

In Search of a Semi-Autonomous Region in Northeastern Syria

by [Kenneth R. Rosen \(/experts/kenneth-r-rosen\)](#)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Kenneth R. Rosen \(/experts/kenneth-r-rosen\)](#)

Kenneth R. Rosen was the inaugural journalist-in-residence at The Washington Institute from 2020-2021.



Brief Analysis

Before the coronavirus pandemic, I had travelled to northeastern Syria twice in twelve months. On my most recent trip in Manbij, I found myself walking wide-eyed into a hardware store like any I would have frequented at home in the United States. Various electrical conduits and fittings for outlet boxes sat on crude shelves nearest deconstructed engine blocks. In the center of the room, a brass teapot idled on a butane burner, its flame bristling low. Outside, men were sweeping detritus out of the street. I assumed it was trash, but they said it was actually the pieces of a car bomb intended for their neighbor, a doctor.

The bomb had achieved its objective, in part. The metal roll-away gate signaled that the doctor's business had been closed. The building abutted the hardware store on one side. It was now hollow, its walls composed of exposed grey brick and spindles of blasted lumber, its innards freed by the blast.

Warshin Sheko, then 27, and Bakri Hussain, then 28, finished sweeping and invited me to a cup of tea and a conversation I'd had countless times during my travels between the northern cities of Manbij, Kobani, Qamishlo, Deir Al Zour and the border with the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) of northern Iraq. The men wished to talk about the so-called "Kurdish question," and President Donald J. Trump, a man innately tied, they believed, to their salvation.

"I would like Trump to decide to stay or else to establish a safe zone for Rojava and bring stability and security and establish an internationally-recognized autonomous region and then he would be a good man," Sheko said.

"It is not enough to just support us," Hussain added, reaching over to fill his cup. "We need stability here. It is true that they brought stability for four years, but now they are leaving again while our enemies..." He trailed off.

The truth was that Trump had little to offer. Ambivalent about the region and its people, promising to end the nation's "Forever Wars" and bring all troops home, what America had done for northern Iraq in the early 1990s—helping to establish a Kurdish enclave that would remain semi-autonomous from the central government in Baghdad—was not likely to happen again in Syria.

It is possible to conflate the development of an autonomous region of northern Iraq with one in northeastern Syria; as a colleague on this forum noted recently, the Kurds in northeastern Syria have suffered, and continue to suffer, greatly. But while they are allies who “by, with, and through” have helped to bring ISIS down to a regional crumb in an ever-growing platter of fractured groups, what the United States owes or can offer the Syrian Kurds is much different than what was secured in the early days of the 1990s in Iraq, in the midst Saddam's massacres of Kurds.

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Manbij is roughly a four-hour drive from the border crossing over the Tigris River at the northwestern corner of Iraq and the north's semi-autonomous region. While the Levant's Kurdish populations are neighbors—and historically part of a broader “Kurdistan” which encompassed parts of southern Turkey, northeastern Syria, northern Iraq and western Iran—only Iraqi Kurds have their own space to grow and prosper.

The semi-autonomous region in northern Iraq was birthed during the March 1991 Iraqi no-fly zone instituted by U.S., British, and French governments during the Gulf War. As far as I can tell, the U.S. government's broader policy goals motivating the no-fly zone at the time differed significantly from those of today, as did the level of international support for the United States' wars in the Middle East.

Moreover, the institution of the KRG was formed as the Kurds of northern Iraq experimented with self-governance, not because it was the intention of those countries, guided by UN Security Council Resolution 688, to birth a new nation. These changes indicate that what happened in the KRG is not replicable elsewhere, under any U.S. administration.

Today, there is no global mechanism that would provide a basis for the United States' outright support of another semi-autonomous Kurdish nation state. At present, such a move would require the cooperation of every player involved: Russia, Turkey, Iran, Israel, Lebanon, and the state- or non-state actors operating along or supporting the Shia Corridor. To place the onus for such a feat of diplomacy on the United States is misguided. Moreover, multinational interests have at best demonstrated mixed feelings, objectives, and hopes for Syria.

Nor should the upcoming elections be seen as a potential change to the broader arc of U.S. policy in Syria. The American role in both Iraq and Syria has shifted—what is possible in terms of intervention, even for ostensible allies, is limited by political will as much as domestic support. It is true that Democratic candidate Joe Biden is less likely to chalk up Syria as a country of mere “sand and death” the way his opponent has. But while top advisers to the former vice president have signaled Biden would keep or increase troop numbers in Syria to apply further pressure and leverage on Damascus, the rare step of creating a no-fly zone in airspace controlled by Russia will not be a priority for either a continuing or a new administration.

On a strategic level, UNSC resolution 2254 could not be implemented through a no-fly zone because the means by which the Assad regime continues supporting itself are ground corridors and external financing, not air power. This international financing part of the focus of new Caesar sanctions. What had been possible for northern Iraq has long been removed from the bargaining table in Syria by U.S. and regional officials.

Nor is any future administration likely to continue sending U.S. troops to Syria, whereas maintaining our ongoing presence and oversight from northern Iraq seems both logistically and politically stable. On January 16, shortly before I arrived in Manbij, a suicide bomber detonated an explosive device outside the Palace of Princes restaurant in northern Syria. The attack killed a U.S. soldier, a U.S. sailor, a U.S. contractor and a Department of Defense civilian, while injuring three other U.S. servicemembers and killing 15 civilians.

Five days later, another attack wounded members of a joint U.S.-Kurdish convoy an hour east of the earlier explosion. These attacks helped motivate and solidify Trump's slow withdrawal of troops over the last two years, despite a recent influx of MRAP fighting vehicles to support troops against Russian antagonism.

Given the risks, no U.S. administration is likely to reverse the decreasing troop presence in Syria, though perhaps, as my colleague wrote, an office for Kurdish affairs in the State Department might help “define more clearly the diplomatic role of Kurdish forces in Syria, and clarify U.S. commitment to its Kurdish allies.” But even that could be too little, too late.

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The reality is that the odds of forming a region in northeastern Syria that mimics what Iraqi Kurds have fought (and lost) to sustain are **slim to nonexistent**. Making gains with leadership in Ankara is a nonstarter, given that the basis of the region’s government hinges on a shadowy connection to the PKK, a state-designated terrorist organization. And seeking amicable terms with Damascus would hamper any further support from the United States.

The remaining possible alternatives offer very little. Existing in that small margin is a continued American presence that protects its allies despite the infeasibility of boots on the ground: through hardened postures against adversarial aggression, the pushback of Turkish advances, and a more concerted support of those whom the United States is working “by, with, and through.” Autonomy or prosperity does not have to be the direct goal of U.S. policy to be a byproduct of U.S. operations that serve the administration’s interests. These interests can include forcing the Syrian government into United Nation talks and rejecting the further incursion of Russian and Iranian assets.

As I reported for a magazine from Manbij on that last trip, the mere presence of U.S. troops, even during a drawdown, bolstered local prosperity and sowed hope. At the site of the suicide attack that killed the U.S. personnel, a man sold cell phone chargers and knock-off iPhone cases nearby. Abu-Omar, then 30-years-old and a former electrical engineer, told me the American pull-out, then anticipated though not yet realized, led him to weigh the benefits and disadvantages of new governance.

“Other parties might occupy the area, the Free Syrian Army might come in, the regime army might come in, and ISIS might return. These would cause instability,” he told me. “Or maybe, if the occupying party was powerful, they might benefit the country and revive it, but that will only happen if the occupying party was strong and took control of the area and established security and safety. In this case, whether the Americans leave or stay, it would be the same.” ❖

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