



Whither the Kurds in “Post-ISIS” Syria?

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Introduction: Once upon a Time in... Four Kurdistans

The Kurds have often been dubbed as “geopolitically cursed” since the **Treaty of Lausanne (1923)** has initiated their scattering into four separate minorities across Türkiye, Syria, Iraq and Iran. Indeed, while most of the twentieth century plagued these communities with disadvantageous drawings of borders and the rise of (Turkish and Arab) nationalist ideologies, the past four decades have further burdened them through the rise of (Shia and Sunni) Islamist ideologies.

In the region, the four concerned governments –often politically at odds among themselves– have generally stuck together to alleviate their shared Kurdish headache. In the West, the mainstream perception of “the Kurds” has dramatically oscillated in recent times. On the one hand, it has been negatively associated with the Türkiye-based Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK)³, which is blacklisted as

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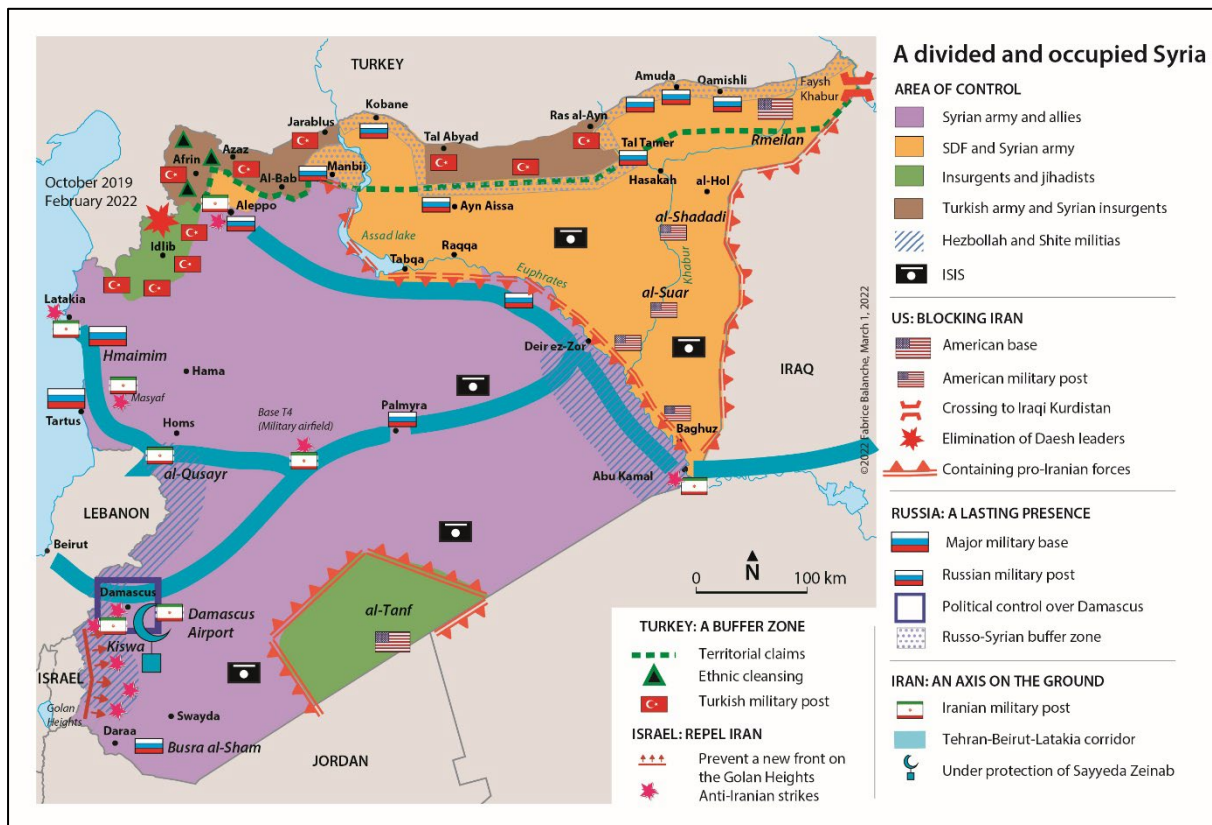
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³ The PKK (*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan*) is the most prominent guerrilla movement involved in the Kurdish-Turkish conflict since the 1980s. Having historically climaxed with roughly 10,000 fighters in the 1990s, the PKK ranks are nowadays estimated at 5,000-7,000 fighters. While the current Turkish government –led by President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s Justice and Development Party (AKP)– initially showed itself open to negotiations with the PKK in the late 2000s, it reengaged militarily against the latter as from 2015. For more information on the PKK, see notably Jiwan Soz, “Against Whom is Ankara Waging War in Syria: the Kurds or the Kurdish Workers’ Party?” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, May 13, 2021, <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/84477>.

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a terrorist organisation by the United States (US) since 1997 and by the European Union (EU) since 2002. On the other hand, the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988) emotionally victimised the Kurds of Halabja after Saddam Hussein’s chemical attack of 1988, and the **Syrian civil war (2011-ongoing)** elevated its own Kurdish fighters to embody one of the few “moderate” camps in a context of widespread jihadi fever.

As from 2014, the role played by Kurdish armed factions in the fight against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS or IS) led to growing support from the US-led international coalition and has elevated their own hopes through territorial conquest at home. At a time when Turkish military operations across “post-ISIS” Syria are notably emboldening the latter’s resurgence, this e-Note draws up a balance sheet regarding Kurdish achievements and challenges in north-eastern Syria (often called “Rojava” as the western part of Greater Kurdistan).



Rojava: Caught between Several Rocks and a Hard P(a)lace

The war that erupted in Syria as an aftermath of the “Arab Spring(s)” dramatically affected the local Kurdish landscape in the northern part of the country. When Damascus withdrew most national security forces from the Jezira plain of eastern Syria in 2011, it prompted the (Kurdish) Democratic Union Party (PYD)⁴ to swiftly create its own militia, the People’s Defense Units (YPG)⁵ –, which largely

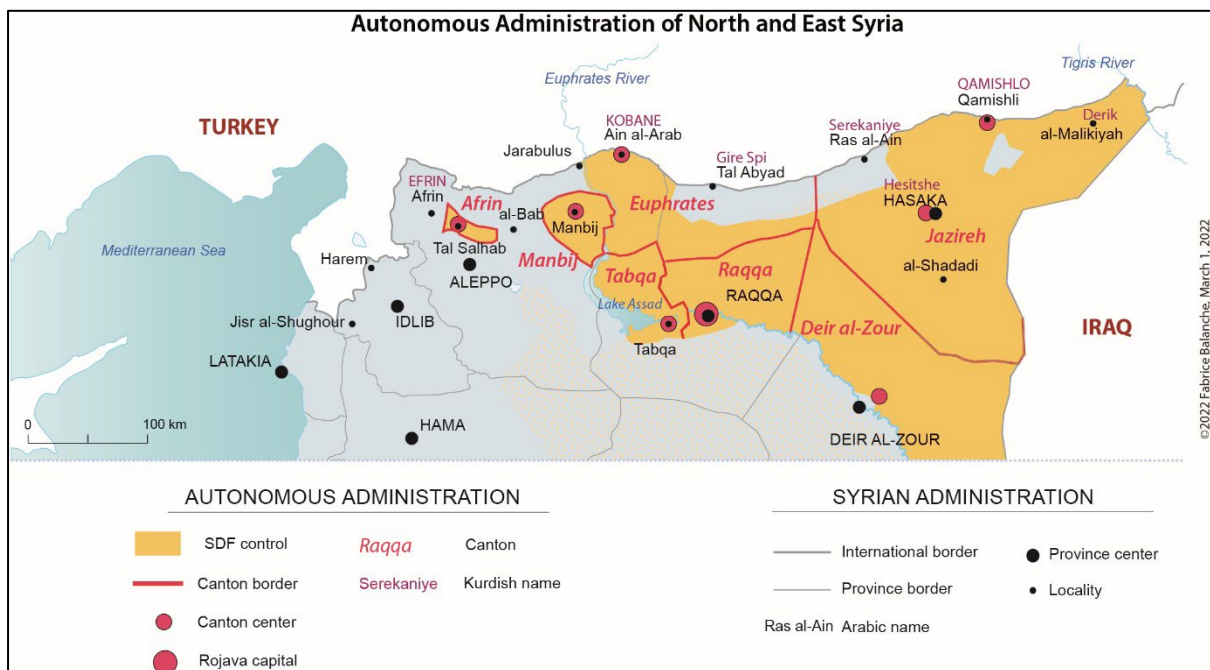
⁴ Created in 2003, the PYD (*Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat*) is the leading political party among Syrian Kurds.

⁵ Created in 2011, the YPG (*Yekîneyên Parastina Gel*) is the primary component of the (Kurdish and Arab) Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) that manage security across the territories of the AANES. Türkiye views the SDF (and the YPG) as an extension of the blacklisted PKK. Conversely, the US and most Western countries differentiate the SDF and the YPG from the PKK, the latter being jointly considered as a terrorist organisation.

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contributed to turning Rojava into a *de facto* autonomous region two years later. From 2013 onwards, the PYD represented the bulk of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), the main authorities of the **Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES)**, which nowadays controls most territories east of the Euphrates valley. In parallel and especially after the highly mediated battle of Kobane in 2014, the SDF – boasting unprecedented external support – spearheaded the rolling back of the Islamic State (IS) until the latter’s “ultimate” defeat in Baghuz in 2019.

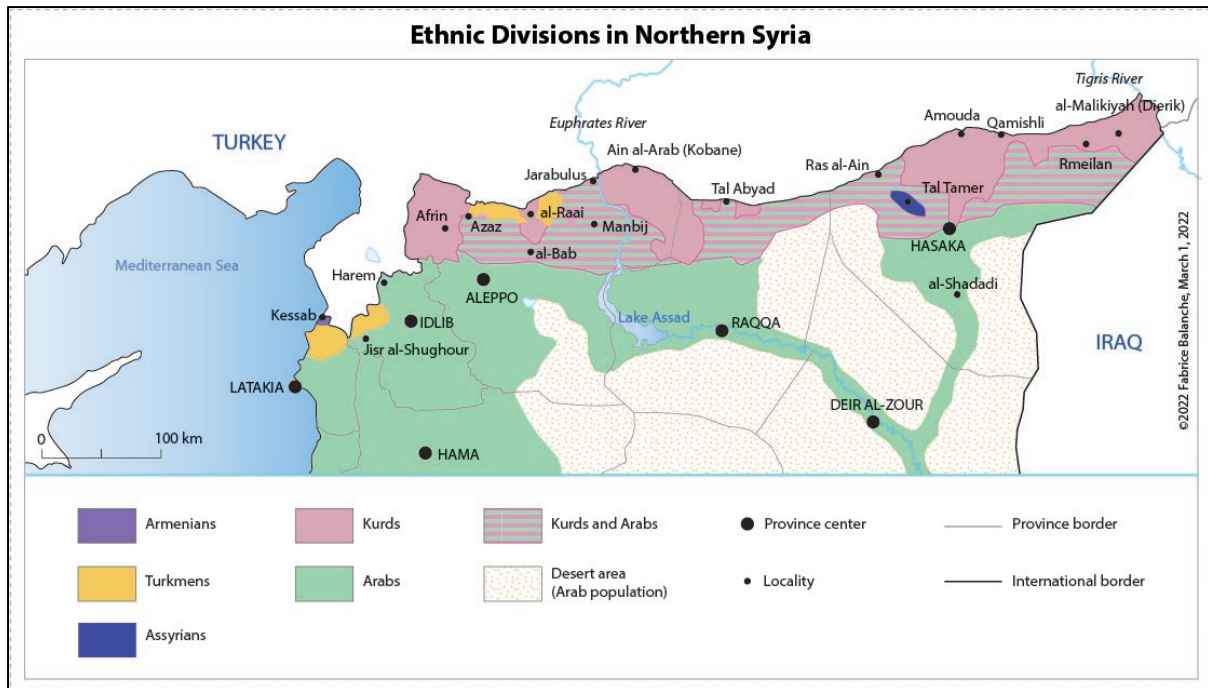
During a first (almost epic) phase, the status of Syrian Kurds –11% of the Syrian population suddenly controlling up to 25% of the national territory– was boosted by the international coalition to the detriment of the Assad regime. As from 2017, however, the Syrian war dynamics started to be dictated by the “Astana troika” –Russia, Türkiye and Iran–, who share little appetite for any scenario of Syrian partition, thus in favour of the Assad regime and preventing further Kurdish gains.



Today, the AANES finds itself in an increasingly precarious political, economic and security situation.⁶ The administration has no alternative but to exploit its main resource –i.e. roughly 80% of Syrian oil– in sad circumstances, notably by degrading agricultural lands and exporting part of the crude product to the very regime it is trying to stay independent from. Cities generally have only four to six hours of electricity per day, while villages merely have one or two hours. The majority of its roughly three million inhabitants –among whom 700,000 are supposedly internally displaced people– need humanitarian aid. Tensions between (southern) Arab and (northern) Kurdish communities, notably revolving around water distribution, have consistently increased, to the point of sometimes reviving local rumours of ethnic cleansing. The SDF had to fend off destabilising measures from Türkiye and the “Assad axis” (including Russia and Iran). At the same time, the Islamic State (IS) attacks on the prisons in Hasaka in January 2022 and in Raqqa in January 2023 also proved that the jihadi group is still active in the area. More than ever, US military presence and EU aid are necessary to enable the AANES to stand its ground.

⁶ Fabrice Balanche, “How to Preserve the Autonomy of Northeast Syria,” The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Policy Watch 3593, May 15, 2022, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/how-preserve-autonomy-northeast-syria>.

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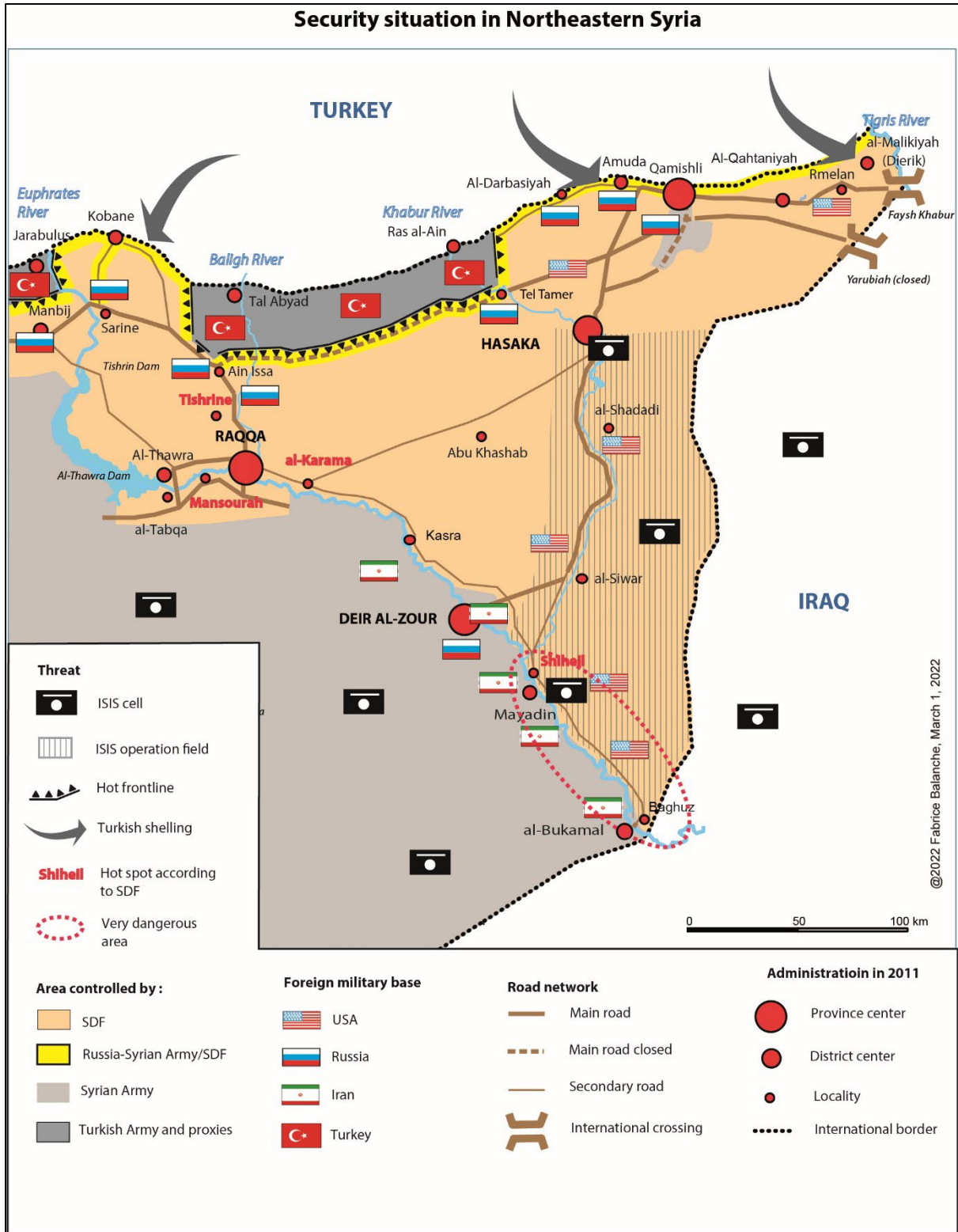
Resisting Damascus while Containing the Islamic State

At the domestic level, the AANES has to deal with a plethora of actors. However, the main balancing act consists in countering the Assad regime’s attempts to unbolt its *de facto* autonomy vis-à-vis Damascus on the one hand, and containing a diminished yet resurgent IS threat on the other.

The **Assad regime** does not hold a particular grudge against Syrian Kurds and has until recently been more obsessed with the Arab rebel groups currently cornered in the Idlib area. Although still aiming at the reconquest of the entire national territory⁷, Damascus basically demands from the (internationally unrecognised) AANES that they dissolve and return to the fold unconditionally. In order to keep the region dependent on Damascus and thus limit autonomist tendencies, President Assad has always pushed the eastern part of the country to specialise in the production of raw materials (such as wheat, cotton and oil) that are to be processed in western Syria. Assad is conscious that these arrangements have kept the region heavily dependent on imports –such as fertilisers and pesticides for export crops– to this day, and that farmers’ income has dramatically decreased since 2011 due to water scarcity.⁸ Aware that there are no widespread calls for its return in the region, the regime is playing its most promising card: strategic patience through economic embargo. It can particularly count on its Russian ally, who has repeatedly vetoed United Nations (UN) efforts to reauthorise direct cross-border aid from Iraq, thus forcing UN aid to be conveyed –drop by drop– via Damascus through the regime-held crossing points of Manbij, Al-Tabqa and Deir Al-Zour.

⁷ While the Syrian regime only controlled 20% of the national territory in 2013, it has regained 65% of it (home to the majority of the Syrian population) today, including the six major cities of the country. This does, however, not reflect a similar ratio of national sovereignty given the tremendous loss in terms of border control. Fabrice Balanche, “The Assad Regime Has Failed to Restore Full Sovereignty over Syria”, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Policy Watch 3433, February 10, 2021, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/assad-regime-has-failed-restore-full-sovereignty-over-syria>.

⁸ Beyond the transversal context of climate warming, the years of war witnessed large destructions on the Euphrates River irrigation systems, and severe reductions in water flows by Türkiye, who controls the three water-strategic cities of Jarabulus, Tal Abyad and Ras Al-Ain.



For its part, the **Islamic State (IS)** is currently alive and active –in clandestine form– across all Iraqi and Syrian territories it controlled in 2015. In Syria, several of its top-level leaders have been traced and killed while hiding in (less monitored) western Syria, but the majority of its attacks have been taking place in the central and eastern regions of the country.⁹ Numerous IS pockets can be flagged across the Syrian desert and in the steppe areas of the AANES, particularly those stretching along the Hasaka-Baghuuz axis. Predominantly organised as sleeping cells, they have been mostly leading low-scale destabilisation operations from the edge of regime-held western towns to the Iranian-monitored¹⁰ border with Iraq. Their hit-and-run attacks operated by small units (of less than fifteen men)¹¹ have typically targeted minor SDF or Popular Mobilization Units (PMU) checkpoints in recent years, rather than the more secured oil fields in eastern Syria. However, the January 2022 assault on the Al-Sina prison of Hasaka stands out as the most recent proof of IS’s regained capacity to launch coordinated operations in unfriendly urban centres.

While most Arab tribal leaders within the AANES have expressed strong reservations about IS, they often had even more doubts about an Assad regime that amounts to little more than an Alawite (Shia) oligarchy that has historically exploited and neglected (their Sunni) eastern Syria. While Damascus had relatively managed to “domesticate” the Raqqa province around the irrigation project of the Euphrates, it always remained much more suspicious towards its interlocutors from the oil-rich Deir al-Zour province. The local populations had very good reasons to be frustrated about their valuable resources being exploited by a predatory government, and often sound equally frustrated about the same mechanism now profiting (the YPG officers of) an AANES often dubbed as “the Kurds”. In May 2021, the AANES defied Damascus once again and decided not to authorise presidential elections in the territories under its control. This decision has been respected in the Arab zones. However, the (unequal level of) commitment by Arab tribal leaders of eastern Syria vis-à-vis the AANES is largely due to the fact that the financial and military support provided to the SDF by the international coalition outmatches the means Damascus and its allies can offer them. While most concerned tribal leaders may sincerely dread Bashar Al-Assad, many of them are on the AANES’s payroll out of sheer economic necessity, but remain convinced that the regime will someday be back and are thus keeping channels open with Damascus in order to guarantee their own future amnesty.

Iran and Türkiye: Shared Interests within Conflicting Agendas

At the regional level, the Kurdish-populated territories have predominantly been torn between the –interdependent yet rival– Ottoman and Persian spheres of influence across history. The contemporary setup across the AANES reveals a stubborn continuity, where interests of Türkiye and Iran converge without fully aligning. While both actors have long shared common views on “Kurdish terrorism” at home, they are in direct confrontation in neighbouring Iraq, where Ankara and Tehran respectively

⁹ Didier Leroy, “The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan Is Back. What about the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria?” *e-Note 33* (Royal Higher Institute for Defence), October 18, 2021, <https://www.defence-institute.be/en/publications-2/e-note/e-note-33/>; Khateb Al-Khaled, “Islamic State Threatens Kurdish Workers in Northeast Syria,” *Al-Monitor*, August 23, 2022, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/08/islamic-state-threatens-kurdish-workers-northeast-syria>.

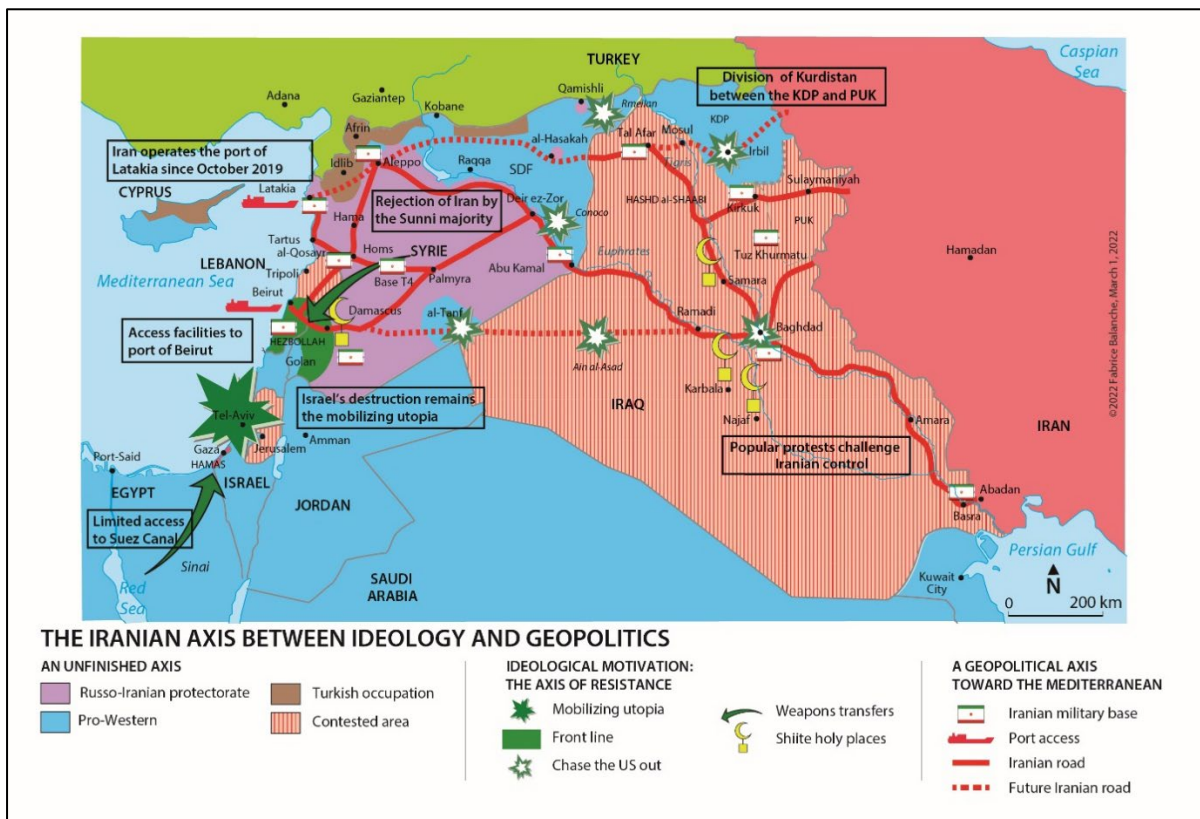
¹⁰ See below.

¹¹ Sultan Al-Kanj, “Islamic State Regains Momentum in Syria’s Kurdish Areas,” *Al-Monitor*, October 24, 2022, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/10/islamic-state-regains-momentum-syrias-kurdish-areas>.

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support enemy Kurdish factions (PDK¹² and UPK¹³). In Syria, both actors largely coordinate under a Russian umbrella, but have equally differed –so far– on issues like regime endorsement and territorial sovereignty.

Since the beginning of the Syrian civil war, the **Islamic Republic of Iran** has strongly supported Damascus –its most consistent ally since 1979 and crucial asset to promote its own regional aspirations. Since antagonising Israel lies at the core of Iran’s revolutionary DNA, the anti-Zionist theocracy has spared no effort to create a land corridor allowing the projection of its influence and weapons towards its flagship Mediterranean asset: Lebanese Hezbollah. Within this framework, Iran has notably nurtured and operated several proxy militias –among which the Popular Mobilisation Units (PMU)– to help implementing its strategy in Iraq and Syria. In both cases, Tehran has sought to harass US military troops in the hope of chasing them out of that part of the Middle East. The killing of Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) Commander Qassem Suleymani in January 2020 by a US drone strike has only exacerbated the Shia bitterness in the region ever since.



As soon as IS started losing territories in eastern Syria, the PMU and the US troops rushed to take control of areas they respectively considered strategic. While the US secured a Jordan-Syria corridor in Al-Tanf and an Iraq-Syria one in Faysh Khabur, the Iranian proxies made their initial transborder breakthrough north of Al-Tanf in 2017 and subsequently tried to enlarge their own Iraq-Syria corridor around the border cities of Al-Qaim (in Iraq) and Al-Bukamal (in Syria). Struggling –like the US and the SDF –against IS hostility, these Iranian assets, however, managed to establish themselves along the

¹² The Kurdistan Democratic Party (PDK) is the largest political party in Iraqi Kurdistan. Founded in 1946, it is dominated by the Barzani tribe and has its stronghold in the northern city of Erbil.

¹³ The Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (UPK) is the second largest political party in Iraqi Kurdistan. Founded in 1975, it is dominated by the Talabani tribe and has its stronghold in the southern city of Sulaymaniyah.

Euphrates valley until the southern end of Raqqa and along the Iraq-Syria border from the northern tip of Al-Tanf all the way to the western bank of the Tigris River near Faysh Khabur. Needless to say that they will do everything they can to hold on to these positions, since they secure an important segment of their Iranian sponsor’s “Tehran-Beirut highway”, and also generate extra revenue for themselves from the other (less official) border crossings.

Contrary to his Syrian counterpart, **Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan** does hold a particular grudge against Syrian Kurds and considers most Arab rebel groups from northwestern Syria as parts of the solution against the threat they represent. Ankara’s strongman is well placed to remember that his country was on the brink of war with Syria in 1998, when then President Hafez Al-Assad hosted the PKK and its emblematic leader Abdullah Öcalan on his territory. Direct confrontation was then ultimately avoided after the latter was forced to leave the country, which subsequently led to his arrest in Kenya. Even decades later, Ankara has not (yet) changed its perception of Rojava as a region representing little more than the PKK’s backyard. In a nutshell, Ankara sees IS as a threat, but the PKK as an even larger one, and its view is not going to change anytime soon. This unpopular outlook drew harsh criticism of Türkiye as early as 2014, when Ankara denied “Turkish Kurds” access to the enclave of Kobane threatened by IS and only allowed –an inevitably delayed– help from (Peshmerga) “Iraqi Kurds”. This same outlook might however sound less unpopular when put into connection with the 6,366 fatalities Türkiye’s PKK conflict has caused since July 2015 alone.¹⁴ In any case, this mostly explains Ankara’s harsh measures against Rojava. Beyond erecting a 764-km-long concrete wall along the 911-km-long border and implementing water-retention policies, Türkiye has indeed deployed its armed forces in northern Syria across four main episodes so far.

Firstly, Operation Euphrates Shield (August 2016-March 2017) was launched to prevent the Kurdish-led SDF from creating a Kurdish-controlled territorial continuum between the Jezira region and Afrin. Secondly, Operation Olive Branch (January 2018-March 2018) was aimed at establishing a buffer zone disconnecting the Syrian YPG from the Turkish PKK. Thirdly, Operation Peace Spring (October 2019) intended to expel the SDF from the border region between Tal Abyad and Ras al-Ain in order to resettle (Arab) Syrian refugees in the 30-km-deep zone. Fourthly, Ankara launched renewed air strikes on SDF infrastructure in late 2022 in retaliation for the 13 November Istanbul bombing (attributed to the PKK by Ankara and to IS by the SDF)¹⁵. All in all, Turkish cross-border bombings have scared the local populations and discouraged foreign investments, thus dealing serious blows to the SDF since the umbrella group’s Kurdish units were left to weather the battle against Ankara on their own. Indeed, Arab SDF units largely abstained from the fights, not considering themselves as being part of that specific dispute. Since Ankara has regularly recycled the Kurdish scarecrow according to needs¹⁶, a new Turkish ground offensive –which is potentially lethal to the AANES– is to be dreaded before the 14 May 2023 presidential election.¹⁷

¹⁴ “Turkey’s PKK Conflict: A Visual Explainer,” International Crisis Group, November 10, 2022 (latest update), <https://www.crisisgroup.org/content/turkeys-pkk-conflict-visual-explainer>.

¹⁵ Amberin Zaman, “Syrian Kurdish Commander Says Kobani Likely Target of Threatened Turkish Ground Offensive,” *Al-Monitor*, November 22, 2022, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/11/syrian-kurdish-commander-says-kobani-likely-target-threatened-turkish-ground>.

¹⁶ Christopher Philips, “Northern Syria Has Become Erdogan’s Punchbag,” *Middle East Eye*, June 6, 2022, <http://www.middleeasteye.net/opinion/turkey-northern-syria-erdogan-punchbag>.

¹⁷ “French Academic Fabrice Balanche Says Turkish Offensive Against Syrian Kurds ‘A Matter of Time’,” December 14, 2022, in *Al-Monitor*, produced by Amberin Zaman, podcast, episode number 126, , 34:09, <https://www.al-monitor.com/podcasts/french-academic-fabrice-balanche-says-turkish-offensive-against-syrian-kurds-matter-time>.

A Seismic Fault Line between Russia and the United States

From a vantage point, the United States—leading the international coalition against IS since 2014— and Russia—militarily engaged in Syria since 2015— represent the two (usual) mastodons jostling to assert their respective dominion over the region.

Russian President Vladimir Putin’s most salient goal is in line with the regime it has decided to salvage in 2015: choke the AANES, force its dissolution and convince the SDF to integrate into the Syrian army’s 5th Corps. To that end, the Kremlin has repeatedly tried to block AANES-bound humanitarian aid, both politically at the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) and militarily on the ground.¹⁸ Russian (and Syrian) troops do indeed occupy certain bases inside the AANES and are slowly gaining ground so as to separate its western Kurdish-dominated areas (i.e. Afrin and Kobane) from the Kurdish stronghold of Qamishli-Hasaka. Further east, Russia hopes to isolate this same Kurdish stronghold from the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in neighbouring Iraq. So far, only US military presence and substantial Western economic aid have managed to prevent Russia and its allies from reaching their strategic goal in eastern Syria.

On the diplomatic chessboard, President Putin seems to have been able to play it smart since 2016 with both President Assad—who has been willing to reconnect with the Kurds against anti-regime Arab rebels in the long run— and President Erdogan—who is doomed to stay connected with anti-regime Arab rebels against the Kurds in the long run. The December 2022 Moscow meeting between the Turkish and Syrian Defence Ministers—the first in eleven years— seems to confirm that Russia has previously negotiated on bartering a Turkish green light regarding the 2020 Syrian offensive in Idlib for a Syrian green light regarding the 2022 Turkish offensive in Kobane. The logic behind it is simple: offering Türkiye a piece of northeastern Syria in exchange for standing aside while Damascus continues to regain control over northwestern Syria.

Skilled at this game, President Putin has recently taken its relationship with Türkiye to unprecedented heights and is now hoping that the latter—boasting its NATO membership— will have the “mandate” (and the boldness) to push anti-Kurdish military operations to a breaking point that forces US troops out of certain key bases like Rmelan.

This finally leads us to address the case of the **United States (US)**. While the Kurds of Syria gained an unprecedented stature as the ground troops of the Obama-initiated anti-IS coalition as from 2014, they paid a heavy toll throughout the “Trump years” (2017-2021), especially after the disastrous US withdrawal from the Turkish border in October 2019. Hoping for credible reassurances from the Biden administration since 2022, they have unfortunately had to deal with the latter’s minimal-service approach to Syria. Basically, President Joe Biden has bigger fish to fry elsewhere and is struggling with a serious dilemma in less important Syria. On the one hand, the rising threat of China and the raging war in Ukraine are strongly “inviting” the US to have a more efficient—not necessarily much lighter, but definitely not heavier— footprint across the Middle East. On the other hand, President Biden is aware that withdrawing all US troops from Syria would not only cost Washington its main local asset (i.e. the SDF) against a resurgent IS, but also push its main local ally (i.e. the Syrian Kurds) into Moscow’s arms.

¹⁸ In December 2019, Russia vetoed the UN Security Council’s proposal to use Al-Yarubiya in the northeast as a border crossing for UN supplies via Iraq, enforcing aid to exclusively transit via regime-controlled areas. The EU and the US have subsequently supported deliveries by NGOs to compensate for the UN shortfall, but such endeavours have been hampered by Russian patrols along the Faysh Khabur-Qamishli axis.

The roughly 900 residual US troops in Syria –2.000-2.500 servicemen were still stationed before the 2019 Turkish offensive– have thus remained in Rmelan, Al-Shadadi and around the oil fields southeast of Deir Al-Zour, where their intensive patrolling prevents Russian and Syrian forces from using routes outside their immediate area of influence. They are also keeping the strategic crossroads between the M4 highway and the Amuda-Hasaka road under strong control in order to complicate Russian access to their military bases in Amuda and Qamishli. Outside of the AANES, the US has also kept its base in Al-Tanf, which still denies Iran from getting a more direct Baghdad-Damascus axis of transit. Should the US withdraw its remaining forces from the AANES, the mixed Kurdish-Arab zone in question could buckle and collapse under any kind of security, health and economic threats.

Conclusion: A Geopolitical Curse Bound to Endure

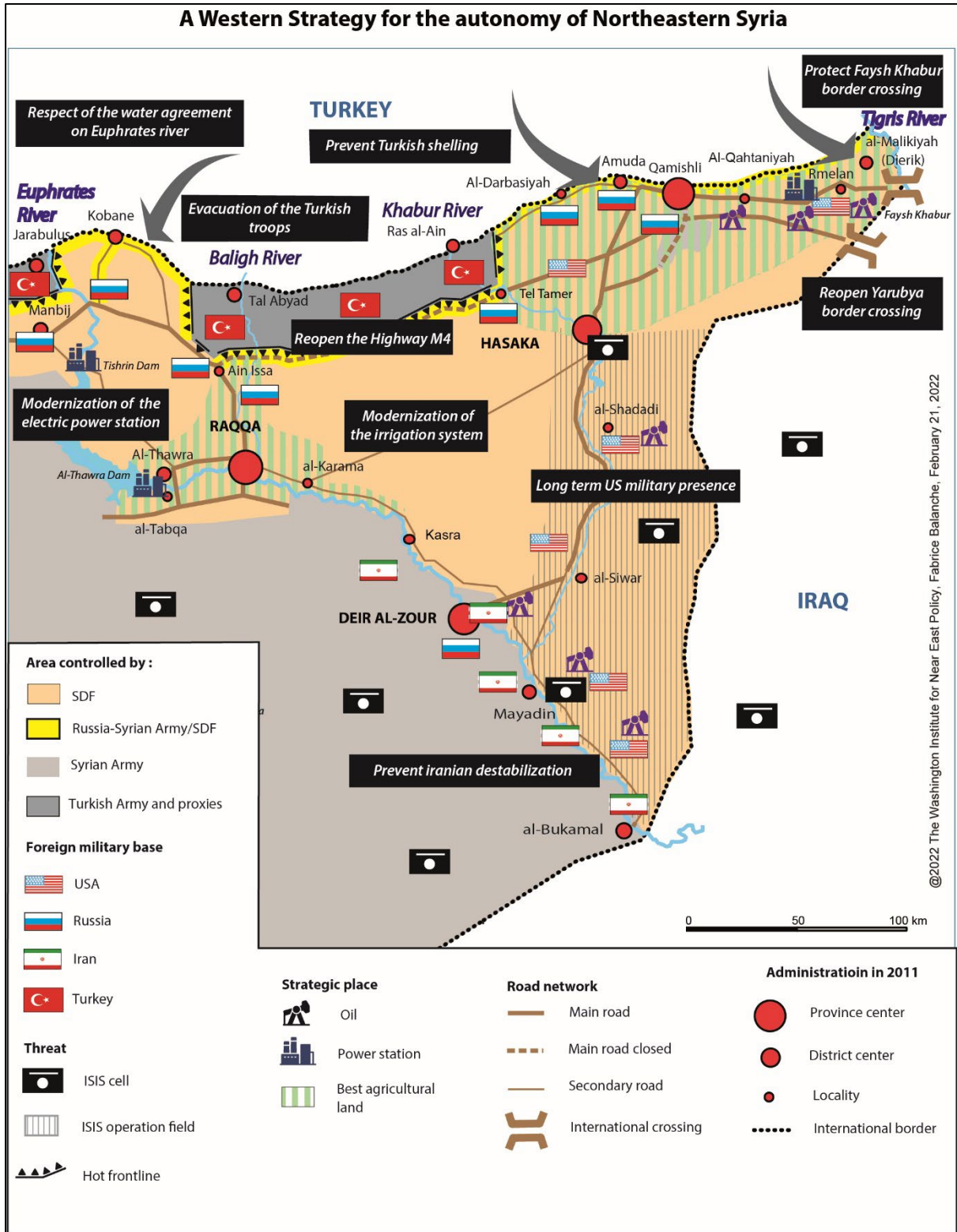
Back in Cold War mode, the US and Russia continue their arm wrestling through a paradoxical attempt to have interdependent local and regional actors of the Middle East trying to economically exhaust one another in Syria. It thus comes as no surprise that the utopian project of one Greater Kurdistan seems as remote as ever. At the scale of Rojava, the aforementioned developments have largely deflated hopes that had developed since 2014. Characterised by great resources but poor development, politically fragmented and ethnically cleaved¹⁹, the Kurdish-led AANES resembles the three other Kurdistans of Türkiye, Iraq and Iran. Chances of its long-term autonomy seem very slim, since the very idea goes against most involved agendas.

However, none of the Arab militias from the SDF seem to have defected so far, despite Damascus’ calls to Arab tribal leaders of eastern Syria, which suggests that the AANES does, after all, stand a chance of remaining cohesive as long as fighters’ wages are paid and US troops remain present. One must indeed bear in mind that the economic degradation of everyday life, reaching alarming levels in eastern Syria, is even worse in most regime-held areas of western Syria, notably affected by US sanctions (Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act).

Only a persistent and deterrent US military presence, combined with better-calibrated European economic aid, can sustain confidence among residents that the AANES can provide long-term safety and stability. Paramount is the need for a Marshall Plan-style humanitarian and economic campaign to reduce internal hardships and subsequent tensions in the AANES. To that end, Western governments need to inject development assistance in a more targeted way, to reassure local authorities, minimise mismanagement, and mitigate frustrations in poverty-stricken Arab areas (from which a new generation of IS recruits could otherwise emerge).²⁰ Politically, the international coalition should make it clear to all parties that its troops will not leave the AANES until Damascus agrees to a political deal on autonomy with serious guarantees. On the ground, the ultimate line to hold onto at any cost is the road between Rmelan and the Faysh Khabur crossing with Iraq, since it is the lifeline of external support to the otherwise encircled AANES.

¹⁹ Amy Austin Holmes and Wladimir Van Wilgenburg, “Kurds and Arabs in Northeast Syria: Power Struggle or Power Sharing?” The National Interest, August 11, 2019, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/kurds-and-arabs-northeast-syria-power-struggle-or-power-sharing-72281>.

²⁰ Balanche, Fabrice. “The Fragile Status Quo in Northeast Syria,” The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, PolicyWatch 3343, July 1, 2020, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/fragile-status-quo-northeast-syria>.



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Aware of this geopolitical reality, Russia, Iran, the Assad regime and Türkiye are expected to remain coordinated on hindering that jugular artery until the ultimate suffocation of the AANES. While such Western antagonism comes as no surprise emanating from the first three actors, Türkiye’s escalatory behaviour is much more alarming. President Biden’s diplomatic efforts should make it clear(er) that preserving the AANES is a true red line, while reassuring Ankara that the US is not going to bat against Türkiye in the way the SDF is lobbying for.²¹ For his part, President Erdogan should (more) cautiously measure the risks he is willing to take in Syria for the sake of his re-election campaign. At the time of writing these lines, an Ankara-Damascus rapprochement is gathering momentum in an atmosphere of unprecedented SDF stigmatisation by both the Assad regime and the Astana trio. President Erdogan recently evoked the idea of meeting President Assad, at a time when a looming Turkish ground operation may leave the SDF with no other choice but to negotiate with Damascus (then indebted to Ankara).²² The upcoming weeks and months seem potentially lethal to the AANES –and thus to the Kurds of Syria–, but may turn out equally destructive to Türkiye’s relations with numerous Western capitals.²³



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²¹ Mathews, Sean. “Turkey’s Looming Invasion of Syria Tests US-Kurdish Ties,” Middle East Eye, November 30, 2022, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/turkeys-looming-invasion-syria-tests-us-kurdish-ties>.

²² Patrick Haenni, “L’impasse stratégique du ‘mouvement öcalanien’ en Syrie,” Areion24, May 12, 2022, <https://www.areion24.news/2022/05/12/limpasse-strategique-du-mouvement-ocalanien-en-syrie/>.

²³ Aaron Stein, “You Go to War with the Turkey You Have, Not the Turkey You Want,” War on the Rocks, May 30, 2022, <https://warontherocks.com/2022/05/you-go-to-war-with-the-turkey-you-have-not-the-turkey-you-want/>.