

A Regional Kurdish Response to U.S. Policy in Syria

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Brief Analysis

Back in 2015—during the annual forum at American University in Suleimaniyah, Iraqi Kurdistan—I had the chance to tell former U.S. special presidential envoy for the Middle East Brett McGurk to “please tell our friends in the administration to not confuse us [the Kurds] with the conflicting U.S. foreign policies of every four years.” As I explained to him, we as Kurdish people were “already confused by our historical and political conflicts and disputes of the region!” However, the tendency of U.S. policy to experience rapid shifts and even reversals after every election cycle has repeatedly contributed to extreme challenges on the ground. Writing from the region, such policies do not bring credibility to either party while in the office and quickly erode trust with the groups the United States hopes to work with.

As successive U.S. administrations have failed to heed this advice, and U.S. policy’s rapid shifts have had a particular impact on the lives of Kurdish people throughout the region, and especially for U.S. allies in Iraq or Syria. These Kurds have been repeatedly asked to make major sacrifices for U.S. interests, only to face unexpected U.S. policy reversals and pay an unforeseen price.

In the most recent case of political reversal, Kurds had expected support in the United States’ regional policy in return for the 11,000 Syrian Kurds who were martyred in defense of their lands, lives, and to promote stability of the region. Syrian Kurdish leadership operated on the expectation that the United States would endorse Kurdish people’s political rights and protect their dignity. The graves of those martyrs stand as a clear evidence that regular Syrian Kurds also operated under the understanding that they were giving their lives in order to keep the stability of the area as a firm and reliable component of the United States’ regional strategy.

Unfortunately, the current situation in Syria has not only led to the abandonment and betrayal of a coalition forces member that actively fought ISIS on the ground, the Trump administration acted in reverse of the pledges he made to the American people and the coalition forces—including Rojava’s Kurdish people—regarding his efforts to defeat ISIS. As their outsized role in the assassination of ISIS-leader al-Baghdadi demonstrated, the majority-Kurdish Syrian Defense Forces are key to the continued destruction of that organization in Syria.

Moreover, the recent U.S. policy reversal in Syria is having direct effects on the very makeup of eastern Syria. While millions of refugees have fled from Syria for years, the dramatic uptick of Syrian-Kurdish refugees from Rojava is

adding another avoidable tragedy to Syrian displacement. This new exodus is by no means accidental; the current Turkish operation seems clearly designed to alter the demography of the Kurdish area of Syria, even openly declaring a plan to settle millions of refugees currently residing in Turkey in Syrian Kurdish areas along the Turkish border. While the recent announcement of U.S. patrols resuming along the border suggests yet another reversal in Syria, these patrols are not enough to resolve the broader threat facing Syrian Kurds, and may only worsen the conflict.

With the weight of these impacts on the ground for Syrian Kurds, it is important to recognize the legacy that this episode will leave in the minds of all Kurdish people. The United States' confused policy in Syria and its tragic consequences for Syria's Kurds is all but guaranteed to severely damage the credibility of any American government that hopes to build future alliances in the region.

The United States' reversal of its policy in Syria is not the first time that the Kurdish people have felt betrayed by the U.S. government. Initially, the United States was supportive of the 1974 Kurdish revolution against Saddam Hussein, only to abandon and betray the movement after making a politically-expedient agreement with the former Soviet Union and the Iranian Shah.

While this and other reversals in support of Iraqi Kurdish independence have stuck in the minds of the Kurdish people. Therefore it is imperative to recognize that the recent betrayal of the Syrian Kurds is unlike the previous instances. Many Kurds understand that these earlier examples were a reflection and result of conflicts between nation-states and the emergence of nationalist political movements in the region that arguably threatened U.S. interests. The motives for the reversal in Syria are by no means so clear cut, and are all the more painful because of this lack of clear motivation.

This most recent betrayal stands out in another respect: in the past, U.S. policy reversals regarding the Kurds were catalyzed by decisions outside of the White House or through major shifts in regional powers' strategies. In the Syrian case, it is clear that the Trump administration itself has been directly and transparently involved in orchestrating such a reversal of support for its Kurdish allies, which in many Kurdish eyes discredits the institution itself.

The United States must recognize the real and lasting damage such reversals have on their relations with their regional allies. Such grave mistakes in managing the long and challenging process of stabilizing Syria are an obstacle to the process of resettlement and efforts to reconcile the country's diverse communities. For the United States, protecting the lives of people should be a main pillar of understanding Syrians' legitimate political rights.

What the United States must also understand is the impact that its decision has had in damaging the esteem with which many Kurds across territories in the Middle East have long held for the country. While those removed from the conflict may defend the abandonment of U.S. allies on the grounds that every country with Kurdish populations is separate and has its own sovereignty, this rationale is unlikely to resonate.

The Middle East is a region where the threat to one area's stability and security can have a domino effect, and many non-Syrian Kurds fear that this event will have lasting damaging impacts on the Kurds as a people. Attacks in Syria are widely seen as genuinely threatening to Kurdish existence and as a potential harbinger of another genocide. The Turkish desire to destroy the autonomous administration that has been established in Rojava—which has been managing local resources, including oil, while defending the area—is clear, especially given the Turkish insistence that the Syrian Kurdish YPG is synonymous and indistinguishable from the Turkish-designated terrorist organization of the PKK. Many Kurds see Turkey as acting on the belief that success in Rojava will encourage its own Kurdish communities to seek their political rights in southeast Turkey.

In an international context, it can feel like Kurds are constantly penalized and even blamed for not having the

appropriate political representation to advocate against these types of situations. But even if Kurdish political representatives have only been able to achieve de-facto political autonomy in certain sections of the region, this unfortunate reality should not deprive a nation from its very basic political rights and the opportunity to develop the required scale of political representation that it has worked towards for over a century.

Despite all these challenges, there is an alternative to the current situation in Syria that can mitigate the damage caused by the U.S. administration's reversals in Syria. The core strategic objective that should clearly remain the ultimate concern of all parties is a clear roadmap of the future of northeastern Syria that is designed to peace to all involved parties. It is imperative to include the Kurdish people in these calculations, and the political rights of the Kurdish people should be officially recognized. A direct negotiation with and a genuine engagement of the Kurdish people is the only right path to resolve the conflict, both from a human rights perspective and due to the major sacrifices the Syrian Kurds have made to protect the region and fight against ISIS. Additionally, The Syrian Kurds already have political representation and the SDF should be engaged. As with any conflict, international legal norms and procedures should be applied to northeastern Syria and negotiations should be conducted through third parties, such as the UN, the United States, the European Union, and regional governments official representatives.

This is the only appropriate way to resolve this conflict. All involved parties, and particularly Turkey, must agree on mutual understanding with the actual representatives of the Kurdish people in the region for there to be any kind of stability in this region of Syria. If such a process does not occur, the current Turkish military operation against the Kurdish people at the Syrian-Turkish border will unquestionably have a lasting negative impact on not just Syrian Kurds, but all the Kurdish communities living in the other countries of the Middle East as well. ❖

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