



Policy Analysis /

Fikra Forum

Mapping Kurdish Optimism for a Biden Administration: Turkey and Iran

by [John Saleh](#)

Feb 16, 2021

Also available in

[Arabic](#)

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

[John Saleh](#)

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 Turkey and Iran could be valuable partners as the United States navigates difficult relations with both countries.

Across the region, Kurds are looking forward to a Biden presidency. Many have high hopes, seeing Biden as potentially the Kurds' most supportive U.S. president to date. With renewed optimism about cooperation with the United States, openings are appearing for movement in 2021, though understanding the landscape of Kurdish affairs in the region will be critical to any future cooperation. [In tandem with exploring the situations and potential room for greater cooperation with autonomous Kurdish structures in Iraq and Syria discussed in the previous article,](#) it is also worth exploring the hopes and expectations of the less autonomous but key Kurdish populations in Turkey and Iran.

Turkey

Kurds in Turkey are facing a bleak situation when compared to their Syrian and Iraqi counterparts. Their political voice has been increasingly shut off from the national political arena, and any form of self-governance is far from realistic. As such, they are seeking solutions to issues of Turkish human rights violations, the restoration of democracy in the region, and peace between the Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK) and the Turkish government.

During the last four years, President Erdogan has used the silence of the Trump administration as an opportunity to escalate policies of repression and intimidation against Kurds in Turkey. In order to silence Kurdish demands for political rights, Turkish authorities have suppressed and prevented Kurdish cultural activities, targeted Kurdish

language education, imposed ethnic demographic change in Kurdish regions through military activity, and arrested Kurdish activists, often torturing them before leaving many of them to die in detention facilities.

As part of this policy of repression, Erdogan has carried out a crackdown against the pro-Kurdish People's Democratic Party (HDP) and its supporters, and about [12 members of the party have been imprisoned since 2016](#)^[KK2] on charges of terrorism and relations with the banned PKK. The imprisoned party leaders include Saladin Demirtas, the former co-chair of the party and one of the most popular Kurdish public figures in Turkey. In the last year specifically, [Turkish authorities have used Corona delinquency](#) as a way to get rid of the Kurds, by neglecting health care for Kurdish citizens, and not providing them with medical assistance.

Kani Xulam, a political activist based in Washington D.C and the director of the American Kurdish Information Network (AKIN) commented, "The Kurds of Northern Kurdistan want peace. They also want their representatives to represent them rather than serve time in various Turkish prisons. Saladin Demirtas was arrested when Donald Trump was elected president. He is still in prison when Joe Biden is about to take his place in the White House."

In this way, Erdogan and the ruling party have employed racist political tactics against Kurds in order to isolate the HDP and keep Turkey's Kurds away from alliances with other opposition parties. [And since Erdogan's Justice and Development Party \(AKP\) lost power in nearly all major cities in local elections last year, 59 of the 65 HDP mayors in eastern Turkey have been suspended from their posts.](#)^[AC5] Despite these facts, Trump has described Erdogan as a great man and a close friend, and the United States has done nothing to stand up for human rights in Turkey during the Trump administration.

As such, Turkish Kurds are open to a new relationship with the Biden administration, especially given his rhetoric on promoting human rights. Turkish pro-Kurdish People's Democratic Party (HDP) took the initiative to offer congratulations to Biden and Kamala Harris, considering their electoral success a victory for the U.S. democracy. In a statement after Biden's unofficial victory, HDP co-chairs Pervin Buldan and Mithat Sancar said, "We hope and expect that American policies under your presidency would prioritize and promote the agendas of democracy, human rights and freedoms, socio-economic justice, gender equality, an ecological approach to climate change, and an ethical and peaceful foreign policy."

Turkey presents a delicate political situation that requires smart maneuvering in the context of recent deterioration in U.S.-Turkish relations and Erdogan's aggressive policies towards U.S. and NATO interests. If Turkey turns away from the United States and turns toward Iran and Russia, it will be difficult for Biden to persuade Erdogan to reduce his aggressive posturing and re-align with NATO. It is therefore critical for the United States to use all soft and hard levers available when dealing with the Erdogan government. These levers could include smart economic sanctions, especially on Erdogan's team and his party as well as increased attention to human rights violations. Such an emphasis on human rights violations would benefit from strengthened relations and communication with Turkey's Kurds for a useful strategy that pushes Turkey's Kurds to achieve their political aspirations within a democratic, and not Islamic, Turkey.

Another strategic project in dealing with Turkish Kurds would be to arrange dialogue between the Turkish government and the PKK with the distant goal of achieving peace between the two conflicting actors. Though oscillating, there have been periods of decreased antagonism between the two, and warmed relations between the PKK and Turkey would eliminate Erdogan's ability to use the charge of terrorism against his Kurdish opponents, justification that allows his government to intervene in Syrian and Iraqi affairs. Supporting legitimate Kurdish political efforts in Turkey could also be a key element in a broader U.S. policy that challenges Erdogan's dangerous ambitions in favor of democracy, just governance, and reduced international aggression in Turkish policies.

Kani Xulam asserts, like other Kurds, that President-elect Biden knows the Kurds, and he also knows that President

Erdogan is at odds with them. That is why Kani expects that Biden will make human rights in Turkey an important criterion in his foreign policy, even if he doesn't confront President Erdogan directly; "We won't be privy to diplomatic cables between Washington and Ankara, but there will certainly be references to imprisoned Kurdish parliamentarians or sacked Kurdish mayors in them. That is progress compared to President Trump crowing about his good relationship with President Erdogan. Biden doesn't have a habit of praising authoritarian figures. In fact, he likes to challenge them, as he did Mr. Milosevic. President Erdogan is, alas, acting like Mr. Milosevic. Unless he changes, I anticipate a colder relationship between the two leaders."

Iran

In contrast to Turkey, Iranian Kurds live in a country that has had a deeply antagonistic relationship with the United States—one that Biden is seeking to navigate to restore a nuclear agreement. Iran's Kurdish minority seeks to reach a situation similar to that of Iraqi Kurdistan—an autonomous region within a federal state with recognition of the Kurds' identity and respect for their socio-political rights. At present, the Iranian regime subjects Kurds in Iran to persecution. The regime uses arbitrary arrests, executions, torture, forced demographic change in Kurdish regions, and a lack of services and development to repress its Kurdish population.

For this reason, and because of Trump's betrayal of the Kurds in Syria, the Kurds in Iran have lost confidence and hope in the Trump administration. Salah Bayaziddi, the Komala party's U.S. representative, told me that "this year marked the 41st anniversary of the Islamic Revolution in Iran, when protests in the streets brought down the Shah's government, and Iranian clerics commandeered the revolution from the people. Then, as in the past year, Kurdish people in Iran are standing up against the Islamists that came to power in 1979 and have been demonstrating against the clerics across Kurdish areas of the country including in cities like Marivan, Sanandij, Kermanshah and Javanroud. Iran's Kurds have always been at the forefront of the fight against the regime's brutality and suppression of its people. That regime would become entangled in wars, support terrorism against the United States, build nuclear and ballistic missile programs, and cause the death of millions of Iranians and non-Iranians alike."

Kurds in Iran hope that Biden will pay attention to human rights violations in Iran and review the nuclear agreement and its flaws. As such, Bayaziddi gives some suggestions: "When the Obama administration as part of the P5+1 signed the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, known commonly as the Iran nuclear deal, on July 14, 2015, we as Kurds in Iran were not opposed, but we warned the international community about its shortcomings and flaws. The JCPOA didn't include Iran's massive human rights' violations and cross-region destructive state-sponsored terrorism policy and developing ballistic missiles program. President-elect Joe Biden as a former Vice President was part of Iran's nuclear deal and surely, he was fully aware the sensitivity of this issue and the flaws of the past and how to deal with Iran in his upcoming presidency. If there is any negotiation with Iran, we as Kurds hope that he will consider discussing human rights violations and suppression of ethnic and religious minorities including Kurds with that country. We also hope the new administration will keep in mind that many experts on Iran believe this country is one of the last remaining empires of the modern world with multi-ethnic and multi-religious mosaic structure. Making a deal with Iran shouldn't be at the expense of turning a blind eye on regime's authoritarian policies and massive human rights violations." Despite the Kurds' fear of the future, the current question remains: will Biden do something for Kurds in Iran?

Iran

Similarly, Iranian Kurds have demonstrated a high willingness for cooperation with U.S. officials and high hopes for the Biden administration.

Kurds in Iran expected the Trump administration to pay attention to their affairs and to cooperate with Kurdish political parties to achieve common interests against the regime. Indeed, meetings between Iranian Kurdish political leaders and U.S. officials did take place in 2018 in Washington. Moreover, the Iranian Kurdish Komala party was also active in Washington and met with officials and diplomats in the Trump administration in December 2019 "to strengthen and develop cooperative relations with the US government," according to recently disclosed pressure files. But Trump and his advisers canceled the idea of cooperation with Iranian Kurds due to the administration's policy of containing Iran and an effort to avoid jeopardizing any potential diplomacy with Iran.

In an interview with the author, Salah Bayaziddi, Komala's U.S. representative, stated: "I know when he assumes the power of presidency, he will face lots of major domestic and international problems and among them US foreign policy in the Middle East. As we discussed, his records and his familiarity with the Kurdish question in the past, it is a sign of hope for Kurds in general, but when it comes to applying those pro-Kurdish policies it might be still be out of reach. We hope the new administration will notice that the Kurds of Iran and its political parties have remained active in the country's opposition movements against the regime and have stood for democratic change in Iran since 1979. Kurds have urged the United States and the international community to call for Iranian domestic and foreign policies based on peaceful coexistence and international and regional cooperation. As the U.S. government counters Iran's presence as a regional aggressor in places like Iraq, Syria and Yemen, it is more critical than ever to assert that Iran must end its threatening behavior around the world and against its own people, including by halting its nuclear activities." Bayaziddi said.

With Biden's victory, hopes for the Kurds in Iran are returning again. "While discussing the above history, we have seen President-elect Joe Biden as one of the most familiar of Kurdish struggle and by some standards one of the most pro-Kurdish U.S. politicians either as a Senator, Vice-President and possibly as a president in the future. He had visited Kurdistan Region of Iran as both Chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and as former U.S. Vice President; therefore, these records make him an exceptional among many other pro-Kurds politicians. Nevertheless, we have not seen him on record to discuss or talk about a long-standing Kurdish human rights' violation and suffering in Iran at least date." [AC6] Bayaziddi said.

Iran is a similarly delicate political situation with openings available for U.S.-Kurdish cooperation. The United States has a lot to gain from cooperating with Iran's Kurds on foreign policy toward the Islamic Republic. Iranian Kurds are the most important and strongest political and non-government military force inside Iran. To activate such a valuable ally as a source of leverage against the Iranian regime, the United States should emphasize focus on human rights violations against minorities in Iran, especially the Kurds. Support for Iranian Kurds would provide increased leverage as the United States seeks to curb aggressive Iranian actions in the region. It is also faintly possible that the United States could train Iranian Kurds in governance and military tactics to help them establish a semiautonomous administrative region inside Iran. Increased Kurdish autonomy inside Iran could provide pressure on the Iranian regime and may ultimately aid in a change of government, or at least in a shift away from the current government's hard stances.

In all these realms, the effectiveness and success of the President-elect Joe Biden's foreign policy towards Kurds in the Middle East is linked to the administration's diplomatic tools and figures, especially the Secretary of State and the National Security Adviser's experiences dealing with Kurdish affairs and regional issues. And there is cause for hope on that front, Biden's appointed Secretary of State, Antony Blinken, has publicly bemoaned the Trump administration's abandonment of Kurds in Syria.

Looking ahead, there are many openings for a tighter relationship between the United States and Kurds in the region, and those opportunities may help both parties advance their interests for a more just, peaceful Middle East. ❖



[View/Print Page as PDF](#)

SHARE



EMAIL ALERTS



[Sign Up](#)



TO TOP

RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Middle East Policy from Trump to Biden: Views from Inside the State Department's Near East Bureau](#)

Wednesday, March 10, 2021, starting at 1:00 p.m. EST

David Schenker,
Robert Satloff



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Lebanon's Predicament: Political Stagnation and Economic Collapse in a Hezbollah-Dominated State](#)

Mar 5, 2021

Makram Rabah,
Ali al-Amin,
Alia Mansour



BRIEF ANALYSIS

A New “Working” Agenda to Solve the Syrian Puzzle

Mar 5, 2021

Ammar Al-Musarea

STAY UP TO DATE



SIGN UP FOR EMAIL ALERTS



THE
WASHINGTON INSTITUTE
for Near East Policy

1111 19th Street NW - Suite 500
Washington D.C. 20036
Tel: 202-452-0650
Fax: 202-223-5364

Contact

Press Room

Fikra Forum is an initiative of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. The views expressed by Fikra Forum contributors are the personal views of the individual authors, and are not necessarily endorsed by the Institute, its staff, Board of Directors, or Board of Advisors.

منتدى فكرة هو مبادرة لمعهد واشنطن لسياسة الشرق الأدنى والآراء التي يطرحها مساهمي المنتدى لا يقرها المعهد بالضرورة ولا موظفيه ولا مجلس إدارته ولا مجلس مستشاريه وإنما تعبر فقط عن رأي أصحابه

The Institute is a 501(c)3 organization; all donations are tax-deductible.





An initiative of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy