

A line of soldiers in full combat gear, including helmets, vests, and boots, is walking away from the camera on a gravel airfield. They are moving towards a large military helicopter with its rotors visible. The scene is set in a desert environment under a clear sky. The entire image has a blue color cast.

# **Will 'We Won' Become 'Mission Accomplished'?** A US Withdrawal and The Scramble for Northeastern Syria

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# List of Key Acronyms

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**IS** – Islamic State

**PKK** – Kurdistan Worker's Party

**PYD** – Democratic Union Party

**SDC** – Syrian Democratic Council

**SDF** – Syrian Democratic Forces

**YPG** – People's Protection Units

# Executive Summary

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## About this Report

- Northeastern Syria is a battleground once again. The crisis began when President Donald Trump made the surprise announcement of the imminent withdrawal of the approximately 2,000 US forces from Syria in December 2018. Nevertheless, some 1,000 US soldiers remained there by the time President Trump decided to withdraw US troops from much of the Syrian-Turkish border on 6 October 2019, paving the way for the launch of Operation Peace Spring by Turkish-backed forces three days later. This latest Turkish-led offensive, the re-entry of the Assad regime into the region and the uncertain nature of future US involvement in the country triggered a scramble for northeastern Syria.
- This report charts some of the major developments in northeastern Syria from the December 2018 withdrawal announcement up until the start of Operation Peace Spring on 9 October 2019. It describes and notes the significance of the bitter dispute between Ankara and Washington over a proposed 'safe zone', analyses how the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) have sought to navigate the crisis and gauges the strength of the so-called Islamic State (IS) in Syria. Providing this context enables this report to selectively incorporate more limited analysis on the latest and most pertinent developments in northeastern Syria at the time of this writing.
- The report closes with an evaluation of the current situation, weighs the possibility that history will remember President Trump's 'We Have Won' speech similarly to President Bush's 'Mission Accomplished' one and offers some recommendations for US policymakers.

## A Safe Zone or an Invasion? – Turkish Ambitions in Northern Syria

- Turkish proposals for a Turkish-administered 'safe zone' claimed that it would simultaneously prevent IS from re-emerging and provide a safe haven to which millions of Syrian refugees could return. It was in actuality an idea principally geared to fatally weaken the SDF, led by People's Protection Units (YPG), thus critically endangering the US-led coalition's efforts against IS.
- Up until recently, Washington sought to manage Ankara's demands by establishing a far more limited 'security mechanism' with joint US and Turkish patrols. Senior US officials repeatedly threatened Turkey not to target the Kurds. Turkey was not satisfied by these half-measures. Ankara's continued maximalist demands on Washington to stand down and allow broader Turkish involvement in northern Syria have largely been met with appeasement by President Trump.

- Trump's decision to withdraw US troops from much of northern Syria in October 2019 incentivised the latest Turkish-led offensive. Despite the allegedly agreed upon 'permanent ceasefire', clashes continue between the SDF and Turkish-backed forces in northeastern Syria.

## **Caught in the Lurch – The Syrian Democratic Forces**

- A full US withdrawal from Syria in the future would risk losing the SDF's and US-led coalition's military achievements against IS at the hands of Ankara and Damascus. As the SDF and their political partners had to make a deal with Assad in a desperate bid for protection from their Turkish adversaries, prospects that the SDF can cement many of their diplomatic and military gains are bleak. Neither state is willing or ready to reach a palatable political compromise with the Syrian Kurds.
- The SDF have already faced huge challenges beyond the existential threat of Turkish aggression. One of the most pressing has been the thousands of IS fighters and their families under their watch in prisons and camps. Another is that the SDF's attempts to win the popular backing of the Sunni Arab population under their control appear to have come up short, making their cross sectarian forces acutely vulnerable to defection.
- In this period of great uncertainty, the SDF's very internal cohesion is being put to the test. Lacking greater military and political backing by the US-led coalition, the SDF will be hard pressed to resist their adversaries in Ankara and Damascus throughout the rest of northeastern Syria as the conflict continues.

## **The 'War of Attrition' – IS's Clandestine Insurgency**

- While the territorial 'Caliphate' has been shattered, IS remains a potent underground insurgency. Tens of thousands of its fighters are unaccounted for and activities ranging from targeted assassinations and suicide bombings to arson continue in areas supposedly recaptured from the organisation.
- This coincides with Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's call for a 'War of Attrition' stage in IS's campaign. Despite his recent death, one can expect that this virulent insurgency will remain a regional threat and will continue to be able to direct or inspire terrorist attacks abroad.
- This recent period of destabilisation in Syria will likely be exploited by IS to its advantage. Their future could plausibly mirror how IS made a comeback following its predecessors' defeat during the Iraq War before recovering in civil-war-torn Syria and subsequently in Iraq in the absence of US forces.

## Conclusion – War is Still Upon Us

- There is a very significant chance that President Trump's 'We Have Won' announcement of December 2018 will be remembered similarly to President Bush's 'Mission Accomplished' speech in March 2003. If the administration does not want to mimic the mistakes of the past, it must seriously reassess its policy options in Syria.
- Turkish national security interests fundamentally conflict with America's for the foreseeable future. The USA should seek to ameliorate Turkish security concerns where possible while at the same time exerting the utmost effort to rehabilitate their relationship with the SDF. The US government should apply further economic and diplomatic sanctions on Turkey in order to better constrain their behaviour in northern Syria going forward. Encouraging renewed peace talks between Ankara and the PKK may help alleviate tensions between Turkey and the SDF.
- The SDF risks being irreparably dismantled due to Turkish aggression. They have called for Damascus's aid only out of necessity. While they are not the perfect partner, it is in the interests of the US administration to maintain this relationship. Leaving up to 600 troops in Deir ez-Zor governorate to fight alongside the SDF against IS for the indeterminate future is not sufficient. To further abandon these vital partners forfeits most of the leverage the US-led coalition has in the Syrian Civil War, exacerbates a deepening humanitarian crisis and damages America's national security interests.
- IS could exploit this new instability in northeastern Syria to potentially reemerge on the world stage in the coming years. US forces should remain in Syria for the foreseeable future and try to resuscitate their relationship where possible with the SDF in order to minimise the threat this largely underground yet still potent insurgency poses to US allies in the region and around the globe.





## Introduction

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On 19 December 2018, President Donald Trump announced the withdrawal of the approximately 2,000 US troops in Syria. In a video posted on Twitter, he stated that 'we have won' against IS and it was time 'to bring the troops back home'.<sup>1</sup> Within days, Jim Mattis, the Secretary of Defense, resigned in protest, as did Brett McGurk, the serving Presidential Envoy for the Global Coalition to Counter the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant. Trump's decision was deemed premature by a range of international allies<sup>2</sup> and domestic actors.<sup>3</sup>

Nevertheless, by the end of September 2019, Trump had yet to follow through on his pledge. In the nine months following the announcement, it remained remarkably unclear how many troops were stationed in Syria at a given time and how long they would remain, due to a long sequence of US policy re-evaluations. In January 2019, it was reported that the US had begun to withdraw 'military ground equipment'.<sup>4</sup> In February, the White House decided to leave 400 troops in Syria, half of which would comprise part of a multinational force in the northeast while the other 200 would be based at the al-Tanf outpost in southeastern Syria.<sup>5</sup> In March reports held that the US aimed to reduce its force levels down to 1,000 troops in the country by early May, after which the withdrawal would pause. Further reductions would be conditions-based, as determined by the Pentagon, until troop levels reached the 400 mark that Trump had approved in February.<sup>6</sup>

The scramble for northeastern Syria truly began following a phone call between President Trump and President Erdoğan of Turkey on 6 October. The White House press statement following the call read, 'Turkey will soon be moving forward with its long-planned operation into northern Syria. The United States Armed Forces will not support or be involved in the operation, and United States forces, having defeated the ISIS territorial "Caliphate," will no longer be in the immediate area.'<sup>7</sup> In the coming days, US troops withdrew from most of their positions and bases near the Syrian-Turkish border,<sup>8</sup> effectively giving the 'green light' for the launch of Operation Peace Spring on 9 October against the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF).<sup>9</sup> Within days the fighting had displaced hundreds of thousands of people<sup>10</sup> and had killed dozens of civilians and SDF fighters.<sup>11</sup> Desperately seeking protection from their Turkish adversaries, the SDF invited the Assad regime and their Russian counterparts to enter SDF-held

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1 Donald J Trump, Twitter post, 19 December 2018 6:10pm, <https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/1075528854402256896?lang=en>

2 'Trump's Syria Withdrawal Announcement Criticized by Allies, Praised By Putin', *RadioFreeEurope*, 20 December 2018.

3 'Republicans rip Trump's surprise Syria withdrawal in meeting with Pence', *Politico*, 19 December 2018.

4 'US begins withdrawing some military equipment from Syria', *CNN*, 11 January 2019.

5 'In Latest Shift, Trump Agrees to Leave 400 Troops in Syria', *New York Times*, 22 February 2019.

6 'U.S. Poised to Send 150 Troops to Patrol Northeastern Syria', *New York Times*, 12 September 2019.

7 United States, White House. "Statement from the Press Secretary", 6 October 2019.

8 'U.S.-allied Kurds strike deal to bring Assad's Syrian troops back into Kurdish areas', *Washington Post*, 13 October 2019.

9 'Turkey launches start of "Operation Peace Spring" targeting SDF in Syria', *Defense Post*, 9 October 2019.

10 'More than 160,000 have fled northern Syria as Turkish offensive escalates', *NBC News*, 15 October 2019.

11 'Turkey Syria offensive: Dozens killed as assault continues', *BBC News*, 11 October 2019.

territory in Manbij, Kobane, Raqqā, Hasakah and Qamishli.<sup>12</sup> In the midst of this crisis, the Trump administration debated whether to keep a few hundred US soldiers in eastern Syria or to pull out of the country altogether.<sup>13</sup> On 22 October, Russia and Turkey announced a permanent ceasefire, effectively carving up northern Syria into spheres of influence belonging to Ankara, Damascus and the SDF. The next day, Trump celebrated the deal proclaiming, 'Let someone else fight over this long bloodstained sand ... this was an outcome created by us, the United States, and nobody else.'<sup>14</sup>

What was once essentially an American protectorate in northeastern Syria – and what had been a comparatively stable third of the war-torn country in recent years – became unglued in a matter of weeks. This report seeks to provide the context for this latest crisis by charting some of the major developments in northeastern Syria following Trump's initial withdrawal announcement in December 2018. It also highlights some of the most important developments following the crucial phone call between Trump and Erdoğan on 6 October, including Turkish-led Operation Peace Spring. Future research may have the last word on what the other key turning points were during this climactic period.

The report is divided into three substantive sections. The first describes and notes the significance of the bitter dispute between Turkey and the USA over the proposed 'safe zone' and the status of northern Syria. The second assesses how the SDF have sought to navigate the crisis and insulate themselves from the existential threat of Turkey. The third section seeks to gauge the strength of IS's insurgency following Trump's December 2018 withdrawal announcement and examines what opportunities lay in store for its possible resurgence. The conclusion summarises the key findings of the report and concludes with a number of policy recommendations on how the US-led coalition might best proceed in order to secure their interests amid the chaos.

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12 'Kurdish-Syrian Pact Scrambles Mideast Alliances', *Wall Street Journal*, 14 October 2019.

13 'White House weighing options that would keep 500 troops in Syria: report', *The Hill*, 24 October 2019.

14 'Trump Claims Credit for a Syria Cease-Fire and Says U.S. Role in Region is Over', *New York Times*, 23 October 2019.

# A 'Safe Zone' or an Invasion? – Turkish Ambitions in Northern Syria

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Only five days prior to President Trump's December announcement of the withdrawal of US troops from Syria, he spoke on the phone with Turkey's President Erdoğan about Syria's future. During the call, Erdoğan urged Trump finally to pull his forces out of Syria considering the near-total collapse of the so-called caliphate. Erdoğan assured his counterpart that Turkey could now bear the burden of ensuring IS's defeat. According to senior administration officials, Trump responded, 'Ok, it's all yours. We are done.'<sup>15</sup>

After months of US reversals, another phone call between Trump and President Erdoğan on 7 October gave the 'green light' Ankara sought, which triggered Turkey's latest offensive against the SDF on 9 October.<sup>16</sup> This section aims to assess Turkey's ambitions in northeastern Syria and highlight how it has sought to pursue its objectives since December 2018.

## Turkey's Syrian Objectives

Turkish claims that it could finish the job against IS ring hollow. In actual fact, Turkey has shown comparatively little interest in defeating the so-called caliphate in recent years compared to its attempts to weaken the Syrian Kurds.<sup>17</sup> The central reason is that Ankara views the Kurdish-led People's Protection Units (YPG) and the YPG-led SDF as largely synonymous with the Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK), an organisation that Ankara has been waging a counterinsurgency against since 1984. The PKK is currently listed as a terrorist group by several states and organisations, including the European Union, the USA and Turkey. The conflict between Turkey and the PKK is estimated to have claimed over 40,000 lives. From the onset of the Syrian Civil War, Turkey has sought to ensure that the PKK's Syrian Kurdish brethren did not establish a robust foothold along Turkey's southern border.

Turkish designs against the Kurds of northern Syria are well documented. As highlighted previously by the author, Turkey and Turkish-backed forces had already conducted two offensives in northern Syria prior to Operation Peace Spring. Operation Euphrates Shield was launched in August 2016<sup>18</sup> and Operation Olive Branch was initiated in January 2018.<sup>19</sup> Both operations were focused on

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15 'Trump told Turkey's Erdogan in Dec. 14 call about Syria, "it's all yours. We are done"', *CNN*, 24 December 2018.

16 'Turkey launches an attack on northern Syria: Green light, go', *The Economist*, 10 October 2019.

17 'Anti-ISIS Operations in Syria: Assessing Scenarios after the U.S. Withdrawal', *IRIS*, February 2019.

18 J. Holland-McCowan, 'War of Shadows: How Turkey's Conflict with the PKK Shapes the Syrian Civil War and Iraqi Kurdistan', *JCSR*, August 2017.

19 J. Holland-McCowan, 'The Kurds After the "Caliphate": How the Decline of ISIS has Impacted the Kurds of Iraq and Syria', *JCSR*, October 2018.

targeting or strategically weakening the YPG and the SDF. Despite Erdoğan's arguments to the contrary, Ankara has not demonstrated a commitment to defeat IS comprehensively. Turkish military action has revealed time and again that Turkey's chief priority in the Syrian conflict is to prevent the development of a semi-autonomous region under the SDF's control that could potentially pose a threat to Turkish security in the future.<sup>20</sup>

To that end, Erdoğan announced on 15 January 2019 his intention to create a 'safe zone' in northern Syria.<sup>21</sup> While the exact shape and nature of such a zone has been heavily contested ever since, a few of Ankara's consistent public demands are worth highlighting. The negotiations between the USA and Ankara have largely centred around how far to pull SDF forces and heavy weaponry away from the southern Turkish border.<sup>22</sup> By September 2019, the *New York Times* reported that Erdoğan desired 'the zone to be 20 miles deep and run 300 miles along the Turkish-Syrian border east of the Euphrates'.<sup>23</sup>

## A 'Security Mechanism' Versus a 'Safe Zone'

For months the USA had sought to circumvent Erdoğan's maximalist demands. Washington countered Ankara's requests to establish a Turkish-run zone by proposing a US-administered area. In August, Washington and Ankara agreed to a framework for establishing a 'security mechanism' along the Turkish-Syrian border. The reported intent of the security mechanism was to prevent a resurgence of IS in the country. The director of the Defeat-ISIS task force, Christopher P Maier, stated that 'the depth is really something that continues to be specific to the actual activities we're doing ... when we're doing aerial reconnaissance, it will go certain depths based on how the mission planning is.'<sup>24</sup> At the same time, Maier stressed that the USA was committed to removing the Kurdish militia elements from the territory and replacing them with other local forces to ensure no security vacuum would be generated.

In such an area, Turkey would have a limited presence and Kurdish militants would pull back their forces 5 to 14 kilometres away from the border.<sup>25</sup> The Turkish and American militaries established a joint operations centre in southern Turkey to monitor the border.<sup>26</sup> Joint reconnaissance flights and ground patrols were also conducted with American and Turkish troops.

These joint Turkish-American patrols were conducted along a 75-mile buffer zone that stretched between Tal Abyad and Ras al-Ayn. The SDF, for their part, claimed that they had initiated a withdrawal of their fighters from both border towns and had dismantled their respective military fortifications,<sup>27</sup> leaving them under the control of local forces.<sup>28</sup>

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20 'Anti-ISIS Operations in Syria: Assessing Scenarios after the U.S. Withdrawal', *IRIS*, February 2019.

21 'Erdoğan pledges Syria "safe zone" as new UN envoy arrives', *AP*, 15 January 2019.

22 'U.S. and Turkey Avoid Conflict by Agreeing on Buffer Zone in Syria', *New York Times*, 7 August 2019.

23 'U.S. Poised to Send 150 Troops to Patrol Northeastern Syria', *New York Times*, 12 September 2019.

24 Terri Moo Cronk, "U.S., Turkey Cooperate in Defeat-ISIS Effort", *US Department of Defense*, 18 September 2019.

25 'The Crisis is Coming: Syria and the End of the U.S.-Turkish alliance', *War on the Rocks*, 5 August 2019.

26 Cronk.

27 'US-backed Syrian Kurds to remove fortifications from Turkish border as part of "safe zone" deal', *MilitaryTimes*, 3 September 2019.

28 'US-backed Syrian Kurds begin pullout near Turkish border as part of a "safe zone" deal', *MilitaryTimes*, 27 August 2019.

Critically, this stretch of the border is not predominately Kurdish. Tal Abyad has been described as the Achilles heel of the predominately Syrian Kurdish belt of northern Syria. Experts have wagered that many of the Arab tribes around Tal Abyad would support a Turkish offensive in northern Syria against the Kurds in the future.<sup>29</sup> Kurdish strongholds along the border such as Kobane or Qamishli – which are well inside the 20-mile-deep proposed safe zone – were not included within this security mechanism.

On the other hand, most of Maier's statements on the 'security mechanism' were vague and lacked key details. In his own words, 'Our assessment is that there are other security forces there that are local ... that would be part of an enduring security force, understanding that that may ultimately result in needing more forces that we would work with Turkey and others to address.'<sup>30</sup> Who these forces most likely were remains remarkably unclear, particularly as it coincided with his assertion in the same speech that the coalition's primary focus continued to be working by, with and through the SDF to defeat IS.

Despite these efforts, Ankara still viewed the security mechanism as unacceptable. Turkey's foreign minister said that 'there have been some joint patrols, yes, but steps taken beyond that ... are only cosmetic'.<sup>31</sup> The government threatened multiple times to establish the safe zone unilaterally if its security concerns were not met.<sup>32</sup>

However, even if a deal regarding the safe zone could have been reached prior to Operation Peace Spring, there was no guarantee that it would have been implemented effectively. Long negotiations resulted in a roadmap to clear the SDF from Manbij in June 2018, but it was never fully put into effect. Joint US and Turkish patrols took months to initiate and SDF fighters reportedly remain in the city.<sup>33</sup> This did not bode well for the viability of any potential deal Turkey and the USA might have struck regarding the rest of northern Syria.

## The Refugee Question

President Erdoğan added a new twist to the plot with his remarkable claim in September that his proposed safe zone could host at least one million of the Syrian refugees who had settled in Turkey and Europe. Perhaps not accidentally, this proposal coincided with a recent turn of public and government opinion against Syrian refugees in Turkey. Newly enforced regulations in the country have rendered it far more difficult for Syrians to find work. Turkish officials are reportedly closing factories and fining employers who offered jobs to Syrians to work illegally or without residency papers. The *New York Times* even reported that the Turkish government has forcibly moved thousands of Syrian refugees from major cities and has deposited them on the Syrian side of the border.<sup>34</sup>

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29 F. Balanche, 'Tal Abyad: Achilles Heel of the Syrian Kurdish Belt', *The Washington Institute of Near East Policy*, 21 December 2018.

30 *ibid.*

31 'U.S. Poised to Send 150 Troops to Patrol Northeastern Syria', *New York Times*, 12 September 2019.

32 'Syria "safe zone" deadline expires with Turkish threat looming', *Reuters*, 1 October 2019.

33 'Turkey will not let Syria safe zone agreement be delayed: foreign minister', *Reuters*, 8 August 2019.

34 'Turkey's Radical Plan: Send a Million Refugees Back to Syria', *New York Times*, 10 September 2019.

Consequently, Ankara partially repackaged the idea of a proposed safe zone not just as a security measure but also as an effective solution for the resettling of refugees. Erdoğan announced that, 'Our goal is to settle at least one million Syrian brothers and sisters in our country in this safe zone ... if needed, with support from our friends, we can build new cities there and make it habitable for our Syrian siblings.'<sup>35</sup> Erdoğan broadcast his idea of a humanitarian and security-orientated safe zone in northeastern Syria to the world during his address at the UN General Assembly on 24 September.<sup>36</sup>

There is no clear evidence that such large numbers of Syrian refugees wish to return to their home country voluntarily. Fully half of the prewar Syrian population has been displaced, including nearly six million internally displaced people and another six million registered refugees. The crisis has been labelled by the UN as the worst manmade humanitarian catastrophe since the Second World War.<sup>37</sup> Fewer than 200,000 Syrian refugees have returned to the country since the civil war began.<sup>38</sup> Many of those that did find their property had been seized or destroyed while others were greeted by the Syrian regime with conscription, arrest or torture.<sup>39</sup>

The contradictions are striking. While on the one hand Erdoğan has trumpeted Turkey as 'the most generous provider of humanitarian aid', having accepted the highest number of displaced people, on the other he threatened to 'open the gates', encouraging migrants to journey to Europe if a safe zone deal did not come to fruition.<sup>40</sup> These messages echo the rhetoric of the migration crisis in November 2015, a time when the EU eventually provided a \$6.7 billion aid package and other political concessions to Turkey in order to halt most of the refugee influx into the continent.<sup>41</sup> Once again, Erdoğan has used refugees as political leverage against his Western counterparts.

## Reaping What You Sow

It is worth highlighting that, in many ways, most of the problems that have surrounded the safe-zone debate are largely of Turkey's own making. Not only did their border with Syria remain remarkably porous as jihadists and foreign fighters flooded into the country, but the government also showed no sincere willingness to work with the coalition to fight against IS.<sup>42</sup> Combined with the inability of the USA to find local Sunni Arab partners with which to work, a Turkish lack of cooperation meant that the Syrian Kurds and their allies were the only local ground partners left with which the US-led coalition could partner.

The breakdown of a peace process between the PKK and Ankara in July 2015 only aggravated the situation. The renewed conflict led to the deaths of nearly 3,000 people in Turkey by July 2017.<sup>43</sup> This latest round of fighting between the PKK and Turkey has raised the stakes

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35 *ibid.*

36 'Recep Tayyip Erdoğan proposes "safe zone" for refugees in Syria', *The Guardian*, 24 September 2019.

37 'Syria "worst man-made human catastrophe since World War II" – UN rights chief', *UN News*, 14 March 2017.

38 'Operational Portal'. Situation Syria Regional Refugee, *UNHCR*, 10 October 2019.

39 'Assad Urges Syrian Refugees to Come Home. Many are Welcomed with Arrest and Torture', *Washington Post*, 2 June 2019.

40 'Erdoğan pushes Syrian safe zone at UN', *Al-Monitor*, 25 September 2019.

41 'Europe's Complicity in Turkey's Syrian-Refugee Crackdown', *The Atlantic*, 29 August 2019.

42 'Anti-ISIS Operations in Syria: Assessing Scenarios after the U.S. Withdrawal', *IRIS*, February 2019.

43 B. Mandiraci, 'Turkey's PKK Conflict Kills almost 3,000 in Two Years', *International Crisis Group*, 20 July 2017.

around whether or not and to what degree the YPG and SDF can achieve lasting power in Syria. Turkey argues that any weapons or political support that the US-led coalition provides for the SDF could be redirected towards future PKK offensives in Turkey. Reaching a new peace deal between Ankara and the PKK could be the best way to lead to a 'détente between Turkey and the SDF'.<sup>44</sup>

## Operation Peace Spring

The dam finally broke in October 2019. The phone call between President Trump and President Erdoğan on 6 October gave Turkey the 'green light' Erdoğan had sought. The main deterrents to an offensive – US forces embedded in SDF positions<sup>45</sup> – were withdrawn within days, giving Turkish-backed forces the chance they wanted. Turkey launched Operation Peace Spring on 9 October. The offensive primarily targeted Tal Abyad and Ras al-Ayn, predominately Arab border towns under the SDF's control. In the following two weeks Turkish backed-forces gained control of most of the territory between the towns and pushed forward south to the strategic M4 highway.<sup>46</sup>

Despite bipartisan efforts in Congress to sanction Turkey strongly for their actions against the Kurds,<sup>47</sup> and mixed messages from the White House,<sup>48</sup> Erdoğan was undeterred. By 22 October, Operation Peace Spring had captured approximately 900 square miles of territory.<sup>49</sup> Following a five-day ceasefire, Turkey cemented many of its gains by signing a pact with Russia on 23 October. The terms of this 'permanent ceasefire' mandated that the SDF had to retreat more than 20 miles away from the Turkish-Syrian border. Russian and Turkish forces would patrol a six-mile strip of border, excluding the city of Qamishli.<sup>50</sup>

Whether Turkish-backed forces will abide by the so-called permanent ceasefire remains to be seen. Frequent clashes between the SDF and the Assad regime on one side and the Turkish backed forces on the other continue, particularly near the strategic crossroads of Tal Tamr.<sup>51</sup> Not all of Turkey's initial demands, such as full control of the border from Kobane to Iraq, have been met. President Erdoğan claims that the YPG and SDF have not completely withdrawn 20 miles from the border and Ankara has repeatedly stated that it reserves the right to expand their 'safe zone' if needed.<sup>52</sup> For now, Turkey has carved out its third significant toehold in northern Syria and has fundamentally restructured the geopolitics of the region. Time will tell whether Turkish ambitions for northeastern Syria are close to being satiated.

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44 Michael Singh & Dana Stroul, 'The Syria Study Group: September 2019 Final Report and Recommendations', *United States Institute of Peace*, September 2019, p.11.

45 'President Endorses Turkish Military Operation in Syria, Shifting U.S. Policy', *New York Times*, 7 October 2019.

46 'A post-mortem of Turkey's Operation Peace Spring', *Al-Monitor*, 25 October 2019.

47 'How Congress plans to push back on Trump's Actions in Syria', *Vox News*, 23 October 2019.

48 'Turkey's Erdogan "threw Trump's Syria letter in a bin"', *BBC News*, 17 October 2019.

49 'Putin and Erdogan Announce Plan for Northeast Syria, Bolstering Russian Influence', *New York Times*, 22 October 2019.

50 'Turkey Halts Syrian Incursion, Hours After Deal With Russia', *New York Times*, 23 October 2019.

51 'The Fighting Continues in Northern Syria', *Wall Street Journal*, 25 November 2019.

52 'Turkey says Kurdish YPG has not fully withdrawn from Syria border area', *Reuters*, 28 October, 2019.





# Caught in the Lurch – The Syrian Democratic Forces

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**T**he SDF and the US-led coalition have shared remarkable achievements. Ever since Washington first partnered with the YPG in the summer of 2014,<sup>53</sup> and subsequently with the YPG-led SDF in October 2015, the Syrian Kurds have served as the primary ground forces of the US-led coalition against IS in Syria.<sup>54</sup> With the support of the coalition, the SDF liberated Manbij, Tabqa and Raqqa, IS's de-facto Syrian capital, as well as almost all of Syria east of the Euphrates. The General Command of the SDF claimed that 11,000 of their fighters perished over the course of the conflict. Another 24,000 had been injured.<sup>55</sup> By March 2019, the SDF had liberated more than 20,000 square miles of territory previously held by IS.<sup>56</sup> Together with the US-led coalition, the SDF toppled the so-called caliphate in Syria.

President Trump's December withdrawal announcement, followed by his latest policy reversals, has jeopardised everything for which the SDF and their coalition partners have fought. The SDF naturally opposed the safe zone idea,<sup>57</sup> but they felt bound to attempt cooperation with the USA on the issue due to their acute vulnerability to Syrian and Turkish forces. This section aims to show how the SDF have sought to navigate their subsequent challenges since the December withdrawal announcement and briefly gauges what their prospects are in northeastern Syria following the initiation of Operation Peace Spring.

## SDF Responses

The organisation responded to concerns that the USA might leave Syria with a mixture of betrayal and defiance. In a rare interview by the *New York Times* in May, the SDF's commander Mazlum Kobani cautioned that a retreat of US troops from Syria would spell the same disaster that befell Iraq following America's withdrawal in 2011, ultimately creating a power vacuum that led to the emergence of IS. Despite his uncertainty, given the Trump administration's myriad policy reversals over whether Washington would abandon them, Kobani asserted that the SDF was prepared to defend the gains they had made even if the USA withdrew. However, the general also expressed his desire that the USA should stay in order to continue to combat IS and to facilitate restructuring the SDF as an internal security force.<sup>58</sup> Kobani concluded that 'of course it would be hard' if the US left, but 'if we end up on our own, we'll continue the war as we did in the time before the coalition'.<sup>59</sup>

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53 'The Daring Plan to Save A Religious Minority From ISIS', *New Yorker*, 26 February 2018.

54 Holland-McCowan, October 2018.

55 'Syrian government labels SDF "separatist terrorist militias" ahead of Ankara talks', *DefenseOne*, 15 September 2019.

56 United States, White House, 'The United States and Our Global Partners Have Liberated All ISIS-Controlled Territory.' 23 March 2019.

57 'Turkey's Radical Plan: Send a Million Refugees Back to Syria', *New York Times*, 10 September 2019.

58 'They were "Comrades in Arms" Against ISIS. Now the U.S. is Eyeing the Exits', *New York Times*, 12 May 2019.

59 *ibid.*

Nevertheless, times have changed since the YPG first aligned itself with Washington. Even before Operation Peace Spring, Turkey and its proxies had already successfully invaded Syria twice to counter the SDF's interests. The Assad regime has also substantially strengthened as it has defeated most of its Sunni rebel adversaries with the help of Russia and Iran. Damascus is no longer content to leave northern and eastern Syria to the Kurds or the jihadists. Despite the YPG's steadfastness in the defense of Kobane, that siege and the subsequent territorial reversals at the hands of Turkish-backed operations have revealed the inability of the YPG and the SDF to defend themselves against conventionally superior firepower absent US-led coalition support.<sup>60</sup>

Consequently, the Syrian Kurdish leadership was justifiably anxious that the extensive movement of Turkish ground troops and aerial forces across the border in the months before Operation Peace Spring could have been the prelude to the next Turkish intervention. These armed manoeuvres occurred despite the YPG's compliance with the US-Turkish negotiated 'security mechanism', according to Ilham Ahmed, the co-chairman of the Syrian Democratic Council (SDC). She said that YPG militants had left the security of the area between Tal Abyad and Ras al-Ayn in the hands of local forces, had dismantled fortifications and tunnels and had withdrawn their heavy weapons 12 miles away from the border as requested. She also mentioned that Turkey was fully aware of what the SDF was receiving from the USA. Indeed, in an effort to ease tensions, Washington had provided Ankara with a thorough list of the supplies the SDF had received every month. However, Ahmed pointed out that as of late September, the safe zone was between 3 to 9 miles deep in northeastern Syria, not the 20 miles for which Turkey had stringently advocated.<sup>61</sup>

The Turkish proposal of resettling at least a million Syrians currently residing in Turkey into the proposed safe zone in Syria is of grave concern for the SDF. For those that live in the predominately Kurdish region of northeastern Syria, these migration proposals could conjure up memories of Ba'athist Arabisation and other displacement policies that have targeted the Kurds for decades. Saddam Hussein's regime in particular sought to change the demography of the disputed territories in Iraq in order to replace longtime Kurdish residents of oil-rich cities such as Kirkuk with supposedly more loyal Sunni Arab families.<sup>62</sup> Most of the Syrian refugees in Turkey are not from northeastern Syria. Resettling them there could displace the local Kurdish population. The prospect of millions of Sunni Arabs moving into a traditionally predominately Kurdish stretch of territory risks diluting the Kurdish control and influence in the region, a prospect likely not lost on Erdoğan.

Through negotiations carried out by their civil counterpart the SDC, the SDF have tried to counter Syrian and Turkish designs on northeastern Syria. The SDC desires Syrian constitutional recognition of some form of autonomy within the region's self-administration zones as part of a more federalised future Syria. This supposedly includes the Arab-majority territories the SDF controls such as

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60 Holland-McCowan, October 2018.

61 'Despite Syria "Safe Zone," Kurdish Leader Fears Threat from Turkey', *Foreign Policy*, 23 December 2019.

62 Elizabeth Ferris & Kimberly Stoltz, 'The Future of Kirkuk: The Referendum and Its Potential Impact on Displacement', *The Brookings Institution*, 3 March 2008, p.1.

Deir ez-Zor, which they have stated they will not leave in the hands of the Syrian government. The SDF have even offered to incorporate themselves within Syria's armed forces if they were granted such a form of autonomy. For its part, the Syrian regime has consistently asserted that it will not accept these 'separatist demands' which would lead to the effective partitioning of the country.<sup>63</sup>

## The SDF as Prison Guards

One of the first SDF reactions to Trump's withdrawal announcement in December was to reportedly discuss the possibility of releasing IS prisoners under their guard. Whether or not this idea was entertained as a potential reminder to the US-led coalition and its allies of the SDF's utility, these discussions hint at a calculation of how the SDF might have concentrated their forces in the event of a Turkish attack. The spokesman for the SDF at the time denied that these discussions ever took place.<sup>64</sup>

Regardless of the verifiability of the reporting, such a discussion points to the critical prison issue that the SDF are confronted with as members of the US-led coalition eye the exits. The SDF have been severely overstretched as they have attempted to maintain control over at least twelve formal and informal displacement camps. Together they hold tens of thousands of civilians, IS family members and 11,000 alleged IS fighters,<sup>65</sup> 8,000 of whom are local Iraqis and Syrians. Most of the countries of origin of IS foreign fighters have either refused to bring them back to their home countries, have selectively repatriated family members or have stripped them of their citizenship.<sup>66</sup> Trump has strongly condemned European countries for their behavior and has threatened to release the prisoners as a consequence: 'We're holding thousands of ISIS fighters right now, and Europe has to take them ... if Europe doesn't take them, I'll have no choice but to release them into countries from which they came, which is Germany and France and other places.'<sup>67</sup>

Many of the civilians in the camp remain committed to the group's ideology. General Joseph L Votel, the former head of Central Command, worryingly described most of those transported from 'the last vestiges of the caliphate' and subsequently detained as 'unrepentant, unbroken and radicalized'.<sup>68</sup> The SDF have made efforts to better regulate the al-Hawl camp, incorporating the use of biometric measures such as fingerprinting and facial recognition to identify and separate the male fighters from the rest of the population. However, the SDF did not use these same methods with civilians in captivity. IS's Syrian and Iraqi civilian loyalists can therefore interact at will with the wider civilian population, substantially raising the risks of recruitment and indoctrination. Extremist networks in the camps have been deemed responsible for attacks against guards and the burning of tents belonging to those deemed less committed to the 'caliphate's' cause.<sup>69</sup>

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63 'Syrian government labels SDF "separatist terrorist militias" ahead of Ankara talks', *DefenseOne*, 15 September 2019.

64 'Kurdish Fighters Discuss Releasing Almost 3,200 ISIS Prisoners', *New York Times*, 20 December 2018.

65 'ISIS's opportunity in Northern Syria's Detention Facilities and Camps', *ISW*, 13 May 2019.

66 Singh & Stroul, p.20.

67 'Trump's threat to dump thousands of fighters into Europe could end up hurting the US's fiercest ally in Syria', *Business Insider*, 23 August 2019.

68 'Its Territory May be Gone, but the U.S. Fight Against ISIS Is Far From Over', *New York Times*, 24 March 2019.

69 'ISIS's opportunity in Northern Syria's Detention Facilities and Camps', *ISW*, 13 May 2019.

The SDF have partially sought to ease their burden while simultaneously currying favour with some of the local Arab tribes by releasing several hundred IS militants to their respective tribal elders in Tabqa, Manbij and Hasakah, as well as Deir ez-Zor and Raqqa provinces.<sup>70</sup> It is possible that IS can defy the tribes' control of these returned local fighters and use these former detainees to reanimate their previous networks.<sup>71</sup>

## Prospects for Reform?

Some would argue that a middle path the US-led coalition could take in continuing to support the SDF in the future, despite Turkish pressure, is to restrict the training, arming and equipping of the organisation to its non-Kurdish components. After all, this was a policy that the Obama administration had tried to adhere to before the Trump administration allowed the US-led coalition to aid the SDF's Kurdish elements directly.<sup>72</sup> While it was never clear how well executed the Obama administration's policy was, due to the Kurdish nature of the group,<sup>73</sup> efforts to create more representatively local forces, particularly in the predominately Arab areas of northern and eastern Syria, could partly alleviate Turkish concerns.

Another key test for the SDF, and particularly for the SDC, is whether they can transition to being a truly inclusive, representative and devolved governing actor in the areas that they control. While their military partnership with the US-led coalition has been exemplary, they have yet to live up to their ideals of creating a truly federalised project where local Arabs and other minorities have an equal say in the affairs of northeastern Syria. Despite the fact that the SDF's roughly 60,000 fighters (as of September) were allegedly split quite evenly between Kurdish and Arab forces, and notwithstanding the SDF's control over extensive, predominately Arab areas, the group remains dominated by its Kurdish YPG component. The Democratic Union Party (PYD), the political wing of the YPG, has therefore conducted the majority of the governance in areas liberated from IS up to this point.<sup>74</sup>

The SDF's heavy-handed approach to governing and their methods of resource allocation have generated unrest in many of the Arab tribal areas. Significant Arab protests have flared up in Deir ez-Zor province where locals claim that the SDF privileges oil wealth and services to the Kurdish-dominated northeast of the country at their expense. Arab residents and elders have also accused the SDF of instituting conscription and conducting arbitrary arrests.<sup>75</sup> This tense situation has only been further exacerbated by the limited amount of civilian engagement in the region carried out by the USA, as evidenced by the cessation of stabilisation funding in northeastern Syria.<sup>76</sup>

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70 'The Dangerous Dregs of ISIS', *New Yorker*, 16 April 2019.

71 'ISIS Is Regaining Strength in Iraq and Syria', *New York Times*, 19 August 2019.

72 Ash Carter, 'Clarity of Purpose: Defeating ISIS' in *Inside the Five-Sided Box: Lessons from a Lifetime of Leadership in the Pentagon* (New York: Dutton, 2019), p.239.

73 'Syrian Kurds are now armed with sensitive US weaponry, and the Pentagon denies supplying it', *MilitaryTimes*, 7 May 2017.

74 Singh & Stroul, p.32.

75 'Arabs in Syria's Deir al-Zor protest against ruling Kurdish militia: residents', *Reuters*, 28 April 2019.

76 Singh & Stroul, p.8.

A potential option for the US coalition could be to try to make further military, economic and political support for the SDF conditional on their progress towards better representing the interests of all parties in northern and eastern Syria, irrespective of whether the constituent parties subscribe to the SDF's political ideology.<sup>77</sup> Progress on this front would also add credibility to the cross-sectarian claims of the SDC. The goal of such an effort would be for the SDF to establish and increase trust between themselves and the Arab populations living in territory currently under their control. While this has been tried before, many of these efforts were deemed of lesser priority than continuing the military fight. Now that the ISIS threat has weakened, there could be more opportunities to apply pressure on the SDF for internal reform.

This outcome should be considered unlikely however. Such a policy is counter to the YPG's ideological and organisational roots, which are centred around the Kurdish struggle and its commitment to what it sees as Abdullah Öcalan's cause.<sup>78</sup> While perhaps some of its more public political manifestations can be mitigated, the organisation would be hard-pressed to compromise fully on something that is integral to its identity and that it believes has constituted a key part of its success in recent years.

In short, the unity between Arab and Kurdish interests, created to defeat their common enemy, IS, has frayed. As a result, one of the greatest challenges for the SDF is to alleviate their monopoly on political power currently demonstrated by their military forces in northeastern Syria they control. Increased US pressure on the SDC to honour their avowed principals combined with conditional stabilisation activities could improve the situation.<sup>79</sup>

All of these policy approaches face significant challenges. The Arab components of the SDF have yet to demonstrate that they are as politically and militarily united as their Kurdish counterparts. Devoting more time and resources towards efforts to strengthen the Arab components of the SDF, and sidelining the Kurdish component, could ultimately render them a weaker fighting force, if potentially a more politically palatable one. It is also hard to imagine that the SDF would ever completely sever links with the PKK's leadership or remove PKK figures from positions of authority in Syria, as the Syria Study Group recommended.<sup>80</sup> As a consequence of these challenges, it appears that Turkey will never be mollified unless the US-led coalition stops funding and assisting an armed group with an integral YPG contingent.

## **Backs Against the Wall**

The initiation of Operation Peace Spring poses an existential threat to the SDF. All of the political and military gains the SDF have made in the years fighting IS with the aid of the coalition are at risk. This section seeks to identify some of the principal recent developments and concerns for the SDF in the future.

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77 J. Cafarella *et al.*, 'ISIS's Second Comeback: Assessing the Next ISIS Insurgency', *ISW*, June 2019, p.9.

78 J. Holland-McCowan, August 2017.

79 Singh & Stroul, p.43.

80 *ibid.*, p.44.

Without the US-led coalition's support, the SDF has been outmatched by Turkish force of arms in Operation Peace Spring. Up until now, Turkish-backed forces have focused their attack in predominantly Arab territory around Ras al-Ayn and Tal Abyad. The SDC claimed that as of 26 October over 300,000 people have been displaced and 250 killed as a result of the incursion.<sup>81</sup>

The SDF's desperate invitation for the Assad regime to re-enter northeastern Syria in order to protect them from Ankara's advances was born out of necessity.<sup>82</sup> Lack of clarity around the US-led coalition's involvement in the country in the future has only made the SDF more politically and militarily vulnerable. As of the time of writing, the situation is extremely fluid. It is unclear if the current 'permanent' ceasefire will hold, as skirmishes continue along the front lines.<sup>83</sup> What appears more clear is that the Assad regime and the SDF may not be enough to resist Turkish military pressure.

Amid the scramble for northeastern Syria, perhaps the gravest danger the SDF faces is the risk of losing their internal cohesion. There is little convincing evidence that the Kurds have gained the durable allegiance of the Sunni Arab forces who have until now been incorporated under the SDF's banner. Arab units could be tempted to join Turkish-backed forces or the Syrian regime's affiliated forces. Prior to Operation Peace Spring, some local Arab SDF commanders had already demonstrated a willingness to defect to pro-government forces.<sup>84</sup> Evidence suggests that the principal reason that most Sunni Arabs have participated in or acquiesced to SDF control and the Kurdish-led local administration was because the Syrian Kurds had secured the backing of the US-led coalition.<sup>85</sup> As the US looks to disengage politically and militarily, whether partially or fully, from northeastern Syria, the Arab units could legitimately ask whether supporting the SDF is in their best interests. They may calculate that it would be better for them to support one of the rival nation states vying for their allegiance instead.

If the SDF were to unravel along ethnic lines, the predominately Kurdish remnant would likely seek to withdraw to their Kurdish population centres in northern Syria in order to protect what limited de-facto autonomy and control they had remaining. Predominately Arab cities still under effective SDF control with the support of the Assad regime such as Manbij or Raqqqa could be up for the taking. If the SDF completely abandoned these cities, however, they would simultaneously surrender most of their leverage in the conflict, while severely weakening their ability to combat a possible IS resurgence in the predominately Arab areas they had left behind. At the same time, withdrawing their residual armed forces to their isolated Kurdish enclaves of northern Syria, many of which are well within the 20-mile-deep safe zone Turkey has proposed, would fly directly in the face of Erdoğan's ultimatums and perhaps provoke further military offensives. In truth, if the SDF completely lost the backing of the US-led coalition, they would likely experience widescale defections of their Arab components, which would be a mortal blow for the SDF as currently constructed.

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81 'The U.S. Should Have Committed to Its Promises', *The Atlantic*, 26 October 2019.

82 'Abandoned by U.S. in Syria, Kurds Find New Ally in American Fore', *New York Times*, 13 October 2019.

83 'Kurdish commander says Turkey resumed fighting despite ongoing cease-fire', *NBC News*, 24 October 2019.

84 'Syria Situation Report: January 23 – February 6, 2019', *ISW*, 8 February 2019.

85 J. Holland-McCowan, 'If Syria Safe-Zone Talks Fail: How the SDF Might Respond to Turkish Intervention', *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, 17 May 2019.

Ultimately, the SDF must recognise that the current administration, and perhaps the one that follows, will most likely seek a partial or full withdrawal from Syria at some point in the future. The SDF's other Western partners in northeastern Syria have made clear up to this point that they will not stay behind if the US leaves.<sup>86</sup> In that scenario, the last remaining option for the SDF is to try to reach a negotiated settlement with Damascus that preserves some of the political and military gains they have made in recent years.

However, beyond the protection of the SDF that the Assad regime recently tried to provide, the prospects for a more comprehensive political settlement between the two sides remains bleak. Peace talks with the Syrian regime over the status of northeastern Syria have gone nowhere.<sup>87</sup> If anything, Damascus has only become more hostile to the SDF over time. The Syrian Foreign Ministry denounced the SDF as a 'separatist terrorist militia' and claimed in a letter to the United Nations Secretary General in September 2019 that they would 'liberate' territories captured by the SDF.<sup>88</sup> This fits the pattern of a regime that seeks to return Syria to its pre-2011 borders. Damascus has appeared unwilling to compromise or engage in meaningful reform.<sup>89</sup> Perhaps the latest developments, with the near-withdrawal of US forces from the country and the Turkish offensive, have changed the calculations of the Assad regime. Russia could be another potential guarantor, but it has shown a willingness to withdraw from security arrangements with the YPG before, as it did in the run-up to the Turkish offensive into Afrin.<sup>90</sup> However, given the current situation and barring a sharp reversal in US Syrian policy, trying to forge diplomatic guarantees with domestic actors, as opposed to seeking security pledges from international partners eyeing the exits, is perhaps the SDF's least bad option.

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86 'As US withdraws troops from Syria, France and UK remain in the back seat', *France24*, 23 February 2019.

87 'They Were "Comrades in Arms" Against ISIS. Now the U.S. Is Eyeing the Exit.', *New York Times*, 12 May 2019.

88 'Syrian government labels SDF "separatist terrorist militias" ahead of Ankara talks', *DefenseOne*, 15 September, 2019.

89 Singh & Stroul, p.8.

90 'Pro-Kurdish forces condemn Russian "betrayal" over Afrin offensive', *Middle East Eye*, 22 January 2018.





# The 'War of Attrition' – IS's Clandestine Insurgency

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**W**hile the Assad regime, Turkey and the SDF jostle for northeastern Syria, IS is seeking to take advantage of the crisis. Indeed, the crux of the debate over Trump's intention to end America's 'forever wars' – however they are defined – is whether IS has been comprehensively defeated or not.<sup>91</sup>

So what remains of the so-called caliphate, which by the summer of 2014 controlled an estimated 10 million people and a territory the size of Great Britain? Despite President Trump's declared victory over IS with his December 2018 withdrawal announcement, the fighting for IS's last territorial stronghold did not end until 23 March 2019 when the US-led coalition and their partners captured Baghouz, Syria.<sup>92</sup> This section demonstrates how the organisation remains remarkably dangerous and is well positioned for a comeback.

## A Clandestine Insurgency

While the so-called caliphate has been at least temporarily dismantled, IS's manpower remains substantial. The UN's Under-Secretary-General of the Office of Counter Terrorism told the Security Council that of the 'initial estimate' of 40,000 foreign terrorist fighters, returners and relocators who had joined the group, between 24,000 and 30,000 had survived.<sup>93</sup> While those numbers seem extraordinarily high, Christopher P Maier, as the director of the Defeat-ISIS task force, claimed that the thousands of IS fighters who were still at large both in Iraq and Syria comprised a 'clandestine insurgency'. He argued that the organisation was engaged in a calculated effort 'to stay below the radar screen, regather strength, and then potentially attempt to establish a caliphate or something more overt down the road'.<sup>94</sup>

The movement has continued armed activities in SDF-controlled areas. The Institute for the Study of War found in June 2019 that IS had begun to reconstitute its ability to utilise vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices (VBIEDs) and had detonated them in recaptured cities, such as Raqqa. Low-level small-arms attacks and IEDs have targeted security forces, patrols and security checkpoints.<sup>95</sup> IS has also targeted two vital ground communication lines between Hasakah and Deir ez-Zor provinces. These included repeated ambushes in Suwar, along the Khabur river valley, and suicide VBIED assaults on a key logistics hub for the US-led coalition and the SDF northwest of Shaddadi.<sup>96</sup>

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91 'When "Get Out" Is a President's National Security Strategy', *New York Times*, 7 October 2019.

92 'IS "caliphate" defeated but jihadist group remains a threat', *BBC News*, 23 March 2019.

93 'With ISIL down but not out, continued vigilance is key, UN Security Council Told', *UN News*, 27 August 2019.

94 'Erdogan says 2 million–3 million Syria refugees can be resettled in "safe zone"', *Reuters*, 18 September 2019.

95 'ISIS Resurgence Update – April 2019', *ISW*, 19 April 2019.

96 *ibid.*

In January 2019, four Americans were killed and many others were wounded in an IS suicide bombing during a routine patrol in SDF-controlled Manbij.<sup>97</sup> This was a remarkable spike in US casualties in Syria: up to that point only two US service members had been killed in the country between 2014 and the end of 2018.<sup>98</sup>

A report by the Inspector General for Operation Inherent Resolve covering the period of 1 April 2019 to 30 June 2019 chronicled IS's resurgence in both Iraq and Syria. The report argued that IS had transitioned from being a territory-holding force to an insurgency that was carrying out raids, suicide attacks and abductions in both countries.<sup>99</sup> IS's attacks in eastern Syria demonstrate its vitality and ability to harass coalition lines throughout terrain supposedly controlled by the SDF.

Furthermore, its sleeper cells and strike teams have carried out numerous assassinations of members of local security forces as well as community leaders.<sup>100</sup> Assassinations in Deir ez-Zor and Raqqa provinces have targeted Arab members of the SDF as well as their civilian counterparts.<sup>101</sup> These measures are likely an attempt to drive a wedge between the local Arab communities and the Kurdish-led SDF by eliminating trusted Arab interlocutors. IS probably hopes that these targeted killings will discourage cooperation with the SDF, while at the same time bolstering IS's own tribal outreach efforts.

One of the most prominent figures who perished in IS's assassination campaign was the Commander of the SDF's 16th Division, a man known as Abou Jabal. Jabal was killed when an explosive device hidden in his car detonated in June 2019. *The Syrian Observer* characterised him as one of the most prominent Arab fighters within the SDF's ranks. The article mentioned that 55 Arab fighters left their divisions soon afterwards in order to protect themselves from further IS attacks.<sup>102</sup> This assassination campaign could critically endanger the SDF's cross-sectarian force structure.

The organisation has also engaged in widespread arson in order to further destabilise the region. IS has claimed responsibility for starting massive fires in the agricultural heartlands of northeastern Syria. In July 2019, *ABC News* reported that 50,000 hectares of farmland had been destroyed since May, causing \$50 million in damage. Dozens of farmers were killed while trying to protect their crops in a year that many had hoped would yield a good harvest after years of war.<sup>103</sup> IS has used the same tactics in central and northern Iraq as a form of punishment for farmers who refused to pay the organisation sufficient protection money. In late May, IS's newsletter acknowledged the strategy saying, 'soldiers of the Caliphate burn the farms of the apostates in Iraq and al-Sham, IS warns of a "hot summer".'<sup>104</sup>

IS military raids, targeted assassinations and arson all constitute disruptions to the limited normalisation and reconstruction

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97 'ISIS Is Regaining Strength in Iraq and Syria', *New York Times*, 19 August 2019.

98 'Global Conflict Tracker'. Civil War in Syria. *Council on Foreign Relations*, 18 October 2019.

99 'Lead Inspector General for Operation Inherent Resolve | Quarterly Report to the United States Congress | April 1, 2019-June 30, 2019', *Department of Defense Office of Inspector General*, 6 August 2019.

100 'ISIS Regaining Strength in Iraq and Syria', *New York Times*, 19 August 2019.

101 'Syria Situation Report: February 7-20, 2019', *ISW*, 22 February 2019.

102 'SDF Authority Erodes and ISIS Reappears in Deir Ez-Zor', *The Syrian Observer*, 6 June 2019.

103 'Islamic State's revenge? Syrians thought they were free. But then the mysterious fires began', *ABC News*, 8 July 2019.

104 W. Zwijnenburg, 'Torching and Extortion: OSINT Analysis of Burning Agriculture In Iraq', *Bellingcat*, 3 June 2019.

efforts that have been taking place in both Iraq and Syria.<sup>105</sup> IS's clandestine activity against its adversaries has rendered it far more challenging to stabilise the region politically and economically for the foreseeable future.

## The 'Battle of Attrition'

IS's current campaign is consistent with the directives of their core leadership. In April 2019, al-Baghdadi released an 18-minute message, his first video address since 2014 and his last before his death in October 2019,<sup>106</sup> claiming that 'the war of Islam and its followers against the crusaders and their followers is a long one ... our battle today is a war of attrition to harm the enemy, and they should know that jihad will continue until doomsday.'<sup>107</sup> His defiant speech sought to frame the group's territorial losses in Iraq and Syria as a temporary setback in the movement's fortunes. In this new 'battle of attrition', al-Baghdadi exhorted his followers to seize terrain temporarily to weaken their opponents when possible. In time, victory was assured.<sup>108</sup>

Anticipating the war of attrition to come, the movement had deliberately relocated many of its fighters to both new and old support zones in Syria as they lost ground over time, placing them outside the range of the advance of their adversaries.<sup>109</sup> Local defence officials claim that the organisation now operates in largely rural terrain where groups of about a dozen fighters or so can exploit the porous borders between Iraq and Syria to operate in the disputed territories in either country. These are areas where the various relevant security forces are spread relatively thinly and their respective areas of responsibility are unclear. The reluctance of security forces to track down IS fighters in such remote and disputed terrain in both Iraq and Syria has provided the organisation with secure support zones from which it can plan and prosecute its campaign.<sup>110</sup>

The decrease in US support for the SDF in Syria has handicapped the SDF's efforts to pursue these 'resurgent cells'. The increasingly limited training and equipment the SDF has received has meant that they have become more unable to sustain long-term operations against IS militants.<sup>111</sup>

IS also maintains a substantial war chest. A RAND report published in August 2019 estimated that the group held approximately \$400 million in assets, much of it invested in legitimate businesses from which they could profit in the future. The group has also continued to raise revenues locally.<sup>112</sup> The organisation's history of tapping into a diverse range of internal revenue streams means that it will be exceptionally difficult for local intelligence sources and law enforcement, let alone international counterterrorist finance measures, to shut down most of IS's potential sources of finance.<sup>113</sup>

105 'With ISIL down but not out, continued vigilance is key, UN Security Council Told', *UN News*, 27 August 2019.

106 'ISIS Names New Leader and Confirms al-Baghdadi's Death', *The New York Times*, 31 October 2019.

107 'Baghdadi Is Back – And Vows That ISIS Will Be Too', *New Yorker*, 29 April 2019.

108 J. Cafarella *et al.*, p.9.

109 'ISIS Is Regaining Strengths in Iraq and Syria', *New York Times*, 19 August 2019.

110 *ibid.*

111 'Lead Inspector General for Operation Inherent Resolve | Quarterly Report to the United States Congress | April 1, 2019-June 30, 2019', *Department of Defense Office of Inspector General*, 6 August 2019.

112 Patrick B. Johnston *et al.*, 'Return and Expand?: The Finances and Prospects of the Islamic State After the Caliphate', *RAND Corporation*, 2019, pp.ix-xvii.

113 S. Heißner, 'Caliphate in Decline: An Estimate of Islamic State's Financial Fortunes', *JCSR*, February 2017.

Even with the more limited revenue IS now generates, the group is still financially capable of launching complex attacks. The organisation does not need to hold territory to 'extort, kidnap, kill, steal, smuggle and traffic to obtain the money they need to survive'.<sup>114</sup> IS's expenses have also decreased as it is no longer paying for the governing costs of their caliphate, with the millions of people formerly under their control. Fewer fighters also means lower personnel costs. The more limited revenue streams IS now has can be more exclusively directed to its armed campaign.

## The Prison Dilemma

The security of prisons and camps in Syria is one of the greatest challenges facing the coalition in the aftermath of the collapse of the so-called caliphate. The al-Hawl camp may be the most vulnerable; it is filled with approximately 63,000 IS family members and civilians who surrendered to the SDF in Deir ez-Zor province between December 2018 and April 2019.<sup>115</sup> UN investigators reported that camp conditions are dire: hundreds of young children have reportedly died from disease and malnutrition. Those investigators were extremely concerned that these deaths could lead to further extremism in the camp.<sup>116</sup> The squalid conditions shared between victims of IS as well as its more ideologically committed members could encourage many of the prisoners to turn on their captors.<sup>117</sup>

Several prison escapes have been attempted. On 16 September 2019, al-Baghdadi urged his followers to break IS fighters out of prisons and displacement camps in both Iraq and Syria. He challenged his disciples, questioning how they could 'accept to live while Muslim women are suffering in the camps of diaspora and the prisons of humiliation under the power of the Crusaders'?<sup>118</sup> This rhetoric is strongly reminiscent of the 'Breaking the Walls' campaign of al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), which resulted in eight major prison breaks, freeing many of their members during 2012 and 2013.<sup>119</sup> As of the time of writing, amid the chaos following the initiation of Operation Peace Spring, approximately 100 IS militants have already escaped from SDF custody.<sup>120</sup> If more IS fighters or sympathisers are released from prisons and camps, there is a real risk that they could form the backbone of the next iteration of the movement.

## The External Threat

IS's global affiliates and sympathisers have also continued to engage in terrorist attacks abroad despite the movement's loss of territory in Iraq and Syria. On 21 April, suicide bombers killed more than 250 people and injured another 500 in three churches and three hotels in Sri Lanka. Despite claims following the attack that there were clear links between the attackers and IS,<sup>121</sup> Ravi Seneviratne, the head

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114 Patrick B. Johnston *et al.*, pp.ix-xvii.

115 'ISIS's Opportunity in Northern Syria's Detention Facilities and Camps', *ISW*, 13 May 2019.

116 'Horrid Conditions in Syria Camp Where ISIS Families Fled Risk Fostering Extremism', *New York Times*, 11 September 2019.

117 'My young cousin fled the bombs ... only to be held in a camp alongside Isis supporters', *The Guardian*, 14 September 2019.

118 'ISIS Prepares for Breakout in Prisons and Camps', *ISW*, 23 September 2019.

119 'ISIS's Opportunity in Northern Syria's Detention Facilities and Camps', *ISW*, 13 May 2019.

120 'Fact-checking Trump's claim that escaped prisoners were "largely recaptured"', *CNN*, 24 October 2019.

121 'Sri Lanka bombers had clear links to ISIS, President says', *CNN*, 29 April 2019.

of Sri Lanka's Criminal Investigation Department, argued that the perpetrators were actually local Islamists who had drawn inspiration from IS's ideology.<sup>122</sup> IS has also claimed multiple attacks in Central Africa, in Mozambique and the Democratic Republic of Congo.<sup>123</sup> Al-Baghdadi's praised groups in both Mali and Burkina Faso for declaring allegiance to his cause.<sup>124</sup> IS attacks have continued in the Philippines<sup>125</sup> years after the brutal fight that led to the liberation of its former stronghold in Marawi.<sup>126</sup> The estimated hundreds of IS fighters remaining in Afghanistan, despite recent claims that the movement have been "obliterated" by Afghan President Ashraf Ghani, could become of increasing relevance to the Trump administration as they seek a future peace settlement with the Taliban.<sup>127</sup>

A UN report in August warned that IS could launch terrorist attacks in Europe by the end of the year and could reverse a recent period of comparatively few jihadist-inspired terrorist attacks on the continent. The report cited evidence that IS leaders have been monitoring political developments in western Europe and were considering attacks that would sow division in politically vulnerable countries. The report stressed that the estimated tens of thousands of IS militants who were still alive would pose a generational problem. The report suspected that many of them would seek to join other terrorist groups, such as al-Qaeda, if they had the opportunity. Deepening the UN's concerns was that up to 40 per cent of the 5,000 to 6,000 foreign fighters who had initially travelled from Europe to Syria and Iraq to join the group remained unaccounted for.<sup>128</sup>

In short, IS maintains the will – and likely the capability – to commit or inspire more external attacks. Any Syrian sanctuary that it can regain could serve as a base from which the movement could reorganise and inspire further attacks abroad.<sup>129</sup> Admittedly, it is uncertain how increased pressure on IS in Iraq or Syria will measurably affect the rate and deadliness of the attacks of its global affiliates or sympathisers abroad. Nevertheless, it is the author's hope that continued pressure on the organisation's core will delegitimise IS's brand over time and render it that much more unattractive for individuals or groups to kill in IS's name.

## The Road to Resurrection

While IS has suffered huge setbacks in recent years, it has yet to be enduringly defeated. The killing of al-Baghdadi is a notable achievement and a serious blow to the organisation.<sup>130</sup> Nevertheless, this section demonstrates that the underground movement that animates the organisation remains a potent adversary and could power an IS resurgence in the coming months or years.

IS today is far stronger than its predecessor AQI was when US forces withdrew from Iraq in 2011. The Defense Intelligence Agency's estimate that as many as 30,000 IS fighters remained at large as of August 2018

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122 'No prior links ISIS link to Sri Lanka Easter attackers, investigator says', *TheDefensePost*, 24 July 2019.

123 'ISIS claims sub-Saharan attacks in a sign of African ambitions', *The Guardian*, 6 June 2019.

124 'Baghdadi Is Back – And Vows That ISIS Will Be Too', *New Yorker*, 29 April 2019.

125 'How ISIS is Rising in the Philippines as It Dwindles in the Middle East', *New York Times*, 9 March 2019.

126 'The Philippines's Marawi City Remains Wrecked Nearly 2 Years After ISIS War', *NPR*, 12 June 2019.

127 'ISIS is Losing Afghan Territory. That Means Little for Its Victims', *New York Times*, 2 December 2019.

128 'ISIS, Eyeing Europe, Could Launch Attacks This Year, U.N. Warns', *New York Times*, 3 August 2019.

129 Singh & Stroul, p.14.

130 'Baghdadi's death a turning point for Islamic State', *Washington Post*, 27 October 2019.

dwarfs the comparable estimate of up to 1,000 militants left under AQL's command in 2011 prior to its subsequent reincarnation as IS. The organisation's footing in both Iraq and Syria today is far firmer than AQL's was in 2011.<sup>131</sup>

In addition, IS represents more of a political revolution than an ideological one. The movement gained such vast territory and influence largely as a consequence of state failure and weakness in both Iraq and Syria. IS's initial military might was due in part to the unwillingness or inability of local states to confront it directly. If the central governments or the various state or sub-state actors that rule swathes of both Syria and Iraq today cannot address some of the political and security concerns that underpinned IS's rise, the movement's alternative political narratives could continue to have resonance.

Complicating any efforts to reach solutions to these systematic issues is the fact that there are a wide range of state and sub-state actors in both countries who are all trying to establish a monopoly of force and political control in their competing spheres of influence. Northeastern Syria serves as an illustrative example. The US-led coalition's SDF partners, Turkish-backed rebels and the Assad regime's affiliated forces are all jockeying for position in the region. IS can exploit these fissures and any future power vacuums that may arise between these fault lines as the Syrian conflict continues. The security gaps that could emerge if the US-led coalition completely withdraws from Syria, if Turkish-backed forces further advance, if the SDF unravels and if the Assad regime goes on the offensive all make the country more vulnerable to an IS comeback.

The Deir ez-Zor region appears particularly ripe for such a jihadist revival. If the US withdraws the hundreds of troops it still has there, the Assad regime will move to push the SDF out of the governorate.<sup>132</sup> IS militants in neighbouring Iraq could also easily cross into Deir ez-Zor. IS would then be able to position itself to the region's Arab population as the more palatable alternative to the heavy-handed Kurdish-led project, now lacking robust US sponsorship, or the brutal Assad regime. Whichever side can effectively enlist the support of the Arab tribes of northeastern Syria to their cause will have the greater chance of securing the region against their adversaries.<sup>133</sup>

In closing, IS is crucially affected by how the ongoing contest for northeastern Syria will take shape. Northeastern Syria has become a powder keg once again. As the scramble for northeastern Syria continues, IS can take strategic advantage of its rivals' competing interests and shifting lines of authority as and when they arise.

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131 J. Cafarella *et al.*, p.9.

132 Hassan Hassan, 'A Hollow Victory Over the Islamic State in Syria? The High Risk of Jihadi Revival in Deir ez-Zor's Euphrates River Valley' in *CTC Sentinel*: Vol. 12, Issue 2, February 2019, p.5.

133 Abdullah al-Ghadhawi, 'The Role of Tribes: New Opportunities for Lasting Stability in Deir ez-Zor', *Center for Global Policy*, 10 July 2019.

## Conclusion – War is Still Upon Us

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This report has charted some of the major developments in northeastern Syria since President Trump first announced a US withdrawal from the country in December 2018 up until the launch of Turkish-led Operation Peace Spring on 9 October 2019. The report first highlighted how Turkey's uncompromising push for a 'safe zone' paved the way for its latest offensive. Operation Peace Spring poses an existential threat to the SDF, risking dismantling the US-led coalition's principal partner in defeating IS. The report turned to address the other significant challenges the SDF faces: managing prisons, tackling an IS insurgency, winning the support of the predominately Arab populations in the region and preserving some of the political and military gains they have made from the Assad regime. Despite its prior claims of self-reliance, recent developments have demonstrated that without US air support the movement is acutely vulnerable to Turkish designs and is largely dependent on the Assad regime's protection. The penultimate section sketched the potency of IS as an organisation. It concluded that the chances that the movement could experience a resurgence on the regional and world stage will exponentially increase as northeastern Syria continues to be destabilised.

There is a real danger that Trump's 'We Have Won' announcement in December 2018 could be remembered as President Bush's 'Mission Accomplished' speech is today. On a nationally televised address from the deck of the USS *Abraham Lincoln* on 1 May 2003, Bush declared an end to major combat operations in Iraq. After defeating Saddam Hussein's army in a swift military campaign, Bush spoke to the world with a huge banner reading 'Mission Accomplished' displayed behind him. He said that, 'in the battle of Iraq, the United States and our allies have prevailed ... it is you, the members of the United States military, who achieved it'. While the president's speech itself also emphasised the hard work that needed to be done to stabilise the country before leaving a 'free Iraq', the symbolism of victory outweighed the messages of triumphant caution.<sup>134</sup> History showed that the fight for Iraq was far from over. The fallout from subsequent US missteps, and the substantial shortcomings of domestic actors in Iraq,<sup>135</sup> made Bush's 'Mission Accomplished' speech seem a manifestation of American hubris and shortsightedness.

The parallels between Bush's 'Mission Accomplished' speech and Trump's 'We Have Won' announcement are worrying. If the Trump administration wishes to avoid a similar historical legacy, here are some policy proposals that may avert the danger:

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<sup>134</sup> George W. Bush, 'George W. Bush Announces End of Major Combat Operations in Iraq,' [www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/wariniraq/gwbushiraq5103.htm](http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/wariniraq/gwbushiraq5103.htm)

<sup>135</sup> Emma Sky, *The Unravelling: High Hopes and Missed Opportunities in Iraq* (London: Atlantic Books, 2016.)

- *Contain Ankara's Ambitions*
  - Turkish national security interests in Syria fundamentally conflict with America's. Despite his claims, Erdoğan has shown little appetite for dedicating substantial efforts to fight against IS as opposed to combating his Kurdish adversaries. The SDF are simply irreplaceable local partners for the time being.
  - The US government should apply further economic and diplomatic sanctions on Turkey in order to punish and constrain their behaviour. The operations of Turkish-backed forces should also be closely monitored as such groups pose their own risks to the stability of the country.
  - Pushing for a resumption of peace talks between the PKK and Ankara may help alleviate tensions between the SDF and Turkey. Short of that, however, there is cause to believe that Ankara's desires to weaken the Syrian Kurds will prove insatiable, short of protection for the SDF from the Assad regime, Russia, or particularly from the USA.
- *Recommit to the SDF*
  - The SDF is facing an existential crisis. Lacking US-led coalition support, the cross-sectarian SDF risks irreversibly unravelling in the face of pressure from Turkey, Assad or IS. The up to 600 US troops left in the eastern governorate of Deir ez-Zor, to reportedly continue the fight against IS alongside the SDF as of the time of this writing, is the principal remaining lever Washington has to prevent the complete disintegration of its vital partner. As a result, a full US withdrawal must be off the table for the foreseeable future.
  - US policymakers should recognise that the SDF's diplomatic overture to Damascus was a measure of last resort. The Assad regime's return to the region threatens the Syrian Kurds' core aspirations for self-rule or greater autonomy. Where practical, the USA must seek to reaffirm its relationship with the SDF in northern Syria in order to advance mutual interests and lessen the group's grudging dependence on the Syrian government.
  - On the other hand, if Washington does recommit to the SDF, policymakers should recognize that the SDF and SDC have substantial flaws. Continued American engagement with the SDF should be conditional, based on demonstrable efforts to make northeastern Syria more politically inclusive and economically viable so that it could become a more attractive refuge for Syrians who do not wish to return to the subjugation of extremists or the Syrian regime.
- *Keep the Pressure on IS*
  - IS remains a potent insurgency despite the loss of its so-called caliphate. Targeted assassinations, suicide bombs and arson have revealed its concealed strength. Tens of thousands of fighters remain unaccounted for and many thousands more of IS's affiliates seek to escape overcrowded prisons and camps.



- IS will continue to take advantage of the ongoing conflict in Syria in order to lay the groundwork for its eventual resurgence. To that end, US policymakers should continue to aid the SDF to keep the pressure on the organisation, at least in eastern Syria's Deir ez-Zor governorate. The USA must also consider the option of working with Turkish or Turkish-backed forces to fight IS in northern Syria as it is unclear if and when their forces will withdraw.
- The coming months and years could mirror the resurgence of IS's predecessor following its defeat by allied forces during the Iraq War. Its successors went on to exploit war-torn Syria and the absence of US forces in Iraq to become more powerful than ever before. It has yet to be demonstrated that Russia, the Assad regime, or Turkey will or could comprehensively meet the threat. Washington should therefore ramp up its military and political engagement in northeastern Syria as well as in Iraq in order to maximise the chances that the movement suffers an enduring defeat this time around.

The hard truth is that US leverage has plummeted precipitously in northeastern Syria since the launch of Operation Peace Spring. Under the 23 October deal between the Turkish and Russian governments, Turkey has claimed that it would not advance beyond the roughly 900 square miles that its affiliated forces had seized from Kurdish control since the operation began. Turkish troops would be allowed more than six miles along most of the length of the Syrian border to conduct joint patrols with Russian forces.<sup>136</sup> The SDF have let the Assad regime and its Russian backers enter swathes of territory they controlled in order to deter their Turkish enemies. How long Washington commits to leave a mechanised force behind in the eastern governorate of Deir ez-Zor is one of the few remaining cards the USA can play to affect how the scramble for northeastern Syria takes shape.<sup>137</sup>

The US government has some significant decisions to make on how to proceed. President Trump, whose presidential campaign and desired legacy has often centred around his desire both to be tougher on terrorism and simultaneously to withdraw from America's 'endless wars' abroad, faces a conundrum. Should his administration finally honour his pledge to withdraw all US troops from Syria nearly a year after he first made the announcement in 19 December 2018? If not, how can he justify that policy reversal to the American people as the 2020 presidential election approaches? Furthermore, is his administration confident that, if troops are withdrawn, Syria will remain sufficiently stable to ensure IS does not rear its head once again? Could an IS resurgence prompt a US re-entry into the country, months or years after Trump labelled the so-called Caliphate '100 percent' defeated? Would such a development question his judgement and force his hand to get further entangled in the Syrian civil war after prematurely declaring victory?

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<sup>136</sup> 'Turkey Halts Syrian Incursion, Hours After Deal with Russia', *New York Times*, 23 October 2019.

<sup>137</sup> 'U.S. will leave up to 600 troops in northeastern Syria to prevent ISIS resurgence, top general says', *The Washington Post*, 10 November 2019.

Policymakers should not lose sight of the fact that America's national security interests in the Syrian conflict go beyond what happens in northeastern Syria. This report concurs with the Syria Study Group's assessment that the conflict is entering a new phase with a host of associated dangers that the US government must consider. Al-Qaeda has an active presence in Idlib governorate, one that the US currently has limited means to constrain. The Syrian refugee issue not only destabilises the country and its neighbours in the region, but also deeply impacts America's European allies. Russia has demonstrated substantial credibility to Middle Eastern powers that it can be an effective arbiter of international affairs in the region, particularly when compared to the USA. Iran has also exploited the Syrian civil war to strengthen its regional influence and has become a more threatening adversary to the US's Israeli partners. Lastly, the Assad regime's possession of most of the country is more tenuous than it looks. Outside Damascus, the regime lacks the forces to secure areas that it has seized and it has continued to use punitive measures against the local population. The brutal Syrian regime's methods fundamentally challenge international norms, norms that the USA historically has stood for on the world stage.<sup>138</sup>

History should prove instructive on how risky a full withdrawal from Syria could prove to be. It is this report's assessment that it is in the national security interests of the USA to maintain a military presence in northeastern Syria as the newest chapter of this bloody civil war continues to unfold. Forfeiting the remaining leverage the USA has in the conflict which comes with minimal financial as well as human costs (only six American troops have died in the crossfire thus far), risks further destabilising the country during this crucial period. In addition, policymakers should remain cognisant of the fact that IS's recent resurgence in Iraq<sup>139</sup> could ultimately spill over into Syria. While AQI had been defeated by the time the USA withdrew from Iraq in December 2011, it got a new lease on life across the border in the midst of the Syrian civil war. One hopes that the US-led coalition and its local partners can keep the pressure on this virulent movement in both countries in order to reduce the chances that "the land between two rivers" remains the centre of conflict in the Middle East for the foreseeable future.

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<sup>138</sup> Singh & Stroul, pp.7-13.

<sup>139</sup> 'ISIS is Regaining Strength in Iraq and Syria', *New York Times*, 19 August 2019.





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