



THE DOSSIER

Opportunities for De-Escalation in the Kurdish-Turkish Conflict

By Meghan Bodette and Calvin Wilder

Executive Summary

In recent months, the United States has made its most concentrated efforts to date to address the armed conflict between the government of Turkey and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and, more broadly, Turkey's "Kurdish question" – the unresolved debate over what civil, political and cultural rights the country's Kurdish minority should be guaranteed. [Credible reports indicate](#) that the United States has leveraged diplomatic backchannels to pressure the PKK to declare a

cease-fire in the conflict and that the PKK has been receptive to this request.

This limited but positive step toward peace has created a window of opportunity for policymakers in Washington to push for a more durable settlement to one of the Middle East's longest-running and bloodiest conflicts. Failure to capitalize on this moment may result in the launch of new Turkish military campaigns, not only against the PKK but also against the U.S.-allied Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in northeast Syria. Such



A Supporter holds a sign reading “We promise you, we will win” during a rally for Turkey’s Republican People’s Party Chairman and Presidential candidate Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu in Çanakkale, western Turkey, on April 11, 2023. In the distance, a large poster of Kılıçdaroğlu, who is challenging Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in the May 2023 elections, promises “the return of spring.” (Ozan Kose / AFP via Getty Images)



campaigns could lead to a resurgence of ISIS and the destruction of a fragile political project that has seen the expansion of women's rights and democratic governance across northeast Syria – key pillars in the Biden administration's push for democratic resilience around the world.

The United States can use these events not only to address long-unresolved challenges to security and stability in northeast Syria but also to compete strategically to counter the influence of adversaries including Russia and Iran, which are poised to gain influence in northeast Syria in the event of a destabilizing Turkish offensive.

Because of the unique gendered impacts of the conflict, particularly in Syria, and the vastly divergent visions of the role of women in public life and society held by Turkey and Kurdish groups across the region, a gender analysis can help the U.S. take its next steps. The [Women, Peace, and Security \(WPS\)](#) agenda and the [National Strategy on Gender Equity and Equality](#) provide policymakers with valuable tools to chart a new course toward deeper engagement on this issue.

Key Takeaways

- A political settlement to Turkey's "Kurdish question" provides the best chance of preserving long-term stability in northeastern Syria and addressing major outstanding issues in U.S.-Turkey

relations, two important steps for ensuring long-term regional security and stability.

- Recent developments, including a partial cease-fire declared by the PKK, and potential developments, including the prospect of a new government in Turkey that may be more willing to pursue negotiations, present a rare opportunity for U.S. diplomacy on this matter.

- The gendered impacts of the conflict underline and exacerbate its seriousness and give policymakers important avenues through which to act.

Policy Recommendations:

- Maintain opposition to any new Turkish military incursion into northeastern Syria.

- Counter forms of Turkish pressure short of a ground incursion that are particularly destabilizing, especially those which benefit ISIS, Iran, and Russia.

- Consolidate a pro-peace policy on the Kurdish question by reassessing U.S. policies that have incentivized conflict or had a chilling effect on dialogue and building on existing political and security frameworks to urge de-escalation in the region.

- Use the Women, Peace, and Security Strategy and National Strategy on Gender Equality and Equity to reassess policies that have contributed to conflict or may pose obstacles to diplomacy.



MAY 2023

THE DOSSIER

Opportunities for De-Escalation in the Kurdish-Turkish Conflict

By Meghan Bodette and Calvin Wilder





Table of Contents

| | |
|---|-----------|
| Executive Summary | FrontPage |
| Key Takeaways | |
| Policy Recommendations | |
| <hr/> | |
| The Istanbul Bombing and Operation Claw-Sword | 3 |
| Steps Toward De-escalation | 5 |
| U.S. Opportunities | 7 |
| The Gendered Dynamics of the Conflict | 9 |
| Gendered Violence in Northeast Syria | 10 |
| Forced Displacement | 12 |
| Promotion of Groups that Use Violence Against Women | 12 |
| Implications for Washington | 13 |
| Recommendations for U.S. Policymakers | 15 |

The views expressed in this article are those of the authors and not an official policy or position of the New Lines Institute.

COVER PHOTO: Syrian Democratic Forces fighters take part in a funeral in Hasakeh, in northeast Syria in February 2022, for members killed during a jailbreak attempt by the Islamic State at the Ghwayran prison. (AFP via Getty Images)

The New Lines Institute for Strategy and Policy

Our mission is to provoke principled and transformative leadership based on peace and security, global communities, character, stewardship, and development.

Our purpose is to shape U.S. foreign policy based on a deep understanding of regional geopolitics and the value systems of those regions.



The Istanbul Bombing and Operation Claw-Sword

Turkey's response to a November 2022 IED attack that killed six people and injured 81 impacted the calculations of both U.S. and Kurdish decisionmakers in a way that may have led to a unique convergence of interests in de-escalation. Two factors highlighted the links between anti-Kurdish nationalism and militarism and anti-Western geopolitical orientations in Turkey. The first was Turkey's [insistence](#) – with limited evidence – that the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and the U.S.-allied Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) were responsible for the attack; the second was rhetoric from hardline interior minister Süleyman Soylu [insinuating](#) that the U.S. itself was to blame.

The [air operation](#) and threats of a ground campaign that followed the bombing caused the United States to [publicly](#) reiterate its opposition to a Turkish ground operation in northeast Syria. It also shows the links between Turkey's "Kurdish question" – the unresolved debate over what civil, political, and cultural rights the country's Kurdish minority should be guaranteed – and its policy toward northeast Syria, illustrating the weakness of a U.S. policy approach that has until now sought to separate the issues. Ankara's long-running and deep-seated misgivings about Kurdish political autonomy within Turkey, and its assessment that the PKK poses an existential threat to national security, have consistently pulled the Turkish state into broader regional entanglements, both in Syria and in northern Iraq. Washington's efforts to develop its counter-ISIS mission in those countries in a vacuum have led policymakers to be blindsided by a Turkish state that sees the Kurdish question as a regional issue rather than purely a matter of domestic policy.

Turkey's decision throughout 2022 to [target](#) the SDF – specifically those engaged in counter-ISIS missions alongside U.S. forces – demonstrated a willingness to threaten U.S. interests in Syria in addition to those of the SDF. This targeting strategy reached a dramatic head in November, when Turkey struck an SDF base housing the force's commander-in-chief, directly adjacent to a U.S. base. The attack forced the United States to confront the fact that Turkey's militarized approach to northeast Syria has aligned it in practice, if not rhetorically, with Iran and Russia in efforts to not



A Syrian Democratic Forces rebel fighter holds a rocket-propelled grenade launcher at the front lines outside of Syria's northern city of Manbij, on June 8, 2022. (Bakr Alkasem / AFP via Getty Images)

only destroy the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) and SDF but also force the U.S. out of the country's northeast.

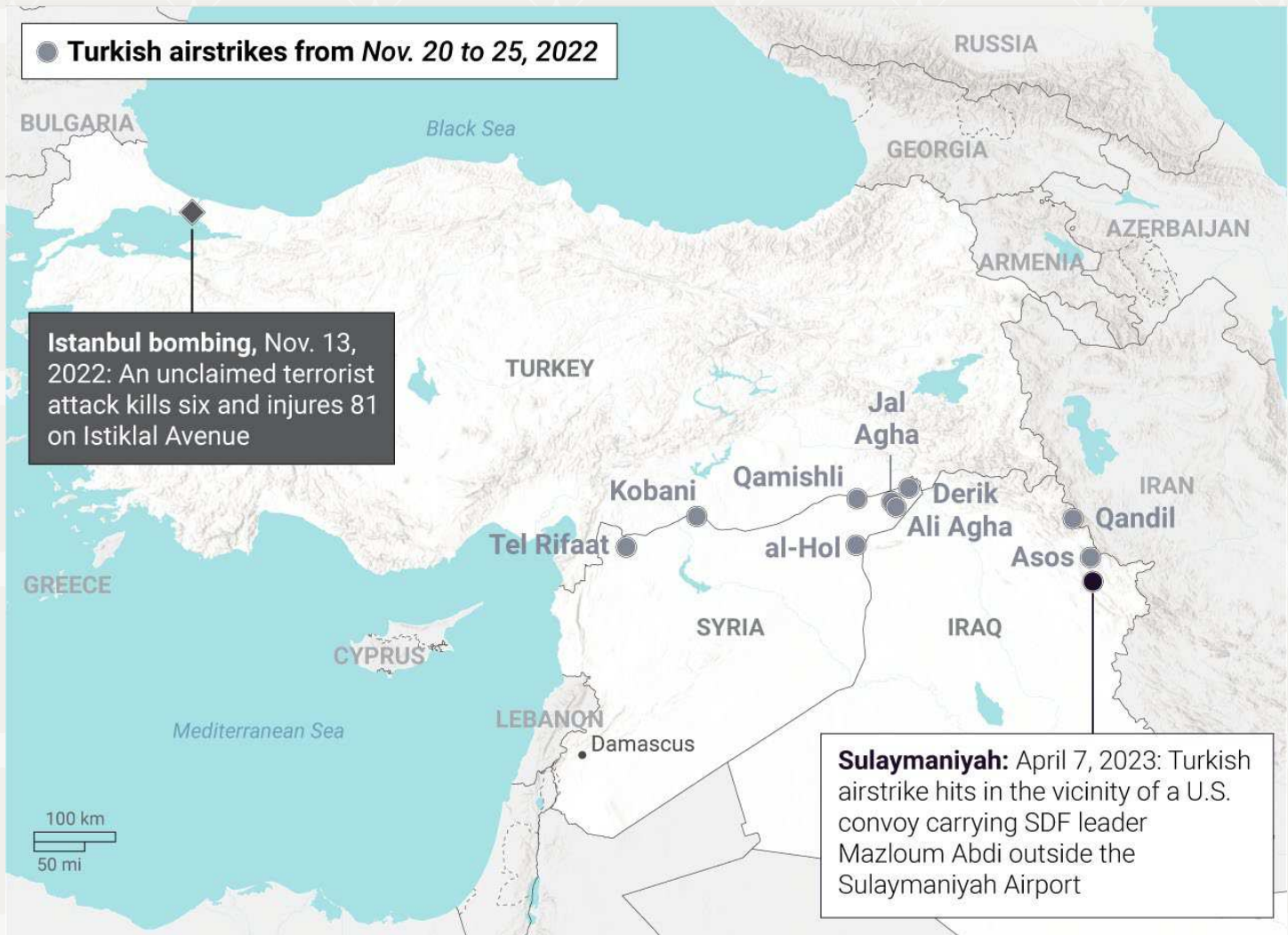
For the Kurdish side, the bombing and air operation highlighted the disproportionate political risks that even limited PKK military activity in Turkey poses to the autonomy of northeast Syria. Turkey's threats of a ground invasion and attacks on the SDF's leadership, rank-and-file members, and critical civilian infrastructure across northeast Syria demonstrated that the existence of the AANES depends on de-escalation and deconfliction with Turkey. While Turkey ultimately failed to convince its allies of PKK or SDF responsibility for the Istanbul attack or gain a green light for a new ground operation in Syria in retaliation, the fact that it attempted to do so and the existential threat that success on those objectives would have posed to the SDF and the AANES forced Kurdish decisionmakers to confront the costs of PKK activity within Turkish borders.

It also raised concerns as to whether a repeat scenario might occur closer to Turkey's May 14 elections, helping Turkish President Recep Tayyip



Turkish Reprisals Following the Istanbul Bombing

Although the identity and motive of the Istanbul bombing perpetrator were never discovered, the Turkish government blamed the attack on the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and People's Defense Units (YPG) to justify increased airstrikes in northeast Syria. Turkey has conducted multiple anti-PKK and anti-SDF/YPG campaigns in Iraq and Syria, the most recent being Operation Claw-Sword.



Sources: The Guardian, Al Jazeera, Hawar News Agency, Daily Sabah, The Defense Post, Kurdistan 24

© 2023, The New Lines Institute for Strategy and Policy

Erdoğan securitize the election environment in a manner that might make the vote less free, stoke nationalist sentiment to shore up support, and force the opposition to distance itself from the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP). The HDP's predominantly Kurdish voter base has contributed to opposition wins before and is [well-positioned to do so again](#). However, the party's outspoken support for a Turkey-PKK peace process could make it a political liability in the event of escalating hostilities.

Suspicious violence has marred the run-up to critical elections before, such as the June 2015 [bombing](#) of a HDP rally and the October 2015 [attack](#) on a pro-Kurdish peace rally in Ankara, both attributed to ISIS.

The Turkish elections have become a referendum on Erdoğan and the ruling Justice and Development party (AKP)'s nine years in power, with the Republican People's Party (CHP) leading an opposition coalition



Kurdish and Gender Views of Turkey's Candidates and Their Parties

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan of the Justice and Development Party will face opposition leader Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu of the Republican People's Party (CHP) in the upcoming May 2023 Turkish elections. While Erdoğan's rhetoric is greatly anti-Kurdish, Kılıçdaroğlu's CHP has quiet support from Turkey's pro-Kurdish party, the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP).

| | Erdoğan/AKP | Kılıçdaroğlu /CHP |
|--------------------------------|------------------|---------------------------|
| HDP backing | Opposed by HDP | Formally supported by HDP |
| Party MPs who are women | 19% | 12% |
| Turkish troops in Syria | In favor | Opposed (as of 2021) |
| The Istanbul Convention | Withdrew from it | Pledged to return to it |

Sources: Al-Monitor.com, Hurriyet Daily News

© 2023, The New Lines Institute for Strategy and Policy

that seeks to portray Erdoğan's rule as [sectarian](#), [corrupt](#), and [authoritarian](#). Erdoğan and CHP leader Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu have also sparred over their stances on Syrian refugees: Kılıçdaroğlu has repeatedly [vowed](#) to repatriate the entire population in the next two years, while Erdoğan has been more willing to permit Syrians to live and work in Turkey. Perhaps the most pronounced difference in the two leaders' policies is their approach to Kurdish issues. Kılıçdaroğlu has [spoken openly about his Alevi heritage](#) and quietly built ties to the HDP, although it is not formally a part of the opposition coalition, leading many to hope that a CHP-led government would be more conducive to broader de-escalation of the Turkey-Kurdish conflict.

As a result of Erdoğan's approach to the Kurdish issue since the breakdown of peace talks in 2015, virtually all major armed and civilian Kurdish entities in Turkey and Syria believe that an Erdoğan victory would be far worse for Kurdish interests regionally than an opposition victory – particularly one delivered by the support of Kurdish voters. The Union of Communities in Kurdistan (KCK), the umbrella organization for the Abdullah Öcalan-inspired Kurdish movement in Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria, has [called for an end to Erdoğan's government in 2023](#), and its leaders have [brought up the role of the HDP in statements](#). Syrian Kurdish leadership has expressed a willingness to talk to the CHP and suggested that a new government [may have to approach the Kurdish issue differently](#) due to HDP votes.

Polls over the past month have [shown](#) that this is by far Erdoğan's most challenging election campaign since he first won the presidency in 2014. Recent polls have generally put Erdoğan and Kılıçdaroğlu in a dead heat and occasionally have shown Erdoğan lagging by as much as 10 points. If the polling numbers are accurate, the election appears likely to go into a runoff, currently [scheduled](#) for May 28. The Turkish lira's rapid inflation, coupled with the acute economic shock of the February earthquake, have put economic issues [front and center this election cycle, meaning](#) Erdoğan's appeals to nationalism and security concerns may prove less relevant.

Regardless of who ultimately wins, this election cycle has revealed that Turkey's "Kurdish question" is a live issue in Turkish politics and that a candidate who cultivates ties with pro-Kurdish political parties and expresses willingness to see the issue resolved in parliament can mount a competitive political campaign. Nearly a decade after Turkey's peace talks with the PKK broke down in 2015, this election has created an opportunity for putting Kurdish political issues back into mainstream politics.

Steps Toward De-escalation

The 7.8-magnitude earthquake that struck southeastern Turkey and Syria in early February, and the resulting humanitarian crisis, decreased the immediate likelihood of a new Turkish operation into northern Syria. The catastrophic damage left



“... a U.S. official said for the first time that there was “no military solution” to the conflict and questioned the efficacy of Turkey’s cross-border operations in Syria and Iraq for the country’s security concerns.”

more than [50,000 people dead](#) and over 1.5 million [homeless](#) in Turkey and northern Syria, giving leaders on both sides of the border a far more pressing crisis to address. SDF leaders had previously [assessed](#) a new attack to be likely in February. Although Erdoğan’s government faced [criticism](#) over the speed of rescue operations and its lax enforcement of building safety codes, subsequent polling found that these critiques did not translate into increased opposition support. Erdoğan’s steady polling numbers may also reduce the immediate risk of an invasion, as Turkish saber rattling in Syria has historically been a way for the ruling party to rally support during periods of high inflation, unemployment, or other domestic crises.

Under these conditions, the PKK had both new incentives and political cover to declare a partial cease-fire, stating that it would end attacks on Turkish territory and would only use force in any country if attacked first. While its initial [announcement](#) appeared focused on the immediate humanitarian situation following the earthquake, subsequent statements point to a longer-running, U.S.-led backchannel influencing the decision. In February, SDF Commander-in-Chief Mazloum Abdi [said](#) “international actors” have “tried to send a message to the PKK through us, sometimes, to convince the PKK to announce a cease-fire.” In December, Abdi [called](#) on countries that supported the SDF in the fight against ISIS to engage in resolving the Turkish-Kurdish conflict and offered the SDF’s assistance in promoting a political solution to the conflict. Speaking at a conference at the European Parliament in March, SDC President Ilham Ahmed [stated](#) that one of the countries that had made the request for Abdi to ask the PKK to declare a cease-fire was the United States.

The PKK itself lent some credence to these claims, when KCK Co-Chair and PKK founding member Cemil

Bayik [said](#) that “some forces and sides had requested that we declare a cease-fire, but when we made this decision, those who asked us for this did not take responsibility.” Messaging from the group’s leaders toward the United States, particularly regarding the role it could play in bringing about new peace talks, has been [more pragmatic](#) in recent months.

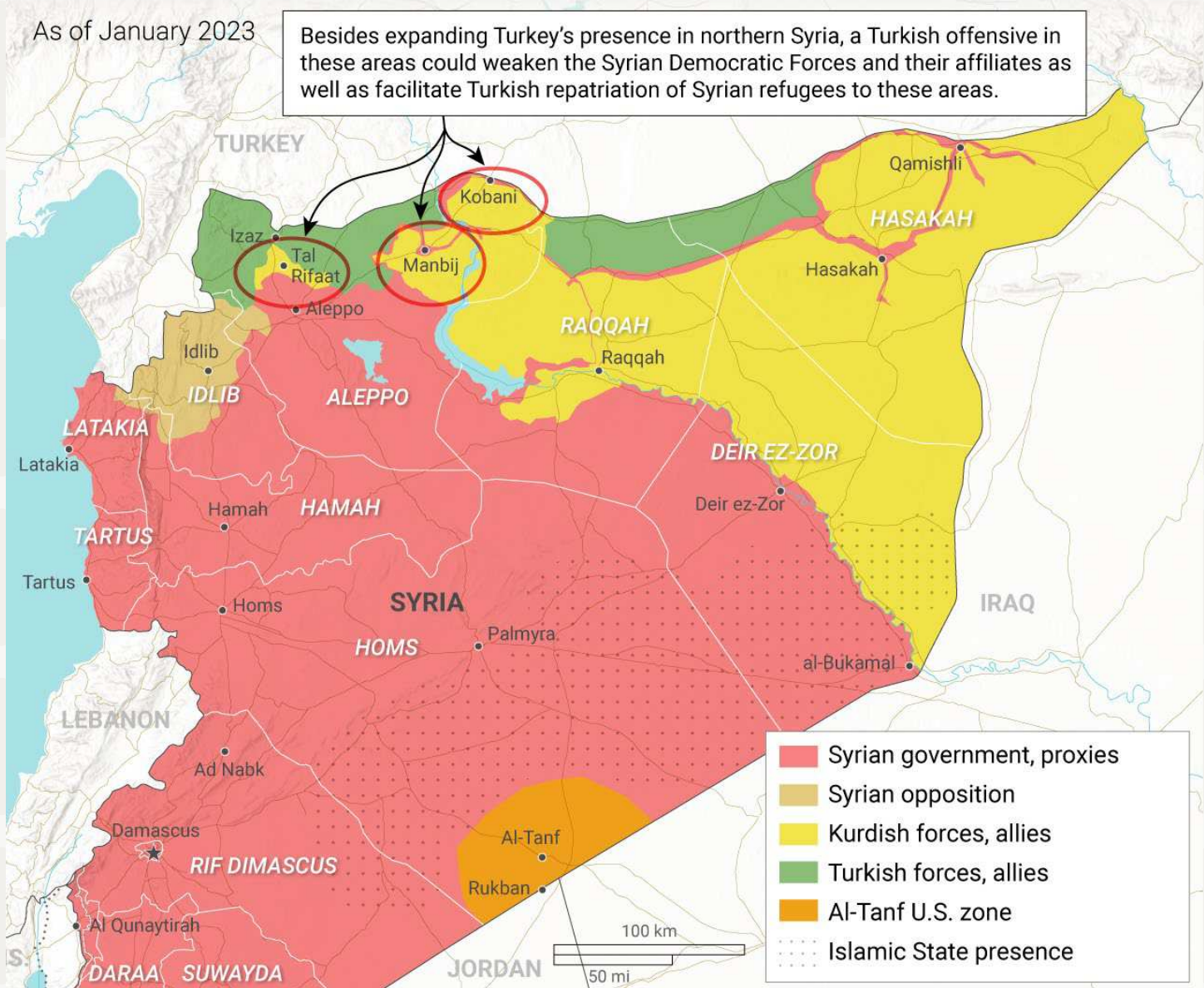
These events suggest a new level of dialogue between the United States and the PKK, based on a shared interest in preventing a new Turkish military operation into northern Syria. U.S. officials had [reportedly](#) pressed Turkey for a return to peace talks after 2015, and at least one high-level U.S. official privately [acknowledged](#) that the United States had directly pressured Turkey to restart Kurdish peace talks in 2016, although the request did not lead to any concrete steps in that direction. In July 2022, a U.S. official said for the first time that there was “[no military solution](#)” to the conflict and questioned the efficacy of Turkey’s cross-border operations in Syria and Iraq for the country’s security concerns.

For their part, the PKK’s leaders had previously suggested that they would welcome international support, including from the U.S., for a negotiated solution to Turkey’s Kurdish question. In the months of U.S.-Turkey negotiations between former U.S. President Donald Trump’s attempted withdrawal from Syria in late 2018 and Turkey’s incursion into Ras al-Ain and Tal Abyad in 2019, jailed PKK founder and leader Öcalan issued a [statement](#) through his lawyers calling for Turkey-SDF tensions to be resolved peacefully.

These previous efforts laid the rhetorical groundwork for a future settlement, but they did not lead to concrete results, suggesting that conditions in Syria and Turkey are now more favorable for de-escalation.



Potential Turkish Offensives



Sources: Human Rights Watch, People Demand Change

© 2023, The New Lines Institute for Strategy and Policy

The PKK has [extended](#) its partial cease-fire through the elections. This is well within U.S. interests, as it will provide greater political cover for efforts to stave off a Turkish incursion into Syria, limit the potential for pre-election violence in Turkey, and perhaps provide breathing room for the opposition to reach out to Turkey's Kurdish voters as the elections approach – increasing the chances that a potential CHP government, widely expected to be less autocratic and opposed to Kurdish interests at home, may also pursue a less hostile policy towards the SDF and the AANES.

U.S. Opportunities

Under these conditions, the U.S. has new opportunities to chart a long-term strategy in northeast Syria.

Turkish leaders have repeatedly declared their intent to [destroy](#) the AANES and the SDF, which they regard as terrorists; [change](#) the demographics of Kurdish-majority areas; and [gain](#) a zone of direct control or indirect influence in the areas of northern Syria controlled by the group. Two Turkish ground



operations have ousted the SDF and the AANES from Afrin, Ras al-Ain, and Tal Abyad. In remaining SDF/AANES territory, Turkey is pursuing a multifaceted military, economic, and diplomatic strategy to create unstable and ultimately unlivable conditions for the communities that make up their base of support to displace these populations or turn them against the authorities. With or without a new invasion, this approach degrades the civil and military institutions of northeast Syria over time, leaving them less able to administer their territory and work with the counter-ISIS coalition to prevent a resurgence of the terrorist group.

In addition to its targeted assassination campaign against senior SDF and AANES leadership, Ankara uses a variety of levers to degrade the region economically: shutting off [water](#) and [electricity](#) access to major cities, pressuring the Kurdistan Regional Government of Iraq to restrict northeast Syria's one open border crossing, and restricting nearly all cross-border trade and transit between Turkish and SDF-held territory. Sustained Turkish pressure forces the SDF to seek new backers for military and political support, further threatening the counter-ISIS mission: Previous escalation has pushed the group to open backchannels with Russia and the Assad regime and to accept new deployments of regime troops and Russian military hardware. Over time, these deals pose an existential threat to both the SDF itself and the U.S. mission in Syria by creating a complicated patchwork of adversaries across northeast Syria seeking to force the United States out and assert Damascus' control over the region.

This could escalate at any time to a new military incursion intended to seize territory from the AANES and the SDF and displace local populations. Past incursions, particularly Turkey's 2018 offensive in then-Kurdish-majority Afrin, [served](#) the dual purpose of forcing out local Kurdish civilians and allowing (largely non-Kurdish) Syrian refugees in Turkey to resettle in the area. The de-facto policy of ethnic cleansing, likely to be replicated in the event of a new Turkish incursion into Kurdish-majority areas in the northeast, has led to numerous human rights abuses and created a new challenge setting back Kurdish-Turkish peace talks.

In addition to this humanitarian crisis, a new offensive would create a security nightmare in northeast Syria,

forcing the SDF to redirect security forces away from the counter-ISIS mission in order to counter the Turkish invasion. Prisons holding thousands of detained ISIS fighters (already [vulnerable](#) to jail breaks) would be an obvious target of new ISIS attacks, and the group would be poised to re-absorb thousands of hardened fighters back into its ranks as it seeks to re-assert itself across Iraq and Syria.

Although the SDF assess the immediate possibility of a new incursion now as lower than it was prior to the earthquake, establishing a 30 kilometer "safe zone" across northern Syria remains a key objective of Erdoğan's, and renewed pressure against the SDF is likely if the AKP prevails in the May elections. Despite apparently calling off plans for an invasion in November, Erdoğan [maintains](#) that Turkey will launch a new invasion "at the most convenient time for us." Reduced hostilities following the current cease-fire provide a narrow window of opportunity for interested parties to push for a more durable agreement before that happens.

With or without a new invasion, the threat itself drives instability and displacement and has negative impacts on key measures of stability, including economic development and political participation. So, too, are specific Turkish tactics in areas under Turkish control, such as the use of armed groups with ethnic, sectarian, and gendered prejudices responsible for violations against Kurds and other minorities.

The objective of this campaign is not only to assert Turkish control over the Syrian-Turkish border and remove a perceived political and security adversary but also to ensure there is no powerful social base for any political project that allows for any form of Kurdish self-governance in Syria in the future. Turkish leaders themselves have stated that demographic change is a goal of their strategy in Afrin and Ras al-Ain. In 2019, Erdoğan infamously [said](#) that "the people most suitable for that area are the Arabs. These areas are not suitable for the lifestyle of the Kurds" when discussing the 30 kilometers of Syrian territory closest to the Turkish border. In 2018, he [claimed falsely that Kurdish-majority Afrin was a majority-Arab city](#), ignored its Yazidi and Alevi populations entirely, and argued that Turkey's intervention would return the region to its "true owners."



Syrian Kurdish women carry flags displaying Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK) leader Abdullah Öcalan's portrait, as they rally in support of Syrian Forces, and to denounce the recent attacks by Turkish forces in Qamishli in northeast Syria in October 2020.
(Delil Souleiman / AFP via Getty Images)

This sustained Turkish pressure across northern Syria also serves Russian and Iranian interests in Syria by weakening the AANES and the SDF – the strongest viable counter to a complete regime recapture of eastern Syria – and driving a wedge between the AANES/SDF and the counter-ISIS coalition by highlighting the latter's unwillingness to address threats to the physical security and morale of the population. Certain aspects of the campaign, such as drone strikes, have [escalated in concert with Turkish-Russian-Iranian diplomatic activity](#), suggesting the possibility of coordination. With the prospect of Turkey-Syria normalization growing, areas currently under Turkish control in Syria could be handed over to Assad without any conditions or accountability – something the AANES and the SDF have refused to accept for the territory under their control east of the Euphrates.

The lack of clearly framed political and strategic objectives for the U.S. presence in Syria beyond the counter-ISIS mission has empowered advocates of a 2019-style abrupt withdrawal to [make the case](#) that the U.S. deployment has run its course. Both an overnight withdrawal and a permanently unstable frozen conflict, however, have negative consequences for the interests of the United States and for overall security and stability in the region. This uncertainty enables U.S. adversaries with better established strategic visions

to exploit the resulting chaos for their own benefit. De-escalation between Turkey and the SDF provides a roadmap for an eventual U.S. withdrawal that avoids a power vacuum or immediate escalation in fighting.

A new approach to the Turkey-PKK conflict, alongside the de-escalatory steps taken by the PKK, enables the United States to take action on some of these challenges where it has otherwise been restricted. De-escalation gives the United States better political conditions to advance its counter-ISIS mission in the country's northeast while maintaining its opposition to Turkish cross-border military activity.

The Gendered Dynamics of the Conflict

A gender analysis is one tool that the U.S. can use to take advantage of this opportunity to promote stability in northeast Syria and leverage stability there for broader global questions of strategic competition.

The current political leadership of Turkey and the AANES have vastly divergent understandings of the role of women in public life and society. Just [18% of MPs](#) from the ruling AKP are women; all of the country's diplomacy and national security leaders are men. These low rates of female participation in Erdoğan's government are reflective of the party's broader political orientation, which offers a conservative, patriarchal view of women as mothers and homemakers against whom gendered violence and discrimination can be justified in the name of "traditional values." The culture perpetuated by Erdoğan's government weaponizes these values to discriminate against women and harshly punish any perceived transgression of gender roles. This worldview is central to the far-right Turkish nationalism that forms the ideological basis for Erdoğan's consolidation of power. As Erdoğan has consolidated power, his government has [rolled back legal protections for women](#) and [attempted to legalize violent practices like child marriage and statutory rape](#).

The AANES, by contrast, is [ideologically committed to women's freedom](#) on the basis that [the oppression of women is the source of all other forms of oppression](#). Its male and female leaders stress the importance of fighting traditional ideas and practices that harm women. All leadership positions are shared by male



“ A U.N. report on Turkish proxy rule in Afrin found a marked increase in sexual violence against women, including an increase in arbitrary detention and abuse in detention centers. ”

and female co-chairs, quotas of 40% to 50% guarantee women’s representation in decision-making bodies, and autonomous all-women’s structures have decision-making power on issues relevant to women’s rights. Women lead military operations against ISIS and diplomatic delegations across the Middle East, Europe and the United States. Rather than backsliding, the AANES has made [reforms](#) to existing Syrian law to better protect the rights of women and committed to improve the implementation of those laws in practice and address their shortcomings. As many countries around the world are facing democratic backsliding, including the U.S., the AANES is a prime example of how democratic governance is enhanced through a strong commitment to women’s rights and representation.

The Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security’s Women Peace and Security Index, which measures women’s inclusion in society, their access to a just legal system, and their physical security across 170 countries, has demonstrated that this index correlates with other key indices related to security, stability and governance. As academic experts Erica Chenoweth and Zoe Marks find, women’s movements can be [one of the most potent challenges to the global rise of autocracies that seek to export their repressive models abroad](#) – a matter the Biden administration has identified as a strategic concern.

With Turkey’s anti-SDF campaigns already aligning it with Russia, Iran, and the Syrian government, the degree to which the autonomy of northeast Syria can be preserved is already a matter relevant to strategic competition in the region. The contrast between Turkish leadership’s patriarchal authoritarian initiatives and northeast Syria’s important if incomplete steps toward gender equality reinforces these high stakes:

This form of gendered authoritarianism is one of the factors aligning Ankara ideologically with Moscow and Tehran, while women resisting gender apartheid in Iran and Afghanistan have found inspiration in and solidarity from Syrian Kurdish women who defeated the ISIS caliphate.

The AANES’s commitment to women’s empowerment in northeast Syria, moreover, has direct implications for U.S. policymakers. The United States’ mission to ensure the “enduring defeat” of ISIS in northeast Syria requires not only security partners to conduct raids but also governance partners with a real commitment to social cohesion and anti-sectarian governance. The AANES’s belief in gender equity percolates into everything from its school curriculum design to its municipal hiring decisions, offering a realistic, long-term strategy to counter both the immediate security threat posed by ISIS and the longer-term challenges posed by the ideology it advances.

These differences are related to the Turkish-Kurdish conflict. As one of these authors has written [elsewhere](#), “while the Turkish security establishment uses pervasive violence and discrimination against Kurdish women as a tactic of war and political repression, the Kurdish women’s movement that originated in Turkey has responded by advancing gender equality in a wide array of military and political structures that share its ideology.”

Gendered Violence in Northeast Syria

Turkey’s efforts to degrade and dismantle the AANES’s governance project in northeast Syria disproportionately impacts women. Some elements, such as efforts to expand the control of abusive proxy gangs across northern Syria, create conditions





Turkey's Assassinations of Female Kurdish Leaders

Nine women, including four in Kurdish leadership positions, have been assassinated through Turkish airstrikes or rebel-led attacks. These women were targeted due to their affiliation with Kurdish military or political organizations.



Sources: BBC, Al-Monitor, NBC News, Rudaw

© 2023, The New Lines Institute for Strategy and Policy

that disproportionately put women at risk of violence and increase gender discrimination. A U.N. report on Turkish proxy rule in Afrin found a marked [increase](#) in sexual violence against women, including an increase in arbitrary detention and abuse in detention centers. Other elements target women's political participation and physical safety directly, such as when Turkey [bombed](#) a girls school and killed four students in northeast Syria in 2022. This fits the pattern of Turkey's [repressive strategies against Kurdish armed groups and political opponents domestically](#). It also suggests that Turkey is aware that the role of women in the AANES and SDF is one of the region's primary strengths and a model that could be exported to challenge authoritarians elsewhere.

Deteriorating economic and environmental conditions are one problem. Worldwide, environmental deterioration has [disproportionate negative impacts on women](#) – particularly poor and rural women. The same patterns [have been observed in northeastern Syria](#). Turkish environmental and economic pressure is creating conditions that directly counter AANES efforts

to promote gender equality. The collapse of northeast Syria's agricultural sector, which has been exacerbated by Turkish restrictions on water and electricity access, has tightened families' pocketbooks and [forced](#) women to seek full-time work in dangerous conditions outside the home, in most cases while continuing to be wholly responsible for childcare and other domestic labor. One recent report [found](#) that 80% of women in northeast Syria reported that they were wholly responsible for domestic labor, even as economic collapse forced them to shoulder new burdens outside the home. Some contributing factors here are structural: Twelve years of war have devastated Syria's economy and infrastructure, and drought amplified by climate change is a problem across the Middle East. The northeast, already structurally underdeveloped by the Syrian state and largely dependent on agriculture, is uniquely vulnerable to these harms. Turkey has chosen to exacerbate these threats with water and electricity cuts, the closure and militarization of the Turkish-Syrian border, and security threats that disincentivize companies from taking advantage of the U.S. sanctions exemption on northeastern Syria.



Extrajudicial killings of political and military leaders by Turkish and Turkish-backed forces are an obstacle to AANES and SDF capabilities and a driver of insecurity and instability among the civilian population. Some of the most high-profile killings, including the brutal [murder](#) of Kurdish political leader Hevrin Khalaf and the [assassination](#) of senior SDF leader Salwa Yousuf, have targeted women specifically, signaling that women who join the SDF or affiliated civil society organizations are subject to unique risks. Women already face gendered barriers to participation in politics and security forces globally, but in northeast Syria the fear of either being in the wrong place at the wrong time by associating with senior women in political and security institutions or becoming a target oneself reinforces these barriers. These attacks serve a twofold purpose for Ankara: decimating the structure of the AANES and SDF itself and asserting patriarchal norms that disproportionately punish women who seek political empowerment.

These targeted killings make it harder for the SDF to recruit women into its ranks and degrade gender parity in civilian governance and civil society. Members of Kongreya Star, the umbrella organization for the autonomously organized women's movement in Kurdish regions of northeastern Syria, and the Zenobia Women's Assembly, an equivalent organization in Arab-majority regions of northeastern Syria told the author that the Turkish campaign of strikes has limited their ability to move freely, especially in border areas. The campaign also has limited the women's participation in public gatherings and women's willingness to meet with them. Some women are faced with increased pressure from their families not to participate in politics because of the strikes. Mothers reportedly expressed fear that their participation might endanger the lives of their children, as it is common for meetings to take place in private homes and is acceptable for women to bring young children to their offices with them; some AANES institutions offer on-site childcare.

The strikes therefore threaten AANES efforts to promote gender parity and women's inclusion in politics and security forces and may diminish women's support for this aspect of the region's governance out of fear for their own safety.

Forced Displacement

Displacement and demographic change are also an important component of Turkey's strategy in northern Syria. Studies show that [displaced women fare worse than non-displaced women](#) in virtually all contexts and communities. Turkey's two incursions into AANES territory have displaced hundreds of thousands of people, many of whom fled to other parts of the AANES. Some have resettled in cities and towns, while others live in internally displaced persons (IDP) camps. According to the author's fieldwork, women's organizations report that gender-based violence, the disproportionate burdens of unpaid care work, and other harmful and discriminatory practices are higher among displaced communities and that these communities are more difficult to reach with necessary resources.

Areas not directly under Turkish control are also impacted. In some border and frontline villages, more than half of the original residents have fled. Frontline clashes, Turkish cross-border strikes, and the constant threat of Turkish drone strikes create a climate of instability that disrupts economic activity, education, and other areas of life, driving many to leave for safer regions. Local authorities state that families who remain tend to be those that do not have the resources to leave and restart new lives elsewhere; residents of these regions stress that they do not want to be refugees. In the event of an incursion, over 75% of the original residents of cities like Kobane and Qamishlo would likely flee.

Promotion of Groups that Use Violence Against Women

To counter the SDF and AANES in northern Syria, Turkey has been willing to indirectly facilitate and directly support groups that perpetrate gross violations of the rights of women and girls. Turkey's attitude towards ISIS in the early years of Syria's war is one example: Erdoğan's government [viewed the jihadist group as less threatening than a Kurdish autonomous entity](#) on its border and as a potentially effective counter to Assad. An independent legal body has found that Turkey [facilitated the rise of ISIS](#) to such a degree as to be complicit in ISIS' commission of



“ If the U.S. fails to act, a third Turkish incursion into northeast Syria will remain an ever-present possibility. This would be an existential threat to the AANES and SDF, and by extension the U.S.-led mission that relies on them. ”

genocide against the Yazidis. [Systemic sexual and gender-based violence](#) against Yazidi women and girls was [recognized by the United Nations](#) as a major element of the genocide; thousands of women and girls were abducted and forced into sexual slavery by ISIS fighters. To date, [Yazidi communities warn](#) that many of the nearly 3,000 missing women and children who are still alive likely remain with their ISIS captors in Turkey or [Turkish-controlled regions in Syria](#).

In its military operations against the AANES and SDF since 2018, Turkey has used armed groups that the U.N. has found to be [responsible for sexual and gender-based violence](#) and gender discrimination that has created a “pervasive climate of fear which in effect confined [Kurdish women] to their homes,” a sentiment echoed by displaced women from Tal Abyad, Ras al-Ain, and Afrin living in other parts of northeastern Syria today. Women are effectively excluded from governance in these regions, reforms guaranteeing women’s rights made by the AANES have been rolled back, and women who participated in AANES women’s institutions are at particular risk of violence.

One reason why many displaced people cannot return to the Olive Branch and Peace Spring zones today is the fear of SNA violence against women: particularly Kurdish women, non-Muslim women, and women perceived as being politically active. The murder of Hevrin Khalaf in 2019 and the [2020 case of several women held in an SNA black site after being abducted in Afrin](#) are among the high-profile instances that have reinforced these fears.

Implications for Washington

Northeast Syria narrowly avoided a new Turkish invasion in November, highlighting the precarious position of the SDF, the AANES, and the U.S.-led

counter-ISIS mission that relies on both to do its work. The recent PKK cease-fire, apparently declared following U.S. pressure, provides a new but narrow window of opportunity to avert future crises, and highlights the constructive role that Washington can play on these issues when it is fully engaged.

If the U.S. fails to act, a third Turkish incursion into northeast Syria will remain an ever-present possibility. This would be an existential threat to the AANES and SDF, and by extension the U.S.-led mission. Were it to occur prior to elections (including between a first- and second-round presidential vote), it would be seen by Turkish leaders as existential for the current government’s survival. Both sides’ trust in U.S. mediation would be diminished, removing a moderating influence on their behavior. The events of 2019 would likely shape the calculations of both sides: Turkey, aware that capturing limited regions is not enough to destroy the AANES and SDF altogether, would likely make the liquidation of AANES and SDF authority in northeast Syria altogether its goal; the SDF, viewing the post-2019 cease-fire agreements as having only delayed the inevitable, would be prepared to fight to the end. This could lead to an active insurgency across most of AANES territory. Geographic realities of the cities likely to be targeted mean that fighting would be taking place effectively on the border and could spill over into Turkish territory as well. The PKK would rescind its cease-fire in such a scenario and would have lost its primary incentives to restrain its activities in Turkey.

In the event of a new invasion, the U.S. could be faced with a U.S.-trained and equipped partner force fighting as part of a protracted insurgency against a NATO ally on the territory of two countries at once, with both sides’ trust in U.S. mediation broken. Serious human rights abuses like those committed during [Operation](#)



Turkish President and leader of the Justice and Development Party (AK Party) Recep Tayyip Erdoğan arrives to deliver a speech during a party meeting at the Turkish Grand National Assembly in Ankara on March 29, 2023. (Adem Altan / AFP via Getty Images)

[Olive Branch](#), Operation Peace Spring, and [in Turkish pacification campaigns in Sur, Nusaybin, and Cizre](#) would be all but inevitable. Millions of displaced people would burden U.S. partners in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, which still faces challenges accommodating IDPs and refugees from the ISIS war. Many would try to reach Europe, a scenario European leaders would likely hope to avoid.

These developments could be used by Turkish leaders to destroy what few democratic safeguards remain in the country, potentially helping Erdoğan secure a victory, contest a loss, or consolidate power following a win. The nationwide state of emergency following the 2016 coup attempt and the violent crackdowns in Kurdish cities after the breakdown of the peace process show that Erdoğan's government is willing to use armed conflict and pervasive political repression against its own citizens to hold on to power.

In Syria, the largest winners of such a scenario would be Russia and Iran. With the SDF project destroyed, they would be free of the most significant obstacle to a complete government recapture of the country. Russia would be in a stronger position to continue its efforts to promote Syria-Turkey rapprochement. ISIS would also benefit: In the event of escalation across the entire northern border, SDF personnel would not be able to maintain counter-ISIS missions in the eastern deserts. The escapes of ISIS prisoners seen during the 2019 invasion would likely be repeated on a larger scale; any new Turkish-controlled zone would likely be as hospitable to extremists as Afrin and Idlib currently are.

To ensure this progress is not lost, policymakers should continue to use their SDF backchannel to encourage the PKK to maintain its cease-fire and work with Ankara to develop a roadmap for reciprocal steps. Turkey's decades-long military campaign to settle the "Kurdish question" through force has metastasized



into a regional conflict that serves no one's interests. Without a durable, mutually observed cease-fire, Turkish pressure will eventually degrade the SDF to the point that it is unable to support the U.S.-led counter-ISIS mission, leading to a collapse of the mission and a major escalation in the Syrian conflict as other actors rush to fill the power vacuum.

Perhaps most importantly, the AANES's commitment to gender equality and social cohesion, which percolates into the civilian governance structures it oversees, offers a stark contrast to the alternatives that would be implemented in the event of a new Turkish offensive, a resurgence of ISIS, or regime recapture of that territory. If the U.S. is interested in making an eventual exit from Syria, a durable Turkish-Kurdish cease-fire offers the best opportunity to do so without facilitating a dramatic reversal of the human rights gains made in the region in recent years.

Recommendations for U.S. Policymakers

First, the U.S. must maintain its ongoing opposition to any new incursion into northeastern Syria. The Biden administration has so far been able to effectively communicate opposition to a new Turkish ground operation. Second, it should counter those forms of Turkish pressure short of a ground incursion that are particularly destabilizing and that may particularly benefit ISIS, Iran, and Russia, such as economic and environmental pressure that weakens the AANES vis-a-vis Damascus and the campaign of targeted killings. In particular, Ankara's efforts to [siphon off](#) water from the Euphrates river and to [restrict](#) electricity access by frequent shutdowns of electricity stations controlled by Turkish proxies destabilize northeast Syria and push the AANES into negotiations with U.S. adversaries and competitors for assistance.

Third, the U.S. should consolidate a pro-peace policy on the "Kurdish question" in Turkey through statements of policy and reassessments of policies that have contributed to conflict. This can draw on existing statements of U.S. policy and the treaty commitments that the United States and Turkey share.

One U.S. priority should be a free and fair vote in Turkey, unmarred by violence and civil unrest. Policymakers should be clear that Washington

opposes any kind of election interference and irregularities or attempts to overturn the results and will hold those responsible accountable if they occur. This could be done through the imposition of targeted sanctions on individuals involved in ordering and implementing severe irregularities after the fact. It could also include public statements prior to the vote conveying that the U.S. expects a free and fair election in line with Turkey's domestic and international legal commitments and status as a NATO member.

The U.S. should also urge all relevant political forces in Turkey to implement their country's own domestic and international legal commitments, particularly in regard to individuals and entities that have served as key interlocutors on the Kurdish issue. This should include an end to the politically motivated prosecution of the HDP; freedom for HDP political prisoners, particularly [jailed elected officials](#); and an end to the [communication](#) ban imposed on Abdullah Öcalan, whose participation in peace talks is a [priority](#) for the Kurdish movement.

Militarily, Washington can look at the precedents for de-escalation on the ground. In northeast Syria, engaging both the SDF and Turkey for [better enforcement and monitoring of the 2019 cease-fire](#) could be a positive step. This could involve investigating and addressing claims of any cease-fire violations, including those related to the treatment of ethnic and religious minorities in Turkish-controlled zones, as well as better monitoring of existing cease-fire lines to prevent clashes that, while limited in strategic impact, have harmed civilians on both sides of the front lines and could escalate into a larger confrontation.

Acknowledging the partial cease-fire declared by the PKK as a beneficial development, communicating to the group that it ought to be continued, and communicating to Turkey that reciprocal steps should be taken would be realistic actions. Both sides can be reminded that they have successfully adhered to a mutual cease-fire before. If this follows progress on de-escalation in northeast Syria, success there could be used as precedent to show that the U.S. can encourage cease-fires between Turkey and Kurdish armed groups.





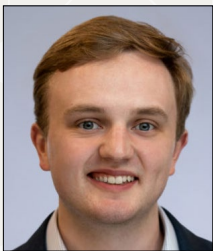
The U.S. has diplomatic and economic incentives to offer Turkey for de-escalation. No matter who is in power after May 14, the country sorely needs economic recovery. A new government might be more willing to accept Western support and will likely have a mandate from Turkey's voters to address economic issues. Given the [costs of four decades of armed conflict with Kurdish groups for Turkey](#), peace itself would have economic benefits; the U.S. and its European partners could communicate this reality and offer their own incentives.

It is likely that measurable steps on the Kurdish issue would improve Turkey's standing in the U.S. Congress — which is, as of now, the branch of government most critical of Turkey's actions and most willing to look for alternative partners. Congressional opposition to the sale of new F-16s and modernization kits to Turkey, for example, is in part based on the likelihood that the jets would be used against the SDF or against civilians in Iraq and Syria. Congress is also the only branch of government to have [called publicly for a peace process and mutual cease-fires](#).

These changes represent a significant shift from the status quo in U.S. policy on Turkey; as such, it is important to offer frameworks for *how* they could

be done as well. Because of the harmful gendered impacts of ongoing conflict, the U.S. could use its Women, Peace and Security Strategy and National Strategy on Gender Equality and Equity in order to reassess policies that have contributed to conflict or may pose obstacles to diplomacy. For example, frameworks provided by the White House Gender Policy Council and the Women, Peace, and Security Act could be used to recommend that certain U.S. policies, insofar as they have prolonged conflict or had a chilling effect on negotiations that might end it, ought to be shifted to better facilitate dialogue on the grounds that ongoing conflict has had specific gendered harms. They could also be used to pursue a stronger response to certain Turkish policies that have had notable gendered impacts.

The U.S. has a limited opportunity to pursue diplomacy that, if successful, could address multiple regional challenges at once, promoting better governance and security in the Middle East that would not only address existing conflicts but also prevent future ones that may force further U.S. intervention. Failure to act could lead to lasting instability in Syria, Turkey, and Iraq at a time when the U.S. seeks to prioritize larger global challenges.



Calvin Wilder is an Analyst for the Nonstate Actors program at the New Lines Institute. Prior to joining the institute, Calvin was a Research Assistant at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy's Program on Arab Politics, where his research focused on economic and

humanitarian issues in territories held by non-state actors in Syria. He previously worked as a Research Assistant on the Chicago Project for Security and Threats' Arabic Propaganda Analysis Team, translating and analyzing Arabic-language propaganda produced by ISIS, al Qaeda, and other extremist groups. He was a Boren Scholar in Amman, Jordan, from 2019-2020, working as a research and translation intern at Syria Direct, where he assisted with the outlet's award-winning coverage of humanitarian and human rights issues in Syria.



Meghan Bodette is the Director of Research at the Kurdish Peace Institute. She holds a Bachelor of Science in Foreign Service from Georgetown University, where she concentrated in international law, institutions, and ethics. Her research focuses on Kurdish

issues, with a focus on human rights, peace, and democracy; women's rights; and Turkey's cross-border military operations in Iraqi Kurdistan and northern Syria. She has briefed officials from governments and international institutions on her findings and has been interviewed by national media including NPR and NowThis for her expertise.



Contact



For media inquiries, email media@newlinesinstitute.org



To submit a piece to the New Lines Institute,
email submissions@newlinesinstitute.org



For other inquiries, send an email to info@newlinesinstitute.org



1776 Massachusetts Ave N.W. Suite 120
Washington, D.C. 20036



(202) 800-7302

Connect With Us



[@newlinesinst](https://twitter.com/newlinesinst)



[@New Lines Institute
for Strategy and Policy](https://www.linkedin.com/company/newlinesinstitute)



[Subscribe](#)



[Sign up](#)

