

What Will Happen to the Kurds If the US Withdraws from Syria and Iraq?

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Executive summary

The future of the Kurds in Iraq and Syria after a US withdrawal has already begun to take shape. The containment of Kurdish political and military cross-border mobility has been achieved to some extent by paving the way for Turkey's military operations; it is now contingent on the recomposition of a desired "favorable balance of power" to fill the power vacuum in the Middle East. With an aggressive Turkish stance in the region, however, neither this containment policy nor the efforts made toward the maintenance of the "favorable balance of power" can be successful.

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Introduction

The chaotic and bloody withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan demonstrated that the US is quite willing to pull out of the Middle East without regard for the consequences for those who are left behind. It has already been announced that its combat forces in Iraq will leave the country by the end of the year. Although President Biden has

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recently stated that the US troops will stay in northeast Syria for one more year, it is reasonable to project that a withdrawal from Syria is also inevitable.

The Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES), as well as the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), will be immediately and significantly affected by this likely move since the existence of both these Kurdish administrations and the security of the regions they control have largely been reliant on the military support and guarantees of the US.

So, what will happen to the Kurds when the US withdraws from Iraq and Syria? The answer to this question has, in fact, already begun to take shape.

The US Has Never Politically Supported the Kurds in Syria

First, it is important to remember that the primary goal of the US in Syria was never to protect the Kurds but rather to prevent the spread of ISIS. The reason that American operations were initiated when ISIS forces encircled the predominantly Kurdish-populated city of Kobane was to prevent ISIS from reaching the Syria-Turkey border after having seized control of the Iraq-Syria border. In line with this strategy, the second US operation, which came immediately after Kobane, was conducted in Tell Abyad (Girê Spî), another key junction for ISIS on the way to the Syria-Turkey border.

A partnership with the Kurds in Syria became necessary for the US amid the urgency stemming from the rapid advancement of ISIS because America's most obvious partner, Turkey—a fellow NATO member—was reluctant to join the fight against ISIS and even supportive of it with limp implementation of border controls. The then Special Envoy to US President Obama, Brett McGurk, has revealed that in 2014 and 2015, the US repeatedly asked Turkey to control the Turkish border with Syria, but “Erdogan took no action.” Moreover, “Turkey opposed the anti-ISIS coalition’s effort to save the predominantly Kurdish city of Kobani” and “refused coalition requests to close border crossings in towns that had become



logistical hubs for ISIS.” Ultimately, as McGurk stated, “faced with Turkey’s intransigence, the US began to partner more closely with the Syrian Kurdish fighters.”²

When it came to completely eradicating ISIS in Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor, partnership with the Kurds was again a necessity given that a joint plan with Turkey for a collaborative US-Turkish-backed Syrian opposition fighters effort would have required something like 20,000 US troops on the ground, which was unacceptable to Obama (and Trump). Nonetheless, the Kurdish fighters in Syria, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), comprised “the best unconventional partner force” that the US “has ever had, anywhere.”³

As a result, the US established its relationship with the Kurds as an ISIS-focused military partnership when it militarily entered Syria, an arrangement it has maintained since. Thus, for instance, the US has never provided political support for the inclusion of the AANES in the Geneva peace talks on Syria, which would have been one of the most important steps for the recognition of that entity. More importantly, the US has even blessed Turkey’s invasion of Afrin by acknowledging that Turkey had “legitimate security concerns”⁴ This constituted an indirect embrace of Turkey’s efforts to link the YPG to the PKK, even though the US had also asserted that the “PKK and YPG are different.” Alas, the US relations with the YPG have been “temporary, transactional, and tactical.”⁵

Given this backdrop, the military operations Turkey launched in October 2019 to the east of the Euphrates were not very surprising. From a realpolitik perspective, in fact, the withdrawal of US troops from Syria revitalized the ongoing but fruitless backdoor diplomacy pursued by US Special Representative for Syria Engagement James Jeffrey on the issue of reconciliation between the AANES, Turkey, and the Syrian opposition. An integral part of that reconciliation, for

² Brett McGurk, “Hard Truths in Syria”, *Foreign Affairs*, May-June 2019, Volume 98, No:3

³ <https://www.newyorker.com/news/dispatch/how-trump-betrayed-the-general-who-defeated-isis>

⁴ <https://www.state.gov/press-releases/>

⁵ <https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/us-relations-with-ypg-temporary-transactional-tactical-113277>

instance, the negotiations between the AANES and the Kurdish National Council (*Encûmena Nîştimanî ya Kurdî li Sûriyê*, ENKS) —the umbrella organization housing Syrian Kurdish opposition parties—reached something of a conclusion under the pressure of Turkey’s threats to expand its invasion beyond Tell Abyad (Girê Spî) and Ras al-Ayn (Serêkaniye). Through such a rapprochement with the ENKS, the AANES has indeed aimed to engage with diplomatic channels and to achieve some degree of US political support, which ultimately failed to materialize.

One can argue that US political support could be achieved if the armed forces affiliated with the PKK—recognized as a terrorist organization by Washington—had withdrawn from northern Syria. However, in interviews I conducted with AANES officials in 2019, it was noted that the US had not provided any guarantees regarding the issue of political support; it had offered protection against the Syrian regime but promised nothing concerning Turkey. Henceforth, the US remained silent even when Turkey violated the October 2019 ceasefire agreement—800 times during its first year in effect—which the US itself had helped to broker.⁶

Hopes that US policy might change with the advent of the Biden administration were extinguished when US Secretary of State Blinken underlined “the importance of cooperation between the United States and Turkey” with a particular emphasis on “shared interests in Syria and Afghanistan.”⁷ Although these “shared interests” were not fully articulated, it is not difficult to surmise that they do not entail sustaining the AANES. President Biden’s latest statement on keeping the US troops in northeast Syria, which has mostly been interpreted as support for the AANES against Turkey, has also demonstrated that the US concern remains ISIS, and not Erdoğan who has recently

⁶ <https://thehill.com/opinion/international/569838-as-afghanistan-crumbles-turkeys-airstrikes-set-up-the-next-disaster?rl=1>

⁷ <https://www.state.gov/secretary-blinkens-call-with-turkish-foreign-minister-cavusoglu-2/>



pivoted back to Russia after his disappointment with the Biden administration.⁸

Overall, it has been clear that the US withdrawal from Syria became just a matter of timing once the US had allowed Russia to enter east of the Euphrates in the aftermath of the Turkish occupation in Tell Abyad (Girê Spî) and Ras al-Ayn (Serêkaniye) in 2019. Since then, the fate of the AANES has depended not on the presence of US forces but on a fragile balance of power-sharing between the US and Russian forces. Indeed, if there is an international power that may play a dominant role in the future of the Kurds in Syria as of today, it is Russia, which has a presence on both banks of the Euphrates, to the west as well as the east.

In this context, the best US can do for the Kurds in Syria is merely the negative of not playing the “Kurdish card” against Turkey to check Erdoğan and/or against Russia in order to secure its “vital interests” elsewhere.

“Favorable Balance of Power”

As is often discussed, the vital interests of the US no longer cover the Middle East. In this new era, when the US is shifting its focus to the Asia-Pacific and, to some extent, the Baltic region, Washington seems to be pursuing a policy of allowing the power vacuum in the Middle East to be filled with a “favorable balance of power” involving Western-friendly states.⁹

In fact, indications of this approach first appeared in 2011 when President Obama decided to pursue the policy of “leading from behind” in the early stages of the civil war in Libya. Further steps were delayed because of the domino effect of the Arab Spring and the spread of the ISIS threat. Once the status quo was sufficiently

⁸ <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/09/29/world/europe/erdogan-putin-turkey-russia.html>

⁹ Discussing the repercussions of the American withdrawal from Afghanistan, Stephen Walt has argued that the real issue for US foreign policy is the need to “build a political consensus.” In this context, he introduces the idea of a “favorable balance of power,” focusing on Europe and the Asia-Pacific; here, I take the favorable-balance-of-power concept as an analytical lens to explain the US politics in the Middle East. <https://www.ft.com/content/bc866786-db9d-4f8d-83b8-828dec42d672>

maintained in the Middle East and the fight against ISIS had attained a relative success, however, the policy of “leading from behind” was resumed in an assertive manner during the Trump Administration.

The Abraham Accords signed between Israel and the Arab states were the first tangible achievement of the US efforts within the context of the “New Middle East.”¹⁰ Another Trump-era project, “NATO plus the Middle East,” was supposed to crown such a “favorable balance of power” in the Middle East with a newly established security architecture.¹¹

So far, the decision to expand the NATO mission in Iraq has been the only significant step taken to this end.¹² It is doubtful whether the NATO mission in Iraq will contribute to the maintenance of security and stability in the Middle East beyond Baghdad. By this move, however, a “failed state,” Iraq, which has been torn apart internally for decades, has unexpectedly become a stage for regional cooperation in the Middle East. In this regard, the Baghdad Conference for Cooperation and Partnership, held on August 28, 2021 was a display of the desired favorable balance of power in the Middle East more broadly, with the participation of Jordan’s King Abdullah, Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, Qatari Emir Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani, Emirati Vice President and Prime Minister Mohammed bin Rashid, and Kuwaiti Prime Minister Sabah Al-Khalid Al-Sabah as well as the foreign ministers of Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Iran¹³

As of today, such a gathering in Bagdad casts (reinforces /reiterates/demonstrates/underscores), at least, the commitments of regional powers to a “sovereign” Iraq on the eve of US withdrawal. In other words, it reflects the favorable balance of power in which the policy of “One Iraq” would be delegated since Iraq is the most

¹⁰ <https://www.ft.com/content/a4126178-92b5-4dcb-8093-4eb5448c68c4>

¹¹ <https://www.politico.eu/article/nato-plus-me-donald-trump-proposes-nato-expansion-into-middle-east/>

¹² https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_166936.htm

¹³ <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/08/baghdad-conference-establish-cooperation-partnership-region>



likely country to collapse in the absence of American “boots on the ground” in the Middle East.

One can argue that the Biden administration’s decision to revitalize the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA)—the nuclear deal signed in 2015 between Iran and P5+1 (China, France, Germany, Russia, the UK, and US)—might mean that Iran also becomes a potential actor in the periphery of such a favorable balance of power, given its unavoidable influence particularly in Iraq. However, without the containment of Iranian expansionism, that the US has obviously failed to achieve, such an argument appears unrealistic.

Accordingly, with its deference to the escalation of Turkish military operations in Iraq in particular, the US signals that it aims to balance Iranian expansion with Turkey, as it did in the 1990s with its “dual containment policy.”¹⁴ It therefore allows Turkey to set up military bases in Iraqi Kurdistan in the name of its fight against the PKK. Turkey’s encroachment and expanding military presence in Iraqi Kurdistan clearly suggest that currently US interests go beyond Turkey’s victory in conflict with the PKK. It is also no coincidence that Turkey’s military operations intensified in 2018, when the Trump administration’s “maximum pressure campaign” against Iran began.

In this regard, it appears that Turkey is preparing to serve as a combatant force in the recently expanded non-combat NATO mission in Iraq as well as gradually replacing the US troops leaving Iraq and Syria. It is doubtful, however, whether pitting Turkey against Iran will help the US to mitigate Iranian expansion and accommodate it within, at best, the periphery of the favorable balance of power. It must also be noted that Turkey itself is obviously in pursuit of expanding its influence in the region.

¹⁴ <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/iran/1994-03-01/illogic-dual-containment>

Reconstruction of Iraq and the Kurds

Turkey's military operations in Iraq have crippled the KRG as much as the PKK. This has favored Baghdad vis-a-vis Erbil in its struggle for control over Iraqi Kurdistan, which was indeed the ultimate goal of the US-initiated "reconstruction" project after 2014.¹⁵ Following Iraq's descent into the status of a failed state as a result of the ISIS attacks in 2014, the US has pursued a policy favoring a centralization of power in the country. If one of the most important factors inhibiting the attainment of this goal has been Iran, the other has undoubtedly been the KRG, which gained power beyond the federal rights codified in the 2005 Iraqi Constitution and even held an independence referendum in 2017.

In this context, the KRG's loss of disputed territory by October 16, 2017—just after the independence referendum—was, indeed, not solely a matter of "betrayal" by the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK),¹⁶ a prominent political party in Iraqi Kurdistan which had seized control over Kirkuk after the 2003 invasion of Iraq. The Iraqi advance first on Kirkuk and then on the disputed area as a whole, was made possible by the US position of "not taking sides."¹⁷ Thereafter, the crack on the KRG's back was doubled by Turkey's intensified airstrikes and ground operations in 2018.¹⁸ Ankara ended up establishing forty new bases in an area 25 miles deep that included the cities of Erbil, Duhok, Soran, and Zakho.¹⁹ The visit of the Iraqi Prime Minister Kadhimi to the KRG in 2020, heralded as the first visit by an Iraqi leader to the region after seventeen years, was a strong symbol of how the tide has turned to Baghdad's advantage.²⁰

Turkey's growing military operations and bases in northern Iraq assist, on the one hand, the continuation of the US pressure on Iran

¹⁵ [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2017/603859/EXPO_STU\(2017\)6038_59_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2017/603859/EXPO_STU(2017)6038_59_EN.pdf)

¹⁶ <https://time.com/4984979/kurds-kirkuk-iraq-peshmerga/>

¹⁷ <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-mideast-crisis-iraq-kurds-trump-idUKKBN1CL2P6>

¹⁸ <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/09/19/turkey/iraq-strikes-may-break-laws-war>

¹⁹ <https://www.rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/06072020>

²⁰ <https://www.rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/100920204>



and on the other, the strengthening of Baghdad in the context of the reconstruction. Hence, there are no strong objections to Turkey's military operations in Iraqi Kurdistan from either Baghdad or Washington. However, it remains unclear what would come next were Turkey to expand its ground operations in northern Iraq to the disputed territories of Kirkuk, Mosul, and Şengal (Sinjar). Such a development seems, for now, to be dependent on the resistance of Iran as much as on the trajectory of US-Turkish relations.

Turkey Replaces ISIS as a “Common Enemy”

Having played a dominant role in defining the destiny of the Kurds in the Middle East throughout the Cold War by framing the Kurdish Question as “a security issue of national concern” and subsequently, to some extent, as a “matter of democracy,”²¹ the US continues to be influential in the Kurdish theater. One of the most important outcomes of this ongoing influence is the containment of the growing Kurdish cross-border political and military mobilization in recent decades that had reshaped the Kurdish Question in a fluid regional context transcending national boundaries. The dissolution of the administrative integrity that Syrian Kurdistan had maintained over the past ten years and Iraqi Kurdistan created over the past 20 is another destructive consequence of this influence. It is not likely that the Afrin, Kobane, and Jazira cantons declared in Syria in 2013 will be reunited under a single administration bound to the AANES anytime soon. More importantly, the victory gained in the war dubbed the “Rojava Revolution” waged by the Kurds in their struggle for rights and recognition has been lost in the shadow of the war against ISIS, particularly in the international arena. The most evident indicator of this is that the struggle of the Syrian Kurds is today memorialized as a battle against ISIS much more than as a battle for the Kurds' own rights that had for years been wrested from them.

²¹ https://www.swpberlin.org/publications/products/comments/2018C45_yilm.pdf

Meanwhile, the KRG has largely lost its ability to function as an interlocutor, not only in Iraq but also in the international arena as a Kurdish political power. Moreover, further deepening of its already fragmented political structure and tightening (shrinking) of the territories it controls appear to be unavoidable.

Perhaps the most important development for the Kurds in light of their history of resistance is the invalidation of the motto for their national struggle, “no friends but the mountains.” Alas, advanced war technologies have turned the mountains, too, into territories that are no longer safe for them.

The Kurds are now experiencing a high level of disappointment not only in Iraq and Syria but across the region, throughout the four parts of Kurdistan. The outcome of this disappointment, for now, is a fury encased in silence. Where this accumulating passion will be channeled or how it will erupt is yet unknown.

The early signs indicate that the Kurdish political actors and parties in Iraq have mostly lost their credibility among the Kurdish people. The decline in the membership of political parties and electoral turnout there is the most obvious manifestation of this development.²² At first glance, it demonstrates that politics has, in the eyes of the masses, lost its functionality as a domain of finding solutions to the economic and legal problems they face.²³

The behavior of the Kurdish voters in the Duhok province, where the dominant Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) lost over 30 percent of its votes in the Iraqi elections held on October 10, 2021, clearly suggests that their anger is turning into a protest against established Kurdish political parties. What explains the significant decline in the KDP vote in Duhok is not only the economic crisis and political oppression prevalent in Iraqi Kurdistan as a whole. This province differs from the rest of Iraqi Kurdistan by directly facing both the Turkish military operations and demographic change in

²² <https://www.rudaw.net/english/middleeast/iraq/121020213>

²³ <https://english.alaraby.co.uk/opinion/violence-will-only-incite-desperate-young-kurds-even-more>



favor of Arabs who arrived from Mosul in the aftermath of the ISIS capture of the city.²⁴ The people of Duhok evidently hold the KDP responsible for their plight.

In this regard, the destruction caused by Turkey's incursions generates empathy among the Iraqi Kurds for the Kurds in Turkey and Syria. These latter have also been suffering from Turkish policies, though the KRG repeatedly accuses the PKK for being responsible for Turkish operations in Iraqi Kurdistan. Moreover, the exclusion of the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (*Halkların Demokratik Partisi*, HDP) from the political arena in Turkey, despite its efforts to push political channels for a peaceful solution,²⁵ raises support for resistance against Turkey in the form of an armed struggle across Kurdistan.

In this context, the escalation of hate crimes and war crimes committed against Kurds both in Turkey and the regions under Turkish occupation in recent years only deepens the fury in silence.²⁶ Thus, asserting that Turkey now replaces ISIS as the "common enemy" of all Kurds would not be a misguided conclusion.

Conclusions

In sum, the US policymakers appear to be treating the Kurdish Question as just a matter of conflict management requiring the maintenance of a favorable balance of power in the Middle East. However, this will serve, at best, to safe-guard the territorial integrity of its constituent states as a common interest shared between them and the US. Thus, the "peace" will not be the most likely outcome in the Kurdish theater. A favorable balance of power can contribute the stability and security of the region only if the US replaces its leading-from-behind policy with the aim of reconciliation and resolution rather than mere management of conflicts. In this regard, it is fair to

²⁴ <https://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/ninewa-final.pdf>

²⁵ <https://www.dw.com/en/the-exclusion-of-the-pro-kurd-hdp-in-post-coup-turkey/a-19472650>

²⁶ <https://www.jpost.com/middle-east/hate-crimes-against-kurds-rise-in-turkey-675473>

claim that the Kurdish Question will be a litmus test of what is to come next in the Middle East after the US withdrawal.

