

Mapping Kurdish Optimism for a Biden Administration: Iraq and Syria

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Brief Analysis

Facing Turkish, Iranian, and Islamist threats, Kurds in Iraq and Syria are hoping for more U.S. support than they saw under the Trump administration.

As the region digests Biden's victory and imagines the regional policies of the incoming Biden administration, there is one ethnic group, the Kurds, who view this victory with great optimism. Across the board, many Turkish, Syrian, Iraqi, and Iranian Kurds believe that the new administration will bring a fairer foreign policy towards them driven by Joe Biden's longstanding knowledge of Kurdish affairs, restoring Kurdish confidence in the United States.

During the past four years, Trump's policies have incurred painful tragedies on Kurds in the region, with the latter losing security, political leverage, and territory as a result. Many Kurds in the region would describe Trump as the worst U.S. president with regard to Kurdish affairs. Much of this frustration stems from the feeling that Trump used Kurds in the fight against ISIS in Iraq and Syria and then turned his back on them, leaving them alone to face Iran, belligerent Shia militias in Iraq and Turkey, and the militias of the Syrian Islamist opposition.

However, the optimism surrounding the new administration—as demonstrated by a series of interviews with major Kurdish officials, both in the United States and the Middle East—provides a window of opportunity to substantially reverse this deteriorating relationship. Many Kurdish political officials believe the interconnectedness of U.S. and Kurdish interests has the potential to perpetuate U.S. commitment to strategic decision-making that emphasizes a stronger relationship between the two.

This as Biden faces pressure from Iran, anti-U.S. components in Iraq and Turkey, and extremist Islamist groups. These actors share the goal of thwarting U.S. diplomacy, and all remain concerned about continued U.S.-Kurdish cooperation in regional security and the war against terrorism.

Foremost among these actors' fears is that the United States and NATO will advance a project for a Kurdish state in

Iraq and independence for Kurds in Syria, realities that would significantly impact the Kurdish issue in Iran and Turkey while giving the United States soft and hard diplomatic pressure tools that could change the power dynamics in the region.

Were Biden to strengthen relations with his Kurdish allies, what would the Kurds desire from the new administration? A close U.S.-Kurdish relationship in the region would involve specific steps for each of the region's Kurdish communities. Iraq, Syria, Turkey, and Iran all have different political environments surrounding their Kurdish populations, and there are unique opportunities for increased U.S. leverage in each case.

Iraq

In Iraq, the opportunity for cooperation is open; Kurdish leaders in Iraqi Kurdistan have welcomed Biden's victory. After Biden's unofficial victory in November 2020, Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP) leader Masoud Barzani tweeted, "I express my heartfelt congratulations to you, my friend, President-elect Joe Biden, for your victory. I sincerely hope and pray that the free world under your leadership will witness more peace and prosperity."

The reason for this warm reception is clear: the Kurdistan Region in Iraq (KRI) has witnessed severe political and economic losses after a 2017 independence referendum, in which 92 percent of the roughly three million Kurds who participated voted in support of an independent Kurdish state. Since then, Iraqi Kurds have felt that the Trump administration dealt with them quite poorly, allowing Iran, Turkey, the Iraqi federal government, and Shia militias to strike Kurdish positions and seize Kurdish territory, most notably in the city of Kirkuk.

Furthermore, Iraqi Kurds are seeking solutions to debates between Erbil and Baghdad over oil revenues and the Iraqi government budget, debates that have left the KRI government unable to pay the salaries of its employees. Likewise, the KRI and Iraqi federal government need resolutions to debates over the Peshmerga forces, disputed land areas, and Article 140 of the Iraqi constitution. Perhaps more importantly, Iraqi Kurds hope for an end to the continued imposition of Iranian and Turkish political aspirations on Kurds in Iraq, including ongoing Turkish skirmishes in the KRI against the PKK.

Iraqi Kurds are optimistic that Biden will support a return to a 2014 Iraqi-Kurdish deal in which the parties agreed to "joint management of the security file between Kurdish Peshmerga forces and Iraqi forces in the disputed areas, and the removal of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) from there (the disputed regions)." Moreover, Kurdish leaders see the traditional U.S. policy of forcing the Kurds to work with the Baghdad government within the Iraqi system as a failed and illogical policy that contributes to Iran's control over many aspects of Iraqi political life. Such tensions and the resulting ineffectiveness of Iraqi governance has meant the return of ISIS and terrorism.

Here, the Iraqi Kurdish political structure can help the Biden administration navigate the country's flailing federal system. The United States cannot rely on many of the strongest Shia leaders to move away from Iranian influence in the country and support U.S. interests. Renewing its support of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) and increasing partnerships and alliances between the KRI and the United States would help counterbalance the Iranian influence that has permeated the Iraqi federal system.

This process would require strengthening democracy and good governance and developing the infrastructure and economic development of the Kurdish region in order to reduce the influence of Iran, Turkey, and pro-Iranian legislators in Baghdad. In addition, a Kurdish national army of the Peshmerga would be a valuable asset in countering the security threats present in Iraq, including terrorism, the Popular Mobilization Forces and Iran. Such a force would be a partner force for NATO and the United States in Iraq to face security risks and protect shared interests during an era of Iranian influence and instability in Iraq.

Syria

Biden's victory has also resonated strongly with the Kurds of Syria. In the view of Syrian Kurds, this victory is a gift from God and the U.S. electorate to enhance democracy in Syria and the region.

The Trump administration's policies in Syria have largely worked in Turkey's favor—most notably the U.S. withdrawal from Syria after the defeat of ISIS. The resulting vacuum allowed Erdogan's forces to enter Syria where they continue to commit war crimes against Kurds. The Trump administration tried to pressure the Kurds to accept the Turkish occupation of their areas and to join the Islamic opposition militia to fight the regime, but that policy has only reduced U.S. influence in Syria, contributed to Russian-Turkish-Iranian cooperation against Syrian Kurds, and suppressed Kurdish aspirations for self-government.

Recently, threats to Syrian Kurds have increased, and those threats are likewise dangerous for U.S. interests in the region. Turkey and its allied Islamic militias have increased cooperation with Russia in the border areas in northeastern Syria. In addition, Islamic extremism within Syrian opposition forces led by the Muslim Brotherhood have led to demonstrations in Idlib rejecting U.S. democracy and declaring the Islamic caliphate in Syria. ISIS cells have also increased activity and continue their terrorist attacks in Syria.

During an interview with the author, commander of the Syrian Democratic Forces, General Mazloum Abdi, explained the SDF's perspective on Biden's win and what they hope for from the next administration. He said, "ISIS remains the biggest threat to the region and the world. The organization has training camps in the areas of influence of the Syrian regime and in the Iraqi desert. The group also maintains huge funds to recruit fighters. We must successfully end the fight against terrorism. To successfully finish what we started, the United States needs to double its forces here. We expect the Biden administration to maintain the military presence of the international coalition in our regions until the political solution that brings stability to northeastern Syria in particular, and Syria in general, is reached. We will work to raise our political and military relations with the president's administration. Our region needs an administration that helps reduce the escalation and return to diplomacy, relations and political solutions."

In Syria, a strong partnership and alliance with the United States and its allies is vital for the Kurds, who are pursuing a project which depends on U.S. diplomacy in uniting the country's Kurdish factors and increasing the international coalition's military presence in northeastern Syria. Such a strengthened partnership would be useful for the pursuit of common security and political interests in Syria. Training Kurdish fighters in military tactics, supplying them with effective arms, and assisting them in building their own capabilities for a federal region that achieves stability, growth, and peace would all be projects towards an environment in Syria that is more open and amenable to U.S. interests. A well-equipped, militarily capable Kurdish administrative region would also prevent the return of ISIS while imposing obstacles to the expansion of Iran, the Assad regime, Moscow, and Turkey in Syria.

Hassan Saleh, leader of the Free Kurdistan Union Party (PYKA) similarly noted convergence of the U.S. and Kurdish strategic interests in Syria: "The people of Syrian Kurdistan are looking forward to President Joe Biden's receipt of high hopes after Trump failed the Kurds and denied the sacrifices of the Kurdish fighters who completely defeated ISIS in the Battle of Baghouz. And it [the Trump administration] gave the green light to Turkey and its mercenaries from the opposition to occupy Sare Kani and Gree Spi, and before that, they [Turkish or Turkish-aligned forces] occupied Afrin and worked on Turkification, Arabization and demographic change. America's interest is with the interests and aspirations of our Kurdish people in terms of accepting democracy, moderation, confronting terrorism, and the interference of Iran and Turkey in the internal affairs of Syria. Interests also converge in building a new Syria. There is no solution that guarantees a secure future in Syria, except for building a federal, parliamentary, pluralistic Syria that respects the will of its people and blocks the path to the emergence of terrorism and religious

extremism. The Kurdish people look to a federal region of Syrian Kurdistan to protect it from oppression and extermination, and contribute to strengthening the sovereignty and stability of Iraqi Kurdistan, thus effectively blocking the path of Iranian interference and ambitions to reach the Syrian depth, as well as stopping Turkish ambitions. A federal Syria will contribute to achieving security and stability, achieving peace and resolving the issue of the Arab-Israeli conflict."

Unfortunately, with the continuation of Turkish threats and the war crimes of Turkish backed Islamist opposition militias, it will be difficult for a more involved U.S. policy in Syria. Consequently, Kurdish allies would need more substantive U.S. support to move to strike and weaken Islamist militias while capitalizing on the recent Turkish retreats from the region.

However, the gains of these efforts could be significant. With a reduced Turkish presence in northeastern Syria, the United States and its Kurdish allies could begin to restructure Kurdish forces and stabilize Kurdish administrative control of the region while combatting terrorist entities. ❖

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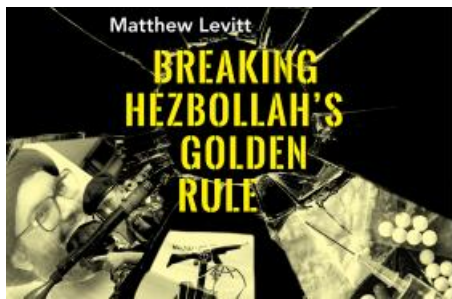
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