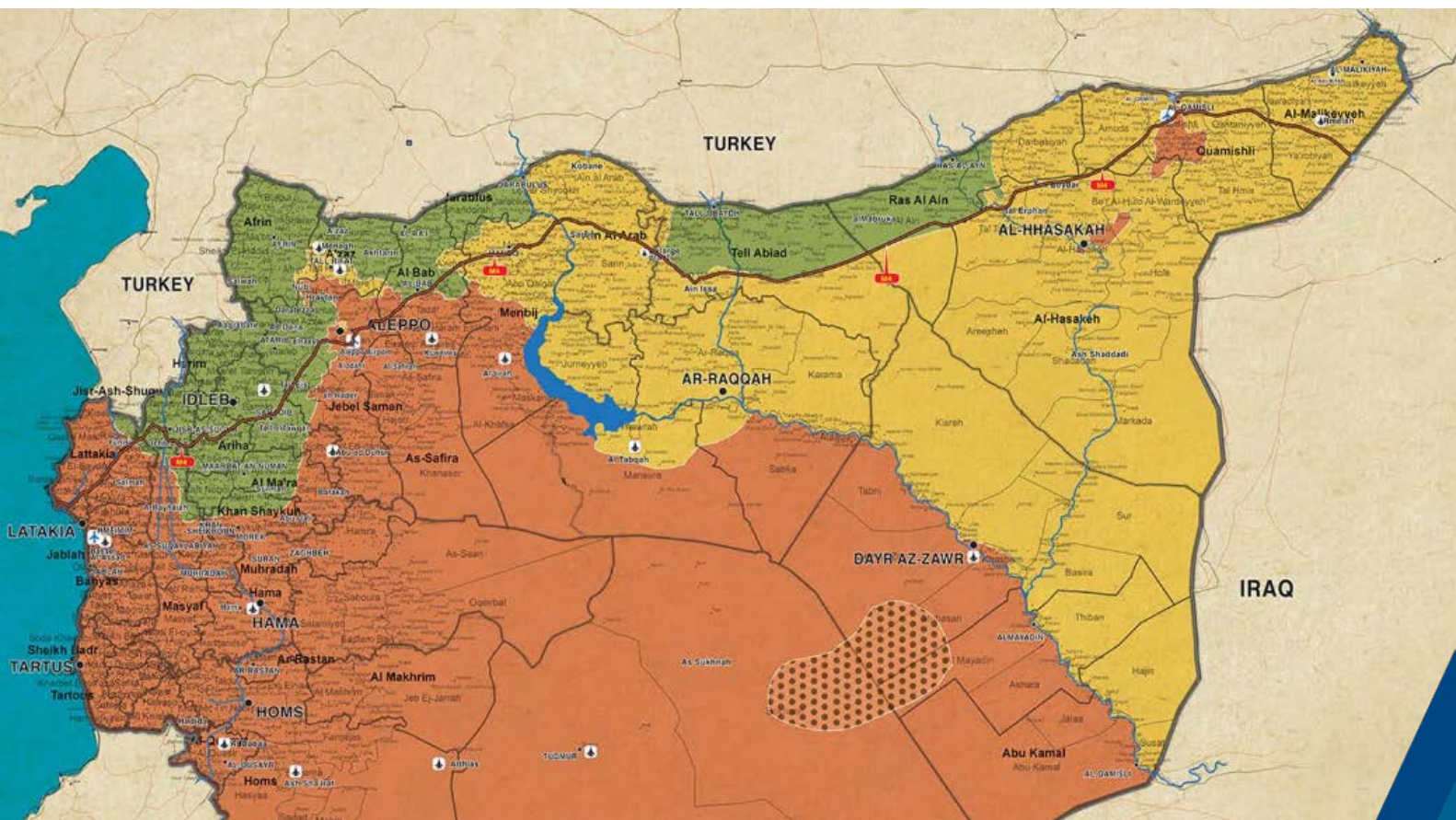


A Turkish Perspective on Syria



Ercan Çitlioğlu

Introduction

The war is not over, but the overall military victory of the Assad forces in the Syrian conflict — securing the control of the two-thirds of the country by the Summer of 2020 — has meant a shift of attention on part of the regime onto areas controlled by the SDF/PYD and the resurfacing of a number of issues that had been temporarily taken off the agenda for various reasons.

Diverging aims, visions and priorities of the key actors to the Syrian conflict (**Russia, Turkey, Iran and the US**) is making it increasingly difficult to find a common ground and the ongoing disagreements and rivalries over the post-conflict reconstruction of the country is indicative of new difficulties and disagreements.

The Syrian regime's priority seems to be a quick military resolution to Idlib which has emerged as the final stronghold of the armed opposition and jihadist groups and to then use that victory and boosted morale to move into areas controlled by the SDF/PYD with backing from Iran and Russia.

While the east of the Euphrates controlled by the SDF/PYD has political significance with relation to the territorial integrity of the country, it also carries significant economic potential for the future viability of Syria in holding arable land, water and oil reserves.

Seen in this context, the deal between the Delta Crescent Energy and the PYD which has extended the US-PYD relations from military collaboration onto oil exploitation can be regarded both as a pre-emptive move against a potential military operation by the Syrian regime in the region and a strategic shift toward reaching a political settlement with the SDF.

Russian and Iranian priorities, on the other hand, entail the elimination of the jihadist Salafist and Sunni armed groups located in Idlib, and consolidate their presence and permanence in Syria while taking active part in shaping the reconstruction of the country in line with their interests.

For the US, the main objective is to maintain the control of the areas with important water and oil reserves adjacent to the Iraqi border in the east and southeast through the PYD and to ensure that the SDF which is described by the Washington as “partner” plays a key role in the future of Syria together with the KNC including autonomy. The US involvement in Syria — both directly and through the PYD — is also considered an important deterrence against possible Iranian aggression toward Israel via Syria.

**This publication reflects the views of the author only*

Turkey on the other hand has revised its engagement with Syria in relation to the overthrowing of the Assad regime, adopting instead a more pragmatic and cautious discourse in line with the existing circumstances and developments, hence prioritizing efforts to stop a potential refugee wave from Idlib and to effectively curtail PYD's actions toward setting up a Kurdish state. More specifically, Ankara's priority in stopping a potential refugee wave is based on a non-violent solution to Idlib and to mitigate the HTS (*Hayat Tahrir al Sham*) which controls large parts of the area.

Bearing in mind also that the UN Security Council considers Jabhat al-Nusra, al-Qaida, HTS, Turkistan Islamic Party and various other groups as terrorists, further echoed in the Astana and Sochi Agreements, a potential military operation in Idlib also carries the potential to create further disagreements between Turkey, Russia and Iran, guarantors to the de-escalation zones.

Yet, for Turkey, which was successful so far in delaying a military solution to Idlib that is set to result in significant casualties and a large refugee wave toward the Turkish border, time is running out and its room for maneuver is gradually narrowing.

Another sticking point is that the SNA (**Syrian National Army**) consisting of moderate opposition groups brought together by Turkey is also considered a terrorist organization by Russia and Syria. This is complicated further by the fact that the groups under the SNA, manned mostly with Syrian Turkmens trained and armed by Turkey, are not only an integral part of Ankara's policy of national security against the armed wing of the PYD, the YPG but also an important aspect of Turkish engagement in Libya.

The HTS

Turkey's relations with the HTS, the latter's efforts to portray a more moderate position and distance itself from the radical jihadist fractions in order to remove its name from the UNSC's terrorist list, together with US backing toward such repositioning without a "green light" from Russia is yet another important (and increasingly critical) link in the chain of problems regarding Idlib.

In this regard, the priority of the talks — regarding the integration of the HTS which has recuperated after recent admissions to boast 30,000 militants into the moderate opposition groups, and Turkey's fulfilment of its obligations under various agreements toward fighting terrorist groups — is for the HTS to convince various fractions that are unwilling to compromise using force if necessary and to join other groups supported by Turkey under a single umbrella.

In this context, a meeting held in July 2020 at the Bab-al Hawa Border Crossing, the issue of the setting up of a new military council and an operational headquarters for the Al-Fateh al Mubin, set up by the HTS, National Front for Liberation and Jaysh al-Izza was discussed and prior to that meeting, the HTS took the first step toward mitigation by arresting the leadership of the Rouse the Believers group set up by the Guardians of Religion (Hurras ad-Din), Ansar al-Din Front, Ansar al-Islam, al-Jihad and al-Ansar.

In addition, the HTS released some of the opinion-leaders whom it initially arrested for defection on conditions of loyalty and serving the organization, hence consolidating its influence and control in the region.

The most important prerequisite for Turkish success on the Idlib “chess board” is for Russia to recognize the efforts toward reconstructing and possibly dissolving the HTS and to not classify the new formation as terrorist.

In this context when the US Ambassador and Syria Special Representative James Jeffrey was asked during a press conference held on 5 February 2020 in Washington, his thoughts on a solution for Idlib and whether he considered it a permanent enclave for rebels in relation to Syrian territorial integrity, he gave the following response which carefully distanced the HTS from other jihadist groups:

In terms of HTS, the HTS has not - we have not seen them planning or carrying out international terrorism attacks. We have seen them focusing on basically maintaining their position in Idlib. The Russians claim that they constantly launch attacks on the Russians. While HTS did not accept or was not part of the Sochi ceasefire agreement from 2018, we have only intermittent and not very strong or significant military actions on their part against the Russians. The Russians use this as an excuse. Basically, they're on the defensive, they're just sitting there.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov’s statement dated 18 January 2019 appears to confirm Ambassador Jeffrey’s suggestion that Moscow uses the HTS as an excuse to conduct attacks against the civilians together with the Syrian army: **“it also worries us in Idlib, contrary to the agreements on creating the demilitarized zone there, Jabhat al-Nusra dominates and violates the demilitarized zone. About 70 percent of this territory is already occupied by terrorists, they are trying to attack the Syrian army’s positions, settlements and they are trying to threaten our military base in Hmeymim.”**

The HTS on the other hand has refrained from any hostile actions toward TAF personnel in Idlib since it needs Turkish support to avoid being a terrorist target and for protection. More remarkably perhaps, the HTS has agreed to cooperate with TAF’s decision to set up checkpoints and bases in the Turkish-controlled areas, allowed safe passage for the Turkish logistical support convoys and facilitated the Turkish army’s acquisition of new areas for temporary bases that are located within the territories it controls.

In this regard, the HTS has been keen to convince Turkey and the US that it could work with Ankara on the field as the largest and most-organized group that controls large parts of Idlib, and that it is not an extension of the al-Qaida and its jihadist ideology.

Iran

For Tehran, the end of the Assad regime and by extension the exclusion of the Nusayris from power would amount to the collapse of geopolitical strategy based on the so-called “**Shiite Crescent**” toward the Bagdad-Damascus-Lebanon (Hezbollah) axis, a scenario that would ultimately mean Iran losing an important if not the only ally in the Arab World. Another fact that renders Syria critical from an Iranian perspective is the geographical proximity of the country to Israel and Palestine which maintains the logistical support Tehran provides for Hezbollah through this strategic corridor.

Indeed, it would not be wrong to suggest that Iran perceives the Syrian conflict as its own conflict. Iran’s increasing support toward the Regime and the mobilization of Hezbollah in Syria, the Revolutionary Guards, the Quds Force and other militant groups to engage directly in the clashes, together with logistical support including advanced weapons systems and strategic defense planning offered by combat advisors are clear indicators of the critical importance of Syria from an Iranian perspective.

Russia’s Discontent

Russia and Iran, the two key actors that support the Syrian regime politically, economically and in technical and logistic terms, are not in perfect harmony over Syria.

More specifically, Iranian efforts toward consolidating its military presence in Syria and political clout by playing the Shia card over the Alawi-dominated regime are seen by Russia as undermining its own dominant position in the country a highly-priced position that the latter is not willing to share with anyone.

Another Russian unease in relation to Iran is the latter’s confrontation with Israel via its proxies, especially Hezbollah, which for Russia provides a pretext for Israeli involvement in Syria, which in turn cements US permanence in the country. In other words, Tehran’s penchant for proxy activities against Israel in Syria offering a pretext for intervention are considered to be damaging long-term Russian plans regarding Syria.

Various developments reported by the Russian media in recent months also gives the impression that Moscow is sending Tehran an implicit message of discontent. This is seen in the response of Hezbollah leader Hasan Nasrallah to an article published on the *Federal News Agency* owned by Yevgeny Prizorkin, a Russian oligarch with close ties to Putin who also owns the Wagner Group (and by extension the Wagner forces in Libya) which called for “**Iranian forces exploiting Syria to agitate Israel and the US forces**” to leave.

While localized fighting amidst the overall military victory of the regime, another bone of contention and source of rivalry between Russia and Iran is over who will get the better piece of the cake within post-war reconstruction of Syria.

Russia’s post-war priorities include the strengthening of the central government, defense and security sector reform, securing deals for lucrative investment projects to cover war costs while Iran is more concerned with maintaining and increasing its

political clout in Syria through proxy militant groups and influence over the local populations. More concretely, Moscow is keen to upgrade its naval facility in Tartus together with the Khmeimim Air Base, and to secure its oil and gas exploration contracts while Iran is focused on modernizing the Latakian port, construction of power plants and other mobile communications projects.

In this regard, the Russian Deputy Prime Minister Yury Borisov announced that Syria and his country signed a series of bilateral agreements regarding bilateral cooperation in a number of sectors including energy, construction and agriculture envisaging 40 new investment projects, among them the rebuilding of hydroelectric stations and deep-sea oil exploration (September 2020) Borisov also announced that a new trade deal would be signed between the two countries in December 2020.

Saudi Arabia – UAE – Gulf States

For the Gulf states such as Saudi Arabia, UAE, Kuwait and others, these countries have so far interpreted the events largely through a sectarian perspective (Shiite – Salafi), aimed at weakening and ultimately ending Tehran’s growing influence both domestically (among the Shiite population) and in the region (other proxies) through Syria.

Besides, following the fallout with Turkey in 2013 over the coup in Egypt, the Gulf states, and above all, Saudi Arabia and the UAE have taken a rather different approach toward Syria, beyond their concern for sectarian influence and their fears regarding Iran.

In this context, following the fallout over Ankara’s support for Morsi in Egypt, Turkey’s involvement in the Astana peace process with Iran and Russia was an important factor which ended Ankara-Riyadh partnership in Syria.

In a similar vein, it is important to note too that Ankara’s support for Qatar during the Qatar-Gulf crisis in June 2017, the completion at the same time of a Turkish military base in the country and the fast-track deployment of Turkish troops, the subsequent expansion of that military base and more recently Turkish support toward the Sarraj government in Libya (financed by Qatar) known for his close links with the Muslim Brotherhood have further increased the enmity in Saudi Arabia and the UAE toward Turkey.

The ousting of Crown Prince Muhammed bin Nayif and his replacement with Muhammed Bin Selman known for his close relations with Abu Dhabi and an equally distanced approach toward Ankara, continued the trend of worsening relations between Ankara and Riyadh and the recent killing of the Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi in a rogue operation carried inside the İstanbul Consulate (2 October 2018) have significantly increased the tensions that mark the bilateral relations today.

In parallel to these developments, both Mohammed bin Selman (MBS) and the UAE Crown Prince Muhammed bin Zayed (MBZ) initiated an anti-Turkish campaign first in the Middle East in Syria, and later in Libya, Somalia in North Africa and now in the Eastern Mediterranean, turning Syria into a central hub both for reducing Ankara’s influence in the country and organizing activities that threaten the latter’s national security.

While Turkey was trying to stop the PYD/YPG from gaining political power via the power vacuum left behind, both Saudi Arabia and the UAE developed their relations with these groups by providing financial assistance and military support.

In this vein, Saudi and BAE officials held several high-level meetings in Riyadh and Abu Dhabi with senior representatives from the PYD/YPG. In October 2017 for instance, Thamer al-Sabhan, the Minister of State for Gulf Affairs together with the US Special Presidential Envoy for the Global Coalition Brett McGurk held a coordination meeting with the PYD/YPG in Raqqa (Syria), and in December 2019 the UAE invited Ferhat Abdi Şahin, better known by his *nom de guerre* Mazlum Kobani sought by Interpol with a red notice on Turkey's behalf, to Abu Dhabi for a meeting.

Finally, clear opposition from the Crown Prince bin Selman and the UAE Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Anwar Gargash toward Turkey's military operations in the region (Operation Olive Branch, Operation Peace Spring, Spring Shield) on the grounds of “**threatening Arab national security**”, and statements describing Turkey together with Iran and other groups in the region as being part of a “**triangle of evil**” has been the last nail on the coffin for their bilateral relations with Turkey.

On the other hand, Riyadh and Abu Dhabi have both recently initiated a process of normalization with Syria and the Assad Regime (of which Turkey is a key opponent), which has paved the way for restoring diplomatic relations including the reopening of the UAE and Bahrein Embassies in Damascus.

In this vein, reports suggesting that the UAE offered the regime in Damascus 3bn USD in return for the violation of the ceasefire in Idlib following Turkey's Spring Shield Operation though unconfirmed, deserve more attention especially when considered together with the recent developments in Libya and the UAE's sending of four F-16s to Crete (Greece) as part of its Eastern Mediterranean policy.

Turkish Minister of Foreign Affairs, Çavuşoğlu once stated without mentioning any name some of the countries donated radical groups financially and created commotion in Afrin and Idlib whenever Turkey launched military operations in these regions.

Indeed, while the frequent violations of the ceasefire by the Syrian army in Idlib in recent days can be explained by other and perhaps more important factors, the activities of the UAE and Saudi Arabia involving the PYD in Idlib should not be ignored.

Saudi Arabia too, upon calls from the US, sent technical teams to modernize the oil fields in Deir ez-Zor and in Rmelan (Rumeylan) controlled by the YPG. At the same time, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia both sent representatives to Raqqa and Manbij respectively to offer assistance yet with no success when the Arab local population rejected such offers.

Following US plans to legitimize the PYD/YPG with Saudi Arabian financial backing, Riyadh has pledged to give USD 520 ml over three years, with the first payment of USD 200ml already being made to the group by the Kingdom.

Within the framework of US efforts to counter Iran in the post-war period by increasing Saudi influence moreover, work is underway to set up a 10.000 strong “**oilfield guard force**” which will consist of the members of the Arab tribes from Al-Hasakah and Deir ez-Zor loyal to the SDF/PYD.

US (Delta Crescent Energy LLC) – PYD Energy Deal

A clear indication of the US determination not to share Syrian oil with anyone but the PYD it effectively controls was manifest in May 2019 though not adequate attention was paid to this development which was treated at the time as a reflection of the wider power rivalry.

During that time, the Russian Wagner Group commanded around 3,000 mercenaries with a majority of them operating in Latakia, near the Syrian 5th Corps (Around 2,500 Wagner Group mercenaries were later deployed to Libya to fight alongside Haftar's forces). When significant numbers of mercenaries were redeployed to Deir ez-Zor and Abu Kamal near the oil fields in Spring 2019, they were targeted by US fighter planes. While the attacks inflicted heavy losses on Wagner mercenaries, the response from Moscow was rather muted. It is understood that Moscow deliberately avoided displaying a strong reaction to the attacks in order not to reveal the presence of the Wagner forces in Syria and their connection to Kremlin but agreed instead with the US to set up various deconfliction mechanisms (such as joint control mechanism of Syrian air space) to avoid similar incidents in the future. Attacks against Wagner forces were nonetheless a clear message from the US to Russia to stay away from the oil fields.

The same message was delivered at a press conference on 5 February 2020 by the US Ambassador and the Special Representative for Syria Engagement James Jeffrey:

We've seen many of these things. Now actually looked at a map of where they're happening. Most of them are happening right on the edge where there is a road that everybody uses, and then there's also an airbase of ours. [...]

Now more serious is we have seen a number – a limited number of occasions, but we have seen them-were they have tried to come deep into area where we and SDF are patrolling, well inside the lines that we have sketched, not right along the borders. Those are the ones that worry me [...]

When taken together, President Trump's statements suggesting that the revenues from Syrian oil would be used to finance US expenditure in the country and that the US troops were stationed to protect these oil fields, Pentagon spokesperson Jonathan Hoffman's statement that the revenues from the oil fields protected by the US troops in Syria would be given to the SDF as well as the US Secretary Pompeo's suggestion that US troops would be stationed in Syria to protect the oil fields from ISIS, also help clarify the big picture regarding US involvement in Syria.

a) Turkish, Russian And Iranian Reactions to the Delta Crescent-PYD Deal

The deal between the US and the PYD (or rather the deal between a state and a terrorist group) represents perhaps a first-of-its-kind in terms of terrorist financing and has attracted strong condemnation from Turkey, Russia and Iran, guarantor states of the Astana Process. Indeed, as the Astana agreement stipulated:

[Guarantor states] rejected in this regard all attempts to create new realities on the ground under the pretext of combating terrorism, including illegitimate self-rule initiatives, and expressed their determination to stand against separatist agendas aimed at undermining the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Syria as well as threatening the national security of neighboring countries. (Article 3)

Discussed the situation in the North-east of Syria, emphasized that security and stability in this region can only be achieved on the basis of preservation of the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the country and agreed to coordinate their efforts to this end. Expressed their opposition to illegal seizure and transfer of oil revenues that should be belonged to the Syrian Arab Republic. (Article 4)

While the three countries have fulfilled their commitments, which were detailed in the agreements, it is unlikely that the US will backtrack from the move that seems long time in the making.

The deal was swiftly condemned by Turkey in a statement released on 3 August, remarking that "**We deeply regret the US support to this step, disregarding international law, violating territorial integrity, unity and sovereignty of Syria, as well as being considered within the scope of financing terrorism. This act, which cannot be justified by any legitimate motive, is utterly unacceptable**". Turkey's statement is also remarkable for emphasizing the link with terrorism which was omitted in the statements released by Russia and Iran.

For its part, the Russian Foreign Ministry released a strongly worded statement on 7 August 2020, criticizing the US move. The statement did not refer to the PYD but described the deal to be between the "**self-proclaimed Kurdish administration**" and the Delta Crescent, envisaging the building of two mobile refineries in the region. US Secretary of State Michael Pompeo's exchange with the Republican Senator Lindsey Graham at the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, confirming the deal and Pompeo's admission that "**it took longer than expected**" together with his claim that **the deal would help those living in northeast Syria** was also quoted in the statement. More remarkably perhaps, the Russian statement suggested that the Delta Crescent was given certain privileges by the US Treasury to by-pass the embargoes placed on Syria.

Tehran too, in a statement released by the Foreign Ministry spokesperson Abbas Mousavi, strongly condemned the deal, remarking that: "**The signing of the agreement by the US, as an occupier force that is illegally present on the Syrian oil, lacks any legal validity and amounts to another step taken by that country (the US) in plundering Syria's natural resources.**"

In a statement published by the official SANA News Agency, the Syrian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, also said that it condemned "**in the strongest terms**" the agreement signed between the SDF and a U.S. oil company to steal the Syrian oil, affirming that it considered it "**null and void**".

In a recent briefing regarding the oil deal between the Delta Crescent and the PYD, held at the Brussels Media Hub via telephone, the US Special Representative for Syria

Engagement, James Jeffrey was further pressed by a *Deutsche Welle* journalist on Turkish responses. When asked “a short follow-up regarding the deal between Syrian Democratic Forces and Delta Crescent Energy” and to elaborate on talks between Turkey and Washington, Jeffrey said:

In terms of the contract or whatever it was between Delta Crescent and the autonomous administration, this is an issue that the United States, other than issuing because we’re asked to issue and we’ve had every reason to not have a problem-necessary waivers from U.S. sanctions because the activity does not benefit the Assad regime, which is the purpose of waivers. This is a private operation to further the development of the oil fields in the northwest. We don’t see this is a change in ownership of these fields or anything else. The fields have been operating by the autonomous administration for many years now they took them back from ISIS.

It is clear from Jeffrey’s statements which omit Turkish and Syrian reactions to the deal, that Washington is keen to soften the strong condemnation it has attracted with the move. Indeed, his remarks regarding the oil fields, that “**we don’t see this is a change in ownership of these fields**” is an obvious message of calm to Syria, Russia, Iran, and Turkey amidst strong condemnation.

In the same vein, Jeffrey’s repeated references to the economic aspects of the deal and his implicit claim that the deal had no political significance can be read as a separate message to Ankara.

While some have claimed that the situation regarding the oil fields is nothing new (and that these fields were being operated by the PYD since 2015), these claims are far from convincing. Given that the US has replaced its technical assistance to the PYD, provided indirectly via Saudi Arabia, with a direct involvement in the form of a commitment to build two mobile refineries, the situation regarding US relations with the PYD has taken a different turn.

It is difficult to ignore, even though the most senior US official would like to state otherwise, that the US-PYD deal carries significant political repercussions. Besides, the reference in Jeffrey’s statements to the “many hundreds of **millions of dollars**” spent on the PYD (implicitly named) by the US and its coalition partners can be considered a clear message to Ankara that regarding the terrorist organization, the US is not acting alone.

It is also equally difficult to assume that Jeffrey who chooses to refer to the “**Kurdish autonomous authority**” as opposed to the PYD is unaware of the remarks made by the US Special Forces Commander, General Raymond Thomas in October 2015 that remains in the archives. In his speech delivered at the Annual Security Forum organized by the Aspen Institute in Colorado, General Thomas would claim that:

They formally called themselves the YPG, who the Turks would say equated the PKK, you’re dealing with a terrorist enemy of mine. How can you do that to an ally? So, we literally played back to them: you’ve got to change your brand. What do you want to call yourself beside the YPG? With about a day’s notice, they declared that they were the

Syrian Democratic Forces. I thought it was a stroke of brilliance to put democracy in there somewhere. But it gave them a little bit of credibility. They wanted a seat at the table and because they had been branded as PKK they could never get to the table. So while we paired with them militarily, McGurk was able to keep them in the conversation and allowed them the necessary legitimacy to be good partners for us.¹

Regardless of the name under which represents itself, whether the PYD, armed-wing YDG, the SDF or the “Kurdish autonomous authority”, the organization which the US has chosen as an ally and partner, and tried to legitimize with a deal signed for by the Delta Crescent Energy LLC, is — as General Raymond himself has admitted back in October 2015 — in effect, the PKK.

The Russian Federation

While Russia is the main actor which, through its involvement, changed the balance of power in Syria in favor of Assad, the clear lack of understanding of Russian positions and Moscow’s interests in Syria, particularly within a historical context, represents the first and the worst error committed by the West, and the US in particular, in a long chain of errors in developing a good understanding of the conflict.

While it was (and still is) crucial to take stock of the long history and the extent of Russia-Syria bilateral relations which dates back to the relations between the Syrian Arab Republic and the USSR, in order to better understand the current scope of Russian policy toward the country, the fact that this was not foreseen, or worst, that it was foreseen but ignored for self-interests, is the main factor which led to the globalization of the ongoing chaos and conflict.

From the earlier days of the Soviet Union onwards, Syria has always enjoyed a rather privileged position in the geopolitical calculations of the Kremlin. Today, it is not possible to find a comparable case which receives the same extent of Russian political or military support than Syria.

Moreover, on 23 August 2017 the two countries extended the “**Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation**” that was initially signed in 1980 for another 49+25 years which will allow Russia under international law to maintain its presence **in Syria until 2091**.

In the context of Russia’s expansionist plans toward becoming a global power, and the steps it has taken in that direction under Putin’s leadership on a pan-Slavic impulse in the Black Sea in Crimea (Sevastopol), in the Mediterranean in Syria (Latakia-Tartus-Hmeymim) and more recently in Libya (Sirte and Al Jufra), it would not be wrong to suggest that Syria’s importance will continue to increase for Kremlin’s policies toward the Mediterranean-the Middle East and North Africa.

¹ AA, 25, January 2018

Russia-Turkey Dispute over the PYD/YPG

Though both are guarantor states to the Astana process together with Iran and signatories to the agreements signed in Astana and Sochi, Turkey and Russia have significant disagreements over several key issues both on the field and regarding the future of Syria.

A key disagreement between Turkey and Russia (but also Iran) is Ankara's insistence on the removal of Assad from power while Tahran and Kremlin have remained key allies of the regime. Despite the fact that the incumbent regime in Syria is recognized by the UN, Turkey has refrained from any contact with the Syrian government (bar the low-level dialogue among intelligence operatives), justifying its presence in the country with reference to the Astana agreements and Article 51 of the UN Charter relating to self-defense instead.

Russia and Iran can both claim stronger reasons for their involvement in the Syrian conflict when compared with Turkey. Russia's involvement is based on its bilateral agreements with the country while Iran says its presence is legitimate because it came at the request of the Syrian government and contributed to Syria's efforts in the fight against terrorism.

For reasons explained earlier, Russia does not consider the PYD a terrorist organization. In fact, Kremlin diverges significantly from Turkey regarding its policy toward the PYD by maintaining direct contact with the organization, offering training, but also shelter in Tell Rifaat and Manbij following the retreat of US forces from these areas.

In a statement released in August 2019, Vladimir Putin's Special Envoy for Syria, Alexander Lavrentyev further claimed that the SDF had pursued a policy aimed at preserving Syria's territorial integrity and that it was supportive of the talks between Damascus and the Kurds, confirming that Russia's stance toward the Kurdish rights was different than other countries'.² Lavrentyev's reference to "**other states**" can be seen as an indirect diplomatic message to Ankara. Indeed, taken together with the statement of the Kurdish National Council's (ENKS) Head of Foreign Relations Bureau Kamiran Haco that they had met with the Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov in Moscow to discuss the work of the Syrian Constitutional Committee and "developments in the northeastern areas of the country", it can be seen that the traditional Russian foreign policy of "**talking to all sides**" as in Libya is in place regarding the Kurds in Syria.³

Another disagreement between Turkey and Russia over Syria relates to the status of different opposition groups. Apart from the HTS, al-Nusra or the al-Qaida (recognized as terrorist groups by the UNSC), Russia also considers the Syrian National Army (or the past Free Syrian Army) backed by Turkey as a terrorist organization.

The eventual eradication of radical and jihadist groups in Idlib in line with the Astana and Sochi agreements, the issue of the Turkish-backed SNA (that has been put on the deep-freeze) will inevitably dominate the agendas and it is not difficult to suggest that it will represent another significant disagreement between the parties.

² Orsam, Center for Middle Eastern Studies, July 29-August 04. 2019

³ Orsam, Center for Middle Eastern Studies, July 29-August 04. 2019

In this regard, Russia (together with Syria) will have an important say on the involvement and status of the Turkish-backed “moderate opposition” in the post-war reconstruction of Syria, following the introduction of a new constitution and the holding of fresh elections once the fighting is over.

It is likely that Russia will use the involvement of the groups under the SNA in the post-conflict reconstruction process as a bargaining chip and allow such involvement together with the setting up of a buffer-zone under Syrian and Russian control, in return for Turkish withdrawal from the territories which it controls.

Moreover, the current modus operandi between Turkey and Russia, which allows other disagreements over Libya, Crimea, Ukraine and in the Black Sea to deepen and exacerbate the existing rifts in Syria, and both sides’ insistence to tackle these issues independently of one another raises important concerns for the future viability of the relationship.

More specifically, the compartmentalization approach, i.e. Isolation of agreement from areas of disagreement which has so far allowed a wide range of issues to be kept separate from cooperation in Syria, including Turkish rapprochement with the US in Libya toward a settlement, the alignment of Turkish and US interests regarding the dissolution/reconstruction of the HTS, Turkish “U-turn” regarding the deployment of the S-400 missile system following US Congress pressure through the sanctions act (CAATSA), Turkish efforts to strengthen military cooperation with the Ukraine but also its denial, in the same vein, to deny recognizing the annexation of Crime, the utmost support of Azerbaijan by Turkey against Armenia and other disagreements does not appear sustainable any longer.

A close inspection of the recent developments taking place in PYD-controlled northeast and southeast of Syria reveals that plans to set up an Iraqi-style autonomous Kurdish region have gathered pace. In this regard, the meeting between the-then Director of the CIA, Michael Pompeo, the Director of the Russian Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR) Sergey Naryshkin and the Director of the Russian Federal Security Service of the Russian Federation (FSB) Alexander Bartnikov in Washington (the two officials are barred from entering the US in the context of US sanctions on Russia) to discuss the issue of Syrian Kurds (PYD and the KUK) and the subsequent meeting on 25 February 2018 in which Vladimir Putin’s adviser on the Middle East, Vitaly Naumkin,⁴ got together with Pompeo at a special event organized by the Georgetown University to discuss the future of Syria all point to a rather special dialogue between the US and Russia on Syria.

Considering also that Russia and the US have similar views regarding limiting the depth of the buffer zone set up by Turkey in the north of Syria, their opposition to the extension of the Turkish-controlled military zone through the merging of the pockets (acquired following Turkish incursions) to cover the whole Turkish-Syrian border, their unfaltering support for the PYD despite strong Turkish objections — directly in the case of the US and implicitly by the Kremlin by protecting the YPG in Tell Rifaat and Manbij, offering training and holding high-level talks — the reality in Syria does not appear to correlate with what is being observed on the ground.

⁴ Prof Dr Vitaly Naumkin is the President of RAS Institute for Oriental Studies, President of Moscow International Centre for Strategic and Political Studies and a distinguished member of the Russian Academy.

When considered together, the widespread international rejection (by the US and Russia above all) to classify the PYD as terrorist, growing Western sympathy toward the latter in the context of the fight against the ISIS, the brokering of the talks between the PYD and the ENKS by France and the US, the financial strengthening of the PYD through oil deals and enabling the latter to play an important role in the wider Syrian economy, efforts to cut off its organic ties to the PKK, the group's increased dialogue with the Syrian regime (but also the Syrian Foreign Minister Walid Muallem's remarks that the "federal option" could be discussed) the emerging prospects of a limited and cultural autonomy for the Syrian Kurds under the SDF banner, backed by Russia and the US can hardly be surprising.

In this respect, the visit of the PYD/YPG-led SDC (Syrian Democratic Council) delegation to Russia in August 2020 to conduct high-level talks and the signing of a joint memorandum with the pro-Russian Popular Front for Change and Liberation is a clear indication of Russian readiness to allow the PYD an active role in the future of Syria.

Indeed, the deal struck in Moscow between the SDC and the Popular Front now allows the PYD to take part in the Geneva talks (albeit indirectly) that it had long wished for.

Reacting to the move which constitutes the next phase of the efforts to merge the PYD with the ENKS the Turkish Foreign Ministry expressed Ankara's concerns in a strongly worded statement released on 31 August 2020, as follows:

Combating terrorism in all forms and manifestations, and standing against separatist agendas aimed at undermining the territorial integrity of Syria as well as threatening the national security of neighboring countries constitute common commitments enshrined in the joint statements of the high-level Astana-format meetings held to date. As a matter of fact, the Astana guarantors reaffirmed, most recently at their meeting held in Geneva on 25 August 2020, their joint objection against separatist agendas of illegitimate entities. We expect the Russian Federation to act in conformity with Astana spirit and the commitments undertaken at the Astana-format meetings, and to refrain from taking steps that would serve the agendas of the entities affiliated with the PKK/YPG terrorist organization.

While Ankara also referred to the Articles 3 and 4 of the Astana Agreement and demanded that Russia acts in the spirit of these commitments, the chances of Moscow backing down from its current course remain rather slim.

The United States

Under President Trump, the US has closed most of its bases in the country (except for Jalabiya and al-Tanf, etc.) though it still maintains air support to these through the airports it has built in the east of the Euphrates. Regarding its relations with Turkey too, Washington has been using delaying tactics, and yet to fulfil its promises to Ankara.

Statements of the then US Central Command Commander General Joseph Votel that **"the President made this decision without consulting me, I felt like I was punched in the gut when I heard it"** and the then White House Security Advisor, John Bolton, before his visit to Israel (January 7, 2018) that **"[the US] will not withdraw from Syria without a promise to protect the Kurdish fighters (read YPG)"**, were clear indications of the subsequent US policy in Syria.

US State Department spokesman Robert Palladino's statement, moreover, following Mike Pompeo's meeting with his Turkish counterpart Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu in Washington, that **"Minister Pompeo expressed his support for the ongoing negotiations regarding northeast Syria. At the same time, he warned about the potential devastating consequences of the unilateral military action by Turkey"** — at a time when the US support for the PYD/YPG despite clear Turkish objections had stoked up bilateral tensions — reaffirmed that the US would maintain its position.

The fact however that the US and Turkey are on the opposing lines of the battle in Syria should have been clear when the US failed to comply with the deal that was reached between the two counties in June 2018 regarding the gradual withdrawal of the PYD/YPG from Manbij. According to Turkish reports, in the first phase of the process, the TAF would begin patrolling the surrounding areas independently. The second phase would include the joint patrolling and the final phase would involve the withdrawal of YPG members from the city toward the east of the Euphrates.

The first phase was completed rather smoothly but when the process entered its second phase, the initial foot-dragging by the US could only be overcome after the targeting of YPG positions by the TAF with artillery fire.

As for the entry of TAF into Manbij, Colonel Sean Ryan, spokesman for Operation Inherent Resolve based in Iraq, remarked in a statement to Pentagon reporters via teleconference that; **"I can tell you that Turkish soldiers will not go into Manbij."** When asked whether the PYD would withdraw from Manbij, Ryan suggested that **"there's never a hundred percent assurances for anything in war time."**

Indeed, this also holds true for another instance of deliberate US deceptiveness when the US practically handed over its base in Manbij to Russia even though it had promised Ankara that the latter would be given the control of the area.

While the overall US foreign policy toward Syria is delineated in detail throughout this report, the abovementioned illustrations of the strained relationship between Washington and Ankara over Syria serve useful in better contextualizing and understanding the role these actors play in the Syrian conflict.

People's Republic of China

It is understood that China is keen to take an active role in the post-war reconstruction of Syria and has based its policy around two key goals. The first goal, if successful in developing good relations with Damascus, is to stop the jihadist Uighur fighters who have been seeking refuge amongst the ranks of the Turkistan Islamic Party returning back to China and their eventual elimination — a goal that Russia also sympathizes with. China's second goal is to develop a robust economic relationship with Syria during its post-war reconstruction. This is clearly indicated by the hosting of the "First

Trade Fair on Syrian Reconstruction Projects” in Beijing and China’s pledge to invest USD 2 billion to establish industrial parks in the country.

Israel

Israel stands out as the country that benefitted the most from the civil war in Syria, entering its 9th year. Following Tel Aviv’s successful back-door diplomacy — under the watchful eyes of President Trump and Gerald Kushner — with Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Jordan now bearing fruit in terms of the recent decision of Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates to officially recognize Israel, Iran and Syria have been largely alienated in their tough stance against Tel Aviv, with further ramifications for the current balance of power in the Middle East.

To begin with, the developing of a fully-fledged relationship between Israel and the UAE is set to further complicate Iran’s military use of the Syrian geography against Israel (also objected by Russia), together with a range of implications for the future of Syria-Iran relations.

In view of the Gulf states’ financial muscle and the extent of the investment Syrian post-war reconstruction will require, Damascus may also be forced to reconsider its choices in the region when the war is finally over.

From the onset of the war, Israel followed a rather cautious policy regarding the Syrian conflict and chose to engage in indirect and covert activities instead of direct engagement, but by responding promptly and harshly to the threats and attacks posed by Iran-led Hezbollah and the Syrian army, it nonetheless showed that it was determined to protect its national security.

In this regard, it can be said that the ever-consuming civil war which has weakened the Syrian army has provided a significant respite for Israel, which has traditionally viewed Syria as one of its most-bitter enemies in the region in view of the latter’s tough stance against Tel Aviv.

It is understood that Israel thus prefers the current state of affairs in the conflict and would rather have a militarily and economically weakened Damascus than a chaos or indeed a takeover by the rebel forces.

This also explains why Israel is content with its limited containment policy — involving air strikes and missile attacks, and only to reinforce its red lines — instead of an all-out conflagration aimed at destroying the defense capabilities of Syria,

Moreover, Israel’s favorable view of the fact that a large area in the east of the Euphrates is now controlled by the PYD/YPG and its eager reception of the progress the latter has made toward securing autonomy, constitutes another added value for Tel Aviv’s future plans.

Reports circulating on open sources that other Gulf countries are preparing to follow on the UAE and Bahrain’s footsteps to recognize Israel also suggest that the latter may soon strengthen its political hand further by acquiring a strong card which can be used to re-admit Syria to the Arab Union.

Recent developments that may result in Syria and Iran gradually reducing their influence in Lebanon, and the growing sphere of influence Tel Aviv started to form against Iran's "Shia axis", also carry the potential to have negative repercussions for Syria.

While its covert relationship with some rebel groups in Syria allows Tel Aviv comfortable room of maneuver in the field, the latter also enjoys the comfort of having the power to deter any would-be threats.

With ability to shape the course of events without directly intervening in the civil war to not jeopardize its security and national interests, Israel seems to have followed an effective and rational policy toward Syria. Given the circumstances, the status quo appears to be the most preferred option for Israel.

Training of the Opposition Groups by the US and Turkey

At this point of the conflict, a new program titled 'Train and Equip' was initiated by Turkey and the US to discipline and avoid the further fragmentation of the "moderate" opposition groups by providing them training and logistical support. On 19 February 2013, the then US Ambassador to Turkey, John Bass and the Undersecretary for Foreign Affairs Feridun Sinirlioğlu signed the deal ratifying the new program which envisaged the training of 1000-1500 selected opposition fighters by American and Turkish specialists in three-month periods for an entire year. The same program was also adopted in Jordan and Saudi Arabia envisaging the training of around 3,000-3,500 fighters within a year.

The first group which was trained in Turkey under Colonel Nadim Hasan consisting of 18 fighters of mainly Syrian Turkmen background, were ambushed in Al-Malikiyah, near Azaz and all but 3 fighters were killed. The second group (54 fighters) were forced by Al-Nusra in Ma'arrat al-Nu'man to surrender their weapons, vehicles, and equipment in return for their lives.

Such field incidents, the capturing of advanced weapons such as the TOW by Al-Nusra as well as the problems in reaching the target number of participants all led to a certain disgruntlement on the part of the US. Indeed, the then US President Barack Obama during a press conference held on 3 October 2015, described the training program as "**unsuccessful**", stating that he was the first person to "**admit that it did not work as expected**". This was an early indication that US would not put its weight behind the Kurds. In the following days, the then US Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter, in a press conference held with his British counterpart Michael Fallon declared that the 'Train and Equip' program would be transformed to "**focus on working together with competent Kurdish and other forces**", pointing though not naming the PYD. With the decision of the US to choose PYD as their new ally in the fight against the Assad regime, the 'Train and Equip' program was discontinued in 2015 (09 October 2015, *New York Times*).

This was confirmed by the new US President, Donald Trump that he would order the CIA to terminate all training and arming programs toward the Syrian opposition bar the support provided to the SDF (PYD/YPG).

Following the decision of the US to choose the PYD as its new ally, Pentagon quickly followed suit, thus leaving Turkey on its own. For its part, Turkey continued to train, provide logistical support and offer guidance in organizational matters for the selected armed opposition groups and later brought them together under the Free Syrian Army (later to be renamed the Syrian National Army) to end the apparent disunity among them, attaining a good degree of success to that end under given circumstances.

While the US decision to pull out of the ‘Train and Equip’ program (which enjoyed an estimated budget of USD 500ml) is usually explained with reference to the programmer’s operational failure, it is understood that the real reason was resistance from Turkey to include fighters from Kurdish background onto the program, fearing that the latter could have links to the PYD. Indeed, the emphasis on “**competent Kurds**” in both President Obama’s and Secretary Carter’s statements does suggest that there was prior planning with regards to identifying potential allies.

It is also important to note too that unwillingness on the part of the US to provide the opposition with advanced weapons systems (anti-tank/anti-aircraft missiles) fearing the latter would fall into jihadist hands was a significant handicap for the opposition in the field. Yet the Javelin anti-tank missiles — requested by Turkey and denied by the US Congress — were provided to the PYD/YPG and the TOW anti-tank missiles, registered to the Saudi inventory, were given to the Salafi groups.

The Breaking Point in Idlib: Balioun

Despite several meetings held between the Russian and the Turkish delegations on the developments in Idlib in February 2020, the Regime’s attacks targeting the civilians continued. In an attack within the Idlib De-Escalation Zone (on the road between al-Bara and Balioun, 3 miles North of Kafr Nabl in southern Idlib) on 27 February 2020 carried out by two Russian Sukhoi SU-34 and two Syrian Sukhoi SU -22 against the Turkish Armed Forces (TAF) units (mechanized infantry battalion comprised of around 400 soldiers that had arrived to Idlib 24 hours before the attack), the Regime forces killed 33 TAF personnel and wounded 52. After the attack, Turkey launched Operation Peace Shield (OPS) under the right to self-defense of the 51st Article of the UN Charter, causing intensive damage to the units of 4th Armored Division and considerable number of casualties.

While Russia initially denied any involvement in the attacks, the Russian Defense Ministry later claimed that Turkey did not provide the coordinates regarding the location of its units. When Turkish Ministry of Defense responded by the particulars of the communication with the Russians regarding the detailed coordinates, this was followed by a rather accusatory suggestion from Kremlin that “**Turkish soldiers should not have been there**” – though one that also admitted responsibility for the attacks.

The detailed assessment of the attacks show that the TAF convoy after the first attack sought defensive fighting position in the nearby buildings which were later bombed with bunker-buster munition and the casualties were mainly from the personnel who were trapped under the rubble. Despite establishing communication with the Russian forces in Syria, the attack continued for 5 hours and another TAF convoy — deployed there to aid the previous convoy — was also targeted. Perhaps more worryingly, Turkish request to open the air space for the transport of casualties and the injured

was denied by the Russians and the injured personnel were taken 70km away to the town of Reyhanlı, in Turkey over land (through the Bab al-Hawa Border Crossing).

At the emergency meeting of the UNSC on 28 February 2020 on the attack, the Turkish Permanent Representative to the UN Feridun Sinirlioğlu underlined the key particulars of the attack which showed that the Russian role in the attacks was beyond any doubt: “[...] **that the precise location of the convoy was coordinated with the Russian military authorities in writing, [...] that the attack continued for 5 hours despite calls [...] that the traces from the radar show the Russian and Syrian crafts were flying on a mission configuration [that] the ambulances and ambulance staff were also targeted.**”

Memorandum on Stabilization of the Situation in the Idlib De-Escalation Zone

Following the incidents in Balioun, a meeting between the Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and his counterpart, Vladimir Putin in Moscow on 05 March 2020 which aimed at stopping the regime attacks in Idlib and ending the humanitarian crisis in the region. At that meeting, the two sides signed the **“Memorandum on the Stabilization of the Situation in the Idlib De-Escalation Zone”**.⁵ The Additional Protocol stipulated that the “ceasefire” (though the protocol refers to “cease all military actions” instead of using the word of “ceasefire”).⁶ would enter into effect 06 March 2020, establishing a security corridor of six kilometers in the north and south of M4 Highway and creating a joint Turkish and Russian patrol along M4 Highway between Trumba (2 km to the west from Saraqib) and Ain al-Havr. By August 2020, 26 joint patrol missions were carried out.

The Additional Protocol further highlighted that there could be no military solution to the Syrian conflict and that it could only be resolved through a UN facilitated process in line with the UNSCR 2254. The Protocol also renewed calls that the Regime stops its attacks in Idlib area and committed the sides to work together to prevent the deterioration of the humanitarian crisis, to ensure the protection of civilians to be also provided with humanitarian aid, to stop the further displacement of civilians and ensuring safe and voluntary return of the internally displaced people to their original places of residence.

The following two points, stated in the Protocol and cited here in full, also deserve attention:

(i)“Reaffirming their (the two parties of the protocol) determination to combat all forms of terrorism, and to eliminate all terrorist groups in Syria as designated by the UNSC, while agreeing that targeting of civilians and civilian infrastructure cannot be justified under any pretext”; and

⁵ 05 March 2020, Memorandum on the stabilization of the Situation in the Idlib De-Escalation Zone.

⁶ While criticized by some observers, the text’s choice of words, referring to the “ceasing of all military actions” as opposed to a “ceasefire” can be considered a more formal but also a wider arrangement which halts military build-ups, fortifications and repositioning of forces.

(ii) “Reaffirming the strong commitment to the sovereignty, independence, unity and territorial integrity of the Syria Arab Republic.”

With regards to the first point, while it is important that the Protocol affirms Russia’s and Turkey’s determination to “**combat and eliminate all forms of terrorism**”, it is likely that the existing disagreements between the two sides regarding which groups are to be considered terrorist will raise concerns over the viability of the agreement.

While Russia, and Syria — though not a signatory to the deal — regards all groups under the National Syrian Army as “terrorists”, for Turkey the terrorists are the “sectarian militias and radicals from outside Syria”. Since the Protocol refers to the definition adopted by the UNSC, groups such as Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham, Hurras al-Din and Turkistan Islamic Party belong to that category that would need to be eliminated.

In addition to significant disagreements over which groups constitute the terrorists, other key concerns are also to be found in various documents and agreements signed by the two sides previously, including the Memorandum of Understanding signed in Sochi on 22 October 2019, the 12-point ‘Joint Declaration’ issued following the summit between Turkey, Russia and Iran, the ‘Memorandum on the Creation of De-Escalation Zones in the Syria Arab Republic’ signed on 4 May 2017 (also referred to in the ‘Additional Protocol’ signed on 5 March 2020) as well as the “Memorandum on Stabilization of the Situation in the Idlib De-Escalation Area” signed on 17 September 2018. More specifically, certain Turkish obligations under these agreements which Russia claims were unfulfilled was later used as a pretext by the latter as a pretext to launch its operation (together with the Syrian regime) in Idlib.

Who Won What with the Additional Protocol?

The strong wording regarding the commitment of the two sides “to the sovereignty, independence, unity and territorial integrity of the Syria Arab Republic” does not reflect the realities on the ground and raises important questions regarding the ways in which the two sides will put these principles into practice.

More specifically, while large areas including those adjacent to the Iraqi border near Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor and in the northeast of the country (constituting 30 percent of the country’s total land area) are controlled by the PYD/YPG backed by US bases and explicitly US support, with further plans for its future governance on some form of autonomy from the Syrian regime, it remains unclear in the Turkey-Russia agreements how the territorial integrity of the Syrian Arab Republic would be protected and by whom.

Besides, bearing in mind that Russia’s presence in Syria is based on bilateral treaties that exist with that country which also provide the legal ground for its bases, it should not come as a surprise that further escalation of the disagreements between Russia and Turkey over Libya (Al-Jufra, Sirte) and Syria (Idlib, Manbij, Tell Rifaat) results in demands for a Turkish withdrawal from those areas which it controls.

While the second article of the ‘Additional Protocol’ — signed on 5 March 2020 in Moscow with immediate effect — envisaged a security corridor of six kilometers in the north and south of M4 Highway within 7 days, it did not stipulate any measures regarding the M5 Highway.

It is important to recall nonetheless that the responsibility for opening up the M4 and M5 Highways for traffic and trade was given to Turkey and not fulfilling that responsibility was among the reasons why Russia, together with Syria, initiated the operation in Idlib.

The main reason why no additional measures were included in the ‘Additional Protocol’ regarding the North-Southbound M5 Highway is that it would later come under the full control of the Syrian army following an operational advance.

For Turkey, the main stumbling block toward establishing the security corridor that was foreseen in the Additional Protocol is the presence of groups belonging to Hay’at Tahrir el-Sham, Hurras al-Din and the Turkistan Islamic Party and their refusal to leave the areas along the M4 starting from Saraqib to West (Latakia) including the towns of Ayn al-Bayda, Jisr al-Shughur, Muhambal, Arihah and Sermin. Indeed, these groups have occasionally attempted to frustrate the joint patrol missions along the M4 by setting up roadblocks, hand made explosives and attacking the convoys, including Russian vehicles which took part in the 17th and 26th patrol mission.

The attack which was carried against the Turkish-Russian joint patrol in June resulting in extensive damage to two Russian vehicles is not an isolated incidence. In fact, the joint patrol missions have been fraught with difficulties and only on 22 July the patrol mission was completed along the whole of the M4 motorway as the Moscow Agreement had stipulated, though this was also interrupted by mortar fire along the route and attacks on Russian vehicles by light weapons. It should be noted that the joint patrols had been stopped by the Russians so far.

Nonetheless, with the deal reached on 6 March 2020, Turkey was able to gain much-needed time by stopping a new influx of refugees toward its borders. And with around 60 temporary stations it was able to acquire to the north and northwest of the M4 highway, Turkey then established a secure zone to give permanency to the presence of its forces in the area for some time.

In that respect, it would not be wrong to suggest that Turkey has assumed great responsibility in Idlib on behalf of the international community. Against the existing and future security risks created by the Regime’s attacks in Idlib, Turkey had used its influence to maintain the status quo which was further stabilized with the ‘Additional Protocol’ to the Sochi Agreement which came into effect on 5 March 2020, to prevent civilian losses, and to distinguish the moderate opposition from terrorist in taking into consideration the security concerns of all sides.

Efforts to Merge the PYD with the KUC

Reports relating to increased efforts on the part of the US and France to bring together the PYD with the Kurdish groups supporting Barzani with significant progress being made toward creating an entity similar to the IKRG all point to a critical juncture for the future direction of the Syrian conflict.

The direct talks between the Kurdish National Unity Parties (PYNK) — which consists of 25 parties close to the PYD — and the Kurdish National Alliance in Syria (HNKS) close to Mesut Barzani took place in April 2020 in the US base near Haseke and was attended by the US Deputy Special Envoy for the International Alliance, William Robak and Mazloum Abdi introducing himself as the Commander in Chief of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF).

The news were reported by the *Al Monitor* as follows:

Rival Kurdish parties in northeastern Syria have begun US-sponsored reconciliation talks after repeated delays in the past [...] The initiative is seemingly designed to include all the Kurdish parties in the PYD-ruled autonomous administration in northeast Syria, paving the way for the autonomous administration to join the UN-sponsored negotiations in Geneva to end the Syrian conflict.

The deal that was reached on 16 June 2020 was announced at a press conference in which the Special Envoy Roebuck commended “both sides [PYNK-HNKS] for the hard work they’ve done to reach the progress reached so far [...] on the basis of the Duhok Agreement”, also commending the role of Mesut Barzani, Nechirvan Barzani and Mazloum (PYD) in bringing the sides together that would “form a strong basis for the Syrian Kurds”.

The ‘Duhok Agreement’ which was referred to in Roebuck’s statement was sponsored by Mesut Barzani and signed on 22 October 2014 in Duhok (Northern Iraq). The negotiations were held between the PYD (represented by the then co-chairman of the Party), and its key ally Movement for a Democratic Society (or TEV-DEM, *Tevgera Civaka Demokratik*) and the HNKS close to the KDP (Iraq). Governance, power-sharing, security and defense were among the issues that were discussed during the negotiations which lasted nine days, and the end of which the groups agreed to set up a 30-member power-sharing council to run the Kurdish-controlled areas in Syria. More importantly perhaps, the agreement also confirmed YPG, or the so-called ‘People’s Protection Units’ as the only military entity in Rojava.

In this context, the reference in William Roebuck’s statement regarding the deal between the PYNK and the HNKS to the Duhok agreement should be read as an outcome of the efforts toward legitimizing the PYD/YPG and legalizing Washington’s collaboration with that group.

These developments were also discussed by Turkish President Erdogan, Russian President Putin and their Iranian counterpart, Rouhani during a teleconference on 1 July 2020, the conclusions of which were noted in a joint statement.

Such strong wording as rejected in this regard all attempts to create new realities on the ground under the pretext of combating terrorism, including illegitimate self-rule initiatives, and expressed their determination to stand against separatist agendas aimed at undermining the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Syria as well as threatening the national security of neighboring countries] should be read as a diplomatic response to statements issued by the PYNK and HNKS, claiming [to attend to the third round of Geneva talks].

Indeed, the part which emphasizes that [Emphasized their strong commitment to the sovereignty, independence, unity and territorial integrity of the Syrian Arab Republic

as well as the purposes and principles of the UN Charter. Highlighted that these principles should be universally respected and that no actions, no matter by whom they were undertaken should undermine them] is a particularly strong warning for all actors, and above all the US, France but also the KRG, that are behind the efforts to unite and mobilize the rival Kurdish groups in northeastern Syria for autonomy.

Yet despite such a clear declaration penned onto the agreements signed by Turkey, Russia and Iran reflecting their shared stance, the deal reached between PYD and People's Will Party in Moscow under the initiative of Russia (August 2020), paving the way for indirect participation of the latter in the Geneva talks is an unfortunate event for the Turkish-Russian relations.

PYD's Kurdification Policies

Following a brief account of how the PYD successfully overcame its disagreements with the other rival Kurdish parties and groups — either through the use of force or exploiting the internal divisions that existed among them — this section of the study deals with various Kurdification policies the PYD has implemented in the territories under its control. Such policies of demographic manipulation to create a Kurdish majority, forced migrations, the destruction of official title deeds, unlawful manipulation of the civil registry data and so on, share a striking resemblance to the former Arabization policies of Hafez al-Assad in the region against the Kurds. While the Kurdification policies of the PYD are a far cry from its earlier appeals to the equal treatment of all ethnic groups and peaceful co-existence, they also provide important clues regarding its future plans for the region.

It is clear that the PYD — backed both politically and militarily by the US — is increasingly leaning towards ethnic cleansing in such areas as Raqqa with an Arab majority and where Arabic is the most spoken language.

To this end, local village names in those areas populated by Arab majorities have been changed from Arabic to Kurdish, to eradicate the historical and cultural impact of the Arabic language on the landscape in an attempt to Kurdify the region with a distinct Arabic character.

Apart from the replacing of place names, the PYD changed the medium of instruction in schools under its control from Arabic to Kurdish despite Arabic being the official language of the Syrian Arab Republic which constitutes a clear violation of the right to education in mother-tongue.

Indeed, it can be seen from the news and visuals published by the French *Le Parisien* newspaper as part of a story titled “Les Kurdes de Syrie”, that many Arabic place names have been replaced with Kurdish ones.

During a news report by the Kurd Street News aired in October 2016, the name of the village al-Sahajara (meaning “tree” in Arabic) near al-Hasakah was replaced with Çoldara (meaning “woodland in Kurdish)

Again, the name of the Ayn al-Arab district (Arab Spring in English) soon after it came under the PYD control following the defeat of the regime forces in 2012 was renamed Kobani.

Other examples of such name changes include Tell Abyad (“white hill” in English) replaced with “Gire Spi” and the Ras al-Ayn, populated by Arabs, Kurds, Chechen, and Christians, with “Sere Kaniye”. It is important to note too that out of the 271 villages in the Ras al-Ayn district, 106 of them are populated by Arab majorities.⁷

Kurdification of the Syrian Schools

It is also understood that in addition to changing geographical names, the PYD is also working on a new syllabus following the changing of the medium of instruction in public schools from Arabic to Kurdish to deny the children of Arab background the right to education in their mother-tongue and to learn about their own culture.⁸

As part of these changes, the PYD has already replaced the Arabic curriculum which is followed by the Syrian Ministry of Education with a Kurdish curriculum in 75% of the local schools with the new curriculum that includes topics such as “Kurdish History”, “Kurdish language”, “Mazdeism” each supported with ideologically biased and customized textbooks.⁹

It is also noted that the new Kurdish curriculum is in direct violation of the official education policy of the Syrian government and that hundreds of schools have been shut down by the PYD as a result of the dispute regarding the adoption of the new curriculum. More alarmingly, recent reports suggest that schools that have been reopened by the PYD have been staffed by PYD sympathizers lacking qualifications and the necessary professional skills.¹⁰

It is disappointing that while such practices of ethnic cleansing adopted by the PYD since 2012 — including arbitrary changes to geographical names and the forceful removal of Arabic from the daily vernacular by replacing the medium of instruction with Kurdish — constitute ethnic discrimination thus serious human rights violations, they have received very little attention and almost no condemnation from the international community.

By the same token, the Western states have also failed to respond to the deal between the US-based Delta Crescent and the PYD, which has meant legitimizing a terrorist group but also siding with a secessionist movement.

The political subjugation of its Kurdish rivals but also the systemic discrimination, ethnic cultural cleansing, forced migration and the totalitarian oppression of the Arab populations living in the territories under its control all underline the fact that the PYD is not a secular and democratic organization as some circles would suggest.

⁷ Bozbuğa, R. “Suriye Kürtleri: Suriye’nin kuzeyinde etnik yapı ve Kürt nüfusu”, 21. Yüzyıl Türkiye Enstitüsü, 05 Ocak 2015. (Syrian Kurds: Ethnicity Structure and Kurdish Population, 21. Century Turkish Institute, 05 January 2015).

⁸ Kajjo, S. Voice of America, “Syrian Kurdish learns their mother tongue freely”, 08 August 2016.

⁹ Abed, s. Voices from Al Hasaka: Part II (Illegally enforcing the Kurdish curriculum) The Rabbit Hole, 20 April 2017.

¹⁰ Darwish, S. M, “The Kurdish School Curriculum in Syria: A step towards self-rule”, *Atlantic Council*, 20 December 2017.

The apparent “immunity” the PYD enjoys in practicing its oppressive policies that constitute clear human rights violations owing to patronage provided by Washington (and the Pentagon in particular) confirms the rather brutal reality that ethical considerations and principles can be suspended at a whim when interests are at stake.

Idlib

Apart from the US organized and approved deal between Delta Crescent Energy LLC and the PYD and its possible repercussions, the situation in Idlib is on top of the list of issues that will play a key role in the future direction of the conflict in Syria.

With a range of actors already situated in the province — including but not limited to the armed jihadist groups, Turkish-affiliated moderate opposition groups, Syrian armed forces (5th Corps and the 4th Armored Division) Russian military police (including members of the Russian Special Forces), Turkish military personnel (based in the temporary facilities, observation outposts and checkpoints), Iranian Hezbollah militias and ISIS militants — the situation in Idlib now resembles a powder keg in the long running Syrian conflict.

When taken together with the rivalry and power-struggle that exist amongst the rebel groups, the diverging and contingent interests of their patrons, but also the worsening humanitarian situation (with displaced Syrians from Eastern Ghouta, rural areas of Damascus, Daraa, Hama and Aleppo moving into the area in their thousands) presenting fertile ground for manipulation by a myriad of secret service operators, the situation in Idlib has deteriorated faster than anticipated.

While more than half of the displaced Syrians — fleeing not only from the jihadist groups but also from regime offensives — have been resettled in the camps and empty buildings in the Eastern of Reyhanlı (in the southern districts of Atmeh, Al-Etarip and Armanaz in particular), as well as in Turkish-controlled Afrin and Azaz, large numbers of them nonetheless remain scattered around the region, living in make-shift tents around olive groves and along the disused rail lines, not least because of the inadequate living conditions in the refugee camps.

The Syrian regime appears keen for another military victory (following the recent recapturing of the M5 highway and other key areas) to consolidate its political position in the country, and wants a clean sweep in Idlib, described as the last stronghold of the rebel forces. For its part, Russia wants to control the entire M4 highway to stop the drone attacks against its Khmeimim base, launched by the Turkistan Islamic Party. To that end, Russia’s immediate priorities also include the elimination of Turkistan Islamic Party based in Jisr al-Shughur and the Hurras al-Din (Guardians of Religion) active in the surrounding areas of the M4 highway.

So far, Russian gains toward the elimination of these two groups (Turkistan Islamic Party and the Hurras al-Din) have been negligible. While the Syrian 5th Corps, trained and equipped and advised by the Russian Special Forces guidance, has the overall responsibility of the Jisr al-Shughur province (including the Kurdish mountains) and the al-Ghab plains, the unit — which is also known as the “Tiger Corps” — has been unable to make significant headway. The difficult and mountainous terrain around the Jisr al-Shughur (a critical location for the entire region that lies between Latakia and the Turkmen mountains) appears to be the main reason why the 5th Corps but also the

Russian jets (delivering over more than 200 sorties) have been unable to eliminate the rebel forces located in this area.

The Turkistan Islamic Party, also known in Syria as the “**Afghanis**”, is one of the most extremist rebel groups in Syria. The group which calls itself the **Mujahideen** is also known for training child recruits (as young as 7) and have used children to perform violent attack include suicide bombings. Unconfirmed reports further suggest that the group — notorious for its snipers who frequently act as private hitmen for the highest bidder — is in contact with the Circassian group (known as “**Shishani**”) based in Idlib city.

Turkey’s Refugee Dilemma

With unconfirmed reports that the Idlib city already hosts more than one million displaced Syrians (many of whom having fled from the south and the southeast) and with at least 3.5 million of them living in the countryside, the massive refugee wave a final regime offensive (backed by Russia and Iran) in Idlib would trigger, is among the major Turkish concerns regarding Syria which has to be shared by the majority of the western countries, international community and the UN.

According to a report published by the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) in January 2020, more than 312,000 people fled from their homes in the period 1-31 December 2019 alone, mainly from the southern Idlib governorate, moving further north, away from the hostilities. The figures published by the OCHA further suggest that from 1 December 2019 to 2 February 2020, some 586,000 people fled from their homes in southwest Syria as a result of ongoing hostilities. Most studies also underline that women and children are disproportionately affected by the hostilities with an estimated 80 percent of those who were recently displaced being women and children. One NGO estimates that as many as 200,000 children and their families had been forced to flee their homes in northern Syria. Overall, by the UN’s own admission, the refugee crisis has reached a horrifying new level.

Considering the fact that Turkey continues to host the largest number of Syrian refugees worldwide, (3.643.870 in August 2019) and bears high expenses on refugee care (housing, employment, education and health) and refugee-related social/demographic issues (Turkish city of Kilis with a total population of around 142.000, is home to 116.000 Syrian refugees), the country’s worries relating to a new wave of refugees are not ungrounded.

Constituting a 4.4% addition to Turkey’s population of 82 million citizens as of 2018, the Syrian refugees have an average household size of five to six (5.8) distributed to 620,000 households. It is further estimated that with the current number of births among Syrian refugees per day at 465, and the total number of births since the start of their flight to Turkish territory at 500,000, the size of the Syrian refugees in Turkey is expected to increase to 4.2 million in the next five years (unregistered Syrian refugees are not part of this estimate). Considering also that newborn Syrian children are not granted citizenship by the Syrian government, rendering them stateless, this “lost generation” is set to cause additional problems in the future.

Turkey is also worried about the growing anti-refugee sentiment at home. Though initially welcomed on humanitarian grounds, the presence of the nearly four million displaced Syrians has stoked up anger and backlash amongst the Turkish public with a further potential for anti-refugee violence. While the Turkish government initially said that it was prepared to host 100,000 refugees and that they would be placed into designated camps (the-then Turkish Prime Minister claimed that the 100,000 mark was Turkey's "red line"), this was later abandoned in favor of a much-contested open door policy.

The controversy around the precise number of refugees in Istanbul is reflective of the war of numbers that have ensued in Turkey regarding the Syrian refugees. Home for the largest number of Syrian refugees, Istanbul was estimated to host around 547,943 Syrians in 2019 (3,64 percent of the city's population). Yet, according to unofficial reports, a further 300,000 Syrians (registered elsewhere in Turkey) live in Istanbul, putting the final figure at one million (5,6 percent). Opinion polls also show that a rising tide of anti-Syrian xenophobia is now sweeping through Turkey's cities.

The anti-refugee sentiment is based on a perception of threat to "way of living" and the Syrian presence is also being blamed for many of Turkey's social troubles including distorting the labor market (driving the wages down), hence causing unemployment.

While situation in Turkey is different to what led to the surge of the far right movements in Europe — threatening democracy in many EU member states including Austria, the Netherlands, Hungary, Denmark and France — anti-refugee sentiment is still evident in rather benign and banal forms, including over the filling of the low-skilled and temporary positions in agriculture and construction with the unqualified Syrian refugees.

It is also noteworthy that while in Europe those parties that are on the far right of the political spectrum have benefitted from popular anti-refugee sentiments, in the Turkish case the social-democratic parties have been the main protagonists of such positions.

Yet it should be noted that despite the growing anti-refugee sentiment and the fact that high intensity fighting in most parts of Syria is over, many Syrians have managed to create a new life in Turkey. And with a generation of children growing up with increasingly distant — or nonexistent — personal memories of Syria, it is difficult to expect large numbers of them returning. And for that reason, a new wave of refugees which would only add to the existing problems mentioned earlier, would pose a burden that would be too heavy for Turkey to bear, economically, socially but also politically.

Moreover, with growing numbers of people in Turkey now convinced — within a much-polarized political landscape — that the refugee crisis is a result of bad policy, the controversy that surrounds the presence of the displaced Syrians in Turkey is likely remain a hot-button topic and may even have domestic political repercussions, that may exacerbate the existing problems further.

Opposition Groups in northern Idlib

Another threat related to Syrian regime's sweeping of the opposition groups to the north — toward the Turkish border — also deserves close attention.

The pending danger from a Turkish perspective in this regard relates to the fact once the final offensive “liberates” Idlib from the jihadist groups and other terrorists, they will be flushed toward the Turkish border together with their families. Under such a scenario, it is not difficult to foresee the chaos that will render it near impossible to conduct screening to identify terrorist fighters and Turkey will face with a Peshawar-like situation along its border. **Such a situation would not only pose a significant risk to Turkey but would also threaten European security as terrorists disguised as refugees would head toward the continent.**

For these reasons, Turkey has been against the idea of a final regime offensive in Idlib and has supported instead a peaceful resolution (or at least one that involves minimal fighting) involving the rebranding of the HTS and its internal transformation as a moderate group, independent of al-Qaeda's chain of command.

Under present circumstances, Turkey seems to have secured the extra time it needs as Russia — following the deal struck between Ankara and Kremlin in Moscow on 5 March 2020 to allow the opposition remain in the Idlib city, 7 km north of the M4 highway and for Russian and Turkish troops to jointly patrol the highway — has postponed its plans for a final offensive in Idlib.

That said, it is also unlikely that Russia which has thus far preferred to use air strikes to force the retreat of the rebels, will engage in a guerrilla battle in sizeable Idlib with a dense population since this would require Kremlin to launch a lengthy grounds operation, risking significant casualties.

For its part, the Syrian regime too is likely to follow a cautious strategy toward Idlib in view of the estimates that around 50,000 jihadist fighters (including the HTS) is currently located in Idlib.¹¹ Limited too in terms of its capabilities to launch a final offensive in terms of logistical and personnel requirements, the Syrian regime is likely to adopt a bitesize approach which will, in turn allow Turkey the opportunity to pursue a peaceful resettlement by focusing on the rebranding and the internal reconstruction of the HTS, the largest and the strongest of the rebel groups in the region.

That said, even if Russia and Syria would decide to strike a deal with the HTS, it still seems inevitable that the two countries will sooner or later engage in some form of battle in Idlib with the splinter jihadist groups such as the Hurras al-Din and the Turkistan Islamic Party that have fiercely opposed the rebranding and the internal reconstruction of the HTS along more moderate lines.

Indeed, Turkey also appears to be preparing for this eventuality. In this context, the setting up of temporary stations, checkpoints along critical junctures and observation posts (around 60, though some open sources give a higher estimate of around 60-66) can be considered the setting up of an unofficial “buffer zone” to protect the Turkish border from an eventual spillover from the fighting that is set to take place between

¹¹ As mentioned previously, the jihadist fighters tend to move around with their families and in this sense, in addition to 50,000 fighters, the total number of the jihadist population is likely to be over 300,000. Other jihadist groups who fought alongside Osama bin Laden in Afghanistan or with Baghdadi in Idlib — together with their families — are a case in point.

the Syrian regime (backed by Russia) against the jihadist groups, above all the Hurras al-Din (Guardians of Religion) and the Turkistan Islamic Party.

More specifically, a closer look on preparations around the temporary stations and checkpoints reveals that the aim is to stem the advances of the Syrian forces further west or north beyond the areas around the M5 highway that it already controls. It is also clear that with temporary stations in Maar Hitat, Qminas, Taftanaz, Ma'arat al-Na'asan, and observation posts in the far north of Idlib (in Salva and Takleh) Turkey is establishing a “safe zone” to stem a refugee wave toward its borders. Turkey has also completed the necessary reinforcements against potential air and land offenses and dropped the number of troops it stationed in the temporary posts to a company level instead of battalion to avoid extensive casualties.

Observation Outposts

Another Turkish concern regarding Idlib relates to the status of its military observation posts (set up in accordance with the Astana agreements), 7 of which now remain in areas that have been captured during regime advances.

It is also important to note that Turkey has refortified these observation posts during and after its Peace Shield Operation and the Syrian regime has so far refrained from obstructing the weekly and fortnightly logistical support provided to these posts. In this regard, it can be suggested that the Peace Shield Operation in response to the Baliaoun attack has been an effective deterrent which —together with Russian pressure over the Syrian regime — has, to a large extent, stopped the regime attacks and harassment targeting the Turkish observation posts.

Occasional skirmishes do continue however, as reported by the Turkish Ministry of Defense on 16 September 2020 that the 7th observation post in Tell Touqan (set up on 9 February 2018) came under attack by civilian groups upon directions by the Syrian regime. The same report also notes that observation posts which are encircled by the regime forces (3,4,5,6,8 and 9) were also approached by armed groups though these were later forced to leave these areas thanks to Turkey's precautionary measures.

For Turkey, these attacks and initiatives are considered a form of posturing regarding its position over Idlib. In this vein TAF withdrawn from the Tel Touqan observation post which is in the south end of Idlib on September 20, Most probably the number 3, 4, 5, 6, 8, 9 posts will follow, soon or later. On the other hand at a time when Ankara's attention is focused on the developments regarding the energy resources in the Eastern Mediterranean and the disputes which have emerged in this context with Cyprus, Greece, France, Egypt, the EU, but also the US, such small-scale attacks are not considered to be aimed at military results but to remind Turkey of its obligations under the Astana Agreement (4 May 2017), and with reference to the Article 5 of the Russia-Iran-Turkey joint statement (1 July 2020) in particular.

In this regard, trying to pressurize Turkey regarding its obligations under the Astana agreement can be placed in the wider context of Syrian unease over progress in Turkish efforts to rebrand the HTS along moderate lines to reach a peaceful resolution in Idlib, thus an attempt to torpedo these efforts and bypass the HTS.

It is important to note that the Syrian position is also supported by Russia which itself resorted to the same tactics earlier. With that in mind, and considering that there is no YPG or HTS presence in the areas where the targeted observation posts are, it is possible to suggest that these attacks were carried out by the regime-affiliated militias with Russian knowledge and consent. Bearing in mind also the fact that the observation posts that are located within the regime-controlled territories are only 10-40km apart from another and a simultaneous attack on them requires military planning and preparation. Lacking such capabilities in terms of coordination, communication, and repositioning, it is highly probable that they were carried out with the behind-the-scene guidance of the Syrian regime.

Turkey-Russia Discord

An important stumbling block for Turkey, regarding Idlib but also the overall Syrian conflict is the disagreements which have emerged with Russia.

Such diverging views and disagreements were manifest in the statements of both sides responding to the killing of 7 Turkish soldiers together with a civilian by the Syrian army's artillery fire in Saraqib on 3 February 2019.

Following the attacks, the Kremlin released a statement on 14 February 2019 (which came after a phone call between President Erdogan and his Russian counterpart), emphasizing the concern of the two leaders regarding the recent aggravation in the Idlib de-escalation zone, adding also that the recent spike in terrorist attacks in the region was causing significant casualties.

Yet, for his part, President Erdogan did not mince his words in a subsequent statement on his flight back from Senegal on 29 January 2019 regarding the attacks and the wider dispute between Ankara and Kremlin over who is a terrorist and who is not: **“Russia tells us they fight against terrorism. Who are terrorists? The people fighting to defend their own lands? If you ask them, they will tell you that the 4 million Syrians in Turkey are terrorists. These people have fled their country because of Assad”**.

While Turkey has officially included the HTS in its list of terrorist organizations (in line with the UNSC's revision of its own terrorist list), it is clear that for Erdogan, **“the people who defend their own lands”** is the Turkish-affiliated groups including the SNA. This situation, i.e. diametrically opposing Turkish position over the HTS and Kremlin's stance regarding the Syrian National Army (SNA) considered by Kremlin as terrorists, represents a dangerous rift that both sides have refrained from tacking so far.

In order to get to the bottom of the Idlib-related disputes between Russia and Turkey, a brief assessment of the “Memorandum on the creation of de-escalation areas in the Syrian Republic” signed between Russia, Iran and Turkey in Astana on 4 May 2017, and the “Memorandum on Stabilization of the Situation in the Idlib De-escalation Area” signed between the Kremlin and Ankara in Sochi on 17 September 2018 is needed.

Article 2 of the 4 May Memorandum excludes those groups who oppose the ceasefire by stating that: **“within the lines of the de-escalation areas: hostilities between the**

conflicting parties (the government of the Syrian Arab Republic and the armed opposition groups that have joined and will join the ceasefire regime) with the use of any kinds of weapons, including aerial assets, shall be ceased". Article 5 of the same text also excludes those groups who are included in the UNSC terror list: **"The guarantors shall: [...] take all necessary measures to continue the fight against DAESH/ISIL, Nusra Front and all other individuals, groups, undertakings and entities associated with Al-Qaeda or DAESH/ISIL as designated by the UN Security Council within and outside the de-escalation areas."**

In this sense, the Astana Agreement prescribes the guarantors to continue fighting those groups (within and outside the de-escalation areas), who do not recognize the ceasefire and those who are included in the UNSC designated terrorist groups.

It is also for this reason that Kremlin responds to accusations over Syria ceasefire violations by claiming that these groups are not party to the agreed ceasefire.

Regarding the bilateral Russia-Turkey memorandum of 17 September (Sochi Agreement) moreover, both Russia and Turkey blame each other for violating the ceasefire.

The Sochi agreement which refers to the trilateral Astana deal (4 May 2017) envisaging **"stabilizing the situation in the Idlib de-escalation area as soon as possible"** includes the following:

- 2. The Russian Federation will take all necessary measures to ensure that military operations and attacks on Idlib will be avoided and existing status quo will be maintained.**
- 3. A demilitarized zone, 15-20 kms. deep in the de-escalation area will be established.**
- 4. All radical terrorist groups will be removed from the demilitarized zone by October 15.**
- 5. All tanks, MLRS, artillery and mortars belonging to conflicting parties will be withdrawn from demilitarized zone by October 10.2018.**
- 6. With a view to ensuring free movement of residents and goods and restoring trade and economic relations, transit traffics on the routes M4 (Aleppo-Latakia) and M5 (Aleppo-Hama) will be restored by the end of 2018.**
- 7. The two sides reiterated their determination to combat terrorism in Syria in all forms and manifestations.**

Yet, despite the clear commitment Russia has pledged to **"take all necessary measures to ensure that military operations and attacks on Idlib will be avoided and existing status quo will be maintained"** (Article 2), the ongoing violations of ceasefire committed by the Syrian army, but also the direct involvement of the Russian Air Force in aiding regime advances toward the north of Idlib suggest that Russia is in violation of the relevant article.

For their part, Kremlin heavyweights including Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov and Special Envoy Alexander Lavrentyev with the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson Maria Zaharova have responded to Ankara's accusations over Syria ceasefire violations by claiming that the agreement does not suspend the fight against terrorism and refer to Article 5 of the said text.

But rather paradoxically perhaps, the conflicting views between Russia and Turkey over the status of various armed opposition groups are each individually supported by the Sochi and Astana accords. In this regard, the fact that Article 5 of the Astana Agreement (referred also in the Sochi accord) and the ambiguous commitments to “**fighting terrorism**” and “**maintaining the status quo**” penned into the Sochi accord would conflict with each other in practice was not taken into account, is among the main reasons which have caused the existing disagreements between Russia and Turkey regarding the situation in Idlib.

It is nonetheless remarkable that Russia has accused the HTS of provoking the attacks. According to the Sochi accord, Ankara's obligation was to separate moderate opposition militants from terrorists and neutralize the HTS. The group which was left out of the Sochi accord attacked the Turkish-backed National Liberation Front groups in January 2019 and took control of large parts of Idlib, thus making it impossible to set up a 15-20km deep safe zone in the ceasefire areas.

To expand its influence, the HTS then attacked the CIA-affiliated Jabhat al-Sham and the Nour al-Din al-Zenki Movement (also affiliated with the CIA). Following these attacks, Jabhat al-Sham retreated toward Afrin (areas included in the Operation “Olive Branch”) and dissolved itself while a significant fraction of the Nour al-Din al-Zenki Movement joined the Ahrar al-Sham when they were refused entry into the “Euphrates Shield” operation area.

Along with a strong presence in the Idlib city, the HTS's consolidated superiority in the countryside subsequently ruled out Ankara's fulfilling of its Sochi pledge to “**remove all radical terrorist groups from the demilitarized zone by October 15**” and **the withdrawal of heavy weaponry from the demilitarized zone by October 10 2018**”. When the latter faced further challenges in meeting the **October deadline regarding the restoring of transit traffics on the routes M4 and M5**, key aspects of the accord were not realized.

The M4 and M5 highways which link Aleppo to Latakia and Hama and represent the key supply lines, and they are also crucial for the Russian objective of linking and protecting its bases. When the highways were not opened to traffic, for which Turkey was responsible, this gave the Russians the perfect excuse to back the regime offensive in Idlib, in which the latter retook Saraqib, located at the intersection of the M4 and the M5.

But the harsh statements from Kremlin (and from the Foreign Minister Lavrov and Lavrentyev in particular), despite Putin's intervention that Turkey was “**doing its best**”, were an early indication that the Syrian regime had secured Russian backing to initiate a large-scale operation.

In this context, it should not be surprising if Russia would resort once again to the same tactic by referring to the latest Summit decisions between Turkey, Russia, and Iran on 1 July 2020 “**to continue cooperation in order to ultimately eliminate all**

terrorist groups” since the Article 5 of the Summit decisions state that: “[the Guarantors] reaffirmed the determination to continue cooperation in order to ultimately eliminate DAESH/ISIL, Al- Nusra Front and all other individuals, groups, undertakings and entities associated with Al-Qaeda or DAESH/ISIL, and other terrorist groups, as designated by the UN Security Council” ..¹²

In other words, because Russia has pointed in particular to HTS’s inclusion in the UN Security Council’s sanctions list, as its main reason for backing repeated regime offensives in Idlib, it may be tempted to push in that direction once again by insisting on the HTS’s removal from the demilitarized zone — and using Turkish non-compliance as a pretext for another attack or as leverage.

As discussed earlier in the preceding sections of the report, Turkey nonetheless appears to have increased military control in Idlib, and the military coordination that comes with it, which gives Ankara more say over the rebel groups, including HTS, and allows it to pursue the rebranding of the HTS along moderate lines. Indeed, Turkish priority now appears to be in that direction; to set conditions for the HTS’s transformation into a moderate political actor.

At the same time, the HTS for its part, also appears convinced that an all-out battle would come at a high cost and might endanger its future survival. It has thus increased security cooperation with Turkey despite strong challenge from internal critics in forging links with Ankara or pursuing the Turkish-backed transformation.

Nonetheless, it is important to underline that the reconstruction of the HTS along moderate lines does not only depend on Turkey or the current HTS leadership and other actors including Russia, Israel, Syria, Iran, the US but also Saudi Arabia and the UAE (despite their wading influence) are likely to intervene to protect — and extend — their own interests.

Conclusion and Forecast

It goes without saying that Russia holds the key in Idlib in relation to reaching a settlement that Turkey favors.

While a costly battle for the province — set to weaken the Russian but also Syrian presence — does not appear to be Moscow’s priority, it is nonetheless likely that the latter will, sooner or later, play the “Astana card” regarding Turkish pledges.

In addition, while the two countries have so far managed to avoid a cliff-edge in the relations by compartmentalizing disagreements that exist on multiple issues but it seems that the resolution to the Idlib conflict is likely to depend on other developments outside Syria.

The situation in Libya is relevant here. As it is well-known, Turkey and Russia stand on opposing sides of the battle line in Libya. Turkey appeared as a “game changer” in Libya with a robust support for the GNA and a strong military presence in Trablus,

¹² As noted earlier, when the UNSC “terrorist list” was revised to include the HTS (as the predecessor of al-Nusra), Turkey followed suit in August 2018 by recognizing it as a terrorist organization.

al-Watiya and Misrata. Russia on the other hand has backed the Haftar forces by sending Wagner militias and war planes (via Syria), with a long-term interest in acquiring bases in al- Jufra and Sirte. In this sense, it is likely that the trade-offs in Libya will also have implications for the negotiations regarding the situation in Idlib.

Recent Russian involvement in August-September 2020 in the energy-related developments in the Eastern Mediterranean and around Cyprus, are also indicative of a complex game of chess. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov's remarks during a visit to the island, backing Greek-Cypriot arguments regarding the Turkish military presence on the island as the guarantor power, Russian Deputy Prime Minister Yury Borisov's statement regarding plans for joint oil exploration with Syria, and Russian live-fire naval exercises in the Eastern Mediterranean all point to Moscow's desire to grow stronger and enter the energy bonanza in the region.

For all these reasons, the last rebel stronghold of Idlib — following Russian move to include the PYD in the Geneva talks, albeit indirectly — has emerged as a crucial stress test for the bilateral ties between Moscow and Ankara. While a peaceful settlement in Idlib via the HTS (supported by Turkey) would not solve all the problems that exist between Russia, Iran, Turkey and the US, it would nonetheless provide some respite and allow diplomacy to develop initiatives and opportunities in bridging key divergences.

Yet, recent steps taken by the US, France but also Russia in Syria and the new dynamics these have set, still carry the potential to further deteriorate the situation for Turkey which now appears to be running short of time.

Under present circumstances, as displayed in a rather dramatic fashion by the US military commander Myles B. Caggins — during an award ceremony organized by the YPG in which he cried as he made his farewell speech in which he said he was extremely sad that he would no longer be able to support the terrorist group — it is clear that the US (together with Russia) has given its blessing for a Kurdish puppet state in Syria under a possible new federal system.

In this regard, the Syrian conflict is likely to soon move into its next phase in which the reconstruction of the country — in economic, political, judicial, technical and commercial terms — will be the focus of attention and perhaps the new battlefield in the wider context of the struggle for power in the region.

In this new battlefield, Russia and Iran is expected to emerge with a geo-economic superiority based on existing agreements and bilateral ties with the Syrian regime together with China in terms of the latter's economic power and technological capabilities.

For its part, the US is expected to focus its attention on consolidating its permanence in the west of the country via the PYD and taking an active role in the reconstruction of the areas controlled by the latter as approved with the visit of Ambassador James Jeffrey to the PYD controlled region on September 20th. Yet, despite its geographical proximity to Syria, Turkish aspirations to take an active part in the post-conflict reconstruction of the country are likely to be opposed by Russia, Iran but also the US in view of Ankara's current stance on the Assad regime but also its rightful objections

regarding the PYD's goal of achieving territorial autonomy and its strong ties with the PKK.¹³

In this regard, the future viability of the Turkish foreign policy toward Syria, and the ways in which it can be altered — without jeopardizing its national security — to reflect the changing dynamics once the dust begins to settle and normalization follows (with the eventual settling of the dispute in Idlib, the drafting of the new constitution, and holding of fresh elections) is an important line of inquiry that requires further attention.

The history of international relations provides ample evidence of pragmatic alterations in foreign policy in line with national interests. Indeed, while a major transformation usually takes time, it is by no means a taboo. As Lord Palmerston put it more succinctly: “We have no eternal allies, and we have no perpetual enemies. Our interests are eternal and perpetual, and those interests it is our duty to follow.” Palmerston's message of “**no friends or permanent enemies**” continues to ring true today.

For Turkey, the main sticking point regarding the post-conflict reconstruction of Syria is the legalization of the PYD the offshoot of PKK to become a state actor (de facto) or take part in the governance of Syria under a federal regime (de jure). Concerned by both prospects, Turkey has been working on the parameters of a detailed action plan to counteract each scenario as part of its national security calculations.

Indeed, recent developments especially since 2016, have shown that the PYD has made significant progress — with backing from Russia, the US, France but also the UAE and Saudi Arabia — toward territorial autonomy or sharing power under a new federal system of government (as a “fallback” option). Under these circumstances, Turkey's plans to counteract such prospects have taken on even greater significance.

Another issue, from a Turkish perspective, relates to the future status of the armed opposition groups that it trained and brought together under the Syrian National Army (the Free Syrian Army). In this regard, the stance of the Assad regime (or its future extension) toward these groups will depend on a political deal which will ensure their safety and security.

In a similar vein, a third issue concerns the areas that remain under Turkish control. Regardless of how long it takes, Turkey — which has consistently pledged to respect Syria's unity, sovereignty, and territorial integrity — will have to withdraw from these areas once normalization begins. Ankara will thus be keen to secure clear commitments that once it pulls back from the areas adjacent to the Turkish border that it controlled following subsequent military operations (“Euphrates Shield”, “Olive Branch”, “Peace Spring” and “Peace Shield”), including Afrin, Azaz, Tell Abiad, Cerablus and Al Bab, the PYD will not be allowed to return to these areas to threaten Turkish national security. In view of the ongoing Kurdification efforts led by the YPG in areas it controls, discussed in detail earlier this issue will remain a highly sensitive issue for Turkey.

¹³ That said, the enormous reconstruction needs of the country and Turkey's construction potential demonstrated in Iraq, may nonetheless tempt the Russian companies to work with their Turkish counterparts for lucrative returns.

Last but not least, the safe return of at least some of the displaced Syrians that have been generously hosted by Turkey so far — free from fear of regime retaliation — and their peaceful integration into the Syrian society as full and equal citizens, remain key priorities for Turkey.

It is clear that the complex post-conflict setting which will emerge with the winding down of the military conflict will usher in a new phase of multinational political conflagration which may well place Turkey in a more difficult situation. To face that, Turkey will need a strong and enduring alliance that will support its rightful arguments based on national security