

U.S.-Kurdish Relations in Syria after the Manbij Roadmap

by [Abdel Raheem Said \(/experts/abdel-raheem-said\)](/experts/abdel-raheem-said)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

[Abdel Raheem Said \(/experts/abdel-raheem-said\)](/experts/abdel-raheem-said)

Abdel Raheem Said is a Syrian-Kurdish journalist and researcher in Kurdish affairs.



Brief Analysis

In June, Turkey and the United States announced that they had agreed to implement a roadmap to promote peace in the Syrian city of Manbij, which has been under the control of the Syrian Democratic Forces since the 2016 expulsion of ISIS. The agreement came as part of U.S. efforts to appease its strategic ally Turkey after a long period of strained relations between the two states. However, it remains to be seen how this agreement will affect relations between Washington and its Kurdish allies in Syria, who are still fighting ISIS in Deir al-Zour's countryside and governing many areas seized from the Islamic State (IS), including Raqqa and other cities east of the Euphrates.

Shortly after its announcement, Kurdish political leaders reacted to the roadmap by declaring their intentions to negotiate with the Assad regime. Saleh Muslim, former president of the Democratic Union Party (PYD), expressed his [concern \(https://www.aa.com.tr/ar/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AF%D9%88%D9%84-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A8%D9%8A%D8%A9/%D8%AC%D8%A7%D9%88%D9%8A%D8%B4-%D8%A3%D9%88%D8%BA%D9%84%D9%88-%D8%AD%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%AF%D9%88%D8%B1-%D8%AA%D8%AF%D9%85%D9%8A%D8%B1-%D9%82%D9%86%D8%AF%D9%8A%D9%84-%D9%85%D8%B9%D9%82%D9%84-%D8%A8%D9%8A-%D9%83%D8%A7-%D9%83%D8%A7-%D8%B4%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%8A-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%82/1171943\)](https://www.aa.com.tr/ar/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AF%D9%88%D9%84-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A8%D9%8A%D8%A9/%D8%AC%D8%A7%D9%88%D9%8A%D8%B4-%D8%A3%D9%88%D8%BA%D9%84%D9%88-%D8%AD%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%AF%D9%88%D8%B1-%D8%AA%D8%AF%D9%85%D9%8A%D8%B1-%D9%82%D9%86%D8%AF%D9%8A%D9%84-%D9%85%D8%B9%D9%82%D9%84-%D8%A8%D9%8A-%D9%83%D8%A7-%D9%83%D8%A7-%D8%B4%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%8A-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%82/1171943) with the agreement to the German Press Agency and noted that "If our interests coincide with the Americans, we will go with them. If our interests coincide with the Russians, we will go with them. If our interests coincide with Al-Assad, we will go with him." Ilham Ahmad, co-chair of Syrian Democratic Council, the political wing of the Syrian Democratic Forces, also [announced \(http://m-syria-d.com/2741\)](http://m-syria-d.com/2741) the party's readiness to negotiate with the Syrian regime without preconditions.

These statements demonstrate Kurdish resentment towards the roadmap in Manbij. However, it is noteworthy that so far, these statements have only been issued by political figures, who generally possess less power and influence than their military counterparts. Currently, the military leaders of the PYK are still largely coordinating with the United States against ISIS.

Moreover, any agreement east of the Euphrates between the Kurds and the Syrian regime would in practice require U.S. approval or at least acquiescence, as the U.S. bases and forces deployed in that region could still thwart any bi-, tri-, or even quadrilateral agreement between the regime, the Syrian Democratic Forces, Russia, and Iran. From a strategic perspective, it is also unlikely for the Kurds to enter into an alliance with the regime and the Russians,

given the knowledge that this alliance will offer them little in the way of territory in Syria.

That being said, recent events in Turkey may push Syrian Kurdish forces towards Iran despite the clear disadvantages of such a move. The recent Turkish crackdown on the Kurdish Workers' Party (PKK) strongholds in Qandil could lead to increased coordination between the PKK and Iran, which usually supports the PKK in its war against Turkey, especially in the aftermath of the 2011 Syrian revolution.

Cooperation between the PKK and Iran in Qandil may lead to concessions to the Iranians in Syria, which would harm U.S. interests and strengthen the regime, along with its Russian and Iranian allies east of the Euphrates. This may be especially true if the regime and Iran manage to easily communicate with the tribes of Arqa, Deir Al-Zour, and Al-Hasakah, which are seriously considering re-embracing the Syrian regime after the military progress achieved by Assad's army in Damascus and Homs and the Turkish operation in Afrin. This option has become all the more tempting after the establishment of the Manbij road map, which shook the tribes' confidence in its U.S. allies and may allow the regime to consolidate its popular base.

Despite this new interest, Syrian Kurdish leaders must be cautious of becoming entangled in ventures with the regime and its Russian and Iranian allies in Syria, which will most likely lead to Kurdish losses. Russia has proved to be an unfaithful ally in many locales. Afrin is only the most recent example, where Moscow is now bargaining with the Turks over Tel Rifaat and surrounding areas once controlled by the Syrian Democratic Forces.

The Syrian Democratic Forces and their Kurdish leaders must also distance themselves from the influence of Qandil's leaders on decisions in Syria. Importing the Turkish-Kurdish dispute from Qandil into Syria will only add unnecessary complications to the issue of the Kurds of Syria, especially after Erdogan's victory in the recent presidential election. His win is expected to bring increased Turkish pressure on the United States and its allies to disengage from what Ankara calls the Syrian branch of the PKK. Only by demonstrating a distance between the organizations can Syrian Kurdish parties prevent this pressure from increasing.

As for Washington, it must be aware that any coordination between Syrian Kurdish groups and Russia will generally weaken American influence in Syria. In order to avoid this realignment, Kurdish leaders—who are in need of a state to protect them—are looking for confirmation that the United States is still interested in protecting Kurdish interests in Syria, especially east of the Euphrates, and will not abandon their loyal allies in Syria. Concurrently, the U.S. military should be wary of attempts by the Syrian regime and its allies to take advantage of the recent closeness between the Kurds and the regime in order to infiltrate the eastern Euphrates. In particular, the United States should be cautious in pushing unpopular tactics in Qamishli, Al-Hasakah, Deir Al-Zour, and Raqqa, especially given the number of Kurdish leaders there who still have close ties with the Syrian regime, Iran, and Russia.

In order to move forward, the United States should convince the Syrian Democratic Forces that the Manbij road map has the ability to stabilize, not damage, the situation in eastern Euphrates. Meanwhile, these leaders must be urged to stay away from Qandil and to avoid further antagonism of Turkey. ❖

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