

**MEMORANDUM**

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**Subject:** Turkey's Incursion into Northeastern Syria: Possible Questions

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The recent Turkish incursion into northeastern Syria and subsequent order from President Trump to withdraw most U.S. troops has implications for U.S. policy in Syria, U.S. relations with Turkey, regional dynamics, and other related issues. Below are some possible questions raised by the operation that Members of Congress may wish to consider as they debate responses to the Administration's actions and to the evolving regional situation. For more information and background, please contact the authors at the extensions above.

### Turkey's "Operation Peace Spring"<sup>1</sup>

**U.S.-negotiated "pause."** Is the pause that was negotiated between the United States and Turkey on October 17 currently holding, and have Kurdish YPG forces withdrawn as anticipated? Can you explain the geographic dimensions of the agreed-upon "safe zone"? Does the pause purport to cover only the safe zone, or Turkish operations in Syria more broadly? Given the seemingly favorable terms of the negotiated

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<sup>1</sup> For more background, CRS Insight IN11179, *Turkish Incursion into Syria: U.S. Policy Implications*, by Carla E. Humud, Jim Zanotti, and Clayton Thomas.

pause for Turkey, might its leaders feel emboldened to act more aggressively vis-à-vis the United States and other actors involved in northern Syria?

**Turkish administration.** For how long and under what auspices, legal or otherwise, does Turkey intend to administer areas under its control in northeastern Syria? How might potential Turkish administration of northeastern Syria differ from its rule in areas west of the Euphrates occupied by Turkish forces and their Syrian partners since 2016? (Some human rights groups have offered evidence of Turkish human rights violations in other areas of Syria that Turkish-led forces previously occupied.)

**Turkey and the Islamic State (IS, aka ISIS/ISIL).** To what extent are Turkish operations aimed at the Islamic State, and does Turkey have the capacity and/or intention to combat IS remnants in eastern Syria? President Trump has stated that Turkey is now responsible for IS prisoners that have been detained by U.S. partner forces; does Turkey have the capability and/or intent to take on that responsibility? What actions, if any, has Turkey taken to prepare to take control of these prisoners? At present, who is controlling detention facilities in different areas of eastern Syria?

**Turkey's Syrian partner forces.** Who are the Syrian-origin forces with which Turkey is partnering in its incursion into northeastern Syria? To what extent does Turkey have control over these Syrian partner forces, some of which have been accused of human rights violations or potential war crimes? How might local Arab and Kurdish communities in eastern Syria view these forces?

**Humanitarian concerns.** As of October 18, the U.N. estimates that renewed conflict in northeastern Syria has displaced more than 160,000, including 70,000 children, though organizations operating on the ground suggest the actual figure may be closer to 300,000. (An estimated 710,000 Syrians were already internally displaced prior to the outbreak of fighting on October 9.) The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) indicates that contingency plans include as many as 400,000 civilians who may require humanitarian assistance and protection in the event of enduring full-scale military operations in the region.<sup>2</sup> What are the most recent displacement figures in northeastern Syria? Is Turkey providing humanitarian assistance in northeastern Syria, or allowing international and local aid organizations access to do so? How are IDPs being accommodated? What are the most acute humanitarian needs in northeastern Syria? Are there any U.S.-funded humanitarian partners operating in northeastern Syria? What are the potential consequences, humanitarian or otherwise, of the likely curtailment of U.S. stabilization activities? What are the latest estimates of casualties resulting from the Turkish operations?

**Refugee return.** Turkish leaders face political pressure to facilitate the return of some of the 3.6 million Syrian refugees in Turkey. One of Turkey's stated goals of Operation Peace Spring is to create a zone in northeastern Syria in which some refugees can be settled. What share of Syrian refugees in Turkey are from this proposed zone? Do reports of some instances of forced return to Syria by Turkey before this operation presage larger returns of Syrian refugees? How many Syrian refugees does Turkey plan to return? What are the implications of such reported forced returns under international humanitarian and refugee law? What are the implications of population moves that may alter regional demographics?

**PKK.** Turkey considers the Kurdish militia known as the People's Protection Units (YPG) to be the Syrian branch of the PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party), a U.S.-designated terror group that has waged a decades-long insurgency in Turkey. U.S. officials have acknowledged YPG-PKK ties, but generally consider the two groups distinct. What are the YPG's goals in Syria? What is the nature of ties, whether military, political, or otherwise, between the YPG and the PKK? Do the two groups coordinate in Syria or elsewhere?

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<sup>2</sup> CRS correspondence with UNHCR staff, October 16, 2019.

**Turkish objectives.** To what extent has Turkey achieved its core objectives in reducing the YPG's profile in northeastern Syria given the YPG's now-reduced territorial control and the terms under which the YPG is cooperating with the Syrian government?

## U.S. Policy and Military Presence in Syria

**Residual U.S. force in eastern Syria.** How accurate are reports of a possible stationing of about 200 U.S. military personnel in eastern Syria away from the immediate Turkey-Syria border area and closer to the Syria-Iraq border? What U.S. interests would such a residual force seek to advance or protect, what measures would ensure its force protection, lines of communication, and capability to carry out its mission, and what factors would determine the duration and rules of engagement surrounding its deployment?

**U.S. counter-IS operations.** How is the departure of U.S. troops from northeastern Syria impacting counter-IS operations? Will U.S. forces remain at locations east of the Euphrates River near Dayr ez-Zour? If so, for how long, for what purposes, with what partners, and under what authorization? What are the roles, missions, and locations of remaining U.S. troops in theater? How have logistics and resupply lines been impacted by the departure of U.S. troops? What are the implications of the Syrian and Russian presence at vacated U.S. bases and positions in northeastern Syria? What was the U.S. withdrawal strategy from Syria before this, and how have recent events impacted that strategy? What is the future of the Global Counter-IS Coalition? What role will the coalition have going forward and what approach does the United States plan to take toward the coalition and its working groups focused on foreign fighters, financing, and counter-extremism?

**SDF and U.S.-led counter-IS campaign.** The U.S. has partnered with the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) against the Islamic State in Syria. To what extent have SDF operations against the Islamic State been impacted by Operation Peace Spring? Under what circumstances, if any, might U.S.-SDF cooperation against the Islamic State return to pre-Operation Peace Spring levels? What evidence, if any, exists that IS sleeper cells and other supporters may seek to capitalize on the Turkish incursion to execute attacks or reestablish control over territory? Given that trust is an essential component of successful partnered operations, might recent events complicate the U.S.'s ability to work with the SDF in the future? Might non-Kurdish elements of the SDF remain open to working with the United States? Why or why not? Should the authority and funding of the Department of Defense train and equip program for Syria be revised to reflect new circumstances and objectives? If so, how?

**Reducing the YPG's fighting capacity.** The October 17 U.S.-Turkey joint statement surrounding the announced pause in fighting calls for "the re-collection of YPG [a key component of the SDF] heavy weapons and the disablement of their fortifications and all other fighting positions." Does the statement reflect a plan to carry out these measures immediately or merely the two sides' future aspirations? U.S. officials previously assured Turkey that heavy weapons the U.S. provided to the YPG would be taken back. How might reductions in the YPG's fighting capacity take place given the change in the U.S. military's presence in the area? Who would be responsible for enforcing these reductions?

**IS resurgence.** How capable are Syrian, Russian, and Turkish forces of extending security control over northeastern Syria and preventing the resurgence of the Islamic State group? To what extent do they prioritize the counter-Islamic State mission in relation to other goals? What posture should the United States take with regard to counter-IS and stabilization efforts by Turkey, Syria, and Russia?

**IS prisoners.** Prior to the Turkish incursion, SDF forces in Syria held approximately 10,000 IS militants in custody at several makeshift prisons in northern Syria, and provided security at the Al Hol IDP camp and other locations where additional IS family members and/or supporters are among the populations. How secure are IS detention facilities following the Turkish incursion? What are the biggest security

challenges at these facilities? To what extent does IS prioritize the freeing of these individuals? Against whom are they likely to take up arms? How many fighters and supporters have escaped to date?

**Iran.** U.S. forces in northeastern Syria were not directly contesting the activities of Iran-aligned elements of the Syrian and Iraqi security forces in the area, but were in a position to monitor them. U.S. forces regularly operated along routes connecting the two countries. How might the withdrawal affect patterns of Iranian weapons shipments via Syria? How, if at all, does the announced U.S. withdrawal affect U.S. options for monitoring and interdicting Iranian weapons shipments? Does the U.S. withdrawal increase or decrease the likelihood of the withdrawal from Syria of Iranian forces?

**Asad-Kurdish reconciliation and implications for a political settlement.** Political elements of the SDF forces had created a de facto autonomous political structure in northeastern Syria that is now being reconciled with and/or subsumed under the control of the Bashar al Asad government in Damascus. How has the agreement between the SDF and the Syrian military affected the SDF so far? To what extent, if at all, has the group been absorbed into Syrian military units? How might any reassertion of political and security control by the Syrian government over northeastern Syria affect the overall balance of power in Syria, and prospects for a political solution to the Syrian conflict? How might the Asad government and its backers change their approach to negotiations? Why, and with what implications for the United States? What effect does the U.S. withdrawal have on U.S. influence over future negotiations? Why?

## U.S.-Turkey Relations

**U.S. sanctions.** President Trump signed an Executive Order on October 14 that lays the groundwork for sanctions to target “such sectors of the Turkish economy as may be determined by the Secretary of the Treasury,” and the Secretary designated some initial ministers and ministries for sanctions that same day. Secretary Mnuchin has stated that “We can continue to ramp up these sanctions.”<sup>3</sup> What would the “ramp up” target be? What economic pressures, if any, are being considered for Turkey’s private sectors? Is the president consulting with European and NATO allies to build multinational coordinated economic pressure on the government of Turkey to influence its decision-making? How will the October 17 U.S.-Turkey joint statement accompanying the announced pause in fighting affect the existing sanctions designations and U.S. options for future designations?

**Sanctions, Congress, and bilateral relations.** How might sanctions on Turkey over its involvement in Syria affect broader U.S.-Turkey relations, and what factors might determine that effect? Are broader sanctions from Congress that could mandate sanctions on certain parties and require the Administration to report on President Erdogan’s net worth and sources of income a good idea? Why or why not? How, if at all, might the recent U.S.-negotiated “pause” or other developments on the ground in Syria impact congressional consideration of possible sanctions?

**CAATSA.** In light of the Turkish incursion into northeastern Syria, some Members have renewed calls that Turkey be subject to sanction under the Countering Russian Influence in Europe and Eurasia Act of 2017 (title II of the Countering America’s Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA; P.L. 115-44; 22 U.S.C. 9525)) for its acquisition of the S-400 missile defense system from Russia. The United States already suspended Turkey’s participation in the joint development of the F-35 fighter jet, in response to the S-400 deal. Is the Administration considering taking any further restrictive steps, including the imposition of sanctions under CAATSA? Is there a chance that Turkey might either reverse its

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<sup>3</sup> Vice President Pence has cited the president’s assertion that “The United States is going to continue to take actions against Turkey’s economy until they bring the violence to an end.” “VP Mike Pence, Treasury Sec. Steven Mnuchin speak after Pres. Trump announces Turkey sanctions via tweet,” ABC News Live, October 14, 2019.

acquisition of the S-400 or refrain from operating it? If so, could triggering CAATSA sanctions affect Turkey's decision on this issue, and if so, how?

**Possible Syria/S-400 linkage, sanctions, and national security waiver.** Is the Administration's diplomacy with Turkey on Operation Peace Spring linked at all to the S-400 issue, and if so, how? Could sticks and carrots from Congress linking Turkey's actions in Syria with the S-400 and CAATSA be effective? Would the Administration be inclined to support any of the pending sanctions bills triggering CAATSA? If so, which ones? Would it be inclined to support any of these bills if they included national security waivers for the Administration tied to changes in Turkish behavior on the S-400 as well as Syria? Please explain your answers.

**U.S. arms sales.** What kinds of arms, and in what volume, does the United States sell Turkey? How important are U.S. defense relationships for Turkey? Several European states have suspended arms exports to Turkey; is the United States considering taking similar action?<sup>4</sup>

**U.S. basing in Turkey.** How, if at all, should ongoing developments affect U.S. military posture and equipment based in Turkey? What are other basing options in the region, and what kind of feasibility studies and other evaluations, if any, should take place in considering these options alongside options in Turkey? Should the United States consider moving sensitive military assets—some open source reporting speculates on the presence of possible U.S. tactical nuclear weapons—out of Turkey? If so, what considerations should be involved? How would relocating personnel and materiel affect relations and future military options regarding Turkey?

**U.S. economic leverage.** What economic leverage does the United States have with regard to Turkey? Although Turkey is not a major trading partner of the United States, accounting for less than 1% of U.S. exports and imports, many major U.S. companies are actively engaged in business operations with the Turkish market. Should U.S. businesses continue "business as usual" with Turkey? How would U.S. consumers and investors be impacted by increased sanctions on Turkey?

**Financial markets.** Turkey, like many countries, relies on access to U.S. financial markets to process international payments and borrow to finance their governments. Should the United States restrict Turkey's access to U.S. financial markets?

**Economic stability in Turkey.** In September 2019, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) assessed the "current calm" in Turkey's economy as "fragile."<sup>5</sup> If geopolitical uncertainty and/or increased sanctions on Turkey trigger a broader financial and/or currency crisis in Turkey, what would the ramifications be for (a) the domestic political situation in Turkey, and (b) the potential spillover risks to the global economy?

**Halkbank indictment.** Did Operation Peace Spring affect the timing of the indictment issued by the Justice Department on October 15 against Halkbank (a Turkish bank that is majority-owned by the government) for possible violations of Iran sanctions legislation? Does the indictment increase U.S. leverage over Erdogan and other officials on Syria and other matters? What are the possible implications of a guilty verdict for Halkbank and the Turkish economy?

**U.S. trade policy.** On October 14, 2019, the President announced that he would raise tariffs on steel imports from Turkey back to 50% and also stop bilateral negotiations to expand U.S.-Turkey trade. Given limited trade between the United States and Turkey, including in steel, what additional trade measures

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<sup>4</sup> One media report suggests that the Administration may be crafting waivers to explicitly permit continued U.S. arms sales to Turkey. Tony Bertuca, "U.S. crafting waivers to continue arms sales to Turkey," *Inside Defense*, October 15, 2019.

<sup>5</sup> International Monetary Fund, "Turkey: Staff Concluding Statement of the 2019 Article IV Mission," September 23, 2019. Turkey, the world's 19<sup>th</sup> largest economy, has low reserves, high private-sector debt denominated in foreign currencies, and high external financing needs.



could the Administration pursue to increase pressure on Turkey? How might potential further trade restrictions affect U.S. exporters and investors who use Turkey as a regional hub for doing business?

## International Reactions

**Implications for NATO.** On October 14, Secretary of Defense Esper stated that he would “press our other NATO allies to take collective and individual diplomatic and economic measures in response to these egregious Turkish actions.” What might these measures be? What has been the response within NATO to Turkey’s military operations in northern Syria? Since 2013, NATO has provided air defense support for Turkey along its border with Syria – is this mission ongoing? Are recent media reports accurate regarding an impending withdrawal of Italy’s SAMP/T air defense battery and a possible withdrawal of Spain’s Patriot battery? Has the Administration consulted with Italy, Spain, or other NATO allies on this point? Does NATO have any established processes to adjudicate disputes between member states? Are there institutional mechanisms within NATO by which a group of member states could seek to change the nature of another member’s participation within the organization? Has this happened in the past?

**Europe.** On October 14, all 28 member states of the European Union (22 of whom are also NATO members) agreed to “commit to strong national positions regarding their arms export policy to Turkey.” Several EU member states, including Italy (Europe’s top arms exporter to Turkey), France, and Germany have suspended arms exports to Turkey, but the EU did not implement a formal EU-wide arms embargo. What is the impact, if any, of these decisions? How else has the EU or individual European states reacted to Turkish actions, and how might they do so in the future? To what extent are European options vis-à-vis Turkey constrained or otherwise impacted by the Turkey-EU refugee agreement?

**U.S. partners in the Middle East.** How will the change in U.S. force posture affect the security of U.S. partners in Jordan, Israel, Iraq, and the Gulf States? How have the governments of these countries reacted? How, if at all, might they seek to secure their interests differently?

## National Security and Defense Policy Concerns

**Implications for partnership strategy.** Despite assertions by Trump Administration officials that U.S. support for the SDF was “temporary, tactical and transactional,” publicly-articulated frustrations by the SDF, U.S. Special Operations Forces soldiers, and other U.S. officials suggest some believe the U.S. betrayed a key partner. What might other U.S. security partners – both present and future – discern from a public perception of abandonment? The U.S. partnership with the SDF has long been in tension with its NATO-allied relationship with Turkey, which views the YPG as a terror threat and has expressed its own frustrations regarding perceived U.S. abandonment after having opened its bases to counter-IS operations. How can the United States better navigate this multiplicity of regional interests and security perceptions?

**Implications for “strategic competition.”** How might the U.S. withdrawal from northeastern Syria affect the ongoing strategic competition between Russia and the United States, both in the Middle East and globally? Might recent developments indicate any shifts in Turkey’s geostrategic alignment away from the United States and towards Russia? Or, conversely, might the decision to withdraw from northeast Syria reduce tensions in the U.S.-Turkish relationship resulting from U.S. cooperation with the SDF?