

The Syria Catastrophe: Is There a Possibility of a Compromise Between the USA and Turkey?

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- **What were the United States' aim and strategy?**
 - **In what direction is the U.S. strategy transforming?**
 - **Is a compromise of both achievable if Turkey's aim and strategy is taken?**
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INTRODUCTION

The USA continues its 'Middle East game' in Syria after the explicit failures in Afghanistan and Iraq, for the sake of Israel's security and survival. The USA's recent policy on the Syrian crisis underlines that it wants to continue a 'game' in Syria by transforming the context even though the basic principles remain unchanged. For instance, the USA, at the moment, works with the PKK/PYD terrorist network as if there is no other option. In this sense, the Secretary of Defence resisted Trump's withdrawal agenda and, at least, managed to convert his withdrawal decision to a 'sustainable' transition, although Trump remains steady in his decision to lower the profile of the U.S. special forces which reaches approximately 5,000 ground troops. It is apparent from the current diplomatic engagements that the USA is in search of a 'smart' exit that is based on preserving the obtained gains and achieving the ultimate pre-identified goals. But the issue is whether the USA is currently in a course to challenge its Syria policy and reach a compromise with Turkey for the common benefit of both actors.

THE AIM OF THE U.S. POLICIES IN SYRIA

The aim of the U.S. policies in Syria can be identified as primary and secondary that serves to achieve the prime ones. The primary aim can be divided in two tiers: the concerns regarding Israel and Russia's presence. Israel's security appears to be the prominent concern due to the cobweb of pro-Israeli influence on American politics and daily life. The perfectly organized pro-Israeli community in the USA exert pressure on the U.S. state mechanism to prioritize pro-Israeli policies. For instance, the \$140 billion grant by the USA to Israel after its establishment and the U.S. political/military support of Israel in the Middle East. Russia's position, on the other hand, challenges the U.S. interests by its military presence and its control of the Syria regime and parts of its territory. If the energy resources in the East Mediterranean, along with the energy transfer from the region, are taken into consideration, Russia appears to be the dominant actor in the region, thanks to its military presence and political influence in Syria. More importantly, the increasing strategic rapprochement between Moscow and Ankara gradually undermines the U.S.-based Middle East geopolitical landscape.

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Iran and Turkey seem to be dependent variables for Israel's security, and relevant American interests. In this frame, the USA demands that Iran withdraws Iranian paramilitary groups and stops supporting Palestinian groups and Hezbollah. Iran's nuclear and missile technology, which is still in the devolvement process, drives the U.S. to isolate Iran within its borders and to restrain it from getting involved in the Middle East. Iran, which has a strong state tradition, is not one to step back, but skilfully commit her efforts for diplomacy until diplomacy hits a dead-end, as was seen in the Nuclear Deal with P5+1. Iran also has the capacity to claim the protectorate of Shia communities in the Middle East - it is unclear, however, whether Shia communities want such protection. The USA perceives Iran as a challenge for its future plans in the Middle East in terms of Iran's capacity for unpredictable actions/operations, but especially her potential challenge Israel.

Turkey, on the other hand, is perceived as the country, which needs to be aligned with the Western world rather than Russia and Iran. Hence the aim is to have Turkey preserve its axis and 'obey' the rules of the American-controlled game. Turkey's economy and diffusion capacity towards the minds and hearts of the Middle East's publics challenges the imposed conditions of the 'Washington consensus.' Contrary to the expectations after the July 15 failed coup attempt, Turkey's increased military capacity and professional armed forces proved their capability in Syria's military theater following the peace support operations of the 1990s and afterwards. The USA, then, wants a complacent and aligned 'ally' which has to say 'yes' to all demands, although Turkish leadership is not of such a nature.

In the end, the ultimate goal of the United States can be summed up as shaping the Middle East to have all actors take a position in accordance with U.S. interests, mainly for a safe Israel and, certainly, for energy security in the resource-rich Middle East. In fact, this is an expected course for a state actor pursuing interest-based goals. But the absence of consent among the other players in Syria will naturally lead to the conflicting interests of the involved actors and, as a result,

the crisis will probably spill over to the wider region, and the globe, in the form of irregularity. Until now, the USA pursued a strategy that allowed it to benefit from the local armed groups, which are recognized as a terror network in the US legislation and could potentially expand terrorism acts targeting the region. It is unclear whether the U.S. strategy will change in the coming months. As a result, a comparison of the recent and probable-future strategy of the U.S. government is necessary in order to identify the possible courses of the Syrian conflict and the repercussions on the stability of the Middle East.

THE RECENT U.S. STRATEGY IN SYRIA

The U.S. presence in Syria after 2015 was based upon the 'fight against DAESH.' This theme was perceived as a part of the 'global war on terror' that highlights the suppression of radicalism in accordance with the lessons learnt from the Al Qaeda and Taliban dictates. The U.S. calculation claims that it wants to destroy the organization before it disperses its roots and branches across the world. Despite this determination, the Obama administration had declared a strategy of 'No boots on the ground!' that requires no American infantry directly fighting against DAESH. Unfortunately, (for the USA) the conditions did not permit this preference and Obama had to send distinguished troops to Syria especially in light of Russia's involvement. In comparison to Obama, Trump, who opposed sending any American soldiers to Syria during his election campaign, confused the world with his words, if compared to the deeds of the Defence Department. Hence we witnessed an increase in the numbers of the U.S. troops, as well as military bases and allotted resources. However, Trump himself challenged his stance and decided to cooperate with his 'allies' in Syria to bring down the troop surge, although the identity of USA's allies is a matter of discussion.

The term 'allies,' which is frequently used by American politicians and spokespeople, is confusing for the actual allies of the USA. The U.S. strategy has leaned on collaborating with terrorist networks, as 'al-

lies', against other terrorist networks as can be witnessed in the American support process of the PKK/PYD against DAESH. Moreover, the U.S. government did not hesitate to make deals with DAESH in Raqqa and in the southeast of Syria (Deyr Ez-Zor). The U.S. strategy, thanks to the opportunities of proxy war, has managed to control one third of Syrian territory. For the sake of limiting the numbers of American soldiers, the PKK/PYD, along with a small amount of Arab paramilitary, appeared to be the U.S. apparatus in Syria. With this strategy, the gains obtained can be assessed as fourfold. This strategy's initial gain was to cut the link between Syria and Iraq in order to facilitate Iran's infiltration of Syria. Iran's inability to provide support to its paramilitary and to the 'Assad' regime will ease the U.S. efforts and directly contribute to Israel's security. The second issue is that the USA enjoyed the capabilities of a terrorist network to check and balance the power Turkey yields in the Middle East. Thirdly, the USA aimed to counter radicalism – wrongly, however, the word 'Islamist' is used to denote it – with a Marxist organization. This option that puts the PKK at the forefront is – again wrongly – expected to balance the influence of religion in the Middle East. The final gain is that the other Arab states could provide support to the American cause due to their concerns on Shia Iran and the strengthening of Turkey in the region. This way, the Arab states could remain in the background and establish links with Israel. Hence the U.S. strategy is multi-dimensional, which can be resembled to hunting many prey by a single bullet. Yet, this strategy shook the long-term alliance between Turkey and the USA since the PKK and its affiliates have been harming the lives of Turkish citizens for four decades despite the fact that Turkey has provided enormous support to the USA after 9/11.

THE TRANSFORMING STRATEGY OF THE USA

The military success of Turkey in three different districts of Syria and the support of the Syrian public in the Sunni-dominated regions 'persuaded' the USA to review its strategy. As Turkey built a security corridor

along the Turkish borders, the USA was forced to start diplomatic engagement against the Turkish demand for Munbic, which the Obama administration promised to evacuate from PKK members after the defeat of DAESH. The demonstrations of the local public in the PKK/PYD-held northeast multiplied the concerns of the U.S. government since public support is essential for a foreign presence in a foreign land. Moreover, the Turkish-Russian-Iranian relations alarmed the U.S. government which sought ways to remove Turkey from this cooperation. The USA's choice between Turkish support for its plan in Syria and continuing the already running U.S.-PKK collaboration became harder. The U.S. strategy seems to be designed to reach a compromise with Turkey while keeping its partner status with the PKK/PYD. Yet, Turkey's national interests and its long history of subjection to PKK-based terrorism will naturally resist such a demand. The S-400 deal and the American blackmail of suspension of F-35 deliveries are the problem fields, complicating the probability of a compromise for both sides.

The new strategy calls for greater U.S. involvement in the Syria theatre – including the participation of France – but secures the U.S. decision-making initiative aimed at shaping the operational environment on the strategic level. This strategy may reduce the cost of the U.S. military expenditure in Syria – the smaller the U.S. troops, the smaller the cost for the USA. But additional to troop cuts, as Trump claimed, the U.S. strategy is based on having Arab states participate in the 'Global Coalition against DAESH' in the northern part of Syria. The reason of this course is to ease the resentment of Sunni Arabs living there while the rich Arab states shoulder the burden of the operation. Furthermore, Iran and Turkey will be balanced by the Arab forces with the argument that the Sunni-dominated regions of Syria are actually secured by Muslim troops, appearing as if the efficiency of PKK/PYD has diminished. But the problem is that it is not clear whether the local public will embrace the Saudis or Emiratis who have never been interested in the safety and prosperity of Sunnis after 2011.

REACHING A COMPROMISE WITH TURKEY?

The Turkish influence on the Syrian moderate opposition and the Free Syrian Army puts pressure on the USA to make a deal with Turkey and be in agreement over Syria. In this sense, Turkey is critical since the Turkish footprints in Syria are bold enough to either deter the U.S. strategy in the case that Turkey is opposed to it or to ease it, in the case that Turkey is part of it. The USA, then, should sacrifice some of its gains in Syria in order to have another ally that is against the Russian presence there. But the problem appears to be the USA-PKK affiliation in Syria that Turkey strongly opposes. The initial American step for building a reliable partnership may be to withdraw all the PKK-affiliated terrorist groups from the borders of Turkey and establish a security zone. Secondly the USA, with its commanding position in relation to the PKK/PYD, may force the latter to surrender their arms and cease every type of aggression against Turkey although this option seems unlikely if pledged support is concerned. But Turkey is committed to destroying all terrorist networks in Syria in the same way that the USA was committed against Al Qaeda and the Taliban. Then, the USA needs to decide what it wants and how it wants to achieve her goals in Syria. Otherwise, the conflict of interests will deepen the differences of both actors. On the other hand it need to be noted that the USA experienced 9/11 once in 2001, but Turkey has been continuously responding to 9/11-like terrorist attacks for decades with more than 40,000 casualties.

TURKEY'S AIM AND STRATEGY IN SYRIA

Turkey's clear objective is to destroy all terrorist networks along its borders. This objective is in order to secure the lives of Turkish citizens and deny any threat to the unity of Turkish soil. Apparently, the PKK terrorist threat enjoyed a safe haven in Iraq and Syria for decades and Turkey cannot permit the presence of either the PKK in these countries or DAESH. For this purpose, Turkey is in search of support from the Western world to politically isolate the terrorist networks and/or to procure military assets. Unfortunately, the USA and

European countries have offered inadequate support to the Turkish cause in her fight against terrorism. Thus, the Turkish preference was to stand on its own feet and fight against terrorism with its national assets.

The Syria case is an opportunity to destroy the terrorist network positioned in Syria. Meanwhile, the Turkish assault and defeat of the PKK, as had been observed in Operation Euphrates Shield, the establishment of a De-conflict Observation Zone in Idlib and Operation Olive Branch indicate the inability of the PKK and its affiliated terrorist networks, which shows them as unreliable partners for the USA. Turkey, then, prefers a strategy based on determined engagement that Turkey prioritized its border security and started to build a safe corridor along its borders against terrorist infiltration.

The ongoing efforts to build a corridor serve several yet affiliated purposes. The first is to have Syrians stay in their territory rather than immigrating to Turkey or to the West. Turkey has built infrastructure and fulfilled the responsibilities of being a 'state' by offering services for basic human needs. The local public is secured not only by Turkish soldiers, but local security forces have been established and there have been no incidents in the freed regions. Actually, the current stable environment in the Turkish-controlled regions points to how the Syrian crisis could be terminated. Turkey frankly shared its plans with its allies and offered a road map. This also satisfied the expectations of the local public in northern Syria to enjoy secured zones and reach basic services. Turkey expects the USA to augment this effort instead of safeguarding Israel or directing the PKK/PYD. What Turkey wants is a safe and secure Syria, with a reliable regime, that will secure the southern borders of the former against terrorist infiltration and attacks, will not challenge societal security in Turkey and will sustain political stability in the Middle East.

CONCLUSION

It is a fact that the USA and Turkey have intertwined interests, inherited from their history of cooperation. Syria is actually a significant case that both parties can promote their partnership. Where the dirty history of

the PKK/PYD and its terrorism are concerned, the USA needs to redesign its Syrian policy and choose the wise option, which is to have the PKK/PYD marginalized while the U.S. government fully cooperates with Turkey and the moderate Syrian opposition. Turkey is an ally of the United States whose absence will challenge the further interests of the USA. Turkey can be a bridge between the East and the West due to its soft power over the regional populations, offering an alternative to the authoritative Arab leaders. Turkey's relations with Russia are not a challenge for the USA, but an opportunity to mediate all involved actors and realize a solution to the Syrian crisis. The emerging U.S. strategy is short of diverting violence towards a further-secured Syria. A compromise between the USA and Turkey will have spillover effects in the Middle East and hopes will flourish for the suffering civilians.

This compromise can be maintained by concrete steps by both parties with certain timelines and 'ought-to-do' lists. In this context, the USA needs to align its new policy with the following urgent acts:

- The USA must stop its support to the PKK for the sake of Turkey's security. Turkey has suffered from the PKK and its derivative 'sister' organizations.

- All terrorist networks in Syria must be equally treated by isolating and marginalizing them rather than presenting them as 'allies.' Otherwise, the USA will legitimize terrorist networks in the wider world to the extent that state actors will tend to display terrorist networks as viable options for collaboration as far as their interests require.
- Turkey wants to build a security zone along its borders to prevent terrorist and illegal immigrant infiltration. The USA should support Turkey's strategy to isolate the crisis in Syria rather than positioning U.S. troops in Sincar of Iraq to ensure the linkage of the PKK-PYD link and cross-border passage.
- Turkey needs to play a mediating role among the involved actors in Syria and cooperate with the USA in the same way it successfully cooperates with Iran and Russia. But Turkey should not be expected to sever ties with the other legitimate actors.

Consequently, a compromise between the USA and Turkey in Syria will not only benefit both states, but the Syrian public and the wider Middle East as well.



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