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TURKEY'S INVASION OF SYRIA WAS PREDICTABLE

A VIOLENT PRELUDE TO MAKING A MAJOR DEAL TO END THE SYRIAN WAR

The increasing violence and new balance of relative power between key players may in fact signal a prelude to a major deal, ending the conflict that quickly escalated to the regional level.

Turkey's invasion of Kurdish-led northeast Syria has been long in the making. For several years, the Turkish leadership has repeatedly vowed to wipe out the de facto autonomous regions run by the PKK-linked Kurdish PYD (*Partiya Yekitiya Demokrat*). This group, with its extension known as the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which also includes Arabs and Armenians for instance, has been a staunch US partner in the fight against the Islamic State (Daesh).

Turkey also has plans to settle a large number of mainly Arab Syrian refugees, who are currently in Turkey, in the predominantly Kurdish northeast. However, after the talks

between Presidents Vladimir Putin and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan on 22 October, it has been confirmed that Russia, which acts as a major deterrent against Turkey's invasion, will not accept any long-term Turkish occupation of Syrian territories, or the kind of massive population transfers planned by Turkey.

The reason why US officials decided to arm and support PKK-linked SDF forces was Turkey's explicit refusal to prioritize the fight against Daesh. For Turkey, the PYD-run Kurdish enclave was always a much bigger problem. In the current situation, several problematic alliances formed during the Syrian conflict have begun to unravel.

Turkey mainly uses its Syrian Sunni Islamist proxies loosely brought together under the rubric of the Turkish Free Syrian Army (TFSA). These forces consist of a large number of different factions involved in the Sunni insurgency against the Syrian government. Some of these groups are hard-core Salafi-Jihad, either directly or ideologically attached to Al Qaeda, such as Ahrar al-Sham and Jaysh al-Islam. In addition, 21 of the militias listed by Turkey as part of the attacking force are Free Syrian Army factions, once armed by either the CIA or the Pentagon. As the SDF is also a US-sponsored force, the current situation brings to the

surface the problematic American Syria policy, where two of its main proxies are now fighting against each other.

Turkey's attack was more or less inevitable. However, the way in which it was allowed to take place with the sudden and badly prepared US withdrawal could have been avoided. For instance, the US, instead of obstructing the Kurdish-led SDF in reaching a deal with the Syrian government, could have encouraged the SDF in this endeavour much earlier in order for it to be better prepared militarily for the Turkish invasion.

After several days of intense fighting, the US and Turkey reached an initial ceasefire agreement which in practice consolidates, for now, the Turkish occupation of two main city centres, Tel Abyad and Ras al-Ain. Rather than a key decision in terms of future developments, this deal was much more about trying to heal the strained US-Turkey relationship.

Turkey is unlikely to remain in Syria in the longer time span, although it has already created its own state structures in the Afrin region. The country's leadership, including President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, have already made it clear that they do not oppose Syrian government forces taking over

the governance of the now autonomous Kurdish-led regions in the upcoming arrangements. In this respect, Russia is likely to act as a mediator through a transitional period, after which Turkey will accept direct negotiations with the Syrian government, duly acknowledging it as a legitimate actor, in order to re-establish the so-called Adana agreement of 1998. According to the latter, the Syrian government is responsible for not allowing any PKK presence in Syria.

Re-establishing this agreement, however, would also require Turkey to finally bring an end to its arming of Syrian Sunni rebels, both 'mainstream' and Salafi-jihad, who now occupy the Syrian Idlib province. The time starts to be ripe for this, as the Arab League is in the process of normalizing ties with Syria, and condemns Turkey's invasion. Turkey now remains the only actor arming the Syrian rebels.

All the latest developments can consequently be interpreted as a violent prelude to a major settlement of the Syrian conflict by Russia, Turkey and the Syrian government. At some point, Turkey needs an honourable exit from Syria. This will be facilitated by disarming the PKK-linked Kurdish-led forces and re-establishing Syrian government authority throughout these regions.

At the same time, Russia is likely to put considerable pressure on Turkey to make significant concessions regarding Idlib, and this is likely to succeed eventually. Some of the rebels in Idlib will presumably accept a deal with the Syrian government, but the international Salafi-jihad factions are likely to either escape or die fighting.

The settlement for peace can end the regionalized war and should be encouraged in this respect by the international community. However, it will not heal the immense wounds suffered domestically in Syria, and nor will it include a recipe for a political solution to the Kurdish question in Syria or Turkey.