

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

Michael Gunter¹

Executive summary

This Commentary survey's Turkey's interaction with Syria's surprisingly influential Kurds and explores the Turkish-US confrontation over the US support of the Syrian Kurds against ISIS. It concludes that the Biden administration will likely continue to implement the limited, but effective role his predecessors Trump and Obama had carried out, but that the ultimate fate of Syria and its embattled Kurds remains unclear.

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PYD/YPG/SDF--PKK Relationship

The Assad regime in Syria began supporting the PKK as long ago as the 1970s as a way to pressure Turkey over water rights and Hatay, a Turkish province Syria claimed. Finally, in 1998, Turkey threatened to go to war against Syria unless it expelled the PKK. Under the terms of the Adana Agreement, Syria then did so. A few months later, Turkey captured Abdullah Ocalan, the PKK leader, in Kenya and has held him prisoner ever since. Nevertheless, the PKK had established deep roots within Syria.

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Indeed, many PKK fighters actually came from Syria where Assad had allowed them sanctuary in return for their promise not to challenge his regime.

Upon these origins, Syrian Kurds sympathetic to the PKK established the Democratic Union Party (PYD) in 2003. Given its inherently powerful base and PKK affiliation, the PYD quickly began creating itself as the dominant Kurdish party in Syria. Its military arm the YPG greatly helped in this project. In 2011, Ferhat Abdi Sahin (code named Sahin Cilo (Cello) and also known as General Mazlum Abdi Kobane)—a seasoned, high-ranking PKK military commander with considerable political experience in Europe during the 1990s—returned to his native Syria and assumed command of the YPG.

This PKK connection probably helps to explain how the previously impotent Syrian Kurds suddenly became such a formidable fighting force even before gaining its de facto alliance with the United States in 2014 during ISIS's failed siege of Kobane. In addition, despite being placed on the U.S. terrorist list largely to please its Turkish NATO ally, the PKK also corroborated with the United States and the Iraqi Kurds to combat ISIS when it also suddenly struck the Yezidis in Sinjar in August 2014. Indeed, without the PKK intervention, the Yezidis would have suffered much more as the Iraqi Kurds proved slow to act while the United States contributed only air support.

On the PYD political front, Salih Muslim, a chemical engineer and fluent in English, had become active in the Kurdish movement during the 1970s when he was an engineering student at Istanbul Technical University. For whatever reasons, the Assad regime then allowed him to return to Syria in April 2011 just after the civil war began. This apparent complicity with the Assad regime led to some accusing Salih Muslim and the PYD as acting as *Shabiha* or thuggish militiamen of Assad. However, as he argued more accurately, Salih Muslim and the PYD instead followed a third path during the Syrian civil between the Assad regime and its opponents. This proved to be



a very complicated, but necessary strategy for survival in the Hobbesian civil war of all against all Syria quickly became.

Once Turkey began supporting the Syrian Arab uprising against the Assad regime, Assad began playing the PKK card again against Turkey and lifting the long-running restrictions against the Syrian Kurds. Indeed, evidence showed that Turkey was surreptitiously aiding jihadists and even ISIS in its efforts to topple Assad and rein in the Kurds.

However, Salih Muslim, the PYD co-chair, also readily admitted, “we apply Apo’s [the imprisoned PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan] philosophy and ideology to Syria.” He also declared that, “we have put forth a project called democratic autonomy.” This term, of course, came right out of Ocalan’s latest books published in English. Soon the PYD had established a number of grassroots governing bodies supposedly to implement Ocalan’s new theories on local government. However, despite these important connections between the PYD and the PKK, the two remain different organizations. Separated for nearly a century into two distinct states, Syrian Kurds have traversed different paths to their current situation and thus often respond to diverse appeals and interests.

Unfortunately, all this was occurring at the same time that the Turkish-PKK peace talks were breaking down. Turkey continued to allow foreign jihadists to traverse its territory to reach Syria and stood by idly while ISIS sought to destroy Kobane, the Syrian Kurdish city on the Turkish border during the epic siege that ran from October 2014-January 2015. Only U.S. air support and heroic Kurdish resistance enabled the Kurds to survive and then begin pushing back and winning. However, the U.S. support for the PYD/YPG/SDF soon led to a crisis in U.S.-Turkish relations.

When the pro-Kurdish Peoples Democratic Party (HDP) won enough seats in the Turkish parliamentary elections held on June 7, 2015 to deny Recep Tayyip Erdogan’s Justice and Development Party (AKP) a renewed majority, Erdogan opportunistically ended the PKK peace process with the PKK and opted instead for an

alliance with Turkish ultra-nationalist, MHP. The strategy worked and Erdogan quickly regained his majority in the snap parliamentary elections he held on November 1, 2015. Turkish cooperation with the PYD proved the road not taken. Their relations swiftly declined with Turkey and its jihadist allies first invading the Syrian Kurdish province of Afrin on January 21, 2018, conquering it by March 2018, and then continuing the process that led up to the incursion into Syria of October 9, 2019.

Turkish-U.S. Confrontation

Among the many elements of the Hobbesian Syrian war of all against all, was the one threatening to pit U.S. troops against those of Turkey, its supposed ally in NATO. This was because the United States had armed and continued to support the Syrian Kurdish-led and PKK-affiliated SDF/PYD/YPG forces against ISIS, Kurdish forces, which Turkey viewed 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 finally occupied the region on March 17, 2018. According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, a British-based monitoring group, 1,500 Kurdish fighters died along with 289 civilians, while only 46 Turkish soldiers and their allies were killed. The Kurds accused Turkey “of Turkification . . . after its occupation of Afrin city, to change the demography of Afrin canton, and replace it with Turkish identity.” Erdogan replied, “Now we will continue this process, until we entirely eliminate this [supposedly PKK-controlled] corridor, including in Manbij, Ayn al-Arab [Kobane], Tel-Abyad, Ras al-Ayn [Sere Kaniyeh] and Qamishli.”

Trump’s new announcement of a U.S. troop withdrawal from Syria on October 7, 2019, 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 20 miles deep. This has resulted in Moscow, Ankara, and the Assad regime achieving strategic but conflicting gains, while the Syrian Kurds have experienced significant losses. Mazloum Abdi, the overall YPG/SDF military commander, dejectedly confessed that he was willing to ally with the Assad regime to save the Kurdish population in Northern Syria from what he termed a “genocide.” However, such an alliance would probably end the hard-won, Syrian Kurdish autonomy. Salih Muslim, the former PYD co-chair and still prominent foreign-affairs spokesperson, declared, “We will not accept the occupation of northern Syria.”

As the Turkish offensive largely drew to a close by October 22, the respected Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR) reported that more than 300,000 civilians were displaced, 477 fighters on all sides killed (266 SDF, 196 pro-Turkish militias, and the remainder presumably Turkish), and 120 civilians killed by Turkish and pro-Turkish proxy militias. In addition, Amnesty International declared that Turkey and Turkish-backed Syrian forces “have displayed a shameful disregard for civilian life, carrying out serious violations and war crimes, including summary killings and unlawful attacks that have killed and injured civilians.” For example, the Turkish-backed Islamist militia Ahrar al-Sharqiya executed Hevrin Khalaf, the female Secretary General of the Future Syria Party, and 8 other civilians at a M4 highway roadblock south of Tel Abyad. *Yeni Safak*, a Turkish newspaper, reported the killing as a “successful operation” against a politician affiliated with a “terrorist” organization. Critics of Turkey accused it of attempting to force “violent demographic re-engineering” or ethnic cleansing, while Turkish authorities replied that they were only correcting the demographics the PYD/YPG/SDF had previously altered. Erdogan also claimed that the new Turkish safety zone “will . . . allow the [Syrian] refugees we have to return to their lands,” a problematic proposition given the dangerous security conditions.

Implications

In the short run, Erdogan's popularity in Turkey has soared, and he has 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.

Turkey has also suffered diplomatic condemnation and isolation from the ruthlessness its Syrian proxy forces have exhibited when they posted videos of themselves killing and murdering Kurds, looting their homes and shops, and creating new refugee problems at the expense of Syrian Kurds who had successfully fought ISIS. Even the famously pro-Turkish, former U.S. ambassador to Turkey, James Jeffrey, told the U.S. Foreign Affairs Committee: "we've seen several incidents which we consider war crimes" including ethnic cleansing, the use of white phosphorus on civilians, and the execution of civilians, among others. Already burdened by economic woes, what will the Turkish public begin to think when the economic bill for Erdogan's Syrian gamble arrives?

To understand Trump's position, it first would be useful to appreciate the background role of the U.S. national style or national character. For most of its history, isolationism or detachment regarding political entanglements in foreign policy along with a self-righteous, almost missionary emphasis on its own exceptionalism, and aversion to power politics involving entangling alliances characterized the U.S. national style. War, of course, constituted a necessary exception to such isolation. However, as soon as peace returned, its national style demanded a return to its traditional stance of political detachment toward the rest of the world. Only the changed international balance of power after World War II began to modify this traditional state of affairs and force the United States into a more normal involvement in world affairs. Nevertheless, its traditional national style continued to influence its foreign policy positions. By characterizing Syria as nothing more than "sand and



death,” Trump was harkening back to themes that remain deeply ingrained in the American national psyche. On the other hand, by green lighting Turkey’s incursion into Syria, Trump was certainly aware of Turkey’s continuing geostrategic importance for the United States compared to the Kurds, whom he so clumsily pointed out “didn’t help us with Normandy” in World War II.

However, despite what he claimed was a “strategically brilliant” decision by withdrawing U.S. soldiers, the unpredictable Trump still had “some 500 troops in the country, many of them in combat, for the foreseeable future.” General Kenneth F. McKenzie, Jr., the commander of the U.S. military’s Central Command, now explained, “We don’t have an end date” for how much longer U.S. troops would remain in Syria and relations with the Syrian Kurds were presently “pretty good.” U.S. troops would also be guarding the Syrian oil fields, which McKenzie expected would eventually lead to problems with the Syrian army.

Nevertheless, as noted above, by deserting its *de facto* Syrian Kurdish ally, the United States questioned the value for others supporting it in the future. Given its continuing primary position in international politics, the United States cannot completely isolate itself. Rather, it should be smart about when and where it does not commit and maintain troops. For example, the U.S. role in Afghanistan should have ended long ago following the death of Osama bin Laden. On the other hand, the modest U.S. role in Syria continues to pay rich rewards and should be continued for all the reasons adumbrated in this commentary. By withdrawing, the United States weakens itself.

Despite Trump’s appeasement of Turkey’s incursion, other U.S. actions discussed above have still hurt the NATO alliance by helping to push Turkey into greater reliance on Russia, NATO’s perceived foe. Erdogan has threatened to close its Incirlik air base that houses U.S. nuclear warheads in response to Trump’s sometimes threat of economic sanctions against Turkey. The Turkish president also declared he could close down the Kurecik radar base if necessary.

Talk about suspending or expelling Turkey from the alliance would be problematic as the NATO treaty makes no such provisions.

Despite the current problems, Turkey remains important for NATO's many roles. For example, NATO's land command is located on Turkey's Aegean shore in Izmir. One of NATO's high-readiness headquarters commanding tens of thousands of troops in a crisis lies near Istanbul. The Turkish navy plays a major role in the Black Sea, especially important since Russia seized Crimea in 2014. Turkey still maintains some 600 troops in Afghanistan. U.S. nuclear bombers remain stationed in Turkey, while radar on Turkish territory watch the sky for potential missiles fired from Iran at Europe. As former U.S. ambassador to Turkey and special representative for Syria, James Jeffrey, recently explained to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee: "When we consider the importance of Turkey."

Russia's apparent gains from the partial U.S. withdrawal have yet to be solidified and may prove illusory or even metastasize into another Afghanistan disaster. Reports indicate that Syrian Kurdish protesters threw rocks and shoes at joint armoured Turkish-Russian patrols. Balancing the conflicting goals of its supposed partners Syria, Turkey, and Iran will prove increasingly difficult. Russia's president Vladimir V. Putin is a clever person. However, already estimated to be paying "no less than US\$3 million daily since 2015," for his Syrian adventure, Putin clearly lacks the \$250 billion to \$1 trillion estimated to rebuild broken Syria. As former U.S. secretary of state Colin Powell once famously quipped: "Your break it, you own it." Will Syria's putative newly crowned, ultimate arbitrator, Putin, be saddled with this enormous, unwanted financial burden? Since the United States clearly wants out and the Assad regime remains internationally despised, who is going to step up to the financial plate?

Turkey's incursion into PYD/YPG/SDF held territory (Rojava) threatens its continuing existence as an autonomous entity. To ward off the Turkish offense, for example, Mazloum Abdi, the over-all SDF commander of some 70,000 troops, announced his willingness



to work with the Assad regime and Russia to, in his words, make painful compromises to protect the Kurds from Turkish and its Syrian proxy mercenaries' potential "genocide." Elsewhere, Abdi stated he also would be willing to work through a federal system. As part of the understanding, Assad's troops were given permission to enter the previously SDF-controlled cities of Manbij and Kobane to deter further Turkish advances. Turkey has criticized the United States for treating Abdi as a "legitimate political figure" and declared that if he took up a Trump invitation to visit the United States, it would ask for his extradition to Turkey. Nevertheless, although severely chastened, the Syrian Kurdish experiment continues to exist and maintains a reserve of international support. It is doubtful that it will be returned to the abyss of the rejected and forgotten.

Of course, only time will tell what the long-term implications of the partial U.S. withdrawal will bring. Joseph R. Biden, the new US president, will likely continue to implement the limited, but effective role his predecessors Trump and Obama had carried out. However, as of this writing in May 2021, the ultimate fate of Syria and its embattled Kurds remains unclear.