

Affirming U.S. Commitments Abroad: The View from Syria's Democratic Council

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Brief Analysis

The head of the council joins two Washington Institute experts for a far-ranging conversation on the U.S. role in the northeast, Kurdish threat perceptions, the effect of the Afghanistan withdrawal, and more.

On September 27, The Washington Institute held a virtual Policy Forum with Elham Ahmad, Andrew Tabler, and David Pollock. Ahmad is president of the Executive Committee of the Syrian Democratic Council, the governing body of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria. Tabler is the Martin J. Gross Fellow in the Institute's Geduld Program on Arab Politics. Pollock is the Institute's Bernstein Fellow and director of Project Fikra. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

Elham Ahmad

The Syrian Democratic Council (SDC) seeks a lasting political solution to the conflict, advocating internal dialogue and, ultimately, political and cultural decentralization that respects the country's diversity and bolsters economic development. Continued support from our partner the United States is crucial to this mission. The Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) faces numerous obstacles, including insecurity, poverty, foreign intervention, and terrorism. In addition, the Geneva peace process and constitutional process have stalled. The United States could help alleviate these issues in the pursuit of a more stable Syria free of despotism, proxy conflicts, and terror.

Of particular concern domestically are challenges such as currency devaluation, blockades, closed border crossings, poor natural-resource infrastructure, and strained relations with the Assad regime. The regime has rejected attempts at resolution and remains unwilling to accept decentralization. It has even arrested Syrian Kurds based solely on their identity. Nevertheless, the AANES is open to reaching a solution with the regime.

Another challenge is political infighting among Kurdish factions, including with the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. Ultimately, these factions make up a unified yet diverse Kurdish cause, and their internal issues should be resolved through dialogue. Yet Kurdish disagreements should not be permitted to delay the upcoming AANES elections, since that would deprive Arabs, Assyrians, and others who live in northeast Syria of their chance to vote.

A resurgent Islamic State poses another threat to the northeast, and to the rest of the world. Local poverty will undoubtedly aid the group's recruitment efforts. Likewise, fundamentalist ideologies thrive in the prisons holding Islamic State fighters and the camps holding their families. The AANES lacks the infrastructure to secure these locations properly, and the international community has been unwilling to repatriate these individuals even as camp populations increase through childbirth. Relevant states—particularly Iraq—should intensify their efforts to repatriate and reintegrate their citizens in order to ease the burden on the AANES.

Another key issue is Turkish hostility in Syria. Turkey currently occupies several parts of the country, displacing residents of Afrin and Tal Abyad and acting against Kurds under the guise of “counterterrorism.” Its drone usage in Syria violates the ceasefire agreement with Russia and the United States and has resulted in casualties to the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF).

Still, the AANES does not harbor animosity toward Turkey. In the interest of peace with neighboring countries, the SDC is willing to engage in dialogue with Ankara, perhaps under U.S. supervision. Such talks must address the Turkish occupation of Syrian territory, and displaced people must be allowed to return to their homes in currently occupied areas. Ankara should also engage in dialogue with Turkish Kurds, who are subject to racist policies and the jailing of their elected officials.

Relatedly, the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), which Ankara regards as a terrorist group, does not have representation in the AANES. Although the SDC is grateful to the PKK for its counterterrorism efforts in Sinjar, Kirkuk, Erbil, and elsewhere, the AANES does not include PKK members.

Russian, Iranian, and Israeli involvement in the Syrian conflict should be addressed as well. The SDC has petitioned Russia to serve as a guarantor of potential future talks with the Assad regime, and Moscow has expressed interest. More actors should commit themselves to ending the war, recognizing that foreign intervention may subside if an agreement can be reached with the regime. In the end, Syrian dialogue should be an internal affair, and the country should not be used as an arena for proxy conflict among regional and global powers.

Finally, the SDC welcomes continued U.S. support for the AANES. Despite popular comparisons with the situation in Afghanistan, the Biden administration has signaled that it will not withdraw from northeast Syria in the near future. Beyond military support and a possible mediation role, Washington also stands to contribute in the areas of infrastructure and civilian counterterrorism initiatives. In addition, it should exempt northeast Syria from sanctions in order to help strengthen the regional economy. Overall, the SDC holds its partnership with America in high regard and awaits further U.S. support.

Andrew Tabler

The SDC has been a central U.S. ally in the fight against terrorism. It should also be commended for its relative success in governing an area populated by diverse groups of people. The council has far outlasted the grim international predictions of collapse that greeted the partial withdrawal of U.S. troops in 2019.

Going forward, stable revenue sources would enhance the Autonomous Administration's bargaining power within Syria. Some recent events—including the closure of border crossings and the revocation of Delta Crescent Energy's local oil license—spell trouble on this point. Yet the United States is not planning to leave northeast Syria in the near future, especially after the ill-planned Afghanistan withdrawal reaffirmed that such moves benefit neither the United States nor its allies. More broadly, the war must end in a way that fosters **sustainable solutions** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/triangular-diplomacy-unpacking-russias-syria-strategy>) and delivers a **decisive defeat to extremists** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/caliphate-gathered-addressing-challenge-jihadist-foreign-fighter-hubs>).

David Pollock

Turkey plays a particularly important role in the Syrian story. Its military activities in the north have critical implications for the SDC, Syrian Kurds, the AANES, and Syria writ large. Despite a pre-2015 record of cooperation with Syrian Kurds, Turkey's more recent invasion and occupation will complicate any efforts to restore cooperation. Would the SDC be willing to reconcile with Ankara? Could the United States oversee such rapprochement? Could Russia?

So far, Washington has achieved only moderate success in balancing the competing interests of its NATO ally Turkey and its Syrian Kurdish partners. Yet the need to find such a balance will surely remain important going forward. ❖

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