

Turkey's dealing with the Syrian Kurds (Part I)

Michael Gunter¹

Executive summary

This wide-ranging survey of the Kurds in Syria will evaluate the mid-term fall-out of the suddenly announced US withdrawal on October 7, 2019. It concludes that 1. The US dishonorably deserted its Syrian Kurdish ally, 2. Alienated future allies who would no longer trust it, 3. Allowed some of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) prisoners incarcerated by YPG guards to escape and potentially revive the genocidal jibadist organization, 4. Rewarded Turkish aggression, 5. Handed the murderous, but badly taxed Assad regime new life, 6. Facilitated Iran's drive to the Mediterranean and potential threat to Israel, and, maybe most of all, 7. Empowered Russia as the ultimate arbitrator of the Syrian imbroglio to the detriment of the United States and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).

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Introduction

Although Syria is an ancient land, the modern state only dates from the borders that had been fashioned by the secretive British-French Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916 and the subsequent French mandate of the League of Nations established in 1920. Since previously the Kurds of

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modern-day Turkey, Iraq, and Syria had all simply lived in the Ottoman Empire, the concept of the Kurds in Syria could only become meaningful after the French mandate had been created and, even later, after failed Kurdish uprisings during the 1920s in Turkey had forced many Kurds to leave that country for Syria. Even today, many Kurds who live in Turkey and Syria do not refer to themselves as coming from those states, but rather as coming from either above or below the line (border). Developments in Turkey have always had a profound influence on the Kurdish situation in Syria. This continues today.

The Iran-Iraq War in the 1980s, the two Gulf Wars against Saddam Hussein in 1991 and 2003, and the Syrian civil war that began in 2011, are the main reasons the Kurdish struggle has come to play such an increasingly important role in Middle Eastern and even international affairs. In addition, the rise of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq and subsequently Rojava in Syria, (now broadened into the Federation of Northern Syria to include the many other ethnic and sectarian groups that live there), has given the Kurds additional de facto, institutional recognition and existence.

Furthermore, the continuing insurgency of the PKK in Turkey and its spill over into neighboring Iraq and Syria, its peace talks with Ankara from 2009-2015, and its de facto alliance with the United States to defeat ISIS, have given the PKK an importance inconceivable a mere decade ago. For example, the PKK played an important role on the ground in Sinjar, Iraq to help rescue the embattled Yezidis from the genocidal ISIS jihadis in 2014. Even more so, the PKK, through its Syrian associated Syrian Democratic Forces/Democratic Union Party/Peoples Defense Units (SDF/PYD/YPG) proved the indispensable boots on the ground that defeated ISIS in such dramatic battles as Kobane (2014-2015) and Raqqa (2017), among others. US air and advisory support, of course, were imperative in these battles, which also brought Turkey, Iran, Russia, Iraq, and Syria, among others, into the equation.



Approximately 10 percent of the Syrian population or slightly more than 2.2 million Kurds may live in Syria, a much smaller number than live in Turkey, Iraq, and Iran. Although the largest ethnic minority in Syria, the Kurds lived in three non-contiguous areas and until the Syrian civil war began on March 11, 2011, were much less successfully organized than in the other three states. For many years, the repressive Syrian government of Hafez Assad and his son Bashir Assad also sought to maintain an Arab belt between its Kurds and those in Turkey and Iraq. This Arab belt artificially separated the Kurds in Syria from their ethnic kin and in many cases from actual blood relatives across the border and uprooted them.

The Syrian civil war began on March 15, 2011. Soon the Assad regime was on the ropes. On July 19, 2012, Assad suddenly pulled most of his troops out of the Kurdish regions to concentrate on holding his precarious position to the west around Damascus and his ancestral Alawite homeland. From practically out of nowhere, the previously unheard-of Syrian Kurds were basically ruling themselves.

The resulting Syrian Kurdish autonomy caused great apprehension in Turkey because suddenly PKK flags were flying just across its southern border with Syria. What had been a common border with the much more pliable Iraqi Kurds largely led by Massoud Barzani had abruptly metastasized into one with the Syrian Kurds largely led by the PKK-affiliated PYD and its military arm the YPG. Ankara feared that this newly established Kurdish position would serve as an unwanted model for Turkey's own disaffected Kurds and the PKK.

When ISIS suddenly arose in 2014, it attacked the Syrian and Iraqi Kurds as well as the United States and other Western interests, among others. The United States desperately looked for boots on the ground to support against ISIS. After a number of fiascoes, the United States finally found the Kurds to the chagrin of the Turks. U.S. air power and military advice helped the Syrian Kurdish PYD/YPG/SDF forces—ironically supported by the PKK, which according to the United States, Turkey, and the European Union (EU) was a terrorist organization—largely to defeat ISIS. Mission

accomplished! Thus, then-US president Donald J. Trump suddenly announced the US withdrawal on October 7, 2019. This tacitly allowed the Turks to enter portions of northeastern (Kurdish) Syria, claiming with some reason to alleviate the Kurdish threat on its southern border by carving out a buffer or safety zone and also establishing a potential return place for some 3.6 million Syrian refugees now living in Turkey.

Turkey's Syrian Crisis

Among many other problems, the Syrian crisis actually threatened to pit US troops against those of Turkey, its supposed ally in NATO. This was because the US had armed and continued to support the Syrian Kurdish-led and PKK-affiliated SDF/PYD/YPG forces against ISIS. Turkey viewed these forces as an existential terrorist threat to its territorial integrity.

On January 20, 2018, Turkish troops with their Syrian-opposition allies/proxies (the Free Syrian Army) under the ironically named Operation Olive Branch entered Afrin, the isolated third Syrian Kurdish canton on its border in northwestern Syria and quickly occupied the region. No better illustration of Turkey's increasingly problematic policies in Syria could be given than the spectacle of Turkey, a US NATO ally, needing permission from Russia, NATO's main adversary, before acting. This was because Russia controlled the skies over the Kurdish enclave and in effect had been partially protecting it as part of its goal of preserving Syrian unity under its dictator, Hafez al-Assad. However, now Russia decided not to oppose the Turkish incursion in support for Turkish backing for Russia's larger, overall aims in Syria such as weakening US influence in Syria, pushing the Kurds to negotiate with Damascus, and strengthening Russian-Turkish cooperation to the detriment of NATO.

Of course, Turkish animus toward the Syrian Kurds was nothing new, as earlier on August 26, 2016, Turkish troops had entered Syria to the east of Afrin to prevent the Syrian Kurds from crossing the



Euphrates River and driving to the west of that waterway to unite with Afrin. At that time, Operation Euphrates Shield managed to prevent these Kurdish ambitions. However, despite US promises to its supposed NATO ally Turkey, the Syrian Kurds did not retreat to the east of the river. The Kurdish-led SDF continued to hold the city of Manbij on the west side with US troops as advisors, whom the US said would stand their ground against any Turkish offensive.

Given the situation, US troops could have found themselves under direct attack from their NATO ally if Erdogan actually carried out his promise to “strangle . . . before it is born” the US-backed SDF border security force. The Turkish president even threatened that “we will rid Manbij of terrorists, as was promised to us before. Our battles will continue until no terrorist is left right up to our border with Iraq.” Exuding outrage in reference to the US support for the SDF, the Turkish president also asked rhetorically, “How can a strategic partner do such a thing to its strategic partner?” He even threatened to give the US troops “an Ottoman slap,” employing a Turkish saying for a deadly or incapacitating blow.

Erdogan, of course, did not actually want to attack US forces. His real aim was probably to end US support for the SDF, collect the weapons the group had received from the United States, and force the Kurds to withdraw east of the Euphrates River. Probably even more importantly, his bellicose attitude was intended for domestic consumption to boost his support in Turkey for the snap presidential and parliamentary elections he suddenly called and won on June 24, 2018.

Furthermore, in June 2018 the United States and Turkey reached an understanding for the SDF/YPG forces to begin pulling out of Manbij and be replaced by separate, coordinated US and Turkish patrols in the western side of the area. This agreement temporarily alleviated the possibility of a military clash between the two NATO allies. Of course, this would only be a beginning settlement as Turkey declared that the Manbij model eventually would also be applied to Syria’s Raqqa, Kobane, and other important areas controlled by the

Syrian Kurdish PYD/YPG, a proposed roadmap certain to be opposed and rejected by the Syrian Kurds. Thus, the onus would again fall upon the United States to decide whether to support its de facto Syrian Kurdish ally or de jure Turkish NATO ally. The long-term possibility of a US-Turkish military clash remained.

Moreover, Trump compounded all this confusion when he suddenly announced on December 19, 2018 that he had decided to withdraw from Syria, apparently leaving the door open for Turkey, Syria, Russia, and Iran to move in to the detriment of the Syrian Kurds. On the other hand, there was immediate push back in the United States against Trump's decision. Secretary of Defense James Mattis and Special Envoy to Counter ISIS Brett McGurk both resigned in protest. The mercurial Trump soon partially reversed himself and decided to keep a residual force of 400 US troops and possibly as many as 1,000 other NATO troops in Syria "for a period of time."

During the summer of 2019, the United States and Turkey continued to dicker over creating a safe zone in northeastern Syria that would allow Turkey to protect its borders from the perceived threat of Syrian Kurdish SDF/YPG forces and provide a secure place for some of the increasingly problematic 3.6 million Syrian refugees in Turkey to return. On September 8, 2019, Turkey and the United States finally initiated their first joint ground patrol in an apparently emerging safe zone on the Syrian side of the border east of the Euphrates river near Tel Abyad. The SDF forces had withdrawn some nine miles from the border and removed their defensive positions. However, the extent of the safe zone was uncertain. Erdogan also remained dissatisfied, declaring, "It is clear that our ally [the United States] is trying to create a safe zone for the terrorist organization [the SDF/YPG], not for us." Further complicating the situation, the Syrian government condemned the joint patrol as "aggression."

Subsequently, Trump's new announcement of a US troop withdrawal from Syria on October 7, 2019, quickly led to a major change in the situation by allowing Turkey finally to establish a small safety zone



stretching approximately 75 miles along the Syrian-Turkish border between the cities of Tel Abyad and Ras al-Ayn and maybe 20 miles deep. This resulted in Moscow, Ankara, and the Assad regime apparently achieving strategic gains, while the Syrian Kurds experienced significant losses.

In the short run, Erdogan's popularity in Turkey soared, and he regained strength after his losses in the local elections held in March and June 2019. However, it seems unlikely that Russia will permit Turkey to extend its safety zone much further against the wishes of its Syrian ally who, of course, wants to regain all its lost territory. Indeed, Turkey has only managed to enter Syria with the permission of Russia. Thus, Turkey's perceived gains from the US withdrawal are only partial and may well be only temporary. For its part, the US also apparently has suffered potentially negative effects. By deserting its Syrian Kurdish ally, the US questions the value for others supporting it in the future. Thus, the US weakened itself.

Thus, on October 9, 2019, after many false starts, Turkey finally drove into a small section of northeastern Syria, in an attempt to establish a "safe zone" to end what it claimed to be an existential PKK threat to its territorial integrity. U.S. president Donald J. Trump's decision to pull out some 1,000 U.S. troops acting as advisors, supporters, and protectors to the PKK-affiliated Democratic Union Party/Peoples Defense Units/Syrian Democratic Forces (PYD/YPG/SDF) or simply the Syrian Kurds triggered the Turkish incursion. Widespread condemnation of Turkey and Trump quickly ensued.

Detractors argued that the United States had: 1. dishonorably deserted its Syrian Kurdish ally, 2. alienated future allies who would no longer trust it, 3. allowed some of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) prisoners incarcerated by YPG guards to escape and potentially revive the genocidal jihadist organization, 4. rewarded Turkish aggression, 5. handed the murderous, but badly taxed Assad regime new life, 6. facilitated Iran's drive to the Mediterranean and potential threat to Israel, and, maybe most of all, 7. empowered

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