



True North in
Canadian public policy

Straight Talk

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Straight Talk: Balkan Devlen

Turkey and Turkish-supported militias have crossed the border into northern Syria. This followed the drawdown of US troops, which had helped to protect Syrian Kurds who were allies in the fight against the Islamic State. In this edition of MLI's Straight Talk, we spoke with MLI author and scholar Balkan Devlen, who discusses Turkey, the Kurds, and the "Syria Problem." This publication is based on a transcript of a recent discussion between Munk Senior Fellow Shuvaloy Majumdar and Balkan Devlen on an episode of MLI's Pod Bless Canada Podcast.



Dr. Balkan Devlen is Associate Professor at the Department of Political Science at the University of Copenhagen. His primary research interests are foreign policy decision-making during crises and conflicts, with a focus on individual leaders, security challenges in NATO's Eastern and Southern flanks, especially the foreign and security policies of Russia and Turkey, and forecasting and strategic foresight. He was a "Superforecaster" in IARPA-sponsored geopolitical forecasting competition (ACE) run by Good Judgment Project led by Philip Tetlock and Barbara Mellers and currently a "Professional Superforecaster" for Good Judgment, Inc. He was a Marie Skłodowska Curie Fellow (2017-2019) and a Black Sea Young Reformers Fellow (2012-2013). In the summer of 2019 he was a Visiting Professor at the Norman Paterson School of International Affairs (NPSIA) at the Carleton University and Ozerdinc-Grimes Fellow in the Centre in Modern Turkish Studies (MTS).

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MLI: We're delighted to welcome today, Balkan Devlen, who has been a frequent Macdonald-Laurier Institute author on issues with respect to Turkey, the Middle East, Eastern Europe, and Eurasia.

I would like to begin by what many commentators are describing as a horrific betrayal of our Kurdish friends and allies – specifically, the agreement that the US administration under President Donald Trump had made with the Turkish leader, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, permitting them to carry out in effect an invasion into northern Syria. Why don't you deconstruct for our listeners what's actually happening in Syria and Washington and Turkey's stated ambitions inside Syria and how they affect the Kurds.

Balkan Devlen: Turkey is concerned about the creation of the so-called "safe zone" along its border, which is about 30 km deep and about 400 km wide zone. Since around 2016 at least, Turkey was trying to figure out how they were going to deal with that zone. What will be the position of the American-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) there? And how that would have an impact on the fight against ISIS, and so on and so forth.

MLI: Now, the Syrian Democratic Forces are largely made up of what kind of fighters?

Balkan Devlen: The People's Protection Units (YPG) Kurdish fighters, which emerged as a militia of the Democratic Union Party (PYD), are actually the core of the SDF, in addition to some Sunni Arab, Christian and Yazidi fighters. But the real the fighting force component is YPG/PYD and that's the primary concern for Turkey. They see them an extension or an offshoot of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which is considered a terrorist organization in Turkey. That's also interesting because up until 2015, the Turkish government was very much in talks with the PYD leadership. For example, former co-chair of the PYD Salih Muslim was coming back and forth to Ankara. Things changed after 2015. Up until that time, Turkey was not that concerned about these offshoots of the PKK. Things changed after that.

MLI: Until 2015, what were the reasons that encouraged Ankara to have an informal relationship with some of these Kurdish militias?

Balkan Devlen: What really changed was Turkey's policy on Syria. Ankara's policy towards Syria from 2011-2012 was first and foremost regime change in Damascus. That's one of the reasons why all sorts of opposition forces were supported by Turkey. Some were the so-called moderate rebels, but they also turned a blind eye to others. Until it became obvious that that's actually a horrible policy choice, including a series of attacks by ISIS in Turkey that killed several hundred people. So the government started to change the policy, which crystallized when they realized there is a Kurdish corridor being formed. The SDF, with American backing, was becoming an effective fighting force against ISIS.

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MLI: Now, did SDF ever have any ambitions of calling for a Kurdish State alongside Kurdish minorities inside Turkey and merging with the Kurdistan Regional Government in Iraq?

Balkan Devlen: As far as I know, no. The concern those Turkish policy makers might have about some kind of Kurdish block, semi-autonomous region leading to a sovereign nation can be seen as a projection of sorts.

MLI: Should we be concerned about it?

Balkan Devlen: I would argue that there are two concerns here. One is that it could act as a sort of centre for attraction and therefore be destabilizing to Turkey's southeast, which has a mostly Kurdish population. The second one is that, given the sort of connections between PYD/YPG and PKK, a Kurdish corridor in that region could become a staging ground for PKK activities in Turkey.

So those are the two major concerns. After its initial support, Turkey did turn against PYD/YPG when it was arming, had weapons and was shown to be an effective fighting force. Up until that time, it wasn't a very significant concern.

MLI: So then tell me what was the significance of Rojava – the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria – to Kurdish identity? What is that symbol to Turkey and to the Kurdish people?

Balkan Devlen: I would argue that it's more about the experiment that was done there; sort of the whole self-rule that was created and consolidated the Kurdish identity. To me, it's different than the Kurdistan Regional Government in Iraq, which tends to be split between two tribal forces that for decades have controlled the region.

MLI: Right, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK).

Balkan Devlen: Exactly. In northern Syria, Rojava allowed an autonomous local identity to emerge. In addition, the fight against ISIS also provided a founding myth, in a way that you see in many other nations, when you have a war with an enemy that you fight and defeat. And in the case of ISIS, you are defeating a genocidal group that aims to completely destroy your way of life, your people, and ultimately to enslave you. So that actually created a very strong national identity component to it. That's Rojava's primary sort of importance rather than anything too geographically significant. Now, it also means that the project itself, and I think we will come to that, does not have much of a future. It's especially difficult to be alone there without having some sort of regional sponsorship for the Kurds in northern Syria, because the resources there are just not sufficient.

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MLI: Now, returning to this corridor that the Turks wanted to establish, we've seen Erdogan – in response to some western condemnation – threaten to weaponize migration and refugees into Europe. Was the whole point of this corridor to establish a safe haven for refugees presently in Turkey, which Ankara can no longer sustain? Or is it more about establishing a geopolitical presence for Turkey in northern Syria for the long term?

Balkan Devlen: I would argue it's the second one. The refugee issue is important but it is secondary. The primary goal, and in that sense that's one of the reasons why it had broad support among the Turkish public, was to move the Kurdish forces away from the Turkish border. As I said earlier, Turkey perceives YPG as a threat to the country. Establishing this corridor in two or three different places, beachheads in a way, would enable Turkey to prevent the creation of a continuous Kurdish zone on the border. Those beachheads and achieving military control of this area are seen as an important means to prevent security threats, as perceived by Turkey.

The refugee issue is secondary. It's part of how they sell the operation to their domestic audience, because if there is one thing that unites the Turkish public it is that there is a growing sort of discontent with the presence of Syrian refugees. There are about four million refugees in Turkey out of a population of roughly 80 million, representing 5 percent of the population – a significant amount of people.

There is a backlash domestically, including among normally pro-government groups, so this measure is also meant to try to calm them down. Look, we'll create this and move that population there. If people want to move, you can do that. But how are you going to do it if they don't want to move? Are you going to bus people there? That's just not going to work. So the refugee issue is, in that sense, secondary to the whole strategy of it.

MLI: Now, we've seen some very interesting summitry between Washington and Ankara and Ankara and Moscow. Why don't we start talking a little bit about this, because I'm very curious about your view. We've seen that there has been public diplomacy between President Trump and President Erdogan and it's not constructive.

Balkan Devlen: To say the least.

MLI: And public diplomacy between President Erdogan and President Putin that is very constructive, at least from the Turkish and Russian perspective. What's going on here?

Balkan Devlen: I think Trump's way of conducting diplomacy while blindsiding everybody, including his own defence department and the state department, is very harmful for the long-term relations between allies. That's also very much true for the US-Turkish relationship.

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In the short-term, and in a limited sense, it might have satisfied Turkey's stated goals regarding Syria. But I think the whole spat – including the back and forth, the language used, and so on – seriously undermined the long-term trust between the two countries. There isn't very much of a dialogue, really. On the Trump side, it was very much an impulsive move because we know he wanted to get out. That's not only limited to Trump. The Obama administration had also wanted to draw down forces in the Middle East. And with the whole fight against ISIS issue, we knew from the very beginning that if you do end up working with another non-state actor, you either need to be there for the very long-term to provide support. Or you would eventually need to leave and the regional actors would get in. And that's precisely what Trump said – I'm leaving, I'm out.

MLI: And that pushes Erdogan right into Putin's arms.

Balkan Devlen: Exactly. So basically, Trump says, I'm going. You do whatever you want to do. And Putin was very happy to step up because he doesn't have to lure anybody in. He just walks in. So the whole sort of back and forth between Erdogan and Trump is not really conducive for any sort of diplomatic issues. Now, when you talk about Turkey and Russia, it's a very complicated relationship, partly because there are so many pressure points available. And Putin is a much more savvy negotiator and a dealmaker. He might not have written *The Art of the Deal*, but he actually knows how to do it. So there's a bunch of pressure points there, including Idlib.

MLI: Why is Idlib important to Moscow?

Balkan Devlen: It is important to Moscow for a number of reasons. For instance, it houses the presence of the last strongholds of the rebels against the Assad regime. Yet this group consists of 60,000-80,000 battle-hardened, radical and radicalized fighters plus three million civilians living in a very small areas.

Now that is the last part that eventually Syrian forces would go and capture, but their presence also serves as a good bargaining chip for Putin and the Syrian regime against the West. This group will continue to be a possible threat, and that leaves Assad as the less, sort of, the two evils. So there is that option.

It also works for Putin to put pressure on Turkey because any operation there would result in another wave of refugees, the numbers suggest anywhere between half a million to a million-and-a-quarter new refugees coming towards the Turkish border because remember, these people are mostly those fighters and their families being bussed around from the rest of these Syrian cities as the government takes them back and they're sent there. So those people most of the time have no option to go back to government control areas if there is an attack. So they would actually go to Turkey.

MLI: So Idlib is a strategic chip for Syria and for Moscow to justify the genocidal Assad regime's ongoing existence?

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Balkan Devlen: That's definitely one way to look at it, and that also works as putting the pressure on Turkey to toe the line.

MLI: So, on that basis, what was the result of the meeting that Erdogan and Putin had? What did they announce to the world?

Balkan Devlen: Turkey gets a safe zone of 30 km to about 120 km, basically ratifying what happened on the ground. And Putin said that the Kurdish forces would withdraw to the 30 km line and the remaining of the border area as well, but this time it will be the forces of Syria, Turkey and Russia that will move in the areas that are right now not under Turkish or Turkish Allied groups' control, and then there will be joint patrols between Turkish and Russian joint military patrolling of a 10 km zone.

So what you have is a 400 km length of a border and then about 10 km, and then you have basically sort of a rectangle that is getting down to the 30 kms and then going up to 10 km again. That's the zone. The whole 30 km zone, the Kurdish forces will withdraw and the regime will take over. So that's actually pretty much what Turkey has been talking with the Americans for years now.

MLI: Would you say that the conduct of the Turkish military campaign was done with or without atrocities?

Balkan Devlen: I would say that the majority of the infantry and the fighting forces consists of the Syrian National Army. The majority of action is by them. There are reports of those Turkey-backed proxy-forces allegedly committing certain atrocities. I don't know. I have not been there. I would be very much surprised if the regular Turkish troops were involved in those alleged atrocities. I don't think that is the case. But again, one of the side effects of working with proxies is unless you can control them, these things are bound to happen and that's one of the risks of engaging in proxy warfare.

MLI: What do you think is the future of Turkish-NATO relations? Can NATO member states gather together with Turkey around the table and expect that they are a steadfast solid alliance or is something bigger happening here?

Balkan Devlen: Turkey's Syria policy and closer relationship with Russia fundamentally undermine Turkey's relations with NATO allies. More importantly, it fundamentally undermines the trust between allies. And so until this particular policy set up changes with the current leadership, I would argue that when the country sits down in North Atlantic Council, other members will always have this particular doubt in mind, to what extent we could count on Turkey to align with us and move forward.

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MLI: Tell us about the differences that western countries have on their opinions with respect to Turkey or Turkey's role?

Balkan Devlen: If you look at the NATO membership, you have the Northern European countries of Germany, Norway, Denmark and others focus mostly on the democratic and human rights backsliding in Turkey and increasingly authoritarian regime in Turkey, and they want to minimize contact.

MLI: So the Nordics would remain cautious about that.

Balkan Devlen: Exactly, and then that also started with the arms embargoes. Sweden, for example, not a NATO member but an important NATO partner, was sort of spearheading that. The Germans are also following.

You also have eastern members such as Hungary and Poland, who have their own authoritarian tendencies – and they might not necessarily be very enthusiastic about sanctioning or condemning Turkey, thinking that such action might actually come back to them in the future as well. So they would probably be more pro-Turkish in their approach. Perhaps pragmatic, in the sense that that might actually turn around and hit them later on as well.

The southern allies along the Mediterranean are concerned with refugees. So they will be more worried about further upsetting Turkey because that actually might increase the chances of Erdogan's threat of weaponized migration, which could impact their economies.

Meanwhile, the Baltics are very much concerned with Russia. On one hand, with Russia's eye turning towards the south, it means there are less resources to destabilize the Baltics. On the other hand, they would also be very much concerned about NATO unity being undermined by increasing Russian influence in that southern region and vis-à-vis Turkey.

The UK has its issues right now and a lot depends on how the Brexit issue proceeds. Once complete, NATO will be the only sort of British link to the defence in Europe, right? So that's a different story, so I can't really predict anything at this stage.

France is an interesting question because Macron definitely has this sort of pan-European idea about what should be the role there and he signals contradictory stuff with Russia. He wants to sort of make a deal occasionally but then he also wants to play the tough guy as well. He will want to sort of play the European leader in that sense and try to pull Turkey to the line and with a mix of carrots and sticks. Whether he can do that or not, we shall see, right?

MLI: Then coming over across the pond, if you will, start with the United States.

Balkan Devlen: The current administration is very much sceptical of NATO and Trump's personal relations do matter here. If there is a new incoming administration and the US goes back to its traditional approach,

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that would probably suggest more pressures on Turkey to not align as much as it did with Russia. But I wouldn't expect the same level of the criticism regarding democratization issues. The US has never been very much concerned about that as long as the military-strategic components work, unlike say the northern Europeans.

We can see that right now with still ongoing negotiations and talks apparently within Turkey and the US regarding both Syria and the F-35s. I would suggest a more accommodating US policy towards Erdogan - basically taking the long view on Turkey rather than the short one.

I think there is not much that can be done with the current state of affairs. What is more important, I think, is sort of maintaining a basic set of relationships that once things improve and change, things can get back to normal, having Turkey not drift too far away from NATO.

MLI: Imagine you're sitting across the table from Prime Minister Trudeau. What would you tell him he needs to know about the Canadian interest in what's happening in Syria and in the Canadian-Turkish partnership?

Balkan Devlen: I would argue that the primary interest of Canada in Syria and broadly in the Middle East is a stable regional order that would benefit Canada's allies and partners in the region. Geographically, Canada is far away, which would insulate it from the immediate effects of instability.

MLI: What would be your counsel in the context of the rights of those Kurds versus the stability that you're advancing?

Balkan Devlen: I would argue that it comes down to resources, how much resources Canada can put in to back up its word, right? And sometimes sort of getting up in front and defending, or claiming to defend certain allies and partners and others, without necessarily being able to help them when push comes to shove is actually more harmful. You end up talking empty words rather than any solid benefit.

What Canada can do is a lot of coordination and mobilization of the other allies, to achieve a region that is stable and does not lead to cascading problems for Canadian allies in the Middle East and beyond. Instead of giving promises that it cannot keep, Canada could work with other countries that could actually do things because they have the resources, connections, interests and can coordinate and mobilize those resources and build those coalitions to be able to do things. That's a better approach than trying to play a primary role in a region where it has a limited leverage.

MLI: Do the diplomatic work, do the coalition building work, do the work, don't just virtue signal.

Balkan Devlen: Exactly. It's very nice for the person or the group that is doing it, but it generally ends up harming for the groups involved.

MLI: We greatly appreciate your lucid insights as to what's happening in a very perplexing region with shifting alliances, and for your suggestions to what the Government of Canada can do. Thank you for spending some time with us, today.



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CONTACT US: Macdonald-Laurier Institute
323 Chapel Street, Suite #300
Ottawa, Ontario, Canada
K1N 7Z2

TELEPHONE: (613) 482-8327

WEBSITE: www.MacdonaldLaurier.ca

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