

Stalemate in Northeast Syria: Options for Advancing U.S. Interests

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Brief Analysis

In addition to clarifying its intentions and fortifying its presence in the area, the U.S. government needs to increase its focus on stability, security, and economic development.

When the United States first became involved in the Syria conflict, its purpose was clear: defeating the Islamic State (IS). Today, that mission is less easily definable—the goalpost has shifted to seeking the group’s “enduring defeat,” while a complex array of state and nonstate actors have become involved across the country. What remains clear is that the strategic importance of an American presence in the northeast far outweighs the risk and cost of the roughly 900 U.S. troops currently operating there. As the Biden administration undertakes a broader Syria policy review and the Assad regime steams toward [another illegitimate election \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/rehabilitating-assad-arab-league-embraces-pariah\)](#), the possible paths for concluding the war and maintaining U.S. involvement are becoming fewer and more untenable, so clarifying American intentions in the northeast is crucial.

A Kinetic Past

The fight against IS was initially disconnected from the larger issues impacting Syria. Diplomacy was therefore detached from the local military engagement that U.S. Joint Special Operations Command conducted with partners such as the Syrian Democratic Forces. Since 2015, the SDF has grown from a band of disparate Kurdish and Arab forces into a strong military asset and partner in the northeast, with ample assistance from the Global Coalition. But the evolution of U.S. diplomacy has been less straightforward.

During the Obama administration, diplomats operated on two tracks in Syria: one that sought to contain and isolate the Assad regime, and another dedicated to high-level engagement on the narrow issue of American hostages. The

dissonance between these two objectives sowed ambiguity about the coalition's anti-IS efforts in the northeast well into the Trump administration. In one instance, closed-door discussions were held on reducing sanctions against the regime or even withdrawing all U.S. forces in exchange for prisoner releases, according to news reports that appeared last autumn.

Meanwhile, the Islamic State's capabilities diminished greatly. By 2016, the commander of the SDF was proposing that the coalition shift its focus to removing all Syrian regime forces from the northeast. The U.S. military advised against that step, signaling a disconnect that would carry over to the State Department's role in future regional negotiations, according to local officials interviewed this March.

As IS lost its military grip, the governance structure in the northeast grew. The State Department, the U.S. Agency for International Development, and other partners stepped in to fund humanitarian and stabilization projects in liberated areas; later, the department shifted to working on political issues through the Syria Transition Assistance Response Team (START Forward). The U.S. military's mission also changed around this time, from active operations to security and stability.

A Stable Future

By 2019, U.S. officials were involved in brokering intra-Kurdish talks, with the aim of forming a single institutional and security entity that married the two main factions: the Democratic Unity Party (PYD) and the Kurdish National Council (KNC). The talks continued sporadically through last month, but no formal settlement has been reached, in large part because the two parties have yet to grasp the geopolitical importance of unifying. Instead of working toward deconfliction with Turkey and building confidence in Washington, Europe, and the local communities under their jurisdiction, they remain focused on internal disputes (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/intra-kurdish-unity-talks-northeastern-syria-are-potentially-jeopardy>) and bureaucratic arguments.

This divergence in priorities has undermined the dialogue in practical ways. For instance, the Kurdish diplomatic presence on the ground remains limited due to disputes over opening offices and similar matters. As a result, most of the local interlocutors are military officials who rarely glean how important the talks are to the international community. The situation has created complications at the UN as well—the KNC is formally recognized as part of the Syrian opposition under the UN framework that seeks to end the civil war, but the PYD has yet to receive a seat at the Geneva process. If the discussions continue to focus on internal squabbles and Kurdish identity, they are apt to collapse entirely.

For its part, the anti-IS coalition has failed to use its de facto security apparatus in the northeast as leverage for compelling local actors to improve governance and define a political solution. Despite its avowed mission of furthering stability, the coalition has been unable to empower governing bodies in a manner that builds confidence among the area's residents. Stable, transparent local governance is the only way to ensure consistent U.S. support and foster a positive outcome in the years ahead. In contrast, if the parties stay mired in their current spats and fail to secure more resources for the northeast, they will enable further Russian obstructionism (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/russia-pushes-dangerous-narrative-ahead-syrias-sham-election>) in both the unification process and the broader stabilization of the Middle Euphrates River Valley.

Policy Recommendations

Northeast Syria is a crucial bulwark against IS, Iran, and potential Turkish aggression, providing a point of stability in a region often awash in chaos. It is also home to thousands of men and women who fought and died in support of coalition operations against IS. Yet the United States has frequently jeopardized its influence in the area, most prominently when making withdrawal announcements. If the Biden administration fails to signal its

confidence in local authorities and its clear intent to continue U.S. support, all of the gains that have been made there—from recapturing IS territory to bridging Kurdish gaps and holding back Russia, the Assad regime, and Turkey—will be lost.

Specifically, Washington should prioritize the following steps in the near term:

- Increase the share of State Department personnel working on northeast Syria issues in Washington and on the ground, both to embolden local partners and to make communication between political interests more fluid. The best way to accomplish this is by granting a larger role to the START Forward team.
- Limit sanctions on businesses seeking to operate in the northeast and take other steps to increase international and local support for stabilization. Similarly, given the **continued lack of UN coordination** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/expanding-humanitarian-assistance-syrians-two-deadlines-approaching>) for humanitarian assistance to the northeast, funding should be increased for the international NGOs that **supply aid across the area** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/economic-future-northeast-syria>).
- Urge UN agencies to ignore the regime pressure that has kept them from improving their cooperation and coordination with the SDF, the entity that provides security and aid to some 1.8 million people in the northeast. Likewise, the UN Special Envoy for Syria should seek a more fluid and frequent channel of communication with the SDF's political arm, the Syrian Democratic Council.
- Press Turkey into deconfliction conversations in support of the Kurdish unity talks.
- Press the SDF and other Kurdish authorities to regularly report on Arab tribal outreach, which is vital to ensuring U.S. staying power against **Iranian** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/irans-long-game-syria>), Russian, and **IS influence** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/islamic-state-threat-syria-two-years-after-caliphate>) in the area.

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