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QI Panel:

The PKK's Future: Real Dissolution or Strategic Shift?

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10:00 - 11:00 AM ET

Adam Weinstein 0:46

Welcome everyone. I'm going to give it maybe another 30 seconds for people to join the Zoom Room, but thanks to those who have already joined you. To those who are just joining I'm going to give it another few seconds for folks to enter the Zoom Room, and then we'll get started.

Okay, we're going to start now. Welcome to those who have joined the Zoom Room and those who are watching it streaming online. Uh, today's panel is the PKK's Future: Real Dissolution or Strategic Shift? My name is Adam Weinstein. I'm Deputy Director of the Middle East program at the Quincy Institute. If you're not familiar with the Quincy Institute, it's a Washington based think tank that envisions a US foreign policy that's rooted in restraint and diplomacy, and we have a great lineup today. First, we're joined by Gönül Tol and she is the founding director of the Middle East Institute's Turkey program and a senior fellow with the Black Sea program. And she's author of the widely respected book Erdogan's War, a strong man's struggle at home and in Syria. And she's also taught at GW. We're also joined by Burcu Ozcelik, I hope I pronounced your last name correctly. And she is a Senior Research Fellow for the Middle East secure, for Middle East security, within the international security department at Rusi in London, and with over 15 years experience in geopolitical risk analysis, particularly in MENA and she previously worked at the United Nations Development Program. And we're also joined by our own Steve Simon, who's a senior research fellow at the Quincy Institute, a distinguished fellow and visiting professor at Dartmouth, and he served on the NSC as the Senior Director for counterterrorism in the Clinton White House and for the Middle East and North Africa in the Obama White House.

So let's get into it, because so much is happening. I'm actually worried that by the time this panel is over, there will be some breaking news that we didn't cover. Gönül, maybe you could walk us through what has happened over the last couple months, beginning with some of the far right politicians, or nationalist politicians, you might call them in Turkey, that were open to to having a new deal with Ocalan. What that deal means, what it means for the SDF and and Syria. And then this, this new agreement brokered between the SDF and the new government in Damascus, and keeping in mind that some of the viewers might not know what any of these acronyms mean.

Gönül Tol 4:11

Well, thank you first of all for inviting me, and indeed you are. I mean your concerns about the fast changing things is is, is right. I'm worried about that too. So going back to what, what's been

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happening between Turkey and the PKK, it all as you mentioned, actually, we thought it started in October when Erdogan nationalist ally David Bucha suggested that if ujalan the PKK is imprisoned. Leader called on his fighters to lay down arms. He could get an amnesty or a parole. And we thought that that's how things started on that front. But actually, these talks between the government and the PKK have been going on for for a while now, for almost. A year, and after David Bucha his gesture, he reached out to the Kurds, he shook hands, and that made headlines in the Turkish press. Abdullah Jalan made a historic call where he asked his fighters not just to lay down their arms, but convene a congress to to dissolve itself. And that's that's indeed historic. And it's not just about what will happen to Turkey's Kurds, but it will have an impact on the Kurds in the region in general.

So what does that call entail? Unfortunately, we have limited knowledge of what's been going on, because if you look at the text, it's it's vacant. I think it's by design, because Turkish Government is really micromanage the process, there was a lot of back and forth between Abdullah Jalan and government officials and the Kurdish representatives. So the text itself was, was really vague, and it did not include, I think the language was designed in a way not to convey the message that this was a quid pro quo. So basically, if you read the statement, you will think that all of a sudden the PKK leader woke up and decided that it was past time for for the PKK to lay down arms, and the time of the armed struggle was over, and that was a unilateral decision.

So that's how the text read. And I think the reason why it sounded pretty much like a unilateral declaration was because President Erdogan, from the get go, did something that he didn't before, with previous Kurdish openings in 2009 that was the first time when the AKP launched the Kurdish opening, and again in 2000 between 2012 and 2015 when the talks collapsed, Erdogan owned the process right. He publicly through his support behind this process, and when it backfired, I think it cost him the nationalist votes. So that was something that he wanted to avoid this time around, and that's why, from the get go, he always said that this was an initiative taken by David barceli. And David barceli being the the leader of the far right party. I think he was chosen mainly because, first, I think, I think he was the engine behind this. But also, no one would really question his nationalistic credentials. So that gave Erdogan a cover, but it also did something that could harm the process, which is, it's so vague that Erdogan was very, always cautious about, about owning the process that we don't know what will happen moving forward. So the next step is going to be the PKK will have to convene a Congress where it will dissolve itself. We don't know when that's going to happen. Just this morning, the Kurdish official said that, you know, the conditions are not ripe for the PKK to convene that Congress. So we don't know what those conditions are, because the government actually never laid out what what was going to be that the government what the steps the government was supposed to take as a as opposed to previous openings. This time around, the government was really vague.

So I think there were even questions about whether this would include the call would would include the Syrian Democratic Forces or not. So there is a lot of lot of confusion around that and tie that to what's happening in Syria. The Syrian Democratic Forces signed this deal with Damascus, which I thought was a great first, first step towards resolving that which, which had

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the potential to impact Abdullah Jalan government talks. But just today, yesterday, actually, the Syrian Democratic Forces announced that they're not happy with what Damascus has done with the new constitution. So it's all very confusing at the moment, and it's very early to tell what this call will lead to.

Adam Weinstein 9:54

Yeah, and we'll get into it later, but my understanding is they're one of their problems with the Khan. Institution is its reliance on Sharia rather. And they view themselves as secular, which sounds quite Turkish, actually, but we can get into it. We can get into that later. You know, from what you're saying, to quote a world leader, we might know it sounds like there's concepts of a plan, but not an actual plan is that, is that the right way to think about it?

Gönül Tol 10:24

No, there might be a plan. We just don't know what that plan is, because I think if you look at it, if you look at why this is happening now, it makes sense from the PK case point of view, and also from erdogans point of view, why they are do doing this right from erdogans point of view, I think. And there are people who disagree with me, the main driver of this has been the fact that Erdogan wants to get elected again in 2028 and the current Constitution does not allow that, so he needs the Kurdish support in Turkish parliament, so I think that was the main push. But, and if you look at it from the PK case point of view and ask, why are they doing this now? Well, I think militarily, their their military campaign has failed, right? Turkey has been waging this very effective war, both inside Turkey and in the region in northern Iraq, that really weakened the PKK in a military sense, and also, the PKK has long enjoyed this popular support among Turkish Kurds, but that has been waning since 2015 as well. In 2015 for the first time, the PKK carried the fight that it used to wage in the mountains to city centers, which destroyed city centers, killed lots of civilians. So since then, the PKK is also under a lot of pressure. And look at the regional dynamics as well. You see in northern Iraq, Turkey is cultivating closer ties with Baghdad that and Iran has been weakened, so there's little room for the PKK to maneuver there. And in Syria too, right? Americans might withdraw. There is a new government in Damascus, a government that is friendly to Ankara. So all those factors culminated in this process. So that's why I think this is something that has been in the making for some time. So I would only expect that there is a plan. We just don't know what that plan is.

Adam Weinstein 12:36

Yeah, that's a good point. And of course, Turkey has had positive relations with the KDP in Iraqi Kurdistan, but now they do have, as you point out, closer relations with Baghdad. And they're the backers of the development Road, which is the road that's planned to run from Al fauport near Basra all the way to Turkey and through Mosul. So So Turkey is cultivating much stronger ties with Baghdad, which is significant. I'm going to shift slightly and ask Burcu. The next question. I saw a cartoon on Twitter that showed Ali Khamenei, the Supreme Leader of Iran, looking through binoculars at Muslim Abdi, the Commander in Chief of the SDF, and Al shara,

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the the new de facto leader of Syria, signing their agreement and shaking hands. And the cartoon shows Ali Khamenei crying. How, how rooted in reality is that cartoon does? It does from Iran's perspective. Do you think they see these developments as contrary to their interests, and what does that mean for Iran Turkey relations and Iran's relations with Kurds in Iraq, like the PUK and also Kurds in Syria?

Burcu Ozcelik 13:54

Yeah, really, really good questions, and thanks for having me. It's good to be on I don't think there's any question that the fall of the Assad regime in Syria significantly altered the dynamics between Iran and Turkey in Syria, primarily, but also at a regional level as well, in terms of their bilateral bid for competition and shifting the balance of power, redefining their regional roles. I think the loss of Syria for Iran is highly significant, and we talk about this in terms of its symbolic power, its ability to project influence, the idea that it's exporting revolutionary ideologies. But there's also a deep sort of financial aspect, right in terms of Iran's ability to control supply chains across Syria that reached into into Lebanon, its support for the axis of the so called Axis of Resistance, in terms of its proxies and. Bullah and Hamas, these were severely crippled with the loss of its long time and closest ally in Bucha al Assad.

So there's also been an internal debate in Iran as to the significance of this loss, of what this means. And there's, I think, ongoing tensions and debate amongst hardliners moderates. These are problematic categories, but if we were to generalize about what this loss means and the potential means of recovery, and there are different questions. There different types of debate as to whether it's a question of Iranian capability to reassert itself and influence Syria in the future. There's a timing issue. You know, when is the right moment to be able to do this, just to seek and capitalize on a moment of opportunity for Iran to be a relevant power over Syria right now, because at the moment, its access as a touch points have been severely limited or cut off completely.

And so this debate is ongoing on the Iranian side, but there is a high level of discontent with the portrayal of Turkey as being the ascendant power in Syria and Iran now very much on the back foot against the backdrop of its already weakened regional role over the course of the of the war in Gaza and the in the Israeli military strikes inside Iran, which have severely degraded, particularly to air defense systems. Now, Iran has been trying to, over the past few months, and certainly since October, trying to project itself as a resilient power, one that is a continues to be a formidable naval power, with footage of underground missile facilities, joint military exercises. There's a the trilateral meeting in Beijing today, for example, between Russia, Iran and China to talk about the nuclear deal and other issues of joint concern. So there's very much an attempt from the Iranian side to counter this, this notion that it's internationally, diplomatically isolated, that it has no allies, that it is this pariah state. So that is the wider picture inside Syria.

If we were to sort of take a sort of zoom in, I think Turkey is watching very closely, because of the long standing history, of course, the Middle East as a theater of conflict between former Turk, sort of Ottoman and Safavid empires. And so this this theater of conflict and competition

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between Turkey and Iran, but it's been ongoing historically. And so this isn't necessarily, this isn't necessarily novel. It's not new, but it has entered a new chapter, I think, with Turkey's enhanced perception of influence now over HDS in Damascus, so Turkey is watching closely to see the level of influence that Iran can redeploy inside Syria and what that might look like. And of course, here, Iran is seen primarily as having a spoiler effect, and what that might look like turkey. For a long time, Ankara has argued that Iran plays this spoiler role with respect to its covert support for the PKK and its affiliates, and this has been the argument made predominantly in northern Iraq, around the Sulaymaniyah area, and claims that there are illegal smuggling routes there, inside into Iran, that they are IRGC supported training facilities, etc.

So this has been a long going concern within Turkish security and intelligence circles about Iran's potential spoiler effect, the extent to which Iran can play this role inside Syria right now, given severe limitations to its maneuverability, its operational access, I think that question is a major one. But we saw in the past week, 10 days, this back and forth between between Turkish Foreign Ministers, Hakan Fidan and and there is Iranian counterpart over the risks involved if Iran were to play this spoiler role, and what could that look like? Turkey has claimed that, of course, on the Kurdish side, that the that Iran might try to influence or leverage its relationship with with the SDF and its constituent sort of organizations, that it might that Iran might be able to trigger or agitate sort of an Alawite uprising, that it can certainly try to undermine the. HTS and Shara in Damascus and potentially support anti government protests, for example, in different parts of the country. The minority question comes to the forefront here, on both sides. Iran, in the past, historically and in the current moment as well, has voiced concern about Turkey's surveilled threats implicit to the you know that there are also minorities inside Iran that could be, that could be agitated, if it came to that right? So this back and forth there on what this, what this could look like.

And then there's a question of course, of development in southern and southwestern Syria, with the Druze community, and the faction of the Druze community, the Israeli military presence there, in the Golan and beyond coming up to Damascus. And the argument there, the concern in Al Qura that if Israeli actions continue unchecked. That this is problematic for a number of reasons instability in Syria, but also because it has the potential to embolden Iranian influence and the Iranian rhetoric that a Shara is unable to control and exert territorial control over the entirety of the Syrian territories, but also that he's unable to take a strong, firm stance against Israeli military occupation of significant part of southern Syria. So it's very much a fluid, fragile context Turkey and Iran now on, whilst they have cooperated on several policy fronts in the past, in Syria and regionally. I mean, they share. There is consensus, for example, on the Palestinian issue, on Gaza, but it's also Syria, I think, has been the manifestation of this theater of conflict, of geopolitical competition, between between Iran and Turkey, and I don't see this subsiding anytime soon.

Adam Weinstein 22:02

A quick question for maybe both Gönül and you Burcu, and if you guys can, you've given us so much to think about. If you can give slightly shorter answers for this question, but I think it's,

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well, maybe it's not a simple question. But you know, the Iranian influence in the Levant in the region was often referred to as the Shia crescent, and there were real politic and also ideological reasons for it. Sometimes people refer to Turkey's ambitions in the region as Neo ottomanism. What do you think about this term? Number one and number two? How much of Turkey's interests in Syria and the broader region are driven by real politic versus perhaps a genuine ambition to restore, restore the grandeur of the Ottoman Empire, in a sense. And maybe I'll start with birch and then Gordon can jump in.

Burcu Ozcelik 22:59

Sure. No, this is a perennial question, and we can't have one of these discussions without the new Ottoman question coming up. So that's acknowledged Yes. And so the sea of this Shia crescent and the new ottoman, these types of posturings, have been pitted against each other as, again, this manifestation of this historical rivalry between civilizational powers, Turkey and Iran. I personally have never really bought into the the Neo Ottoman ambition as a as a clearly formulated piece of foreign policy making, from, from, from the AKP, of course, this was inspired by and at its core lies with the doctrine of strategic depth by former, at the time Foreign Minister, Ahmed Davutoglu. And there are those I imagine within AKP circles who who took this to be the basis of the pillar of what Turkish foreign policy making should be. And this speaks to various, um, sort of, you could say collective trauma I may be in the Turkish in the Turkish psyche, as having been sidelined from from, from from Europe, from from the West, however defined.

And so this pivot to the Middle East, to the Islamic world, seen as Turkey's natural sort of neighborhood and sets of alliances and relationships. Again, I mean, depending on who you speak to or who you take at seriously or at face value, there are different opinions about how seriously one should take the notion of Turkey pursuing Neo ottomanism. But again, if you take that to mean kind of soft power in terms of cultural influence, the export of certain ideas around political Islam, for example, I think that's valid. I think in terms of the projection of influence. And in that sense, you could use that term, but it becomes more problematic when then it's taken to mean territorial expansionism and the annexation of land, for example, overseas. And there have been quite aggressive rhetoric, of course, from President Erdogan and others in his cabinet over the years, in terms of the eastern Mediterranean, in terms of Kelley, of course, in Aleppo in Syria. But I think it's a different matter when you begin to talk about, well, how realistic is this? How feasible is this for Turkey to be able to seriously be considering the reconfiguration of state borders in the Middle East. I think that is an exaggeration, and I've gone on too long Adam, so apologies.

Adam Weinstein 25:48

It's okay. There's a lot to say. Um, Neo-Ottomanism. Is it real or not real, or something in between?

Gönül Tol 25:54

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I think for Ahmet Davutoğlu, it was really real. And there was a time he genuinely thought that the worst thing that happened to the Middle Eastern countries was the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. And if you look at his writings in the 1990s, you know, he genuinely believed that Turkey had the right and the speed and the responsibility to go back in and solve the region's problems. So I think from and he saw in the Arab uprisings, he saw a great opportunity and the vindication of his views from 1990s right? Because he always thought that there was 100 year parenthesis where the Ottoman Empire collapsed, and finally, Arabs, as he had predicted in the 1990s he he said that Arabs would eventually rebel against their their autocratic regimes, and he saw that happening with the Arab uprisings. So that's why, from his point of view, you know, optimism was actually, I mean, we may think that it's irrational, that it was just emotional outburst. It wasn't. He had this well planned out, and he had this very clear vision, and his heart was in it.

But if you look at it from Erdogan point of view, Erdogan is never, has never been an ideologue, and he doesn't care. He just used that new Ottoman basically. Ahmet Davutoğlu was the nerd professor who provided the tools, the ideological tools, for Erdogan at a time when Erdogan needed a new narrative to consolidate his power before the Arab uprisings, that narrative was the AKP, was this western looking conservative democracy, and once he got what he wanted in 2011 and consolidate all power in his own hands, he needed Another project to to take the next step, which was grabbing more power through a presidential system. So that Islamist project, if you remember, before 2011 he never talked about being Turkey, being or Erdogan being the leader of the Ummah, you wouldn't hear that. It only started, starting from 2011 and even in his victory speech after 2011 elections, mentioned that it has those, those dynamics in history.

So I think for Ahmet Davutoğlu, new optimism was real. For Erdogan, it was just another tool for him, but that they they realized, starting from 2015 that it was not sustainable. So. And then another turning point came in 2019, when Erdogan lost local elections, which was a huge deal for him. So, and Turkish economy was not doing well, so he understood this mere Ottoman foreign policy that he had been pursuing really cost him a lot. It isolated Turkey in the region, particularly vis a vis these countries with deep pockets like the South, like Saudi Arabia and the UAE. So it had a real impact on his domestic calculations. So he reverted, and now I think we are in it at a time when Turkey is now reverting to a and zero problems with neighbors 2.0 and their ideology is not involved. No mention of the the joint Ottoman past. It's primarily driven by economic and connectivity projects. So imagine, I mean, right after toppling of the Assad regime, Ahmed Al Shara, he paid his first visit to Saudi Arabia, not to Turkey, and Erdogan was okay with that. Why? Because he needs the Saudis as much as. Damascus needs Saudis because Turkey is in a financially weakened position. So he's now all business. He's all talking about these connectivity projects being an energy hub and attracting investment. So no reference to the neo-Ottoman ideology.

Adam Weinstein 30:21

And, of course, for viewers who don't know, Gönül wrote a book called strategic depth in 2001 where he outlined some of these ideas, and then he was Erdogan foreign minister at the

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beginning of the Arab Spring, and had his ideas had some influence on the erdogans initial reaction to the Arab Spring.

I'm going to shift over to Steven. You know, I'm going to, I'm going to ask you a two part question. One is, the Pentagon has combatant commands, and divides up the world into these combatant commands, and sometimes they don't quite release, from a layman perspective, make total sense about where their boundaries begin and end. As an example, Israel was in the European Command until 2021 and then it was moved to central command, which handles the Middle East in 2021 now Turkey falls under European Command, not central command, although Central Command handles the part of the world that Turkey has immense interest in, including Syria, and there's a perception in Ankara that the leaders of Central Command have no relationship with Turkey there. They haven't had these military to military exchanges, and that perception is rooted in reality. And there's a perception in Ankara that the senior leadership of Central Command crafts US foreign policy in the Middle East more even than the White House. And there's a perception that they resent Turkey and that they are pro Kurdish To put it simply, how true is that number one, and how much influence do you think CENTCOM had over Muslims decision to try to make peace with Al shaa and the new government in Damascus?

Steven Simon 32:19

Good questions. I'm I'm actually sorry that the discussion that's been going on until now can't just continue, really, because I was just totally fascinated by by the discussion thus far, and I learned a tremendous amount. So let me, let me keep this brief so we can get back to the to the good stuff, as it were, look, I think, yes, the unified commands, you know, have a lot of clout, you know, particularly us, CENTCOM, in part, because this their State Department equivalents, the assistant secretary, let's say of New Eastern Affairs, has no money at all, whereas, you know when, when the CENTCOM commander just shakes out his pants pockets at night, the change that falls out, you know, is enough to, you know, equal the GDP of several countries in the region. So, you know, they can, they can do things programmatically and in terms of budget support and so forth. You know, in the region with client states that that that can be useful in paving the way for for CENTCOM interactions and and operations within that area of responsibility, within that commanders, combatant commanders, area of responsibility. So the the commands have resources that other branches of the government, US government don't have, so that's very useful for them in pursuing their military objectives.

But in Washington, I have to say, I'm not aware that you know that CENTCOM is in any way calling the shots, in part because, well, first, I'm not sure I really understand the policy process as it works right now in Washington, in the first Trump administration, the policy process was, I don't know, shall we say, somewhat anarchic and and it was therefore, you know, difficult to predict what outcomes there might be from debates within the administration about The way forward on this issue, or, you know, or that issue, and without a kind of, you know, a systematic policy process run by the NSC and culminating with the President, it's really, it's hard to see how things. Uh, would would shake out, and it's hard to see, with respect to your question, the role in

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which a combatant command will have in a particular sector of the decision making process, the policy making process in in the capital.

So that's, that's, I think, an unanswerable question right now. I mean, one could say, of course, is that, well, you know, with a somewhat unsystematic policy process, then a combatant commander will have more room to run in his in his region, he'll be subject to less interagency interference in in Washington, but we'll see, we'll see how that, how that works out in terms of, you know, CENTCOM and the SDF, YPG and so forth. I'm, I'm fairly confident, just on the basis of, you know finger Spitz gefu, you know it's like the way things feel to me that that CENTCOM was pushing their Kurdish counterparts towards a deal with the with the interim government. I think they were probably pushing on an open door, because I think Kurdish interests in Syria, at any rate, would be favored by a deal with with Damascus. And I think at the at the street level in Kurdish areas, the the massacres going on in the Alawite areas of western Syria were an object lesson for them. I mean, if you really want to avoid this kind of thing, you better get in bed with with Ahmed Ashara. So that's it.

Adam Weinstein 36:55

Gönül, I see you have an interjection.

Gönül Tol 36:57

Yes, no, this is all great. I just wanted to say that, you know, these negotiations between the mask Damascus and the Syrian Democratic Forces have started a year ago. That was in anticipation of us withdrawal from from Syria, and the US administration wanted to make sure that I need had several concerns in Syria. So I would think that three things really drove their Syria policy, the fight against ISIS, the need to curb Iranian influence. And also, a lot of people in the CENTCOM community had this bond with the Syrian Kurds, so they didn't really want to abandon them, especially at a time when a Turkish president was constantly threatening another military incursion, right? So those were the three drivers, and from from Washington's point of view, they wanted to make sure that things were in order before that decision to withdraw was made so an agreement between Damascus and the Syrian Democratic Forces they hoped would ensure that the fight against ISIS would not be interrupted.

And of course, the toppling of the Assad regime changed things dramatically, because it was mostly the Syrian Democratic Forces that who drag their feet in the negotiations because they thought that Americans could still stay which would give them, which would strengthen their hand in negotiations with Damascus and in Ankara. But now Assad is gone, Iranians are weakened, and these are the the powers that, in some ways, cooperated with the Syrian curse. So they feel very vulnerable. And also add to that picture the fact that ujo land now made that historic call. So it's from from the Syrian Democratic Forces point of view, things are looking very complicated for them, and they find themselves in a very vulnerable spot. So that's why, and I think the push came from Damascus. If you look at the timing of that agreement between SDF and Damascus, it was notable. It came right after those clashes in the in the coastal towns.

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Right al Shara wanted to make sure that he projected stability, that that everything was under control, that he was able to protect vulnerable communities. So that handshake between Al Shara and general Muslim came at a perfect time.

So I think if you look at it from that point of view, it would the Syrian Democratic Forces didn't want to do this for a long time, and they finally did, because I think they are thinking that Trump will order a troop withdrawal, which will force their hand, but I'm skeptical about what will happen. By the way, I think that agreement was a good step, but I. Um, but I'm worried about a lot of things that can happen along the way.

Adam Weinstein 40:04

Good, now before I go to Steven, who has his hand up, I'm going to ask you for a quick response to this, which is, you know, it's one thing for the SDF to get a deal with Al Shara when they still have the backing of US troops, but if those US troops do leave. I mean, is that deal going to hold up? There's money to be made at these border crossings. So far as integrating the Armed Forces of Syria. I mean, that's even you look at Iraq, for example. That's something that even the Peshmerga and the Iraqi army have had trouble doing under ostensibly better conditions. I mean, will the what will the sdfs leverage be once US troops leave, and why wouldn't Damascus just abrogate the agreement?

Gönül Tol 40:49

Well, the the leverage that they have is the fact that Al Shara is desperate. He cannot rebuild Syria with others help, right? He needs help from from particularly from European countries and from Gulf countries. So he cannot be seen as attacking these, the Syrian forces, who are viewed in the West as heroes who fought against ISIS. So that's not a good look for him. So I think that is, that is the biggest leverage that the Syrian Kurds have. They really, Ahmed Al sharaline, each really needs to show the world that that he can control things. And we're talking about a large armed group, right? The Syrian Democratic Forces is the second largest after a Syrian National Army, which is backed by Turkey. So, and they are very effective fighters. So which means you have those very effective fighting force, large number of armed men, and they can spoil things. So that's why Ahmed al Sharan have to meet them in half, half way.

But I don't know what that looks the main sticking point has been the Syrian Kurds want to be integrated into the Syrian National Army as a bloc, whereas Ahmed asharah is saying that, no, you have to be integrated as individuals. So the SDF is pushing for this. Why? Because they still want some kind of autonomy, although that's a toxic word in the New Syria they're not going to use it, but they still want to be able to retain some sort of autonomy in that regard. So that is the main sticking point, and I don't know how that's going to get resolved. And also remember that all these things will be closely tied to what's happening between ojalon and the Turkish state so on that last point. I mean, let's say hypothetically there they were able to operate as a bloc, either formally or in practice. Is that acceptable to Turkey, that in name, they're part of the Syrian

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National Army, but there, but from Ankara's perspective, the PKK is operating as a block in northeastern Syria. Would that be acceptable?

Adam Weinstein 42:46

On that last point. I mean, let's say hypothetically there they were able to operate as a bloc, either formally or in practice. Is that acceptable to Turkey, that in name, they're part of the Syrian National Army, but there, but from Ankara's perspective, the PKK is operating as a block in northeastern Syria. Would that be acceptable?

Gönül Tol 43:08

Well, you know, it domestically. It's not something good for Erdogan, because Erdogan, in the run up to 2028 wants to be able to say that he ended the PKK insurgency and he destroyed the Kurdish autonomy in northern Syria. So those are the two things that he wants to say, and that's an ideal scenario for him. He just wants them to disappear, but that's not going to happen, right? So would that really undermine Erdogan? Well, a good thing about being an autocrat is you can spin things however you want, right? He can say, look, the PKK members who are not Syrian, left the country. That's what, what we have wanted all along. So that's done. And if there's no mention, and I assume there won't be any mention, to any Autonomous Region, Kurdish autonomous region, there you have it. Erdogan will declare victory. And if they somehow, I think the fact that if they integrate into the Syrian National Army as a block, that could be a bigger problem for for Damascus than Turkey, because Erdogan can spin the facts however he wants. But from Damascus point of view, that will always be a concern, because they don't just want to be integrated as a block, but they also want to remain where they are right now, right so imagine they are there with their roots, with their relationship that they have cultivated with the locals, so that could be perceived as a as a threat by Damascus.

Adam Weinstein 44:47

Steve, you had your hand up earlier. I don't know if you meant to. Do you have something to add?

Steven Simon 45:00

Yeah, there are a couple of things going on here. The one is that there's a larger context, which is European politics, and the state of war between Ukraine and and Russia, the US stance towards NATO, and the kind of quasi crisis that's precipitated within the alliance. And I think that gives Turkey, well, a fair amount of leverage within the Alliance right now. And it means, reciprocally, of course, that the Europeans will give Erdogan a lot of running room, terms of Turkey's, you know, out of area concerns, especially in northern Syria. So I think, you know, if I'm either the United States or the Kurds or both, I'm going to think, well, you know, Turkey's position is somewhat improved here now, and it's always been a concern that that Turkey would decide to move unilaterally, as it has done actually in the past, during the Syrian civil war and

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afterward, against the Kurds. So we'd really, we we really need to take this change in context seriously.

Secondly, you know, in terms of the Kurds, I think Gönül makes an important point in that if you look at the Syrian forces, there are about 1/3 the size of the New York City police force, as I count the numbers anyway, and the New York City police force can barely control the five boroughs of the municipality, which has a much smaller population and much smaller surface area than land area, than than Syria. So, you know, I'm not really sure what the what the Kurds have to fear from Damascus. That's really comes back to a question of Turkey and and the pressure that that that Turkey can apply thirdly, you know, this, the conversation really gets back to the policy process in Washington. So in what I mean by that, referring again to Gönül's remarks, which sort of prompted this, this thought, you know, Trump said in 2018 that he wanted the United States to withdraw its forces from Syria. And precisely nothing happened. And a year later, I don't know, you know, Trump got out of bed and and, and he read something you know on bright Bardo. What have you about the United States still having forces in Syria. And he evidently blew his stack, and he said, Well, what's going on? I did not, didn't I say we had to leave. And, and, you know, DOD sort of said, Oh, yeah. Oh, did you really? Was that you? And because, you know, the Defense Department just decided to keep you know US forces there in the interim. And then so Trump puts his foot down in 2019 that winter and and guess what? Nothing happens. You know, there's still US forces. And now the number of you know US troops on the ground, as we know, is about twice the size of of the force that people had been talking about, sort of reflexively, for a really long, long time. So about 2000 troops.

Well, you know, ISIS is now an issue again. You think of the New Orleans attack. You know, there'll be there'll be others inspired by ISIS, and the administration is going to find itself, more than likely, in the same position that previous administrations have found themselves, which is to say, do we want to withdraw US forces from the region and then get attacked by ISIS, or an ISIS inspired individual, and have to explain why it was that this attack took place on our watch, when we pulled our forces away from the defeat ISIS mission in Syria. Nobody's going to want to explain that. So, you know, I'd have thought that US forces will stay, will stay anyway.

And lastly, you know on this, on the agreement between Muslim Abdi and and and and Shara. First of all, I have seen nothing in terms of detail on this agreement. So. Okay, if there's fine print, it hasn't been publicized, so we really don't know what we're talking about. Secondly, a shout out. Went into this having abandoned his preconditions that he laid down, I think, as Gunnar may have mentioned, you know, earlier, you know, in this, in this process. So, I mean, where I'm going with with this point is simply that, who knows? You know what this deal actually signifies in terms of Kurdish autonomy or Kurdish subordination to the central, you know, government in Damascus, what it has to say about Kurds relation, the Kurdish relations with Turkey, you know, I don't, I don't know.

So lastly, I had a question for my for my colleagues, if I can, well, let me, let me post it to you, Adam, and then, you know, you can decide whether you want to raise this in the last minute, in this in this session. But I was wondering about Turkey and Israel in Syria. So, you know Gönül

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basically, well, I don't know, I understood Gönül to say that, you know, erdogans interests here are primarily mercantile and and he's, he's not getting into this sort of Neo Ottoman strategic thing. And that's, that was, that was a really important point, I thought. But at the same time, there is a strategic dimension to Turkish interest in Syria. And that interest, it seems to me, is challenged by the extent of Israeli claims on Syrian territory, on control of Syrian territory, and on establishing its own relations with a large minority population in in the Soweto region and in Syria so is there a prospect here of increased tension or clashes, perhaps between between Turkey and Israel.

Adam Weinstein 52:09

I think that's a great question, Steve. Before we go to that, I just wanted to I remember in President Obama quote that I'll paraphrase, because I can't find it right now, which he you know when ISIS was first rising up in northern Iraq and Syria. He said, You know, the threat of ISIS wasn't just the military threat or its ability to hold territory, but this sort of distortionary effect it could have on US domestic politics, which I think speaks to your point, that you know, even if a lone wolf attack, really, you know, isn't networked and has nothing to do with with ISIS in the region, it will be portrayed that way at home, and that's something presidents think about. But I think your question is good, so gunnel, please answer it, and then also maybe Bucha, because you had said that. You know, there's an Iran dimension to this vis a vis Israel. But if you can keep your answers maybe to one minute or one minute or one minute 30 seconds, because I'm going to ask a lightning round question at the end to close out the panel. So I know brevity for such a complex question is hard, but please, please try.

Gönül Tol 53:11

Well, I think Turkey is not Turkish. Officials, I know for a fact that they're really worried about Israel's military presence, not just because it will complicate what Erdogan wants to do in Syria, but they think that it will also complicate Ankara's relationship with Washington at a time when there's a lot of hope in Ankara that they can get along with this new administration to resolve even the most difficult problems like this 410 defense cooperation, right? So they see Israeli presence as a huge problem, but what can they do about it? Not much. I certainly don't think that they're interested in a in a conflict with Israelis. Yesterday, I was on a panel, and someone asked whether Damascus could ask Ankara to send troops to Southern, southern Syria. And my answer was, I doubt that, because again, Turkey, we're talking about a Turkish Government that feels very marginalized, and they don't want to anger the Saudis and the Emiratis.

And we know that the Gulf countries are really worried about what Turkey could do in Syria, and that's one of the reasons why both Ahmad Ashara and everyone else on his cabinet, right after they took power, they went out of their way to say that we are not under Ankara's thumb. You know, we want to establish these close relationships with everyone. They said that over and over again. So I think he doesn't, Damascus doesn't want to be seen as this government who needs military protection from from Turkey, and Turkey also is not interested in, I think, at this point, sending more troops and to be seen as a big threat by the. Gulf countries.

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Burcu Ozcelik 55:03

Yeah, I think if I can just come back maybe to the point that Stephen made about Turkey strategic interests, when we look at ancora's, the discussions with ojalon and the historic call for the for the laying down arms, the link, of course, the link up with political calculations that are either one certainly seems to, seems to hold for the next election cycle and indefinite presidential sort of tenure. I think in what's happening is that, in parallel to that there are, there's a rationale within the security and defense establishment, who doesn't think necessarily in election cycles, but rather in generations, right in terms of there's an understanding that there's a paradigm shift, and we see this term used by different actors, by the Turks, by the Israelis, by the Kurds as well, certainly. But there is this realization that we are in a different era now, and this has been brewing, certainly since before October, when Bastian made this announcement. And so the geopolitical shifts that are happening, mainly through the lens of Syria, are significant for the turkey Kurdish, the conflict and the end of the four decades insurgency.

So there are correlated tracks here that we need to bear in mind. I think there's the political calculations on one side. There's also the deeper strategic interests that Turkey holds in terms of its national interests, and the view that, yes, the US troop presence in Syria may come to an end. So that's an open ended question. I think much of that has to do also with any kinetic activity against Iranian facilities that might be possible in the coming year, the squeezing of Shia militia groups in Iraq, and potential us support or endorsements there, whether there could be a shift of US troop presence into bases in northern Iraq, I think are also questions. So again, bigger context, but just bearing in mind that there is an awareness, I think, in Turkish officials, that strategic interests now align with tolerating some level of Kurdish presence in the new Syria and their and their engagement there, and we have the Iraqi Kurdistan model, bear in mind, which has been one of the very few successes, I would say, of Turkish word for policy making during the AKP period, with respect to the question on Israel, I think this is, as panelists have said, this is of high concern within Within policymakers in Ankara, there is a very low appetite for a confrontation directly with Israel or with Iran, I think Turkey, particularly now with respect to the developments on the Russia Ukraine front, there's a growing potential role for Turkey in the European security architecture, and particularly with respect to Turkey, Turkey UK relations here, which is picking up speed from where I sit in London.

So again, Al Shara has been very pragmatic and strategically silent on the Israeli military presence up until now there this is tied to and very contingent upon his desire for the sections relief for for donor support, for the economic recovery of the country. But this is a looming question, right? What's going to happen? How is this going to be addressed? But again, with the Trump Netanyahu link and that, and the uncertainty there in terms of what will happen with the with the Gaza ceasefire that's on the brink, and the hostage deal, I think again, fluid on a number of fronts at the same time.

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Adam Weinstein 58:45

Okay, thanks for that. Just so everyone who's watching know I'm gonna, I'm gonna take moderators privilege and probably extend the panel by maybe one or two minutes. I wanted to give a shout out that I meant to give at the opening of this panel, but I'll give it now to the Holling center for international dialog, which helped Quincy jumpstart some of its work on us Turkey relations, and has also hosted a few very helpful roundtables over the years, gathering experts and non experts like me, which I learned a lot from. But I'm thinking back to some of those discussions, and it reminds me of this evergreen question that I'm sure everyone on this panel has heard a million times, but we have to close out on this, which is that we always talk about us Turkey relations as being transactional, transactional and a little bit dysfunctional, and a lot of it has to do with perceptions about us, support for the Kurds in northeast Syria, and that if we can't and the PKK, which, you know, I don't think it's hyperbole to say that the Turkish state views them as the PKK, as their al Qaeda. And from their perspective, the US is working with subsidiaries. Of their al Qaeda and supporting them, and that this has been a thorn in the side of the relationship. So for a lightning round, please keep it to 30 seconds to one minute, even though it deserves a lot more time. I'm going to go to each of you. Do you think these events in Syria? You know, if you can predict a year down the line or five years down the line, is it going to lead to a less transactional us Turkey relationship? Is it going to lead to improved relations, or maybe, is it too early to know? I'll start with you, Steve, too early to know? Well, I appreciate your brevity, Burcu?

Burcu Ozcelik 1:00:40

I'll agree with that, but with the caveat that most, most relations, are transactional. And I think we're going to be seeing more of this, both in the Trump era and becoming more normalized. I think so it's a bit of an anomaly to just talk about transactionalism in the context of Trump era foreign policy making, I think. But I think developments in Syria, there's a there's a slim glimmer of hope right now with the agreement between the SDF and Damascus. And if this holds, and if the PKK process does unfold in the direction that I think many of us are hoping that it does, that this could potentially lead to sort of an opening political mobilization and contestation in Turkey as well in the direction of greater democratization, which could ameliorate the the relation between Turkey and the U.S.

Adam Weinstein 1:01:31

Gönül, last word.

Gönül Tol 1:01:33

I mean, it's we live in a transactional world. We have a president here who is asking for minerals from Ukraine in response in return for aid, right? So this is a transactional world, and if you look at it from Turkey's point of view, Turkey has long wanted a transactional partnership with the United States, and it's finally got it, but I'm not sure whether that's something that they will be

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happy about, because, again, with limited Turkish resources. Turkey doesn't have that much to offer, particularly, I'm not talking about Europe, but but to the United States, the United States of Trump, I would say that's why Trump returns to Mohammed bin Salman instead of he hasn't even called Turkish president yet. So this transactional world may not be a great thing for a country like Turkey that is limited in resources

Adam Weinstein 1:02:29

Okay. Well, thanks for that all. I really appreciate your time. I encourage everyone to follow our panelists on their Twitter accounts and check out the many books and articles they've written on these topics, I learned a lot. I wish we had another hour, but I guess we'll just do another another panel in a couple months, and I'm sure everything will have changed by then.