignore the costs of inaction.

Parts of that harm reduction approach are straightforward, if exceedingly difficult to implement: bolster military deterrence in the east, reinvigorate stabilization assistance, press local partners to govern inclusively, continue humanitarian assistance, and accept more refugees at home. But the path is less clear in the many places where this approach interacts with Turkey and its core interests and assertive policy—as it does in the 4,000 square miles of Syria over which Turkey holds sway, in its efforts to resettle refugees into areas seized by force, in its displacement of and hostility toward Kurds, in its centrality to humanitarian assistance, and in its support for radical armed groups.

To a large extent, the prospects for future refugee outflows and resettlement are linked to the security and safety of the Turkish-controlled zones in northern Syria as well as to the U.S. military presence in eastern Syria. Turkey long sought Western help in creating “safe zones” in northern Syria; it never received the military help it sought, and Western offers were generally limited to integration support within Turkey and humanitarian actions in Syria. Ankara eventually acted unilaterally on the military front. Turkey, having staked out these areas, now faces an uphill struggle to secure and sustain them. Ankara must internationalize the security of these areas or face ongoing instability and potential conflict with the Syrian regime, Iranian proxies, Kurdish insurgents, and Russia.

In the face of these risks, there may now be an opportunity for strict conditional Western engagement on these issues with Turkey—even in the context of poor overall Turkey-U.S. and Turkey-EU relations. Perhaps, by helping Turkey meet this challenge, the Western powers can simultaneously improve the humanitarian situation, demonstrate openness to Turkey to accompany a firm stance on other issues, and secure access and visibility into Turkish actions, potentially reducing the risks of further demographic engineering that could sow the seeds of continued conflict.

The international community is understandably reluctant to legitimize Turkey's new suzerainty and certainly will not protect or police them militarily. But the international community should seek to make them safer by other means, if only for humanitarian purposes and to avoid a new phase of conflict. In turn, increased international involvement in the Turkish-controlled zones—even if limited to humanitarian support—should only be provided if Turkey commits to reforms in the administration of those zones.

But this engagement can only take place if international players feel that it is safe to operate in areas of Turkish control, which points to certain necessary changes in Turkey's relations with its SNA proxies. Similarly, humanitarian organizations will only engage in these areas if they are able to operate without undue interference from Turkish authorities. These are substantial hurdles, even setting aside the political obstacles to securing more substantial Western support or the underlying uncertainty about Syria's long-term political future. On the other hand, if a successful modus operandi can be established in these areas—and improvements from Ankara secured on access, impartiality, voluntariness of resettlement, and treatment of political differences—serious humanitarian improvements are possible, both in the Turkish-created zones and in the AANES. These improvements, in turn, could have positive repercussions for Turkey's long-term security and stability as well as easing its domestic pressures.

Millions of Syrians will never accept life under Assad's rule, including armed groups backed by Turkey and the United States and its allies. Turkey's effective annexation of Afrin, the ESZ, and TARA represents, for better or for worse, the likely end of Syria as a unitary state conforming to its official borders. The fact that Turkey, among other powers, continues to rhetorically support Syria's territorial integrity is irrelevant so long as it continues to hold these areas by force. More interesting is the question of how Turkey's position on its own areas of de facto control—and their separation from Syria—interacts with its position on federalism or autonomy for areas in eastern Syria under U.S. influence.

This is a paradox at the heart of Turkey's Syria policy: Ankara absolutely rejects any form of autonomy in the AANES as a derogation of Syria's territorial integrity; yet, through its military operations, it has itself essentially ended Syrian sovereignty and carved out semi-autonomous zones. And Turkey lambasts Washington's cooperating with the YPG/SDF—which it considers a terrorist organization—to advance counterterrorism, humanitarian, and stabilization objectives; yet Ankara coordinates closely with HTS—an organization Turkey itself as well as the United States and the United Nations label a terrorist group—in Idlib to advance humanitarian objectives. While the United States understands the complexity of the situation in Idlib and adapts to its humanitarian implications, Turkey is unbending on the SDF, undermining U.S. stabilization efforts at every opportunity. Especially in light of Ankara's understanding view of shifting affiliations among non-Kurdish armed groups in Syria, its focus on the YPG's lingering PKK connections, rather than the efforts to shift the YPG/SDF away from Qandil, is a policy decision of questionable merit and little consistency.

The United States should maintain its troop presence in northeast Syria. Even narrowly defined counterterrorism goals in Syria are ill-served by withdrawal and disinvestment. The lasting defeat of IS, de-escalation of the wider Syrian conflict without renewed large-scale fighting, and improved humanitarian access, stabilization, and AANES governance reforms to improve local legitimacy are all best served by continuing U.S. and coalition presence and the clear deterrent messages that presence conveys. And in the Turkish-controlled zones, the United States and Europe must adapt to the reality of a *fait accompli*. That does not mean the abuses and forced displacement of Turkey's seizure of Afrin and TARA should be excused—to the contrary, Western governments should press for full investigations into and redress of human rights abuses as well as return of the displaced. But additional support in the ESZ and Idlib, strictly conditioned on the improvements in Turkish administration outlined in this report, could incentivize improvements. If Ankara cooperates, this conditional engagement could make a difference in Syrians' lives and provide a modicum of leverage in securing access and visibility.

In keeping with the Biden administration's desire to rejuvenate ties with democratic allies, Syria offers a pressing challenge on which trans-Atlantic coordination is essential and mutually beneficial. Europe largely shares the United States' interests. With the primary exceptions of the United Kingdom and France, European countries effectively left the defeat of IS in Syria to the United States, despite the more immediate threat the group posed to Europe. The refugee question is dramatically more important to Europe—and undoubtedly, the European Union, its member states, and the United Kingdom have made major humanitarian contributions. But if the Biden administration offers strategic clarity by recommitting to deterrence and stabilization in Syria,

European allies should reciprocate by increasing their engagement. There is little excuse for Europe's limited contributions to the stabilization of eastern Syria in cooperation with the United States. And in the areas of Turkish control, Europe can do more than the United States, given differing restrictions, capabilities, and modes of engagement with Turkey. Indeed, European policymakers have already made their core judgment, visible in their support to refugees in Turkey and the migration deal with Ankara; both of these efforts unquestionably help people but equally clearly adhere to Turkish political parameters. It is a simple logical step, therefore, to increase support to ensure that Turkish occupied areas of northern Syria do not become long-term sources of human misery, displacement, and instability.

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Acknowledgments

This report, examining the refugee and displacement crisis in northern Syria and Turkey, is a project of the CATS Network. The Centre for Applied Turkey Studies (CATS) is funded by Stiftung Mercator and the German Federal Foreign Office. The authors are grateful to CATS for their support of this project as well as to the Istanbul Policy Center for many years of collaboration on this and other research projects. In particular, the authors thank Michael Werz, Fuat Keyman, Senem Aydın-Düzgit, Asha Padmanabhan, Sinem Adar, Hürcan Aslı Aksoy, Bettina Emir, and Günter Seufert for their support on this project. This report would not have been possible without the expertise and engagement of the nearly 60 current and former officials, academics, experts, and activists interviewed in its preparation. The authors are particularly grateful to Asli Aydıntaşbaş, Robert Ford, Brian Katulis, Daphne McCurdy, Katrina Mulligan, Mona Yacoubian, and others for their feedback on earlier drafts—the authors benefited greatly from their input but, of course, take full responsibility for the final product. Finally, the authors thank Carl Chancellor, Shanée Simhoni, and Bill Rapp for their hard work through the art and editorial process.

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