

# The Dangers of the United States Ignoring Intra-Kurdish Dialogue in Syria

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Dr. Azad Ahmed Ali is a researcher from Syria who has authored dozens of books and studies in both Arabic and Kurdish. He received his PhD in the History of Engineering Science from Aleppo University. He is a contributor to Fikra Forum.



Brief Analysis

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**The United States' approach to intra-Kurdish dialogue requires a profound understanding of regional history and dynamics, without which it risks further complications and difficulties in Syria.**

*This article is in response to Kenneth R. Rosen's April 20, 2021 article ["Intra-Kurdish Unity Talks in Northeastern Syria Are Potentially in Jeopardy"](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/intra-kurdish-unity-talks-northeastern-syria-are-potentially-jeopardy) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/intra-kurdish-unity-talks-northeastern-syria-are-potentially-jeopardy>)*

Perhaps the most pressing concern at the front of everyone's minds across the Middle East, whether in the media or political sphere, is that most crucial of questions, namely: What does the United States want?—and where is its Middle Eastern policy really headed? Of particular concern is how the United States has dealt with previous dilemmas and crises in the region, which indicate that the United States—in its policy dealings with political Islam, terrorism and other issues in the Middle East—has generally drawn on media and policy expertise that lacked depth of knowledge and was not grounded in scholarly studies.

This superficial approach to hot-button issues has become an ongoing problem in U.S. media outlets, and it consequently affects other relevant U.S. institutions and decision makers. The problem stems from shallow knowledge of non-U.S. actors in the region, whether Arab, Kurdish, or Afghan.

There is no denying that the United States has many serious and credible thinktanks and media outlets, staffed by thousands of top-notch researchers, experts, and journalists with excellent credentials and quantitative and qualitative training. However, the current breadth and depth of U.S. expertise on global affairs is still insufficient for

the simple reason that the area under these researchers' assessments is the entire globe—U.S. foreign policy requires it to study or deal with all the countries of the world, using one approach or another.

To develop comprehensive and precise knowledge of nearly every country, its history, contemporary situation, policies, and political parties adequately would require an information army larger than even the U.S. military. Thus, the United States' problem in this regard is first and foremost a problem of knowledge—rather than politics or diplomacy—and that the essence of these difficulties lies in the enormous scope of the work still to be done. Any country or institution can study the United States, but it is challenging for U.S. institutions to study and understand all the complexities of the modern world.

The limits to **Kenneth R. Rosen's analysis (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/intra-kurdish-unity-talks-northeastern-syria-are-potentially-jeopardy>)** are part of the broader issues discussed above, namely, a superficial approach that removes key points and simplifies the complex history of the Syrian Kurdish political sphere. Mr. Rosen has undertaken an analysis that appears removed from the dialogue process and exaggerates its risks. I therefore take it upon myself to correct the picture that Mr. Rosen has painted through an analysis that provides context for the political process that is happening in northern and eastern Syria.

First, it is important to be precise when it comes to the issues still facing the intra-Kurdish talks between the Democratic Union Party (PYD) and the Kurdish National Council (KNC). While Mr. Rosen characterizes the Kurdish Syrian Rojava Peshmerga forces—concentrated in the Kurdistan region of Iraq—as an “exiled fighting force,” this is a mischaracterization. Rather, this force was built from soldiers and officers who defected from the Syrian army, and from youth volunteers from the Syrian camps in the Kurdistan region of Iraq. Likewise, while Mr. Rosen categorizes their return or cooperation with the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) as a political sticking point, it is instead an issue that depends on certain military and security conditions that are beyond the scope of the Kurdish unity talks. Moreover, this force does not operate directly under the KNC, which lacks the necessary financial and logistical capacities to take on such a leadership role. This type of imprecision reflects the layered and complex nature of the Kurdish situation in Syria, which requires extensive study and experience to fully understand.

The Kurdish political movement is about as old as the Syrian state itself; contemporary Kurdish parties are an extension of the Xoybun movement, which itself grew out of the early Kurdish political movement in the cities of Amuda, Qamishli, Kobani and Al-Hasakah, Afrin, and Ayn Diwar. The Xoybun organization was itself formed with the help of Christian groups in Bhamdoun, Lebanon, in 1927; the movement later influenced the map of contemporary Syrian Kurdish parties and organizations.

We therefore cannot separate the current dialogues from other historical dialogue processes that led to the formation of the various political parties involved, as well as broader unions and coalitions. The Kurdish political experience in Syria has a rich past that can yield positive results for all parts of the political process in Syria if these challenges are examined carefully and in their full complexity.

This analysis requires characterizing the political scene and the numerous Syrian political parties in a precise manner while taking into account all actors across the civil and political spectrum, rather than reducing the situation to two sides only, as Mr. Rosen does. The group that currently holds power is the Kurdish National Alliance parties, which are known by the Kurdish abbreviation PYNK. This group is in dialogue with the Kurdish National Council, known in Kurdish as ENKS, which is an older coalition that is part of the Syrian opposition. The third group on the Kurdish political scene in Syria—which Mr. Rosen overlooks—is also composed of a wide spectrum of parties and civil society organizations, most importantly the Kurdish Democratic Unity Party in Syria (PYDKS) and the Kurdish Progressive Democratic Party in Syria (PDPKS), which are allies. The ENKS objected to any dialogue with the PYDKS, preventing their involvement, while the PDPKS did not wish to enter into the dialogues. Yet his third group of parties, if actively included and encouraged to participate in the dialogue, would help give the dialogue process

greater legitimacy and momentum.

Even if Mr. Rosen were correct in his assessment of the future risks of these gradual dialogues, the real danger lies in two areas of the current U.S. approach to the issue. The first is the superficial readings of the Kurdish political scene in Syria, and by extension the poor assessment of its future actions. The second danger stems from the real lack of a clear U.S. vision to resolve the Syrian issue and to democratize political life. If the Biden administration lays out a roadmap to address the Syrian situation and creates a climate conducive to expanding Kurdish dialogue and regionalizing the existing autonomous administration in light of new realities, then the dialogue could be expanded to include other elements in northern and eastern Syria, especially Arabs and Syriac Christians, in order to expand the political process and complete one of the common national foundations. Only by expanding to a more inclusive process can the dialogue move towards practicing democracy.

This change in policy would also help ensure that the current political process in the eastern Euphrates succeeds in resolving the Syrian crisis and providing a platform for implementing a path towards a democratic solution for all of Syria. Without these steps, regional and international interference will continue to enervate the Kurdish and Arab political process, while the risk of a descent into chaos and the return of all forms of extremism remains present. ❖

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