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The Future of Northeast Syria

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Cover Photo: A woman walks through al-Hol displacement camp in Hasaka governorate, Syria April 2, 2019. *REUTERS/Ali Hashisho*

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Executive Summary

The future of northeast Syria is unsettled after eight years of civil war and the US intervention to combat the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS). It also faces the various divergent interests of powerful external actors, including Russia and Turkey. In mid-April 2019, the Atlantic Council, Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, and the Foreign Policy Research Institute convened a group of scholars, intermediaries, and civil-society members from the United States, Europe, and the Middle East to discuss Syria's northeast at the granular level. The group focused on the building of local security and governance infrastructure, how these efforts interact with the interests of outside parties, and whether a broader power-sharing arrangement can be reached to manage, or help end, the conflict. Over the course of the two-day dialogue, a general consensus emerged that any solution in Syria will require a clear US position on the future of Syria and what Washington is prepared to accept in any post-conflict scenario. The same is true for Russia, the second-most-powerful external actor involved in the conflict, and the guarantor of security, locally and internationally, for the Bashar al-Assad government in Damascus. A third actor, Turkey, has also managed to carve out a contiguous zone of control, stretching roughly from just west of the Euphrates river to a semicircular front line just north of Hama, which is patrolled by Russian and Turkish troops.

The political and military dynamics in Syria are playing out at two different levels, with the non-state, Kurdish-majority Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) engaged in a complex set of negotiations with state-level actors,

including the Syrian regime, Russia, the United States, and Turkey. In parallel, these state actors are involved with different—and often competing—local actors, each with their own demands for post-conflict governance in Syria. The conference dialogue focused on how the Syrian Kurds and their Arab allies see local security, and the key challenges that stem from non-state governance in a large, ethnically mixed area under threat from hostile outside powers.

The conference's first session focused on the role of outside actors in shaping local governance and security institutions in the northeast, and how the security and political interests of outside actors differ. Following this panel, the participants discussed the SDF and the development of civilian governance in Syria's northeast. The discussion focused on intra-ethnic political differences, and the interplay between Kurdish governance and Arab tribal dynamics in parts of the northeast. The third session focused on the main militia in the area, the Syrian Democratic Forces, and its most important member, the Kurdish-majority People's Protection Units (YPG). The session focused on tensions within the security apparatus, with a particular focus on the relationship between Arab and Kurdish militias, amidst the persistent threat of an insurgent ISIS still active inside Syria. The fourth and fifth sessions switched gears, as participants were asked to think about how to implement a permanent ceasefire, and how any such effort could reconcile the interests of both outside actors and locals. A summarized report of the conference follows (see appendix).

Findings and Recommendations

The Syrian conflict continues, with the regime's military operations focused near the city of Hama and along the southern edge of a deconfliction zone around Idlib jointly monitored by Turkey and Russia. The start of the renewed offensive in the northwest, led by the regime and Russia, just a few days after this conference concluded, underscores three interrelated conclusions agreed upon by the conference participants. First, the Assad regime and Russia remain committed to retaking all of Syria, and are willing to use overwhelming force to do so. Second, the role of outside actors—in this case, Russia and Turkey—is an important component, and a key enabler of regime violence. Third, the prospects for a negotiated settlement remain elusive, owing to an intractable regime position on rebel capitulation and, conversely, rebel refusal to succumb to regime rule. Further still, the major powers in the conflict—Russia and the United States—remain at odds over key aspects of any future peace arrangement, owing to extreme differences of opinion over the role of Iran in a post-conflict Syria and the future of Bashar al-Assad. Two lesser powers, Iran and Turkey, also diverge over the future of the armed opposition and how to structure a more formalized peace process. Finally, Ankara remains overtly hostile to the SDF, owing to internal security threats from the SDF's parent organization, the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK).

This messy set of contradicting policy goals and interests has contributed to an ossified process, one beset by the unwillingness of any actor to compromise on core objectives. In the northeast, specifically, SDF now faces very real challenges. One such challenge is governance in Arab areas such as Deir Ezzor, where the SDF is viewed as an external force led by Kurds and intent on changing social mores and norms. As a result of its territorial expansion, the SDF has also grown in numbers, which has led to more people involved in governance, increasing the amount of corruption in governed territory. This feeds local concerns that the group cannot maintain security in far-flung areas. Beyond these micro concerns, the entirety of the SDF project depends on the US security guarantee to protect the border from Turkish military intervention, and from the regime and its allies along the Euphrates river to the south.

Clearly, there is no easy solution to the Syrian conflict. Nor is there a perfect plan to deal with the northeast. The discussions at this conference reinforced this

reality, and participants diverged over potential policy recommendations. Faced with bad options, the international community should consider the least-bad ones. In the opinion of the authors, that means the following.

- ◆ The two largest powers involved in Syria, the United States and Russia, should establish an overt and iterative forum for dialogue about the conflict. This bilateral forum would be used to better understand the positions of each government, with talks also used as building blocks for a joint mechanism to try winding down the conflict.
- ◆ As an outgrowth of this bilateral track, each side would be entrusted to work through its allies and partners (including Iran, Turkey, and the regime on the Russian side, and the SDF on the US side) regarding the status of the talks, as well as ways to integrate the two rival peace processes now based in Sochi and Geneva.
- ◆ In the northeast, the United States should not completely withdraw troops, unless it receives assurances from Russia that it and its client, the Assad regime, will not use force to take back territory. Doing so will require US concessions to the Russian side, ranging from an indirect security guarantee for the Assad regime to the potential lifting of some Syria-related US sanctions.
- ◆ Further scholarship is needed on the security implications of foreign ISIS fighters held by the SDF in northeast Syria, and the prospects for their repatriation. The conference's discussions touched on this issue, which compounds the SDF's capacity problems and will undoubtedly have a bearing on the probability of ISIS's resurgence, but it was not a focus. Given the ramifications for US, European, and regional security, the US government should facilitate closer study of this dilemma.
- ◆ A mechanism is needed to bring the Syrian regime into compliance with its commitment to disarm under the terms of the Chemical Weapons Convention, along with real punishment mechanisms for the regime's violations



A Turkish military vehicle drives at Manbij countryside, Syria December 29, 2018. *REUTERS/Khalil Ashawi*

(with Russian support) of its nonproliferation commitments. This may mean continued, targeted sanctions not included in any potential sanctions relief.

- ◆ To mollify Turkey, a mixture of carrots and sticks may be needed.
 - ◇ In the northeast, Ankara should be encouraged to open dialogue with the SDF, perhaps with the facilitation of the United States or a third, independent state party. This dialogue should initially include a series of confidence-building measures, beginning with a steady ceasefire along the entirety of Turkey's zone of control in Syria, along with that of the SDF near the town of Manbij.
 - ◇ Following this, Turkish and SDF delegations could formalize what have been, up until now, back-channel talks, and hold at least two separate meetings, one in Manbij and then one at Incirlik Air Force Base.
 - ◇ These talks should be aimed at reaching a common set of security guarantees, and will require considerable international pressure to even get off the ground. Ideally, the United States and Russia would each put pressure on Ankara toward this end, perhaps using the Turkish government's participation in various peace forums and constitutional dialogues as the vehicle to begin discussions.
- ◆ The United States should clearly and publicly lay out its policy in Syria, especially with regard to its future military presence in the country.

This approach is imperfect. It fails to seriously account for the US administration's aversion to Iran, and requires pressure on Turkey to accept some form of Kurdish autonomy, which is anathema to Ankara's security policies. It is also imperfect for the United States and Russia; it depends on the external actors making concessions to allow for a slowdown in violence, and to more effectively pressure each side's clients and partners to engage in negotiations in good faith. The international fissures effectively allow countries and actors to play one side against the other, thereby lessening the pressure to reach compromise. As noted, the United States has an opportunity to play a decisive role

in the resolution of the conflict: a solution in Syria will require greater clarity from the US administration regarding its position on the future of Syria, and what it is prepared to accept from a negotiated settlement. The Syrian war is an epic humanitarian crisis that shows little sign of ending. To try reversing the violence, each side—including the most powerful actors—will have to make concessions. Until then, the external drivers of the conflict will remain, undermining any effort—no matter how well intentioned—to try forcing the combatants to the negotiating table. This, of course, will result in more dead Syrians, while everyone else watches.

Appendix

Session One: After the Caliphate: The Role of Outside Actors in Syria's Northeast

The US Position

The territorial defeat of ISIS in Syria has touched off discussions about the future role of outside actors, and how the United States, Russia, and Turkey will collectively shape politics and outcomes in Syria's northeast. The first panel of the conference discussed how these actors' interests differ, and what those differences mean for the future of the northeast.

A panelist familiar with the US administration explained that the United States' position in northeast Syria is contingent on two major goals: ensuring the continuation of stabilization efforts, and establishing a safe zone through diplomacy with Turkey. The unexpected declaration of US withdrawal from Syria in December, and subsequent backpedaling, resulted in confusion over US commitments in Syria's northeast, where stabilization efforts were well underway. Now that heavy equipment and some troops have been removed, the US goal in the northeast appears to be a "calibrated withdrawal," which ensures that stabilization efforts continue with international support.

The panelist shared that the United States is also concentrating its diplomatic efforts, through the service of Ambassador James Jeffrey and his team, on negotiating a safe zone along the northern border with Turkey. This is seen as crucial, given Turkey's concerns about the territorial and political ambitions of the Kurdish YPG component of the SDF. The negotiations are ongoing, but the Turks have recently indicated an interest in having a force of their own in the northeast, a suggestion against which the Kurds obviously push back. The panelist pointed out that this also raises the question of how the Russian government would respond to a Turkish presence, and how that would figure into Russia's vision of stabilization and border security for the northeast.

Indicative of the shift in the US position toward Syria was the freezing of \$200 million in State Department stabilization funds last year, to put pressure on allies and partners to step up and contribute to the international effort. Through the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS, \$325 million of stabilization support was pledged,

with significant contributions from Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and the United Kingdom. The funds flow through United States Agency for International Development (USAID) programs to pre-existing stabilization efforts in the northeast, including demining and the establishment of emergency response services. Following President Donald Trump's withdrawal announcement, the US State Department's Syria Transition Assistance Response Team (START) was unable to sustain a presence in the northeast to oversee and ensure accountability in these programs, because of the uncertainty about the US troop presence, which guarantees its security. But, START has been able to make periodic visits to ensure funds are flowing to sanctioned local implementers.

The current US administration has clearly articulated the primary importance of ensuring ISIS' lasting defeat. The panelist noted that while "defeat" has a specific military definition, that is difficult to apply to the situation in Syria's border regions, and this stated policy aim has implications for how the United States and the coalition address the insurgency, as well as the ideological underpinnings that have allowed ISIS to thrive. The second stated aim of US policy toward Syria relates to the political process of putting pressure on the Assad regime to make changes that will facilitate refugee returns and enable Syria to be a more constructive regional player. This points to some discrepancy between US strategy and the resources available to achieve it, considering the limited leverage the United States has in Syria. The third prong of US policy in Syria is the removal of all Iranian forces from the country. In keeping with the broader US strategy toward Iran at the moment, the panelist pointed out, this is a maximalist objective that again calls into question the alignment of ends with available ways and means, especially considering the long history between Iran and Syria and the balance of leverage in that relationship.

The panelist acknowledged that even as there is a yawning gap between strategy and resources, the United States is entering a new phase of engagement in Syria that will require it to exercise all levers of statecraft, to include economic sanctions and the withholding of reconstruction funds for Syria. There is an active debate over the mission of US military forces in Syria and whether Iran can be a core objective. From a legal standpoint, the Authorization for the Use of Military Force (AUMF) currently invoked in Syria dates back to



Fighters of Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) sit at the back of a truck in Deir al-Zor, Syria May 1, 2018. *REUTERS/Rodi Said*

2001, and clearly authorizes operations against organizations, nations, and individuals that played a role in the September 11, 2001, attacks on the United States. The AUMF has since been interpreted to authorize operations against ISIS, but it would be difficult to stretch any interpretation to justify a US military presence to deter and counter Iran.

The panelist argued that, moving forward, it will be useful to view US strategy in Syria through the lens of strategic competition with Russia and Iran, as policymakers in Washington will likely calibrate their approach to give the United States an edge over its rivals. However, the United States lacks the leverage in Syria to really compete successfully, so it is unclear if Syria is really the best field for such a contest. The panelist noted that the obsession with countering Iran will likely detract from what the United States could do well in the northeast.

Beyond the Iranian distraction, there is also general reticence in Washington to make the shift from kinetic counterterrorism to counterinsurgency—even if it is conducted by, with, and through Syrian

partners—because of the resourcing required, as well as the legacies of US counterinsurgency efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan. Participants agreed that, despite this, security threats will persist, and the United States will have to cope with ISIS’s opening of the insurgency playbook and the prevalence of sleeper-cell attacks. One issue the participants flagged as particularly important is the detainees in the northeast—suspected ISIS fighters, conspirators, and their families held in makeshift camps overseen by the SDF. Whether release, abuse, or execution, their future could pose a risk for radicalization, mobilization, and further attacks. Intelligence collection in these camps, and elsewhere in the northeast, is dependent on the US military presence and the guarantee of relative stability, which have been thrown into question.

Turkey’s Position

The uncertainty of the future US role in the northeast has stalled decision-making for other external actors in Syria, including Turkey. A second panelist with expertise



Syrian Democratic Forces and U.S. troops are seen during a patrol near Turkish border in Hasakah, Syria November 4, 2018. *REUTERS/Rodi Said*

on Turkish foreign policy described Turkey's approach to Syria as having shifted toward a longer-term strategy after the Euphrates Shield operation in 2016-2017, when the Turkish incursion across Syria's northern border (ostensibly to counter ISIS, but actually aimed at pushing back against Kurdish expansion in the region) left a swath of Syria under Turkish control. Turkey overlooked the existing local governance, and set up or supported new administrative and security structures in its areas of control, which the panelist was able to visit in 2017. These Turkish administrators and security forces are linked to the Interior Ministry and receive their salaries from the government in Gaziantep, but are referred to as part of an international peacekeeping force rather than a governance system. Turkey's actors on the ground include: the Gendarmerie General Command, the tip of the spear in counterterrorism operations in northern Syria; the Turkish police, who train local Syrian police forces; National Intelligence Organization (MIT) officers; and conventional armed forces, though the panelist said they are not as influential on the ground. The panelist explained that Turkey is trying to establish a centralized,

Turkish-led police force to replace and disarm the factional and inept Free Syrian Army (FSA) forces it previously backed, with the intent to push back against the expansion of the YPG and the Kurdish Democratic Union (PYD), but also to make the Turkish area safe for life and trade to resume as before.

Counterterrorism and security are not Turkey's only goals in northern Syria. The panelist, who met with Turkish administrators there, concluded that Turkey aims to make itself indispensable by improving living conditions in the region, so as to discourage migrant flows to Turkey and enable some refugee returns, provide an alternative to the Kurdish-led governance project in northern Syria, and facilitate renewed trade with the region. Along those lines, Turkey has invested heavily not only in the security sector, but also in education and healthcare. However, Turkey restricts access to areas under its control, blocking Syrian and international humanitarian actors from operating there, unless they funnel support through Turkish-approved organizations. As participants pointed out, this increases local

dependence on Turkey, but hinders adequate public-service provision and much-needed relief and reconstruction efforts. One participant remarked that this has also engendered some resentment among the local population, which may prove counterproductive to Turkey's long-term goals for stability and security in the region.

The panelist stated that Turkey is looking to expand this model in Syria, but acknowledges that this will be difficult in the Kurdish-dominated northeast. Turkey's stabilization plan for Manbij—which would dissolve the local council established there by the SDF and replace it through the election of a general assembly jointly monitored by Turkey and the United States—draws on lessons learned from Turkey's experiment with governance in Jarablus and aims to be more inclusive of the local population. However, the plan has failed to garner Kurdish support, and has been hampered by Turkish officials' reticence to communicate and cooperate with the SDF. One participant assessed that Turkey was unlikely to find success in expanding its model in Syria without improved negotiations with the YPG and PYD, but that this cannot occur without clarity from the US administration on its own stance toward the Kurds.

Russia's Position

According to a third panelist familiar with Russian decision-making in Syria, Moscow had hoped that Trump's announcement of withdrawal from Syria would push the Kurds into Russia's arms, but this did not occur. Russia is finding it more difficult to chart the post-ISIS phase of the conflict, as the main drivers of its Syria policy—its intelligence apparatus and the Ministry of Defense—are now less relevant. According to the panelist, the question now facing Russia is political: how to “win the peace” by framing a political process as inclusive and encouraging of refugee returns and constitutional reforms. The panelist added that Moscow is having more trouble navigating relationships with Turkey and the Kurds than it expected. Moscow is signaling intent to address Kurdish grievances, demonstrated by a constitutional draft circulated in 2017, but is also cognizant that Turkey is key to Russia's interest in weakening NATO and deterring its eastward expansion. According to the panelist, Russia also wants to encourage relations between Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Assad, in order to legitimize the Syrian regime in the eyes of regional leaders. However, the panelist added, Russia does not want to throw the Kurds under the bus, as peeling them away from the United States is important to Russia's goal of damaging US credibility in the region.

The participants agreed that Russia is stuck in a balancing act between Turkey and the Kurds in northeast Syria, and wants a clear position on the Kurds from the United States—and vice versa—before it makes further strategic choices. One participant argued that Russia is inclined to lobby for a level of Kurdish autonomy—if not full administrative autonomy, at least cultural—and the continuation of a Kurdish security force, the tradeoff being that the YPG would have to relinquish its heavy weapons and reduce the size of its force. Others pointed out that Russia lost some ties to the Kurds after greenlighting Turkey's attack on Kurdish-controlled Afrin during Operation Olive Branch in early 2017, and that Russia appears less and less interested in running reconciliation between the Kurds and Turks. One participant pointed out that Russia has an interest in seeing the Assad regime mediate Turkish-Kurdish relations in the future, in another effort to legitimize the state by resuming its engagement in statecraft.

Several discussants observed that all the major players in northeast Syria are “kicking the can down the road”: the Kurds are waiting on a signal from the United States, Russia is waiting on a signal from the Kurds vis-à-vis the relationship with the United States, Turkey is waiting on Russia, and everyone is unsure of the US position. Nobody wants to negotiate when they are weak, but everyone is weak, so the status quo becomes entrenched and actors react rather than act. In the meantime, the status quo benefits the regime. Several participants noted that in this situation, the United States has the opportunity to have a real say in the future of northeast Syria, but that this would require a clear, decisive strategy that seems unlikely to materialize without a significant change from the current administration.

Session Two: The Locals: The Syrian Democratic Forces and the Autonomous Administration

The transition from offensive combat operations to post-conflict stabilization is being led by local actors operating outside the control of the Syrian central government. The SDF, working alongside civilian entities inside the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, is working to provide services to the local population. This effort is politically challenging, often done with few resources, and dependent on balancing local intra-ethnic and political dynamics to provide security and basic services. The second panel discussed these efforts, the successes, and key challenges.

As it stands today, the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (commonly referred to as Rojava)



President Vladimir Putin of Russia, Hassan Rouhani of Iran and Tayyip Erdogan of Turkey attend a news conference following their meeting in Tehran, Iran September 7, 2018. *Kirill Kudryavtsev/Pool via REUTERS*

consists of a network of self-governing structures in the areas of Afrin, Jazeera, Euphrates, Raqqa, Tabqa, Manbij, and Deir Ezzor. It is led by the Syrian Democratic Council (the political wing of the SDF), with the Movement for a Democratic Society (TEV-DEM) as the ruling coalition. On paper, TEV-DEM is a coalition, but it is dominated by the PYD. As such, one Kurdish party is essentially making decisions for the entire region, including traditionally Arab-majority areas.

To understand governance in northeast Syria, one participant suggested, it is important to keep in mind three things: the difference between perception and reality, the power of single-party control, and the differences between Arab-majority areas with and without Kurdish minorities.

Most participants agreed that perceptions are not a good indicator of reality in northeast Syria. While TEV-DEM's influence over the Rojava self-administered areas is meant to be limited to setting the political and

ideological agendas, several participants argued that, in reality, five to ten higher-ups in the PYD make all the strategic decisions for the region. Local councils in Arab-majority areas throughout the region have had some success in service provision, but have little to no say in regional political or legislative affairs, according to participants who visited these areas.

One participant contested that there are two types of Arab-majority areas, with implications for governance: those with Kurdish minorities, which provide an interface with the PYD; and those without, where control of security provision (which the tribes tend to dominate) translates to political control. According to the participant, the SDF absorbed many former ISIS fighters, in part, to act as interlocutors with tribal leaders in Arab-majority areas.

The discussants agreed that Arab participation in Kurdish-led governance structures is disproportionately low, partly due to a lack of inclusion, but also

due to disinterest among many Arabs. One participant acknowledged that this disinterest may stem from the knowledge that participation would be largely symbolic, since the PYD runs everything anyway. Another offered that it could also be that few Arabs are interested in buying into the Kurdish “experiment” in Rojava, in case of a regime takeover in the near future. Another participant reported that ISIS sleeper cells have targeted Arabs affiliated with the SDF, making many fearful to join. Being targeted by the regime is another risk, participants noted. The lack of inclusion, compounded by disinterest or fear of joining the SDF, means that no Arabs are making strategic decisions for the region, such as the one to send a delegation to Damascus for negotiations to regime. This obviously has implications for social cohesion at the local level, and several participants reported increased Arab resentment of Kurdish rule in the northeast.

While Arab participation in governance in northeast Syria is lacking, one of the panelists pointed out that there has been some progress in women’s participation. The Autonomous Administration’s Charter of the Social Contract not only grants women the right to participate in political, social, economic, and cultural life; it requires that women have at least 40-percent representation within all governing bodies, institutions, and committees. There is a Women’s Committee within the administration in charge of social-status laws, such as those related to polygamy, child marriage, and dowries. Another panelist added that, in some places, women are an exception to the lack of Arab participation in SDF structures: in Manbij in particular, many women join the SDF-affiliated Manbij Military Council, in order to protect themselves from forced marriage, polygamy, and abuse. The panelists noted that, while the region has seen improvements in women’s participation in areas under SDF control, many governance structures in the northeast operate independently from the Autonomous Administration and have not experienced these changes.

Several participants pointed out that, even in areas that fall under the Autonomous Administration, female participation does not always equate to empowerment. Often, women who receive leadership roles are then poorly equipped to succeed in them, lacking training, education, or the respect of their peers. As one conference participant who has frequent contact with the region noted, women’s participation in local councils and the Kurdish Women’s Protection Units (YPJ) has largely been addressed to the West to garner international support, rather than the support of Syrian society. Women are still dealing with institutions and traditions that have prevailed for years, the participant added. Another noted that there is also a lack of diversity within female

representation; most candidates for positions set aside for women are hand selected by TEV-DEM, with PYD members receiving higher positions.

The Autonomous Administration has other problems beyond representation: participants noted the dire need for improvements in service provision and humanitarian response. One discussant explained that some 50-60 percent of the Autonomous Administration’s already-small budget is spent fighting ISIS, leaving little for necessities like demining, reconstruction of public infrastructure, such as hospitals and schools, or restoration of water and electricity. Participants noted that if the Autonomous Administration fails to provide essential services, it will exacerbate tensions already stoked by demographic-representation problems, with dangerous implications for radicalization and unrest in the region.

Session Three: Local Dynamics in a Kurdish-Dominated Northeast

The third panel discussed the security and political challenges the SDF must face, given uncertainties about the future of the US presence in northeast Syria, tensions with Turkey, and critical political and military divergences with the Syrian regime. The two panelists discussed these challenges, underscoring the centrality of the United States in determining the future of the SDF. The panelists also discussed the enduring challenge the United States faces. The United States and Turkey are NATO allies, but have differed on how to prosecute the war against ISIS in Syria. Ankara views the United States’ key partner force, the SDF, as a terrorist group linked closely with the PKK.

The United States, in contrast, views the SDF as the critical enabler of the war against ISIS, and essential to holding territory taken from the group. Beyond the Turkish-US dynamic, a panelist pointed out the potential spoiler role Iran could play, as it seeks to co-opt disaffected Arabs—particularly in Raqqqa, where the restoration of services has been slow. The same is true for the Syrian regime, which has pursued its own line of effort to engage with Arab tribal elements in the area, perhaps in conjunction with Iran, with the aim of undermining support for SDF rule. In general, both panelists agreed that it is easy to envision how security could get worse, particularly in Deir Ezzor, which is outside of the SDF’s core Kurdish areas along the border with Turkey and populated with ethnic Arabs wary of Kurdish rule.

During the group discussion, there was a wide divergence of opinion about how to reconcile US and Turkish interests, and whether that was even possible.

One discussant also pointed out the purported US policy of using its presence in Syria's northeast to deny the regime total victory, thereby forcing it to elicit concessions. This approach also includes more vigorous US action to put economic pressure on Iran. However, as one participant noted, this policy contradicts Russian goals, and precludes serious thinking about whether it is possible for the United States and Russia to cooperate in some capacity to end the civil conflict.

The participants also questioned whether the Assad regime has the capacity to co-opt tribal elements and project power in the northeast. One discussant suggested that the regime ultimately views the northeast as filled with reconcilable elements, with the exception of core PKK cadres that espouse a hardline view toward central state control. Instead, the regime's focus is on ending the US partnership with the SDF, given Assad's antipathy toward the US military presence in the country. The regime may share this top-line goal with both Russia and Turkey, albeit with notable differences in how to achieve it.

For the SDF, these geopolitical divergences ultimately wed the group's political survival to the United States. However, efforts are underway to try mollifying Turkey and reach agreement on a safe zone. One panelist suggested that a purported Turkish-US compromise—which would allow for some Turkish troops to move into the northeast, in return for a pledge to remove elements of the SDF from the border, along with a Turkish commitment not to target the Kurds—would be the “best offer the SDF could hope for, compared with the alternative of what would happen if the United States leaves without reaching agreement with Turkey.” However, the discussants noted that anti-Turkish sentiment is considerable within the YPG, and also prevalent in the SDF. Therefore, progress on this issue could be illusive, and may not come to fruition. This session reiterated a general theme: the future of Syria's northeast is dependent on the US presence, and therefore tied to the policy choices Washington makes. Many participants noted that, in the absence of a US security guarantee, the SDF could seek out security guarantees from the Assad regime to prevent a Turkish incursion.

Session Four: Compromise and Reconciliation: What Would a Settlement Look Like?

The first session of the conference's second day pivoted from the hyper-local dynamics in the northeast, and asked participants to focus on the feasibility of political compromise. One panelist noted that the Assad regime

views elements of the SDF as reconcilable and could, in theory, negotiate with elements of the group. However, another panelist noted, any potential reconciliation suffers from regime recalcitrance on any form of compromise with the opposition. Also, the SDF's core leadership has a hardline view on its own political system and the necessity of decentralizing the future Syrian government. More broadly, the panelists and discussants noted the wide divergence in the perceptions and policies of the foreign actors involved in the fighting.

As one panelist indicated, the SDF is wary of making concessions to the regime, because it does not view Assad's government as a critical interlocutor. This is because the SDF still has an indirect US security guarantee and is not under enough pressure to make political concessions. However, the regime may have some opportunities in the SDF's Arab-majority areas, which the core Kurdish leadership views through a security prism, as opposed to how it administers core Kurdish-majority areas. The same panelist indicated that there could be some local hedging in anticipation of a potential regime return in the Arab areas in the Euphrates River valley and in Deir Ezzor.

The issue of ISIS family members living under SDF rule, and their relationship with local tribes, is a good example of the local issues with which the SDF's leadership must now deal. After clearing ISIS from the area, local tribes have put pressure on the SDF to release tribal members who may have fought alongside the group or are related to a killed or detained fighter. Further, the rapid increase in the number of SDF members has also led to an increase in corruption, as local SDF members have been bribed to ensure that prisoners are released. This could create future security challenges, and also demonstrates one of the longer-term challenges the SDF will face as it consolidates control over territory, expands its ranks, and continues to work outside of any central government control.

One panelist underscored that the regime would demand that it police its own borders, a task that is traditionally a hallmark of government sovereignty. However, as is currently the case in Syria, the regime does not control the entirety of its northern border with Turkey. The Russian position seeks to bolster the Syrian regime's legitimacy, and Russia works toward ensuring that the outside actors involved in the conflict recognize regime authority. This effort has proved difficult, and has hindered a joint understanding of a future peace agreement in Syria among the relevant actors.

During the discussion, one participant suggested that there was an internal split within the SDF's leadership

about how to allocate resources between Arab- and Kurdish-majority areas under the group's control. The leadership, for example, has raised concerns about money being spent in Arab areas, even while services in Kurdish areas remain underfunded and insufficient. This fissure could also translate into differences in how the SDF conceives of any potential compromise with the regime. Along with Kurdish-Turkish tensions, broader US-Russian tensions further complicate this dynamic. These tensions increase the impediments to compromise, because external actors who do not feel the full brunt of the conflict's negative effects could be less amenable to making concessions. Conversely, great powers can also increase pressure, if and when they reach consensus on Syria. However, as one discussant aptly noted, "what Syrians want does not matter" to the decision-makers in this situation.

Session Five: Negotiating with Outside Actors

The final session focused on the role of outside actors in shaping any post-conflict reconciliation, and whether there was a pathway to a common position on how best to end the Syrian civil war. As has been made clear, the role of outside actors in shaping the conflict was a common theme in every panel. In particular, participants noted the role the United States plays in protecting the SDF from regime and Turkish attacks. The Turkish-SDF tensions were also a common theme, as was the potential for Iran to play spoiler in negotiations. Further complicating the situation, US great-power competition and deteriorating relations between the United States and Russia impact events in Syria, and prevent cooperation on efforts to tamp down the violence and pursue a negotiated settlement. The final panel reiterated these themes.

One panelist noted that Turkey's security concerns about the SDF mean that it will work to undermine and prevent Kurdish governance in the northeast. This overarching concern, the panelist noted, drives Turkey's interactions with the United States and Russia. US-Turkish tensions dominated every panel because of the potential for a Turkish-Kurdish clash in the northeast. In this session, there was a consensus that Turkish and SDF goals were divergent in Syria, and that one outcome of this is Ankara's outreach to Russia to facilitate its cross-border military presence.

As for the Arab states in the Middle East, the reality is that countries like Saudi Arabia and Qatar are now on the

outside looking in. As one panelist put it, "The Arab states are now second tier players and are looking to project power through the United States and to hedge with cordial outreach to Russia." The broader tensions between Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates with Turkey and its allies also have some impact on the Syrian conflict. Specifically, the Saudis and Emiratis now view the YPG as a potential proxy force to hedge against Turkey and, in line with the current US thinking on the conflict, as a means to block further Iranian advances in the northeast. However, the Gulf Arab States—in particular, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates—are also looking to hedge their bets. They have begun to slowly recognize the inevitability of Bashar al-Assad's victory, and have engaged with the regime to try peeling it away from Iran.

For Russia, the northeast is a lower priority than the northwest. This reflects the country's focus on Idlib, and the recognition that it can play the United States and Turkey against one another. As one panelist noted, the US-Turkish tensions have a net-positive effect for Russia because of the secondary problems they pose for NATO. Moscow also seeks to hedge its bets, and has thus offered the Kurds certain guarantees if they were to support a Russian-backed constitutional process. This approach, as one participant noted, has prompted Turkish pushback. Given that Moscow and Ankara have worked so closely together on the northwest, Turkey's response could prompt Russia to harden its position against the SDF, and this dynamic could prevent Russia from placing any serious pressure on the regime to appease the SDF. Of course, the overarching issues for Russia are the US presence in the northeast and Moscow's failure to entice Washington to engage in serious dialogue about how to settle the conflict.

One potential outcome, as a discussant pointed out, is that if there were movement in this area, Russia could actually be counted on to pressure both Damascus and Ankara to make concessions. Similarly, if the United States were to push for greater Kurdish representation at future dialogues in Geneva, Turkey could find itself on the opposite side of two stronger powers. Yet, there remain no indications that the regime is interested in any compromise that would lessen centralized government control over any part of Syria. As one participant put it, "For Damascus, decentralization is about how to incorporate local councils back into the center." Thus, for all the talk about the divergent goals of the outside actors, the vast majority of participants agreed that the most important local actor, the Syrian regime, is not ready for peace on terms acceptable to the other combatants.

About the Authors



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