

Kurdish Approaches to Trump's MENA Policies: Hoping for Continued U.S. Engagement

by [Baraa Sabri \(/experts/baraa-sabri\)](/experts/baraa-sabri)

Mar 20, 2025

Also available in

[العربية \(/ar/policy-analysis/almqarbat-alkrdyt-lsyasat-tramb-fy-alshrq-alawst-wshmal-afryqyaalaml-fy-astmrar\)](/ar/policy-analysis/almqarbat-alkrdyt-lsyasat-tramb-fy-alshrq-alawst-wshmal-afryqyaalaml-fy-astmrar)

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Baraa Sabri \(/experts/baraa-sabri\)](/experts/baraa-sabri)

Baraa Sabri is an analyst and researcher from Syria. Currently, he studies international Law at the Department of Graduate Studies in Germany. His research focuses on international relations, governance, public affairs, conflicts, and human rights in the Middle East and North Africa.



Brief Analysis

Based on their experiences with Trump's first administration, many Kurdish politicians in both Syria and Iraq believe they are on the brink of historic decisions that will shape their political future.

Syrrian and Iraqi Kurdish politicians possess a shared conviction that U.S. policies under Trump may shift dramatically at any moment—driven by Trump's reactions to immediate developments in these countries and the composition of his government team, which will influence his views. There is the expectation that Washington's policies under Trump will be marked by decisiveness and stark clarity, contrasting with the polished diplomacy and behind-the-scenes approach of previous U.S. leaders.

Meanwhile, developments in Syria and Turkey in particular have rapidly reshaped the field on which Kurdish politicians are operating. With the Trump administration now beginning to shape a broader Middle East policy, Kurdish factions across borders have begun revisiting regional calculations based on Washington's attitudes towards developments in Syria, Iraq, and Iran, along with the administration's broader approaches to the Middle East—both in terms of Trump's stated interest reducing U.S. troop presence in the Middle East, signaling specifically a withdrawal from [Syria \(https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/national-security/dod-drafting-plans-withdraw-us-troops-syria-recent-trump-comments-rcna190726\)](https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/national-security/dod-drafting-plans-withdraw-us-troops-syria-recent-trump-comments-rcna190726), and the return of maximum pressure against Iran. Notably, the broader Trump administration approach is providing hope to most Kurdish parties in Iraq. Yet in the Syrian context, concerns centering around U.S. troop withdrawal in the backdrop of ongoing negotiations about the future of Syria have complicated attitudes towards the administration.

Syrian Kurdish leaders feel caught in a difficult cycle with Trump's return to office. While publicly welcoming Trump's victory, leaders of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), the Autonomous Administration, and the Syrian

Democratic Council (SDC) remain wary of the strong personal relationship between Trump and Turkish President Erdoğan, with its potential impact on a shifting Syrian political landscape. Immediately after the election results were announced, Erdoğan and his foreign minister Hakan Fidan began advocating for new military operations against Autonomous Administration territories, statements that were quickly eclipsed by the unexpected toppling of the Assad regime and much altered realities of Syrian politics but remain an underlying concern for the SDF.

Under Biden, the Kurds in Syria experienced relative stability, as his administration prevented new Turkish ground invasions, even as it remained effectively silent in the face of Turkish airstrikes targeting civilian infrastructure and SDF positions. While Kurdish parties such as the Kurdish National Council, the SDC, and the SDF welcomed Trump's return, they also acknowledged the unpredictability of his future policies on Syria and the U.S.-SDF partnership, as SDC leader Ilham Ahmed **remarked (<https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2024/11/syrian-kurd-fm-ilham-ahmed-says-pkk-leader-ocalans-words-vital-importance>)** in an interview with *Al-Monitor*.

Now, SDC messaging has focused on the open question of a continued U.S. presence in Syria, given the Trump administration's overt consideration of a **troop withdrawal (<https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/national-security/dod-drafting-plans-withdraw-us-troops-syria-recent-trump-comments-rcna190726>)**. SDC

Washington representative Sinam Mohammed has **emphasized (<https://www.rudaw.net/english/middleeast/syria/04022025>)** in her messaging that Trump has yet to make a decision regarding U.S. troop withdrawal in Syria, and that they have sent the U.S. government “many letters” emphasizing the importance of a continued U.S. presence there. **Mazloun Abdi (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/jan/09/kurdish-general-urges-donald-trump-to-leave-us-troops-in-north-east-syria>)** has likewise focused on this aspect of U.S. policy: “The key factor of stabilization in this area is the U.S. presence on the ground.”

However, since taking office, the Trump administration has remained largely silent on the fate of its forces in Syria. Nonetheless, **media (<https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/national-security/dod-drafting-plans-withdraw-us-troops-syria-recent-trump-comments-rcna190726>)** leaks suggest a possible rapid withdrawal, despite Israel's contradictory stance—both opposing and encouraging such a move at different times. This ambiguity, coupled with the lack of communication with **the SDF (<https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/syrias-sdf-says-it-has-not-received-any-plans-us-forces-withdraw-2025-02-05/>)**, heightens Kurdish concerns and adds to the uncertainty surrounding their position.

The shared belief among Syrian Kurds, regardless of their political affiliations, is that Trump is likely to withdraw U.S. forces from Syria and leave the area vulnerable to other actors—namely Turkish-backed Syrian elements and a potential resurgence of Iranian involvement if Syria's security situation weakens and allows for the return of these elements to the northeast of the country. The secondary effort, therefore, is to ensure that the SDF's long-standing partnership with Washington will prompt the United States to secure the SDF's position through political or diplomatic measures before such a withdrawal. In this context, many Kurds believe that the recent agreement between the SDF and HTS—reached under direct pressure following **General Corella's visit (<https://www.rudaw.net/english/middleeast/10032025>)** to eastern Syria and marked by vague terms and problematic broad outlines—is part of Washington's preparations to withdraw from the region.

The SDF aims to establish long-term stability for both them and their Autonomous Administration by advocating for a new constitution that ensures a democratic and decentralized Syria, guaranteeing the rights of Kurds and other components of the Syrian population. This push comes amid a growing rift between Qamishli and Damascus, particularly following the recent constitutional declaration issued by Damascus, which reflects trends that contradict the interests of the regions and minorities at large.

The SDF views Washington as the only power capable of applying the necessary pressure to advance this process and

curb Turkish hostilities toward Syria's Kurds. However, any further marginalization of the SDF by Washington could create an opportunity for Iran to engage with certain factions increasingly alarmed by Turkey's persistent threats—especially as violence against the Alawite minority on the Syrian coast escalates. A weakened U.S. role in the region may, in turn, embolden groups aligned with Iran to expand their influence, despite the SDF's overall strategic orientation and clear preference for Washington.

By contrast, in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI)—with its two major parties, Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK)—expect a significant positive shift in their position. Erbil, which has long-standing ties with Washington, believes Trump's presidency offers greater protection against Tehran's machinations and will pressure Baghdad to resolve lingering issues with Erbil. Notably, the longstanding issue between Baghdad and its relationship to the KRI's oil sector, a primary means of revenue generation for the KRG, has seen some movement since Trump's presidency began, with the Iraqi legislature [approving a budget amendment \(https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/iraq-parliament-approves-compensation-plan-resolve-kurdistan-oil-dispute-2025-02-02/\)](https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/iraq-parliament-approves-compensation-plan-resolve-kurdistan-oil-dispute-2025-02-02/) to address some of the issues related to the standoff.

The KRI relies on its traditional ties and the quality of its relationships with members of Trump's administration to secure Kurdish interests in Iraq before the anticipated U.S. withdrawal in the fall of 2026. During the Biden administration, the perception that the United States had a more lenient position with Iran and its allies in Baghdad filtered into attitudes towards the United States' lack of response to Baghdad's efforts to stop the KRI from exporting oil abroad, shuttering the region's independent economy. Moreover, the [lifting of some some sanctions \(https://www.dw.com/en/fact-check-is-joe-biden-weakening-iran-sanctions/a-68992276\)](https://www.dw.com/en/fact-check-is-joe-biden-weakening-iran-sanctions/a-68992276) against Iran contributed to the strengthening of the Iranian presence in Iraq. Former KRG president Masoud Barzani [emphasized \(https://www.memri.org/tv/fmr-kurdish-president-masoud-barzani-american-withdrawal-peace-israel\)](https://www.memri.org/tv/fmr-kurdish-president-masoud-barzani-american-withdrawal-peace-israel) the desire for a break with the policies of the previous administration in a recent interview: “The swings between solution and impasse that characterized the previous U.S. administration cannot continue.”

In contrast to the SDF, the KDP—Barzani's party—also counts on their relations with both Turkey and Washington to encourage U.S. involvement in fostering peace negotiations between the PKK and Erdoğan's government, which is seeking to maintain Erdoğan's grip on power despite current constitutional limitations. To achieve this, Erdoğan's Justice and Development Party (AKP) needs the support of the pro-Kurdish People's Equality and Democracy Party (DEM) to push for constitutional amendments or call for early elections. With significant developments on this front now that the PKK has accepted their ideological leader Öcalan's call to lay down arms, such efforts are likely to have a significant ripple effect in reducing security risks in the KRI's northern Duhok and Erbil provinces, where PKK militants had been active. Additionally, the region hopes its resource-rich lands will attract U.S. investment, potentially bolstering the struggling local economy. Moreover, the expectation that Trump will deal harshly with Iran has quieted Iranian pressures on Iraqi politics, including in the KRI, an optimism that Iranian Kurdish groups—including those based in the KRI—have shared. The Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran (KDPI) and the Kurdish Freedom (Azadi) party welcomed Trump's victory, while Komala, a far-left party, viewed it as an opportunity to weaken Iran.

While one people, Kurdish political parties frequently disagree about a coordinated approach, not only overall but likewise within their respective countries. Likewise, the approach to Trump's policies is differentiated by local differences, yet a combined interest in the administration's potential to counter Iran and influence regional actors hinges on a shared hope in continued U.S. involvement in the region—as a deterrent against Iran and as a mediator in Kurdish negotiations with other states.

Ambiguous U.S. policies and unclear strategies make Kurdish politicians anxious, limiting their ability to build long-term strategies that protect their interests and those of their allies. Throughout Kurdish politics, the perception is

that Kurdish political structures will not be able to survive in this complex and challenging region without a clear partnership with Washington, based on a strategic dimension that protects them from falling into the hands of anti-Western and anti-democratic forces. ❖

RECOMMENDED



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

[How the Trump Administration Can Limit China's Arms Exports](#)

Mar 21, 2025

◆
Grant Rumley

[\(/policy-analysis/how-trump-administration-can-limit-chinas-arms-exports\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[U.S. Support for Iraqi Security Forces: Challenges and Future Prospects under Trump](#)

Mar 21, 2025

◆
Mohanad Faris

[\(/policy-analysis/us-support-iraqi-security-forces-challenges-and-future-prospects-under-trump\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Avoiding an Israel-Syria Showdown \(Part 2\): An Opening for New Negotiations](#)

Mar 21, 2025

◆
Ehud Yaari

(/policy-analysis/avoiding-israel-syria-showdown-part-2-opening-new-negotiations)