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# Threats Perceived and Real: New Data and the Need for a New Approach to the Turkish-SDF Border Conflict

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## INTRODUCTION

The conflict between Turkey and the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) is one of the largest and longest-running armed conflicts in the world. And yet previous American administrations – both Republican and Democrat – have treated it as an issue of second-order importance. This is no longer a sustainable approach. Turkey now uses this conflict as a pretext to occupy a large swath

of northern Syria, where Arab, Kurdish, and Syriac Christian members of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) who fought alongside the United States to defeat ISIS, have been captured, transferred illegally across the border, tried in Turkish courts, and sentenced to many years in Turkish prisons. In areas of Syria occupied by Turkey, hundreds of thousands of civilians have been forcibly displaced from their homes, including Arabs, Kurds, Yezidis, Armenians and Syriacs. If these practices are not

halted, Turkey may effectively annex a large swath of Syrian territory into the Turkish Republic, and permanently change the demography of the region home to endangered minorities who survived ISIS. Despite the complexity of the problem, devising U.S. policy should be relatively straightforward because core U.S. national security interests align with American values and the obligation to uphold international law.

The Syrian conflict and creation of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) has fundamentally transformed the Turkish-PKK conflict from one that was previously limited to the Turkish military and Kurdish militants in southeastern Turkey and the Qandil Mountains of Iraq – to one that now impacts civilians of every ethnic and religious group across a large region of northern Syria, where Turkey has established and continues to expand its military occupation in violation of a U.S.-brokered ceasefire agreement.

The Turkish government has argued repeatedly both in public and in private conversations with U.S. officials that their presence in Syria is temporary and will terminate once there is a political solution to the larger Syrian conflict in accordance with UN Security Resolution (UNSCR 2254). Prior to the outbreak of the Syrian conflict, the Republic of Turkey had annexed Syrian territory once, when the province of Hatay in Syria was incorporated into Turkey in 1939 based upon a French-British-Turkish Agreement. The annexation of Liwa Al-Iskanderuna, as the region is known in Arabic, was never formally recognized by any Syrian government after gaining independence in 1946. French officials defended the decision at the League of Nations as “necessary in order to avoid a Turkish attack on Syria.”<sup>1</sup>

While Turkish officials maintain that their presence in Syria is temporary, official Turkish court documents indicate that the Syrian region of Ras Al-Ayn (known as Serêkaniyê in Kurdish) is treated as if it was part of Şanlıurfa in Turkey, as will be discussed later. Turkish officials also claim that their presence is justified due to specific threats from across the border. My analysis of ACLED shows that from January 2017 until August 2020, there were 3,319 attacks from Turkey or Turkish-backed forces against the SDF/YPG or civilians in Syria, compared to 22 cross-border attacks from the SDF or YPG into Turkey. The data is presented in more detail in the methodology section, as well as a counterargument.

While dealing with a potential threat from the SDF/YPG given its ties to the PKK is a priority for Ankara in intervening in Syria, other rationales include protecting the four million plus IDPs in Idlib and elsewhere in northern Syria subject to attacks by Assad that would likely push them over the border into Turkey. Turkey has already absorbed over three million Syrian refugees at a cost over the past decade of many tens of billions of dollars and believes it politically and financially impossible to absorb a second equally large wave. Turkey is also concerned about ISIS attacks emanating from or planned in Syria, having fallen victim to four major ISIS terrorist attacks from 2015 and after. Finally, Turkey wishes to maintain a buffer inside Syria to support the effort for a compromise solution to the overall Syria crisis, given its hostile relationship to the Assad regime and its allies Russia and Iran.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan continues to threaten further military operations in northern Syria and Iraq, while democratically



elected Kurdish politicians inside Turkey are summarily removed from office and replaced with government “trustees.” In March, a Turkish prosecutor launched a case to shut down entirely the pro-Kurdish People’s Democratic Party (HDP), the third largest party in the country. According to the HDP’s Legal Commission, over 22,000 HDP members have been detained since June 2015.<sup>2</sup> In the so-called “Kobane Trial” 108 Kurdish politicians are facing life in prison for a tweet in 2014 which called on the international community to take action against ISIS in Kobane. The European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) found that the HDP’s call for protests was “within the remit of political free speech and did not constitute incitement to violence.”<sup>3</sup> The trial is significant also because it was the battle of Kobane that led to the U.S. decision to arm the Syrian Kurds in the YPG/YPJ. Ankara’s increasingly aggressive foreign and domestic policies are both driven by the same fear: greater Kurdish autonomy, even beyond Turkey’s borders in northern Syria.

The October 2019 Turkish intervention in Syria, which President Trump failed to deter, was a major setback for the United States: it made it more difficult for the U.S. to achieve its objectives in Syria, allowed Russia and Iran to expand their area of operations, destabilized the region, killed innocent civilians, and contributed to ethnic cleansing of Kurds, Yazidis, and Syriacs, Assyrians, and Armenians who fled during the intervention. As a result of the Turkish intervention, the second-deadliest site of the Armenian genocide in Syria (Ras al-Ayn) is now under Turkish control. In 1916, an estimated 65,000 Armenians were killed in Ras al-Ayn.<sup>4</sup> During the Turkish intervention in 2019, the Armenian embassy in Damascus helped evacuate Armenian families from the city.<sup>5</sup>

Despite a ceasefire agreement negotiated by Vice President Pence after the 2019 intervention, which was meant to end hostilities, clashes continue and Turkey is still expanding its occupation of northern Syria. Some 21 villages inhabited by Syriac Christians in the region of Ras al-Ayn alone have now fallen under the control of Turkey and its proxy forces known as the Turkish-backed Free Syrian Army (TFSA) or the Syrian National Army (SNA). Syrian citizens in the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) who were attempting to hold the line and prevent further Turkish encroachment (as stipulated by the U.S.-brokered agreement) have been captured, taken illegally across the border to Turkey, and received prison sentences ranging from 7.5 years to life in prison. This is a flagrant violation of international law and the Fourth Geneva Convention, which Turkey has been a party to since 1954. If these court cases are left unchallenged, they may be used to establish a legal precedent justifying the de facto annexation of Syrian territory to Turkey.

What was once a “Turkish-Kurdish” conflict, now impacts every single religious and ethnic group in northern Syria, the Kurdistan region of northern Iraq, and the Sinjar region of western Iraq. The need for a peaceful resolution to the conflict is more urgent than ever before.

In his first major foreign policy speech at the State Department on February 4, President Biden asserted that, “we need to reclaim our credibility and moral authority.”<sup>6</sup> This report makes a few suggestions for how to do this. The Biden Administration has an opportunity to undo some of the harm caused by the Turkish intervention in October 2019, and an obligation to prevent atrocities. The 2018 Elie Wiesel Genocide and Atrocities Prevention Act, passed with bipartisan



support in Congress, is intended to enhance the ability of the U.S. government to “prevent acts of genocide and other atrocity crimes, which threaten national and international security.”<sup>7</sup>

The new dataset presented in this paper allows for an impartial, objective, and quantitative assessment of the conflict along the Syrian-Turkish border. Combined with an analysis of Turkish court documents and my own observations and interviews conducted in Northeast Syria, I provide new information that could help develop a new approach to the cross-border conflict.

In what follows I will make five arguments:

**First, although Turkish officials claim their intervention and occupation of Syrian territory was in response to cross-border attacks from the SDF, the data does not substantiate these claims.** The conflict is profoundly asymmetrical. This becomes clear from an analysis of more than three and a half years of the conflict along the Turkish-Syrian border, beginning on January 1, 2017 until August 1, 2020 using data collected by the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED). The numbers are staggering: ACLED data registered 3,319 attacks by the Turkish military or Turkish proxies against the SDF/YPG or civilians in Syria, compared to 22 attacks by the SDF/YPG into Turkey. Of those 22 incidents, 10 of them could not be independently verified. In other words, the actual number of cross-border attacks attributed to the YPG/SDF may be no more than 12. Furthermore, these 12 incidents all occurred *after* Turkey launched Operation Peace Spring on October 9, 2019. These twelve incidents of cross-border attacks were in response to the Turkish incursion into sovereign Syrian territory.

**This quantitative analysis of the border conflict using ACLED data confirms internal assessments of high-ranking U.S. officials who served on the ground in Syria during this period.** Turkish fears that the SDF/YPG would use their control of Syrian territory as a launchpad for operations against Turkey were understandable given the decades-long history of armed conflict and the fact that the leader of the PKK, Abdullah Ocalan, lived in Syria for almost twenty years from 1980 until he was captured in 1999. Mazloum Abdi has been the SDF commander-in-chief since 2015, and is a Syrian Kurd and former PKK cadre. However, these fears, justifiable as they may be, were based on the past and not the current reality. The ACLED data from 2017-2020 shows that the actual threat of cross-border attacks from Syria into Turkey has been minimal – and stands in sharp contrast to the thousands of attacks from Turkey or Turkish-backed forces against the SDF or civilians. (See counterargument section below.) A resolution to the conflict will require an honest assessment of *both* the past and the present reality.

**Second, the Turkish-led operations resulted in the mass displacement of civilians of all ethnic and religious groups in the region, not just Kurds or SDF/YPG fighters.** The U.S.-Turkish ceasefire agreement stated that “maximum care will be exercised in order not to cause harm to civilians and civilian infrastructure” and entailed a commitment to “safeguard religious and ethnic minorities.” However, the reality is that hundreds of thousands of civilians including Arabs, Armenians, Syriac-Assyrians, Kurds, and Yezidis have been forcibly displaced, losing their property and their livelihoods. During my research in Syria, I personally interviewed members of all these ethnic and religious groups who lost their homes and properties as a result of

Operation Peace Spring. Many of them explained that their homes are now occupied by Turkish-backed armed groups. The deprivation of property makes minorities even more vulnerable.<sup>8</sup> Unless the original inhabitants are allowed to return safely to their homes, disputes over land could become a major source of instability. The ACLED data illustrates that the TFSA groups continue to target civilian infrastructure in areas where they are not allowed to operate.

**Third, Turkey continues to expand the territory it controls in northern Syria – in violation of the U.S.-Turkish ceasefire agreement negotiated by former Vice President Pence.** The impact on religious minorities is worth highlighting. As a result of Operation Peace Spring, some eighteen villages inhabited by Yazidis and eleven villages inhabited by the Christian minority (Syriacs, Assyrians, and Armenians) located in the vicinity of Ras al-Ayn fell under the control of Turkey and TFSA forces. A further ten Syriac villages have fallen under Turkish control due to fighting east of Ras al-Ayn *after* the ceasefire, as illustrated in the map below (Figure 12). **Syrian citizens in the SDF defending this region have been captured by Turkish-backed forces, transferred illegally to Turkey where they were put on trial in Turkish courts and sentenced to prison. These court cases illustrate that Turkish courts are exercising jurisdiction over Syrian territory, as if it was part of the Republic of Turkey.**<sup>9</sup> The U.S. government has not accused Turkey of a violation of the ceasefire agreement although it has raised concerns about Turkish military activity including in the area cited above; Turkish officials note that the agreement did not specify the exact coordinates of the ceasefire line but rather referred to the “location” of forces, and they assert, with some independent corroboration, that they

did have some forces east of Ras al-Ayn before the ceasefire entered into effect and thus the area depicted in dark yellow on the map (Figure 12) was within the Turkish zone. The SDF disputes this.

**Fourth, Turkish-led operations have not resulted in the stability Turkey desires, but only exacerbated the conflict.** According to a Report by the U.N. Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Syria, civilians residing in Afrin and Ras al-Ayn “witnessed an onslaught of violations perpetrated by members of the Syrian National Army.”<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, Turkish-backed forces in the TFSA often fight amongst themselves. According to the ACLED data, which makes it possible to provide a quantitative assessment of infighting among Turkish-backed forces, Turkish proxy forces have engaged in hundreds of episodes of violent infighting in areas of Syria that they control. These violent incidents – even if they do not directly target civilians – prevent civilians from returning because armed groups have either stolen their property, or infighting contributes to generalized fear and instability.

**Finally, this data can help inform a new approach to resolving the decades-long Turkish-Kurdish conflict, which is no longer confined to southeastern Turkey and the Qandil Mountains of northern Iraq, but encompasses a vast geographical terrain and impacts all of the religious and ethnic groups in the region. As a first step, the United States needs to renegotiate the 2019 ceasefire agreement with Turkey.** The 2019 Agreement was negotiated in haste to put an end to the destructive intervention, but did not include specific geographic coordinates, and has been violated hundreds of times. Vigorous American leadership can help find a peaceful resolution to

the conflict, just as American leadership was key in facilitating the Camp David Accords between Egypt and Israel, the Good Friday Agreement in Northern Ireland, the Dayton Accords between Bosnia-Herzegovina, and the peace deal between Columbia and the FARC. The fact that the United States had longstanding and arguably much stronger ties with one of the two parties to these various conflicts – in particular with Great Britain in the case of the Good Friday Agreement and Israel in the Camp David Accords – did not preclude the United States from playing a constructive role as mediator. The same should hold true for the longstanding U.S. relationship with Turkey as a NATO ally.

### **Ghosts of the Past: The Historical Transformation of the Turkish-PKK Conflict**

Turkish incursions into Syrian territory are motivated by a historical, yet outdated defense posture toward the Turkish-Kurdish conflict. The PKK was first formed in 1978 with the goal of establishing an independent Kurdish state in southeastern Turkey. Since the civil war began in 1984, between 30,000-40,000 people have been killed.<sup>11</sup> The conflict spilled over into northern Iraq, in part because PKK militants sought refuge in the mountain fastnesses along the border, but also because Iraqi Kurds – most of whom were not aligned with the PKK – began to gain defacto autonomy from Saddam Hussein after the creation of the northern no-fly zone enforced by American, British, and French aircraft patrols.

In the 1990s, Turkey launched major cross-border operations against the PKK in the Kurdish region of northern Iraq, where the Turkish military maintains

numerous bases and outposts. Coinciding with the Kurdish Newroz holiday, on March 21, 1995 more than 35,000 Turkish troops launched a cross-border operation into the Kurdish region of Iraq. The House of Representatives quickly passed H. Res. 124 “Condemning Turkey’s Illegal Invasion of northern Iraq”, which stated that “Turkey’s actions jeopardize United States and international efforts under Operation Provide Comfort in northern Iraq, and threaten the provision of vital humanitarian assistance by nongovernmental organizations to the Kurds.”<sup>12</sup>

In 1996, Congress passed H. Con. Res. 136 that advocated for a U.S. role in bringing about an end to hostilities between Turkey and the PKK and a return to peace negotiations. Notable sponsors included Rep. Christopher Smith (R-NJ), Steny Hoyer (D- MD), Nancy Pelosi (D-CA), Benjamin Cardin (D-MD), John Lewis (D- GA), and Eliot Engel (D-NY). The Resolution “Support Peace and Democracy in Turkey” reported that more than three million people had been displaced by the conflict, with serious human rights abuses on both sides, including the PKK’s killing of innocent civilians and Turkish soldiers posing with the heads of decapitated Kurdish militants (see excerpt below, Figure 1).<sup>13</sup>

In 1997, the State Department designated the PKK as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO). One year later, in 1998, Hafez Al Assad expelled Ocalan from Syria, where he had lived for almost two decades. The following year, Ocalan was captured in Kenya with the assistance of the CIA, and brought to Turkey, where he has been imprisoned ever since.<sup>14</sup>

Even after designating the PKK as an FTO, American officials warned Turkey against large-

scale operations in northern Iraq, a sentiment often echoed by Iraqi officials. During a visit to Washington, D.C. in 2007, Iraqi Deputy Prime Minister Barham Salih said: “Turkish military intervention in Iraq will be a precedent for others to do so. And that is the last thing we need.” Mr. Salih, who is now the President of Iraq, further explained that there were no military solutions to the PKK problem, and highlighted a shared aspect of Kurdish history, despite ideological differences: “We were guerrillas ourselves before coming to government in Baghdad, and we know how guerrilla warfare is fought.”<sup>15</sup>

The United States continued to support anti-PKK operations in northern Iraq through a secretive surveillance program known as Operation Nomad Shadow. According to media reports, the program involved unarmed drones tracking PKK movements in the mountains and then sharing the intelligence with Turkey.<sup>16</sup> U.S. officials credited the intelligence sharing with allowing Turkey to conduct allegedly more precisely targeted anti-PKK operations, and preventing a large-scale Turkish intervention in Iraq. However, a large-scale operation in the Gara mountains of Iraqi Kurdistan this past February resulted in the deaths of 13 Turkish captives. Although the operation clearly and tragically failed, it may be used to justify further military operations in the Yezidi-populated region of Sinjar. On February 15, Erdoğan said at a rally “From now on, nowhere is safe for terrorists, neither Qandil, nor Sinjar or Syria.”<sup>17</sup>

Although the PKK long ago officially renounced its separatist agenda and instead advocates for Kurdish rights and decentralization inside the existing boundaries of sovereign states, this tragic history of armed conflict continues to shape the perceptions of Turkish government officials towards Kurds

both inside and outside their borders. Continued fighting between the Turkish military and the PKK in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq has resulted in the evacuation of some 400 villages near the border.<sup>18</sup>

As the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) expanded their control of territory in Syria, one battle against ISIS at a time, Turkish officials began to fear that Kurdish militants would use that territory as a launchpad for operations against Turkey. Many spoke of a fear of a “second Qandil” in northern Syria.<sup>19</sup> However, an analysis of more than three and a half years of the conflict along the Syrian-Turkish border shows that this did not come to pass.

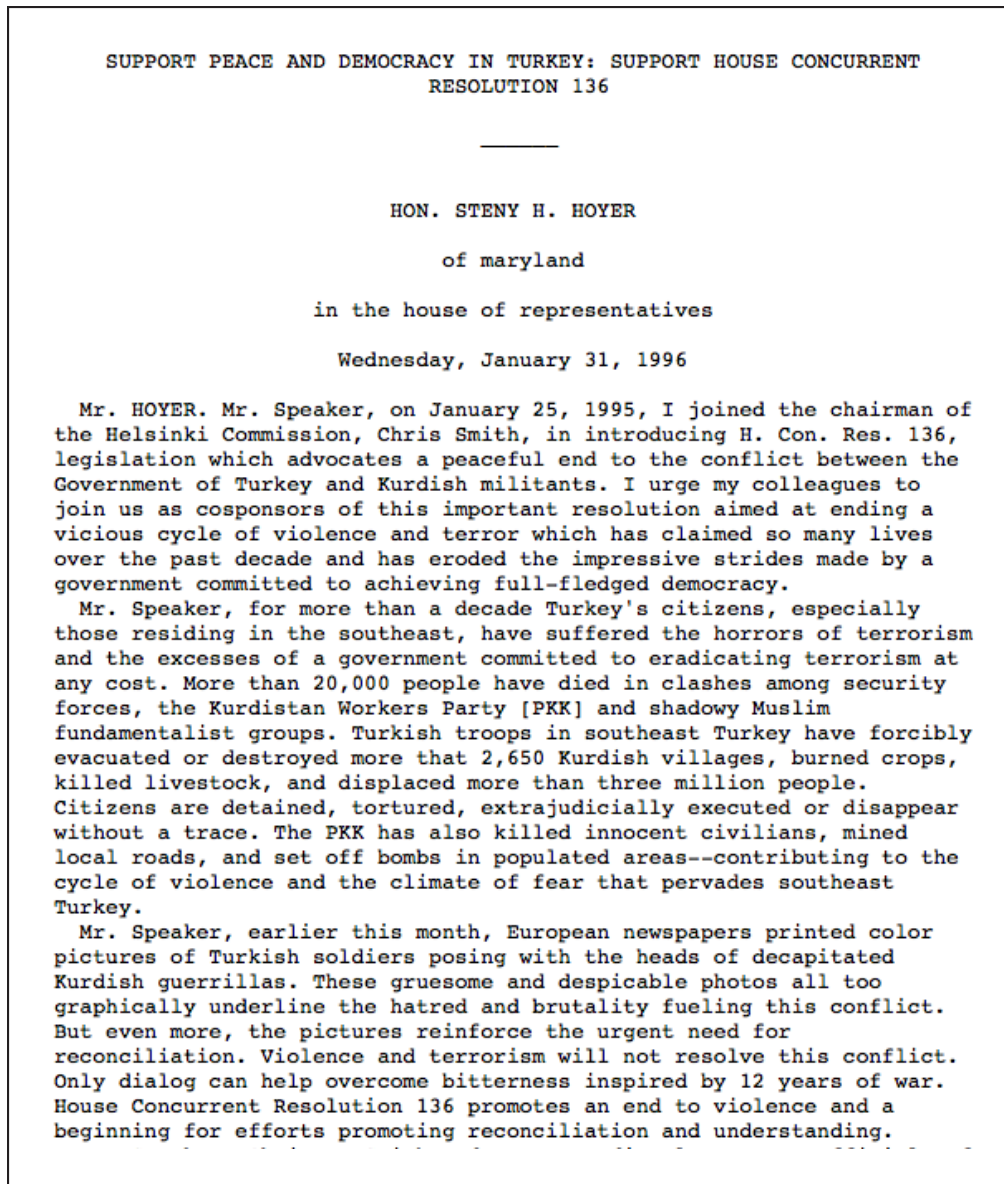
After more than 30 years of the conflict, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan recognized that more war was not the answer, and that a resolution of the Kurdish issue required a political settlement. To this end, the Turkish government under Justice and Development Party (AKP) leadership engaged in peace negotiations with the PKK between 2012-2015. However, the breakdown of peace talks in 2015 led to a radical shift in policy toward the PKK in Turkey, as well as the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and People’s Protection Units (YPG) in Syria. Since the collapse of peace negotiations, President Erdoğan began describing the SDF and YPG as existential security threats to Turkey. This claim has been used to justify three major Turkish cross-border interventions: Operation Euphrates Shield in 2016-2017, Operation Olive Branch in 2018, and Operation Peace Spring in 2019, which have resulted in a growing Turkish occupation of northern Syria that continues until today.

As a result, it is no longer accurate to refer to the issue as merely a “Turkish-Kurdish” or “Turkish-PKK” conflict, because virtually all of the religious



and ethnic groups in northern Syria and northern Iraq are now threatened by it. **Until now, American policies toward the issue have failed because they are mired in remnants of Cold War ideologies and strategies. U.S. policy will continue to fail unless we fundamentally rethink our approach to the conflict based on the new reality.**

**FIGURE 1: Excerpt from House Resolution 136 calling for the end of hostilities between the Turkey and PKK**





**FIGURE 2.**

| <b>ATTACKS IN SYRIA ATTRIBUTED TO TURKEY OR TURKISH-BACKED FORCES AGAINST SDF/YPG/CIVILIANS BETWEEN JANUARY 1, 2017 AND AUGUST 1, 2020</b>   |       |
|--|-------|
| <b>ACLED Data</b>  |       |
| Total number of attacks by Turkey or Turkish-backed forces into North and East Syria that impacted civilians or the SDF/YPG<br><i>(Incidents that involved infighting between Turkish-backed forces have been excluded from this total, unless civilians were killed as a result.)</i>                     | 3,572 |
| Total number of attacks by Turkey or Turkish-backed forces into North and East Syria that impacted civilians or the SDF/YPG<br><i>(Incidents that involved securing Turkey's territorial control of Syria such as transfers of territory and arrests of civilians have been excluded from this total.)</i> | 3,319 |

| <b>ATTACKS IN TURKEY ATTRIBUTED TO SDF OR YPG BETWEEN JANUARY 1, 2017 AND AUGUST 1, 2020</b>         |    |
|--|----|
| <b>ACLED Data</b>  |    |
| Total number of attacks by SDF or YPG into Turkey that impacted civilians or Turkish security forces | 22 |
| Total number of attacks that could be independently verified   | 12 |

## Methodology

My analysis of the Syrian-Turkish border conflict is based on both quantitative and qualitative research methods. In order to conduct a quantitative assessment of the conflict based on impartial sources, I created a new dataset using ACLED, with the help of two research assistants. This information is supplemented with qualitative interviews I conducted on the ground in Syria, including in the region on the frontlines held by opposing forces: Turkey and the Turkish-backed proxies on one side and the U.S.-backed SDF on the other. I also conducted a telephone interview with the lawyer in Turkey who is representing some of the Syrian citizens and SDF members who have been sentenced to prison. The quantitative and qualitative information

is further reinforced by an analysis of Turkish court documents and internal memos by high-ranking U.S. officials who were based in northern Syria. Due to the sensitive and politicized nature of the conflict, every effort was made to only use sources that are impartial in nature. This means that the database was constructed using ACLED instead of sources from either party to the conflict. I have also refrained from using official statements issued by either side of the conflict: neither from Turkish government or military officials nor from officials of the Autonomous Administration of Northeast Syria (AANES) or the SDF.

A few caveats are in order. The conflict between Turkey and Kurdish militants has lasted more than a century and extended over the territory of four countries: Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Syria. The data and

analysis presented here is limited to the period between 2017-2020 and to one region: the Syrian-Turkish border. The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) from which the data is drawn, is one of the most widely-used datasets available, and provides detailed descriptions of each event including the actors, location, time, casualties and injuries, and the type of violence used.<sup>20</sup> The purpose of this report is therefore not to analyze the long history of the conflict, during which serious human rights abuses were carried out by both sides, but rather to provide an impartial assessment of the recent conflict in this specific border region.

In order to create the new dataset on the Syrian-Turkish border conflict, we downloaded all events registered by ACLED, beginning with the earliest date available for both countries, which was January 1, 2017. We then specified the relevant actors in the conflict. These include the Turkish military as well as Turkish-backed factions which ACLED identifies either by the names of the individual factions, such as Hamza Division, Sultan Murad, Jaysh al-Islam, Ahrar al-Sharqiya, Ahrar al-Sham, and so forth, or as “Operation Peace Spring Forces” or “Turkish-backed forces,” as well as the SDF and YPG.

Between January 1, 2017 and August 1, 2020, ACLED recorded 3,900 incidents of attacks from Turkey into Syria, including those within Turkish-occupied parts of Syria. Because we are only interested in those attacks that target the SDF/YPG or civilians, we went through all 3,900 incidents and *excluded* events that involved infighting between Turkish-backed forces from our dataset, unless civilians were killed as a result of the infighting, in which case we included them.

However, it should be emphasized that even if no civilians or SDF were killed during such episodes, they may be seriously harmed in other ways. For example, Turkish-backed forces often fight over the stolen property of civilians. Infighting between SNA factions contributes to chaos and instability, which is one of the main reasons that civilians who fled the Turkish invasions are still unable or unwilling to return to their homes.

The following are two examples of infighting between Turkish-backed factions that we excluded from the total count of events. Although civilians were clearly impacted in both cases by militias fighting over stolen property, we did not count events like these in our database because civilians were not killed or directly targeted.

The first is an example of infighting *between different* militias in the Turkish-backed SNA. Because of the large volume of events recorded by ACLED and the necessity of analyzing each individually to ensure methodological rigor, we have excluded events that occurred after August 1, 2020. The following incident is an example of serious clashes between Sultan Murad and Hamza Division, which are both part of the Turkish-backed SNA, that took place after August 1.

*“On 6 September 2020, Sultan Murad Division clashed with Hamza Division in Qabour Qarajna in the countryside of Tel Tamer in Al-Hasakeh following a dispute over the takeover of properties owned by displaced civilians. Clashes were accompanied by the exchange of shelling. Several houses were burned during the clashes. Clashes in Um Shu’ayfah, Mahmudiyeh, Aniq El Hawa, Qabour Qarajna, and Manakh resulted in the killing of an unknown number of fighters from both sides.”*



There are also cases of clashes *within the same* Turkish-backed group, as this incident makes clear:

*“On 6 April 2020, internal clashes erupted among Turkish backed Sultan Murad Division whom are operating under OPS in Ras Al Ain city... after a dispute between the two groups over stealing a washing machine, which resulted in seriously injuring four of them.”*

After excluding all episodes of infighting between different and within the same Turkish-backed groups that did not result in civilian deaths, we were left with a total of 3,572 incidents. This included incidents that involved securing the Turkish occupation of Syrian land: Turkish patrols, building Turkish military bases or outposts inside Syria, imposing curfews in Turkish-held regions, detaining or arresting civilians who live in Turkish-held areas, and non-violent transfers of territory. Although these incidents may violate international or human rights law, or involve human rights abuses such as arbitrary detentions of civilians, we excluded these from our final tally in order to ensure our comparison remains as accurate as possible. The SDF/YPG does not control territory inside Turkey, and hence there are no such comparable events on the Turkish side of the border. We therefore eliminated all incidents that involved securing Turkey’s occupation of Syrian land, so that our comparison is systematically defined only by attacks that affect civilians or members of the security forces on the opposing side.

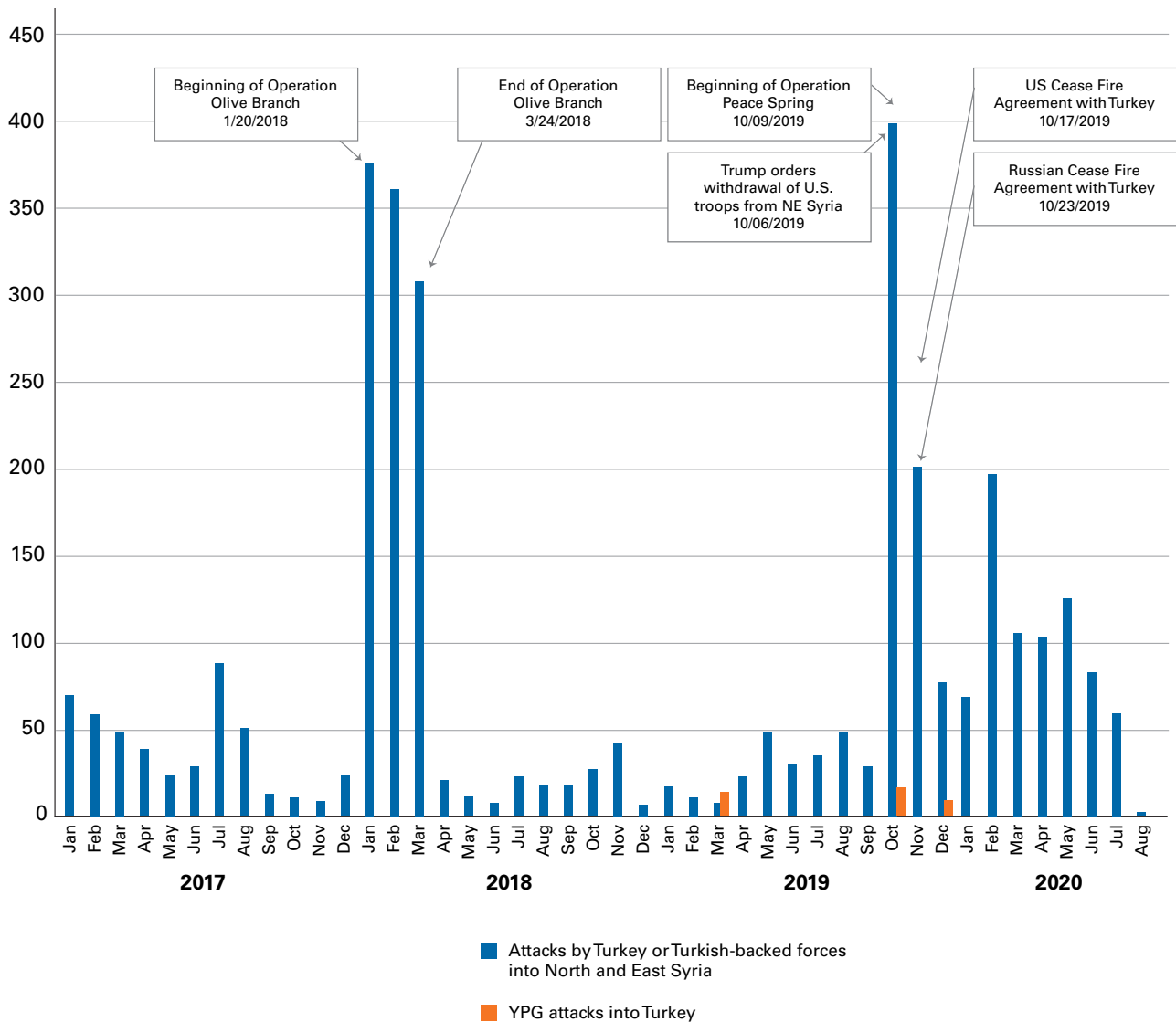
Excluding such incidents, the total number of attacks from Turkey or Turkish-backed forces targeting civilians or the SDF falls to 3,319.

We then turned to an analysis of attacks from the Syrian side of the border into Turkey. During this same time period (January 1, 2017 until August 1, 2020) ACLED registered only 22 incidents of cross-border attacks by the YPG/SDF into Turkey. Of those, 10 we were not able to verify with independent sources. In other words, we can only credibly account for 12 incidents. Furthermore, these 12 incidents all occurred after Turkey launched Operation Peace Spring in October 2019.

The only cross-border incidents from Syria into Turkey that happened prior to the October 2019 intervention were four incidents allegedly involving drones that were recorded in March 2019. ACLED cited Anadolu Agency, Daily Sabah, and SETA, which are all close to the ruling AKP party. When we checked the referenced articles, we discovered that the wording in the articles was very similar, and that they all cited one single anonymous source. We were not able to verify these incidents with independent sources. It is of course possible that these incidents did occur but were not widely reported because they were considered insignificant. For example, the four drone incidents reported by Anadolu Agency resulted in no casualties. It is also possible that the incidents did not take place at all, but were fabricated or exaggerated by the pro-Erdoğan media to justify the Turkish intervention.

The graph below (Figure 12) displays the 22 cross-border attacks attributed to the SDF/YPG from Syria into Turkey, including the 10 incidents we could not verify, highlighted in yellow, and the 3,319 attacks from Turkey or Turkish-backed groups against the SDF/YPG or civilians in red.

**Figure 3. Comparing Cross-Border Attacks between Syria and Turkey  
January 1, 2017 – August 1, 2020**



## ACLED Data Confirms Internal Assessments of Senior U.S. Officials in Syria

The ACLED data confirms assessments provided by the senior American diplomat on the ground in northern Syria, Ambassador William Roebuck – namely that the Syrian side of the border was quiet for more than 20 months prior to the Turkish intervention. Soon after Operation Peace Spring, Ambassador Roebuck wrote a scathing [internal memo](#) with the title, “Present at the Catastrophe: Standing By as Turks Cleanse Kurds in Northern Syria and De-Stabilize our D-ISIS Platform in the Northeast.” The following is an excerpt from his internal memo that was published in *The New York Times* on November 7, 2019:

*“In all the time I was in the northeast, since January 2018, I heard — and sometimes delivered — points that articulated appreciation about Turkey’s legitimate security concerns regarding the border with Syria. **And yet that border stayed quiet on the Syrian side the entire time — over 20 months—I have been in Syria, until Turkey violated it with its October Peace Spring military operation.** When quietly called on this discrepancy, a senior U.S. official explained to me, “well, it’s a perceived threat (because of ideological and other affiliations between the PYD and the PKK) that Turkey feels, so we have to take it seriously.” But eventually the talking point became reality. We began speaking as if there really were attacks across the border into Turkey, causing real casualties and damage. But these were chimerical—strongly felt perhaps—but palpable only as fears and concerns, not on the ground.”<sup>21</sup> [emphasis added] Some U.S. officials*

have been willing to confirm in public what Ambassador Roebuck conveyed in private. Brett McGurk, who previously served as the Special Presidential Envoy to the Global Coalition to Counter ISIL and currently serves as the National Security Council as Coordinator for the Middle East and North Africa, said in an interview with *The New Yorker* published on October 19, 2019, “...we have worked on the border to make sure no weapons or fighters crossed that border, and I think we can demonstrate that there [were no threats to Turkey across the border.](#)”<sup>22</sup>

## Counterargument

As Figure 3 shows, a very large number of the total Turkish attacks came during the January-March 2018 “Olive Branch” campaign in Afrin and the October 2019 “Peace Spring” campaign. Furthermore, the ACLED data captures all incidents from Turkey or Turkish-controlled areas of Syria targeting the SDF or civilians, but only 22 SDF attacks into Turkey. Turkish officials argue that most of the Turkish attacks came from inside Turkish controlled areas of Syria, and were in response to attacks by the SDF. Such attacks, which the U.S. government knows occurred (including from discussions with SDF leaders themselves) are not recorded in the ACLED statistics, which presents only SDF attacks *into Turkey*. Both sides have justified their attacks against each other inside Syria as ‘tit-for-tat’ retaliation. The all but absent SDF attacks into Turkey in the 2017-20 period reflects close monitoring of the SDF by U.S. personnel and a U.S. commitment to Ankara that there would be no attacks into Turkey from Northeast Syria.<sup>23</sup>

The Turks argue that as the U.S. presence in the northeast is temporary, and withdrawal was announced if not fully carried out three times between 2018-2019, the risk of a large SDF armed force in that region, without eventual U.S. oversight, is of great concern.

However, the U.S. government has never charged the Turkish government with any wide-scale violation of the October 2019 U.S.-Turkish ceasefire agreement, nor reimposed related sanctions, although Washington has raised specific violations on the part of Turkey, as has Turkey to the U.S. concerning violations by the SDF, which the U.S. has a responsibility to ensure adheres to the agreement. Furthermore, the violations and Turkey's territorial expansion has taken place almost entirely in the area to the east of Ras al-Ayn (dark yellow on figure 12). There has been no significant Turkish territorial expansion on the southern and western edges of the Peace Spring area, although violations of the ceasefire do take place, especially in the vicinity of Tel Tamer and Ayn Issa.

The October 17 Agreement called for a halt of ground movement and eventual cessation of hostilities along the "line of military contact" between Turkish and Turkish allied forces in the Syrian National Army on the one side and SDF on the other. However, there was no agreed upon map or grid coordinates to specifically establish the location of this line of contact. SDF personnel were informed by U.S. officials that they understood the general eastern line ran south from "roughly east of Ras al Ain to the M-4 Highway." Three days after the October 17 ceasefire agreement went into place, U.S. officials

quickly learned that the Turks had considerable forces to the east of Ras al-Ayn. Turkey largely controlled terrain in that area north of the highway just south of the Turkish border. Turkish military presence was spotty and sporadic as was SDF presence south of that highway to the M4 Highway. There was no obvious front line, forces were intermixed, but some Turkish forces were close to Tel Tamer in the southeast area on the M-4. Turkey has maintained thus that it effectively had a "front line" as of October 17 on the borders of the dark yellow area (Figure 12), and its operations within it were reportedly to "cleanse the area of SDF elements" whom Turkey believed were supposed to withdraw.<sup>24</sup>

Although Turkish officials claimed to only want to target the SDF, in reality, hundreds of thousands of civilians were displaced. Below are photographs of some of the Yezidi and Arab families I met during my visit to Syria in September 2020. One year after the October 2019 intervention, they were still unable to return to their homes and had effectively lost their properties and livelihoods.

### **Testimonies of Arab, Yezidi, and Christian Families Displaced During Turkey's Peace Spring Intervention**

Civilians of all backgrounds were displaced during the Peace Spring intervention. Below I will highlight the testimonies of four Yezidi families I interviewed in Syria, as they are widely considered one of the most endangered minorities in the country. Prior to the onset of the Syrian conflict in 2011, the U.S. Department

of State estimated that there were some 80,000 Yezidis in Syria.<sup>25</sup> The Assad regime does not recognize the Yezidi religion and they were required to register as Muslims on their official ID cards. After the withdrawal of regime forces in mid-2012, the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria recognized the Yezidi religion for the first time in Article 33 of the Social Contract, while their communities were largely protected from ISIS by the SDF/YPG. Under YPG protection, Syrian Yezidis were spared many of the horrific crimes that their co-religionists in Sinjar, Iraq suffered. Yezidis were included within the Autonomous Administration and were represented in the Ministry of Religious Affairs.

This relative security was upended by the two Turkish interventions in Afrin in 2018 and Ras al-Ayn in 2019, which prompted many Yezidis to flee. Yezidi shrines, cemeteries, and cultural associations in Turkish-occupied Afrin and Ras al-Ayn have been either desecrated or entirely destroyed.<sup>26</sup> Yezidis in Afrin have been kidnapped and subjected to forced religious conversion by some of the armed groups operating there.<sup>27</sup> The State Department's 2020 Country Report on Human Rights Practices acknowledged the kidnappings and disappearances of women that have occurred in Afrin, citing the example of Arin Dali Hesên, a Yezidi woman from Kimar village who was kidnapped in February 2020 by the Hamza Division.<sup>28</sup> Residents of Afrin fled in the direction of Shahba, while those from Ras al-Ayn fled to other areas under SDF control, in particular the region around Amude and Hasakah. The continued existence of the Yezidi community in Syria depends to a large extent on conditions in the areas

controlled by the Autonomous Administration, and whether Turkey will create conditions in Turkish-held areas that allow Yezidis who fled to return safely to their homes.

*Adel, Yezidi from the city of Ras al-Ayn / Serêkaniyê*

"On October 9 we fled from Serêkaniyê. At 3pm we left our house, all our properties behind. I brought my family first to safety then was planning on going back to Serêkaniyê but received a call telling me 'don't go back.' I lost my house, including money I left in my house. I don't have anything."

**Figure 4.**



Video of Adel describing his displacement from Ras al-Ayn, (Author, 2020).

*Motia, Yezidi from Sikeriya village, east of Ras al-Ayn / Serêkaniyê*

"The seeds, the fuel, the generator, all my farm equipment... All this was left behind. We had 300

donum (74 acres). We just evacuated. *Jaish al Islam* is on our land now. We didn't even think to return. Because I am a Kurd and Yezidi. If we return, they will kill us. Or they will kidnap us and ask for a ransom. They ask for tens of thousands of dollars. We can't deal with that. As long as one member of the TFSA is there, we can't go back."

**Figure 5.**



Video of Motia describing his displacement from Ras Al-Ayn, (Author, 2020)

Yousra, Yezidi from Til Naif village, west of Ras al-Ayn / Serêkaniyê

"We had a shop in Serêkaniyê (Ras al-Ayn) where we sold sweets and ice cream, and a beautiful house. We fled on October 9, 2019 at 4pm. Now we can't go back because our home is occupied by Hamza Division. We had 700 donum (172 acres), where we grew cotton and wheat. They stole everything: our lands, our cotton, our tractor."

**Figure 6.**



Yezidi family displaced from Ras al-Ayn during Turkish Operation Peace Spring in October 2019, still unable to return home one year later. Their home is occupied by the Hamza Division, a Turkish-backed armed group in the Syrian National Army (SNA). (Author, September 2020, Syria)

*Basima, Yezidi from Lezga village, 16km from Ras al-Ayn / Serêkaniyê*

"My name is Basima Daoud, I am the wife of Khedr Khabour. We are from the occupied region of Ras al-Ayn. The name of our village is Lezga. It is a Yezidi village. There are a few other villages around us. Can Tamer, Sikeriya, Tel Saher, all of these are Yezidi villages. And another village is Abba. The Turkish attack took place on October 9, 2019. Wednesday at 4pm in the afternoon the attack started on Tel Khalaf. When we heard the sound of the attack, we were terrified. Two days before that we were in a protest, because we don't want Turkey to attack Ras al-Ayn. We were in the protest tent for three days. I am a housewife. I do not work in the Self Administration. I am a normal wife raising my children. I was going to this protest tent because I don't want Turkey to attack Ras al-Ayn. I don't want them to displace us and our families and destroy our houses, and to take our lands and properties. On Tuesday we were still going to the protest tent. On Wednesday the attack started with planes and airstrikes. It was not



an attack with light weapons but with planes. We didn't expect that they would attack our village. Our village is far from Ras al-Ayn, 16km away. We said we would stay in our village and not leave. After six days they arrived to our village, so we had to flee."

**Figure 7.**



Photo of Basima Daoud, (Author, 2020).

### Turkish-backed Forces targeting of Civilian Infrastructure

Turkish officials at times complain to American officials that the SDF is violating the ceasefire. One problem with adjudicating these claims is that the ceasefire agreement brokered by former Vice

President Pence did not include exact geographical coordinates in terms of longitude and latitude, but merely intended to end hostilities at the line of contact. The thinking was apparently to stop the invasion in its tracks and freeze the frontlines as they were on October 17, 2019. However, as the ACLED data highlights, Turkey and Turkish-backed forces continue to carry out attacks *outside* the areas they occupied on October 17, 2019, including in the region of Tel Tamer.

The following are two examples of how Turkish-backed forces which are part of Operation Peace Spring (OPS) continue to target civilian infrastructure in the region of Tel Tamer. The first incident involved looting of farming equipment, while the second involved shelling Tel Tamer's power plant, presumably in an attempt to destroy the supply of electricity. These two incidents are *not* included in our total of 3,319 attacks by Turkish-backed forces against the SDF or YPG. They deserve highlighting, however, to illustrate that the attacks appear intended to destroy the very infrastructure civilians rely on to live, and that the hostilities continue until the present.

This also raises the question of how the SDF is expected to respond to such attacks on civilian infrastructure? If they attempt to defend the area of Tel Tamer – which they have the right to do according to the U.S.-brokered ceasefire agreement – they risk being captured by SNA militias and transferred to Turkey where they are likely to be sentenced to prison. If they do not respond to these attacks on farming equipment or the power plant, even more civilians will continue to flee.

*“On 7 November 2020, rebel factions, operating under OPS, looted farming equipment from farmers in the villages of Mahmudiyeh, Aniq El Hawa, Qasemiyeh, and Rihaniya in the frontline areas with QSD in the countryside of Tel Tamer under the pretext of ‘suspension of farming and cultivation in the region.’”*

*“On 8 January 2021, exchange of shelling took place between opposition rebels, which operate under OPS, and QSD on the frontlines of Tel Tamer in Al-Hasakeh. Turkish forces shelled the parameters of Tel Tamer’s power plant, causing damage to the power lines and temporary power cuts in the villages of the countryside of Tel Tamer.”*

**Figure 8.**



Some Arab families have returned to Ras al-Ayn after being displaced during the Turkish intervention in October 2019. Others, however, such as the family pictured here in the Washokani Camp, are still unable or unwilling to return home more than one year later. Yezidis and Christians cite fear of religious persecution as a reason for not returning due to extremist factions within the TFSA. Yezidi shrines and cemeteries have been desecrated in areas occupied by the TFSA. Reports of forced marriage or the fact that their homes are now occupied by armed groups deter other families from returning to Ras al-Ayn. (Author, September 2020, Syria)



**Figure 9. Types of Violence Between Turkey or Turkish Proxies and the Syrian Democratic Forces or YPG**

| TYPE OF VIOLENCE  | ACTOR   | ACTOR  |
|---|---|--|
|   | Turkish Military or Turkish-backed Syrian National Army (SNA) against SDF/YPG or civilians in Syria | Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) or YPG against Turkish military or SNA or civilians in Turkey |
| Shelling by rockets, mortars, or artillery fire               | X   | X  |
| Use of drones, landmines, or IEDs / remote violence           | X   | X  |
| Battles / armed clashes                                       | X   |  |
| Airstrikes  | X   |  |
| Violence against civilians                                    | X   |  |
| Abduction/forced disappearance                                | X   |  |
| Religious persecution   | X   |  |
| Gender-based violence   | X   |  |
| Arrest or detention of civilians                              | X   |  |
| Extradition / Illegal cross-border transfers and detention    | X   |  |
| Violent or non-violent transfer of territory                  | X   |  |
| Building of military outposts / Military patrols              | X   |  |
| Looting or destruction of civilian property or infrastructure | X   |  |

One final point worth highlighting is that the ACLED data helps to highlight not just the dramatic differences in terms of the quantity of attacks, but also the difference in quality or type of armed conflict events. The above table is derived from ACLED methodology, but modified to this specific case. An “x” indicates that the actor has been documented as engaging in a specific type of armed conflict event.



## Turkey Expands Occupation, more Christian and Yezidi villages fall under Turkish Control

Tel Tamer is a Christian region of northern Syria, home to some 35 Assyrian villages on both sides of the Khabur River. It was partially overrun by Islamic State militants in 2015. After being liberated from ISIS, the region of Tel Tamer has been protected by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). The SDF leadership is still dominated by Kurds, but in line with its ideology of democratic confederalism and self-defense, has been working to devolve responsibility to local people to protect their own areas. This means that Arabs would assume responsibility for defending Arab-majority regions, Christians assume responsibility for areas inhabited by the Christian minority, and so forth. For this reason, the region of Tel Tamer is defended by four separate units led by Syriac-Assyrians or Armenians: the Syriac Military Council (MFS), Bethnahrin Women's Protection Forces (HSNB), Khabur Guards and the Martyr Nubar Ozanyan Brigade. The Syriac Military Council is known by its acronym in Aramaic *Mawtbo Fulhoyo Suryoyo* (MFS) and coordinates among the four units. While the leadership are primarily Syriac and Assyrian Christians, their rank-and-file members also include Arabs and Kurds. The MFS has worked closely with the YPG since 2013, and has been an integral component of the SDF from the beginning.

As a result of OPS, the region of Tel Tamer is now on the frontlines of the area occupied by Turkey and Turkish-backed proxies. The Turkish attacks on Tel Tamer began on October 12, 2019, just days after the intervention was launched. On October 17, Turkish officials signed the U.S.-brokered ceasefire agreement in which they agreed

to respect human rights and were especially "committed to the [protection](#) of religious and ethnic communities." However, in an earlier analysis of ACLED data, I found that Turkey was implicated in more than [800 violations](#) of the U.S.-brokered ceasefire agreement in the first year after it was signed, and had targeted the region of Tel Tamer *every single month* between October 2019 and September 2020.

The Turkish attacks on Tel Tamer further highlight the hollowness of Erdoğan's claims that the Turkish interventions are only intended to target Kurds in the SDF/YPG, which Turkish officials see as identical to the PKK. Tel Tamer is home to Assyrians, a tiny Christian minority that survived ISIS atrocities. In no conceivable way do they represent a threat to Turkey, and yet the Turkish military and Turkish-backed forces target them on a regular basis. Until now, seven members of the Syriac Military Council (MFS) have been killed in clashes with the Turkish military and Turkish-backed proxies since Peace Spring.

## Illegal Transfers of Arab, Christian, and Kurdish SDF Members from Syria to Turkey

Human Rights Watch has documented at least 63 cases of Syrian nationals who have been arrested in Syria and transferred illegally across the border and imprisoned in Turkey, although the actual number may be closer to 200. At least three of these cases are members of the Syriac Military Council who were captured by Turkish-backed SNA factions while fighting to defend the region of Tel Tamer: Jamil Gerges, a Syriac Christian, and Muhassan Al Okla and Emad Al Saud, who are both



Sunni Arabs. After being captured by SNA militias, they were taken to the border, where they were handed over to the Turkish military and put on trial in Şanlıurfa in southern Turkey. I spoke to their defense attorney in Turkey by phone, who told me that the three men were severely beaten/tortured in Syria by the SNA militias who captured them, then suffered mistreatment again in Turkey while in detention. They were reportedly interrogated without a lawyer, and given Turkish documents to sign, without a written Arabic translation, although none of them speak Turkish. “They had no idea what they were signing. They were already torturing them, then forced to sign documents in Turkish which they did not understand,” their lawyer said.<sup>29</sup>

Although Gerges, Al Okla, and Al Saud are all Syrian citizens who were defending Syrian territory as part of the Syriac Military Council, they were accused of membership in an armed terrorist organization, and of “disrupting the unity of the state and the unity of the country” (Turkey). This latter charge was dropped due to lack of evidence, which is why the three men received a lesser sentence of 7.5 years in prison in Turkey. According to their lawyer, the General Prosecutor wants to appeal the case, which may result in a harsher sentence, possibly life in prison.

Indeed, most of the approximately sixty Syrian nationals who have been tried in Turkey for “disrupting the unity of the state and unity of the country” received life sentences, including Cicek Kobane, who is a member of the Women’s Protection Units (YPJ). Ms Kobane was born in Raqqa in 1994. She fled with her family as refugees to Turkey after the outbreak of the war in 2013, then later returned to Syria and joined the YPJ in 2015. After she was captured by the SNA militias during the Peace Spring intervention, militants posted a

video of her to Telegram, where some of the men can be heard calling her a “pig” that would be taken to slaughter.<sup>30</sup> According to Hidayet Enmek, Kobane’s lawyer, she played a humanitarian role within the YPJ and was not armed when she was captured by the SNA factions.

As these cases make clear, Syrian citizens in the SDF of all religious and ethnic backgrounds – Arabs, Kurds, Christians – who were defending their country from the Turkish intervention have been tried in Turkish courts as if they were PKK terrorists. Under Erdoğan, the Turkish judiciary has been transformed into a political weapon, with 36,066 people being investigated in Turkey for “insulting” the president in 2019 alone.<sup>31</sup>

The larger issue of how the AKP has weaponized the Turkish judiciary is outside the scope of this report, and just one of many challenges in the U.S.-Turkish relationship. However, the practice of arresting SDF members and transferring them illegally to Turkey could be prevented by simply renegotiating the terms of the ceasefire agreement. Comparative research has shown that even failed ceasefire agreements can lead eventually to peace, if they are used as a stepping stone to build confidence and the agreements are renegotiated.<sup>32</sup>

Over 10,000 young men and women in the SDF died fighting against the Islamic State. Now the SDF members risk being illegally transferred to Turkey and sentenced to prison. The United States has both a moral obligation and strategic interest to speak out against this travesty of justice. If these court cases are left unchallenged, they may be used to establish a legal precedent justifying the de facto annexation of Syrian territory to Turkey.



Figure 10.



Jamil Gerges, Muhassan Al Okla and Emad Al Saud. Three members of the Syriac Military Council, captured by Turkish backed Syrian National Army, turned over to the Turkish military and tried and sentenced in Turkish court.

Figure 11.

|                           |   |
|---------------------------|---|
| <b>SUÇ</b>                | : Devletin Birliğini ve Ülke Bütünlüğü Bozma, Silahlı Terör Örgütüne Üye Olma, Kasten Öldürme |
| <b>SUÇ TARİHİ VE YERİ</b> | : 13/10/2019 - <u>ŞANLIURFA</u>   |
| <b>GÖZALTI TARİHİ</b>     | : 13/11/2019 - 18/11/2019   |
| <b>TUTUKLAMA TARİHİ</b>   | : 18/11/2019  |
| <b>KARAR TARİHİ</b>       | : 11/12/2020  |

Yukarıda açık kimliği yazılı sanıklar hakkında mahkememizde yapılan duruşma sonunda:

**GEREĞİ DÜŞÜNÜLDÜ:**

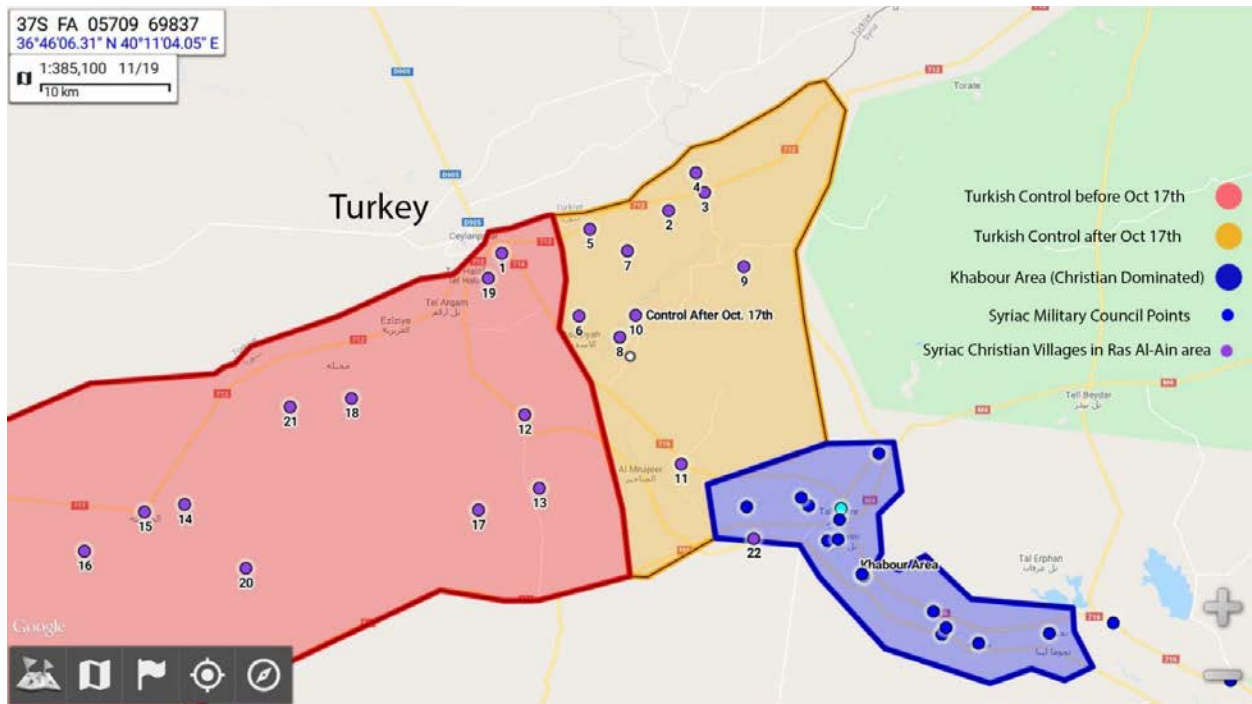
**1-İDDİA:**

-İddianame özeti: Şanlıurfa Cumhuriyet Başsavcılığının 2020/3736 esas ve 24/03/2020 tarihli iddianamesi ile sanıklar hakkında Silahlı Terör Örgütüne Üye Olma, Kasten Öldürme, Devletin Birliğini ve Ülke Bütünlüğü Bozma suçlaması ile Türk Ceza Kanunu 302/1, 53, 58/9, 63, 3713 Sayılı Kanunun 5/1 maddeleri. b) Türk Ceza Kanunu 81/1, 35/2, 53, 58/9, 63, 3713 Sayılı Kanunun 5/1 maddeleri. c) Türk Ceza Kanunu 314/2, 53,58/9, 63, 3713 Sayılı Kanunun 5/1.maddeleri uyarınca cezalandırılması talebiyle mahkememize kamu davası açılmıştır.

-İddia makamı esas hakkında mütalaasında: Barış Pınarı Harekatı kapsamında 13/11/2019 günü Resulayn Bölgesinde sanıkların etraflarının çevrildiği, sanıkların silahlarını atarak teslim oldukları, sanık Muhasin'in "Cemil Fırat" kod adını kullandığı, sanık Cemil'in alınan savunmasında; YPG'ye katıldığını, silahlı ideolojik eğitim aldığını, uygulama noktasında

Turkish court document showing that location of the crime "Suç Tarihi ve Yeri" was allegedly in Şanlıurfa, Turkey although the description of the event itself is then in Resulayn, (Ras al-Ayn), Syria. The defendants are Syrian citizens who were captured while defending the region of northern Syria during the Turkish Peace Spring intervention. They were accused of attempting to destroy the unity of the country (Turkey), attempted murder, and being a member of a terrorist organization. The first two charges were dropped for lack of evidence.

**Figure 12. Map Showing Expansion of Turkish Territorial Control – In Violation of October 17 ceasefire agreement with the United States**



|    |               |    |            |    |                 |
|----|---------------|----|------------|----|-----------------|
| 1  | Ras Al-Ain    | 2  | Tal Baidar | 3  | Mrekis          |
| 4  | Jan Tamer     | 5  | A'louk     | 6  | Bir Nouh        |
| 7  | Kherbet Hamid | 8  | Hakamyie   | 9  | Bab Al-Kher     |
| 10 | Tal Jamous    | 11 | Salehyie   | 12 | Shlah           |
| 13 | Bagdo         | 14 | Sarli      | 15 | Mabrouka        |
| 16 | Abu Jloud     | 17 | Disho      | 18 | Alyiah          |
| 19 | Asfar Najar   | 20 | Twemyie    | 21 | Salehyie Gharbi |
| 22 | Salmasa       |    |            |    |                 |

Ras Al-Ain area contains 45 villages that are populated with Syrian Christians , or are jointly populated by Syrian Christians and other ethnic groups. Not all shown in the map above.

## Threats perceived and real

Turkish officials equate the SDF/YPG in Syria with the PKK in Turkey and Iraq, citing the fact that the SDF grew out of the Kurdish YPG and is headed by General Mazloum, a former PKK cadre. However, for years now the SDF has been an *Arab-majority force* of Syrian citizens, including important units of Syriac and Assyrian Christians, while the PKK, with very few exceptions, is almost exclusively Kurdish.<sup>33</sup> The ACLED data I've analyzed here further highlight major discrepancies in terms of cross-border operations. While the PKK has historically used their bases in northern Iraq to launch attacks against Turkey, ACLED data shows that the SDF/YPG in northern Syria behaved very differently. With the exception of the drone incidents discussed previously that could not be independently verified, it was not until after the Peace Spring intervention in 2019 that the SDF/YPG launched counter attacks.

The ACLED data illustrates the profoundly asymmetrical nature of the conflict along the Syrian-Turkish border: with 3,319 attacks from the Turkish side, compared to at most 22, but possibly no more than 12 from the Syrian side. This data confirms the assessments of two senior U.S. officials, Ambassador Roebuck and NSC coordinator for the Middle East and North Africa Brett McGurk, who are deeply familiar with the situation on the ground.

If the SDF does not pose a serious security threat to Turkey, an alternative explanation must be considered to explain the large-scale Turkish interventions in Syria. One possibility is that the prospect of even limited Kurdish autonomy in the semi-autonomous region of northern Syria is politically threatening to the current Turkish

government and the AKP-MHP alliance, which is in line with their practice of imprisoning elected Kurdish officials inside Turkey and replacing them with government "trustees."

## On the need for coordinating U.S. Policy to Syria, Turkey, and Iraq in a Special Office

As the Biden Administration is reevaluating U.S. policy to the region, it would be expedient to address the issue of Turkey-Syria-Iraq-Kurds in a coordinated fashion, either in a special envoy office, or another department that would focus specifically on the intersection of these issues. The only way to make progress in resolving the multiple dimensions of the conflict is through a *coordinated approach*. There are many reasons for this, including but not limited to the following:

- Turkey is carrying out military and security operations in southeastern Turkey, northern Syria, and northern Iraq, which it views as a single battlespace, while the United States lacks a coherent response. Because Erdoğan has faced virtually no repercussions for replacing democratically-elected Kurdish politicians inside Turkey, he seems to believe he can replace the entire Kurdish-led Autonomous Administration that governs approximately one-third of Syria. The human costs are even greater in Syria.
- Civilians of *all* ethnic and religious groups are impacted by these operations. *It is no longer a Turkish-Kurdish or Turkish-PKK conflict. U.S. policy will fail unless we reframe our approach to the conflict. The survival of endangered*



*minorities in northern Syria and northern Iraq, in particular Yazidis and Christians, depends on a peaceful resolution of the conflict.*

- During its military operations inside Syria, the Turkish military or their proxies have captured Syrian citizens who were defending Syrian territory in line with the U.S.-brokered ceasefire, and illegally tried and sentenced them in Turkish courts. Although they are Syrian citizens defending Syrian territory, they are accused of membership in an armed terrorist organization, setting a dangerous legal precedent potentially *justifying the de facto annexation of Syrian territory to Turkey.*
- The success of the ongoing Kurdish unity talks in Syria may depend on the willingness to compromise and the acquiescence of actors in Iraq and Turkey.

## Recommendations

- **The Biden Administration should take the opportunity to lead the international community in genocide response in Syria and Iraq and build off the momentum of the recent visit by Pope Francis to Iraq.** This should include a focus on *both past atrocities* committed by the Islamic State, as well as *ongoing persecution* of religious and ethnic minorities – regardless of who the perpetrators are, as required by the 2018 Elie Wiesel Genocide and Atrocities Prevention Act.
- In line with the 2019 Global Fragility Act (GFA), which calls for a whole-of-government approach to address the root causes of violence that have resulted in mass displacement globally, **the Biden Administration should prioritize the protection of civilians in Syria.**
- **Every effort should be made to prevent another Turkish intervention in Syria.**
- In his statement recognizing the Armenian Genocide, Biden pledged that “We do this not to cast blame but to ensure that what happened is never repeated.” It is unconscionable to allow Turkey to occupy the second deadliest site of the Armenian genocide in Syria (Ras al-Ayn / Serêkaniyê) as a result of Operation Peace Spring in October 2019, which forced the remaining Armenians to flee. **The Biden Administration can push for Turkey and their extremist TFSA factions to withdraw and allow civilians to return and receive justice for crimes committed against them.**
- **Civilians who fled from Afrin, Tel Abyad, Ras al-Ayn / Serêkaniyê and other areas as a result of the previous Turkish interventions in Syria should be allowed to return home safely and regain lost property, or to obtain just compensation.** Some civilians, in particular religious and ethnic minorities (Yezidis, Kurds, Armenians, Assyrians and Syriac Christians), will not feel that it is safe to return to their homes until Turkey and extremist TFSA factions have withdrawn.
- Factions within the TFSA that have engaged in executions, kidnappings, forced religious conversion, forced marriage, **and other human rights abuses need to be sanctioned and held accountable.**



- **Ensure that Turkey uphold its obligations according to the Fourth Geneva Convention.** This should include releasing SDF members who are unjustly detained in Turkish prisons, and stop arresting Syrian citizens in Syria and transferring them illegally to Turkey.
- **Renegotiate the U.S.-Turkish ceasefire agreement from October 17, 2019**, so that it will do justice to the legitimate security concerns on both sides.
  - ▶ Include the SDF in renegotiating the ceasefire agreement. Excluding one party to the conflict from the negotiations is a recipe for failure.
  - ▶ Specify exact geographic coordinates on the map so that potential violations of the ceasefire could be adjudicated.
  - ▶ Appoint a third party to adjudicate ceasefire violations.
  - ▶ Push for Turkey and TFSA factions to relinquish territory they acquired after the October 17 ceasefire agreement.
  - ▶ Enforce sanctions for any ceasefire violations, as stipulated in Executive Order 13894.
- **Find an alternative arrangement for border security between Syria and Turkey which is acceptable to both sides.** Consider a model similar to the Multinational Force and Observers (MFO) that has successfully guarded the border between Egypt and Israel since 1981, in which a dozen different countries contribute troops who rotate in and out of the Sinai.
- During the 1990s, Congress passed H. Con. Res. 136 that advocated for a U.S. role in bringing about an end to hostilities between Turkey and the PKK and a return to peace negotiations. Notable sponsors included Rep. Christopher Smith (R-NJ), Steny Hoyer (D-MD), Nancy Pelosi (D-CA), Benjamin Cardin (D-MD), John Lewis (D-GA), and Eliot Engel (D-NY). The Turkey-PKK conflict has now metastasized into one that impacts every religious and ethnic group across northern Syria and Iraq, and America's Arab-majority partner force that we relied on to defeat ISIS: the SDF. The conflict impedes core U.S. national security interests to ensure an enduring defeat of ISIS and bring about a peaceful resolution to the Syrian conflict. **Congress should again act to address this important dispute which is needed now more than ever before.**
- U.S. mediation helped bring about a peaceful resolution to numerous armed conflicts in different regions of the world: the Camp David Accords between Egypt and Israel, the Good Friday Agreement in Northern Ireland, the Dayton Accords between Bosnia-Herzegovina, and the peace deal between Columbia and the FARC. **The U.S. should bring the same effort to bear on the Turkish-Kurdish-Syrian-Iraqi conflict and designate an envoy.** A peaceful resolution to the conflict is in the national security interests of the United States and every party to the conflict. The survival of religious and ethnic minorities in their ancestral homelands depends on it.

*The views in this Occasional Paper are those of the author, and do not reflect the position of the Wilson Center or the Middle East Program.*



## Appendix A

### Acronyms

AANES: Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria

ACLED: Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project

AKP: Justice and Development Party

ECHR: European Court of Human Rights

FARC: The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia

GFA: Global Fragility Act

HSNB: Bethnahrin Women's Protection Forces [part of SDF]

HDP: People's Democratic Party

IDP: Internally Displaced Person

ISIS: Islamic State of Iraq and Syria

KRI: Kurdistan Region of Iraq

MFO: Multinational Force and Observers

MFS: Syriac Military Council [part of SDF]

OPS: Operation Peace Spring

PKK: Kurdistan Workers' Party

SDF: Syrian Democratic Forces

SNA/TFSA: Turkish-backed Syrian National Army and Turkish-backed Free Syrian Army

YPG/YPJ: People's Protection Units and Women's Protection Units [part of SDF]

## Appendix B

### Factions within the Turkish-backed Free Syrian Army / Syrian National Army

[Only those mentioned in this report are listed, not a definite list]

Ahrar al-Sharqiya

Ahrar al-Sham

Hamza Division

Jaysh al-Islam

Sultan Murad

### Factions within the Syrian Democratic Forces

[Only those mentioned in this report are listed, not a definite list]

HSNB: Bethnahrin Women's Protection

Khabur Guards

Martyr Nubar Ozanyan Brigade

MFS: Syriac Military Council

YPG/YPJ: People's Protection Units and Women's Protection Units



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