

A NEW GAZA: TURKEY'S BORDER POLICY IN NORTHERN SYRIA

Asli Aydintaşbaş

May 2020

SUMMARY

- Turkey now controls a long stretch of Syrian territory along its southern border that hosts nearly four million people, most of them Sunni Arabs.
- The challenges for Turkey there include a difficult balancing act with Russia, the huge financial costs of direct rule, the presence of radical Islamist factions, and the lack of a modus vivendi with the Kurds.
- Turkey faces the risk of the “Gazafication” of the area – the emergence of a militarily controlled territory that is perennially poverty-stricken and unstable.
- EU member states can find ways to cooperate with Turkey to support stabilisation in parts of the safe zone, without violating their interests and core principles.
- They should single out the Euphrates Shield Zone for stabilisation work, on the understanding that other areas captured from the Kurds are politically sensitive for European governments and voters alike.
- Europe should aim to strike a grand bargain with Turkey: in return for targeted European reconstruction aid to the safe zone, the country would lift its veto on stabilisation in Kurdish-controlled areas, allow trade between these zones, or agree to Kurdish participation in the UN-led political process on Syria.

Introduction

For decades, Turkish leaders pledged that their country would never pursue any sort of territorial expansion – presiding as they did over a modern nation-state built upon the ashes of a vast empire. They considered Turkey’s borders to be sacrosanct. But, now, the country controls a stretch of Syria along its southern border that effectively expands Turkish rule. This sudden experiment in social engineering beyond Turkey’s borders reflects a quiet revolution in Turkish foreign policy. And it presents major challenges that, ultimately, may affect Turkey’s ability to control this area or pursue its broader goals in Syria.

Today, the most significant part of Turkey’s Syria policy is its creation of this “safe zone” in northern Syria overseen by friendly administrations. The residents of the area – most of them Sunni Arabs – are dependent on Turkish political, economic, and logistical support. Ankara’s overarching goal in this 30km-deep zone is to ensure that it remains outside the control of the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and semi-autonomous from the regime in Damascus. Turkish leaders also hope to persuade Syrian refugees in Turkey to move to the area – though they have had little success with this so far. Ankara regards its military footprint in Syria as key to protecting Turkey’s long-term territorial integrity and to having a say in the fate of Syria.

The area is not contiguous but a patchwork of administrations that Turkey carved out in successive military incursions between 2016 and 2020. The safe zone comprises areas under direct Turkish rule – Tel Abyad, Jarablus, and Afrin – and Idlib, which is under Turkey’s military protection but ruled by an autonomous administration. Ankara seems to be bracing itself to maintain a military presence in the safe zone in the long term.

Yet Turkish decision-makers will have to deal with the implications of administering a Sunni Arab-majority area in northern Syria. For instance, it is unclear whether Turkey should create a durable order there or whether the project is worth its financial cost. It remains to be seen whether Turkey can co-exist with radical Sunni opposition factions close to its border and reach a *modus vivendi* with Kurds inside and outside the safe zone. What happens in the area will

be determined not just by Turkey but also by Russia, the United States, and the Syrian regime. And there is a risk of the “Gazafication” of the safe zone – that is, the emergence of a militarily controlled territory that is perennially poverty-stricken and unstable. All these factors could create a prolonged domestic and international political headache for Ankara.

The European Union and its member states have never found it easy to understand Turkey’s aims in Syria – but they need to pay close attention to the situation. Turkey remains a key partner for Europe. Some EU member states are unwilling to support a revisionist Turkey or legitimise what they see as Turkish occupation in Syria. And many have concerns about Turkey’s hardline approach to the Kurdish issue in Syria and its displacement of Kurds in border regions. But the Turkish-European partnership in Syria does not have to involve a binary choice: there are ways for Europe to support stabilisation in parts of the Turkish-controlled safe zone without violating European interests and core principles, or attempting to legitimise a long-term Turkish presence in Syria under international law. While EU member states have a firm policy of opposition to reconstruction in Syria before a political transition, the truth is that the war in Syria is almost over – and the Assad regime has won. As Julien Barnes-Dacey recently [argued](#), European governments should adjust to this reality and pivot to a strategy to protect the social forces that are still standing in the war-torn country who are best placed to bring about a gradual transformation in Syria.

This paper examines the objectives and implications of Ankara’s creation of the safe zone. It analyses how the evolution of Turkish policy on northern Syria has shaped Ankara’s relations with Kurdish-run areas and Idlib, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan’s domestic narrative, life in the safe zone, and the prospects that Turkey will maintain a presence in the area in the long term. The paper then explores the five key challenges Turkey faces in the safe zone. Finally, it makes a set of recommendations for Europe’s approach to engaging with Turkey in northern Syria, in line with European concerns, interests, and principles.

Europe should single out the Euphrates Shield Zone (ESZ) for stabilisation work, on the understanding that other areas Turkey captured from the Kurds are politically sensitive for European governments and voters alike. Europeans will inevitably dislike the idea of tying humanitarian aid or reconstruction efforts to political

decisions. But they can, for example, throw their weight behind Turkey's demand for a new border crossing in Tel Abyad and for reconstruction there, in return for the removal of the Turkish veto on humanitarian aid to Kurdish-controlled areas or trade between Kurdish and Arab areas in northern Syria. Such deals would provide humanitarian relief and confidence-building measures to fractured Syrian communities at this late stage in the war.

No doubt, Europe will have to engage with Turkey in ways that accommodate European principles and concerns. By acting collectively, EU member states can push for a grand bargain with Turkey, whereby, in return for targeted European reconstruction and stabilisation aid in the safe zone, Turkey lifts its veto on reconstruction in Kurdish areas or allows Syrian Kurds to participate in the UN-led political process on the future of Syria. That, in itself, would remove a major obstacle to the UN process and strengthen the international push for political transition to end the conflict in Syria.

Turkish interventions to create a safe zone

Few warzones are as crowded or complex as northern Syria. Between the Astana process (involving Iran, Turkey, and Russia), the Sochi agreement (involving Turkey and Russia), and a recent Turkish-US deal on a safe zone, a web of military arrangements and governance structures now [stretches](#) across an area roughly the size of Switzerland. Turkey, the US, Russia, and Syria have deployed troops in various parts of the safe zone, as have three major non-state groups with sizeable fighting forces: the SDF; Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), an al-Qaeda affiliate formerly known as Jabhat al-Nusra; and the Turkish-backed Syrian National Army. The complex ceasefires and other arrangements between these actors have allowed for the formation of separate zones controlled by Turkey; Turkey and HTS; Russia, the SDF, and the Syrian regime; and the US and the SDF.

In northern Syria, east of the Euphrates, this seemingly precarious set of arrangements has created more buffers than existed in the status quo ante. This has [resulted](#) in an unexpected calm since Turkey's October 2019 incursion into Syria, Operation Peace Spring. Turkey had long [labelled](#) the US-backed Kurdish-administered area along its borders as a "terrorism corridor" and an "existential threat"^[1] – due to the overlap between the SDF leadership and Kurdistan Workers'

Party (PKK) cadres. (The statement that followed a Turkish National Security Council meeting in January 2018 read: “we are not going to allow a terrorism corridor and the formation of a terrorism army on Turkey’s border, and will take the necessary precautions.”) By gaining control of a 120km-wide stretch of the 440km-wide Kurdish-held area, Ankara seems to have [addressed](#) both its fears of Kurdish independence – for now – and the biggest irritant in the Turkish-US relationship.

Turkey conducted its first military intervention in Syria in 2016 to capture the town of Jarablus from the Islamic State group (ISIS), and to pre-empt an offensive to seize the town planned by the SDF and the People’s Protection Units (YPG) – which would have established a contiguous Kurdish territory on Turkey’s border and, theoretically, a launch pad for attacks on the country. Since then, the Turkish military has intervened in northern Syria four times: to push ISIS out of the area between Jarablus and Al Bab in Operation Euphrates Shield in 2016; to [capture](#) YPG-controlled Afrin with Operation Olive Branch in 2018; to [take over](#) Kurdish-controlled territory between Tel Abyad and Ras al-Ain (“Resulayn” in Turkish) with Operation Peace Spring in 2019; and to protect Turkish observation posts from a Syrian military offensive, and create a safe zone for displaced persons, in Idlib in 2020.

Today, Turkey directly administers three separate regions in northern Syria – the Tel Abyad-Ras al-Ain area, Afrin, and the ESZ – and is the dominant force in northern Idlib. There is also a small pocket of settlements for displaced persons in Azaz – between Afrin and the ESZ – that are controlled by the Syrian opposition but are dependent on Turkish aid. In all, these separate enclaves in northern Syria host an estimated four million people under direct Turkish guardianship, according to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA). This [includes](#) between 2.6 million and 2.8 million people in northern Idlib, 900,000 of whom [recently fled](#) to the area. (Nearly two million of these people are [crammed](#) into a 1,000-square-kilometre strip of land bordering Turkey.) Together, refugee camps in Turkey and the safe zone effectively give Ankara direct responsibility for the welfare of almost 8 million Syrians. By comparison, areas controlled by the SDF and the Syrian regime contain an estimate 2.4 million people and 13.6 million people respectively, according to the United Nations.

Evolution of Turkey's Syria policy

The evolution of Turkey's Syria policy reflects its transformation from a key US ally in the Middle East into a resurgent power in a new age of geopolitical competition. Turkey viewed the 2011 Arab uprisings as an opportunity to expand its influence in the region. Indeed, during the initial phase of the Syrian war, Ankara was euphoric about the possibility of a successful armed uprising by Sunni forces, leading to a transition in Damascus that would enhance Turkey's influence across the region. In 2012 Erdogan famously [declared](#): "Inshallah, we will go to Damascus soon to hug our brothers. That day is close. Inshallah, we will read el-Fatiha at the tomb of Salahuddin and pray at the Emevi mosque there."

As Ankara stepped up support for the opposition forces in Syria, Turkey's rulers grew frustrated with the Obama administration's reluctance to take more decisive measures to overthrow the Assad regime. Meanwhile, due to its open-door refugee policy, Turkey emerged as the epicentre of Syrian opposition activity.

The most radical shift in Turkish policy came in 2015, with the rise of Syria's Kurds – who, backed by US airpower, steamrolled through northern Syria, capturing key border towns from ISIS. Ankara's priority shifted from supporting regime change in Damascus to preventing the emergence of an autonomous Kurdish area in Syria. Until then, Turkey had been engaged in a peace process with the PKK and was in talks with the group's leadership in Imrali and Qandil, as well as with the YPG. But the peace process [broke down](#), and Kurdish forces captured Tel Abyad – creating a near-contiguous Kurdish zone on Turkey's southern flank.

As Turkey is home to a large Kurdish minority and a Kurdish-led party sympathetic to PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan's vision of Kurdish autonomy, Ankara came to view a YPG-dominated zone on the border as a threat to Turkish territorial integrity. Soon after the YPG captured Tel Abyad, *Sabah* – a newspaper with close links to the Erdogan family – [declared](#) on its front page that the Syrian Kurdish forces were "more dangerous than ISIS". This marked a major shift in Turkey's national security priorities.

Turkish relations with Kurdish-run areas

The Turkish incursions into Afrin and Tel Abyad have [displaced](#) a large number of people into SDF-controlled areas, which stretch from the Turkish border to Deir ez-Zor. Since October 2019, the US-brokered ceasefire between Turkey and Kurdish forces has broadly held. To the east and west of the Tel Abyad pocket, including the town of Kobane, Russian and Syrian regime forces have taken up positions on the frontlines between the SDF and Turkish-supported forces. However, the US no longer formally maintains a military presence in support of Kurdish forces on the Turkish border and has transferred many of its troops to SDF-run areas further south. The Kurdish-controlled area east of the Euphrates on Turkey's border is now under Russian protection, while the Assad regime has a small official presence in the town of Qamishli, alongside Kurdish forces.

Turkey has no relationship with the SDF-run areas and has shown no interest in a peace process or a thaw in relations with the Kurds. The country does not allow trade or humanitarian aid for Kurdish areas to pass through territory it controls (with the exception of limited border trade between Jarablus and Manbij). As far as Ankara is concerned, the SDF – though aligned with the US and recognised by Russia – is an extension of the PKK and, therefore, should not control any part of Syria.

Ankara regards its military incursions as having successfully prevented the emergence of a contiguous Kurdish-controlled zone on its border, but is conveniently ignoring the fact that Kurdish self-rule is firmly in place in areas to the east, west, and south of the safe zone. Erdogan has refused US President Donald Trump's [repeated offers](#) to mediate with SDF leader Mazloum Kobane and has ruled out a role for the Kurds in the constitutional process on Syria's future. Given rising nationalism in Turkey and Erdogan's alliance with the Nationalist Action Party (MHP), it is highly unlikely that Turkey will change its hardline policy on Syrian Kurds any time soon.

Idlib's importance to Turkey

Since early 2020, Turkey has focused its attention on areas west of the Euphrates, particularly Idlib. Idlib is the last opposition stronghold in Syria and an important

buffer between Turkey and the Syrian regime. Accordingly, by March 2020, Turkey had [deployed up to](#) 20,000 troops to the area – though the numbers are slightly lower today, according to Turkish sources.

The strategic importance of Idlib has grown significantly for Turkey because Ankara regards its military footprint there as a prerequisite of controlling territory in other parts of Syria. Senior Turkish officials fear a domino effect in which the regime’s capture of Idlib would ultimately bring an end to the Turkish presence in Afrin, the ESZ, and other areas.

However, it difficult for Turkey to maintain a long-term presence in Idlib due to the presence of HTS – with which it made common cause to resist the recent regime offensive. Political scientist Saban Kardas [calls](#) Turkey’s Idlib conundrum “mission impossible”, as the country is caught between Russia and HTS, and has to [administer](#) a small territory containing millions of displaced persons.

Accordingly, the epicentre of instability in areas of Syria bordering Turkey has moved from the north-east to the north-west. While intricate arrangements between Turkey, the US, and Russia have created a seemingly stable Turkish-controlled zone east of the Euphrates, Turkish border regions near Idlib are suspended in what Kardas [describes](#) as an “unstable equilibrium”.

The safe zone and Erdogan’s domestic narrative

Control of a Sunni Arab-majority zone in Syria also fits well with Erdogan’s domestic narrative, in which Turkey is the guardian of Muslims beyond its borders. The current leadership in Ankara [believes](#) that a resurgent Turkey is [destined](#) to be one of the big global players in the twenty-first century. Accordingly, Turkey’s assertive foreign policy in Syria (and Libya) is enabled by an ideological mixture of nationalism and neo-Ottomanism. The Turkish military footprint overseas is particularly appealing to followers of Erdogan’s Justice and Development Party (AKP) and its ally, the MHP. A Turkish-controlled zone in Syria is an integral part of the concept of a resurgent Turkey, showcasing both its defence capabilities and the political will to flex its muscles in the region.

Ankara also regards a dependent enclave in Syria as an instrument for broadening its relationship with other powers – both in political negotiations on the future of

the country and in a future reconstruction effort there. Europe is particularly relevant to the debate on reconstruction. The 2016 refugee deal between Turkey and the EU laid the foundations for a transactional relationship model between them, whereby the country serves as a gatekeeper and key provider for Syrian refugees in return for European financial support. Erdogan has [been open](#) about his desire to extend this arrangement into Syria, [pointing](#) in interviews and multinational venues to computer-generated graphics of new cities and towns that Turkish contractors can design and build in Syria to house one million displaced Syrians. In this, he aims to ease the domestic pressures on Turkey's refugee policy. Erdogan also views reconstruction in Syria as a potential boost to the Turkish economy, which is experiencing a downturn, and a way to solidify Turkey's foothold there. He [hopes](#) that the international community will provide the \$26.4 billion required for the megaproject.

Yet the prospects of this remain very limited. The problem with reconstruction in Syria is two-fold – involving both regime-controlled areas and the safe zone. Firstly, Europe has long been opposed to financing the reconstruction of Syria while the Assad regime remains intransigent. In areas of the country outside the regime's control, European countries are concerned about a lack of long-term security guarantees and uncertain about, or opposed to, the Turkish model. The European and Turkish visions of a safe zone are not exactly in sync. Moreover, EU member states have been unwilling to rally behind the Turkish project in Syria because of sensitivities around the Kurdish issue and doubts about Turkey's long-term motives. While humanitarian aid has continued to flow across parts of Syria, no reconstruction effort is under way there. If there were greater Turkish-European agreement on the governance model for the safe zone, Europe would have an interest in supporting stabilisation efforts there.

The question is: will Europe abandon its opposition to reconstruction now that the war is winding down but the humanitarian disaster continues? It makes sense for the international community to make a distinction between regime-controlled areas, where human rights abuses remain widespread, and areas under direct Turkish and Kurdish control – where, despite problems, including allegations of demographic changes, there is a relatively stable order and efficient governance structure. This suggests that Europe should accept the reality that these areas are likely to be under Turkish or Kurdish control for some time to come, and should

show greater flexibility in providing stabilisation and reconstruction aid to them.

Idlib is an altogether different case – partly because it is more of a legal grey zone, and partly because it is in urgent need of reconstruction. Recently, Ankara seems to have been encouraged by German Chancellor Angela Merkel’s reported pledge to contribute €25m to build temporary housing for displaced persons in Idlib, as well as an EU commitment to provide further humanitarian aid there. While Europe’s interests do not exactly align with Erdogan’s utopia of new Turkish-built towns in Syria, there are good reasons for Europe to stabilise these areas and create buffers in the country. Turkish officials rightly saw Merkel’s gesture – however modest – as signalling the possibility of a new phase in the partnership.

Life in Turkish-controlled areas of Syria

As Turkish-controlled administrative units in Syria have diverse social and political characters, Ankara’s policy on them is one of differentiated rule. Turkey’s preferred option for Idlib is to tolerate and work with an autonomous but contained zone managed by HTS – so long as the group complies with its requests. In towns under direct Turkish rule, such as Tel Abyad and Jarablus, Ankara provides all essential services and has a hand in governance, in line with its policy of ensuring that the areas are dominated by a pro-Turkey demographic group. Direct Turkish rule differs from the Russian and US militaries’ arrangements in north-eastern Syria in that Ankara has created administrative bodies enmeshed with its domestic bureaucracy and heavily invested in civic infrastructure.

In both the ESZ and Afrin, despite the presence of local councils, the real authority rests with Turkish governors appointed by Ankara. These governors coordinate humanitarian aid, reconstruction, and administration, while [relying](#) on Turkish-trained local police officers to provide security – albeit with a significant role for the opposition groups Turkey united under the banner of the Syrian National Army. Turkey pays the salaries of all local civilian and military personnel.

The population of all three Turkish-controlled areas has [soared](#) in the past year. This is largely due to the influx of displaced persons from other parts of Syria, including Idlib. Turkish officials say that, since Operation Euphrates Shield began, the population of Tel Abyad has grown to more than 100,000 people.

In all three zones, the authorities have [connected](#) local infrastructure to the Turkish electricity grid and, in the absence of banks, [opened](#) branches of the Turkish postal service to provide wire transfers and pay salaries. The areas import most of their food supplies from Turkey, delivering some of it through bakeries and stores built with Turkish aid.^[2] Turkish-backed local administrations issue identity papers and title deeds. Residents of the areas use a mixture of Turkish lira and US dollars, while the authorities now [make payments](#) to local fighters largely in the former currency. And most signs in official buildings are in Arabic and Turkish. Turkish officials emphasise that, while they have no desire to Turkify the areas, they want to create a pro-Turkey society there.

The crown jewels of Turkey's administrative project in Syria are [hospitals in Jarablus, Al-Bab, and Afrin](#). Because it sees hospitals and schools as symbols of its long-term ambitions in the areas, Ankara has invested in public health to win the hearts and minds of the local population. Staffed by Syrians and overseen by Turkish health officials, these newly built hospitals include surgery rooms, delivery rooms, and equipment such as tomography and dialysis units.

Education has been another priority for Turkish rule in Syria. In the ESZ, there are more than 30,000 students in 98 elementary schools, 12 middle schools, and several high schools, according to Turkish officials stationed there.^[3] While the Turkish incursion into Afrin led to an exodus of locals affiliated with the Kurdish self-administration, the city has recently experienced an influx of Arabs from other parts of Syria, [changing](#) the ethnic balance in the city. There are now [45,000 students](#) in Afrin's 204 schools. The curriculum is taught in Arabic and Turkish, with Turkey's Ministry of Education overseeing the education system as a whole. In October 2019, Turkey [opened](#) three colleges in Syria as part of [Gaziantep University](#) and administered by its faculty (the School of Economic and Administrative Sciences in Al-Bab, the School of Islamic Studies in Azaz, and the School of Education in Afrin).

Across the areas of Syria it controls, Turkey has [increased](#) the visibility of its Directorate of Religious Affairs, started to [pay](#) the salaries of Syrian imams, and [opened schools](#) that provide religious education. Turkey [seems](#) to regard religion as a source of social cohesion, but there [has been](#) some criticism of this policy in

Afrin from Kurdish groups and international observers. In the city centre, where some residents have a secular lifestyle, there have been [anecdotal reports](#) of women feeling pressured to cover up and be more religiously observant.

Both Tel Abyad and the ESZ are religiously conservative enclaves. During a visit to Jarablus in late 2017, the author noticed that all female residents had covered up – some in head-to-toe niqabs, as opposed to the more modern veils that religiously conservative Turkish women use. While it does not want to impose secularism on Sunnis living near its borders, Ankara needs to recognise that the emergence of an ultraconservative Arab-majority territory in northern Syria would have long-term political and social implications for nearby regions of Turkey.

Turkey's [decision](#) to unite the armed opposition groups that supported its incursions – and had been fighting for the Free Syrian Army – under the banner of the Syrian National Army has also had important implications. As it [provides](#) training, salaries, and weapons to the Syrian National Army, Ankara has significant influence over these groups – but also owns their failings.

The groups [came under](#) international criticism during Operation Peace Spring, particularly after footage emerged of some of their fighters [summarily executing](#) Kurdish politician Hevrin Khalaf. The US and EU officials the author interviewed for this paper said that they expressed concerns about several of the groups in meetings with their Turkish counterparts, underlining that this was “damaging to Turkey’s reputation”. One US official noted that senior Turkish military officers were aware of the problem.

Answering queries in the Turkish Parliament in November 2019, Defence Minister Hulusi Akar [addressed](#) the issue of war crimes in Syria, stating: “if there are allegations about the Syrian National Army or the Turkish armed forces, we carry out a full administrative and legal investigation. We have done so far about these allegations what any modern military would do – and we are ready to continue to do that.” Akar has also said that Turkey established two military tribunals in Tel Abyad and Ras al-Ain (Resulayn) to investigate allegations of war crimes – and that their work continues. But there is little publicly available information about these proceedings.

Meanwhile, Idlib has an altogether different governance structure. Since it [drove out](#)

other opposition groups in 2017, HTS has been the dominant force there. Administrative services are [provided](#) by the civilian arm of HTS, the Salvation Government. The group, which is widely believed to have tens of thousands of fighters, [controls](#) the Bab al-Hawa crossing with Turkey, levying taxes on goods and vehicles. Since the beginning of the Astana process, HTS and Turkey have developed a mutually accommodating relationship, with the group allowing humanitarian supplies to enter the area under its control and steering clear of the Turkish military's observation posts, which are designed to monitor the ceasefire.

Turkey's long-term plans for north-eastern Syria

There is fundamental uncertainty about Turkey's long-term agenda in maintaining control of a Sunni Arab-majority zone in north-eastern Syria, presenting a major challenge for Turkish and European policymakers. For several years, there has been a public debate in Turkey about the longevity of Turkish engagement with Syria. Within the bureaucracy, there are two schools of thought on Turkish stabilisation activities in Syria. While some officials see the administration of a safe zone in Syria as a burden and advocate limited investment in it until the inevitable handover to Damascus, they have been overruled by those who argue that Turkey will be in the region for the long haul – and that the ESZ (and even Afrin) may never be fully reintegrated with Syria as part of a unitary state.

Erdogan is likely sympathetic to this second view, as he has [publicly advocated](#) the construction of new cities in the safe zone and, at heart, he is a neo-Ottomanist who believes that Turkey is destined to be a regional hegemon. “We are about to enter Afrin”, Erdogan [said](#) in March 2018. “We can give the good news any minute. The conquest is near, the good news is here.” Conquest, a throwback to the military expeditions of the Ottoman era, has been a recurrent theme in Turkey’s pro-government media during all three major Turkish incursions. And, prior to each incursion, mosques across the country [have read](#) the “Conquest” surah from the Koran, as instructed by the Turkish Directorate of Religious Affairs. One Turkish official in the border regions noted: “this is our first experiment in establishing an order in the Middle East in over a hundred years,” referring to Ottoman withdrawal from the region during the first world war. Two Western diplomats who deal with Turkey told the author that it was hard to imagine the country giving up control of the safe zone.

In meetings in Ankara, Turkish officials denied that Turkey planned to maintain a presence in north-eastern Syria in the long term, but emphasised that it had been almost a decade since the Syrian regime controlled areas such as Jarablus, Idlib, and Afrin. They favoured a semi-autonomous governance model for the area in the run-up to a political transition in Syria under UN Resolution 2254. This is ironic because, while Ankara characterises Kurdish autonomy in Syria as a source of instability, it would like to preserve Arab-majority autonomous zones in the north-east.

Given Erdogan’s coalition with ultra-nationalists at home, it is hard to imagine that Ankara will soon return to a peace process with the Kurds or pursue reconciliation with Damascus. The two issues are almost interlinked. Hypothetically, a post-Erdogan Turkey might have less interest in maintaining the safe zone, especially given that support for reconciliation with the Assad regime is growing within the Turkish opposition. But, in the absence of a return to a broad political settlement with the Kurds, Ankara will want to retain a Sunni Arab-majority buffer zone on its border.

The five challenges ahead for Turkey

The safe zone creates at least five challenges for Turkey’s long-term position in

Syria. The most pressing of these challenges are as follows.

A difficult balancing act in relations with Russia

The inherent tension between the Turkish and Russian projects in Syria is the most significant long-term challenge for Turkey in the safe zone. So far, despite their divergent interests, Turkey and Russia have had a symbiotic relationship – a co-dependency that is little understood in the West. The failed coup attempt of 2016 soured Turkey’s relations with its Western partners and created new incentives for it to cooperate with Russia. Sharing a disdain for the Western-led global order, the two countries have coordinated their policies on Syria since 2016. Economically, Turkey has grown more dependent on Russia in the past few years, due to its reliance on Russian gas and tourism revenues. Erdogan’s government has also collaborated with Moscow on several critical infrastructure projects, including the TurkStream pipeline, which provides Russian gas to Turkey, and a consortium to build Turkey’s first nuclear reactor.

But the greatest co-dependency between the two has been in Syria. From Ankara’s perspective, given that the US works with Syrian Kurds, Russia held the key to unlocking the grand Turkish project there. Both Erdogan and his Russian counterpart, Vladimir Putin, hoped that the US would reduce its military footprint in Syria (for different reasons). And it was with Russia’s blessing – reflected in its decision to open Syrian airspace – that Turkey launched successive cross-border operations into Syria. In 2017 Turkey purchased the Russian-made S-400 missile system and joined Russia and Iran in the Astana process, which is designed to create a new order and spheres of influence in Syria. In 2018 the countries [agreed](#) that Turkey would [establish 12 military outposts](#) in Syria to monitor a ceasefire between the regime and the rebels in Idlib.

Yet Ankara and Moscow never saw eye to eye on the endgame in Syria. While it accommodated Ankara’s ambitions for a safe zone in northern Syria, Moscow was clear about its desire to eventually restore the Syrian regime’s control of the entire country. Accordingly, Russia used every opportunity to [bring up](#) the 1998 Turkish-Syrian Adana Agreement – which allows for the hot pursuit of “terrorists” – with the aim of easing Turkey’s concerns about the Kurdish presence on its borders.

The most significant point of divergence between Ankara and Moscow concerns

the nature of the Syrian opposition. Ankara actively supports Syria's Sunni-led opposition and saw a key role for it in the country's future but, for Moscow, political legitimacy rests solely with the Assad regime. In Idlib, Turkey's willingness to build a pragmatic and lenient relationship with armed groups such as HTS and Free Syrian Army factions was anathema to Russia's overall policy in Syria. Ankara's policy of accommodating and containing HTS – as opposed to demobilising the group – has been a spoiler in its relations with Russia. Turkey makes a distinction between radical Islamist groups; Russia does not.

This has turned Idlib into a greater source of friction in the Turkish-Russian relationship than any other part of Syria. “The incompatible positions of different stakeholders in Idlib set in motion a repetitive pattern, rendering any deal inherently unstable,” [argues](#) Kardas. In contrast to Ankara, Moscow regards HTS as being – like its previous incarnation, Jabhat al-Nusra – a threat to Syria's territorial integrity and a terrorist group that it must eliminate.

The nature of the military escalation that occurred in Idlib in February 2020 provides a good example of the dilemmas Turkey faces in dealing with Russia. Moscow demanded early on in the Astana talks that Turkey secure the M4 and M5 highways (linking Latakia and Aleppo, and Damascus and Aleppo, respectively), which are crucial to the regime's survival in Aleppo and to the Russian military presence in Latakia. As one Western diplomat noted: “Russians were always clear about what they wanted in Idlib – they never lied to Turks”. Russian officials [periodically complained](#) that Ankara is not doing enough to curb attacks by HTS and other radical groups in Idlib. Since 2018, the Syrian regime, backed by Russian airpower, has incrementally increased its territorial hold in the area, culminating in a major offensive in December 2019. Turkey responded to that offensive by deploying thousands of troops in what became [the first direct confrontation](#) between the Turkish and Syrian militaries.

Despite Turkey's military superiority, the Syrian army – backed by Russian airpower and Iranian militias – captured half of Idlib and forced nearly one million Syrians to flee towards the Turkish border. With heavy casualties on both sides, the confrontation ended with the 4 March [ceasefire agreement](#) in Moscow between Erdogan and Putin. Both leaders were keen to avoid a direct Turkish-Russian confrontation. Turkey conceded control of the southern part of Idlib and

the strategically important town of Saraqib to the Syrian regime, agreeing to joint patrols with Russia along the M4 highway, roughly 30km south of the Turkish border. Ankara saw these terms as less than ideal but, ultimately, acceptable.

Turkish officials know that the Moscow-brokered ceasefire may be more of a quick fix than a lasting solution to the Idlib conundrum.^[4] Erdogan's spokesman, Ibrahim Kalin, recently [said](#): "we are happy that this ceasefire agreement is holding but obviously it is a temporary measure. It's not going to solve local problems in Syria." Ankara's dilemma is that it has invested too heavily in the relationship with Russia – both politically and economically – to untangle itself now. Such a scenario would not only have huge economic costs but also prompt millions of refugees to flee from Idlib to the Turkish border and, perhaps, into Turkey itself.

While the Turkish intervention in Idlib has [prevented](#) the nightmare scenario of a new refugee influx into Turkey, almost three million Syrians are now trapped in the small area between the M4 and the Turkish border – a fact that makes northern Idlib Ankara's problem. Turkey wants to maintain current territorial divisions in Syria until there is a final settlement of the conflict. However, there is no indication that the Syrian regime is willing to give up on its desire for full territorial control and cede the northern half of the governorate to HTS, or to Turkey. Indeed, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad has [vowed](#) to recapture Idlib. While it seems unlikely to conduct another major offensive at the height of the covid-19 pandemic, Damascus will probably push to take the M4 or Idlib city at some point.

Such an offensive would be another test of the Turkish-Russian relationship. And, in the absence of a real offer of help from the West, Ankara's options in Idlib are limited. The February showdown has already demonstrated that, in the shadow-boxing between Ankara and Moscow, the Russians have the upper hand.

Western observers who saw Idlib as a major turning point in Turkey's foreign policy and a chance for a pivot to the West have been disappointed. Ankara may have been frustrated with the Russian position but, in the absence of strong backing from NATO allies, Erdogan had to accept a deal with Putin in Moscow. Turkey and Russia seemingly aim to create an uncomfortable equilibrium in which they engage in a controlled proxy war in Idlib but maintain their other ties. Turkey

has the capacity to sustain a safe zone in Idlib that stretches all the way to the M4, but it will have to do so on terms that are acceptable to Russia.

Islamic radicalism on Turkey's doorstep

As it administers a Sunni Arab-majority area in Syria, Turkey **faces** another major challenge in managing relations with extremist groups near its border, including HTS in Idlib and some factions of the Syrian National Army. Blinded by what they view as an existential threat from an autonomous Kurdish zone, Turkish decision-makers **have been** willing to ignore the ideology and misconduct of some of the Salafist groups that sided with Turkey in Euphrates Shield, Olive Branch, and Peace Spring. They have also been relatively unconcerned about the formation of a jihadist safe haven in Idlib under HTS.

But, with a secular political system and a moderate Islamist party in power, Turkey's presence and its governance model for the safe zone will inevitably clash with the more extremist world-view espoused by the jihadist elements of the opposition – particularly in Idlib.

Turkish security officials have long argued that HTS does not pose the same type of transnational jihadist threat that ISIS or al-Qaeda do, and that its leadership is responsive to Turkish requests. Ankara sees HTS as less dangerous than hardcore al-Qaeda affiliates such as the Huraseddin Group and the Turkistan Islamic Party, believing that it is possible to establish a transactional relationship with the Salvation Government. One Turkish official emphasised that, because HTS leader Abu Muhammad al-Jolani is from Damascus, he would behave with the sophistication sometimes associated with natives of the city and act more responsibly – if only major powers in Syria would recognise his legitimacy. Accordingly, Turkey has dealt with HTS on issues such as border crossings and the distribution of humanitarian aid. The group ended its levies on humanitarian aid at Turkey's request in 2019 and also declared its support for Peace Spring.

Turkey's leniency towards HTS contrasts with the attitude of not only Russia but most Western countries. The one exception to this is the US special envoy for Syria, James Jeffrey, who remains sympathetic to Turkey's pragmatic approach. He **remarked** in late January that HTS is “considered a terrorist organization but it is primarily focused on fighting the Assad regime. It itself claims – we haven't

accepted that claim yet, but they do claim to be patriotic opposition fighters, not terrorists. We have not seen them generate, for example, international threats for some time.” Jeffrey also publicly denied Russian claims that HTS had been a threat to the Russian or Syrian militaries: “we watch very closely the claims that the Russians say that these people are launching attacks and the Russians are only retaliating, or the Syrian regime is only retaliating. That’s not true.” In an April webinar, Richard Outzen, a top aide to Jeffrey and a senior adviser at the State Department, [said](#): “the HTS thing is interesting from the US perspective because we have concerns about extremist groups and the possibility of, due to Turkish military presence, control by more moderate forces and dilution of and splitting up of HTS and radical elements is a tantalising possibility.”

Through transactional engagement, Ankara hopes to peel off elements of HTS to fight al-Qaeda affiliates and, ultimately, join the Syrian National Army. Yet there has been growing tension between the Turkish armed forces and HTS since 4 March, when Turkey agreed to a [ceasefire protocol](#) with Russia. The agreement between Turkey and Russia hinges on joint Turkish–Russian patrols along the M4, but HTS and other jihadist groups have opposed such initiatives (even if HTS has softened its stance).^[5] These groups have been instrumental in organising local [protests](#) to block the patrols, hindering Ankara’s ability to fulfil the terms of the ceasefire.

On a more fundamental level, it is unclear why it would be in Turkey’s long-term interest to cultivate an emirate run by jihadists on its border – however compliant that organisation might be. The danger here is that Turks could make the same mistake as Pakistan’s Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), which has cultivated the Taliban for many years. The ISI was confident that it could control the Taliban, and saw it as a useful instrument of regional influence – but the relationship has helped turn Pakistan’s border regions into a breeding ground for radical Islamism.

As Sam Heller’s [reporting](#) on internal discussions within HTS demonstrate, the group has its own agenda and is only begrudgingly ceding control of Idlib to the Turkish military. Speaking to his cadres, HTS commander Abu al-Fateh al-Farghali [described](#) the group’s accommodation with Turkey as being purely tactical – and limited. He also [described](#) Turkish soldiers as “infidel” and “apostate”, and vowed to fight Turkey if it tried to impose direct rule in Idlib, as it has in other parts of

northern Syria.

This “murky accommodation”, as Heller calls it, may not be sustainable for long. Even if Turkey does not want to impose direct rule in Idlib and is comfortable working with Salvation Government, the fact that it has deployed thousands of troops to the area and is [importing new opposition groups](#) under its own command indicates that it will eventually seek a greater degree of local control – in both providing assistance to the large refugee population and fulfilling the terms of the ceasefire with Russia. Turkey’s growing presence in Idlib is a threat to HTS hegemony there. This means that, sooner or later, Ankara will have to choose between peace with Moscow and peace with HTS.

The growing cost of Turkish operations

Turkey’s establishment of a dependent area in Syria has come at a significant economic cost. Since it launched Euphrates Shield, Ankara has not only [overseen](#) significant investment in infrastructure but united an estimated 40,000 fighters within the Syrian National Army. Turkey is also facilitating international humanitarian aid and providing stabilisation assistance – including that for infrastructure, food, and electricity – to the area it controls.

It is currently impossible to calculate the full economic cost of maintaining this zone in Afrin, Tel Abyad, and the ESZ because Turkish institutions have not published aggregate figures for the undertaking. In addition to paying the salaries of personnel in the safe zone, Turkey has incurred costs for maintaining the area through the defence budget; the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency; the Turkish Red Crescent; the Disaster and Emergency Management Presidency; the Directorate of Religious Affairs; the National Intelligence Organisation; the Ministry of Education; NGOs with ties to the government; and municipalities on the Turkish side of the border. With three areas now under Turkish control – one of them for more than three years – Ankara’s expenses also include those for humanitarian operations; infrastructure projects; income subsidies; energy and defence initiatives; and the salaries of civilian employees and the groups that make up the Syrian National Army. In all, these expenses likely run to a few billion dollars per year.

In normal circumstances, maintaining a safe zone at the cost of \$2 billion–\$3 billion

is sustainable for an economy the size of Turkey's. But this can be challenging during an economic downturn. One Turkish official stressed that Ankara would not shy away from spending money on what it regards as an existential national security priority – a stance that is consistent with the traditional Turkish approach to Iraq and Cyprus. But there may come a time when Turkish citizens question the merits of this investment.

The answer to the question of “how much is too much?” depends on the nature of Turkey's endgame in Syria. It remains unclear whether Turkey will stay in this area for the long haul – in which case, \$2 billion–\$3 billion per year may be too small an investment for such an underdeveloped area. Alternatively, if Turkey aims to eventually hand the area over to the Syrian regime, it would lose the benefits of Turkish investment in the safe zone.

Refugees settled in Turkey

The presence of around 3.6 million Syrian refugees in Turkey is a growing political problem for the Turkish government. The public has supported successive Turkish incursions into Syria that Ankara labelled as counter-terrorism operations against the YPG and the SDF. But the Turkish government also [justified](#) the moves as creating a safe zone to facilitate refugee returns.

Ankara is keenly aware of the economic and political costs of hosting so many refugees, which have made its open-door policy [increasingly unpopular](#). Exacerbated by the economic downturn, public antipathy towards refugees is rising. Indeed, this sentiment [reportedly contributed](#) to the AKP's massive losses in the municipal elections Turkey held in June 2019.

The problem for Ankara is that Syrians in Turkey do not appear to be moving to the safe zone in large numbers. As the topic of repatriation is highly politicised, publicly available data on these returns is inconsistent. For instance, [according](#) to the Turkish Ministry of Defence, nearly 600,000 refugees have moved back to Syria to settle in the three Turkish-controlled areas. Yet other parts of the Turkish government have [cited](#) different figures. Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu has said that 371,000 Syrians have moved to the areas.

While the Turkish government hopes, and claims, that the safe zone will eventually

host up to two million former refugees who have returned from Turkey, this seems wildly unrealistic. Though it is difficult to assess the exact number of Syrians who have voluntarily returned to their country, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees [estimates](#) that a total of 231,928 Syrians voluntarily returned to Syria between 2016 and February 2020. Only 89,000 of those are from the 3.6 million Syrians who originally sought refuge in Turkey during the nine-year conflict. Therefore, contrary to Turkish expectations, most of the Syrians who have entered the safe zone seem to be internally displaced persons, moving from one part of Syria to another.

Turkish and Western diplomats interviewed for this paper have expressed scepticism about the prospects of refugee returns from Turkey. “Who would leave Turkey and move back to a dusty town?”, one Turkish official asked. One Western diplomat suggested that the Turkish government had hyped up figures for Syrian returnees because it wanted to highlight the rationale for establishing a safe zone to its domestic audience. One Western employee of an aid organisation pointed out that there have also been movements in and out of the safe zone with each Turkish incursion – as YPG- or SDF-affiliated families fled, and displaced persons from other parts of Syria arrived.

Several factors make large numbers of refugee returns from Turkey unlikely. As most Syrians in Turkey are not natives of the safe zone, they have little reason to move to towns such as Afrin or Jarablus – which are now populated by Syrians from Idlib and other parts of Syria. Moreover, many Syrians have lived in Turkey for almost a decade now and, accordingly, have established their livelihoods in the country. They are reluctant to uproot their families again. (More than one million Syrians are [actively](#) working in Turkey, while nearly 700,000 others are studying in the country.) And, finally, Syrians in Turkey have far greater personal freedoms and upward mobility than they would have in landlocked enclaves controlled by Turkish-backed armed factions.

The history of migration flows suggests that refugees rarely return to a country of origin en masse. As it seeks international funding for reconstruction in Syria, Ankara faces a problem in the ambiguity of data on refugee returns and its implications for European donors and the Turkish public.

Erdogan has been keen to showcase the safe zone as a prime candidate for European reconstruction aid in international forums. The Turkish government believes that, with their extensive experience in the construction sector, Turkish companies would be the primary beneficiaries of such aid. However, it is [hard to imagine](#) that international donors will put up the \$26.4 billion Turkish officials have suggested it would cost to build new cities in the safe zone.

Instability in Afrin

Another long-term problem for Turkey is in administering Afrin – the only historically Kurdish enclave within the safe zone, and an emblem of wider unresolved issues between Turkey and the Syrian Kurds. Without some normalisation of the relationship or a return to the peace process between Ankara and the Kurds, Turkey’s Syria policy will forever be caught in the stranglehold of fear about the Kurdish issue.

Afrin is already proving to be a hard case for Turkey to deal with, due to Turkish-backed rebels’ alleged involvement in demographic changes and other human rights abuses. The demographic shift is a reality. Most of the refugees who have moved to Afrin over the [last three years](#) are Sunni Arabs from parts of Idlib and Eastern Ghouta, which were formerly held by the opposition. The city reportedly [experiences](#) occasional fighting between rebel groups, as well as friction between locals and the groups that moved into the area as part of the operation.

Meanwhile, there has been a [steady uptick](#) in terrorist attacks in Afrin – which the Turkish government has attributed to the YPG.

In March 2018, shortly after the Turkish incursion, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights published a [report](#) detailing widespread human rights abuses in Afrin, including ransom, looting, and kidnappings: “civilians now living in areas under the control of Turkish forces and affiliated armed groups continue to face hardships, which in some instances may amount to violations of international humanitarian law and violations or abuses of international human rights law.” The UN Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, and Amnesty International have also [reported on](#) mass displacement, pressure on locals, and other violations in Afrin. Opposition groups such as the Turkish-backed Ahrar al-Sharqiyya and the

National Salvation Front have allegedly targeted residents of the city they suspect of supporting the YPG.

Afrin is symbolically important to both Kurds and Turkey. Until its capture by Turkey in 2018, the city had been part of the autonomous Kurdish administration. During this time, Afrin was on the western edge of the area on Turkey's border under Kurdish control. By capturing Afrin, Ankara created its own contiguous zone stretching from the ESZ to Azaz and Idlib. This, according to Turkish officials, prevented Syrian Kurds from accessing the Mediterranean coast. While Turkey has [invested](#) a good deal in economic and administrative infrastructure in Afrin to secure its foothold there, the proxies the country has chosen for the task impede its ability to win the backing of the city's Kurdish elite.

Two leading members of the Syrian opposition – neither of whom are Kurdish or affiliated with the YPG – have confirmed reported human rights violations by Turkish-backed rebels, while expressing concern about increasing ethnic tension in Afrin between its recently arrived Arab residents and local Kurds. According to one member of the Syrian opposition, “if the support for PKK [in Afrin] was 30 percent before Operation Olive Branch, it is probably 70 percent now”, because Kurds have been alienated by the behaviour of opposition groups .

The combination of growing ethnic tension and terrorist attacks means that Afrin remains unstable. In many ways, this makes the city the weak link in the Turkish-controlled regions of Syria – and a microcosm of Turkish-Kurdish tension that runs through the north-east. The discontent of local Kurds, and friction between them and Arabs who have been displaced from other parts of Syria, is a long-term problem for Turkey. While European powers have maintained a tacit policy of not publicly criticising Turkey's role in Afrin, Western diplomats interviewed for this paper have privately expressed concern about the situation there.

Recommendations for Europe

Despite Turkey's determination to create a Sunni Arab-majority area on its southern border, these challenges make the project less than secure – broadly sustainable, but a source of headaches. In the long term, Ankara faces several dilemmas that will not only determine the viability of its Syrian project but also have a significant impact on its relations with actors such as Russia, the US, and

Europe. This vulnerability should prompt Europeans to engage with Turkey in a meaningful conversation about Syria. As one can see in the Idlib imbroglio, Erdogan sometimes responds to Russian pressure or economic hardship by looking to Europe for partnership. Europe should seize such opportunities.

Nonetheless, Europeans face their own dilemmas in dealing with Turkey in Syria. For example, EU member states are reluctant to diplomatically support, let alone finance, Turkey's grand project to create a Sunni Arab-majority area in Syria – especially when this involves the displacement of local Kurds in some areas. But Turkey is an indispensable partner for Europe on issues ranging from trade to migration. As such, Europeans do not want to be entirely deaf to Ankara's insistent demands for help in Syria. Questions about Turkey's goals and the possibility of a long-term Turkish occupation trouble European decision-makers – but not to the point that they want to cease all dialogue with Turkey on Syria.

The truth is that Turkey has already established a Sunni Arab-majority zone in Syria. It is hard to imagine that Ankara will hand over control of this area to the Syrian regime any time soon – if ever. This provides Europe with all the more reason to talk to Turkey.

Europe faces a wider disengagement paradox in Syria. As their motto has been “no reconstruction funding before a political transition”, Europeans have been careful not to engage in stabilisation or reconstruction in regime-held areas that could help legitimise Assad. But this policy has been ineffective. The underlying causes of the Syrian conflict are still there, but neither a military solution nor an economic war to displace Assad seem realistic. The US-led “maximum pressure” campaign against the Assad regime has produced no tangible change in the regime's behaviour. And, even with the blood of more than 500,000 of its citizens on its hands, the regime looks poised to win the war – thanks to Russian and Iranian assistance, as well as Western inaction.

Europe's principled policy has not changed the behaviour of the parties to the conflict or helped ordinary Syrians. As such, there is a valid argument to providing an exception to this general principle in Turkish-backed areas, so as to help ordinary Syrians and contribute to the gradual transformation of the country. Despite the ups and downs in the relationship, Turkey and the EU have a close

partnership that operates within a well-established institutional framework. To gain leverage in Syria, European governments should start a conversation with Ankara on the development of Turkish-controlled areas. The EU's core interests in Syria are preventing the flow of more refugees into Europe, curbing extremism in the country, and building up viable alternatives to Assad's rule within society, to facilitate a political transition. Turkey is essential to the pursuit of all these goals.

Europe undoubtedly needs to uphold its core principles, but it can engage with Turkey's Syria policy in ways that accommodate these concerns. If they are united, EU member states have a chance to strike a *grand bargain* with Turkey whereby, in return for European reconstruction and stabilisation aid in some areas, Ankara can be persuaded to turn a blind eye to stabilisation aid to Kurdish areas or to allow Syrian Kurds to participate in the UN-led political process on the future of Syria – provided that the Syrian Kurdish administration meets Turkey's demand to remove PKK cadres and reduce their influence in its ranks.

A *quid pro quo* with Turkey that allowed for Kurdish representation at the UN would strengthen the wider UN process for a political transition in Syria. Because 2.4 million Syrians live in areas controlled by the SDF, the lack of Kurdish representation in the constitutional committee has been a barrier to progress. Due to the broad tension between the SDF and Turkey, the unresolved nature of the Kurdish issue has also been one of the biggest sources of instability in northern Syria. Without some sort of a *modus vivendi* between Turkey and the Kurds, it is hard to guarantee even the fragile stability in the area. The threat of escalation and new Turkish incursions would always be there – potentially throwing cold water on efforts to establish a partnership between Europe and Turkey on Syria. From a political and humanitarian perspective, it is in Europe's interest to help establish a more accommodating relationship between Turkey and Syrian Kurds.

Despite the domestic climate in Turkey, such a push could have a chance of success if the US also lobbied for Kurdish participation in the UN process – given Jeffrey's rapport with Ankara. Even if there is relatively little chance of progress in Turkey's current domestic political climate, both the EU and the US should continue to gently lobby Ankara on the need for reconciliation with Syrian Kurds – underlining the fact that peace with the Kurds would also help Ankara achieve its wider regional ambitions. At Russia's insistence, Syrian Kurds have recently started

an informal, albeit fruitless, political dialogue with the Syrian regime.^[6] If Turkey also lifts its veto on Kurdish representation, there may well be a more functional and conclusive UN process for a political transition in Syria.

Similarly, by facilitating pilot reconstruction projects in the Turkish-controlled ESZ, the EU's institutions and member states could improve their relationships with Ankara and provide international NGOs with greater access to northern Syria. It is important for Europe to single out Idlib and the ESZ in an initial dialogue with Turkey. This is partly because, as both are predominantly Sunni Arab and Turkey did not capture them from Kurdish administrations, these areas are less politically sensitive than Afrin for European decision-makers. While it would be impossible to establish European unity on, for example, engagement with Afrin or the Peace Spring Operation area – with key member states having vehemently criticised the Turkish incursion there – European countries could reach a consensus on funding in the ESZ. The following issues could be focal points for European engagement with Turkey.

Reconstruction and deradicalisation in Idlib: Idlib is difficult legal terrain for European aid because it is controlled by HTS, which the UN designates as a terrorist organisation. But such aid already reaches Idlib. It is in Europe's interest to expand this assistance – to meet the short-term housing needs of the many refugees who live there, and to work with Turkey to undermine the influence of HTS. With nearly three million Syrians trapped in a small area, and with an al-Qaeda government in place, Idlib is an incubator for radicalisation on Europe's doorstep. The EU's approach to the area should have two main elements: working with Turkey on a deradicalisation programme while supporting the construction of temporary housing for refugees there, especially the one million people who recently arrived and live in makeshift homes or tents. In this, Merkel's reported pledge of €25m for temporary housing has already acted as a confidence-building measure. Similarly, the EU could fund short-term housing for newly displaced Syrians. This would have to come with a deradicalisation programme and support for Turkish efforts to splinter HTS and complement its presence with more moderate factions under Turkish command within the Syrian National Army.

Extension of the refugee deal: In early March, after thousands of refugees lined up on the Turkish-Greek border, the EU and Turkey [decided](#) to review the 2016

migration deal – under which the EU promised to provide Turkey with €6 billion (in two equal tranches) to support the 3.6 million Syrian refugees living in Turkey. As the allocation of funds ends in 2020, Ankara is keen to renegotiate the deal. The sides could discuss Turkish-controlled regions of Syria (excluding Idlib) during the talks. The EU could stipulate that the new funds would go to not the Salvation Government – as this would pose legal problems – but to civic projects and refugee resettlement. The EU would need to establish a mechanism for monitoring the use of funds, as Turkey does not currently allow international observers or NGOs into the safe zone. Stabilisation aid in the ESZ would create a basis for wider Turkish-EU cooperation in Syria.

Support for secular education in the ESZ: Ankara seems to regard religion as a tool for social cohesion in the areas of Syria it controls – as seen in its emphasis on the work of the Turkish Directorate of Religious Affairs and imam-hatip schools in providing religious education. But support for secular education – initially in the ESZ, and later in other Turkish-controlled areas such as Tel Abyad – remains important. The EU can extend its refugee agreement under a separate protocol to support girls' education and secular education through Turkey's Ministry of Education in the area.

A deal on Kurdish border crossings and trade: Turkey and EU member states will have to agree to disagree on the Kurdish issue. Europeans do not want to facilitate a permanent Turkish presence in north-eastern Syria, but their current approach has had little impact on Turkish behaviour. Meanwhile, SDF-controlled Kurdish areas remain isolated and locked in a humanitarian crisis – as Turkey has not allowed them to trade or access emergency aid (even during the coronavirus pandemic). In January, the UN Security Council restricted the number of border crossings that agencies can use to bring aid to north-eastern Syria – making it difficult for the Kurdish administration to receive UN support. With the current UN mandate on aid to Syria set to expire in July, a new round of negotiations on border crossings is under way. Europe could agree to a package deal with Russia and Turkey that allowed for direct humanitarian access to the ESZ in return for stabilisation or trade with SDF-controlled areas. For example, the EU could throw its weight behind Turkey's bid at the UN for a new border crossing in Tel Abyad, in exchange for Turkey reducing its restrictions on Kurdish-run areas. Similarly, in exchange for reconstruction aid to the ESZ, European governments could ask

Turkey to open trade routes between the areas it controls and those run by the SDF, particularly in Tel Abyad, Manbij, and Kobane – which remains sandwiched between two Turkish-controlled zones. The restoration of trade routes would ease the humanitarian situation in Kurdish-controlled areas and improve their relations with Turkey.

Simultaneous Kurdish and ESZ representation: As discussed above, while it objects to Kurdish autonomy as damaging to Syria’s territorial integrity, Ankara advocates autonomy for the safe zone. This should allow for some creative thinking on the diplomatic front. For example, Europeans can try to convince Turkey to lift its veto on Kurdish or SDF representation at the UN-led constitutional committee in Geneva, in exchange for official representation of the ESZ in the talks. The fact that Syrian Kurds are talking both to Russia and the Assad regime, as well as to Iraqi Kurds who are friendly with Ankara, makes this proposition easier to achieve. Both the Turkish-controlled zone and SDF territory are home to significant constituencies – of 1.4 million people and 2.4 million people respectively – who are not represented by the Syrian regime but nonetheless deserve a seat at the table. Turkey has been pushing for some movement in the constitutional committee. In a recent webinar hosted by the Atlantic Council, Kalin [underlined](#) Ankara’s commitment to a solution under UN Resolution 2254: “The [Assad] regime is not interested in advancing the constitutional committee, because they are afraid of the rise of a new constitution that would be binding and lead to a transitional interim government – and, eventually, free and fair elections. You may ask: ‘how realistic it is now even talk about the elections, free and fair elections in Syria?’ We have to keep this on our agenda all the time. We can have free and fair elections if the constitutional committee is allowed to do its work, if there is a representative government to include and represent all the Syrians and we can refer to the UN Resolution 2254, which includes all these basic principles. So, the political process needs to advance.” Turkey hopes that the zone under its control can take part in elections organised by local forces, thereby gaining one more layer of autonomy from the Assad regime. But Kalin’s vision of a new Syria under a representative government would almost certainly have to include a role for Syrian Kurds, who have been running their own affairs for almost a decade and are now talking to all sides in the Syrian conflict, except Turkey.

Afrin’s potential role in reconciliation: Afrin is one of the least stable areas in the

Turkish-controlled zone, due to the presence of an unhappy Kurdish constituency, armed groups, and Arab refugees from other parts of Syria. There is a tacit understanding in which EU member states – many of which opposed the 2018 Turkish incursion – avoid both publicly criticising Turkey and supporting the Turkish presence there. This arrangement is unhelpful for residents of the city. Afrin is emblematic of the transnational Turkish–Kurdish conflict, but could serve as the starting point of a reconciliation process. Even though there is no indication that Ankara is currently interested in a peace process, Erdogan has been remarkably pragmatic on the Kurdish issue in the past. It is important for the EU to keep pressing Ankara to use Afrin as an opening for a dialogue with secular Kurds and minority groups in Afrin.

About the author

Asli Aydintasbas is a senior policy fellow with the Wider Europe programme at the European Council on Foreign Relations and an expert on Turkish domestic and foreign policy. Prior to joining ECFR, Aydintasbas had a long career in journalism, including working as a columnist at *Cumhuriyet* and *Milliyet*, and hosting a talk show on CNN Turk. She has frequently contributed to publications such as the *New York Times*, *Politico*, and the *Wall Street Journal*, and she still writes a Global Opinions column for the *Washington Post*. Much of her work focuses on the interplay between Turkey’s internal and external dynamics. Aydintasbas is a graduate of Bates College and has an MA from New York University.

[1] Interview with a senior member of Erdogan’s foreign policy advisory board, Istanbul, October 2019.

[2] Author’s observations from fact-finding visit to the ESZ, October 2017.

[3] Figures provided by Turkish officials during an October 2017 visit to the area.

[4] Author’s conversation with a senior Turkish official, February 2020.

[5] Author’s conversation with a Turkish official, March 2020.

[6] Author’s discussions with a senior Western diplomat in January 2020 and Kurdish source in February 2020.

ABOUT ECFR

The European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR) is the first pan-European think-tank. Launched in October 2007, its objective is to conduct research and promote informed debate across Europe on the development of coherent, effective and values-based European foreign policy. ECFR has developed a strategy with three distinctive elements that define its activities:

- A pan-European Council. ECFR has brought together a distinguished Council of over two hundred Members – politicians, decision makers, thinkers and business people from the EU’s member states and candidate countries – which meets once a year as a full body. Through geographical and thematic task forces, members provide ECFR staff with advice and feedback on policy ideas and help with ECFR’s activities within their own countries. The Council is chaired by Carl Bildt, Lykke Friis, and Norbert Röttgen.
- A physical presence in the main EU member states. ECFR, uniquely among European think-tanks, has offices in Berlin, London, Madrid, Paris, Rome, Sofia and Warsaw. Our offices are platforms for research, debate, advocacy and communications.
- Developing contagious ideas that get people talking. ECFR has brought together a team of distinguished researchers and practitioners from all over Europe to carry out innovative research and policy development projects with a pan-European focus. ECFR produces original research; publishes policy reports; hosts private meetings, public debates, and “friends of ECFR” gatherings in EU capitals; and reaches out to strategic media outlets.

ECFR is a registered charity funded by the Open Society Foundations and other generous foundations, individuals and corporate entities. These donors allow us to publish our ideas and advocate for a values-based EU foreign policy. ECFR works in partnership with other think tanks and organisations but does not make grants to individuals or institutions. www.ecfr.eu

The European Council on Foreign Relations does not take collective positions. This paper, like all publications of the European Council on Foreign Relations, represents only the views of its authors. Copyright of this publication is held by the European Council on Foreign Relations. You may not copy, reproduce, republish or circulate in any way the content from this publication except for your own personal and non-commercial use. Any other use requires the prior written permission of the European Council on Foreign Relations. © ECFR May 2020. ISBN: 978-1-913347-23-9. Published by the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR), 4th Floor, Tennyson House, 159-165 Great Portland Street, London W1W 5PA, United Kingdom.