

Intra-Kurdish Unity Talks in Northeastern Syria Are Potentially in Jeopardy

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Brief Analysis

The talks, which resumed in April in secret sessions, have made progress toward an agreement. But many are concerned that delays and unreasonable demands have turned the talks into theater among regional parties vying for power.

Power-sharing negotiations between the two major Kurdish parties in northern Syria—an already years-long process—have nearly gone cold since President Biden took office. Due to the joint mediation of the talks by the U.S. State Department and [General Mazloum Abdi of the U.S.-backed Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces](#) (<https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/12/16/kurdish-commander-mazloum-abdi-trump-prevent-ethnic-cleansing-kurds-turkey/>), the administration change in Washington has had serious repercussions on the process. In addition, bitter infighting between the two Kurdish parties has worsened their already fraught relationship. Together, these factors have weakened and delayed the talks, which are necessary for political progress in the region.

The talks, which resumed in November 2019 and continued sporadically through April, are meant to form a single Syrian Kurdish political party that marries the two major existing parties: the Democratic Unity Party (PYD) and the Kurdish National Council (KNC). The State Department hopes a solid, unified Kurdish body might be able to make headway towards realizing the United Nations resolution that seeks a political end to Syria's decade-long civil war. While it is unclear how the parties will unite (as a coalition, or some other governance structure), an engagement is proving elusive and does little to appease Turkey or Assad. But leaders of the PYD and KNC have not met in person since December, having only held negotiations with the mediators, and discussions and interviews with party leaders and residents across the country's northern regions underscore how elusive such a unification could be if not

pressured towards a serious return to the negotiations table.

Among the sticking points of the so-called “unity talks” are the return of a KNC-aligned Kurdish unit in northern Iraq that has been banned from returning to northern Syria, the adoption of an accredited education system, and the termination of the PYD’s remaining ties to the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK). The negotiations are also hung up on re-envisioning the current progressive co-chair system of governance in which one female and one male representative make up an area’s delegates. Were the two parties to unify, it’s unclear how power-sharing between parties would be incorporated into this model.

A senior U.S. official noted in an interview in February that the talks had hit a stumbling block at the start of the year and were potentially at risk of halting altogether. But others on Capitol Hill familiar with the negotiations believe much of what divided the two parties has now been settled and that what remains are agreements that can be concluded later, [once a formal arrangement For power sharing has been agreed upon.](https://www.hoover.org/research/beyond-persecution-why-biden-administration-should-support-agreement-between-knc-and-pyd)

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Several on the Syrian side have spoken publicly about the importance of the negotiations’ success. The U.S. Representative for the Syrian Democratic Council Sinam Mohamad characterized the talks as both necessary and fraught with issues: “It is a need for all the people and it should happen because if we want to solve the Syrian issue, it will start to bring all the Syrian parties together at the table and it will start with the Kurdish people...[and] is what we need if we are very keen to end the suffering of the Syrian people.” Nonetheless, Mohamad noted, the process “is now not working.”

From his vantage point as mediator, [Mazloun likewise emphasized](https://twitter.com/MazlounAbdi/status/1355923787515129859) **(<https://twitter.com/MazlounAbdi/status/1355923787515129859>)** on January 31 that, “Our goal is the success of the dialogue. The agreements we reached are important and protect our people’s interests. It is everyone’s duty to prepare for the new state of unity.”

Yet mutual distrust is a potentially derailing factor. In recent weeks, the KNC has blamed the PYD for setting the KNC’s official headquarters ablaze and doing little to rid itself of rampant regional self-administration and distant relations with the PKK. “We spoke about the violations that had been done by the other side against us in that period where they set our offices afire, arrested our people, accused the Council of betrayal in the media, prosecuted Peshmerga families, and put a lot of pressure on us,” [Mohammed Ismail, a senior leader of the KNC](https://www.kurdistan24.net/en/story/18640-Syrian-Kurdish-opposition-leader-Safe-zone-should-be-international-)

(<https://www.kurdistan24.net/en/story/18640-Syrian-Kurdish-opposition-leader-Safe-zone-should-be-international->), told me in his office in Qamishli. “So they returned us to ground zero, to square one. We told them that talks could not be held in those conditions and that they had to play a role in that regard.”

Ismail believes that the governance structure shared with the PYD needs further reshaping, despite saying they remain close to an overall agreement. “We wished it would be done by next week,” Ismail told me. “We didn’t want it to take so long at all. We wished we could have done it in 10 to 15 days. But [it has taken] too long a time. The monitoring side is also not active. The Americans apparently do not want to hurry.” Following our interview, Deputy Special Envoy to Syria Ambassador David Brownstein urged the groups to advance their talks toward an immediate unification with the aim of bringing that delegation to the UN-sponsored Syria peace talks.

In contrast, there are plenty who place blame on the KNC, which is supported by the Kurdistan Regional Government’s dominant political party in northern Iraq, for dragging the talks into a standoff. They cite the KNC’s unreasonable demands, such as the request that [Rojava Peshmerga, an exiled fighting force named after the Kurdish-majority part of Syria](http://www.rudaw.net/english/middleeast/syria/161220184) (<http://www.rudaw.net/english/middleeast/syria/161220184>), be returned to share in the security efforts despite the SDF’s rejection of the force’s request to return. A visit in early March to the

Kurdish Region of Iraq by the Syrian National Council, a part of the Syrian opposition headquartered in Turkey and seen by many Syrian Kurds as beholden to Turkey, also signaled for many the unwillingness of the KNC and its Iraqi partner to take the negotiations seriously. Some called the visit a “stab” in the back.

In addition, the KNC demands that it control 50 percent of the current Autonomous Administration. As one resident of Qamishli put it to me, asking for 50 percent of positions without a vote by the people undermines what democratic values the current governing body has sought to instill, and would moreover marginalize the voices of both Kurds and the region’s Arabs, Syriacs and the other ethnic groups in the region.

Though tensions are high and several issues notably fraught, the negotiations ideally could mean an end to the political stalemate in the north and a unification of disparate parties seeking a solution through which they can band together against other state and non-state actors within the country. But for this outcome to be realized, the United States and its SDF mediator counterpart must signal their own desire to no longer play host to petty charades and the easily-workable hang-ups presented as reasons for delaying progress in the negotiations. ❖

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