



## POLICY MEMO

# Escape from the Syrian Labyrinth: A Road Map

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The Ukraine war has led Americans to rediscover what first drew them, some seven decades ago, into a military alliance with the Turks: Turkey's indispensability as a counterweight to Russia. However, even as Washington and Ankara have found common cause in Ukraine, they continue to work at cross purposes in Syria. In a demonstration of bold, fresh, and practical thinking, Turkish scholar Ömer Özkizilcik offers us a road map for aligning American and Turkish policies there too. But first, to set the stage for Özkizilcik's plan, Hudson Senior Fellow Michael Doran surveys the strategic logic and the diplomatic context that make the road map compulsory reading.

## Introduction: Putting the "Geo" Back into Geostrategy

*Hudson Senior Fellow Michael Doran*

What a difference a day makes. On February 23, 2022, Turkey's reputation in Washington was very low. Its military incursions into Syria, disputes with Greece in the Aegean and Eastern Mediterranean, acquisition of Russia-made S-400 missile defense systems, and other issues led American officials to question whether the warm cooperation of previous eras could be rekindled.

The next day Russia invaded Ukraine, and the attitude in the White House toward Turkey improved instantly. The outbreak of the biggest war in Europe since 1945 quickly elevated two new priorities to the top of President Joe Biden's agenda: the search for military partners capable of balancing Russia, and the search for suppliers of natural gas to Europe. Both missions led directly to Ankara.

As a counterbalance to Russian power, whether in the post-Soviet world or in the Middle East, Turkey is indispensable. Ankara has opposed all of Russia's recent major military operations—including the interventions in Georgia in 2008, Ukraine in 2014, Syria in 2015, and Libya in 2017. In contrast to the other North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) members, who mostly offered political opposition, Turkey resisted Russia's adventurism militarily. Its Azerbaijani ally, its defense partners such as Georgia and Ukraine, and its local partners such as the Syrian National Army (SNA) have routinely engaged Russian or Russian-backed forces in Georgia, Ukraine, Syria, Azerbaijan, and Libya.

On several occasions (the 2015 downing of the Russian Su-24, the Turkish Bayraktar TB-2 drones targeting Wagner



elements during the Libyan Civil War, and the Russian AeroSpace Forces' attack on a Turkish contingent in Idlib in February 2020), Turkey's regular military has directly clashed with Russian forces—uniquely among post-Cold War European militaries.

TB-2 drones played a chief role in the Ukrainian military's defense of Kyiv at the outset of the war. Turks proudly advertise the drones as “Pantsir avcısı”—Pantsir hunters, referring to the Russian Pantsir air defense system, which Turkish and Turkish-backed forces have repeatedly chewed to pieces in Azerbaijan, Syria, and Libya. Following the February 2020 Russian strike in Idlib, which killed dozens of Turkish soldiers, the Turkish military responded with Operation Spring Shield, directly targeting the Assad regime's northern deployments, which included both Wagner units and Iran-backed Shia militias like Hezbollah.

As the Biden White House began viewing Turkish military power through the prism of the Ukraine war, its awareness of Turkey's value to European energy security also increased. While it is not a major supplier, Turkey was instrumental in building the Southern Gas Corridor (SGC), which brings gas from Azerbaijan to Italy through Georgia, Turkey, Greece, and Albania. In October, Greece and Bulgaria started commercial operation of an interconnector, a 113-mile pipeline delivering Azerbaijani gas from the SGC to Bulgaria, thereby decreasing southeast Europe's dependence on Russian supplies. “This pipeline is . . . a game changer for Bulgaria and for Europe's energy security,” European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen said during the interconnector's inauguration ceremony. “It means freedom . . . from dependency on Russian gas,” she continued.

Von der Leyen's statement was an exaggeration. The interconnector is a good start, but it will not deliver energy security to Europe. Something approaching a complete solution is in sight, however—and it, too, relies on Turkey.

Turkmenistan, on the eastern shore of the Caspian, has the fourth-largest gas reserves in the world. An interconnector between its gas fields and the Azerbaijani terminus of the SGC would represent a true game changer. Ashgabat has been reluctant historically to build the pipeline, but with the urging of Ankara, Turkmen President Serdar Berdimuhamedov is contemplating a change of course. In December he held a trilateral summit in the western Turkmen city of Awaza with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev. According to an official press release, these leaders discussed steps to deepen cooperation between the three countries, “in trade, energy, and transportation.” The formulation is an obvious hint that an interconnector with the SGC is under consideration.

Turkey's importance to the SGC goes far beyond its role as a transit state. The SGC is part of the Middle Corridor, the only land-based transport and energy supply route between Asia and Europe that neither Russia nor Iran controls. Without Turkish military power and Turkish diplomacy, the Middle Corridor would not exist—because Moscow and Tehran would work together to shut it down.

“God created war to teach Americans geography,” Mark Twain supposedly said. The dubiousness of the dictum's origins does nothing to diminish its sharpness. The Ukraine war has convinced the Biden team to begin the hard work of putting the “geo” back into American geostrategy by reevaluating Turkey's role in American foreign policy.

But the hardest work remains. A decision made over eight years ago is preventing Washington from reaping the full benefits of Turkish geostrategic heft. In 2014, President Barack Obama took the fateful step of turning the People's Protection Units (known by their Kurdish acronym, YPG) into the main ally of the United States in the fight against the Islamic State (ISIS). Neither of Obama's successors unwound the alliance, which has done untold damage to US-Turkey relations. The

YPG is the Syrian arm of the Kurdistan Workers' Party, or PKK, a terrorist organization that has fought a decades-long insurgency with the goal of creating an independent Kurdish state in eastern Turkey. Countering the YPG so that it cannot build an independent statelet in Syria is therefore a geopolitical imperative of Turkey.

Significant elements of the American strategic community have erroneously assumed that the conflict between Ankara and Washington over the YPG results from the personal political agenda of President Erdoğan, his supposed “neo-Ottoman” or “Islamist” agenda. Nothing could be more misleading. Turks make a very useful distinction between “state policies” and “government policies”—between policies that are based on a consensus of national security professionals and those that represent the goals of the ruling coalition. Opposition to the PKK and its affiliates, including the YPG, is the quintessential state policy. Back in the 1990s, when the dominant element in Turkish politics was a hyper-secular military, Ankara had the same perception of the PKK threat as it has today. Despite all the changes in Turkish domestic policy, the hostility to the PKK remains unchanged.

American policy, in fact if not by intention, has helped the YPG build a statelet on Turkey's border. Ankara will reconcile itself to the idea of such a political entity only the day after the United States encourages al-Qaeda to build a statelet in Mexico along the US border.

Turks do not refrain from bluntly saying that the US-YPG alliance is their top national security concern—a challenge that is even greater than balancing Russian power. As a result, we see in Turkish policy a notable compartmentalization. Ankara is supporting the Ukraine war as if the goal of Turkish policy is to undermine Russian power. Meanwhile in Syria, it engages Russia in a diplomatic process that, if it reaches its logical conclusion, will improve Russia's international position.

To understand this seeming contradiction, it is helpful to view it through Vladimir Putin's eyes. The Russian leader seeks to rehabilitate Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad and to restore Assad's control over lost Syrian territory. The Turkish military has developed and trained the SNA, some seventy thousand Syrian fighters who oppose the Assad regime. Turkey and its local partner control large swathes of Syrian territory and hold sway over millions of Syrian citizens across the north of the country. Disbanding the SNA and neutralizing Turkish opposition to the Assad regime, therefore, are Putin's top priorities in Syria.

If he attains those goals, Westerners who believe in the importance of containing Russia stand to lose a great deal. To repeat, Turkey is among the staunchest and most effective supporters of Ukraine. Since 2014, Ankara has never wavered in its opposition to the annexation of Crimea. Not only has it supplied drones to the Ukrainian military, but it even signed a drone co-production deal with Ukraine before doing the same with Azerbaijan, its closest ally. The Turkish military has also supplied Ukraine with many armored vehicles and, reportedly, rockets. In addition, the Turkish navy is helping to rebuild the Ukrainian navy, providing it with, among other things, corvettes. While providing this support to Ukraine, Turkey has also developed itself into the greatest obstacle to the Russian agenda in Syria.

However, if the diplomatic process in Moscow moves forward as planned, Turkish pressure against Russia in Syria will lessen quickly and could conceivably disappear entirely. At the end of December, Turkey's defense minister, Hulusi Akar, and intelligence chief, Hakan Fidan, met their Syrian counterparts in Moscow. Future ministerial-level meetings in Moscow are already in the works—a clear sign that Putin is making great headway in brokering a modus vivendi between Ankara and Damascus.

Putin envisions it as a quid-pro-quo. In return for ending its opposition to the Assad regime, Turkey will expect Russia and



Assad to end all support for the PKK and YPG. The precise terms of the draft deal have yet to be publicized, but the Turks are likely demanding that Damascus and Moscow recognize the YPG as a terrorist organization and prohibit all its activities on Syrian soil.

If Putin gets this deal, Turkey, Syria, and Russia will stand united against the YPG. Meanwhile, the United States would become the odd man out, its forces sitting alone in the northeastern quadrant of Syria with only their YPG friends to keep them company. A bilateral Russia-Turkey framework would determine the future of Syria.

Experience teaches us that analysts in the American national security community will paint a Russia-Turkey deal over the Assad regime as yet more proof of Erdoğan's supposedly anti-Western agenda. This analysis, however, will miss the key point: American support for the YPG is the main factor driving Erdoğan into Putin's arms.

Advocates of this analysis suffer from amnesia regarding the calculus that first convinced the Americans to bed down with the YPG. In 2014, when the alliance flowered, President Obama had his sights set on the Iran nuclear deal, which itself was fruit of the conviction that Russia and Iran shared with the United States many core interests, stabilizing Syria among them. In order not to queer the nuclear deal, Obama sought a Syrian partner against ISIS who would refrain from working to topple the Assad regime and, thereby, catapult the United States into conflict with Assad's patrons, Russia and Iran. As an arm of the PKK, the YPG has, historically, had cordial relations with Tehran and warm relations with Moscow.

In other words, the US borrowed the local partner of Russia and Iran. But the strategic accommodation with Moscow and Tehran that Obama dreamed of building never materialized. If Putin's current diplomatic gambit with Erdoğan pays off, he will have managed to swap the YPG to America in return for its

relationship with Turkey—hardly a wise trade from the US point of view.

How might the Biden administration respond? There are three basic scenarios. First, it could cut and run, on the model of the Afghanistan withdrawal. Its exit would create a vacuum in eastern Syria that Turkey, Russia, and Iran would fill. In that case, Turkey would drive the YPG from its border and dismantle any political structures that the organization built with the United States. The Turks would likely seek to control a 30-mile-deep buffer zone inside Syria. Russia and Iran would control the areas American forces evacuated further south, in places such as Deir Ezzor.

Second, the United States could continue to muddle through, maintaining its alliance with the YPG. This option would only succeed in goading Turkey, incentivizing it to work with Russia, not the US, to solve its security challenges in Syria. Relegated to observer status, the US would watch from the sidelines as Russia (to say nothing of Iran) works with Turkey to shape the future of Syria. In time, Washington would become increasingly irrelevant to developments on the ground and would negotiate the departure of its forces. In other words, Scenario Two merely delays Scenario One and then devolves into it.

Scenario Three entails working with Turkey to build a Syria that serves the interests of the US and its allies. This move makes sound geostrategic sense, but it carries a hefty political cost up front. To win over the Turks, the United States has to end its alliance with the YPG.

With the attached road map, Ömer Özkizilcik explains how the United States can carry out this difficult mission responsibly, in a way that would save the lives of America's YPG partners, be the least disruptive to the lives of Syrians currently living under YPG rule, and be most strategically beneficial to the US and its allies, Israel not least among them. His vision has five qualities that are particularly noteworthy:

1. It builds on an existing partnership between Turkey and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq—a partnership with which the United States is already very comfortable.
2. By blocking the Iranian supply lines across Syria, the road map creates the basis for a US-Israel-Turkey alignment in Syria, much like the alignment that existed in the 1990s.
3. The road map weakens the Assad regime and its patrons, Russia and Iran, and creates a framework for joint US-Turkey action in the future, including the elimination of ISIS.
4. It requires no direct American military action against either Russian or Iranian forces. Indeed, it only calls for little if any direct military action against anyone by the United States, whose role is limited to providing diplomatic support and extended military deterrence.
5. The road map encourages local governance of Arabs over Arabs and Kurds over Kurds in Syria.

Many Americans will object strenuously to the very notion of breaking ties with the YPG. America, they will argue, owes the organization a debt of gratitude for the role it played in defeating the Islamic State. Betraying allies, they will continue, is not just a sin and a dishonorable act, but it is also a blunder, because it undermines trust among others in America's friendship. This line of reasoning is impossible to refute. One can only ask whether the embrace of the YPG itself didn't entail the betrayal of America's treaty ally Turkey.

If allying with Turkey's mortal enemy was not a crime, it was certainly a blunder. When Turkey first protested the decision by Obama to arm, train, and equip the YPG, the Americans attempted to mollify Ankara by explaining that their relationship with the YPG was "temporary, tactical, and transactional." The bill has now come due on those promises. Those words may have been insincere, but they nevertheless expressed a profound truth. Sooner or later, US forces were going to leave Syria, but Turkey was always going to remain its neighbor—

and Ankara was never going to reconcile itself to a YPG statelet on Turkey's southern border.

In short, the balance of power dictated that Washington was always going to abandon the YPG. By deluding itself about this fact, the US behaved rashly. The only question is whether it will now act with an eye to minimizing the loss of life among the YPG and the local population, and to putting the "geo" back into "geostrategy." Learning from its past imprudence, the US has a chance to read the strategic map accurately, revitalize the US-Turkey alliance, and contain Russia and Iran more effectively. Or it can simply follow Obama's playbook to its logical endpoint and cede all influence in Syria to Moscow and Tehran. That is the stark choice. To posit a third alternative is to perpetuate the delusion—a course of action that will only strengthen America's strategic rivals and visit more death and destruction on Syrians and America's YPG partners.

Özkizilcik shows us the path forward. But the window for heeding his advice will not remain open for long. Time is running out.

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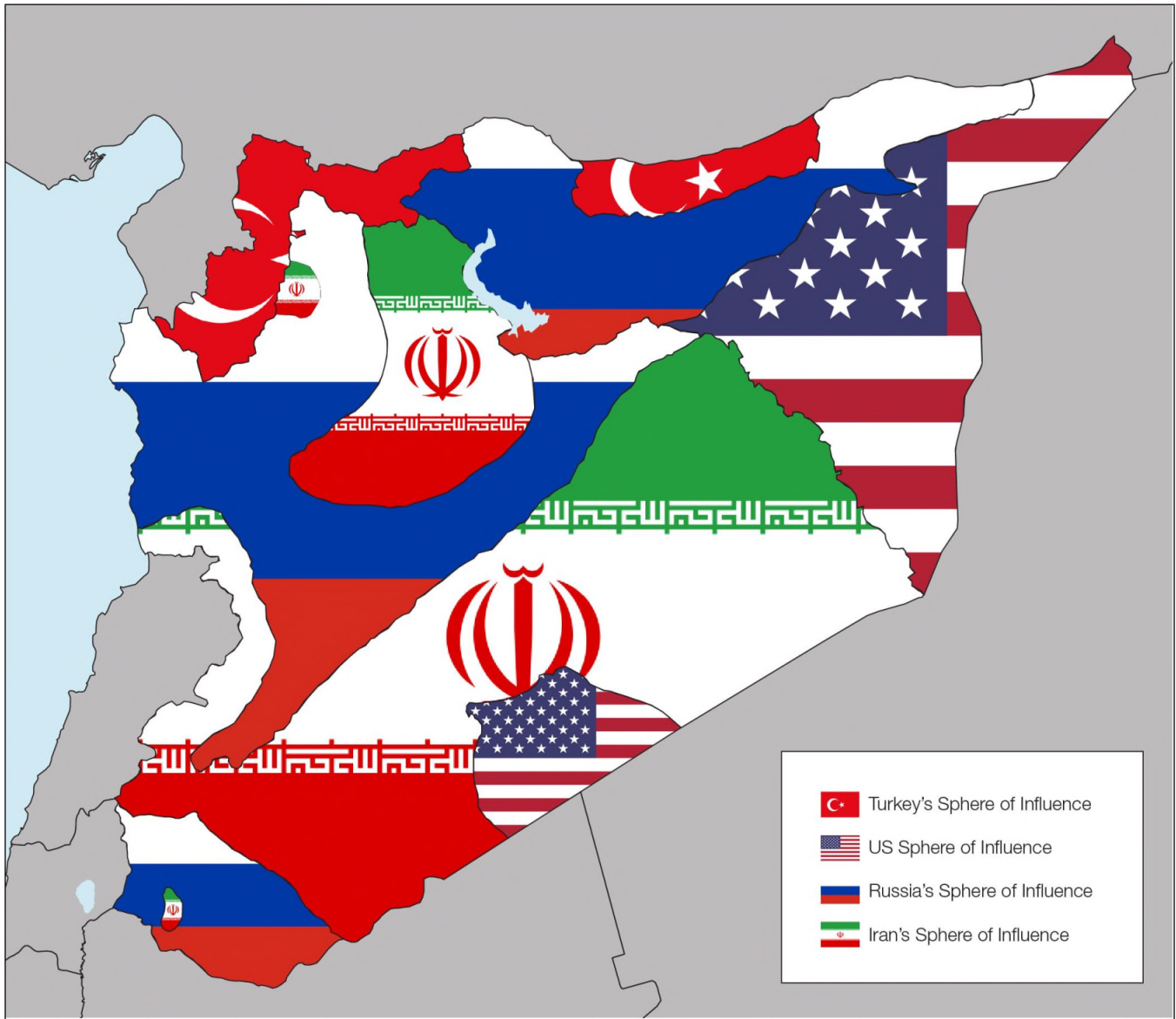
## A Road Map for Syria

*Ömer Özkizilcik*

Foreign military interventions have divided Syria into four parts: the Russian, Iranian, American, and Turkish spheres of influence. In practical terms, however, it makes sense to speak of only three spheres because the areas that Russia and Iran dominate function as a single unit. To be sure, Moscow and Tehran do not always work in perfect harmony, but both regard preserving the regime of Bashar al-Assad as a vital interest. They also recognize that a defeat of the Russian military in Ukraine would imperil not just the joint Iran-Russia project in Syria but many other shared interests as well. If they fail to hang together, they will hang separately. Consequently, analysts commonly refer to the Russian and Iranian spheres as a single complex, namely "the Assad regime territories."



Map 1: Spheres of Influence



Source: Author.

No such unity pertains to the Turkish and American spheres. For some seven decades, Washington and Ankara have worked together closely in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), but in Syria their policies are hopelessly

misaligned. The cause of the friction is easy to identify. In 2014, the Obama administration chose the People's Protection Units (YPG) as America's primary partner in Syria for combating the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). The YPG is the Syrian



wing of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which seeks to hive off the eastern half of Turkey and create an independent Kurdish state. In Turkey, the hostility toward the PKK is total. Citizens and national security officials alike unanimously regard it not just as a terrorist organization but also as the top security threat to the Turkish Republic. Ankara requested that the Obama administration refrain from partnering with the YPG. Although the United States itself regards the PKK as a terrorist organization and does not deny the ties between the PKK and the YPG, the administration refused.

Soon after initiating the partnership, the US military created the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), an alliance of militias that now dominates the American sphere of interest. If the Americans believed that the incorporation of non-Kurdish, mainly Arab, elements into the SDF would mollify Ankara by diluting the PKK influence, they were sadly mistaken. The YPG's command structure remains intact, and it dominates the SDF. By placing Arab militias under its control, the United States simply expanded the territory that the PKK can control and, for the first time, gave it the means to dominate ethnically Arab areas. American power allowed the PKK to overcome all of the natural barriers to creating an independent PKK statelet in northern Syria, knitting together areas of Kurdish settlement that would otherwise be isolated from one another.

For almost a decade now, the US-YPG alliance has poisoned relations between Ankara and Washington. Trust will not resume until the two countries resolve the conflict. This road map sketches out one possible solution by outlining the path along which Turkey and the United States can proceed together to create a unified sphere of influence. Seven basic assumptions inform this proposal:

1. A revitalized US-Turkey partnership requires a complete end to the alliance between the YPG and the US, with the YPG withdrawing entirely from the newly created US-Turkey sphere of influence.
2. The US and Turkey should seek to avoid direct confrontation with Russia.
3. The Turkish military, its Syrian allies, and the non-YPG elements of the SDF will be willing and able to assume most of the security duties that currently belong to the SDF and the YPG.
4. The ethnic composition of the political and military structures in each part of the joint US-Turkey sphere should reflect the local demographics: Kurds should govern Kurds, Arabs should govern Arabs, etc.
5. The elimination of ISIS in Syria is a core interest of both the Americans and the Turks.
6. Protecting civilians and minimizing the disruption of local conditions by evacuating the YPG are top concerns of both Washington and Ankara.
7. The US and Turkey will sponsor the development of local political and military structures in accordance with United Nations Security Council Resolution 2254, which recognizes the legitimacy of the Syrian opposition and calls on the Assad regime to negotiate a political transition with it.

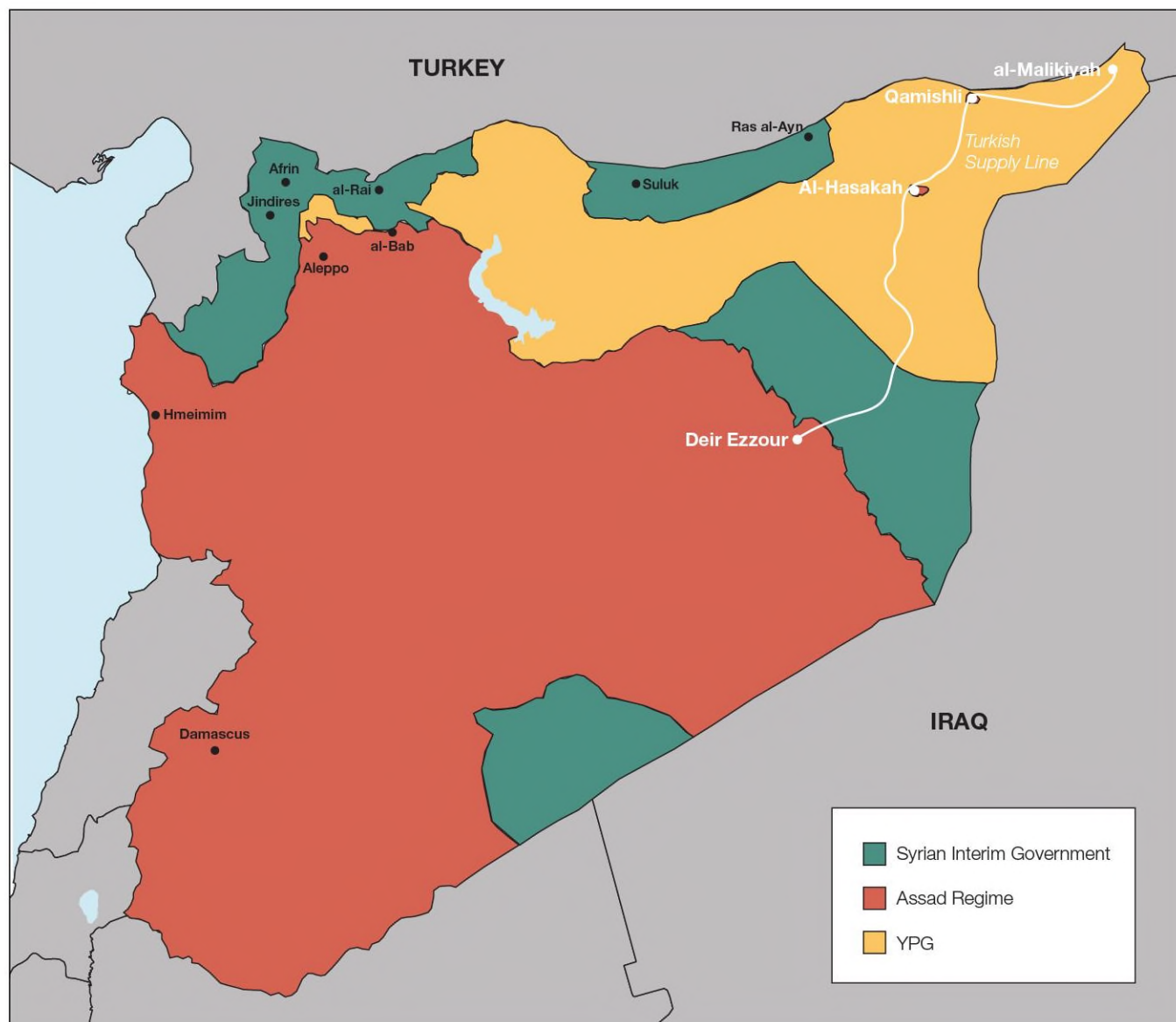
### Step 1: Evacuating the YPG from Deir Ezzour

The path to revitalizing the US-Turkey alliance begins with detaching the Deir Ezzour Military Council from the SDF and evacuating all YPG fighters from the region. The council is an ethnically Arab militia with strong roots in the local population. A relatively cohesive entity, it is an unnatural partner for a Kurdish affiliate of the PKK. American power brokered its marriage to the YPG. American power, therefore, can now sever the union.

The United States will encourage the Deir Ezzour Military Council to leave the SDF and join the Syrian National Army (SNA). Officially established in 2017, the SNA is the Turkey-backed Syrian military force. It opposes the Assad regime and therefore should not be confused with the Syrian Arab Armed Forces, Assad's military, for which Russia and Iran provide support.



Map 2: The Evacuation from Deir Ezzour



Source: Author.

The Deir Ezzour Military Council will integrate relatively smoothly into the SNA, many of whose fighters already hail from the region. During the civil war, some 250,000 people fled Deir Ezzour, seeking safety in the Turkey-protected areas of Northern

Syria—places such as al-Bab, al-Rai, Suluk, Jindires, and Afrin. These exiles have provided a steady stream of recruits for the SNA, which boasts within its ranks approximately as many Deir Ezzouri fighters as are currently serving in the Deir Ezzour



Military Council—around 7,000. When the Deir Ezzour Military Council joins the SNA, which currently contains seven legions, it will become the core of a new Eighth Legion.

Turkish special forces units will accompany the Deir Ezzori elements of the SNA to the region and will work with them and the Deir Ezzour Military Council to ensure that the Eighth Legion becomes a cohesive force. American special forces units that the US has already deployed to the region will remain in place, and they too will help guarantee a smooth transition. Supply lines from Turkey to its forces in Deir Ezzour and deployment routes from north to south will not pass through the Russian sphere of influence but will instead run along Road 716 to Highway N7 from al-Malikiyah to al-Hasakah and then on to Deir Ezzour. Turkish and American forces will work together to guard the route (see map 2).

Residents will view the Eighth Legion as an indigenous force. They regard the YPG, by contrast, as alien, because its soldiers hail from a different ethnic group and from a different part of Syria—or, indeed, from Turkey, Iraq, or Iran. After stabilizing the area, the Eighth Legion will work with the Turkish and American forces to oversee the creation of new local councils, which residents of the region, who will all adopt the Syrian revolutionary flag as their own, will elect.

Of course, the YPG may try to torpedo this operation. It might, for example, refuse to leave the province and invite the Assad regime and Russia in. But we have seen this movie before—in February 2018, when Russian mercenaries and pro-regime forces attempted to take over the oil-rich area, the US counterattack killed roughly 100 Syrian soldiers and 200 Russian paramilitaries within a matter of hours. Neither Moscow nor Damascus has forgotten the lesson.

If for one reason or another the US would prefer not to participate directly in the defense of the new political structure in Deir Ezzour, then Turkey would willingly assist the Eighth

Legion on its own. The recent historical record leaves no ambiguity on this point. In 2020, for example, Turkish forces in Idlib bested Assad regime forces, which included a significant Russian contingent. Much farther than Idlib from the Russian air base in Hmeimim, Deir Ezzour is beyond the range of the Russian air-defense systems. Given the setbacks that the Russian military has suffered in Ukraine and given the ongoing nature of that conflict, Moscow will think twice before attempting to oppose the Turkish military.

In the unlikely event that the YPG would be tempted to fight without the Russians, it would soon regret the decision. In Operation Olive Branch in 2018 and Operation Peace Spring in 2019, the Turkish military and the SNA quickly and decisively removed the YPG from Afrin, Tal Abyad, and Ras al-Ayn—that is, from areas that were far more familiar and permissive to the YPG. Faced with no chance of success, the YPG will either leave of its own volition or suffer a shattering defeat.

Once the YPG has evacuated the region, many refugees and internally displaced people who fled Deir Ezzour will return voluntarily to their hometowns. Cooperation between the United States and Turkey will immediately shift the balance of power on the ground. The tribes of Deir Ezzour are divided into three: those who work with the US and the YPG; those who work with Turkey; and those who work with Russia, Iran, and the Assad regime. If the tribes in the combined Turkish and American sphere make common cause, their combined power will increase compared to the tribes working with Russia, Iran, and the Assad regime.

Turkish special forces will assist them by, among other steps, building a base to host drones and helicopters. In addition to carrying out force-protection missions, the base will join the Americans in the fight against ISIS.

As counterterrorism partners with the United States, the Turkish military and the newly created Eighth Legion of the



SNA will prove superior to the YPG. While the YPG has an interest in fighting ISIS, it has no interest in actually defeating it, because the fight itself is what provides the organization with its sole source of international legitimacy. Moreover, the militants of the YPG lack the ability to address the structural conditions that fostered ISIS's rise in the first place, namely the vulnerability of Sunni Arab communities that are internally divided and threatened by external enemies, especially those with support from Iran and the Assad regime. The YPG is a totalitarian Marxist and Kurdish nationalist force. As such, its rule over Arabs is a gift for ISIS, which frames Kurdish authority over Arabs as a form of foreign domination.

In its operations against ISIS, the YPG primarily relies on its special forces, the Hêzên Antî Teror (HAT) units. They consist largely of PKK veterans who spent most of their lives in the Qandil Mountains of northern Iraq and lack local knowledge. To negotiate the human terrain, they rely on local Arab fixers, some of whom exploit their connections for personal benefits. Thanks to its organic ties to the local population, the Eighth Legion will be a more efficient fighting force and will create a stable and legitimate political order, one capable of repelling ISIS permanently.

Because American forces will not only remain in Deir Ezzour but be buttressed by their Turkish counterparts, they will continue to ensure that the region's oil does not fall into the hands of the Assad regime. In addition, they will work even more effectively to block the Iranian supply route that currently traverses the region—a point that Step 6 further develops.

### Step 2: Evacuating the YPG from Hasakah Province

After evacuating the YPG from Deir Ezzour, Turkey and the United States will turn their attention to evacuating it from the Hasakah region, the only other area in Syria where American troops are currently stationed. In contrast to Deir Ezzour, however, this province has a diverse population of Arabs and Kurds. Additionally, the Assad regime still maintains a presence

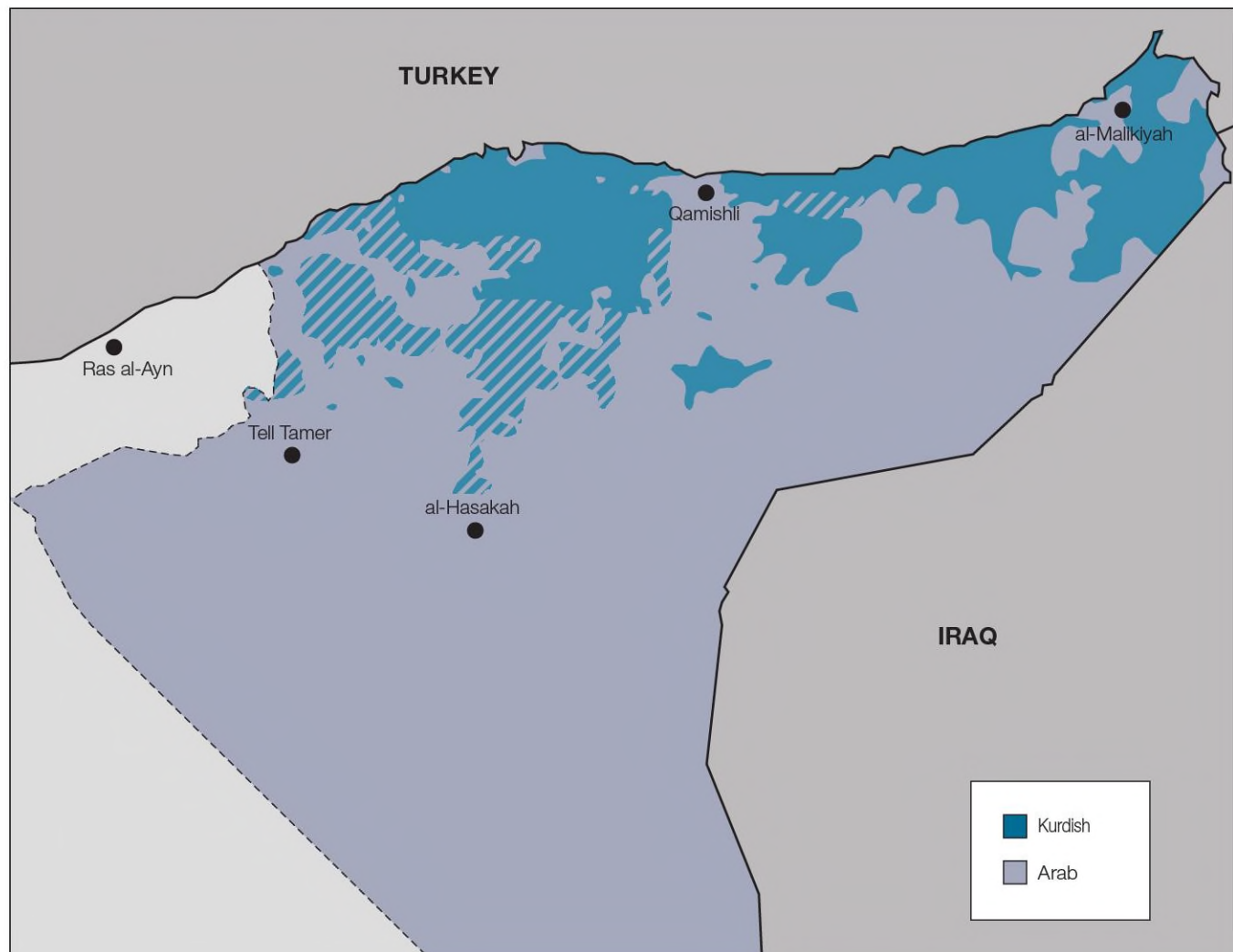
in the city of al-Hasakah and in Qamishli, where the YPG protects it.

In keeping with the principle that local political structures should reflect the ethnic composition of the people they represent, the US-Turkey coalition needs to find a Kurdish partner in Hasakah—one that both Ankara and the local Kurdish population trust. The Syrian Kurdish Council (abbreviated in Kurdish as ENKS) and its military wing, the Rojava Peshmerga, fulfill these criteria. ENKS has good relations with Ankara and is part of the Syrian National Coalition, the largest Syrian opposition group opposed to the Assad regime. In addition, ENKS has close ties to the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq, which maintains a warm friendship with Ankara and a strong hostility to the PKK. In recent years, the KRG has been in direct conflict with the PKK, against whom it has deployed the Rojava Peshmerga as its primary force. Being hostile to the PKK, the KRG is naturally hostile to the YPG, the PKK's Syrian wing.

Here again, if Turkey and the US demonstrate strong support for the Rojava Peshmerga, the YPG will be more inclined to refrain from fighting, especially because Hasakah's location on Turkey's border gives Ankara a strategic edge. Thus, after a signal of resolute intention by the Americans and Turks, the YPG will be inclined to withdraw voluntarily to either the Russian sphere of influence in the west, or to the Qandil Mountains via the smuggling routes from Syria into Iraq. Turkey and the United States will guarantee safe passage to units that choose to retreat.

If, however, the YPG opts to resist, the Turkish Armed Forces will attack, northward from Deir Ezzour and southward from Turkey proper. Meanwhile, the Rojava Peshmerga will advance from the east, with KRG support, into the YPG-held Kurdish territories. Once the YPG fighters realize they are flanked on three sides, those who joined them either under duress or due to a lack of alternatives will defect. The YPG leadership

Map 3: The Demography of Hasakah Province



Source: Author.

will soon find that it can rely only on militants from the Qandil Mountains. The battle will end quickly, with a decisive defeat for the YPG.

As part of the Syrian Kurdish Council, the Rojava Peshmerga will facilitate ethnic self-rule within these Kurdish areas, and it will fold itself into the SNA, forming the Tenth Legion. Defectors

from the YPG and Syrian Kurdish elements who are already fighting in Turkey-supported groups will swell its ranks.

As the Rojava Peshmerga assumes control of the Kurdish communities of Hasakah, a simultaneous initiative to separate the Arab communities in the region from the YPG will ensue. The US will urge local militias to follow the example of the Deir

Ezzour Military Council, to leave the SDF and become units in the SNA. Together with Arab exiles from Hasakah, these militias will form its Ninth Legion. As in Deir Ezzour, Turkish special forces will deploy to the region, and residents will elect local councils. ISIS prisons and refugee camps like the Al-Hol camp will be run by the SNA.

Thanks to the cordial relationship that the YPG maintains with Moscow, Tehran, and Damascus, the Assad regime has always maintained a presence in the city of al-Hasakah and in Qamishli. During the process of evacuating the YPG and bringing the area under the authority of the SNA, therefore, the Turkish and American militaries will monitor the perimeter around Assad's forces to avoid a confrontation. The Turkish military has experience in executing this task. During previous operations, it prevented clashes between regime forces and the SNA in Manbij, Tell Rifaat, and Ras al-Ayn.

### Step 3: Engaging Russia

As the US and Turkey begin to follow this road map, Russia will gain influence over the YPG, which, due to the loss of both US military support and oil revenues from Deir Ezzour, will become incapable of maintaining its control over the majority-Arab areas. Cities such as Raqqa, Tabqah, and Manbij, which are more in the Russian than the American sphere of influence, will be up for grabs, thus providing Russia with an opportunity to extend regime control over these areas.

Moscow will have two ways to proceed. First, it might seek the full dissolution of the YPG, calling on it to disband its local governance structures and armed forces and to submit instead to Assad regime institutions. Or it will seek to impose regime control indirectly by allowing the YPG to remain intact on the condition that it operates as a subordinate element of the Assad regime rather than with full autonomy.

To accommodate Moscow, the US and Turkey should consider giving Russia a free hand in Raqqa, al-Tabqah, and Manbij. In

truth, they would only be ceding territory that, if push came to shove, would be costly to hold. In return for this concession, however, the US and Turkey should expect two things: Russia's general acquiescence to the road map and its withdrawal from Kurdish areas in northern Syria, namely Ayn al-Arab (Kobane), Amuda, al-Dirbasiyah, and parts of Qamishli (see map 4).

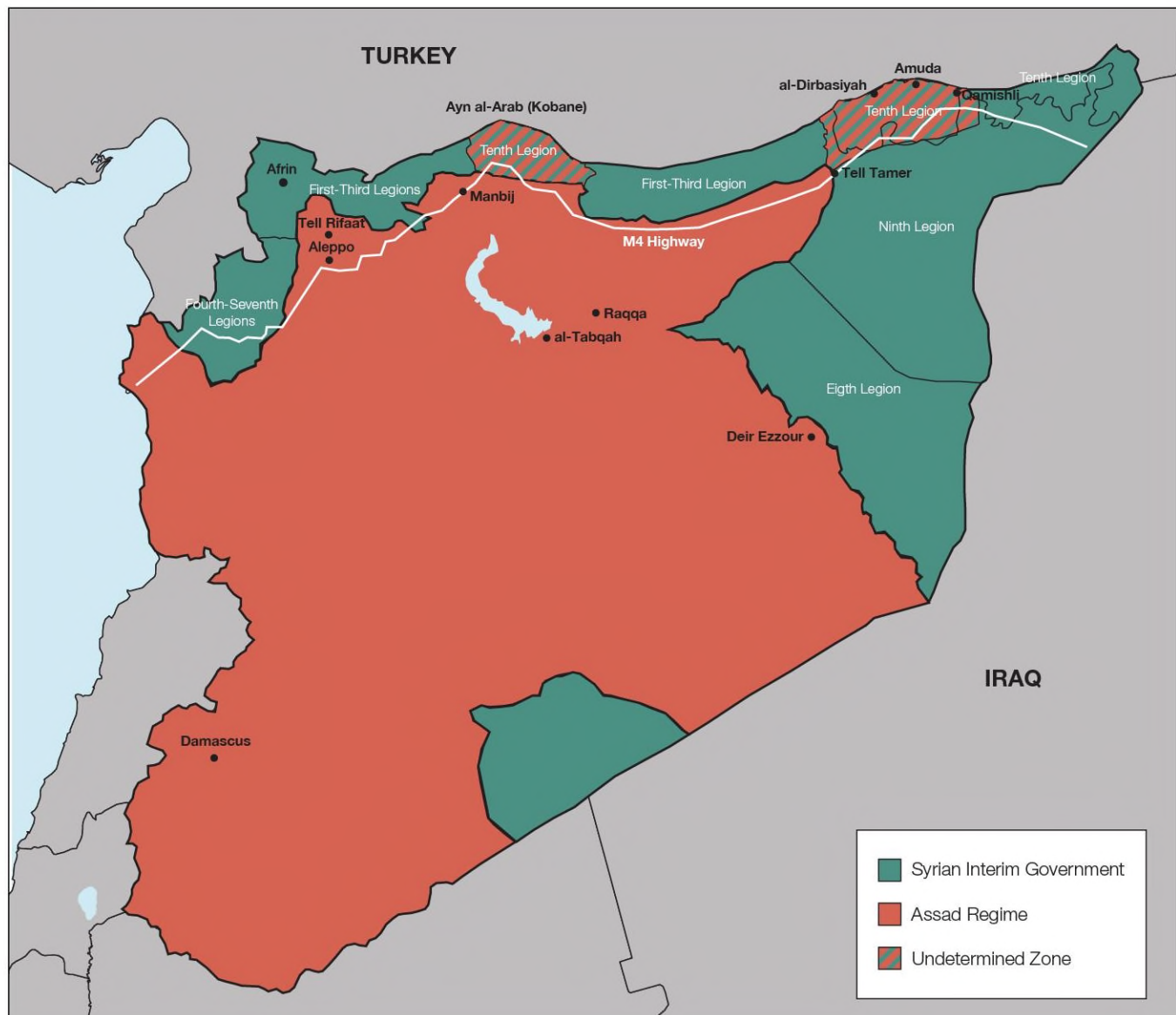
These areas are mostly Kurdish. In 2019, Erdoğan and Putin signed an agreement requiring the YPG to withdraw from these areas to points south of the M4 highway, some 30 kilometers from the Turkish border. But Putin never complied. Using diplomacy and taking advantage of the leverage that Turkey's geographical proximity offers, Ankara and Washington should raise the question with Moscow anew. Putin's compliance would allow Turkey and the US to link their zones of influence from the Iraqi border in the northeast of Syria all the way to Afrin in the northwest.

Chances are good that Putin will be receptive to the deal. When he faced an impending Turkish offensive against Afrin in 2018, he recognized the Turkish interest in the region and withdrew his forces. If he were to follow this model again, the YPG would withdraw to Russia-controlled areas of Syria, and the Rojava Peshmerga would enter Ayn al-Arab (Kobane), Amuda, al-Dirbasiyah, and parts of Qamishli unopposed. Following this step, local people should elect local councils to administer themselves. If the YPG tries to fight without Russian support, it would once again suffer inevitable defeat.

But we cannot ignore the possibility that Russia will reject the US-Turkey deal and instead level maximalist demands. Moscow may prefer to integrate the YPG fully into the Assad regime to extend regime control to the Turkish border. In such a scenario, Turkey and the US would either capitulate or show Russia some teeth, using their advantageous position to force terms on Moscow.

If the Turkish military were to drive Russian forces from these areas, the operation, especially with the support

Map 4: Potential Swaps with Russia



Source: Author.

of American diplomacy, would shake the entire Russian position in Syria. In adjoining areas—such as Raqqa, al-Tabqah, Tell Rifaat, Manbij, and Tell Tamer, where the Assad regime only recently established control, sometimes only

indirectly—residents would see a new chance to challenge the regime. If Putin did not immediately understand that he faced a threat to his entire Syrian enterprise, he would quickly come around.



#### Step 4: Clearing Idlib

After uniting the Turkish and American spheres of influence, Ankara and Washington will work to clear Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), a former al-Qaeda affiliate and designated terror organization, from Idlib. Turkey and the US will begin this process, first, by demanding that HTS disband, and second, by calling on its Syrian members to join the National Front for Liberation, which joined the SNA in 2018 and now makes up its Fourth, Fifth, Sixth, and Seventh Legions.

To ensure that HTS accepts this demand, Ankara, with assistance from Washington, will step up its financial and logistic support to the National Front for Liberation and communicate with figures inside HTS to encourage their defection. Elements who refuse to defect will receive an ultimatum: join the SNA or become legitimate targets of Turkish and US drone attacks. Turkey and the US will condition their aid to the National Front for Liberation on efforts to go after elements that reject the offer. After clearing radicals from Idlib, local people will elect local councils.

#### Step 5: Restructuring the Syrian Interim Government

While working to disband HTS, Turkey and the US will also restructure the administrative system in the new US-Turkey sphere of interest. The goals for the restructuring are three: (1) to make it more democratic and pluralist, (2) to reflect the new realities on the ground, and (3) to allay fears that the consolidation of the Turkish and American spheres of influence is the prelude to the de facto partitioning of Syria between, on the one hand, Turkey and the US, and on the other, Russia and Iran.

The Syrian Interim Government is and shall remain the primary civilian authority in opposition-held areas. At the moment, its legitimacy derives from the Syrian National Coalition, which 114 nations including Turkey and the US recognize as the representative of the Syrian people. The reformed Syrian Interim Government should have two components: a

bicameral legislature and an executive office. The first chamber of the legislature would contain delegates chosen by the local councils in the US-Turkey sphere. The second chamber would contain delegates from the Syrian National Coalition, which represents the Syrian people, including those who are under the control of the regime or live as refugees abroad. Together the two chambers will elect the executive.

If the Syrian Interim Government were to be formed from local councils alone, without the participation of the Syrian National Coalition, it would simply become the government of northern Syria. To prevent a de facto partition of the country, it is crucial to include the Syrian National Coalition, which has a mandate to represent all the Syrian people.

The SNA will answer to the executive branch of the Syrian Interim Government, which the US and Turkey will recognize as their primary interlocutor.

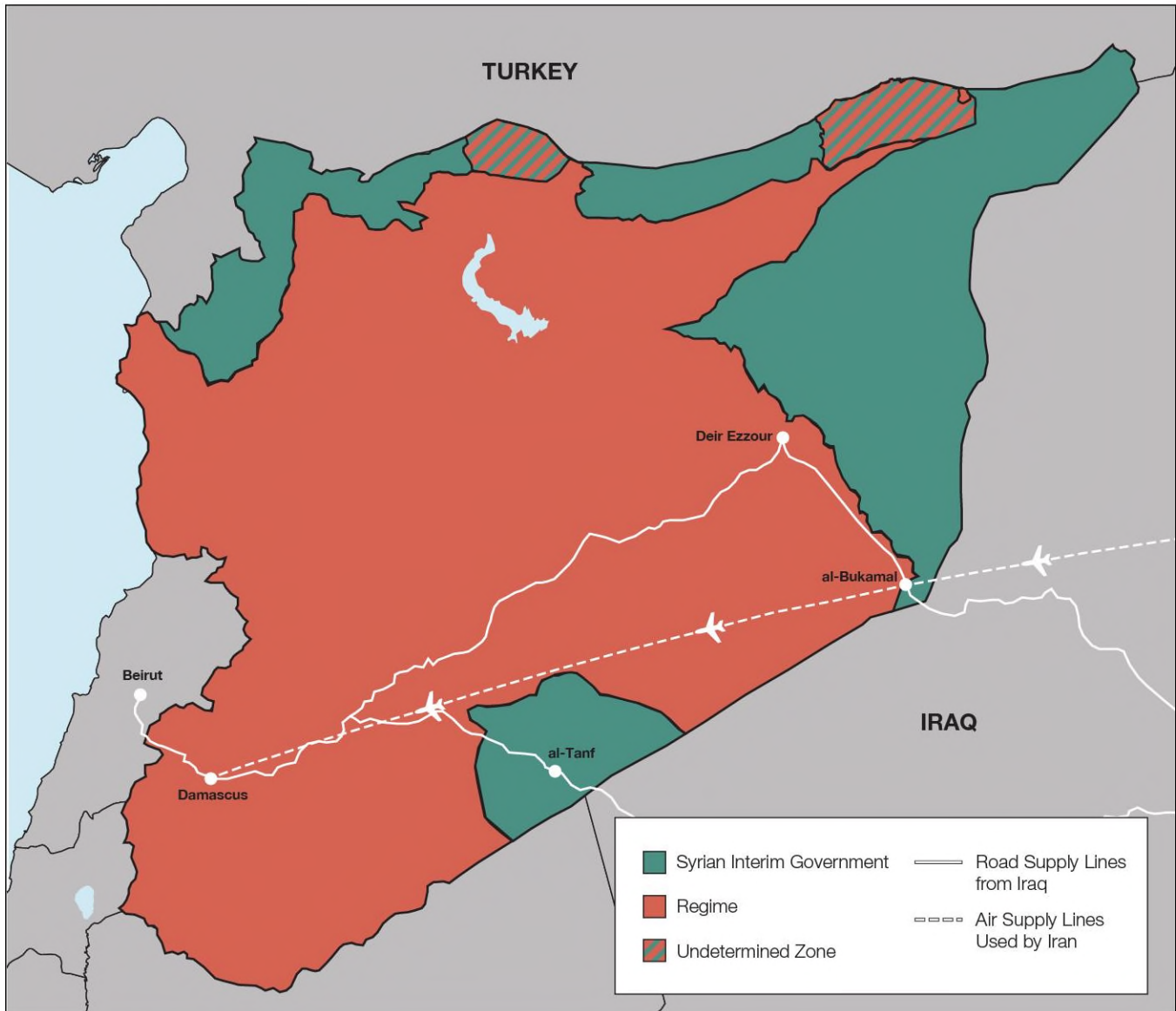
#### Step 6: Blocking Iran's Supply Corridor

In practical terms, Tehran has only two land routes by which to move weapons and other supplies across Syria to Damascus and Beirut. The first is the al-Walid border crossing in Iraq, which is under the control of the American military in the al-Tanf region. The second goes through al-Bukamal, in the Deir Ezzour governate. Iran-backed Shia militias currently control this route. Thanks to its cozy relationship with the Assad regime, the YPG does not contest their presence.

The contrast with the policies of the KRG is instructive. The KRG's close relations with Turkey mean that Iran has never managed to open a northern route into Hasakah province. The newly established Syrian Eighth Legion will be composed of trained, experienced, and efficient fighters, Deir Ezzour locals known for their staunch opposition to Iran and its regional ambitions. Their return home will allow them to follow the example of the KRG and prevent Iran from controlling the border crossing in Syria.



Map 5: Blocking Iran



Source: Author.

After the evacuation of the YPG, Turkey and the United States will sponsor a campaign to drive the Iran-backed militias from Abu Kamal. In addition to the capabilities and motivations of the Eighth Legion, the US and Turkey also

rely on the newly established drone and helicopter base in Deir Ezzour. Faced with a united front from Turkey and the United States, Iran's proxies will have no chance of winning this engagement and will either withdraw to Iraq or die.



Before long, the Eighth Legion will control al-Bukamal (see map 5).

But we should also consider Iran's tendency to respond to such setbacks indirectly, in a time and place of its choosing. It might, for example, use militias to target Turkish and American military facilities in Iraq. In such a case, the US and Turkey have to prepare themselves in advance to deter Iran, to

persuade it that if it gives the order to attack, it will lose much more than it will gain.

## Conclusion

If Washington and Ankara closely follow this road map, they will not just align their policies in Syria but also eliminate the greatest source of friction between them and create a basis for allied action in the future.

## Glossary

**Deir Ezzour Military Council:** The Arab-majority militia of the Syrian Democratic Forces, based in the Deir al-Zour Governate.

**Syrian National Army (SNA):** A coalition of Turkish-backed Syrian groups opposed to the Assad regime.

**National Front for Liberation:** A coalition of Syrian anti-regime rebel groups in Idlib that is part of the Syrian National Army.

**Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF):** The American-backed defense force of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, which is led by the YPG.

**Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK):** A Kurdish militant political organization with an armed guerilla movement, designated as a terrorist organization by Turkey, the United States, the European Union, Canada, Japan, Australia, the United Kingdom, and New Zealand. The PKK primarily acts in the Kurdish-majority regions of southeast Turkey, northern Iraq, Iran, and Syria. Its Syrian wing is the PYD/YPG.

**Democratic Union Party (PYD):** A political party among Syrian Kurds, established in 2003 as the Syrian branch of the PKK. The PYD follows the ideology of Abdullah Öcalan, a founding member of the PKK.

**People's Defense Units (YPG):** The military branch of the PYD that is the primary component of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). The Syrian wing of the PKK, they are considered a terrorist organization by Turkey.

**Syrian Arab Armed Forces:** The military forces of the Syrian Arab Republic. President Bashar Hafez al-Assad serves as the commander-in-chief.

**Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG):** The official governing body of the autonomous Kurdistan region of northern Iraq, established in 1992.

**Syrian Kurdish Council/Kurdish National Council (ENKS):** A Syrian Kurdish political party in opposition to the Assad regime with close ties to the KDP, the ruling Kurdish party in the KRG.

**Rojava Peshmerga:** The paramilitary wing of the ENKS, mostly comprised of Syrian Kurdish refugees and Syrian Arab Army deserters.

**Syrian Interim Government (SIG):** An alternative government in Syria that claims to be the sole legitimate representation of the Syrian opposition to the Syrian Arab Republic and the Assad regime. The SIG was founded in 2013 by the umbrella opposition group, the Syrian National Coalition.



Syrian National Coalition: A coalition of opposition groups united behind the mutual purpose of replacing the Bashar al-Assad government.

Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS): A Sunni Islamist political and armed group, headquartered in Idlib, formed in 2017 from a merger of the former al-Qaeda affiliate in Syria, the Nusra Front, with multiple smaller organizations.



## About the Author



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