

What U.S. Diplomacy for the Kurds in Syria?

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John Saleh is a journalist and political analyst focused on U.S. and foreign power involvement in the Middle East, with a special focus on Syria and Kurdish affairs. Saleh is a contributor to Fikra Forum.



Brief Analysis

Kurds in Syria's northeastern region face an uncertain and threatening future, especially now that most American forces have withdrawn from the country. A sporadically belligerent Russian military presence, coupled with Turkish aggression against U.S.-backed Kurdish forces, has produced an increasingly precarious situation for Kurds in the area. Even Kurdish civilians face violence as Turkish-backed extremist Islamic militias perpetrate war crimes in Kurdish cities occupied by Turkey. The U.S. should take several steps in addressing these threats and securing safety for its Kurdish allies in Syria.

American officials will need to recognize that the United States – along with local Kurdish, Arab, and Christian partners – has lost significant influence in Syria. Russian military expansion in northeastern Syria, along with increased Turkish aggression, has created regional instability, weakened the international strategy to support anti-terrorism efforts, and further complicated the already difficult task of finding a comprehensive political solution for Syria.

President Trump's decision in October 2019 to withdraw American forces from Syria has largely contributed to the United States' diminishing influence in the country. As a result, Kurds are facing increased violence and uncertainty. The United Nations confirmed in a special report covering the period from July 2019 to February 2020 that Turkish-backed rebels have killed civilians and looted local businesses in Kurdish cities like Afrin, Tal Abyad, and Ras al-Ain – acts that amount to war crimes.

Moreover, the Kurds' precarious situation has provoked political strife between Kurdish and American leadership. In an **October 2019 Q** meeting with senior U.S. diplomat William Roebuck, General Mazlum Abdi, commander of the Syrian Democratic Forces, appealed to the United States to protect Kurds in Syria: "You are not willing to protect the people, but you do not want another force to come and protect us. You have sold us. This is immoral." General Mazlum insisted that the U.S. should help stop Turkish attacks or allow Kurdish officials to strike a deal with the Assad regime and Russia to protect them from Turkish bombing. Ultimately, the U.S. succeeded in halting Turkish aggression by threatening the imposition of sanctions and withdrawing Kurdish fighters from Turkey's borders. Nonetheless, Turkey continues to target Kurds by occupying Kurdish cities and settling Arabs, Turkmens, and Islamic extremists in Kurdish homes.

And while President Trump decided to keep a small amount of U.S. forces in northeastern Syria to protect oilfields

and continue combating ISIS, Russian forces have expanded into Kurdish areas and are cooperating with Turkish forces for joint military observation on the Syrian-Turkish border. Moreover, Russian forces and their local proxies continue to harass American and allied forces to expand their control towards the oil wells. Meanwhile, Turkey and its extremist militias are cooperating to attack Kurdish forces, while Iranian Shia militias and Hezbollah continue conducting military activities in the region.

On a diplomatic level, Turkey, Iran, and Russia share the common goal of suppressing Kurdish political ambitions. In conjunction with the Assad regime, they continue to target the Kurds in Syria to prevent them from achieving federal autonomy or future rights, rejecting any authentic Kurdish representation in negotiations related to a political solution for Syria.

All these developments threaten U.S. military personnel, diplomats, and strategic initiatives for stability and development. As such, the United States should take several steps to combat increasing hostility against its Kurdish allies and secure American interests in the region.

First, the United States should re-establish a military presence in the region and declare northeastern Syria as a no-fly zone. Establishing a no-fly zone would help protect U.S.-backed forces like Kurds and Assyrian Christians, while preventing Assad's acquisition of the significant food-producing region. The no-fly zone would also provide leverage in pressuring Russia and Assad to accept UNSC resolution 2254 on a political solution to the Syrian conflict.

Ultimately, the U.S. should pressure Turkish forces to withdraw from the Kurdish areas indefinitely. In the interim, however, U.S. officials should work to prevent Erdogan from resettling Arabs in predominantly Kurdish lands.

In addition, the U.S. ought call a conference in Washington to discuss a mechanism for guaranteeing and protecting the future of U.S. partners in Syria, Kurdish or otherwise. Current divisions within Kurdish forces and between other U.S. allies necessitate a common understanding and clear American diplomatic strategy in the region. American diplomats can use their successes with Iraqi Kurds, who currently enjoy their own federal region, to encourage cohesion and cooperation among Kurdish forces in Syria.

The U.S. must provide further diplomatic, military, and economic support for its Kurdish allies. Critical in this support are training programs in leadership, good governance, and the principles of democracy, programs which are unfortunately badly needed. USAID can also contribute to infrastructure development in Kurdish areas and to the improvement of economic and agricultural production. Moreover, the U.S. should offer Syria's Kurds cultural exchange programs, education, and projects to develop media and freedom of expression.

As a small but symbolically important step in strengthening U.S.-Kurdish relations, the U.S. should open an office for Kurdish affairs in the State Department. This office would help define more clearly the diplomatic role of Kurdish forces in Syria and clarify U.S. commitment to its Kurdish allies.

Finally, American officials should engage Turkey diplomatically to address the threats to Kurdish people resulting from the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Syria.

The United States needs to be more assertive and clear with Turkey. Turkish cooperation with Russia and Iran threatens U.S. interests, and American officials need to make stronger demands of Turkey to protect American allies and goals. At the very least, the U.S. should stop Turkey from resettling Syrian Arab refugees and extremists in the homes and lands of the Kurds.

Broadly speaking, the Kurds have been amicable and loyal partners to the United States for decades. It is therefore in the United States' interest to develop this partnership, not only as a means to combat terrorism, but also to solidify assured cooperation on other issues of common interest. The above-mentioned steps are important, not only to prevent against aggression directed towards Syrian Kurds, but also to bolster American influence in Syria at the

expense of adversarial powers like Iran and Russia. ❖

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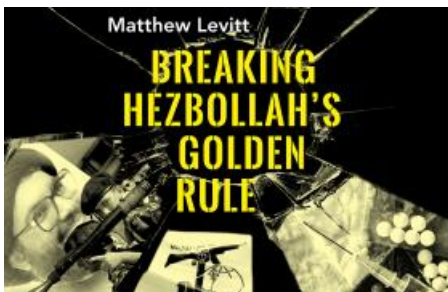
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