

Turkey's Operation Peace Spring and the Battle for a Free Syria

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“Operation Peace Spring was launched by the Turkish Armed Forces and the Syrian National Army in order to secure the Syrian refugees’ right of return and to put an end to the terrorist threat along Turkey’s border. The operation has been welcomed by a majority of Arabs and a significant portion of Kurds in Northern Syria. Popular support for Operation Peace Spring among Syrians has to do with Turkey being the only state supporting majority-rule in Syria, unlike Russia, Iran, France, and the United States, all of which support various factions that depend on small ethnic sectarian and ideological minorities.”

Introduction

Operation Peace Spring, which was launched in October 2019, has been in the making for more than four years. By mid-2015, the YPG-PYD's expanding occupation of the mostly Arab-majority Northern Syria, combined with their deliberate policy of forced displacement of its Arab and Turkmen, but also dissident Kurdish opponents led to a new wave of Syrian refugees entering Turkey. Moreover, the PYD's occupation of Northern Syria was accompanied by the most deadly wave of terrorist attacks of the last two decades against Turkey by the PKK. Beginning in July 2015, this wave of attacks had claimed the lives of approximately one thousand Turkish citizens by July 2016. Based on these two major motivations, *Operation Peace Spring* was launched by the Turkish Armed Forces (TAF) and the allied Syrian National Army (SNA).

By all indicators, including a [recent survey](#) conducted by Gallup International, *Operation Peace Spring* appears to have been welcomed by a majority of the region's Arab population and a significant portion of Kurds. The widespread local Syrian support for *Operation Peace Spring* is in great part due to Turkey being [the only state](#) supporting majority-rule in Syria, an absolutely essential characteristic for a functioning democratic society. In stark contrast, Iran, France, Russia, and the United States militarily supported and supplied various factions that depend on small ethnic sectarian and ideological minorities. Relatedly, it has been repeatedly demonstrated



Abdulazim al-Muhammad and his 2 year-old daughter wait to return to his homeland in Syria's Ras al-Ayn following Turkey's *Operation Peace Spring*, in the Ceylanpinar district of Sanliurfa, Turkey on November 22, 2019. (Eşber Ayaydin - Anadolu Agency)

that the territories that came under the control of Turkey and the Turkish-backed opposition alone did not revert back to the Assad regime, whereas significant territories previously held by the YPG, Daesh and the HTS, all came under the control of the Assad regime.

A third factor that may have influenced ordinary Syrians' overwhelmingly positive evaluation of Turkey as the most benevolent outside power in Syria is the fact the *Operation Peace Spring*, similar to *Operation Euphrates Shield* (2016) and *Operation Olive Branch* (2018) before, has been conducted with minimal civilian casualties and minimal destruction of infrastructure. In stark contrast, the U.S.-YPG takeover of Raqqa resulted in thousands of civilian casualties, and the Russian-Iranian backed Assad regime's takeover of Aleppo and much of Northwestern Syria from the Syrian opposition resulted in tens of thousands of civilian casualties. Moreover, it has been demonstrated time and again that the YPG allowed Daesh terrorists [free passage](#) in quid pro quo deals. Even more publicly and far more often, the YPG collaborated with the Assad regime, including handing over anti-government activists to the regime, and more recently, handing over entire towns and territories to the regime as a form of protection against Turkey and the SNA.

The territories captured from the YPG during *Operation Peace Spring*, such as Tal Abyad and Ras al-Ayn, are overwhelmingly populated by Arabs with relatively few Kurds. Against this background, it remains a question as to why many prominent Western opinion leaders supported the YPG, a radical ideological minority within an already small ethnic minority (Kurds make up approximately 10 percent of Syria) that occupied almost one-third of Syria with the support of the U.S. military and significant [Saudi financing](#). Widespread support for the YPG among influential Western opinion leaders represents a convergence of far right (e.g., Pat Robertson) and far left (e.g., Noam Chomsky) radicalism, which share an overt – in the case of the former – or covert – in the latter case – Islamophobic bias in their political evaluations.

Finally, Turkey is the only neighbour of Syria that is both materially capable and politically willing to assume part of the responsibility for the reconstruction of postwar Syria, which is the minimal necessary condition to enable the return of Syrian refugees. The magnitude of such a reconstruction effort and the return of the Syrian refugees to their homeland, however, can be far greater with the assistance of the European Union and the United States. Otherwise, such reconstruction and return of refugees will most likely remain limited to the rather small pockets that Turkey has access to in Northern Syria.

Origins of the Operation: YPG takeover of Northern Syria and the Refugee Crisis

Operation Peace Spring, which was launched in October 2019, has been in the making since the PYD-YPG's capture of Tal Abyad in June 2015, which was widely recognised as a "[turning point](#)" in the Syrian conflict, and the PKK's [declaration](#) of a so-called "[People's Revolutionary War](#)" against Turkey shortly thereafter in July 2015. These two historical turning points that took place in mid-2015 highlight the humanitarian and the security concerns that motivated Turkey to undertake *Operation Peace Spring* after lengthy preparations and years-long negotiations abroad.

The PYD's policy of forced displacement of its Arab, Turkmen, and Kurdish opponents from Northern Syria was documented by Amnesty International in a [detailed report](#) already in October 2015. This policy of deliberate displacement and population engineering served the goal of building a totalitarian one-party state inspired by the Bolshevik Revolution that forged the Soviet Union, which led the author of this outlook to depict the PKK and the PYD's attempt as a "[Kurdish Soviet experiment](#)" in Syria and Turkey. Turkey hosts approximately [300,000 Syrian Kurdish refugees](#), most of whom fled from the PYD-YPG occupied areas of Northern Syria, and who "fear returning home [due to PYD/PKK threat](#)." This number is still less than one-tenth of the approximately 3.5 million Syrian refugees of all ethnic backgrounds that Turkey continues to host, a sizeable portion of them being the Arab inhabitants of Northern Syria who were forcefully displaced by the PYD-YPG. This latter point was recognised even by Western media outlets such as the [New York Times](#), which is otherwise very sympathetic to the PYD-YPG. In short, allowing for the repatriation of hundreds of thousands of Syrians who were forcefully displaced by the PYD-YPG and sought refuge in Turkey constitutes one of the two major justifications and motivations for *Operation Peace Spring*.

The PYD-YPG's occupation of Northern Syria and PKK terrorism in Turkey

The YPG's takeover of Northern Syria was accompanied by the PKK's decision to launch the deadliest terrorist campaign that Turkey has suffered in the last two decades. Within a month of the YPG's occupation of Tal Abyad, which brought the entire Syrian-Turkish border east of Euphrates river under contiguous YPG control, the PKK declared that it was unilaterally ending the ceasefire and launching a "People's Revolutionary War" against Turkey.

The immediate reason given was the [construction of hydroelectric dams](#) in southeastern Anatolia, which struck many observers as a particularly unconvincing pretext for launching one of the bloodiest terrorist campaigns of the 21st century. According to the [International Crisis Group's report](#) based on open sources, at least 4739 people were killed in the Turkey-PKK conflict between July 2015 and November 2019 including at least 490 verified civilians and 1220 Turkish security forces personnel. Importantly, 2034 of these people were killed between July 2015 and July 2016, corresponding to almost half of the total casualty figures. PKK attacks included numerous suicide bombings in Turkey's urban centres such as the [suicide bombing next to a major stadium in Istanbul](#) during a football match in December 2016.

[The most likely reason](#) behind the PKK's decision to initiate its most comprehensive offensive against Turkey in July 2015, right after its YPG Syrian-affiliate captured Tal Abyad in June 2015, was to preserve, consolidate, deepen, and possibly expand its occupation in Northern Syria, while keeping the Turkish military and security forces busy fighting domestic terrorism, and hence preventing Turkey from intervening against the PYD-YPG at such a critical juncture. In fact, a pro-PYD mobilization that ended with dozens of civilian fatalities already took place in October 2014 when thousands of pro-PKK sympathizers took to the streets in numerous Kurdish-majority towns in Turkey to protest Turkey's lack of assistance to the YPG-held Syrian town of Kobani (Ayn Al-Arab) besieged by Daesh at the time. During the course of these events, dozens of dissident Kurdish civilians who did not support the PKK/PYD, such as 16-year old [Yasin Börü](#), were murdered, in what one journalist described as the "[PKK's witch hunt](#)." Throughout this conflict, PKK [leadership](#) and pro-PKK [political](#) actors, including legal [political parties](#) that are openly sympathetic to the PKK in Turkey, explicitly prioritised the preservation of the PYD-YPG's gains in Syria - the so-called "Rojava revolution" - as the most critical objective of the PKK's violent campaigns. In other words, the PKK's campaign against Turkey, which included numerous acts of terrorism such as suicide bombings, and claimed the lives of more than 490 civilians and 1220 Turkish security personnel since July 2015, was explicitly linked to the PYD-YPG's occupation of Northern Syria.

Moreover, many militants receive training [in Syria](#) and [are involved in](#) both [the PKK](#) and the YPG attacks in Turkey and Syria respectively. Turkey's Ministry of Interior published a bilingual report (in English and Turkish), also available in [Arabic](#) and [German](#), on the concrete [links between the PKK and the PYD](#), which includes biographies of leading terrorists who participate with both the PKK and the YPG. In a detailed story about the YPG and the PKK by the *Wall Street Journal*, titled, "[America's Marxist Allies Against ISIS](#)," a YPG fighter, Ms. Ruken, pithily summarizes the [unity of the PKK and the YPG](#) in her own words: "Sometimes I'm a

PKK, sometimes I'm a PJAK, sometimes I'm a YPG. It doesn't really matter. They are all members of the PKK."

Among numerous similar examples, YPG fighters celebrated their capture of Raqqqa by displaying a [gigantic poster of Abdullah Öcalan](#) in the city centre, demonstrating their strong affiliation with the PKK in a rather spectacular and irrefutable manner. Throughout Syria, YPG militants unabashedly and proudly [praised Abdullah Öcalan](#), the leader of the PKK, which is recognised as a terrorist organisation by the European Union, the United States, and Turkey. In short, in addition to hundreds of thousands of Syrians displaced by the PYD-YPG who have been living as refugees in Turkey, *Operation Peace Spring* was also necessitated and justified due to the terrorist attacks emanating from the PKK-PYD-YPG with specific reference to the war in Syria, which claimed the lives of hundreds of Turkish civilians and over a thousand Turkish security personnel since July 2015.

The Majority of Syrians support Turkey's intervention

There have been numerous indicators that the majority of Syrians supported Turkey's intervention in Syria, particularly as it relates to the PYD-YPG. In the absence of free and fair elections, referenda, or regular nationwide opinion polls, the mass migration movement within and beyond Syria can be considered an indicator, however imperfect, of which factions and external powers Syrians prefer. Among the three zones of control in Syria, namely, Russian-Iranian backed Assad regime, French-Saudi-U.S. backed YPG-PYD territory, and Turkish-backed SNA and Idlib zones, the largest internal migrations have been away from Assad-regime and YPG-PYD controlled territories to Turkish-backed SNA and Idlib zones. To a certain extent, millions of Syrians already voted with their feet to indicate that they feel most secure in territories controlled by Turkish-backed groups. Second, more than 3 million Syrians have fled to Turkey since the beginning of the war, making Turkey the host country with the largest number of Syrian refugees worldwide. Thus, somewhere between one-fourth and one-third of Syria's total prewar population either lives in Turkey or in the Northwestern Syrian territories protected by Turkey at present.

A new Gallup International survey, conducted in the governorates of Hasakah and Raqqqa, which are the only ones affected by the *Operation Peace Spring*, but among residents not living in territories already under Turkish or Turkish-backed FSA/SNA control, indicated that 57% of Syrians ["support Turkish military intervention."](#) The Gallup survey also indicates that when broken down according to ethnic categories, 64% of Arabs and 23% of Kurds openly support the Turkish military intervention. This indicates a clear majority are in favor of Turkish intervention among

Syrians in general. Among Syrian Arabs, an overwhelming two-thirds majority indicated their support for Turkish intervention. Moreover, the 23% support that the Turkish intervention already enjoys among Syrian Kurds must be considered a lower bound, and the actual levels of support are likely to be much higher because of the deliberate oversampling of the subset of Kurds who are most likely to oppose Turkish intervention by definition: Gallup explicitly states that they included 100 Kurds who fled from the territories that already came under Turkish control during *Operation Peace Spring*, and since these Kurds are among those that fled Turkish intervention, they are almost by definition likely to oppose it. Including 100 respondents with such a background in an otherwise demographically representative sample of 600 Syrians, the majority of whom must have been Arabs, probably skews the Kurdish responses by about a third if not more. Thus, it is possible that actual Syrian Kurdish support for the Turkish intervention might be as high as 50% rather than the 23% reported in the Gallup survey. In any case, even the current survey indicates that one out of four Syrian Kurds and two-thirds of Syrian Arabs support the Turkish intervention, leading Gallup to conclude that "there is a deep intra-Kurdish divide." Based on their interviews, they maintain that, [m]any Kurds in Syria are ideologically at odds with the PYD - a left-wing affiliate of the PKK with non-Syrian leadership," which is consistent with the assessment of many other experts on Syria.

There are numerous other indicators of a deep intra-Kurdish divide and subsequent Kurdish support for Turkey's intervention against the PYD-YPG in Syria. In a dramatic illustration of the deep intra-Kurdish divide, Professor Mustafa Muslim, the elder brother of Salih Muslim - leader of the PYD - could not live in the Soviet-inspired totalitarian one-party regime that his brother was building and subsequently left "Rojava" and [sought refuge in Turkey](#). Mustafa Muslim [stated that](#) "the PYD only represents 10 percent of Syria's Kurds" and that they "arrest dissidents and do not want any difference of opinion." Indeed, his brother and PYD leader Salih Muslim explicitly stated that not only rival forces and parties of Arabs or Turkmens, but even the *peshmerga*, the Kurdish fighters affiliated with the Kurdistan Democratic Party, would be [denied entry](#) to the PYD-YPG occupied Northern Syria.

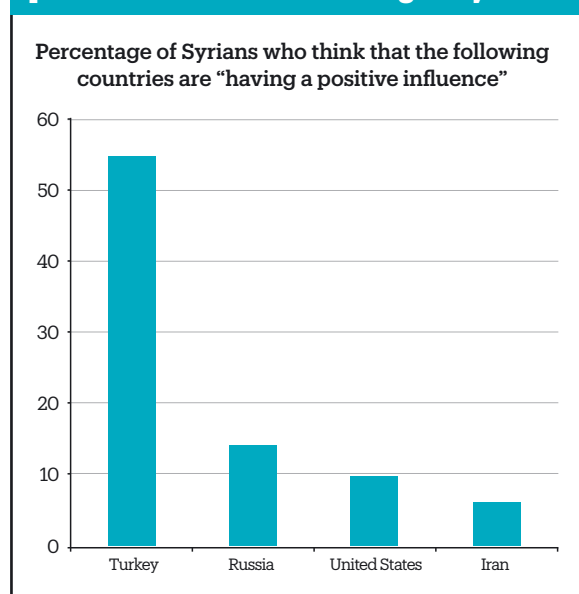
Nechirvan Barzani, the President of the Kurdistan Regional Government in Iraq, speaking at a panel in Erbil stated that "Turkey does not have any problems with Kurds in Syria and it only aims to fight a PKK-affiliated terror group there" as TRT World [broadcasted](#) and [reported](#). Barzani maintained that "the biggest problem was that the PKK tried to obtain its legitimacy at the expense of Syrian Kurds" and "[w]hat Kurds eventually suffered came as a result of the wrong policy they [PKK] followed," according to [Rudaw](#), the leading broadcaster of the Kurdistan Regional Government. In short, public opinion surveys as well as testimonies of leading Kurdish notables, including

the President of the Kurdistan Regional Government and the brother of the PYD's leader himself, indicate that there is a deep intra-Kurdish divide even among Northern Syrian Kurds. Perhaps more importantly, an overwhelming majority of Arabs (64 %), who constitute the absolute majority in Northern Syria, in both Hasakah and Raqqah, support and welcome Turkey's intervention to free their territories from PYD-YPG occupation.

Turkey is the only country having a positive influence according to most Syrians

Turkey is seen as "having a positive influence in the region" by 55% of the representative sample of Syrians surveyed by Gallup. In stark contrast, only 14%, 10%, and 6% of Syrians have a favorable opinion of Russia, United States, and Iran respectively. Thus, among the four major military powers currently on the ground in Syria, Turkey is the clear favorite among Syrians by a large margin. The [Gallup report](#) emphasizes that this is not an ephemeral or local outcome, since "[f]or many years now, public opinion has consistently shown that Turkey is considered the only country that has a positive influence on affairs inside Syria." The particularly favorable views of Turkey by Syrians might be due to the fact that **Turkey has been, and remains, the only foreign actor that has consistently supported majority-rule in Syria. Russia, Iran, France, and the United States, on the other hand, have supported various ideological, ethnic, and sectarian minorities in Syria, including the Baathists (Russia), the Alawites (Iran), and the PYD-YPG (France and the United States).**

Graph 1: Which country is having a positive influence according to Syrians?



Source: [Gallup International Survey in Syria](#).

Turkey is also the only actor that has so far guaranteed that the territories under its control would not revert back to the Assad regime. This is a significant point that should not be overlooked since 57% of Syrians interviewed by [Gallup International](#) are of the opinion that "living under Daesh would be preferable to living under the control of Assad." There are many examples of territories that were first captured by Daesh, HTS, or the YPG, which were later taken over by the Assad-regime, either by force (e.g., from HTS) or peacefully handed over (e.g., by YPG), whereas there is no example of a territory under Turkish protection, which was then captured by or handed over to the regime. The finding that the Assad regime is the least preferable option for most Syrians is also troubling if we consider that both the PYD-YPG and HTS (in Northwestern Syria) ceded or lost significant territories to the Assad regime, either willingly as in the case of PYD-YPG or unwillingly in the case of HTS. In stark contrast, Turkish backed FSA-SNA controlled territories alone have so far remained immune from being taken over by the Russian-Iranian backed Assad regime.

Roy Gutman, a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist reporting on Syria, provocatively suggested that "[America's dirty secret in Syria](#)" is a "de facto alliance with Assad," which was exposed by Turkey's intervention in Afrin (*Operation Olive Branch*): "The Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces the United States relies on to fight the so-called Islamic State in eastern Syria is allied with the infamous regime of Bashar al-Assad," Gutman contends. There is also evidence that surfaced in a testimony to the U.S. [Congressional Committee](#) of Foreign Affairs to suggest that the Obama administration worked with Russia to [prevent the fall](#) of the Assad-regime. Instead of surrendering territory to Turkish-backed Syrian opposition forces such as the FSA and later, the SNA, the U.S.-backed PYD-YPG repeatedly invited regime forces to patrol and even take over territories under its control. The widespread collaboration between the PYD-YPG and the Assad regime was also noted as a critical observation in Gallup International's summary of interviews with Kurdish Syrians in Raqqah and Hasakah provinces, where they [stated](#) that "many Kurds who joined the beginning of the Syrian revolution view the PYD as collaborators with Assad and a group that has previously handed over many activists to the regime."

Apart from its overt collaboration with the Assad regime, the YPG has also collaborated with Daesh/Islamic State (IS), although far more covertly. Upon the capture of Raqqah by the SDF with massive US and British support, the "BBC has uncovered details of a [secret deal](#) that let hundreds of IS fighters and their families escape from Raqqah," including "some of IS's most notorious members." In short, the overt and the covert collaboration of the PYD-YPG with both the Assad-regime and Daesh, as well as the successive defeats suffered by HTS (most recently and significantly surrendering Khan Sheikhoun), makes the Turkish-backed Syrian opposition (FSA/SNA) the only reliable military force

able to protect the majority of Syrians who prefer to avoid living under Assad-regime at all costs.

Another factor that may partially explain ordinary Syrians' overwhelmingly positive evaluation of Turkey as the actor with the most positive influence in Syria is the fact **that Turkey has conducted its military operations in Syria with minimal civilian casualties and minimal destruction of infrastructure**. Many Turkish social media accounts shared pictures and videos of Afrin following the completion of the operation by Turkey and the FSA through *Operation Olive Branch* (2018) juxtaposed against pictures and videos of Raqqa following its "liberation" by the United States and the SDF in 2017. In stark contrast to the Turkish-led operation, the U.S.-led coalition's strikes on Raqqa alone killed 1,600 civilians, as revealed in an investigation by [Amnesty International](#), and reported by [BBC](#), [Deutsche Welle](#), [NPR](#), and [Voice of America](#), among others. Likewise, the Assad regime's takeover of Aleppo and much of Western Syria from the Syrian opposition with massive Russian and Iranian support resulted in tens of thousands of civilian casualties, and included the use of chemical weapons. Turkey's military operations in Syria compare far more favorably to those of Russia, Iran, and the United States in terms of civilian casualties and the destruction of infrastructure.

The territories liberated during Operation Peace Spring by the TAF- SNA as of October-November 2019 such as Tal Abyad and Ras al-Ayn are overwhelmingly Arab populated regions with relatively small Kurdish minority populations, only a fraction of which are Kurdish PYD-YPG supporters. The choice of the majority Arab towns of Ras al-Ayn and Tal Abyad as the primary objectives of the Turkish and SNA operation has been noted by both [Turkish](#) and [non-Turkish](#) commentators well before the beginning of *Operation Peace Spring*, since this operation has been in the making for many years as noted above. Tal Abyad in particular was identified as the "[Achilles Heel](#)" of the YPG's territorial entity precisely because of its Arab-majority. It is inaccurate from a demographic point of view to depict *Operation Peace Spring* as a Turkish-SNA incursion into Kurdish-majority territories because the operation deliberately and precisely targeted the Arab-majority towns of Ras al-Ayn and Tal Abyad. In terms of the demographic context, it is worth emphasizing that even a significant percentage of Syrian Kurds, ranging from at least 23% according to the Gallup International's survey up to a large majority of Syrian Kurds as argued by Mustafa Muslim quoted earlier, also reject the PYD-YPG and welcome the Turkish- SNA intervention. Many Syrian Christians also openly protested PYD-YPG rule, as demonstrated by the [joint statement of 16 Armenian and Assyrian organisations](#) in Hasakah province, protesting the PYD's forceful conscription of Christians, confiscation of their private properties, and interference in their church curricula.

As mentioned above, the most uncompromising supporters of the PYD-YPG in the West come from both the far right (e.g., Pat Robertson) and far left (e.g., Noam Chomsky). The widespread support that the PYD-YPG enjoys among Western opinion leaders is perplexing, especially given its totalitarian Soviet-esque ideology and organisation, which was also staunchly anti-American originally but subsequently revised to accommodate its new geopolitical relationship of patronage with the United States. President Trump's decision to withdraw U.S. troops from Syria, and the [agreement between the United States and Turkey](#) regarding the establishment of a 20-mile/32-kilometres deep safe zone in Northern Syria along the Turkish border exposed those political actors and opinion leaders most committed to preserving the current status quo in Syria, including, most importantly, the U.S. military presence and active support for the PYD-YPG. Pat Robertson, the Christian conservative televangelist and one-time Republican presidential candidate, who has not openly opposed Trump on any major decision or policy despite numerous domestic and international controversies, immediately came out against Trump with a swift and popular video broadcast, arguing that President Trump is in danger of "[losing the mandate of heaven](#)" with his decision to withdraw U.S. troops from Syria. In an extremely rare instance of agreement with Pat Robertson, far left critic and public intellectual Noam Chomsky likewise spoke out strongly against the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Syria. In the case of Chomsky, his intervention appeared as a glaring contradiction with his otherwise anti-war, anti-interventionist stance. In response, Mehdi Hassan of the Intercept [critically noted](#) that "Chomsky, the arch-anti-interventionist surprised a lot of people last year... when he said that the U.S. should maintain a troop presence in Syria in order to deter Turkish aggression against the Kurds". In the past, Chomsky even objected to NATO's intervention against Serbia to stop the genocide of Bosniak Muslims and later to protect Kosovar Albanian Muslims against the same type of aggression. More recently, Chomsky also [opposed](#) a "no fly zone in Idlib or Aleppo where civilians were being bombed by Russia and the Assad regime." Reading the justifications that Pat Robertson, Noam Chomsky, and other far right and far left advocates of U.S. military intervention in support of PYD-YPG, juxtaposed against their staunch opposition to any military intervention to protect far more numerous Muslim populations that were and/or are being systematically murdered in Syria, the Balkans, and elsewhere, one cannot escape the thought that their support for PYD-YPG is motivated by their overt (Robertson) or covert (Chomsky) Islamophobia.

Leaving aside the staunch and doctrinaire supporters of the PYD-YPG among the evangelical Christian right and the far left, there is also a very large, if not hegemonic group of pundits, scholars, intellectuals, and policy-makers at the "liberal centre" who have also espoused rather sympathetic views of the YPG and decried the U.S. government's decision for a partial withdrawal from northern Syria as

a “betrayal of the Kurds.” **The discourse of an American “betrayal of the Kurds in Syria” is perhaps the most bitterly ironic reversal of facts. This is because the U.S. decision to abandon the Syrian opposition and to instead support the PYD-YPG, which often collaborates with the Assad-regime, in fact constituted the most [disastrous betrayal of Syrian allies](#).** The U.S. indeed betrayed its allies with disastrous consequences for millions of Syrians, but that betrayal consisted of abandonning the Syrian opposition and instead supporting the PYD-YPG, rather than ceasing to support the PYD-YPG, as suggested by numerous American pundits following *Operation Peace Spring*.

Apart from all the political and humanitarian factors, including ordinary Syrians’ popular support for the Turkish-FSA-SNA interventions in Syria, **Turkey is also the only power among Syria’s neighbours that has both the material capability and the political will to assume part of the responsibility for the reconstruction of Syria and secure a voluntary “right of return” for millions of Syrian refugees.** Reconstruction and refugee repatriation can be far more extensive and successful, however, with the assistance of the European Union, the United States, and external funding secured from intergovernmental and/or non-governmental organisations. Otherwise, such reconstruction and refugee repatriation will most likely remain rather limited to small pockets that are administered by Turkey and the FSA/SNA in Northern Syria.

Operation Peace Spring has been a step forward in the struggle for a free Syria. This is in great part because, given the trajectory of the past 8 years of war, the only reliable actor that has demonstrated the ability to protect and consolidate a “Free Syria” beyond the control of the Assad regime appears to be Turkey and the Turkish-backed SNA. It is not without reason that the Assad-regime has been fighting alongside the PYD-YPG against the Turkish-backed SNA in Northern Syria since October 2019, if not much earlier. The PYD-YPG’s occupation of mostly Arab-majority regions of Northern Syria by mid-2015, combined with its policy of forced displacement of its opponents, led to a new wave of refugees entering Turkey. It was also accompanied by the most deadly wave of terrorist attacks of the last two decades against Turkey by the PKK. *Operation Peace Spring* was launched by the TAF and the SNA primarily in order to secure Syrian refugees’ right of return and to put an end to the terrorist threat along Turkey’s border. The operation was welcomed by a majority of Arabs and a significant portion of Kurds in Northern Syria. Popular support for *Operation Peace Spring* among Syrians also has to do with Turkey being the only state supporting majority-rule in Syria, unlike Russia, Iran, France, and the United States, all of which militarily supported and supplied various factions that depend on small ethnic sectarian and ideological minorities. Turkey and the Turkish-backed SNA alone have so far demonstrated that the territories under their control would not revert back to the Assad regime, whereas significant

areas previously held by the YPG and HTS later came under the control of Assad regime. Furthermore, *Operation Peace Spring*, similar to *Operation Euphrates Shield* (2016) and *Operation Olive Branch* (2018) before, has been conducted with minimal civilian casualties and minimal destruction of infrastructure. These achievements stand in stark contrast to the U.S.-PYD-YPG takeover of Raqqa, which resulted in the killing of at least 1,600 civilians, and the Russian-Iranian backed Assad regime’s takeover of Aleppo and much of Northwestern Syria from the Syrian opposition, which resulted in tens of thousands of civilian casualties. Furthermore, it has been clearly shown that the YPG allowed members of Daesh free passage in quid pro quo deals, in addition to their more overt and extensive collaboration with the Syrian regime. Finally, Turkey is the only power neighboring Syria that is *both* materially capable and politically willing to undertake part of the responsibility for the reconstruction of postwar Syria in order to enable the return of Syrian refugees. The assistance of the European Union and the United States would certainly upgrade the extent of such a reconstruction and refugee repatriation, which otherwise would only be limited to the areas under the control of the Turkish-backed SNA.

With the United States repositioning its limited forces to East-Central Syria around Deir-ez-zor province, and the YPG surrendering many of its positions on the front-lines to the Assad-regime, the risk of a crisis or even an actual clash between Russian and Turkish forces is much higher than before. Although this risk seems to have been averted for now with the Russian-Turkish [agreement](#) on the withdrawal of the YPG 32 kilometres from the Turkish border, this seems to be merely a temporary solution both because YPG did not actually withdraw 32 kilometres away from the Turkish border, and also because there is a much more established YPG zone under Russian protection in the Tel Rifat region north of Aleppo. Even more critically, from Russia’s point of view, the “de-escalation zones” in Idlib province, the perimeter of which is established by Turkey’s observation points, “are merely a [temporary measure](#),” whereas this perimeter demarcates the minimum amount of territory necessary for the opponents of the Assad-regime to survive without a humanitarian catastrophe. On the other hand, both Russia, where real incomes [declined](#) for the fifth year in a row, and Iran are economically and militarily overstretched. Thus, both Russia and Iran may have to accept the current internal borders of Syria, including the perimeter of the deescalation zones in Idlib, as part of the semi-permanent status quo of a frozen conflict for the short and the medium term. In fact, if and once the YPG-PYD is (re)moved from Tel Rifat and Manbij and moved 32 kilometres away from the Turkish border, then declaring a permanent ceasefire and effectively ‘freezing’ the conflict with its current internal borders might provide the most immediate, politically feasible and ultimately humanitarian resolution to the war in Syria, until a comprehensive political solution can be reached.

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