Kurdish Reactions to Their Abandonment in Syria

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Brief Analysis

The U.S. withdrawal of troops from northeast Syria has placed Kurdish fighters in a near-impossible situation, while alarming Kurdish communities in other countries, but Washington can still take steps to mitigate the damage.

On October 21, footage of Kurdish civilians heckling withdrawing U.S. troops in both Iraq and Syria offered a rare and disturbing sight. This scene was facilitated by President Trump's October 6 decision to unilaterally withdraw U.S. forces from Syria, in effect paving the way for the Turkish military to cross the Syrian border three days later and attack the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). Thereafter, a safe haven quickly became a war zone. According to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 180,000 people have now been forced from their homes. James Jeffrey, the U.S. administration's envoy to Syria, told Congress on October 22 that the fighting has resulted in hundreds of SDF deaths, a likely war crime by a pro-Turkish militia, and the escape from prison of more than a hundred Islamic State (IS) fighters.

The U.S. action has unsurprisingly left the Syrian Kurds feeling abandoned and exposed against the militarily superior Turkish army and its Arab militias. On a deeper level, America appears to have entirely lost Kurdish sympathy and trust, while at the same time failing to either deter or appease Turkey. Rather than ameliorate matters, President Trump has poured salt on the wound. He responded to backlash against his policy by claiming the Kurds were "no angels" and that they had failed to contribute to the Allied cause in World War II, while characterizing their Syrian military campaign as a fight over "long-bloodstained sand."

Is the KRG Next?

Elsewhere in the region, concerns among Kurds are rising. On October 9, Iraqi president Barham Salih, who is Kurdish, tweeted that "Turkey's military incursion into Syria is a grave escalation…the world must unite to avert

a catastrophe." Masoud Barzani, former president of Iraq's Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), likewise characterized the Turkish attacks in northeast Syria as "a dangerous assault and threatening situation" for the "stability of the whole region." The KRG and its parliament both called for halting the military action in northeast Syria.

Influencing these carefully crafted statements is Turkish economic and military power over the KRG, which depends particularly on Turkey as the sole outlet for its oil to reach world markets. Turkey is in turn the KRG's largest trading partner, with Turkish exports valued at $6.7 billion in 2018. Militarily, Turkey maintains fifteen bases and some 2,500 soldiers inside Kurdistan. Since May 2019, under Operation Claw, these forces have taken the fight to the Turkey-based Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) in the triborder area encompassing Iraq, Turkey, and Iran. On October 10, a Turkish drone killed two PKK operatives deep inside Kurdistan, meters away from Iraq's largest amusement park in the city of Sulaymaniyah.

This background perhaps explains the deep concern expressed by Adham Barzani—a former KRG legislator and a cousin to Masoud Barzani—that Turkey's easy disintegration of the Kurdish-led autonomous area in Syria meant the KRG would be next. More likely, however, is that Turkey could synchronize its operations against the SDF and PKK by encroaching from Syria into Iraq to target PKK camps in Sinjar and perhaps Makhmur. Such worries also explain the KRG's continued support for the Iraqi central government, which has faced a growing protest movement, given that the Iraqi Kurds could soon need Baghdad's help against Turkey. In 2017, although unaccompanied by punitive action, Turkey opposed the KRG independence referendum and worked with both Baghdad and Tehran to undermine it.

Popular condemnation of the United States and Turkey, in contrast to the muted official language, has been loud and clear in the KRG. These voices are lamenting the scapegoating of the Kurdish people for the sake of geopolitical expedience. One protestor in the KRG capital, Erbil, put it this way: "Throughout history, our nation has been massacred. We are hopeless and angry at the same time." Some have taken to the streets; others have called for boycotting Turkish products; and Kurdistan media outlets have devoted ample time to covering the conflict.

A further profound worry for the KRG is the expected influx of Syrian refugees. Already, some 8,000 have crossed the border, a figure only kept this low by SDF efforts to bar border passage and prevent the potential creation of a demographic vacuum. Rebar Ahmed Khalid, the KRG minister of interior, told reporters that his government is bracing for about 30,000–50,000 in the short term, and as many as 250,000 if the escalation continues. The KRG and members of the public alike have sent aid to refugee camps in Iraqi Kurdistan as well as Syria.

The U.S. commitment to Iraq and the KRG poses yet another concern. Alongside the protest movement, which is challenging the Iraqi government's legitimacy, the American withdrawal raises the risks of an Islamic State resurgence. The level of KRG-Baghdad security cooperation needed to deny IS a safe haven remains elusive. At the same time, Iran and its proxies are pressuring Iraq to expel the U.S. military presence from its soil. Should violence rise in Iraq, many in the KRG fear Trump might leave the country just as abruptly as he left Syria.

Beyond Iraqi Kurdistan

The Kurdish polity is far from monolithic. Yet despite the absence of a transnational political movement, Kurds are drawn together by an emotional affinity, especially when faced with outside pressure. Thus, in Syria the Turkish government has declared its plans to target Kurdish People's Defense Units (YPG) and to resettle Arab refugees living in Turkey in predominantly Syrian Arab towns. However, Kurds around the world perceive a larger Turkish design here, as expressed in anti-Kurdish rhetoric out of Ankara, the Turkish media, and pro-Ankara Arab militias. Setting aside the matter of human suffering, many Kurds perceive Turkey's main goals as undermining the rise of a Kurdish political statelet in Syria and changing the demographics of the Kurdish-majority provinces.

In Iran, home to the region's second largest Kurdish population, numerous protests broke out during which participants denounced the Turkish incursion. The Iranian government, despite its satisfaction in seeing the United States weakened and Syrian president Bashar al-Assad emboldened, opposed the Turkish move. Further, the Trump administration, in its maximum-pressure campaign against Iran, has completely ignored the country's Kurdish groups as potentially friendly actors, helping push some Iranian Kurdish elements into talking with Tehran.

The Kurdish-majority cities of Turkey have remained quiet, with the only domestic group to oppose the Turkish military incursion being the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), the country's largest Kurdish bloc. The Turkish government has accused the HDP of links to the PKK, jailing the group's co-president and replacing dozens of its elected mayors with Ankara-appointed ones. Even the new Istanbul mayor, Ekrem Imamoglu, whose defeat of the Justice and Development Party candidate the HDP helped facilitate, supports the military operation. The PKK, for its part, condemned the Turkish military operation but also denounced the SDF for agreeing to the October 17 U.S.-mediated ceasefire.

A Path Forward

For the time being, the truce negotiated by the United States and extended by Russia has paused the military escalation. Meanwhile, the fate of the Syrian Kurds and their autonomous region will remain beholden to Trump's policy whims—namely, whether he will reverse course under pressure from Congress—as well as to Turkish and Russian moves. With their agency thoroughly limited, the Kurds had little choice but to take the self-preserving step of inviting the Assad regime into SDF-controlled territories and abiding by the concessions imposed on them.

Despite this highly uncertain picture, the United States remains distinctly capable of limiting the damage to the Kurdish population, finding a path toward peace, and stymying an Islamic State resurgence. The first step in doing so is making the ceasefire stick and transforming it into a durable truce, even if one short of full peace. More urgently on this count, Washington must strive to achieve a cessation of hostilities, including any rumblings of ethnic war, with its potential for ethnic cleansing and other war crimes.

Second, to alleviate human suffering, the United States should offer humanitarian assistance to internally displaced persons within both Syria and the KRG. Since much of the NGO community left northeast Syria after the redeployment of Assad's forces, the United States should increase support to the UN agencies on the ground.

Finally, the United States should assure the Iraqi government and the KRG that it will sustain military pressure on the Islamic State. Such a move could have the added benefit of bolstering the U.S. military's status in Iraq and absorbing forces that have withdrawn from Syria. Indeed, an IS resurgence would be devastating to an Iraq already pressured by domestic protests; Baghdad must see the U.S. presence as a certainty. In Syria, meanwhile, Iraqi and Peshmerga forces could offer assistance in securing the detention centers and camps holding IS fighters and their families. All such steps could reverse a media narrative focused on U.S. abandonment of the Kurds. As in the past, that narrative could also tell of the United States changing course and righting its wrongs.

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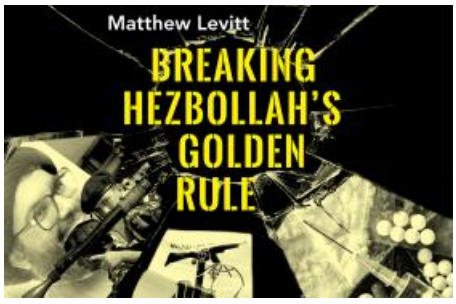

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