

Rojava Should Wait for the New Syria

by [Hassan Mneimneh \(/experts/hassan-mneimneh\)](/experts/hassan-mneimneh)

Jan 24, 2018

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

[Hassan Mneimneh \(/experts/hassan-mneimneh\)](/experts/hassan-mneimneh)

Hassan Mneimneh is a contributing editor with Fikra Forum and a principal at Middle East Alternatives in Washington.



Brief Analysis

January 24, 2018

The Turkish offensive into Afrin, the westernmost enclave controlled by Kurdish factions in northern Syria, opens another sad chapter in the long Syrian conflict. Immediate attention from Washington can contain the situation. It has been advised to address the underlying tensions plaguing Syrian relations and maintain its influence in the face of Russian-Iranian interferences. The fundamental question is whether a new Kurdistan is entitled to emerge in Syria.

There is a good case to be made for an autonomous Kurdish region in northeastern Syria, on the basis of both principle and pragmatics. In its core areas, the region has a large Kurdish population, probably a majority, certainly a plurality. Had the aftermath of World War I, a century ago, yielded a Kurdish state as promised and anticipated, large parts of the region would have been an integral part of it. The Kurdish national aspirations have long been ignored, and it is within the natural rights of the population to seek a form of government that is reflective of its culture and values. The Kurdish nationalist view is that southern (Iraqi) Kurdistan has taken considerable steps towards emancipation. It is now the turn of western Kurdistan (Rojava) in Syria, with each of northern Kurdistan in Turkey and eastern Kurdistan in Iran trailing, but eventually joining the march. The conflict in Syria merely presented the opportunity for national assertion.

Yet, this assertion did not translate into aggressive chauvinism, but as a novel experiment of “people’s democracy” that seeks inclusiveness and egalitarianism, with non-Kurds and women prominently engaged in its bottom-up structure. Through the empowerment of the public, and local elections that provided the mandate, a federative unit of Syria was formed in the area under the control of the PYD (Democratic Union Party, the predominant Kurdish nationalist force). While the alliance with the United States appeared at first to be opportunistic for both parties—with the nascent Kurdish entity in need of tangible support, and Washington in search for ground forces for its anti-IS (“Islamic State”) efforts. The upgrading of the tactical into strategic was expected, in light of the shared values and interests. Having offered substantive sacrifices in blood and treasure, it is only fair for Rojava to expect a continuing, even solidifying U.S. backing in the next phase of the Syrian conflict. This support is required against the sustained efforts of both Russia and Iran to re-instate the despotic regime over all of the Syrian territory. It is also needed against Turkey’s attempts at pursuing its ambiguous role in fighting against IS, while in reality, an attempt at denying the Kurdish population, in Syria and in Turkey, its legitimate rights.

There is certainly truth in all these arguments. For each, however, a counter-argument equally rooted in fact and reality is handily available. The overarching ideological framework of Kurdish nationalism—irredentist, even supremacist—with occasional references to the discarded nineteenth century notions of Aryanism versus Semitism populating some corners of the social media scene—continues to mirror the exclusivist nationalist ideologies that had thrived and failed in Arab, Turkish, and Iranian settings. The promoted notion of “people’s democracy,” a notion of popular governance proposed top-down by Abdulla Öcalan upon his conversion from Leninist-Stalinist communism to anarchist communalism, has earned multiple romanticized reports in the foreign press. It does, however, seem to coexist with an ongoing, even escalating, consolidation of power in the “federal” entity. Far from the culmination of a grassroots movement towards self-assertion, the 2015 and 2017 local elections have instituted a centralized system of unequal citizenship with “recently” settled Arab tribes (previously nomadic, made to assume a sedentary presence in the region half a century ago) granted some, but not all voting rights.

The expulsion of Arab inhabitants from villages captured by the Kurdish forces may have been exaggerated, although multiple and troubling instances have been duly documented. Still, in its symbolic, linguistic, and political aspects, the “Democratic Federation of Northern Syria” is distinctly Kurdish—notwithstanding the fact that much of its territory, acquired in the course of the U.S.-led effort to oust IS, was never part of any ideologically expansive claim of a Western Kurdistan. The argument that local Arab tribes and communities have offered their support for the new federal entity weakens in credibility when it is noted that many of them had felt compelled to assume a pro-IS stance. Immediate survival, rather than free will and consideration, may be the dictating agency in such decisions. For Western eyes, the region under PYD control is evidently more visually appealing than what was IS territory or what still is Syrian opposition controlled lands: women in militia-gear and positions of authority offer a stark contrast with the draped or covered female presence elsewhere in Syria. Semiotics, however, are not values. The Syrian Kurdish population is far closer in mores and beliefs to the rest of Syria—which is severely misrepresented by the Islamism dominant in opposition circles. The progressive social drive of the PYD is a positive asset, but cannot be equated with a liberal democratic bent—which is often absent in its actions, policies, and statements.

Even if the PYD lacked good faith in seeking the support of the United States, which it had considered an imperialist hegemon in the past, it is reasonable to expect that a transformation—of policies and stances—may evolve as a result of field cooperation. The United States itself, while having envisaged a quasi-contractual relationship with the PYD, has warmed up, at least at the level of its field commands, to the notion of a longer-term alliance. A better management of the fears and expectations of Turkey, as a NATO ally and a potent regional power, would be needed in a still-lacking approach of clarity and balance in U.S. policy in Syria. More importantly, as the enabler of the expansion of the authority of the PYD over much of northeastern Syria, the United States has the distinct responsibility of saving the region from building towards a certain and destructive explosion in the future.

In much of Arab Syria, the “Democratic Federation of Northern Syria” is not accepted as a bona-fide measure of self-governance within the national Syrian context, but a thinly veiled effort at Kurdish separatism. While the PYD has complained of its exclusion from international conflict-resolution talks on Syria, many Syrian opposition personalities and groups have accused the PYD of adhering to an ambivalent position, placing itself at an equal distance between the regime and the uprising. In their view, had the PYD assumed a more national posture, at the stage of the uprising where the patriotic sentiment prevailed, the outcome may have been to tip the balance in favor of a new democratic Syria. The PYD’s abstention is accordingly blamed as at least partially responsible for a feedback loop of increasing factionalism that reduced the popular revolution to an Arab Sunni uprising, before being hijacked by Islamist and jihadist forces. For many in the Syrian opposition, the PYD has engaged in deception, subterfuge, and betrayal. The United States, which most Syrian opposition consider that it has reneged on its promises of support to them, is viewed as bearing false witness to a project of secession.

With the PYD as an active partner of disputed credentials and uncertain intentions, and with a Syrian Arab population suspicious of both the PYD and the United States, the “Northern Syria” experiment cannot be conceived as a potential model to usher Syria towards a tenable federative system. Instead, by endorsing the experience, or even enabling it without full endorsement, Washington exposes itself to the demagoguery of its well established foes in Syria — Russia and Iran — as well as its confused allies, such as Turkey — all of which already engaged in a full-throttle denunciation of “the U.S. plan to fragment the region”. Unfortunately, their narrative is well received by the general Syrian and broad Arab population, and is reinforced by mis-statements emanating from Washington (such as the assertion by then-candidate Donald Trump that IS was created by the United States).

Two parties stand to benefit from a true or inflated U.S.- “northern Syria” association: the Damascus regime and the “Islamic State” in its eventual and all but certain effort to re-emerge. By rejecting “separatism” the regime is nominally redeemed for a population exhausted by warfare and seeking any excuse to re-embrace it in a nostalgic quest for antebellum normalcy. More ominous, the antagonism, at times unchecked, that the PYD militias have displayed towards populations suspected of collaboration with the Islamic State, or even profiled for such suspicions, enhances the potential pool of recruitment cultivated by the radical organization for its next phase.

It can even be argued that the PYD has been the enemy that the Islamic State has “favored.” For five precious months in 2016, IS mounted a fierce defense of its al-Bab stronghold, which was the first major city the Turkish “Shield of the Euphrates” operation was slated to capture. The resistance of IS halted the advance of the Turkish-led forces, and enabled the “Syrian Democratic Forces” (SDF), dominated by the PYD, to cross the Euphrates and capture Manbij on its Western bank, with far less IS resistance. By allowing the SDF and regime forces to meet through their advances south of al-Bab, IS insured that Turkey had no path to engage in the definitive battle of al-Raqqah, and that the SDF would lead the offensive. In al-Raqqah, IS displayed far less intensity in resisting the attack than it had done in both al-Bab and in its main stronghold in Iraq, the city of Mosul. It may not be sufficient to attribute this IS behavior to the depletion of its forces (some of which later able to leave al-Raqqah through an arrangement with the SDF, as documented by the BBC). Instead, a calculation of affinity versus animosity of the putative force to capture al-Raqqah, with/towards a population IS will have to exploit in its next phase may have been part of the equation. While the official position of the PYD is that its consolidation of power and enhancement of the support it receives from the United States insure that IS is denied the opportunity to re-emerge, separatist moves by the PYD strengthen the IS potential.

It is possible to preserve the political gains and administrative reform achieved locally in PYD-held territory; it is conceivable to achieve local governance and to prompt a new Syria, free of despotism, towards a federal system. Such actions, however, can only be achieved with the rest of Syria, not despite the rest of Syria. The population of Syrian Kurdistan, defined historically and not on the basis of recent conquests, are entitled to Rojava, if they so choose. The birth of a political entity, potentially opting for independence, maybe even on the path towards a unified Kurdistan, as far-fetched this political dream may appear, cannot be through an act viewed as betrayal. In justifying unilateral actions, the parallel with Iraqi Kurdistan is untenable. All of the Syrian population, Arab, Kurd and otherwise, was equally subjected to the oppression of the Damascus regime. Syrian Kurdistan has no traumatic and defining experience comparable to the genocidal campaign of al-Anfal launched by the defunct regime in Baghdad against the Iraqi Kurdish population in the 1980s. References to al-Anfal as a justification for PYD actions, as occasionally voiced by sympathizers, are mere overreach that further widens the gap of mistrust between Kurds and Arabs in Syria.

The current trajectory is towards a new instantiation of the Syria crisis with demarcation lines drawn anew, and alliances re-shuffled. The United States is in a unique position, through deliberate action with its PYD partners, to reverse the trend. It is a common U.S., Syrian Kurdish, and pan-Syrian interest that Rojava Kurdistan wait for a new,

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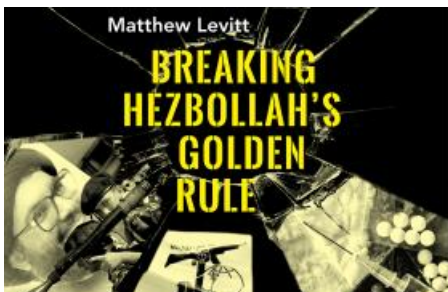
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