Implications of Turkish Invasions in Rojava for American and European Foreign Policies

Veysi Dag[1]

Abstract

This paper examines how Turkish invasions into Northern Syria's Kurdish enclave undermine US and European policy objectives. It argues that the Turkish state, obsessed with Kurdish hostility, endangers American and European foreign policies by further destabilising war-torn Syria, facilitating the empowerment of Islamist extremist groups, impeding a peaceful resolution to Syria's protracted conflict, and assisting Russia's anti-Western interests. The paper suggests that the US and Europe could rather deploy a dual strategy aimed at exerting pressure on Turkey to discontinue its disruptive and belligerent actions. To cease targeting anti-ISIS Kurdish forces, Turkey must either resume the Kurdish-Turkish peace process or risk being designated as a rival state, analogous to Russia, and subjected to punitive sanctions.

Introduction

Turkish President Recep T. Erdogan and his ministers have regularly threatened to invade the Kurdish region of Rojava in northern Syria.

---

[1] Dr. Veysi Dag is a Research Fellow of the German Research Foundation (DFG) at Rothberg International School of Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Israel, and Research Associate at SOAS, University of London, the United Kingdom.

They have publicly stated that the goal of the Turkish armed forces is to attack Rojava's infrastructure and destroy whatever is operational.[2] In 2018 and 2019, the Turkish military, in collaboration with Islamist Jihadists, launched two large-scale incursions into Rojava. Turkish forces have continued to launch airstrikes, drone assassinations and bombings aimed at Kurdish armed groups and civilian infrastructure. Turkish invasions and raids have converted previously peaceful areas of northern Syria, such as Afrin and Tel Abyad, into devastation zones for the local people and safe havens for recruiting and training Islamist Jihadists. This aggressive Turkish approach including military occupations has resulted in the displacement of hundreds of thousands of people and demolition of countless civilian buildings and extensive infrastructure and facilitated the growth of radical Islamic terrorism with regional and international ramifications. Several radical jihadist groups, including Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) leaders, have sought refuge in Turkish-occupied areas. Human rights organisations, notably Amnesty International, severely condemned the Turkish invasions, describing the Turkish actions as "war crimes" involving murder and injury and the mass displacement of civilians.[3]

While perceiving the Kurds as a hostile object, the Turkish state has refused to participate in any negotiation with Kurds for a possible peace process in the long-term conflict.[4] On the contrary, it has stated its desire to launch a third large-scale military invasion, targeting Kurdish forces and driving them 30 kilometres away from the Turkish border.[5] The American administration, however, is

---

[2] Usta, B. (2023). "Türkiye set to target infrastructure in fight against terrorism." *Daily Sabah*. Online. Available at: https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/war-on-terror/turkiye-set-to-target-infrastructure-in-fight-against-terrorism (last accessed on 3 January 2023).

[3] Amnesty International (2019). "Syria: Damning evidence of war crimes and other violations by Turkish forces and their allies." Online. Available at: https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/press-release/2019/10/syria-damning-evidence-of-war-crimes-and-other-violations-by-turkish-forces-and-their-allies/ (last accessed on 3 January 2023).

[4] Zaman, A. (2023). "*Syrian Kurdish commander wants peace with Turkey but will 'fully' resist attack*." *Al-Monitor*. (Online). Available at: https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2023/01/syrian-kurdish-commander-wants-peace-turkey-will-fully-resist-attack (last accessed on 24 January 2023).

[5] Euronews. (2022). "Northern Syria needs 'clearing' of Kurdish forces: Erdogan tells Putin." Online. Available: https://www.euronews.com/2022/12/11/northern-syria-needs-clearing-of-kurdish-forces-erdogan-tells-putin (last accessed on 3 January 2023).

opposed to the impending Turkish invasion. The US Secretary of Defense has warned the Erdogan regime against any other military operation that jeopardises the fight against ISIS, endangers the lives of coalition troops, harms American interests, promotes the reorganisation and rise of Islamist terrorist groups and exacerbates Syria's instability. [6] Despite this opposition to another military offensive, the Turkish state adopts a hostile anti-Kurdish approach, preparing to attack and eliminate Kurdish gains and rights in northern Syria in partnership with Russia and the Assad regime. [7] The latter, which Erdogan previously denounced as ruthless and illegitimate, appears to be the new hope for the ultra-nationalist Turkish regime in its pursuit of an aggressive and antagonistic approach toward Kurds. To put it bluntly, the Turkish state has abandoned its goals of overthrowing the Assad regime in favour of preventing the Kurds in northern Syria from building an autonomous entity and gaining self-determination.[8]

The Turkish state's objective to destroy the Kurdish self-administration and its armed forces may, meanwhile, coincide with the gradual withdrawal of US and European forces from operations in Syria, leaving Russia, Iran, the Assad regime, and radical Islamist groups in control. It is also notable that the Turkish state's invasion rhetoric is being ratcheted up at a time when Russia (directly) and the West (indirectly) are embroiled in the Ukraine war. This Russian-instigated invasion is entering an escalation phase, endangering European security interests. In response to Russian threats, Western powers are strengthening their military cooperation through the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), aiming to expand it by admitting Sweden and Finland as new members. For its part, and despite its long-standing alliance with the West, Turkey is invading

---

[6] Hacaoglu, S. (2022). "US Warns Erdogan Against New Turkish Military Campaign in Syria." *Bloomberg*, Online. Available at: https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-12-01/us-warns-erdogan-against-new-turkish-military-campaign-in-syria (last accessed on 3 January 2023).
[7] Ertan.N. (2022). "Turkish-Syrian normalization continues as top diplomats meet." *Al-Monitor*. Online. Available at: https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/12/turkish-syrian-normalization-continues-top-diplomats-meet (last accessed on 3 January 2023).
[8] Kizilkan, Y.B. (2018). "Changing Policies of Turkey and the EU to the Syrian Conflict." *İktisadi ve İdari Bilimler Dergisi* 33(1): 321-336.

northern Syria with Russia's acquiescence and blocking the European countries' ambitions to join NATO, demanding additional concessions regarding its repressive policy towards the Kurdish population in the Middle East and Kurdish refugees in these European countries. The Turkish stance not only challenges the strategies of European governments and the US in response to Russian threats but also offers Russia room for manoeuvre in Syria and Europe. What does Turkey's policy toward Kurds, including an invasion of Rojava, entail for the US and EU foreign policies, particularly as they face the Russian threat in Europe?

The paper contends that another Turkish assault in Rojava, northern Syria, poses a significant threat to US and European foreign policy objectives in Syria and the Middle East, as well as in Europe. This threat will undoubtedly divert anti-ISIS forces from their fight to completely dismantle the global radical Islamist jihadist groups; rather, it will lead to their growth and expansion. Moreover, the Turkish invasion will create new sources of refugees heading to Europe and only delay a political solution for inclusive governance in Syria; and it will also benefit Russia by compelling the final exit of the Western coalition from Syria, undermining the NATO bloc and diverting attention from opposition to Russia in Ukraine and elsewhere. To reverse Turkey's destructive policy and prevent future invasions, the West should instead encourage dialogue for a peace process among Kurdish and Turkish stakeholders through an offer of direct mediation to promote conflict resolution mechanisms. Based on statements from Turkish government elements and European representatives, as well as my own personal conversations with Kurdish politicians in Rojava, this paper considers shifts in the positions of key actors in Syria, as well as the consequences of previous Turkish invasion offensives, and looks at on how Turkish policy is harming Western interests abroad.

The paper is divided into three sections. The first discusses the outbreak of the Syrian civil war and the intervention of multiple state and non-state actors; the second section focuses on the emergence of the Kurdish movement and the Turkish state's invasions; and the

final section highlights how Turkish policy threatens the failure of Western objectives in Syria and also its repercussions for Russia-European relationships. The paper concludes by making some suggestions for Europe's approach toward Turkey.

Intervention in the Syrian Civil War and the Interests of Western States

During the 2011 Arab Spring, the Syrian people demanded the overthrow of the Assad regime. In response, the regime employed disproportionate violence to silence the Syrian people's voices. This repressive strategy caused political instability, increased Islamist radicalism, and led to the civil war, in which many nations, including the US, its European allies, Russia, Turkey, Iran and Arab states, were actively involved.[9] The intervention of these powers converted Syria into a battlefield for competing interests in pursuit of disparate and contradictory objectives.

According to the Cambridge Dictionary, an "intervention" is a deliberate "involvement in a difficult situation to either improve it or prevent" specific actions and actors from worsening this situation. It ranges from direct military intervention, in which external powers use coercive tactics, through direct military involvement to the deployment of additional combat forces in another state's domestic affairs for their national interests.[10] The US and European states intervened at the beginning of the Syrian civil war to prevent the Assad regime from committing atrocities and violations of human rights and to topple the regime and replace it with a moderate Islamic government.[11] In order to achieve these objectives, Western nations suspended bilateral agreements with the Assad regime and implemented a variety of sanctions on regime affiliates.[12] The US initiated a covert $500 million programme to train and equip

---

[9] Kirişci, K. (2018). *Turkey and the West: Fault Lines in a Troubled Alliance*. Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press.
[10] Von-Hippel, K. (2004). *Democracy by Force: US Military Intervention in the Post-Cold War World*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press.
[11] Kizilkan. Changing Policies.
[12] Ibid.

moderate Syrian opposition factions.[13] However, several so-called "moderate" oppositional groups joined Al-Qaida-affiliated Al-Nusra and ISIS. As a result, the US ceased assisting these groups and began to support secular Kurdish groups in their battle against ISIS and radical Islamists. Thus, the Western powers altered their strategy in Syria from facilitating the political transition of the Assad regime to eradicating Islamist extremists. Multiple factors contributed to this shift from engagement with the Islamic rebels to alliance with Kurdish-led forces.

One of the most important factors was that neither the US administrations nor European governments were interested in sending combat troops to Syria to confront either Assad forces or extremist Islamist groups. Based on their experiences in Afghanistan and Iraq, Western nations decided to back reliable local groups in their fight against the regime and any emerging radical Islamists posing a threat to their interests.[14] Since the supposed "moderate" Syrian rebels proved to be unreliable as they joined the Al-Nusra Front, and the Turkish state's objectives became incompatible with the interests and values of the US and EU, Kurdish forces, with their proven military capacity and secular values were more in line with the aims of the West. Consequently, the Western nations forged an alliance with the Kurdish forces.[15] However, the Turkish government opposed this newfound partnership in an effort to thwart Kurdish gains in the form of autonomous self-administration in northern Syria. While the Syrian soil became a breeding ground for Sunni-Islamist groups that morphed into global Islamist terrorist networks targeting Western nations, Russia and Iran helped the Assad regime to hold on to power. Damascus relied especially on Iran and Shia militias, such as Hezbollah, who not only fought hostile Sunni Islamist jihadists in defence of the regime but also posed a threat to

---

[13] Black, Ian. (2015). "US axes $500m scheme to train Syrian rebels, says NYT." *The Guardian*, (online). available at: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/oct/09/us-to-axe-5-scheme-train-syrian-rebels-nyt (last accessed on 22 January 2023).
[14] Knights, M. and van-Wilgenburg, W. (2021). *Accidental Allies: The U.S.–Syrian Democratic Forces Partnership Against the Islamic State*. London, New York, Oxford, New Delhi and Sydney: I.B. Tauris.
[15] Ibid.

Israel via the transit of weapons from Syria and Iran.[16] Consequently, the Syrian civil war was to have far-reaching ramifications on the whole region, as well as on European nations and the US.

The Turkish Invasion of Syria and its Implications for the Syrian Civil War

Due to Turkey`s geographical proximity and its administration's neo-Ottoman ambitions, the Turkish state has been one of the most active powers in Syria, intervening with the goal of establishing a Suni Islamic client state under its control through which to dominate the Kurds and their political aspirations.[17] Therefore, Erdogan allied Turkey with radical Sunni Islamist groups and cancelled bilateral deals with the Assad regime. Unlike Western countries, Turkey did not pull back and, along with Qatar, continued to sponsor a number of extreme Islamist groups. These included ISIS and various extremist groups with Al-Qaida affiliations, such as Tahrir al-Sham (previously Al-Nusra), Suqour al-Jaber and Jaish Al-Nasr.[18] In other words, the Turkish state supported the growth of extremist Islamist groups, for example, by allowing them to travel safely to Syria, where they obtained a plethora of military and economic resources, including weapons, training, logistics and information.[19] Ankara solidified its ties with ISIS, becoming involved in clandestine oil and other business activities.[20] The radical Islamist groups shifted their focus from fighting the regime in Damascus to capturing territory and declaring caliphates and using Syria as a base for recruiting and training domestic and foreign militants and plotting terrorist attacks in Europe, including Paris, Brussels, Berlin, London, and Stockholm. They also terrorised residents by killing and displacing them. As a

---

[16] Phillips, C. (2020). *The Battle for Syria: International Rivalry in the New Middle East*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.
[17] Kizilkan. Changing Policies.
[18] Saeed. S. (2022). "Promoting Terror by the Turkish State: The Case of the Turkistan Islamic Party." *The Commentaries* 2(1), 101-112.
[19] Pamuk, H. and N. Tattersall. (2015). "Exclusive: Turkish intelligence helped ship arms to Syrian Islamist rebel areas." *Reuters*. (online). Available at: https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-turkey-arms-idUSKBN0O61L220150521 (last accessed on 23 January 2023).
[20] Nordic Monitor (2019). "Erdoğan government's role in ISIS oil trade exposed." Online. Available at: https://nordicmonitor.com/2019/09/erdogan-governments-role-in-isis-oil-trade-exposed/ (last accessed on 3 January 2023).

result of the expansion of the jihadists and enormous refugee surges, the Syrian conflict had significant consequences on Europe's doorstep, jeopardising its security and causing a political crisis.[21]

Turkey has continued to equip and organise these Islamist militias under the guise of the Free Syrian Army (FSA), later renamed the Syrian National Army (SNA). They have been deployed against the Kurds in Syria to prevent Kurdish expansion and aspiration to an autonomous status. Turkey's actions have gone beyond intervention to invasion, as defined by the Cambridge Dictionary, namely, "when an army or country uses force to enter and take control of another country."[22] In other words, Turkey's armed forces invaded and seized Kurdish regions, such as Afrin and Tal Abyad, both against the will of the local population and in contravention of Syria's sovereign rights. In fact, Turkey has not only occupied these vast lands but also begun to colonise them by taking control and exploiting the cultural and natural resources there. For example, it has put Turkish governors in Afrin, Al-Bab, Tal Abyad and Tal Rifaat and changed the demographics of Afrin and Tel Abyad through ethnic cleansing.[23] The governors have been in charge of introducing the Turkish education system to Turkify the local inhabitants.[24] They have begun the confiscation of a collection from antique archaeological sites to transport and exhibit in Turkish museums.[25] Furthermore, Turkish officials have overseen the transportation to Turkey of agricultural

---

[21] Heisbourg. F. (2015). "The Strategic Implications of the Syrian Refugee Crisis." *Global Politics and Strategy* 57(6): 7-20.

[22] Cambridge Dictionary (2023). "Invasion." (Online). Available at: https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/invasion (last accessed on 22 January 2023).

[23] Phillips, D.L. (2020). *Frontline Syria From Revolution to Proxy War.* London, New York, Oxford, New Delhi and Sydney: I.B. Tauris

[24] ANF. (2018). "Policies of assimilation and cultural genocide continue in Afrin." (Online). Available at: https://anfenglish.com/news/policies-of-assimilation-and-cultural-genocide-continue-in-afrin-30781 (last accessed on 23 January 2023).

[25] Mustafa, S. (2019). "Did there remain monuments in Afrin that were not stolen by Turkey?." Anha. (online). Abvailable at: https://www.hawarnews.com/en/haber/did-there-remain-monuments-in-afrin-that-were-not-stolen-by-turkey-h10333.html (last accessed on 23 January 2023).

goods, such as olives, to sell on the international market – in addition to the thousands of olive trees that Turkish proxies cut down.[26]

Thus, Turkey's intentions in Syria have shifted dramatically, from intervention, toppling the Assad regime and promoting Islamist groups through invasion, occupation and control of Syrian territory to colonisation and exploitation of local and regional resources. With the outbreak of the Russia-Ukrainian war, Ankara has intensified its cooperation with Moscow with the overall strategy of maintaining the Assad regime, reversing Kurdish gains, and compelling Western forces to withdraw from Syria. The section that follows outlines this Turkish policy shift as shaped by the growth of Kurdish movements in Syria.

The Rise of the Kurds and the Shift in Turkey's Syrian Policy

Influenced by the concept of "democratic confederalism" promoted by the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) founder, Abdullah Öcalan, Syrian Kurds in the PKK established the Democratic Union Party (PYD). This has served as the political arm of the Kurdistan Communities Union (KCK) in Syria, as well as the Movement for a Democratic Society (TAV-DEM), an umbrella organisation affiliated with the KCK.[27] When civil war broke out, these Kurds left the PKK and relocated to Syria, where they organised and trained previously marginalised Kurdish, Christian, and Assyrian populations[28] and banded these multi-ethnic and multi-religious communities together to form self-defence units, such as the People's Protection Units (YPG) and the Women's Protection Units (YPJ).[29] During violent conflicts between the regime's armed forces and Islamist radicals, Kurdish-led forces enabled the marginalised communities to form

---

[26] Duvar English (2020). "Turkey seeks to export 90,00 tons of Afrin olive oil to US, says local official." (Online). Available at: https://www.duvarenglish.com/turkey-seeks-to-export-9000-tons-of-afrin-olive-oil-to-us-says-official-news-55120 (last accessed on 22 January 2023).

[27] Stansfield, G, and M. Shareef (eds.) (2017). *The Kurdish Question Revisited*. New York: Oxford University Press.

[28] Knapp, M. Flach, A. and Ayboga, E. (2016). *Revolution in Rojava Democratic Autonomy and Women's Liberation in Syrian Kurdistan*. London: Pluto Press.

[29] Schmidinger, T. (2019). *The Battle for the Mountain of the Kurds: Self-Determination and Ethnic Cleansing in the Afrin Region of Rojava*. Oakland: PM Press.

multi-ethnic and multi-religious self-governing administrations in the form of three "cantons."[30] Concurrently, ISIS announced its caliphate after conquering vast areas in northern Iraq and Syria.[31] In 2015, ISIS expanded its sphere of influence in Syria by attacking the Kurdish city of Kobane. However, the Kurdish-led YPG and YPJ, backed by the international coalition, engaged in fierce clashes with the ISIS caliphate and Al-Qaida-affiliated Islamist jihadists to liberate the city and other locations used as safe havens for the jihadists' training and attack planning.

The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), created by Kurdish forces, joined by some Arab tribes and supported by the US and international coalition,[32] began hunting ISIS across Raqqa and down to Deir ez-Zur in south-eastern Syria. While the YPG and YPJ were primarily comprised of Kurds, the SDF was formed as a coalition of all ethnic and religious factions in northern Syria. The establishment of the SDF was required to persuade the Turkish state to accept an independent and non-Kurdish entity at its border, replacing the Kurdish troops of the YPG and YPJ, which the Turkish state had associated with the PKK – but the Turkish authorities have continued to associate the SDF with the PKK, refusing to acknowledge its anti-ISIS position.[33] However, the SDF's triumphs over Islamic militants had an impact both locally and internationally. Locally, numerous Arab tribes have expressed support for the Rojava model and joined the Kurdish-led SDF, while the Kurds have garnered international sympathy and acknowledgment for their military achievements from the U-S. and European states.[34]

The empowerment of the Kurdish population in Syria has become a thorn in the flesh of the Turkish state. Turkey realised that the Kurdish struggle against the global Islamist terrorist group, ISIS, was

---

[30] Allsopp, H. and W. Van-Wilgenburg (2019). *The Kurds of Northern Syria: Governance, Diversity and Conflicts*. London, New York, Oxford, New Delhi and Sydney: I.B. Tauris.
[31] Federici. V. (2015). "The Rise of Rojava: Kurdish Autonomy in the Syrian Conflict." *SAIS Review of International Affairs* 35 (2): 81-90.
[32] Knights, and van-Wilgenburg, (2021). *Accidental Allies*.
[33] Allsopp and Van-Wilgenburg (2019). *The Kurds of Northern Syria*.
[34] Paasche, T., Foxx, J. and Murray, S. (2022). *America's War in Syria: Fighting with Kurdish Anti-ISIS Forces*. Havertown and Oxford: Casemate Publishers.

not only gaining international attention but that the Kurds were also celebrated as an effective counterforce to radical jihadists in Syria and Iraq. Instead of establishing peaceful relations with its neighbouring Kurds in northern Syria for its security and economic interests, the Turkish state altered its Syrian policy to collaborate with Russia and Iran and has recently expanded this partnership to include the Assad regime in order to challenge the policies of the Western states and eliminate the structures and status of the Kurds. This strategy shift is tied to Turkey's antipathy toward Kurds, a continuation of its anti-Kurdish and racist policies dating back to pre-Republican times. In other words, Turkey's approach to the Kurds is similar to that of the Committee of Union and Progress Party (CUP), which tried to eliminate "disloyal" forces during the First World War that would threaten the state's homogeneous national identity and interests. It was in this context that the young Turks were responsible for the systematic genocide of Armenians in 1914-15.[35] In short, because the Kurds in Rojava have not committed their allegiance to the Islamic and ultranationalist Turkish regime, they pay the price of extermination and suffer the same fate as the Armenians.

In order to counter Kurdish forces and implement its hostile anti-Kurdish policy, the Turkish state has merged Al-Qaida- and ISIS-linked radical Islamist groups into the Syrian National Army (SNA).[36] In an invasion dubbed "Operation Olive Branch," Turkey and its Islamist partners invaded Afrin in January 2018. The Erdogan regime cited security concerns, specifically, the need to "defend" the Turkish border from Kurdish "terrorists," as well as to provide a safe zone for the four million Syrian refugees who have sought asylum in Turkey. However, Turkish authorities failed to provide any evidence of attacks on Turkish territories carried out by Rojavan Kurds.[37]

---

[35] Dag, V. (2020). "The looming genocide against the Kurds: history should not repeat itself." *Open Democracy.* Online. Available at: https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/north-africa-west-asia/looming-genocide-against-kurds-history-should-not-repeat-itself/ (last accessed on 2 January 2023).
[36] STJ Projects (2021). "Ongoing Violations Without Accountability: Islamic State Members in the Syrian National Army." (Online). Available at: https://stj-sy.org/en/ongoing-violations-without-accountability-islamic-state-members-in-the-syrian-national-army/ (last accessed on 24. January 2023).
[37] VOA. (2018). "AP Explains Turkey's 'Operation Olive Branch' in Afrin, Syria." Online. Available at: https://www.voanews.com/a/ap-explains-turkeys-operation-olive-branch-afrin-syria/4219146.html (last accessed on 03 January 2023).

Hundreds of civilians were killed as a result of the Turkish invasion, in addition to the hundreds of thousands forced to abandon their homes. Turkish bombings and shelling levelled many villages and towns,[38] and many recordings posted on various social media sites by the Turkish army's Islamist allies revealed the atrocities committed in Afrin. These videos showed the mutilated bodies of male and female Kurdish combatants, as well as Turkish forces torturing civilians.

Prior to the Turkish assault, Afrin had been largely spared the worst consequences of Syria's civil war, functioning as a sanctuary of peace in a conflict-torn region that sheltered over a million internally displaced people (IDPs) from neighbouring towns and cities. With its stable administration and amicable coexistence of populations, Afrin could have served as a model for a new Syria. This was not allowed to be. The Turkish state launched the second invasion offensive after then President Trump authorised the withdrawal of American troops from some border regions in northern Syria (Kobane, Tal Abyad, and Tal Rifaat) to eastern Syria (Deir ez-Zur). In October 2019, after the US abandoned its Kurdish allies in these border regions, the Turkish military, along with its radical Islamist proxies, the SNA, initiated "Operation Peace Spring" against the Kurds.[39] This offensive destroyed a large number of villages and towns, killing almost 70 civilians, including Kurdish politician Hevrin Khalaf.[40] The Turkish army deployed a range of weaponry, including napalm and white phosphorus, which are illegal.[41] Thus, the new Turkish policy pushed Syria into a protracted conflict marked by the dynamic rise of many extremist Islamist jihadists, terrorism,

---

[38] Cockburn, (2018). Syria's war of ethnic cleansing.

[39] Gunter, M.M. and M.H. Yavuz. (2020). "The October 2019 Turkish Incursion into Kursish Syria: Its Background and Broader Implications." *Middle East Policy* XXVII (1):86-101. ; Brussels International Center. (2019). "Operation Peace Spring: Delusion in Turkey's Objectives ." Online. Available at: chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://www.bic-rhr.com/sites/default/files/inline-files/Mohammed%20Sami_Final%20Policy%20Report%20.officiel.pdf (last accessed on 3.January 2023).

[40] BBC. (2019). "Hevrin Khalaf: Death of a peacemaker." Online. Available at: https://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-middle-east-51068522 (last accessed on 3 January 2023).

[41] France24 (2019). "Kurds accuse Turkey of using napalm and white phosphorus." Online. Available at: https://www.france24.com/en/20191017-kurds-accuse-turkey-of-using-napalm-and-white-phosphorus (last accessed on 3 January 2023).

destruction and the uprooting and displacement of local communities. Aimed at eliminating Kurdish aspiration, Turkey's hostile approach also created additional risks to American and European interests and strategies in Syria in particular and the Middle East in general.

US and EU Policy Objectives in Syria

Although the priority objectives of the US and European states in Syria have sometimes varied due to a range of developments, including the engagement of different state and non-state actors from Europe and the Middle East, they have generally advocated relatively constant goals. As elsewhere, Europe has tended to rely on American military and capacity. The two have cooperated to assist moderate and secular forces in their fight against radical Islamist groups and tried to establish a representative and civic governance. In some other cases, the European states have been engaged in ending violence from both state and non-state actors, allowing Syrian refugees to return while the US has prioritised preventing Iran and its extremist Shia proxies from posing threats to its allies from Syrian soil and balancing Russian dominance in the region.[42]

Since the start of the Syrian civil war, the US and European states have had similar goals in Syria: first, the overthrow of the Assad regime and, later, the elimination of radical Islamist militants posing challenges to Western nations. Both Western actors have sought to engender a more representative and effective governance with less influence from the Assad regime, which has been implicated in atrocities against the Syrian people, including the use of chemical weapons. The US administration has stated that it does not recognise the Assad regime as the legitimate government in Syria, but it now seems to be less interested in replacing Bashar Assad, [43] who has

---

[42] Congressional Research Service (2022). "Armed Conflict in Syria: Overview and U.S. Response." Online. Available at: https://sgp.fas.org/crs/mideast/RL33487.pdf (last accessed on 3 January 2023); Kizilkan. Changing Policies.

[43] Alarabiya News. (2023). "US opposes rehabilitating Syria's 'brutal' Assad after Turkey thaw." Online. Available at: https://english.alarabiya.net/News/middle-east/2023/01/04/US-opposes-rehabilitating-Syria-s-brutal-Assad-after-Turkey-thaw- (last accessed on 5 January 2023).

retaken control of the majority of Syrian territory and consolidated his power with the support of Russia and Iran, recently joined by Turkey. Europe appears to be taking its cue from Washington. In terms of radical Islamists, Western nations continue to support moderate oppositional Arab and Kurdish entities opposing the global terrorist threats posed by ISIS and Al-Qaida-affiliated forces. Despite the fact that these radical terrorists in Syria have been militarily vanquished to a large extent, their sleeper cells continue to launch attacks against the West's local anti-ISIS, Kurdish partners. They also disseminate extremist ideology, which has far-reaching consequences well beyond Syria. The Syrian provinces of Idlib and Afrin are crucial for the reorganisation of these Islamist groups, posing serious challenges to local communities and European societies while also impeding refugee return. As a result, the US and France, in particular, are striving to ensure that Syria does not become a safe haven for Islamist terrorists.

The US and European states likewise endeavour to reduce violence against civilians perpetrated by both state and non-state actors. In Afrin and elsewhere in Syria, Islamist extremists sponsored by Turkey have engaged in robbery, looting and indiscriminate confiscation of civil property, as well as arbitrary arrest, detention, torture, kidnapping and killing of civilians. Concerning refugees, Europeans is interested in eliminating the source of new waves from Syria.[44] Germany particularly supports the return of Syrian refugees from neighbouring states as they might otherwise move to the European continent. Millions of Syrians have fled to neighbouring countries, including Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, and Iraq, in addition to Europe. In this context, European states are promoting the reconstruction of Syria's housing and infrastructure, which have been targeted and damaged in the civil war. The restoration of Syrian towns and cities is critical for the return of the refugees, but it is currently hampered by ongoing military attacks and violent conflicts,

---

[44] ANF. (2021). "Aleppo, Afrin and Idlib: Turkey installs "regime of robbery and plunder." Online. Available at: https://anfenglishmobile.com/features/aleppo-afrin-and-idlib-turkey-installs-regime-of-robbery-and-plunder-53239 (last accessed on 5 January 2023).

mostly instigated by Turkey. Meanwhile, the US has shifted its focus from ousting Assad to preventing the spread of Iranian power in Syria and beyond, which threatens Israel and Sunni Gulf states. Iran's forces and proxies could use Syria as a base to launch attacks on Israel and Sunni Arab states in the Gulf region. To this end, the Iranian regime has sent weapons to extremist Shia and Sunni groups, such as Hezbollah and Hamas, which pose a security risk to Israel through attacks launched from Syria and Lebanon.

With Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the US has also upped its attempts to undermine Russian interests in Syria. Russia aims to reinstall the Syrian regime, consolidate its hegemonic influence in the region and control the oil market and energy transport infrastructure. For its part, the US is seeking to counteract Russia's dominance in Syria while also ensuring that Russia and other competing forces do not control the oil market and energy transport infrastructure. The Russian invasion of Ukraine has aggravated the energy crisis, with European countries bearing the brunt of the consequences, which include soaring prices and rising inflation. Clearly, the Russia-Ukrainian war is a major impediment to focusing on aspirations in Syria and cooperating with Russia as a "peace partner" that is waging its own war. While the US seeks to curb the Russian influence in Syria, European countries have to address the possibility of further Russian attacks of varying kinds, which constitutes an economic, political and security-related threat to the continent. Despite its NATO membership, long-term cooperation with and integration into the Western alliance, Turkey's policy and actions pose a challenge to the West regarding all the aforementioned objectives.

The Turkish president talks to the Russian president on a daily basis to boost Turkish-Russian cooperation, empowering the Assad regime and helping it to consolidate its power while weakening and seeking to eliminate that of the local anti-ISIS SDF troops. Turkey has overtly voiced its desire for the US to withdraw from Syria and abandon the Kurds. By pressuring the US to leave Syria and allow the destruction of the SDF, Turkey is promoting the emergence of

extremist Islamist groups, promising to generate yet more refugees and further instability in Syria. Even as a NATO member, Turkey is attacking American and European foreign interests by cooperating with Russia. It is assisting Russia in evading European and American sanctions and overcoming the Western attempt to isolate it.[45] Thus, Russia is consolidating its interests in Syria and the Middle East with the assistance of Turkey. In exchange, Turkey receives a blank check for its anti-Kurdish strategy in Syria as well as low-cost Russian gas.[46] Finally, Turkey is now jeopardising American and European interests by impeding Sweden and Finland's NATO membership aspirations. Turkey explains its objection by claiming that these Scandinavian nations assist the Kurds in Rojava and Europe, but the Turkish veto serves Russia by causing a rift in the NATO alliance, undermining the united position of the West against the Russian threat in Europe and the Middle East.

Conclusion

Turkey has been involved in Syria since the beginning of the unrest and civil war, following its own agendas and frequently pursuing policies that contradict the objectives of the US, EU and NATO. Initially, Turkey became active in Syria in an attempt to depose the Assad regime and offered arms and an open-door policy to extremist Islamist groups connected to Al-Qaida and ISIS. *It has* also organised and trained jihadists to fight against Kurdish forces. In short, it has played a significant role in the emergence and growth of various radical jihadists and the development of Islamist terrorism, as well as in transforming Syria's civil war into a protracted conflict marked by the destruction of civilian infrastructure, displacement of local populations, and production of mass refugee migration. Turkey has deployed Islamist extremists to kill Kurds and prevent the cessation of violence and the restoration of peace in Syria since reaching an

---

[45] Foy, H., Fleming S., Politi, J. and Pitel L. (2022). "US and EU step up pressure on Turkey over Russia sanctions." Financial Times. (Online). Available at: https://www.ft.com/content/95243a73-22c8-447e-bbae-a10a206d7e9e (last accessed on 22 January 2023).

[46] Jonesw, D. (2022). "Erdogan Agrees to Putin's Plan for Turkey to Be Russian Gas Hub." *VoA- News.* (Online). Available at: https://www.voanews.com/a/erdogan-agrees-to-putin-s-plan-for-turkey-to-be-russian-gas-hub/6798604.html (last accessed on 23 January 2023).

agreement with Russia in Afrin in 2018. Its collaboration with Russia and Iran, which has now been extended to the Assad regime, seeks to eliminate not only Kurdish forces but also the presence in Syria of Western countries and the anti-ISIS coalition. Thus, Turkish invasions motivated by anti-Kurdish sentiment endanger the interests of its Western NATO allies by facilitating the spread of global Islamist terrorism, obstructing a political resolution to Syria's protracted conflict, escalating new conflicts, and contributing to the withdrawal of Western forces and interests.

These belligerent Turkish policies preclude any possibility of a reconciliation or political resolution, affecting a diverse multi-religious, multi-ethnic, and multi-linguistic population. In other words, Turkey's anti-Kurdish campaign in Northern Syria, which includes threats, massacres, and invasions, has a detrimental impact on US and EU government interests. The Turkish government's hostility toward Kurds has also prompted it to reject Sweden's and Finland's NATO membership ambitions to counter the Russian threat. Finally, Turkey's Syrian strategy not only undermines Western objectives in Syria and beyond but also promotes Russia's interests in fashioning room for manoeuvre and evading sanctions imposed by US and EU governments. Despite the Turkish state's overt and covert attacks against Kurds in Syria and elsewhere, the US and European powers have refused to denounce Ankara; instead, they have appeased it. However, the ramifications of Turkey's anti-Kurdish strategy affect not only the Kurdish-Turkish relationship but also the regional and international politics of US and EU member states.

Instead of appeasement, it may be argued, the US and Europe should apply a twofold strategy to alleviate the harmful implications of Turkish policies, not only through rhetoric but also through actions. The West can encourage the Turkish government to engage in a dialogue with the PKK, SDF, and other Kurdish parties to resume the peace process through their mediation (i.e. of the Western powers). Peace and reconciliation between the Kurds and the Turkish state would reveal the emptiness of the Turkish claims about

the Kurdish ambitions to carve out their own state in Syria. A Kurdish-Turkish peace will equally remove the Turkish state's rationale for its destructive and aggressive actions against Kurds within its own borders, as well as in Syria and Iraq. The revival of the peace process between Kurds and the Turkish state could have a dynamic impact on Turkish domestic and foreign policy in Syria and the Middle East in favour of Western objectives that are being opposed by Turkey's current anti-Kurdish agenda.

However, the US and EU should adopt preventive and even punitive actions against Turkey's aggressive approach if it continues to attack anti-ISIS Kurdish partners and defy Western policies in Syria and towards Russia. The West's position should not be contingent on the outcome of Turkey's upcoming presidential election in May 2023, assuming that the AKP-MHP alliance under the leadership of Recep T. Erdogan pursues an aggressive anti-Kurdish and anti-western campaign intentionally in order to gain votes from nationalist supporters, but that it will modify its policy after its re-election. This approach is short-sighted since the AKP-MHP coalition, which is dominated by ultranationalist Turkish members, aspires to resurrect the CUP's spirit and construct a new Turkey in accordance with the National Pact Misak- Milli. This objective includes extending the new Turkish borders into northern Syria and Iraq and eradicating "disloyal" elements such as Kurds. [47] Therefore, the sanctions against Turkey should include cancellation of bilateral agreements with the Turkish government, suspension of Turkey's NATO membership, and the removal of Turkey's access from global financial structures. In other words, Western powers should regard Erdogan's regime similarly to Putin's, as one that has invaded a neighbouring state, destroyed its infrastructure, and displaced local populations. Western powers should recognise that Turkey operates as a hostile state rather than an ally. Since the Turkish regime shares authoritarian

---

[47] Tiğrek, M. (2022). "Lozan'ın gizli maddeleri: İtimat et rahat et- (Lausanne's secret articles: Trust and relax)." *Ahval*. (Online). Available at: https://ahvalnews.com/tr/lozan-anlasmasi/lozanin-gizli-maddeleri-itimat-et-rahat-et# (last accessed on 23 January 2023).

characteristics with the Russian, it does not merit the treatment that allies accord each other.