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POLICY BRIEF

TURKEY, THE KURDS, AND THE FIGHT AGAINST ISLAMIC STATE

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SUMMARY

- The resumption of fighting between Turkey and the PKK risks spilling over into northern Syria, where the PKK-affiliated PYD/YPG has gained influence and become a valuable military partner against Islamic State. This could result in greater regional instability and undermine action against IS.
- The collapse of the Turkey-PKK peace process could also increase tensions between rival Kurdish groups in Iraq, harming efforts to push back against IS there.
- The EU should recognize that both Turkey and the Kurds are essential to progress against IS and the eventual stabilization of northern Syria and beyond, and that an effective anti-IS strategy requires reconciling their interests.
- The EU should make the revival of the peace process a central talking point in diplomatic engagement with Turkey, particularly after the upcoming November elections.
- Europe should also offer greater support to PYD/YPG on condition that it adopts a constructive role, promoting political inclusion in the areas it controls and holding back from further expansion into non-Kurdish majority areas.

The recent escalation in fighting between Turkey and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) threatens to worsen regional instability and set back the fight against Islamic State (IS). Over the summer, the two-year-old ceasefire between Turkey and the PKK broke down, throwing the peace process in this long-running conflict into doubt at a particularly dangerous time. A renewed Turkey–PKK conflict in south-eastern Turkey and northern Iraq risks spilling over into north-eastern Syria, where the PKK-affiliated groups, the Democratic Union Party (PYD) and the People's Protection Units (YPG), have emerged as the dominant Kurdish political and military forces over the course of the country's four-year civil war – and the YPG has become a key Western ally in containing IS.[1] With Syria and Iraq already confronting entrenched conflict and the spread of jihadism, a Turkey–PKK flare-up now threatens to deepen the strife engulfing the region, seriously complicating European efforts to promote some measure of stability and fight IS.

In this context, Europe faces a tricky balancing act. To combat IS in Syria, Europe needs Turkish partnership, given that Turkey shares a 900-kilometre border with Syria that has been the key crossing point for IS fighters travelling to and from Europe. So far, however, Ankara has been at best inconsistent in responding to European concerns. The YPG, on the other hand, has proven to be an effective "boots-on-the-ground" partner and complement to the anti-IS coalition's airstrikes in northern Syria, albeit predominantly

1 This report uses the phrase "PYD/YPG" to refer to the political and military actor as a whole, "PYD" where only referring to the actor's political activities, and "YPG" where only referring to the actor's military activities. This report does not disaggregate the reference to the PKK as such (although the PKK's military wing goes by the name People's Defence Forces, or HPG), so that the use of "PKK" refers to the political and military actor as a whole.

in Kurdish majority areas. An effective strategy in northern Syria will require the partnership and coordination of both of these actors, but the eruption of conflict between Turkey and the YPG's sister group, the PKK, threatens a destructive new front between them.

The breakdown of the ceasefire, which was marked by new PKK attacks on Turkish security personnel and renewed Turkish airstrikes against PKK bases inside Turkey and in Iraqi Kurdistan, coincided with the recent US-Turkish agreement to establish greater security cooperation against IS. Although US officials deny having endorsed the Turkish airstrikes, the coincidental timing has produced the widespread impression that Washington has bumped the peace process down its list of priorities, choosing not to push back against Turkish anti-PKK strikes and focusing instead on extracting Turkish security guarantees, including the use of the Incirlik airbase. Although securing long-sought Turkish cooperation is undeniably valuable for the anti-IS coalition, a policy that traded this against the Turkey–PKK peace process would risk weakening one of the coalition's only effective non-Islamist partners on the ground in northern Syria (the YPG), making it ever more difficult for the coalition to pull together a coordinated fight against IS.

Turkish officials have repeatedly said that they view the PYD/YPG and the PKK as equivalent, although in practice Ankara has thus far treated them differently. If the peace process breaks down conclusively and Turkey and the PKK return to full-scale hostilities, it will be increasingly difficult for Ankara to maintain the same degree of practical distinction between the two groups. In this scenario, the risk of a spillover of the Turkey–PKK conflict into northern Syria would rise, distracting all groups involved in that area from the shared goal of degrading IS. Turkey's international allies – including Europe – would be less able to insulate their work with the PYD/YPG from Turkish pushback.

Moreover, the collapse of the Turkey–PKK peace process would risk increasing tensions in Iraq between the PKK and its main Kurdish rival, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), which Turkey backs. When Turkey–PKK tensions run high, Ankara tends to rely more on a strategy of backing the KDP as a Kurdish counterweight to the PKK, leaving the PKK and its affiliates more dependent on their own main regional patron, Iran. If Turkish airstrikes against PKK positions in Iraq exacerbate divisions between the PKK and the KDP, this would further weaken their ability to mount a coordinated Kurdish fight against IS in areas where both forces are present.

The fact that the escalation in Turkish-PKK fighting cannot be separated from the domestic Turkish political context, with snap elections now scheduled for 1 November, adds to the uncertainty of the situation.

The EU should respond to these threatening developments with a more active policy that recognises that both Turkey and the Kurds are essential to progress against IS and the eventual stabilisation of northern Syria and beyond, and that an effective anti-IS strategy requires reconciling their interests. A credible peace process inside Turkey is the starting point for any wider Turkish accord with the PKK and its affiliates. Europe should regard Turkish policy towards the PKK as a matter that directly affects its own interests in the region, including the aim of pulling together a coordinated and effective fight against IS.

Europe should therefore devote considerable diplomatic attention to supporting the revival of the Turkey–PKK peace process. Beyond this, as part of a wider effort to reconcile Turkish and Kurdish concerns, European states and the EU should work with the PYD/YPG (which, unlike the PKK, is not considered a terrorist group by the EU and the US) in the areas the group already controls, with the aim of preventing an IS comeback and promoting inclusive governance institutions in those areas. Europe should tie the incentive of stronger backing and wider recognition for the PYD/YPG to its policies towards Ankara as well as in Syria. Among these conditions should be YPG avoidance of any efforts to displace local Sunni inhabitants and unilateral advances into additional territories that are not predominantly Kurdish. Continued YPG advances risk provoking Turkish retaliation in response to concerns of Kurdish overreach, while also alienating Syrian Sunni Arabs to the detriment of the anti-IS fight.

Taken together, this approach would represent an imperfect but best-available way to help reverse the current escalation and work towards more effective action against IS and towards de-escalating the Syria conflict among Europe's allies in the region.

Breakdown of the Turkey–PKK ceasefire

Over the past three years, both Turkey and the PKK have taken promising steps towards the peaceful resolution of a conflict that has already lasted over 30 years and has killed an estimated 40,000 people, mostly Kurds. In 2012, then-Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan ordered a new round of peace talks with PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan; soon after, in March 2013, Öcalan declared a unilateral ceasefire and called on the PKK to withdraw from Turkey. One year later, the Turkish parliament approved a legal framework for negotiations.[2] Many hailed this new round of talks as Turkey's most promising attempt yet at ending the conflict with the PKK. The ceasefire largely remained in place during this time, despite sporadic clashes and setbacks, including the PKK's declaration in September 2013 that it would halt its withdrawal from Turkey, citing government inaction on certain steps agreed to in the peace talks.[3]
In this environment, Turkey was at times able to demonstrate remarkable flexibility towards the PKK's Syrian affiliates, which had surged to prominence, including by taking control of some largely Kurdish areas, following the outbreak of civil

2 "Turkey approves framework for PKK peace talks", *Reuters*, 10 July 2014, available at http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2014/07/turkey-approves-framework-pkk-peace-talks-201471019443811435.html.

3 Daniel Dombey, "PKK halts removal of fighters from Turkey in blow to peace process", *Financial Times*, 9 September 2013, available at http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/d8f1abec-1962-11e3-83b9-00144feab7de.html#axzz3jjsrlbUv.

Kurdish zones of influence in Syria, Turkey, and Iraq

- YPG control and/or heavy presence
- IS control
- Syrian opposition groups control
- Syrian government control
- Approximate areas of proposed IS-free zone
- KRG territory recognised by Iraqi constitution
- KRG presence in disputed territories
- Provinces where HDP won in June 2015 elections

- Capital city
- City/town
- Border crossing

Source: Author's information compiled from various interviews and other sources.

war in Syria. Turkey invited PYD leader Salih Muslim to Istanbul in July 2013, and has since continued talking to the PYD. Under intense US pressure, Turkey also facilitated the delivery of weapons by Iraqi Kurdish groups to YPG forces fighting IS in the northern Syrian border town of Kobani in October 2014. Nevertheless, this Turkish decision came after a protracted delay, and after Turkey's earlier refusal to allow Kurds to cross the border to help the defence of Kobani led to riots in which at least 35 people were killed. The episode deepened the mistrust towards the governing Justice and Development Party (AKP) felt by many Turkish Kurds, not only the traditional supporters of the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP).

In the lead-up to the June 2015 general election, both the HDP and the AKP intensified their rhetoric against each other. In part due to widespread Kurdish anger at the AKP over the Kobani episode, many AKP-voting Kurds defected to the HDP in order to support the party's bid to cross Turkey's 10 percent election threshold, resulting in a historic Kurdish electoral achievement: the HDP won 13 percent of the vote, passing the threshold for the first time and denying Erdoğan a parliamentary majority. Months of failed government-formation negotiations led to the announcement of new elections.

By July 2015, the ceasefire had cracked under domestic and regional pressures. On 20 July, an IS-affiliated suicide bomber in Suruç, a Turkish-Syrian border town, killed 32 young activists who were planning to travel to and support the reconstruction effort in Kobani. Two days later, the PKK's armed wing killed two Turkish police officers it accused of collaborating with IS, describing the action as revenge for the Suruç bombing.[4] Turkey promptly restarted airstrikes against PKK fighters in the Qandil Mountains of Iraqi Kurdistan and arrested hundreds of Kurds inside Turkey on suspicion of being PKK members.[5] President Erdoğan said it was "impossible" to continue the peace process,[6] and PKK commander Cemil Bayik ruled out the possibility of another unilateral PKK ceasefire. Since 20 July, the PKK has killed at least 113 security personnel.[7] Turkey claims it has killed over 1,000 PKK fighters in the recent raids, but the PKK denies having suffered this many casualties.[8] Dozens of civilians have reportedly been killed, including a disputed number (21, according to the HDP; only one, according to the Turkish Interior Ministry) in the overwhelmingly pro-HDP Kurdish town of Cizre during a nine-day curfew enforced for a military operation against the PKK in early September.[9]

One apparent factor driving the escalation is Erdoğan's domestic political strategy in the lead-up to new elections. There is considerable speculation that Erdoğan has bet on taking a hardline stance on the PKK as a political strategy to reduce support for the HDP, with the aim of pushing it below the threshold for parliamentary representation and thus restoring the AKP's majority. If there is a political motive for Turkey's offensive against the PKK, it is possible that Erdoğan might reverse course and reopen negotiations after an election victory; however, this cannot be taken for granted, not least because the dynamics of the conflict may have spiralled out of control in the intervening period, forestalling the possibility of short-term de-escalation.

At the same time, the fundamental logic behind the search for a negotiated settlement remains valid for both sides. Turkey and the PKK have fought for decades using the same tactics that have re-emerged since July. Ankara has no reason to believe that more airstrikes and unlawful arrests will bring the PKK to its knees. Similarly, the PKK has no reason to believe that renewed attacks against Turkish security targets will successfully pressure the Turkish state into acquiescing to their demands, which include greater linguistic and political rights for Kurds and more autonomy in the south-east. Indeed, the more the PKK reverts to violent tactics, the harder it will be for the HDP and reformists in Ankara to push through decentralisation reforms in the near future or in the case of discussions over a new constitution.

The Kurdish role in Syria and beyond

Developments in Syria since 2011 make the stakes of a collapsed peace process and return to full-scale war between Turkey and the PKK now arguably higher for all affected states and groups – not only Turkey – than at any time since the peak of the violent Turkey–PKK conflict during the 1990s.

The PYD/YPG has recently gained a degree of international support, becoming a key ally to the anti-IS coalition. The YPG represents the coalition's most successful partner on the ground in northern Syria, in part because persistent doubts about the nature of many other opposition groups have precluded the provision of comparable coalition support to those groups. The combination of US airstrikes and YPG intelligence and follow-up on the ground lies behind the most significant battlefield defeats that IS has suffered in Syria, including in Kobani and Tel Abyad.

US air support has enabled the YPG to fight IS, but also in the process to gain control of most of Turkey's border with Syria. The PYD/YPG now controls three largely Kurdish enclaves in northern Syria, which it refers to as "cantons": Jazira (Hassakeh province), Kobani (east of the Euphrates), and Afrin (north-west of Aleppo), as well as the territory between Jazira and Kobani. When the YPG wrested Tel

4 "PKK claims killing of Turkish policemen in revenge for Syria border attack", *Hurriyet*, 22 July 2015, available at http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/pkk-claims-killing-of-turkish-policemen-in-revenge-for-syria-border-attack.aspx?PageID=238&NID=85756&NewsCatID=341.

5 Turkish authorities have in the past used such waves of arrest to target non-militant Kurdish politicians, activists and journalists. See "Turkey: Kurdish Party Members' Trial Violates Rights", Human Rights Watch, 18 April 2011, available at https://www.hrw.org/news/2011/04/18/turkey-kurdish-party-members-trial-violates-rights.

6 Ewen MacAskill, "Turkey says Kurdish peace process impossible as Nato meets", the *Guardian*, 28 July 2015, available at http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jul/28/turkey-erdogan-not-possible-peace-process-kurdish-militants.

7 See Aaron Stein (@aaronstein1), Twitter, 8 September 2015, available at https://twitter.com/aaronstein1/status/641208359744602112.

8 Ayla Albayrak and Emre Peker, "Turkey Faces Threat of Growing Unrest", the *Wall Street Journal*, 12 September 2015, available at http://www.wsj.com/articles/turkey-faces-threat-of-growing-unrest-1442050203.

9 "Turkish forces stop pro-Kurdish MPs on protest march to Cizre", *Reuters*, 10 September 2015, available at http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/sep/10/turkish-forces-stop-pro-kurdish-mps-on-protest-march-to-cizre.

Abyad from IS control in June 2015, it established this critical link between these two cantons.

One reason for the PYD/YPG's success is that it has maintained a non-aggression pact with the Syrian regime that has allowed it to concentrate on fighting IS, while relying on state institutions to provide services in some areas under its control. The regime continues to maintain a visible security and intelligence presence in Qamishli, the most important Kurdish-populated city in Syria. This pact should be understood as being founded on pragmatic considerations rather than on shared sympathies. In practice, it breaks down from time to time, resulting in clashes between the two sides,[10] when local dynamics defy the political understanding. The arrangement mirrors the PKK's similar understanding with Iran, which has historically used the PKK as a card against Turkey in the region; this relationship is equally prone to breakdowns.[11]

The PYD/YPG and Damascus, and similarly the PKK and Tehran, are not natural friends. The PYD is, at its core, an anti-regime movement. Many PYD activists rose up in protests against the regime in Qamishli in 2004, and were arrested and tortured for their disobedience. In the same way, the PKK's Iranian offshoot was established in 2004 with the mandate of fighting the Iranian regime for its repression of Kurds, and Tehran has repressed expressions of Kurdish political identity in Iran, most notably by torturing and executing Kurdish activists.

Nevertheless, the PYD/YPG's non-aggression pact with the Syrian regime has damaged its credibility among non-PYD-affiliated Kurdish and Arab opposition figures. It has also been accused of ruling autocratically. Although the PYD/YPG has established local governance councils and security bodies in the areas it controls, non-PYD-affiliated Syrian Kurdish[12] and Syrian Arab activists and politicians complain that they are allowed little space to participate. Particularly in areas that are not predominantly Kurdish, the PYD/YPG has met resistance to its rule. Ethnic tensions have already become apparent in and around the mostly Arab town of Tel Abyad, which was captured by the YPG in June 2015. Many Syrian rebels and activists doubt the sincerity of the PYD's promises to empower local Arabs and other minorities by devolving power to local councils, and also the YPG's vow to cooperate meaningfully with elements of the Free Syrian Army (FSA). More controversially, some rebels and activists have also accused the YPG of forcibly displacing Arabs in and around Tel Abyad.[13] The YPG strongly denies a policy of displacement, but several Arab villages near Tel Abyad show signs of having been burned, leading many to believe that some Kurdish reprisals against Arabs have taken place.

Turkey has responded with concern to the PYD/YPG's territorial expansion. Since 2011, Ankara has tried several tactics to keep in check what it perceives as an emerging PYD/YPG threat. Early on, Turkey tried, along with its main Kurdish partner, the KDP in Iraq, to prop up a broad coalition of mostly KDP-backed Syrian Kurdish factions as a counterweight to the PYD/YPG. The KDP and the PKK are historic rivals, and Turkey has nearly a decade of experience with a similar policy of supporting the KDP as a balancing force against the PKK in the context of transnational Kurdish politics. The coalition's internal divisions and lack of a strong political or armed presence inside Syria led to the failure of this strategy. In a more belligerent tactic, Ankara has backed hardline Islamist and/or jihadi groups like Ahrar al-Sham and at times Jabhat al-Nusra, as well as Turkmen militias, including the Sultan Murad Brigade, not only because they are opposed to the regime, but also because they share the Turkish goal of containing PYD/YPG ambitions in northern Syria.

Turkish concerns arise from the fact that the lines between the PKK and the PYD/YPG are blurred. Both groups look to Öcalan for ideological inspiration, and to Qandil for military direction. Many Kurds from Turkey who trained in Qandil with the PKK are now fighting in Syria as part of the YPG. In interviews, PKK members and supporters identify closely with the PYD/YPG, declaring it to belong to the "same" movement as theirs. PKK leaders increasingly link Turkish manoeuvring against the PYD/YPG to the prospects for the peace process. PKK commander Cemil Bayik has described the war in Syria as "an Iranian-Turkish war", in which Turkey is working through ISIS to extend Sunni control and asserted that "a country that wants to destroy all of the cantons in Rojava for sure cannot solve the Kurdish problem in Turkey."[14]

Still, Turkish claims that the PKK and the PYD/YPG are equivalent[15] are exaggerated. The PYD/YPG may share the PKK's ultimate goal, which does not entail secession, but rather the establishment of highly decentralised local governance structures across Kurdish regions of south-east Turkey, northern Syria, northern Iraq, and north-western Iran under the flag of Öcalan, with the aim of attaining strategic leverage for the movement across the Middle East. However, the groups follow different interim mandates. While the PKK is still primarily concerned with the movement's original raison d'etre – attaining democratic autonomy and greater linguistic and political rights for Kurds in Turkey – the PYD/YPG is focused on consolidating power in, and ultimately linking, its three cantons in Syria as well a chunk of Iraqi

10 For instance, see "Fighting breaks out between YPG and Syrian army in Hasakah", RUDAW, 17 January 2015, available at http://rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/170120151.

11 On 13 August 2015, the Party of Free Life in Kurdistan (PJAK) issued a statement claiming it had killed 12 members of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) outside Sanandaj, a town in western Iran. Iran's semi-official IRNA news agency acknowledged the attack but disputed PJAK's claims of IRGC deaths, saying five Basij members had been killed. See "Kurdish militants attack Iran troops", NOW News, 13 August 2015, available at https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/NewsReports/565729-kurdish-militants-attack-iran-troops. In August 2015 alone, Iran executed at least two PJAK members. See Bozorgmehr Sharafedin, "Iran executes Kurdish activist, wary of Kurdish gains in Middle East", *Reuters*, 27 August 2015, available at http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/08/27/us-iran-rights-kurds-idUSKCN0QW24H20150827.

12 See "Interview: Kurdish National Council's Fouad Aliko", the Syrian Observer, 17 August 2015, available at http://www.syrianobserver.com/EN/Interviews/29664/Interview_Kurdish_National_Council_Fouad_Aliko.

13 See "Press Statement from Raqqa is Being Silently Slaughtered", 1 July 2015, available at http://www.raqqa-sl.com/en/?p=1285.

14 Author interview, Qandil, December 2014.

15 See "President Erdoğan says PYD 'no different than PKK' for Turkey", *Hurriyet*, 19 October 2014, available at http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/president-erdogan-says-pyd-no-different-than-pkk-for-turkey.aspx?pageID=238&nID=73172&NewsCatID=338.

territory north-west of Sinjar, which would allow them to establish a corridor from Iraq to YPG-held Syria.

In an apparent recognition of this difference, as well as the disadvantages of provoking a fight on an additional front, Turkey has in general shown willingness to treat the PYD/YPG differently from the PKK despite claims that it views them as equals. Even during its recent heavy shelling of the PKK in Qandil, Turkey has largely exercised restraint vis-à-vis the PYD/YPG in Syria. One apparent exception was a reported incident in late July in which the YPG accused Turkey of shelling one of its positions in Zur Maghar, a village on the east bank of the Euphrates; Turkey quickly denied the accusation.[16] According to a US military source, Turkey did indeed fire on the YPG in Zur Maghar, in order to prevent the group from trying to cross the Euphrates and gain control of even more of the border.[17] Ankara's quick denial of the episode – in contrast to its boasting about how many PKK fighters the recent raids in Qandil have killed – demonstrates that the government so far still sees value in maintaining a distinction between its PKK and PYD/YPG policies. A former Turkish ambassador to Syria, who has been involved in Turkey's contacts with the PYD, recently stated, "So long as the PYD is not attacking Turkey or our interests, we have no problem with them."[18]

But the fact that the Zur Maghar incident took place, and was widely regarded as direct Turkish aggression against the PYD/YPG, means it may become harder for Turkey to fight the PKK in south-east Turkey and Iraqi Kurdistan while maintaining a relative détente with the PYD/YPG on its border. Equally, it could become harder for the PYD/YPG to maintain a clear-cut distinction between its mandate – focused on linking its three Syrian cantons – and the PKK's mandate of resistance against Turkey.

Turkey's dynamic with the PKK and its affiliates also has direct implications for intra-Kurdish ties in Iraq. If Turkish relations with the PKK and its affiliates sour further, tensions between these groups and the KDP can be expected to rise. The latest Turkish attacks on the PKK in Iraqi Kurdistan have already exacerbated PKK–KDP relations, and weakened the KDP's standing among Iraqi Kurds. Many Iraqi Kurds have grown more sympathetic to the PKK and the YPG as a result of their fighters' historic victories against IS in Syria, and their role in fighting IS in northern Iraq and rescuing Yazidis who were trapped on Mount Sinjar after KDP peshmerga largely withdrew from Sinjar following the 2014 IS advance on the town. Iraqi Kurdistan has proven to be an important obstacle to further IS advances and a relatively reliable and effective component in the coalition strategy to push back IS and retake adjacent areas in Iraq. That effort can well do without the distraction of internecine Kurdish rivalry and the prospect of open PKK–KDP hostility.[19]

A possible flashpoint zone

Turkey's agreement with the United States in late July to cooperate more actively with the anti-IS coalition was driven in part by alarm about the PYD/YPG's expansion along its border, and aimed to reduce Western reliance on the YPG. A core feature of the deal was an ill-defined plan to clear IS out of a stretch of northern Syrian territory between Jarablus, on the west bank of the Euphrates, and Azaz, which borders YPG-controlled Afrin in the west, and extending roughly 50 kilometres deep into Syria – in short, precisely the area that the YPG has been eyeing in order to link all three of its cantons. Since at least 2013, YPG commanders have consistently repeated their aim to advance on this zone.[20] The area, largely Arab and Turkmen, is also crucial as a potential supply route for Syrian rebels fighting IS – a US and European priority – and the Syrian regime – a Turkish priority.

Reports suggest that the US and Turkey have yet to agree on critical features of the proposed zone, including what forces will be used to clear the area of IS, what forces will take control of it after IS leaves, and the ultimate goal of the operation. US officials have vaguely referred to the proposal as part of a "sustained effort to drive ISIL [another acronym for IS] out of the region", whereas Turkish officials have varyingly called it a "no-fly zone" or a "safe zone"; the US flatly denies having agreed to either of these objectives.[21]

It appears clear, however, that the proposal is intended to preclude control of the area not only by IS, but also by the YPG, and thus to foil the Kurdish group's plan to link its three cantons. Turkish officials have declared YPG control of this area to be a "red line", while the US position on it remains unclear. Senior US officials have been quoted as saying that Washington has agreed with Ankara not to rely on the YPG to clear IS from this zone.[22]

The specific Turkish objection to the PYD/YPG taking charge of the area, and thus obtaining control of nearly the entire Turkish-Syrian border, is understandable given the overlap between the PKK and the PYD/YPG. Controlling contiguous territory from Sinjar in north-western Iraq to north-western Aleppo would offer the PKK unprecedented leverage, something that Turkey fears could spur greater PKK-aligned Kurdish ambitions in the region. A YPG move towards crossing this Turkish red line would invite direct

16 See "Turkey accused of shelling Kurdish-held village in Syria", *Agence France-Presse*, 27 July 2015, available at http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jul/27/turkey-shells-kurdish-held-village-in-syria.

17 See Lucas Tomlinson and Jennifer Griffin, "Turkey's strikes on Kurds could drag US into new front, military sources fear", FoxNews.com, 10 August 2015, available at http://www.foxnews.com/politics/2015/08/10/turkey-strikes-on-kurds-could-drag-us-into-new-front-military-sources-fear/.

18 Talk delivered by Ambassador Ömer Önhon at the Barcelona Centre for International Affairs, 8 September 2015.

19 According to interviews conducted by the author in March 2015, pro-PKK and Yazidi sources attribute the failure to recapture Sinjar from IS to the reluctance of KDP peshmerga fighters to join the battle in support of YPG/PKK forces. For another account, see "Kurd Allies Fighting IS in North Iraq Hampered by Rivalries", *Associated Press*, 30 January 2015, available at http://www.nytimes.com/aponline/2015/01/30/world/middleeast/ap-ml-iraq-fight-for-sinjar.html.

20 See Wladimir Van Wilgenburg, "Kurdish militia aims to connect Kurdish enclaves in Syria", Al-Monitor, 24 November 2013, available at http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/11/kurdistan-syria-militias-turkey.html and Nazim Dastan, "YPG: We will also liberate Jarablus", DIHA, 25 August 2015, available at http://diclenews.org/tr/news/content/view/471221.

21 See Gulsen Solaker, "US denies reaching agreement with Turkey on Syria 'safe zone'", *Reuters*, 11 August 2015, available at http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/08/11/us-mideast-crisis-turkey-usa-idUSKCN0QG1UG20150811.

22 See Dion Nissenbaum, "US, Turkey Agree to Keep Syrian Kurds Out of Proposed Border Zone", the *Wall Street Journal*, 3 August 2015, available at http://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-turkey-agree-to-keep-syrian-kurds-out-of-proposed-border-zone-1438641577.

Turkish aggression against the PYD/YPG; Turkish officials have already threatened to hit any YPG fighters who attempt to enter the area.[23]

Turkey appears to favour a strategy to clear IS from the zone that relies heavily on Turkmen militias and Ahrar al-Sham, a Salafist group that the US is wary of in part due to its collaboration with Jabhat al-Nusra (the two make up the key groups in Jaysh al-Fateh, a coalition of Islamist, jihadist and some FSA rebels in northern Syria).[24] Ahrar al-Sham, Jabhat al-Nusra, and Turkmen militias have all clashed with the YPG in the past. If these groups take control of the proposed IS-free zone, and the YPG makes a move across the Euphrates, the risk of new clashes between them would rise. Some Turkmen leaders have already begun staking out rhetorical positions regarding the region that are overtly hostile to the PYD/YPG.[25]

Moreover, in light of longstanding perceptions of Turkish support for anti-YPG forces, the PYD/YPG is certain to interpret any hostility from these groups as Turkish aggression against them.[26] This would make it ever more difficult to avoid a grim scenario – even if IS were successfully pushed from the area – that would potentially include: a spillover of the Turkey–PKK conflict into northern Syria; the opening of new ethnic hostilities around the Euphrates that would distract Kurdish, Arab, and Turkmen forces from their common objective of stamping out IS; and the weakening of the YPG, one of the anti-IS coalition's only non-Islamist and effective partners on the ground in northern Syria.

Europe's role in the crisis

The overarching European goal should be to help find a constructive solution that recognises the necessary role of the PYD/YPG in Syria, and therefore works to head off the risk of a resumed Turkey–PKK conflict while forestalling any developments in northern Syria that would lead to an escalation of current tensions. This objective would also involve reducing the risk that a Turkey–PKK unravelling could cause further problems for Kurdish parties' anti-IS effort in northern Iraq.

To achieve this, Europe should pursue two objectives: 1) persuade Turkey and the PKK to cease military action and put in place a framework for peace talks that would lay out mutually agreed conditions for a durable ceasefire and the withdrawal of armed PKK militants from Turkey; 2) encourage the PYD/YPG to adopt a more constructive role in the areas it already controls, and to limit prospects of further expansion into areas that are not predominantly Kurdish.

Reviving the peace process

The recent cycle of fighting between Turkey and the PKK risks escalating quickly to a point at which it will be extremely difficult for either side to backpedal.

Although there are hardliners on both sides who still want to fight each other, a return to conflict is fundamentally against both Turkey's and the PKK's strategic interests. It is hardly an attractive prospect for Turkey to confront a potential three-front war with the PKK – in south-east Turkey, northern Iraq, and northern Syria – at the same time as it faces the most serious and direct threat yet from IS. Soon after Ankara agreed to allow the US to use Incirlik to launch airstrikes against IS, IS released a video threatening Turkey, and specifically Erdoğan, directly.[27]

Some in Turkey view the PKK as a long-term threat and IS as a short-term threat, when in reality the reverse may be true. The Turkey–PKK conflict has been managed at different points in the past, and the two sides have shown that they can de-escalate and negotiate when it suits their interests. The conditions that allow IS to thrive in Turkey's neighbourhood, however – the civil conflicts and disintegration of state authority in Iraq and Syria – are likely to remain in place for the foreseeable future. Ultimately, Ankara has much less control over the factors that will determine whether IS is a short- or long-term threat, and the magnitude of that threat, than over those that will determine the same about the PKK.

On the other side, the PKK's armed struggle against Turkey has long seemed outdated to many Kurds, especially in comparison to the Iraqi Kurds' economically beneficial relationship with Turkey, and in light of Turkey's relative progress on meeting Kurdish demands on democratisation during the most intense period of EU accession talks. The PKK's military campaign has alienated many Kurds in Turkey who have now tasted peace and are not willing to return to conflict or who see economic promise in the AKP, as well as many Iraqi Kurds who do not want their relatively stable region to become a theatre of war for Turkey and the PKK. The PKK only recently regained its edge and transnational appeal for Kurds, thanks to its prominent role fighting IS in Syria and Iraq – not through fighting Turkey.

In seeking to influence Turkey and the PKK to reverse the escalation of violence, the EU must accept that it has limited direct leverage on either side, and that Turkey has long been

23 Feridun Sinirlioğlu, Turkish Undersecretary to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, said US and Turkish forces would hit Kurdish and IS fighters who tried to enter the zone. See "Ankara says Turkish, US forces to hit ISIL, Kurdish militants if entered 'safe zone'," *Today's Zaman*, 11 August 2015, available at http://www.todayszaman.com/anasayfa_ankara-says-turkish-us-forces-to-hit-isil-kurdish-militants-if-entered-safe-zone_396259.html. US officials later denied having agreed to hit Kurdish fighters.

24 See Sam Heller and Aaron Stein, "The Trouble With Turkey's Favorite Syrian Islamists", War on the Rocks, 18 August 2015, available at http://warontherocks.com/2015/08/the-trouble-with-turkeys-favorite-syrian-islamists/.

25 The head of the Gaziantep branch of the Turkey-backed Syrian Turkmen Nationalist movement recently said that the main aim of the buffer zone was "to go against the project of Syrian Kurdistan". See Nabih Bulos and Louisa Loveluck, "Turkmen militia enlisted to patrol Syria anti-Isil buffer zone", the *Telegraph*, 25 August 2015, available at http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/11824264/Turkmen-militia-enlisted-to-patrol-Syria-anti-Isil-buffer-zone.html.

26 In 2013, for instance, PYD leader Salih Muslim accused Turkey of arming Ahrar al-Sham and Jabhat al-Nusra to fight the Kurds in Syria. See Amberin Zaman, "Syrian Kurdish Leader: Ankara Supporting Jihadists", Al-Monitor, 23 September, 2013, available at http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/security/2013/09/pyd-leader-salih-muslim-turkey-support-jihadists-syria.html. In 2015, PKK-affiliated media accused Ahrar al-Sham, Jabhat al-Nusra, and the Sultan Murad Brigade of besieging a Kurdish district in Aleppo, and specifically pointed to the latter as being backed by the Turkish state. See "YPG on guard against threats around Sheikh Maqsoud", ANF News, 28 May 2015, available at http://en.firatajans.com/kurdistan/ypg-on-guard-against-threats-around-sheikh-maqsoud.

27 See Ceylan Yeginsu, "Elections Seem Likely in Turkey As ISIS Threat Rises", the *New York Times*, 18 August 2015, available at http://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/19/world/europe/isis-video-urges-turks-to-revolt-against-their-president.html.

sensitive to outside interference in what it considers to be a domestic affair par excellence. Although Europe was once the most influential external force driving Turkey's democratisation, its clout has waned along with Turkey's stalled EU accession process. Moreover, the Turkish government has rejected the introduction of a third-party mediator despite repeated PKK requests to have one.[28] On the PKK side, the EU's terrorism listing has had a double-edged effect: on the one hand, it has severely limited Europe's ability to engage with the PKK; on the other hand, its potential removal at the end of a successful peace process creates an important EU carrot that gives Europe leverage over the group.

EU member states are unlikely to be able to play any formal role in the Turkey–PKK peace process, as Norway did in 2009,[29] but Europe can still play an important soft power role in Turkey. Europe should do more to prioritise the peace process in recognition of its relevance to Europe's own security interests. Whether and how to revive the peace process is a decision that will need to be taken by Ankara, but European member states and the EU should immediately move this aim much higher up its list of priorities vis-à-vis Turkey. Europeans should be pro-actively visiting Ankara to deliver this message, adopting it as a key talking point in its diplomatic engagement with Turkey, including at the leader and foreign minister level. This message can begin to be communicated now – while there are two HDP ministers in Turkey's interim government, including Ali Haydar Konca, who has been appointed Minister for EU Affairs – but it should be significantly stepped up after the new elections on 1 November, whatever the result. On the PKK side, Europeans should strengthen contacts with the PKK's Europe-based offices to deliver similar messages. After the snap elections and formation of a new government, Europeans should also increase their public condemnation of both sides' escalation in violence.

The EU can also take steps that will facilitate the progress of the peace process, should it resume. It should do more to cooperate with Turkey in developing rule of law and justice reforms, with a particular focus on juvenile justice, an area that would benefit large numbers of young Kurdish prisoners.[30] Prison remains one of the most significant politicising arenas for Kurdish youth, many of whom come into contact with PKK members and ideology for the first time while behind bars. Correcting Turkey's juvenile justice problem is critical to stemming the growth of PKK-affiliated youth militancy, which has burgeoned in Cizre and some other Kurdish cities in the south-east. Building on the experience of EU member states, Europe could also stand ready to offer assistance with decentralisation and transitional justice, as these issues come into focus in any future negotiations. EU work with civil society, free local media, and youth groups in the medium term could help strengthen the hand of those who promote a more tolerant and nuanced view of Turkish-PKK relations.

A constructive vision for the PYD/YPG

Although the YPG's value to the anti-IS coalition as a force that can take additional territory from IS is reaching the point of diminishing returns, the PYD/YPG continues to hold relevance for broader European interests. Helping the YPG, in collaboration with its non-Kurdish opposition allies, to improve security in the areas it already controls can prevent the possibility of an IS comeback in those areas, especially in vulnerable areas such as Tel Abyad and parts of Hassakeh. Supporting the development in PYD/YPG-controlled territory of governance and administrative institutions that allow for power-sharing with Arabs and other ethnic groups as well as non-PYD-affiliated Kurds can ameliorate brewing ethnic tensions which, if left unchecked, might add a new dimension of conflict to Syria's intractable civil war. On the broader Syrian front, the PYD, as the dominant Kurdish political group in Syria, will play an important role in future negotiations for a Syrian transition.

Europe should aim to influence the PYD/YPG to be a constructive player that contributes to, rather than thwarts, European interests in Syria, including achieving the degradation of IS without provoking territorial disintegration or additional conflicts. To be able to play such a role, Europeans will need to gain leverage through more intensive engagement with the PYD and the conditional offer of greater support to the YPG. By contrast, a policy of distancing itself from the PYD/YPG will not help secure the EU's objectives with the group.

While the US takes the lead in organising and launching coalition airstrikes in coordination with the YPG against IS, Europe should play the leading role in shaping and intensifying the anti-IS coalition's political engagement of the PYD. Already, many European countries have demonstrated more flexibility about talking to the PYD than the US, which has yet to grant PYD leader Salih Muslim a visa (he frequently travels around Europe). Any deeper engagement of the PYD should, however, be accompanied by appropriate messaging that indicates the necessity of positive gestures to Ankara, including public assurances that the PYD/YPG's mandate has nothing to do with resistance against Turkey, as well as Europe's concern for the YPG's consistent exclusion of Arabs and non-PYD-affiliated Kurds from decision-making roles.

As European states deepen political contacts, they should offer to supply the YPG with basic combat gear, including boots, gloves, night-vision goggles, and protective vests – basic materials that many YPG fighters still lack – as well as basic military training; these steps will help the YPG protect its areas from an IS comeback. But this material support – as well as the prospect of future military supplies and

28 PKK commander Cemil Bayik: "Having a mediator is the norm, it is the usual model in the world. But Turkey will not allow it. We need a mediator [in the peace process] but Turkey does not accept the presence of a mediator because it does not want to fix the problem, its aim is not to find a solution. Turkey would not even accept the idea of the US as a mediator, even though the US is closer to Turkey [than to the PKK]." Author interview, Qandil, December 2014.

29 Turkish intelligence held talks with the PKK in Oslo in 2009, before the announcement of a formal peace process.

30 See William Jones, "Kurdish Kids and Turkey's Shameful Prisons", Amnesty International, 27 April 2012, available at http://blog.amnestyusa.org/europe/kurdish-kids-and-turkeys-shameful-prisons/.

cooperation – should be conditioned on YPG commitment to allow, especially in mixed or Arab-majority areas, more meaningful participation of FSA factions that have already opted to work with them and other vetted brigades that do not have a record of sectarian reprisals. Assistance should also be conditioned on a commitment to build inclusive governance institutions that are not reliant on the Syrian regime and allow more Arab opposition participation in administrative decision-making, especially in and around Tel Abyad.

In addition, Europe should press the PYD to refrain from any attempt to move forces across the Euphrates; investigate claims of forced displacement and Kurdish reprisals against Arab populations, especially in and around Tel Abyad, and to punish those responsible if the claims are found to be true; and stop any use of child soldiers.[31] Europe should also do more to support civil society and free local media in PYD/YPG-held areas. Civil society and local media groups have had relatively more room to operate freely in PYD/YPG-held territories compared with many other regions in Syria, and have played important roles in easing Arab-Kurdish tensions.[32]

Current approaches to the PYD/YPG within Europe vary. For instance, whereas Germany and Belgium have been relatively reluctant to engage officially and openly with the PYD/YPG, France has taken a very different approach. In February 2015, French President François Hollande took the unusual step of receiving the co-leader of the PYD and the commander of the women's unit of the YPG at the Élysée Palace, much to the ire of Turkey.[33] In the future, such European gestures should not be presented as uncritical endorsements, but rather accompanied with the appropriate messaging that seeks to make the PYD/YPG a more constructive player.

Some European states are still reluctant to engage with the PYD openly or provide material support to the YPG for fear of alienating Turkey. But avoiding engagement only diminishes Europe's already-weak leverage, reducing its ability to advocate for constructive relations between the two sides. A European policy of engagement and conditional support to the PYD/YPG in the areas the group already controls, in conjunction with active European support for the Turkey–PKK peace process, can contribute to the outcome that is not only in Europe's own interest but also in Turkey's best interest: an eventual peace between Turkey and the transnational movement that the PKK has evolved into.

The case of Kobani showed how Western support for the PYD/YPG can prompt Turkish outreach to the group, resulting in a more coordinated and focused fight against IS. A unique convergence of interests took place as the October 2014 battle in Kobani unfolded, and resulted in one of the most important coalition victories against IS. The US saw an unrivalled opportunity: large numbers of IS militants concentrating in one area where the coalition had a reliable ground partner with whom to coordinate airstrikes. Both Ankara and Erbil, seeing that the US was not going to allow Kobani to fall, calculated that a shared Kurdish victory in Kobani would be preferable to one delivered entirely by PKK-affiliated forces. The YPG, having long rejected the presence of Barzani-backed fighters in Syria, desperately needed additional weapons and won points for giving in to the growing public Kurdish demand for unity. The PYD/YPG also allowed 1,300 Turkey-backed FSA fighters to pass into Kobani to support the war effort.[34]

Some European states have also been hesitant to step up engagement and support for the PYD/YPG out of fear of empowering them to a degree that threatens the territorial integrity of Syria. This fear is a red herring. Key structural constraints to Syrian Kurdish secessionism – including the PYD/YPG's reliance on outside powers such as Damascus, Tehran and Washington that reject Kurdish secession, and the non-contiguous nature of Syrian Kurdish territory – remain in place. Additionally, the PYD does not subscribe to secessionism but rather to "democratic autonomy", a PKK concept that rejects the model of the nation-state in favour of empowered local governance.[35] Moreover, this model of autonomy conflicts with the KDP-led model in Iraq, which emphasises centralised Kurdish governance and economic integration with Turkey, precluding the fusion of Syrian and Iraqi Kurdish autonomous ambitions. Ultimately, it is the prolongation of the Syrian and Iraqi conflicts, rather than European political engagement and limited material support for Kurdish groups, that is the biggest contributing risk factor for state disintegration.

Another reason that European states have shied away from the PYD/YPG is because of their alleged ties to the Syrian regime. The YPG and regime forces cooperated recently in Hassakeh, and some European officials believe that the regime gives the YPG weapons, citing videos[36] and pictures[37] that show YPG fighters with tanks that appear to be Russian-made and normally used by the Syrian army. YPG officials and people close to the PKK have strongly denied this, and explain that

31 For allegations that the PYD has employed child soldiers, see "Syria: Kurdish Forces Violating Child Soldier Ban", Human Rights Watch, 15 July 2015, available at https://www.hrw.org/news/2015/07/10/syria-kurdish-forces-violating-child-soldier-ban-0.

32 For example, see Arta FM radio, a radio station based in Amude that broadcasts in Kurdish, Arabic, and Syriac. See "First Kurdish Radio Breaks the Sphere of Arabic Hegemony in Syria", Syria Untold, 22 September 2013, available at http://www.syriauntold.com/en/2013/09/first-kurdish-radio-breaks-the-sphere-of-arabic-hegemony-in-syria/; see also "Kurdish-Arab Fraternity Coordination Committee", Syria Untold, 21 February 2014, available at http://www.syriauntold.com/en/work_group/kurdish-arab-fraternity-coordination-committee/.

33 See Fehim Tastekin, "Hollande-PYD meeting challenges Erdogan", Al-Monitor, 12 February 2015, available at http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/02/turkey-france-kurdish-guerillas-elysee.html.

34 See Humeyra Pamuk and Ece Toksabay, "Kurdish PYD to allow Free Syrian Army fighters to come to Kobani: Erdogan", *Reuters*, 24 October 2014, available at http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/10/24/us-mideast-crisis-kurds-idUSKCN0ID0X020141024.

35 After the PKK dropped its demands for an independent state, Öcalan (while in prison) turned to the writing of an American philosopher, Murray Bookchin, to develop a new ideological framework that rejects the concept of the nation-state and seeks instead to empower highly decentralised local governance structures across Kurdish regions, effectively rendering borders less meaningful rather than aiming to redraw them. See Federico Venturini, "Bookchin: living legacy of an American revolutionary", ROAR, 28 February 2015, available at http://roarmag.org/2015/02/bookchin-interview-social-ecology/.

36 See Ragihandina YPG, "Scenes from the battles waged by our troops in the countryside of Tel Tamer", YouTube, 12 March 2015, available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NM3Rw4TBFvM&sns=em.

37 See Nin Baz (@NinBazi), Twitter, 5 March 2015, available at https://twitter.com/NinBazi/status/573331838023835648/photo/1.

the YPG has captured these weapons from the regime, but has not been handed them. Overall, as discussed above, Europeans should understand the PYD/YPG–Damascus relationship, and the parallel PKK–Tehran relationship, as pragmatic bargains that are driven more by the Kurdish groups' lack of alternatives than by shared interests.

However, the PKK's status as an international pariah, and its bitter relations with the other most powerful Kurdish group in the region, the KDP, have pushed the PKK and its affiliates into a position in which it is difficult for them to develop alternative relationships that would help wean them off support from Damascus and Tehran, and to some extent Baghdad. Because the PYD/YPG's relationship with Damascus is in large part a function of the PKK's relationship with Tehran, a Turkish accord with the PKK would likely be a prerequisite to the PYD/YPG moving towards the Syrian opposition camp. As Mohammed Amin Penjweni, an Iraqi Kurdish expert on the PKK who maintains close contacts with PKK leaders, remarked: "If all the doors are closed to the PYD, what can they do? If Turkey and Europe open doors to them and allow for international military support to them, they would be able to get the regime out from Hassakeh."[38]

Increasing the PYD/YPG's independence of Damascus (and, by extension, the PKK's independence of Tehran) is critical to the development of better ties between the PYD/YPG and actors whose main goal in Syria remains the removal of the Assad regime, including Turkey and other Arab opposition groups in northern Syria. As long as the PYD/YPG is necessarily reliant on Tehran's or Damascus's support, Ankara will have reason to worry that these powers could use the group against it. A European policy that prioritises the advancement of the peace process, and intensifies engagement of the PYD and conditional support to the YPG, could help open alternatives to the PYD/YPG, and ultimately to the PKK, that would reduce these groups' reliance on Damascus and Tehran.

At the same time, Europeans should be wary of over-relying on the YPG, especially in areas where its presence could do more harm than good. Europeans should not depend on the YPG for short-term gains against IS in additional areas that are not predominantly Kurdish. Although supporting the YPG in areas between Azaz and Jarablus might result in tactical gains against IS, it would also risk provoking new ethnic tensions. At the same time, Europe should work with Ankara to ensure that the rebel groups that eventually move into this area do not exhibit hostility towards Kurdish forces. European policy towards this potential flashpoint should be guided not only by the short-term goal of winning back territory from IS, but also by the aim of avoiding the risk of opening new fronts in the Syrian conflict that would make the long-term solution to the IS problem – an end to the civil war and the restoration of legitimate governance – ever more elusive.

38 Author interview, Sulaimaniyah, March 2015.

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