

The Future of Northeastern Syria: In Conversation with SDF Commander-in-Chief Mazloum Abdi

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Brief Analysis

With the latest unexpected escalation between Iran and the United States in Iraq, the ongoing challenges of Syria have, for the moment, become a less-discussed point of regional tension. However, for the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which precariously continues to control an autonomous region of Northeastern Syria, the last few months have tested the organization's hold over the region.

In the months since U.S. troop withdrawal from the Turkish-Syrian border and the subsequent Turkish Operation Peace Spring, launched on October 9, the future of northeastern Syria has become in some ways less certain for the SDF. In addition to the previous major loss of Afrin during the earlier Turkish Olive Branch Operation in March 2018, the SDF has now also lost hold of Ras al-Ain and Tal Abyad.

Yet for now, the two ceasefire deals Turkey signed with the [United States](#) (<http://www.kurdistan24.net/en/news/633ebfd4-1955-46e9-bfd9-56512ede029c>) On October 17 and with Russia on October 22 have so far prevented further conflict and expansion of Turkish territorial control into northeastern Syria. Furthermore, the SDF [reached a deal](#) (<https://www.kurdistan24.net/en/news/7f4f2cf7-da36-43b8-b870-502a97e68275>) with Damascus with [Russian](#) (<http://www.kurdistan24.net/en/news/44c1ebac-fae4eb2-8c82-ff79b8cadeb6>) mediation to protect the Syrian border, which, though it has not led to a concrete agreement between Damascus and the SDF, has at least encouraged ongoing negotiations between the two.

In December, the author sat down for an interview with SDF Commander-in-Chief Mazloum Abdi, who explained the current position and concerns of the SDF, and how the two ceasefire deals now governing the Syrian-Turkish border have lessened the risk of a future Turkish attack. General Mazloum noted that although there is still a risk Turkey could attack either Jazira (Hassakah province) or Kobani, such a scenario would not be easy for Turkey. "They know that we will put a major fight—but there are larger agreements for now. There are agreements with Russians and also with the United States, which are preventing Turkish attacks. The Americans say that if Turkey attacks [Kobani], there will be sanctions against Turkey—and there are also Russian forces there."

Moreover, for the local self-administration of northeast Syria (NES), not much has changed in the months since Turkey's latest incursion. Although it had to evacuate its administration center from Ain al Issa and move to Raqqa, a number of checkpoints and the Fish Khabur border crossing with Iraq are still under SDF jurisdiction. The border crossing in particular has been key, as it allows foreign journalists and NGOs continued access to the northeast of Syria without needing to obtain a visa from the government in Damascus. What has changed is that Russian forces have replaced positions of the U.S. army, and Syrian forces now man the front line with Turkish-backed forces, though they do not maintain checkpoints.

Meanwhile, the U.S. army has now shifted its location deeper into the territory of northeastern Syria—between October and November, the U.S. army withdrew from areas near Raqqa, Kobani, and Manbij and repositioned their forces to the Hasakah province and the oil-rich Deir ar Zour. Forces are now tasked with protecting oil infrastructure and continuing the fight against ISIS.

The Resilience of the SDF

In spite of the territorial losses, one notable outcome of the fighting has been the demonstration of unity between Kurds and non-Kurds within the SDF, despite expectations to the contrary. SDF officials have reported that there was no major defection of Arab SDF fighters or uprising of Arab citizens in northeastern Syria to support either Syrian regime forces or Turkey in areas like Raqqa or Deir ar Zour. As General Mazloum stated, “Turkey’s plans were undermined; they were expecting that once they attack, the Arab-populated areas will rise against us [SDF], Raqqa, Deir Az-Zour, Manbij and Tabqah for instance.” Similarly, although there was an expectation that non-Kurdish SDF soldiers would defect, “Nothing like that ever occurred, actually, there has been more unity. And as we speak, Arab fighters are joining the SDF more than pre-Turkish invasion.”

This was not the only effort to prompt these forces to abandon the SDF. Earlier in December, Syria’s security chief Ali Mamlouk also [asked \(https://english.enabbaladi.net/archives/2019/12/ali-mamlouk-calls-on-the-jazira-tribes-to-defect-from-sdf/\)](https://english.enabbaladi.net/archives/2019/12/ali-mamlouk-calls-on-the-jazira-tribes-to-defect-from-sdf/) Arab tribes to defect to the Syrian government. Mazloum suggested that the two efforts to prompt defection—Damascus with its threats, Turkey with its attacks—have both failed. Mazloum reported that his troops “rejected [the] call” of the Syrian government, attributing this to a shared vision: “Those who have joined the SDF believe in the ideas and goals of the SDF.”

The Challenge of Recognition

Yet the call by Ali Mamlouk highlights the continuing reality that the SDF and Syrian government are not on good terms, despite the two sides’ earlier military cooperation against Turkey. Negotiations between Damascus and the SDF to settle the status of NES in the eyes of the Syrian government have been ongoing, as the SDF leader confirmed. However, so far Damascus refuses to agree to any stipulations that they would recognize the SDF, and the government still wants to [integrate \(https://thedefensepost.com/2019/10/30/syrian-arab-army-sdf-turkey/\)](https://thedefensepost.com/2019/10/30/syrian-arab-army-sdf-turkey/) SDF fighters on an individual basis into the Syrian army.

In contrast, the SDF has stated that they would only join the Syrian army in the event of a new Syrian constitution, in which the SDF “preserve[s] its autonomous status in the area of command and institutions.” According to General Mazloum, it is only “Within that framework [that] our discussions with the Russians and Syrian government [will] continue.”

So far, Syrian president Bashar al-Assad seems to be uninterested in such a deal, although an agreement with the SDF could improve the Syria’s [deteriorating \(https://www.reuters.com/article/syria-economy-pound/syrian-pound-hits-record-low-in-panic-selling-dealers-say-idUSL8N28C3PQ\)](https://www.reuters.com/article/syria-economy-pound/syrian-pound-hits-record-low-in-panic-selling-dealers-say-idUSL8N28C3PQ) economy that has weakened due to the sorry state of the Syrian pound—which has hit a record low amid sanctions and war. The SDF still controls major oil

and agricultural resources and is conducting trade with the Iraqi Kurds, which could provide an influx into the overall Syrian economy were some sort of agreement to be reached.

Refugee issue

Moreover, the SDF is now primarily concerned with another type of challenge to its borders: the publicly expressed desire by Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan to settle a million Syrian refugees currently in Turkey into Syrian areas under his control.

As General Mazloum sees it, “It is Erdogan’s goal to bring non-locals and force them to resettle, displace the Kurdish people and democrats from their homeland—and then hire mercenaries from those resettled to use them against Syrian people’s unity, using Syrians to advance Erdogan’s agenda in Syria.” The SDF leader argued that the basic conditions necessary for resettlement of Syrian refugees have not yet been met: “First the Syrian war must be resolved so that everyone can return to their homes.”

The SDF and the local administration have always stated that it is their policy to allow any refugees originally from the area under SDF control to return and resettle there. However, the SDF commander-in-chief emphasized that the majority of Syrians in Turkey are from regions of Damascus, Homs, and Daraa in the south. General Mazloum argues that Turkey’s resettlement plan would benefit neither the NES’s current residents nor those being resettled, as he said those refugees currently in Syria “also do not want to be resettled in Northeastern Syria.” Such a resettlement plan would decrease pressures for a political solution that allows refugees to return to their homes in Syria, and the general insisted that such a process should take place in order to resolve the Syrian crisis.

In contrast, Turkey’s resettlement plan would in turn solidify the displacement of Kurdish Syrians from Afrin and other areas currently under Turkish control, eroding support for the SDF in those regions in turn. A June 2019 [report \(https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/ohchr_-_syria_monthly_human_rights_digest_-_june_2018.pdf\)](https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/ohchr_-_syria_monthly_human_rights_digest_-_june_2018.pdf) from the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) expressed concerns that permitting Arabs to occupy Kurdish homes in Afrin could permanently change the ethnic composition there. The SDF fears that the scenario already playing out in Afrin could also affect the areas newly controlled by Turkey, though the Turkish Defense Ministry has [dismissed \(https://www.aa.com.tr/en/turkey/turkeys-activities-in-syria-safe-zone-abide-by-law/1648898\)](https://www.aa.com.tr/en/turkey/turkeys-activities-in-syria-safe-zone-abide-by-law/1648898) these accusations.

Balancing Between Russia and Damascus

Despite recent history, the SDF is not currently concerned that Russia would threaten the SDF with a green light for a Turkish attack on Kobani or other regions in order to pressure the SDF to give more concessions to Damascus as it did in January 2018. Then, Moscow [allowed \(https://www.middleeasteye.net/opinion/why-did-russia-abandon-afrin\)](https://www.middleeasteye.net/opinion/why-did-russia-abandon-afrin) Turkey to attack Afrin once it became clear that the Kurds were not willing to handover Afrin to Damascus.

Now, the Russians might seek access to oil-rich areas currently under U.S. protection, but General Mazloum thinks it unlikely that such interests would manifest into action. “There are agreements between the Russians and the Americans...They [the Russians] have not asked us something like that, and they are coordinating with the Americans as well, not only us.”

The current situation demonstrates that although the SDF is weakened, it has managed to keep its de-facto autonomy, balancing between Moscow, Damascus, Ankara, and Washington without the disintegration of the SDF. Moreover, the continued U.S. presence in the oil-rich regions of northeastern Syria has now given the SDF a point of leverage in negotiations with Damascus.

However, a political agreement with Damascus is far from assured. And if the SDF and Damascus are not able to come to an agreement, tensions are likely to rise once more. The ongoing regional tensions between the United States and Iran could also negatively (<https://www.kurdistan24.net/en/news/03a64066-d941-45d6-87bd-6f95767d5f1a>) affect the SDF, especially in Deir ar Zour. However, Damascus does not have enough manpower to replace the SDF, especially with its deteriorating economic condition. Thus, the SDF will continue to remain a de-facto autonomous entity despite uncertainty over its future unless there are unexpected changes in the political field of Syria. ❖

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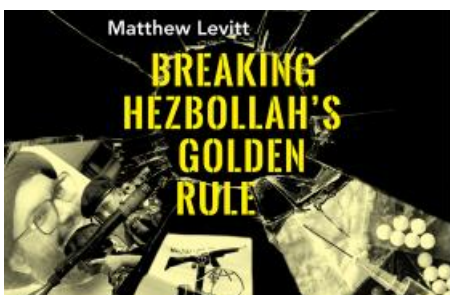
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