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## SAFE ZONE IN NORTHERN SYRIA AND TURKEY

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The longer the Syrian crisis lasts, the more complicated the problem becomes. There are now an interwoven cycle of several wars on different fronts and in different geographies, between different actors and within the framework of changing alliances. In such an environment, Syria's neighboring countries, notably Turkey, make efforts to minimize the security risks originating from Syria. Every country has to concentrate on the developments in their own border region. What Turkey has intensely proposed lately is the establishment of a safe zone on the border line between Azaz and Jarabulus which is under ISIS control. This study examines the reasons behind Turkey's demand for a safe zone and how the conditions have gradually been matured to establish a safe zone.

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Turkey has principally brought this issue to the agenda since a long time ago. The proposal was firstly suggested within the context of the increase in the Syrian refugee influx at the beginning of 2012 and reception of Syrians across the border. It was later considered as part of the efforts made in order to weaken the Assad regime. Finally, Turkey brought for-

ward the issue of safe zone again under the name of 'de-terrorized zone' after the Kurdish militia YPG captured Tell Abyad in June 2015, ISIS gained ground towards Azaz and Syrian refugees started flooding into European countries. The arguments about the reason for and objective of the demand for a safe zone differentiated as well as how it would be established depending on the changing characteristics of the Syrian crisis.

The first question that comes to mind is what the goal of establishing a safe zone will be. It is possible to categorize Turkey's expectations under two main titles: easing the increasing pressure of Syrian refugees and ensuring border security with the strengthening of Turkey's Syria policy in short, medium and long term.

### ***A. The Pressure of Refugees***

- According to the unofficial figures, approximately 2.5 million Syrians take refuge in Turkey as of November 2015. The refugee influx continues increasingly with Russia's involve-

ment in Syria. Unlike Europe, although Turkey has a large Syrian population, it is seen that the social reaction is at a relatively controllable level and that there are few problems in the Syrians' adaptation process. However, the increasing number of Syrian refugees also imposes an increasing burden in terms of Turkey's economy and social life. There are also political and security risks. Turkey aims to establish a stable safe zone where the people escaping from Syria can take shelter. In case of the establishment of a safe zone, new refugee influx will be received there; it will be ensured that the Syrians living in Turkey will return to this zone and Turkey's burden will be relieved. Therefore, the potential problems that Turkey may face will be resolved across the border. The issue of refugees has become the problem of not only Turkey but also Europe with Syrians' influx into the West. The de-terrorized zone offers a

measure to reduce Syrian influx into Europe.

- The humanitarian aid that Turkey and several other countries in the world send to civilians in Syria reaches the region from Turkey. The majority of this aid is sent via Oncupinar border gate on the narrow line between Azaz and Afrin which is under the control of Syrian opposition. If ISIS or YPG captures the mentioned line, there will be limited or no possibility that Turkey sends humanitarian aid to Syrian inlands, especially to Aleppo. Attaching high importance to the developments in Aleppo, Turkey demands for the establishment of a safe zone in order to protect and expand this line.

### ***B. Strengthening Turkey's Syria Policy and Border Security***

Turkey's Syria policy can be divided into three main phases from the beginning of the Syrian crisis until the end of 2015. The first phase started with the begin-

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ning of the civil uprisings in March 2011 and lasted until the negotiation between the Turkish Minister of Foreign Affairs of that time, Ahmet Davutoglu and the Syrian President Bashar al-Assad in Damascus in August 2011. Turkey thought that Syrian government could resolve the crisis through political means and Turkey could persuade al-Assad with its influence on the regime during that time. The terms agreed in the negotiation between Davutoglu and al-Assad were not put into practice and the Syrian government continued to approach the crisis with military means, which caused Turkey to abandon its approach to persuade Syria and resort to

pressure and isolation. In the second phase, Turkey started utilizing increasingly the political, diplomatic and economic sanctions and elements of pressure on Syria. Turkey also began to provide the political and military opposition of Syria all kinds of support. During the last phase of Turkey's Syria policy, the characteristics of the protracted civil war has changed, so Turkey tried to adapt itself to the new situation. At the beginning, Syrian Civil War was roughly identified as the conflict between the Assad regime and the opposition. However, in time, it turned out to be a complicated civil war with multi-actors, changing alliances, strengthening ethni-

cal and sectarian character, leading to a *de facto* division, including foreign fighters on both sides and finally involving major and regional powers in the war directly. Whereas only Assad regime was considered to be a threat in Turkey at the first phase, threat perception changed throughout the process. Turkey tries to adapt its Syria policy and the tools of foreign policy that it utilizes to the new situation at the third phase that we witness today. The rise of two actors in Syrian civil war is of great importance for Turkey in this sense. One of them is PYD/YPG, the Syrian extension of PKK and the latter is the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), the derivative of al-Qaeda. These two actors that Turkey considers as terrorist organizations cannot have a political status on the Turkey-Syria border or in the vicinity of the border; they declared their own *de facto* autonomous regions/states. While Turkey's demand for a safe zone was initially seen as the fight against the Assad regime, this new situation shows that it is a fight both against

the regime and the mentioned new threats. From this perspective, Turkey's demand for a safe zone can be expected to serve the purposes below:

- The control of the regime has decreased in northern Syria since the mid-2012 and now it has the control of only some limited areas. This power vacuum has been filled by ISIS that Turkey considers as a terrorist organization and by YPG, the extension of PKK. By November 2015, ISIS, YPG or the regime control almost 90% of the Turkey-Syria border. Only the remaining 10% is under the control of the opposition which is also supported by Turkey. Turkey's high level politicians have indicated that Turkey does not want to face these three actors on its borders. The establishment of a safe zone will also lead the allies like Free Syrian Army to control some 100 km border shared with ISIS. Therefore, at least ISIS-based security risks will decrease.
- YPG indicates that its ul-

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time goal is to form an integrated Kurdish region on the line starting from the Iraqi border and reaching Afrin. This means that Turkey will face a state-like entity under PKK's control nearly along its entire border with Syria. This development will weaken its hand within the context of the fight against PKK, Turkey's vital problem, beyond the security risks which will result from the border. Nevertheless, the establishment of a safe zone will eliminate the possibility that YPG may pass to the west of Jarabulus.

- The military success that the opposition will have

is important for Turkey to force the Assad regime towards political solution. That is why Turkey attaches great importance to the maintenance of geographical connection with the opposition and Aleppo which Turkey sees as a close region of interest. The connection has already been established on the line between Azaz and Afrin and on Idlib. However, what is critical for Turkey are the developments in Aleppo. This connection is established in the narrow zone between Azaz and Afrin. The geographic connection between Turkey and the opposition, Turkey

and Aleppo will be secured with the safe zone.

- ISIS or YPG control over the zone between Afrin and Jarabulus on the border will lead Turkey to make its extension to Syria and the Middle East in the long term from these two actors that it sees as terrorist organizations. Therefore, it is important to secure the line in order to assure Turkey's long term Syria and Middle East policy as well.
- One of the greatest difficulties that the opposition, which fights the regime on the northern front, has is that they have to fight against ISIS at the same time. The fronts that ISIS has opened on the eastern country side weaken the power of the opposition in its fight against the regime. For example, ISIS launched attacks while the opposition was planning joint operations targeting the regime positions in Aleppo, and therefore, the operation in Aleppo was postponed. A safe zone may also reduce ISIS' pressure on the opposition

and pave the way for the change of power balances in Aleppo in favor of the opposition.

- A safe zone can set a good example of the regions under the opposition control, especially the southern front providing that it becomes successful. The establishment of such a zone may cause pressure on Syrian regime and pave the way for efforts to find political solutions in Syria.

#### **Points to Take into Account and Put into Practice Concerning the Safe Zone**

The factors that should be taken into account in terms of establishing a safe zone include the demographic structure of the population in the mentioned geography, the approach of the local people towards Turkey's protection and a safe zone and the relations between Syrian regime and the opposition. When considered in this respect, it is possible to paint such a picture:

There are totally 278 villages on the line between Azaz and Jarabulus. The majority of the population in these vil-

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lages is Turkmen. Apart from this, there are Arabs and limited number of Kurds. More than 70% of the settlements are occupied by ISIS. The social groups living here acted in concert with the Syrian opposition to a large extent against the Syrian regime since the beginning. The villages and towns in the region were even controlled by the armed local opposition groups before ISIS entered the region. The local population neither wants the authority of ISIS nor that of YPG in their settlements. It is aimed in the safe zone plan to enable 14 different opposition groups, especially Turkmen-created Sultan

Murad Brigade to advance by land. These groups are supported by the local people. Similarly, Turkey's protecting the region will strengthen the grounds of legitimacy because the local community likes Turkey. Turkmen and Arabs have close relationships by affinity with the people on Turkey's side of the border. The geography is of level land differently from the Iraqi border, which may facilitate military operations. It can be said that there is a low risk when all these perspectives are taken into consideration.

However, establishing a safe zone can be said to include several risk elements.





Safe zone is planned to be established between Azaz and Jarabulus, of around 100 km wide and 40 km deep. Such a narrow and small geography may not allow the zone to be literally safe. ISIS control will continue around the zone, which will easily and continuously make it open to ISIS attacks. It will become harder to literally provide security in the zone especially as long as ISIS continues to control Manbij, which is closely situated to the zone and has an Arab-Turkmen population. Manbij is one of the places where ISIS has the greatest power and it is difficult to take the organization out of this town without intense operation.

The biggest problem in the debates about safe zone is lack of forces which will fight on the ground and the fragility of the alliance between them. Above all, al-Nusra Front is not part of this plan since it is a terrorist organization. In addition, Ahrar Ash-Sham is one of the powerful groups on the northern front but it is not certain whether it will take part in this movement. The USA and Turkey have differ-

ent opinions about this group. Therefore, it is primarily doubtful that there is a literally powerful opposition which will advance on the ground. Syrian opposition trusts the air support of the USA and Turkey to a large extent. It is believed that it was the US air operations, not YPG, that but were successful in Tell Abyad and Kobanî. That is why they think that they will advance without facing a large-scale resistance with the air support. However, there are questions whether this view is right. Secondly, many opposition groups will act together. Nevertheless, the alliance among the groups is fragile. That is to say, lack of the most powerful groups on the northern front and fragility of the alliance among them reduces the possibility to succeed against ISIS in a great number of joint land operations. The USA or Turkey may directly have to take the responsibility on the ground against ISIS in such a situation. This may be a limited operation in terms of geography and target when launched by special units rather than a comprehensive operation.

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If such a zone is going to be established, what should be done first is to prepare for the formation of civil administration and organization of the daily life following the establishment of the zone. A significant number of people still live in this region. It is planned to enable Syrians who lived in this region to return at the first stage. Beyond this, new refugee influx may be received in the region. Therefore, it can be foreseen that there will be an intense population in the safe zone. At this point, unlike the regime and PYD, ISIS turns out to be a successful example of an alternative government model which provides security and systematic meeting of the

needs of people. That is why it should be planned before how medical needs will be met, education and municipality services will be provided, civil administration will be formed, internal security will be ensured, preparations for food and shelter will be made, economic life will be revived and the needs for electricity and water will be met. The success of the zone will be an example of a successful model except for the regime and ISIS at the following stage.

### Conclusion

We can count the reasons which led Turkey to express aloud its demand for a safe zone within the last period

and which allowed for the emergence of favorable conditions to establish this zone as follows:

- PYD seized Tell Abyad where there is an intense Arab population as well as Turkmen and established a connection between the two regions under its *de facto* control. This development increased the possibility of a PKK-controlled region along the Syrian border, thus also increasing Turkey's concerns.
- ISIS launched terror attacks first in Suruç, then in Ankara. Also, Turkish security forces started intense operations against ISIS cells in Turkey and sometimes the two engaged in combat. This caused ISIS to increase its threat in Turkey and to become an urgent problem.
- PKK announced that it ended the solution process at the beginning of July 2015 and the conflicts started again between Turkey and PKK, which influenced Turkey's view of northern Syria in two

aspects. Firstly, Turkey did not directly consider PYD as a threat even though it was skeptical about it due to the continuation of solution process and conflict-free environment. In addition, although Turkey was troubled with PYD/YPG's approaches that undercut Turkey's policy of territorial integrity in Syria such as declaring cantons, expectations that the solution process would be successful was a factor that hinders Turkey from taking steps against PYD/YPG. The end of the solution process both led to the PYD/YPG presence to become a big threat in northern Syria and Turkey to remove the factors that hindered her concerning this actor.

- Turkey and the USA signed an agreement in order to act together in fight against ISIS. It was concluded in this agreement that the aircrafts of the USA and coalition forces would benefit from the opportunity to use Incirlik Air Base and Turkey's airspace and

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that Turkey and the USA would act together in order to establish a de-terrorized zone between Azaz and Jarabulus.

- ISIS advanced towards Azaz and this brought in the possibility that Turkey's connection to Aleppo would be cut. ISIS increased its influence on Azaz, which triggered Turkey to protect its Aleppo connection.
- ISIS opened fronts on eastern countryside of Aleppo against the opposition when Syrian army was stuck in Aleppo and this indirectly reassured the regime. This situation showed that it would be difficult for Turkey to reach its expectations about Aleppo without eliminating ISIS influence on the opposition.
- Syrian refugees flooded into Europe. This development both caused the West to engage more in Syrian problem and Turkey to gain importance as a fundamental partner in terms of refugee problem. There-

fore, Turkey's demands and arguments about Syria started to taken into consideration more. Turkey's proposal that a safe zone should be established and opened to build settlements for Syrians as a solution to refugee problem can be evaluated within this framework.

- Russia has been directly involved in Syrian Civil War on the side of the Assad regime. This intervention has increased the possibility that a regime zone can be established with Russia's permanent existence and protection in Syria. This has pushed the USA to take more responsibilities in order to balance Russia in Syria. It can be evaluated within this context that the USA brought its F-15 warplanes to Incirlik Air Base after Russia acquired air superiority by bringing its warplanes in Syria. The USA has now air superiority, which has weakened Russia's deterrence which poses an obstacle before the establishment of safe zone.

For all these reasons, both the issue of safe zone that Turkey has put forward for a few years has become an emergency and the regional developments have helped to put Turkey's demand into action. It is expected that military operations will be launched in order to end ISIS existence between Azaz and Jarabulus concerning the statements of Turkish and American authorities, the mobility on Incirlik Air Base and the measures taken along the border. The first option is that Turkmen and

Arab armed units that have been preparing for a long time will advance on the ground with intense air support within the scope of efforts made in order to eliminate ISIS from this region. However, it cannot be acceptable for joint military operations of the USA and Turkey to fail to defeat the terrorist organization, ISIS. If air support is insufficient at this point support on the ground may also be brought to the agenda. This will increase the possibility to win as well as the risks.

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