



 REPORT WORLD

Turkey's “Turkey First” Syria Policy

APRIL 12, 2017 — SAM HELLER

After six years of conflict, Syria's war had reached a turning point—and it had turned decisively against Turkey.

The strategic victory of the Syrian regime and the realignment of key international powers had made it possible to envision a sort of post-conflict order, at least in part of the country. That order—as it seemed to be taking shape—was unacceptable to Turkey, and it had no place for Turkey's Syrian allies and proxies. But after the regime's alleged chemical weapons attack on April 4,¹ the question now is how Turkey might react, and whether international outrage has given Turkey a new opening to secure its interests.

Over the past year and a half, the regime of Bashar al-Assad and its allies Russia and Iran have relentlessly battered Syria's rebels, defeating them on the battlefield and outmaneuvering them politically. Turkey has been a critical patron of the opposition, and its primary channel to the outside world. Now, for many Syrian rebels, Turkey is the key to their survival. The opposition, especially in Syria's north, has never been more dependent on the Turks. Rebels need Turkey's help to continue battling Assad and, within their own ranks, to resist jihadists' attempts to take over.

Yet Turkey has never been less invested in the opposition's fight against the regime of Bashar al-Assad. Turkey has been preoccupied with its own, specifically Turkish security priorities, and it has enlisted its Syrian rebel proxies in service of an agenda related only tangentially to the Syrian revolution. Syria's rebels have dim prospects; what possible future they have is mostly as a Turkish project, oriented toward largely Turkish ends.

Turkey's main, overriding priority in Syria has become its fight against the Kurdish Democratic People's Party (PYD) and its parallel armed force, the People's Protection Units (YPG). The two groups are the Syrian manifestations of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), a leftist movement that has waged a decades-long guerrilla insurgency against the Turkish state. Both the PYD and the YPG are webbed to the PKK by ideological ties and embedded, veteran PKK cadres. With the backing of the United States-led international coalition against the Islamic State, the YPG has taken hold of most of northeastern Syria and declared a "democratic federation" along an extended section of Turkey's southern border.



MAP SHOWING AREAS OF CONTROL IN NORTHERN SYRIA AS OF MARCH 5, 2017. SOURCE@DESYRACUSE; LABELS ADDED BY AUTHOR.

Turkey has adopted a narrow strategic focus on its own national security and regards the PKK as an imminent threat. The PKK has recently waged a campaign of insurgent attacks and bombings against Turkish state institutions. Officials claim that the attacks have been staged using men, material, and expertise from the eastern Syria stronghold of PYD and YPG. And Turkey considers the PKK, PYD, and YPG to be inextricably linked.

The Syrian opposition’s fight against the regime of Bashar al-Assad—mostly being fought in western Syria, and for which the opposition depends on Turkish support—has been a secondary or tertiary concern for the Turkish government.

The Turks “need to prioritize, and they can’t fight everyone at the same time,” said a Turkey-based Western diplomat who requested anonymity to speak freely. “But they’ve decided to prioritize the PKK.”²

Official Turkish thinking can be somewhat inscrutable, even to Turkey’s allies and proxies. The Turkish state has also been uniquely closed-off and dislocated since a failed coup attempt in July of last year, which set in motion a sort of rolling domestic political crisis. The attempt provoked a wide-ranging, ongoing crackdown against the followers of United States-based Muslim cleric Fethullah Gülen, who, Turkey alleges, helped engineer the coup attempt. Turkish officialdom is now also preoccupied with an upcoming referendum (scheduled for April 16) that would further empower President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and remake Turkish politics.

Yet interviews in Turkey with more than two dozen Turkish officials, Turkish experts and analysts, Turkey-based foreign diplomats, Syrian rebels, and others highlight the extent to which Turkey has made a hard strategic turn on Syria. In Syria today, Turkey’s first and main concern is Turkey.

The Syrian opposition's future is likely to be defined by how it fits into Turkey's agenda and by Turkey's strategic success or failure. But, unfortunately for the opposition, Turkey has lately seemed incapable of achieving even its own narrow security aims. Before the Assad regime's April 4 chemical weapons attack, Turkey had exhausted most of its useful policy options and burned many of its key relationships. But now, that attack may have disrupted the international political forces that had aligned against Turkey—and Turkey may have a window to pursue its own ends.

Turkey's Counterterrorism Pivot

Turkey's priority in Syria had been regime change, said a Turkish official familiar with the making of Turkey's Syria policy and who spoke with me in March on condition of anonymity. Now, he told me, Turkey's chief concern had become counterterrorism, although he said political considerations had prevented Turkey from saying that frankly and publicly.

Counterterrorism, he made clear, encompasses the fight against both the self-proclaimed Islamic State and the PYD-YPG.³ Yet only the latter still holds ground along Turkey's border and, of the two foes, the PYD-YPG is clearly Turkey's prime concern.

Last August, Turkey launched Operation Euphrates Shield, in which Turkish forces and Turkish-backed rebels seized a section of eastern Aleppo province from the Islamic State.⁴ Euphrates Shield succeeded both in driving the Islamic State back from its last stretch of the Turkish border and in preventing the PYD-YPG from connecting its main territory in northeastern Syria with Afrin, an enclave in northwestern Aleppo province. Turkey has since been lobbying for a role in the upcoming American-led offensive on the Islamic State's de facto Syrian capital, in Raqqa. Serendipitously, in order to participate Turkey would likely have to march through and disrupt the PYD-YPG's contiguous zone of control.

"We are bordering with the YPG—in Afrin, Tal Abyad, in other parts of northern Syria. And it's a direct threat for Turkey, a direct security threat," said Ufuk Ulutaş, Director for Foreign Policy Research at SETA, an Ankara-based think tank viewed as close to the Turkish government.



AHRAR AL-SHAM FIGHTERS MOVE ON AL-BAB AS PART OF EUHRATES SHIELD. SOURCE@AHRARAL_SHAM.

“Now that we have expanded the Euphrates Shield operation up until al-Bab and we kicked ISIS [the Islamic State] away from our borders, ISIS is not that big of a threat for Turkey,” Ulutaş told me in SETA’s offices. “The closest ISIS territory we have is around fifty kilometers away from our borders. I don’t think Raqqa is our priority. I think our priority is Tal Abyad, Afrin, Kobani, Hasakeh,” all border areas now under Kurdish control.⁵

Turkey has been attempting to salvage a Syria policy that, since 2011, has proved disastrous.

Turkey has been attempting to salvage a Syria policy that, since 2011, has proved disastrous. The country has played a pivotal role in the Syrian war, just as the war has, in turn, had a critical, disruptive impact on Turkey. As the rear base for the Syrian opposition and the portal to Syria’s north, Turkey has played an indispensable part in managing and shaping the Syrian insurgency. And it has felt the war’s effects more immediately than any of its allies in the Friends of Syria Group, a diplomatic collective that also includes Western democracies and Gulf states: nearly three million Syrian refugees reside in Turkey,⁶ and both the Islamic State and the PKK, emboldened by their respective successes in Syria, have staged dozens of bloody attacks across the country. The Islamic State’s acts of terrorism, including on popular tourist sites, have been the most spectacular. But attacks by the PKK and linked groups and clashes between the PKK and Turkish forces have also—by one count—killed almost nine hundred Turkish security personnel and left more than 2,600 people dead nationwide since July 2015.⁷

Now, six years of involvement and investment in the Syrian war has rewarded Turkey with a massive PKK safe haven just across the Turkish frontier. What’s more, the YPG—as the leading component of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)

—has made itself the preferred partner of the United States and its international coalition in the fight against the Islamic State. The YPG's backing by the United States-led coalition has earned it political cover from a hostile Turkey.

The grave security implications for Turkey of allowing an internationally sponsored “PKK-istan” along much of Turkey's southern border⁸ have only compounded the simultaneous stresses of the separate attack campaigns by the Islamic State and PKK inside Turkey, Turkey's deteriorating economy, and the country's implusive political identity crisis.

Turkey's pivot toward counterterrorism in Syria began in summer 2015, the official and Turkish experts told me.⁹ In June 2015, the YPG captured the border town of Tal Abyad, starting to link its disconnected enclaves into a single, uninterrupted zone of control just across Turkey's southern border. And in July of that year, the Islamic State bombed a rally in the majority-Kurdish, southeastern Turkish city of Suruc; leftist youth organizations had held the event to announce their planned support for the Syrian Kurdish city of Kobani. The bombing sparked a sudden escalation of violence, primarily between the Turkish state and the PKK, which seized on popular anger among Turkish Kurds: many still resented Turkey's inaction as the Islamic State closed in on Kobani in 2014 and felt their government had turned a blind eye to the Islamic State's activities in Turkey, including its attacks on Kurds. The PKK executed a series of bombings and attacks inside Turkey, while the Turkish government renewed military operations against the PKK. Islamic State attacks escalated in parallel, culminating in an August 2016 bombing in the southern city of Gaziantep that prompted the Turkish government to intensify its crackdown on Islamic State elements inside Turkey and to intervene directly against the Islamic State in Syria.

The July 2016 coup attempt seems to have further clarified Turkey's diplomatic and security priorities. The United States, Turkey's NATO ally, had already aggravated Turkey by collaborating with the YPG. Then, after the coup attempt, America refused to treat Gülen's extradition as a political issue (instead of a legal one, for which Turkey has yet to follow normal procedure). Turkey adopted a new political line that was increasingly independent of the United States and also moved swiftly to repair relations with Russia, which had earlier collapsed after Turkey shot down a Russian jet over Syria in November 2015. The threat of retaliatory Russian bombing had meant Turkey could only fight the Islamic State in Aleppo using its Syrian proxies and cross-border artillery fire. Turkey and Russia's sudden reconciliation allowed Turkey to secure Russia's go-ahead to safely stage Operation Euphrates Shield, a direct ground incursion into Syria. The price was, it seems, Turkish passivity as Russia helped the Assad regime overrun Aleppo's rebel-held eastern neighborhoods.¹⁰

In December 2016, Russia and Turkey announced that they had brokered a nationwide ceasefire and arranged negotiations between the Assad regime and the Syrian opposition, to be held in the Kazakh capital of Astana beginning in January 2017. The Astana talks—co-sponsored by Russia, Turkey, and (to a lesser extent) Iran—were meant to bring

together Syria's warring parties for their first direct negotiations. Yet both Astana and Turkish-Russian collaboration more broadly subsequently proved to be less substantive than they initially appeared. The Astana talks failed to produce any real political breakthrough or new bilateral deal-making in the mold of Euphrates Shield, and the ceasefire mostly collapsed.

On April 4, 2017, the Syrian government bombed the south Idlib town of Khan Sheikhoun from the air and poison gas spread through the town, killing at least seventy and affecting hundreds more.¹¹ The United States took swift retaliatory action, launching a cruise missile strike on the air base from which the regime had launched the gas attack.¹² The strike itself was seemingly meant to send a narrowly defined deterrent message.¹³

Text of a letter from @POTUS @realDonaldTrump to the Speaker of the House of Representatives and the President Pro Tempore of the Senate ↗ pic.twitter.com/Tl0Sm93EHn

— Dan Scavino Jr. (@Scavino45) April 8, 2017

Yet American officials have also sent mixed signals—before and after the strikes—about broader U.S. strategy in Syria. Less than a week before the chemical weapons attack, top U.S. officials had said that removing Assad was no longer a U.S. priority in Syria.¹⁴ Suddenly, some of the same officials seemed to reidentify regime change in Syria as a U.S. objective,¹⁵ albeit one that would apparently come after the defeat of the Islamic State and which America will not itself bring about.¹⁶ Those officials have also repeatedly raised the prospect of Russian complicity or negligence in the chemical weapons attack, endangering what had been a budding U.S.-Russian rapprochement.¹⁷

The Turkish government was quick to bandwagon on U.S. action, both encouraging it beforehand and praising it after.¹⁸ In the leadup to the American strike, the Turkish Health Ministry announced that autopsies of three victims of the chemical weapons attack by Turkish doctors indicated the victims were killed by the nerve gas sarin.¹⁹ Turkish officials also seemingly broke somewhat with Russia, although, on a subsequent call, both Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu and Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov reportedly voiced support for an investigation into the April 4 chemical attack and their continued commitment to joint Turkish-Russian efforts towards a peace settlement.²⁰ Now Turkish officials have begun urging the United States to do more in Syria, including establishing safe or no-fly zones and applying new pressure for political negotiations to end the war.²¹ “Are they enough?” Erdoğan asked a referendum rally about America's limited strikes on April 6. “I do not think so.”²²

Yet none of this seems likely to meaningfully change or reorder Turkey’s strategic priorities in Syria—only to present it with new tactical opportunities.

Euphrates Shield and the Path to Raqqa

The Syrian opposition in the north is now divided between two geographically disconnected enclaves: the part of the northeastern Aleppo countryside known as Euphrates Shield (after the eponymous operation); and the jihadist- and Islamist-dominated rebel northwest, centered on Idlib province. Each depends on Turkey for cross-border access to both military and humanitarian supplies.



TURKISH RED CRESCENT (KIZILAY) TENTS IN IDP CAMP INSIDE EUPHRATES SHIELD ALEPPO. SOURCE@JRAPLOS.

Turks are now on the ground inside the Euphrates Shield section of Aleppo, supervising military operations and nascent governance arrangements. Turkey has extended electricity and other utilities from Turkish territory into these areas and pushed rebels out of the border towns of A’zaz and Jarablous, replacing them with Turkish-trained Syrian “Free Police.”²³ Turkey, relying primarily on Turkish and Syrian organizations, has managed an expansive relief and stabilization program that it has tried to make a model of Turkish state-building and a magnet for Syrian refugee return.²⁴

There are as many as fifty rebel factions now inside Euphrates Shield, Syrians told me, but they fight alongside Turkish special and conventional forces and most operate under active Turkish direction. There are indications the Turks may be moving to reorganize them into a more unified, coherent force.²⁵

All this has been possible because of Turkey's agreement with Russia. The internationally brokered, effective no-fly zone over Euphrates Shield has made it a safe harbor for civilians and somewhere the non-jihadist rebel opposition has been able to recoup and rally.

“In the northern countryside, there's no bombing,” said al-Sheikh Jumu'ah, a commander in the Levant Front, a major Aleppo faction. “The area has become a sort of Turkish protectorate, politically.” Jumu'ah spoke to me in Gaziantep, where he'd been since he was evacuated from the city of Aleppo. He said he planned to enter Euphrates Shield, where his brigade is already active.²⁶

But that welcome respite from aerial bombing has come with a price. Euphrates Shield rebels are constrained by Turkey's own (very limited) political and diplomatic arrangements. As Turkish forces and Turkey-backed rebels were fighting to capture the city of al-Bab—now the outer bound of Operation Euphrates Shield's territorial advance—the Syrian regime's forces were doing an end-run south of them and connecting with SDF territory. Euphrates Shield is now surrounded on three sides by the regime and SDF. To its east, American and Russian troops are deployed on the ground alongside the SDF to deter an attack by Euphrates Shield rebels and Turkish forces on the SDF, or vice versa; to its south and west, Russians are interspersed through both regime and SDF territory in a similar buffer role. Unless Turkey can strike another deal, which currently seems unlikely, Euphrates Shield rebels are stuck.

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As Jumu'ah said to me, “Before—when these countries weren't intervening in things like this—any town where the regime was, or the Kurds, or anything that was against our goals and our revolution and was fighting us, we didn't have to ask any country if we'd liberate it or not. No, we'd just go right in and fight.”

Operation Euphrates Shield, it now seems clear, was primarily meant by Turkey as a blocking move against the PYD-YPG (fighting as part of the SDF) and a means to secure additional Turkish leverage. But it was sold to many in the Syrian opposition—including Free Syrian Army rebels who had been beaten and intimidated by Idlib's jihadists—as the future of the Syrian revolution. It was a second chance at relevance, a base from which they'd push south and east into Islamic State territory. The revolutionary opposition's *raison d'être* remains the fight against the regime, but both the PYD-YPG and the Islamic State are also considered enemies of the revolution. The PYD-YPG (or linked security bodies) and the Islamic State have purged the revolutionary Syrian opposition in their areas of control and fought Free Syrian Army and Islamist rebels. The PYD-YPG in particular is seen by most of the opposition as a separatist, occupying force

and as an ally of the Assad regime, and opposition members resent the international backing the YPG has received against the Islamic State. (Arab-Kurdish ethnic tension and old resentments also seem to figure in, although few are willing to acknowledge it.)

Euphrates Shield is seeded with factions made of rebels from the parts of eastern Syria held by the SDF and Islamic State, rebels told me. These Euphrates Shield rebels have been trained and prepped by Turkey to fight their way home.²⁷

The battle for Raqqa was supposed to be the next step for Euphrates Shield. Turkey wanted to take Raqqa using Turkish-backed rebels and Turkish forces, in what Turkish officials stressed to me was a serious alternative to an SDF assault backed by the United States-led Coalition.²⁸ Turkish officials and experts also emphasized that the PYD is an unpopular, alien force and can't sustainably govern an Arab city like Raqqa.²⁹

Western diplomats told me that, contrary to Turkish assurances, the United States and others regarded the Turkish alternative as basically unserious. Some in the American military took to calling Turkey's theoretical Raqqa force the "Unicorn Force."³⁰

One diplomat pointed to recent visits by high-ups, including CIA Director Mike Pompeo, U.S. Central Command's General Joseph Votel, and Senator John McCain, none of whom were apparently convinced by Turkey's proposal. "If there was heavy thinking taking place [in the Turkish government], you might think they'd have a very solid, convincing Plan B so they could tell these visiting dignitaries, 'This, concretely, is how we propose doing it differently,'" the diplomat said. "The fact that they weren't able to do that says a lot."³¹

Instead, the United States and Russia seem to have reached a tacit agreement to ringfence Euphrates Shield and exclude Turkey from Raqqa. The Turkish government continues to try to sell its Raqqa plan, but it also appears to realize it has failed.³² Without Raqqa, though, Euphrates Shield is a dead end. It's a triangular fraction of a single Syrian province that, Turkish officials readily conceded to me, has no inherent strategic importance.

On March 29, Turkey's National Security Council and Prime Minister Binali Yıldırım formally declared Operation Euphrates Shield successful and complete,³³ but there seems to be no Turkish withdrawal forthcoming. The Euphrates Shield area looks set to remain a semipermanent zone of Turkish influence inside Syrian territory. In an April 4 interview, President Erdoğan promised further stages for Euphrates Shield but focused on possible action in northern Iraq, including a PKK zone of influence in the Sinjar region.³⁴

Still, Euphrates Shield seems likely to merit continued Turkish attention, both as Turkey's main foothold inside Syria and because of how it relates, geographically and politically, to Turkey's struggle against the PYD. And U.S.-Russian

tension over America's April 6 missile strikes may yet disrupt the international convergence that had contained Euphrates Shield.

Whatever the designs of various regional and international powers—Turkey included—it may not be possible to keep a lid on an Aleppan countryside jammed with foreign occupiers and restless local proxy forces.

Rebel official Mustafa Seijari told me Euphrates Shield rebels from PYD-held cities like Manbij were now looking, frustrated and angry, across the front lines at what they saw as the SDF's occupation of their home areas. Seijari represents Liwa al-Mu'tasem, a faction trained and equipped by the U.S. Department of Defense and now operating as part of Operation Euphrates Shield.

Turkey has told the Euphrates Shield rebels, for now, to stand down. But, speaking to me in the border town of Kilis, Seijari described a situation in and around Euphrates Shield-held eastern Aleppo province that sounded fundamentally unstable.

"Today, some of these men can see these Russian fighters with their own eyes, or these American soldiers," Seijari told me. "Imagine if you have a fighter who gets over-excited and goes and kills a few American soldiers. Or, from the other side, fighters come and kill Turkish soldiers. Or Russian soldiers are killed. Suddenly, Syria's the battlefield for World War III."³⁵

Idlib on the Strategic Margins

Idlib and the broader northwest has been much less central to Turkish thinking.

Turkey's influence is more limited over Syria's northwest. The area is now mostly dominated by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, a jihadist bloc led by Syria's former al-Qaeda affiliate and over which Turkey has little real control.³⁶ Islamist movement and opposition faction Ahrar al-Sham is the only vaguely plausible counterweight to Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, and is traditionally a close Turkey ally. But Ahrar is also less malleable than the north's other rebels—it refused to attend the Astana talks, which strained its relations with Turkey—and it recently announced it would absorb the area's smaller, more controllable factions to shield them from attack by Tahrir al-Sham. Ahrar al-Sham has intervened to halt specific instances of Tahrir al-Sham aggression, but, Ahrar officials told me, it refuses to enter an open, unlimited confrontation with Tahrir al-Sham that would divert it from its battle against the regime.³⁷

Turkey can't pull the strings of Idlib's rebels the way it can inside Euphrates Shield. It isn't present inside the country, and, rebels have told me, it doesn't itself provide material support to rebels. But it liaises with them, plays a key logistical role, and controls access to the border and Turkish territory for rebels and the northwest as a whole.

Idlib's main importance is as a vector of the armed struggle against Assad, the last section of opposition territory from which rebels are able to challenge the regime militarily. And lately, the struggle against Assad has simply not been a priority for Turkey. Turkey's unstated policy, the Turkish official told me, has been to push for the de-escalation of Syria's central regime-opposition conflict.³⁸ It was within this frame that Turkey pushed the Astana talks and encouraged the opposition, both directly and through Turkish think tanks, to engage Russia in dialogue. Turkey remains invested in its local allies in the northwest and it wants to protect their interests, the official said, and there's little indication it will take substantive steps toward reopening relations with Assad. But regime change in Syria is no longer a major Turkish goal.³⁹

Seriously combating Tahrir al-Sham inside northwestern Syria also seems not to be a key Turkish priority. The United States and others have grown progressively more alarmed over what the United States calls "the al-Qaeda network in Syria," a web of local and transnational jihadists who have, America alleges, built up a dangerous external operations capability.⁴⁰ The network centers on what had been the Nusra Front, Syria's former al-Qaeda affiliate, which now makes up most of Tahrir al-Sham. Tahrir al-Sham has also been, seemingly inexorably, consuming Western and Turkish proxies within the northern armed opposition.

بيان توضيحي من مبعوث الولايات المتحدة الخاص لسوريا مايكل راتني
حول موقف الولايات المتحدة من هيئة تحرير الشام وتنظيم القاعدة في
#سوريا: pic.twitter.com/6x355ks6Zp

— U.S. Embassy Syria (@USEmbassySyria) March 11, 2017

There seems to be no way to really halt or reverse Tahrir al-Sham's takeover of the northern opposition without dramatic action by the Turks, potentially on the scale of Operation Euphrates Shield. But while Turkey has taken steps to discourage factions from joining Tahrir al-Sham and stalling its initial surge of growth, it doesn't seem interested in going beyond that.

"When it comes to Nusra, I don't think it should be our priority," said Ulutaş, of the think tank SETA. "Let the Russians deal with it, if they really want to do that. Or the Americans, let them deal with that. That doesn't mean Turkey won't

help, but I don't think Turkey will help them militarily, like today—in a coalition, with airstrikes, et cetera.”⁴¹

The Turkish official compared Tahrir al-Sham to the Tamil Tigers—a terrorist organization, sure, but not one that Turkey necessarily feels impelled to go to war against, particularly at a time when it's already fighting both the Islamic State and various iterations of the PKK.⁴² Unlike the Islamic State, Tahrir al-Sham—and before it, the Nusra Front and Fateh al-Sham Front—has fairly scrupulously avoided carrying out attacks inside Turkey that might provoke a Turkish reaction and endanger its logistical networks in Turkey. If Tahrir al-Sham started launching attacks inside Turkey, the official said, then Turkey's calculus would change.⁴³

The official said Turkey has been breaking up Tahrir al-Sham cells inside Turkish territory. But he suggested more concerted action against Tahrir al-Sham inside Syria's northwest could be part of a trade, for example, for Turkish participation in the fight for Raqqa—that is, as something to be bartered rather than a Turkish priority for its own sake.

Turkey's main interest in the northwest seems to be maintaining some stability and avoiding a sudden, unchecked flow of refugees toward its border. Idlib and surrounding rebel-held areas now house more than two million people,⁴⁴ including thousands who have been bussed out of Homs and Damascus under “reconciliation” deals and dumped, desperate and impoverished, in the rural north. Turkey already hosts three million refugees and provides them with relatively generous benefits, helping them live in far better, more normal conditions than in Lebanon or Jordan. It's reluctant to take in more.

Yet the northwest may also be a handy tool of leverage for Turkey, including as a convenient means to express its displeasure toward Russia and others at being put in a little Euphrates Shield box and excluded from the Raqqa offensive. On March 21, Tahrir al-Sham and a group of Free Syrian Army and jihadist factions launched a new offensive against the Syrian regime in northern Hama province. Days later, on March 24, the northwestern factions most closely aligned with Turkey, including Ahrar al-Sham, launched a second, parallel offensive along another Hama axis to the west. Although there were a number of hands in these Hama offensives—the CIA, for example, backs some of the Free Syrian Army brigades involved in the first, Tahrir al-Sham-led operation—the second offensive, at a minimum, likely enjoyed Turkish encouragement.⁴⁵

The Khan Sheikhoun chemical weapons attack and the still-unspooling American response could help make the Syrian northwest newly relevant for Turkey. In the wake of the U.S. missile strike, Turkish officials have called for safe or no-fly zones. Turkey has already secured an effective safe zone over the Euphrates Shield section of Aleppo province, so these officials are presumably looking for a safe zone for Idlib and its surroundings, which could prevent additional refugee flows into Turkey. If rebel military pressure on Assad again became an international priority, it would likely have to come through Idlib. In the extreme, Turkey could opportunistically support a possible U.S.-led effort to dislodge the Assad

regime, which Turkey still views as the root cause of Syria's instability. At a minimum, Turkey could try to leverage its support for any new international initiative in the northwest to secure gains elsewhere, including concessions from the United States related to its support for the YPG and SDF in the battle for Raqqa.

Turkey's outlook is transactional, and, so far, Turkey has secured key security priorities like Euphrates Shield as part of political trades. Now the Idlib-centered northwest is one of Turkey's last potentially useful bargaining chips.

The Syrian Opposition, Along for the Ride

The fate of the Syrian opposition now hangs largely on Turkey's influence and political fortunes. Yet Turkey mostly seems interested in using its leverage for its own national security ends, and even then—even when it has had perfectly real, legitimate concerns—it hasn't seemed able to make its case effectively. That Turkey may have tried to negotiate using a half-jihadist Hama offensive is only more evidence of how Turkey's more precise, subtle tools of diplomacy and persuasion have been blunted. Turkey has done grievous, possibly irreparable damage to many of its international relationships, either over substantive disagreements related to support for the YPG or, ahead of its upcoming referendum, for the sake of domestic political posturing.⁴⁶

For Syrians now in Turkey—either pro-opposition, or just unwilling to live under the regime—many may just end up becoming Turks. When I was in Turkey this March, Syrians and internationals were abuzz with reports that Turkey has been contacting a limited number of Syrian refugees about securing Turkish nationality. Yet many Syrians with whom I spoke still hadn't reconciled themselves to permanent exile, and they were largely ambivalent about joining a Turkish society that is itself unsettled and, in important respects, alien to them.

Inside Syria, Idlib seems to have little future other than as a jihadist fiefdom, a holding pen for the displaced, and a semi-controlled proxy battlefield. The non-jihadist opposition can regroup under Turkey's protection inside Euphrates Shield, meanwhile, but to what end is unclear. The Euphrates Shield area currently has few real prospects for expansion. It looks as if it is destined for de facto Turkish annexation, something that did not excite opposition Syrians with whom I spoke, even if they preferred it to the return of the Assad regime.⁴⁷

The Syrian opposition may still be able to ride the back of a Turkish intervention further east into Kurdish territory, something Turkey seems intent on doing if it can get various internationals out of its way. Turkish officials told me that Turkey's border with Syria's PYD-held northeast is long and flat—and that, when the Americans left, the PYD would have nowhere to hide.⁴⁸

Yet Turkey has lately been sidelined by the United States and Russia and left seething. Turkey seems convinced that it faces a deadly serious security threat, that its erstwhile allies have recklessly exacerbated it, and that it must act to secure its own interests.

And Turkey is right. For Turkey's allies, including the United States, Turkey has been a problematic, frequently unhelpful ally. From their perspective, Turkey has consistently been insufficiently concerned with a specific (Islamist) kind of terrorist. But Turkey's allies have themselves focused solely on the lone variety of terrorist organization that directly threatens them. In the process, they've not only charged up the PKK—notwithstanding the fact that the United States has actually designated it a terrorist organization—but actually given it political cover and legitimacy in a way that could seriously endanger Turkey's territorial integrity, and even the existence of Turkey as we know it. The respective threat perceptions of Turkey and its allies are fundamentally disconnected, and there may be no way to square their priorities.

The Turkish government bears much of the responsibility for Turkey's recent predicament, whether by aggravating its Kurdish issue domestically for political ends, making a series of shortsighted, counterproductive bets on anti-PYD-YPG forces inside Syria, or generally behaving erratically at home and abroad. But Turkey does face a grave danger, and it is thanks in part to allies who have somewhat nonchalantly undermined Turkish security. And now, no one else is going to handle Turkey's problems but Turkey.

What exactly Turkey will do is unclear. The Turkish government has seemed furious, both in a sort of free-floating way over its general ill-treatment and marginalization, and at the United States and others for a list of more specific grievances. It had apparently identified a YPG-led assault on Raqqa, specifically, as a red line. But even if Turkey had wanted to retaliate, it didn't have a lot of useful options. The expulsion of American forces from Turkey's Incirlik Air Base had been floated as a possibility. And both Turkish officials and Syrian rebels suggested to me that Turkey had been considering attacking the PYD-YPG in Syria's northeast, including in the border town of Tal Abyad. It was an open question as to whether Turkey would have risked it without a go-ahead from the United States or Russia, which didn't seem forthcoming.

Now the Khan Sheikhoun chemical attack and America's missile strike may have shuffled a deck that had been thoroughly stacked against Turkey. Before April 4, there seemed to be some rough international agreement on how to handle Raqqa and, potentially, define a post-Islamic State, post-conflict political order in Syria's east. This arrangement would presumably have been on terms inclusive of the PYD-YPG that were patently unacceptable to Turkey. After Khan Sheikhoun, U.S.-Russian relations are suddenly substantially more fraught. Shaping operations for the Raqqa attack are still underway, but a further deterioration in U.S.-Russian relations could—conveniently for Turkey—complicate the

U.S.-led coalition's ability to safely support the Raqqa offensive and potentially delay the battle. Turkey is evidently trying to draw closer to America, although it remains to be seen what Ankara can get from Washington that relates to Turkey's core priorities.

Syria's war had looked like it was heading toward some visible, halfway end, at least in some parts of the country. Because of Turkey's insistent rejectionism, however, that likely only meant that a new explosion of conflict was on the horizon. Turkey had run through all its good options, and those it had left were increasingly desperate. Yet the Khan Sheikhoun attack has sent the war in new, unpredictable directions. For Turkey, that may mean a new set of opportunities. Turkey's interests—and the fate of its Syrian allies—will depend on whether Turkey can seize them.

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