

How the United States Can Still Keep Faith With Its Best Allies in Syria

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Brief Analysis

Despite the heavy risks created by recent policy reversals, a well-managed transition can help preserve the major gains against the Islamic State while protecting America's local partners.

As the United States prepares to withdraw its 2,000 troops from Syria, it has one last essential mission to accomplish. Those U.S. forces have fought successfully, hand in hand, with 60,000 Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) against Islamic State terrorists for the past four years. And President Trump's latest statement about this, on January 2, noted his desire to protect these Kurds. So, despite all obstacles, the United States should still try to protect that brave and loyal militia in the short term, and secure a safer medium-term future for the Syrian Kurds and their local partners.

No illusions: the way to complete this mission is not easy. But it is clear—and crucial for what remains of American credibility in the entire region. From now on, the previous U.S. role in Syria overall may well be largely “outsourced” to others, like Turkey and Israel—whether in containing Iranian expansionism, dealing with Russian influence, mopping up the remnants of the Islamic State, or countering the Assad regime's worst impulses. But utterly abandoning the SDF need not be part of this transition.

Five Steps for Supporting the SDF and Promoting Stability

First, the United States should continue to coordinate as closely as possible with the SDF, which consists roughly equally of Kurdish and Arab fighters, over the coming four months or so, even as U.S. forces move out. This will help keep jihadist stragglers at bay, while keeping other hostile forces—like the genocidal Assad regime, and its accomplices from Iran and Hezbollah—from attacking the people of eastern Syria. President Trump's latest tweets about a slow and orderly withdrawal from Syria, and his declaration in neighboring Iraq that some U.S. forces would

remain there, using the country as a continued base for air operations over Syria as required, all seem to point in that direction.

Also vital to grasp is the fact that the SDF remains by far the best bet to prevent an Islamic State (IS) resurgence in eastern Syria. Currently, combat-ready SDF fighters probably outnumber all the Assad regime's deployable regular troops put together, after eight years of grinding battle. Furthermore, given their exceedingly slow and spotty record of fighting against IS, neither the Damascus regime, nor its Russian, Iranian, and Hezbollah allies, nor Turkey can be counted on to sustain the fight against an IS revival. On the contrary: their encroachment on additional territory in eastern Syria is more likely to provoke that very revival among some of the local Sunni Arab inhabitants.

To be sure, the SDF is now understandably disappointed at the prospect of an American ground withdrawal from Syria. Without at least assured U.S. air cover, plus continued weapons deliveries and intelligence and logistical support, the SDF will be no match against looming threats either from the Turkish military or from the Assad regime's forces with their Russian, Iranian, and Hezbollah accomplices. Yet for now, the SDF remains eager to cooperate with the United States and other allies on the ground (including the small remaining British and French military contingents) nonetheless.

At the same time, SDF local authorities are tempted, under duress, to seek some last-resort entente with the Assad regime. In fact, that regime has maintained a token, tolerated presence in northeastern Syria's two largest cities, Qamishli and Hasaka, both controlled by the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD), throughout the past eight years of civil war. Air travel, educational, and certain other links have also continued—as have occasional negotiations, punctured by serious firefights and other skirmishes.

Yet Assad has so far shown no serious intent to compromise politically with the Kurds. Nor do Assad's forces and their foreign allies show much desire to fight the SDF directly, or to confront opposing Turkish forces. The new standoff among all these contingents around the strategic-crossroads city of Manbij amply proves this point. Thus, if the United States manages this transition reasonably well, it can better preserve its victory against the Islamic State, and protect its best friends from that campaign.

Second, the United States should keep working hard to broker new understandings between the Turkish government and the SDF about the medium-term future of northern and eastern Syria. Turkey claims a potential security threat from the main, Kurdish-led People's Defense Units (YPG) militia and its parent political party, the PYD—an offshoot of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), which both the United States and Turkey officially designate as a terrorist organization. As Secretary of State Mike Pompeo pointed out, this is a conflict with a long and tortured history. But it is also one punctuated by numerous effective ceasefires, private negotiations, and mutually beneficial understandings.

Remarkably, as recently as mid-2015, then PYD leader Salih Muslim was an honored official guest for political talks in Turkey. At the time, Turkey even coordinated military action around the northern Syrian city of Kobane, and border security overall, with both the YPG and Kurdish Peshmerga forces from the Kurdistan Autonomous Region just across the border in Iraq. Today, there is good reason to believe that Turkey would once again prefer to reach such understandings with the Syrian Kurds, perhaps over a de facto territorial division of control, rather than wage all-out war against a substantial guerrilla adversary.

Moreover, the new four-month schedule for U.S. ground troop withdrawal puts that deadline well after Turkey's next election, at the end of March. This offers some assurance of a delay in any new Turkish invasions, so long as U.S. forces remain interposed with the SDF—and some potential for a more moderate Turkish posture toward the Kurds, once the election is over and President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has more domestic political margin for maneuver.

In this connection, a YPG spokesman revealed on January 2 that Russia plans to mediate understandings not only

between Syria's Kurds and the Assad regime but also between those Kurds and Turkey. So all sides, including both Russia and the United States, have a strong and urgent interest in finding some peaceful accommodation here, even if a partial or conditional one. It may well be that different arrangements will be needed for different parts of this large region: the northern strip just along the Syrian-Turkish border; the southern areas around the cities of Raqqa and Deir al-Zour, closer to the Jordanian and Iraqi borders; and the major, mostly Kurdish cities in between.

Third, the United States should try to maintain, if only from a distance, the economic lifelines on which the SDF-allied areas of Syria depend to limit their ties with the Damascus regime. These include increasing exchanges with the Kurdistan Autonomous Region across the border in Iraq, aid and investment from a few friendly Arab governments, and possibly even some trade with Turkey. To the extent that all those outside parties would like to exert some influence in Syria beyond the Assad regime's writ, it will be in their own interest to cultivate business ties with the local authorities there. Realistically, the SDF-controlled region will almost certainly need to maintain some economic links with the rest of Syria as well, on which it relies for some electricity, some banking and government salary payments, and some agricultural and oil commerce. Yet it need not become entirely subservient to the government it detests in Damascus, to the point that these millions of Syrians, of all ethnicities and religions, lose all possibility of at least local self-government.

Fourth, the United States and all its other allies, including Turkey, should actively encourage the SDF and its existing local administrations to expand their partnerships with their other Syrian neighbors. These include not just Arabs tribes, Syriac Christians, Turkmens, and other minorities, but also Kurds unaffiliated with—or even opposed to—the ruling YPG militia and PYD party. It is true that the latter have previously sometimes acted as imperious overlords, rather than truly democratic leaders, in the territories they now control. More recently, however, numerous credible, independent reports from the field demonstrate much-improved relations among these diverse groups, even in the majority-Arab or mixed towns and villages throughout Syria east of the Euphrates River.

Fifth, and finally, the United States should firmly inform Russia, Turkey, the United Nations, and all other interested outside parties of its determination to pursue the above policy guidelines—the U.S. military withdrawal from Syria notwithstanding. American credibility has admittedly suffered from this latest reversal, but that is all the more reason to restore it as best one can. The alternatives are almost too bleak to contemplate: the revival of Islamic State terrorism, bloody warfare on Syrian soil between two U.S. allies, or ultimate victory for Syrian president Bashar al-Assad, Iran, and Hezbollah there—or, even more likely, some terrible, drawn-out combination of all three of those dire scenarios.

Conclusion

In short, the United States has indeed largely defeated, if not destroyed, the Islamic State terrorists in Syria. In that narrow sense, U.S. forces can claim victory and go home. But it would be a shameful “win” if Washington now totally turns its back on the allies who most helped in winning that battle. The preceding policy guidelines offer a realistic path to ensure that the United States avoids snatching such a defeat from the jaws of its victory over the Islamic State.

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