

# Managing the Shift in U.S. Relations with Syria's Kurds

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Brief Analysis

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## Any plans to end arms transfers to the SDF must be handled carefully if Washington hopes to prevent an Islamic State resurgence, alleviate tensions with Turkey, preserve a valuable local ally, and curb Iranian influence.

In a November 24 call with Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan, President Trump reportedly pledged to stop providing arms to the Syrian Kurdish People's Defense Units (YPG), according to Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu. U.S. officials have qualified such reports, suggesting that no immediate cutoff is in the works and that arms reductions will be gradual. Yet Cavusoglu insisted the promise was explicit and said that Ankara wants to see it "implemented practically."

The United States has been helping the YPG since 2015 and directly arming the YPG-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) since May 2017. In return, the SDF has served as Washington's most crucial partner in the battle against the Islamic State (IS) in Syria, seizing the terrorist group's "capital" in Raqqa following a four-month battle that ended this October. Since then, defense officials have noted that the United States will remain militarily engaged in Syria, but other administration statements seem to signal an imminent wind-down. On December 1, Defense Secretary James Mattis announced that the Marine unit providing artillery support to the SDF would be withdrawn. He also described the post-Raqqa phase as a transition from "a military-led effort" to "a diplomatic solution." Similarly, Trump and Russian president Vladimir Putin issued a joint statement last month reaffirming that the UN-mediated Geneva peace talks are the way forward.

If Washington does in fact cease arming the SDF -- and does so in a rushed or otherwise ill-advised manner -- it could face accusations of abandoning its Kurdish allies once again, especially after staying on the sidelines during

the recent Iraqi Kurdish referendum crisis. Mishandling the SDF issue might also allow Iran to reap significant rewards from international inaction in yet another arena. Either perception would underscore America's unreliability as an ally in the Middle East.

To avoid these outcomes, U.S. officials will need to carefully manage several difficult tasks at once: mending relations with Ankara, safeguarding hard-won victories and alliances in Syria, and pushing for a viable political settlement to the war. Syrian Kurds should play their part by governing their self-declared "Rojava" region in a more inclusive fashion and avoiding actions that threaten Turkey.

## A "TEMPORARY" PARTNERSHIP

On May 17, deputy assistant secretary of state Jonathan Cohen described the relationship with the YPG as "temporary, transactional, and tactical," noting, "We have not promised the YPG anything." Likewise, the group does not harbor unrealistic political expectations of the United States, taking care to maintain pragmatic ties with other powerful actors in Syria, including the Assad regime and Russia.

Since the war broke out and IS took over large swaths of Iraq and Syria, Washington has been reluctant to intervene directly, instead arming, training, and providing air support to local partners for the narrow military purpose of defeating IS. Such efforts failed initially, including a \$500 million Pentagon program that produced miniscule, ineffective Arab forces that were prone to defections. The Obama administration eventually scrapped that program and sought more capable forces. The Kurds stepped up to the challenge beginning in 2014, defending Kobane against a six-month IS siege.

In October 2015, the YPG established the SDF, a new umbrella organization led by Kurdish units and incorporating Arab, Christian, and Assyrian groups. SDF leaders were soon coordinating with the U.S. military on a regular basis, and arming the group proved to be most consequential in rolling back IS, culminating in the liberation of Raqqa last month.

At the same time, however, U.S. support for the YPG/SDF has taken a deep toll on bilateral ties with Turkey, particularly after American forces adopted measures to protect SDF units from Turkish attack (e.g., embedding U.S.-flagged vehicles with SDF units and creating a buffer between the Turkish border and SDF territory). Ankara strongly opposes the creation of a YPG-controlled Kurdish political entity in Syria, arguing that the group has organic ties to the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), a U.S.-designated terrorist group that has waged intermittent war against the Turkish government for decades. Ankara also consistently opposes giving the Kurds a seat at the negotiating table with other Syrian actors. Although U.S. officials do not equate the YPG with the PKK, they are wary of the group's Kurdish nationalist ideology, realizing that it will never be acceptable in Arab-majority and conservative areas of Syria.

This past weekend, Kurdish authorities organized local council elections in Rojava in an attempt to shore up their autonomy, gain legitimacy, mark the shift from fighting to governing, and stave off ethnic conflicts with local Arabs. The three-phase election process is supposed to culminate in the creation of a regional parliament early next year, but the voting has raised tensions with Turkey and the Assad regime.

## MANAGING THE TRANSITION

The Trump administration's decision to coordinate a diplomatic solution with Russia and, perhaps, stop arming the SDF creates new opportunities for ending the war. Washington is signaling that it will stay engaged in Syria beyond the military defeat of IS, though not in an open-ended fashion. Recent actions also suggest that the United States is repositioning itself with major national allies instead of nonstate actors. Secretary Mattis has noted that halting arms transfers to the SDF could allow Washington to reallocate funds to stabilization and reconstruction

programs that require the cooperation of Syria's neighbors. Yet any such transition from military to political support must be managed carefully.

Although the United States need not choose between Turkey and the SDF, better relations with Ankara are essential to stabilizing Syria, especially if Turkey gains more leverage via its engagement with Russia. Ankara has been sidelining itself of late by taking extreme positions on the future of the Syrian Kurds, so the proposed U.S. strategy of converting military aid into stabilization support could help allay Ankara's fears of a high-powered military emerging in Rojava. Yet this will not be easy given U.S.-Turkish tensions on other issues beyond Syria, including the diplomatic row over accused Turkish coup plotter Fethullah Gulen.

As for the Kurds, they would surely chafe at being left out to dry, especially if Turkey is able to freely attack parts of Rojava. The withdrawal of military support would be even more painful if political support is withheld as well. Thus, even if the U.S. military stops arming the SDF, it should remain engaged in northeast Syria in order to safeguard the transition -- a necessary element in Washington's goal of preventing an IS reemergence.

## **MENDING OLD RELATIONS AND LEVERAGING NEW ONES**

**A**lthough the military effort against the Islamic State is winding down, the potential for other conflicts in Syria remains ripe. This includes ethnic conflicts between Kurds and Arabs, and further uprisings by those within the Sunni Arab majority who are still angry at Assad and his Russian and Iranian backers. Any diplomatic solution to the war must therefore emerge from deconflicting various armed factions and reconciling zones of influence. Russia, Iran, and Turkey will use their respective proxies to influence this process, hence the significance of maintaining U.S. relations with local partners. Tehran has been using Hezbollah and other Shia militias to shore up the Assad regime and establish a land bridge across southern Syria, imperiling the U.S. regional goal of containing Iranian hegemony. Saudi Arabia continues to bolster Sunni Arab opposition forces bent on continuing the fight against Assad. And Turkey has worked with certain Arab and Turkmen rebel groups inside Syria, so further interventions cannot be ruled out.

Cutting off aid to the SDF would undermine America's chances in this battle for influence in Syria unless complemented with a clear post-IS strategy. Governance, policing, and costly reconstruction efforts are needed to prevent a jihadist resurgence. Moreover, if the SDF is forced to retreat in the face of dwindling U.S. support, the resultant vacuum would likely be filled by the Assad regime and Hezbollah. The latter prospect is hardly in Washington's long-term interests, or Ankara's for that matter. Some degree of U.S. economic and military aid to the Kurds will therefore be necessary for the foreseeable future.

Yet such aid should be conditional on YPG/SDF commitments to govern in a democratic, inclusive fashion and address Turkey's heightened threat perceptions. In the former case, long-term stability in Rojava and adjoining areas hinges on non-Kurdish populations feeling empowered and included, not occupied by Kurdish forces. In the latter case, the Syrian Kurds must distance themselves from the PKK if they hope to find a seat at the peace talks. Among other moves, this means avoiding further symbolic provocations, as when Kurdish forces unwisely mounted a wall-size picture of PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan in Raqqa after the city's liberation. It could also include mending fences with the Kurdistan National Congress, a Syrian Kurdish faction that has long rejected the PKK.

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