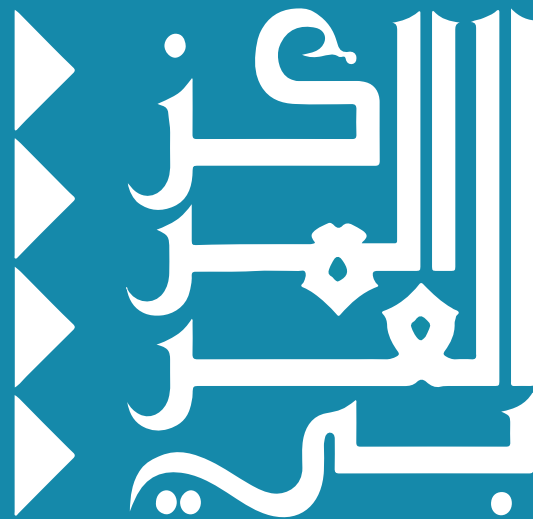


The Turkey-Russia Rift Heralds an Autonomous Kurdistan in Syria

Mustafa Gurbuz

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Arab Center Washington DC
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Turkey effectively ended its military operation in Syria, Operation Euphrates Shield, soon after Russia reached an agreement with the Syrian Kurds. Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan withdrew his earlier plan to push the Turkish military forward to the Manbij and Afrin cantons, following the successful operations in al-Bab. The decision to withdraw was inevitable indeed because Ankara's options became too narrow, as both the United States and Russia took steps to back the People's Protection Units (YPG), an affiliate of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). The US military deployed its forces in Manbij to deter Turkish attacks on the YPG; and when Turkey began to shell Kurdish forces in the Afrin region, Russia followed a similar strategy. On March 20, Moscow announced that it was setting up a military area in YPG-held Afrin to ensure the durability of the cease-fire, agreed to in the Astana talks, between the YPG and the Turkey-backed Free Syrian Army. The move angered Ankara because it boxed Turkish forces in northern Aleppo. The end of Operation Euphrates Shield came with Erdoğan's remarks, "The Russian and US interest in the terrorist YPG saddens us."

Turkey's recent rift with Russia heralds an autonomous Kurdish region in Syria—an idea that has gained some sympathy in Washington circles. Turkey's frustration with the Obama Administration and ensuing rapprochement with Russia resulted in the Syrian regime's triumph in Aleppo as well as Ankara's victory over the YPG in capturing the strategic town of al-Bab. Although Turkey effectively blocked the possibility of a full territorial unification of Kurdish cantons, Ankara's plan of complete removal of YPG forces from the western side of the Euphrates was never realized. Given the fact that the Trump Administration has continued to work with the YPG for the Raqqa operation,

Moscow's strategy of backing the YPG against Ankara has capably undermined Turkey's military operations in Syria.

As both the United States and Russia appear sympathetic to some form of Kurdish autonomy in northern Syria, it is important to analyze how autonomous Kurdish cantons would look like. The current reality on the ground suggests that (1) the Kurdish cantons in the eastern Euphrates—namely Jazira and Kobani—would enjoy more domestic autonomy compared to ones in the western Euphrates, i.e., Afrin Canton and the Shahba region; and, (2) Washington's strategic decisions, such as conditions for US arming of the YPG and measures to define future management of oil fields that are captured from the Islamic State, will be decisive in shaping the characteristics of Kurdish autonomy.

Russia Plays a Balancing Act between Turkey and the YPG

Russia's direct intervention in Syria has been the main source of tension between Ankara and Moscow since September 2015. When confronted with the conflicting interests of Turkey and the Syrian Kurds, Moscow perceived that its best interest was to act as adjudicator. As Aaron Stein astutely documents, such a strategy has had a military dimension: Russia has a track record of using the Afrin-based YPG militia as a counter escalation tool in order to stop Turkey's advances with Operation Euphrates Shield. As a result of frequent Russia-YPG cooperation, Ankara would never be able to gain leverage over Moscow on the ground.

Moscow's deals with Ankara aimed to ensure that any progress on the part of the Syrian opposition is halted—no matter whether it

helps or hurts the YPG's long-term ambitions. In both the Russian-Turkish agreement over Aleppo and the Russian-Kurdish agreement over Afrin, Moscow focused on curbing the effectiveness of the Syrian rebels.

Russia's pro-government media recently suggested that Turkey should mend fences with the Asad regime in order to crush the Kurdish autonomous zones. Such an engagement is highly unlikely as it would require Turkey's abandonment of support for Syrian rebels in exchange for a dubious alliance with the Syrian regime. Russia would welcome such a surprising development, as its priority will be weakening the Syrian opposition.

Thus, the strategic positioning of Ankara and Moscow continues to reinforce the tacit agreement between Syrian Kurds and the Asad regime since the beginning of the Syrian revolution: for the regime, YPG forces are neither friends nor foes, but they are surely helpful strategic allies against the Syrian opposition. There are good reasons to believe that such a relationship would become institutionalized as parties find a *modus vivendi* in an increasingly fragmented Syria.

Kurdish Autonomy Looks More Probable Than Ever

As Radwan Ziadeh rightly suggests, there is no meaningful history of federalism in Syria, and thus, a Syrian Kurdish proposal for self-governance under a federal structure is not realistic. Equally true, however, is the fact that Kurdish YPG forces will not relinquish their territorial gains without fierce resistance—unless an unlikely military alliance between Turkey and the Asad regime is formed.

The YPG's close relations with the Asad regime indicate that the Syrian Kurds may continue to receive special treatment and be accorded a relatively autonomous status, even if Syria never assumed a federal structure. The Kurdish region called Rojava—meaning “the West” in Kurdish, in reference to all Kurdish cantons in Syria as Western Kurdistan in the Middle East—has been immune from the regime's air strikes since the beginning of the Syrian civil war. In addition, Damascus enabled Rojava residents to enjoy access to central government services such as public sector salaries, schools, health care, travel by civilian airlines, and the issuing of identity cards, passports, and property records.

Although there were skirmishes and short periods of violence between the Asad regime and the YPG, the strategic interests of both sides quickly prevailed and restored the relationship. The tensions in Hasakah—a major city in the Jazira Canton—are a case in point. On August 18, 2016, the Syrian Air Force made its first bombing on YPG-controlled territory, targeting several places in Hasakah. Violence ended within a week's time as the Syrian regime ceded more territory in Hasakah to the YPG, retaining only five percent of the city. The regime's attacks were perceived as a warning to defend its hegemony over Arab tribes, on which the YPG has increasingly expanded its influence. As Aron Lund aptly notes, the YPG's control over lucrative oil wells and smuggling routes has enabled the Syrian Kurds to pay significantly higher salaries to allied Arab tribes compared to the regime's offerings, thus diminishing the government's role as the arbiter of local disputes and as a primary source of patronage. In short, the Asad regime does not like losing its influence in Rojava, and yet, it perceives the Syrian Kurds not as an enemy to be eliminated but merely as a competitor. Given

such a tacit strategic alliance between the YPG and the Asad regime, the Syrian Kurds' equivocal discourse on federalism serves a double purpose. On the one hand, the YPG leadership avoids provoking the ire of the regime by downplaying its aspirations for independence; on the other hand, the group provides hope for its constituency by equating federalism – which is unknown by many – with de facto independence. Moreover, the Kurdish quest for federalism is often presented with an emphasis on democratic ideals that targets a western audience for support. Consider, for example, last year's equivocal statements by Hediye Yusuf, the co-chair of the Constituent Assembly of the Rojava Democratic Federal System:

We believe that a federal system is [the] ideal form of governance for Syria...We will not allow for Syria to be divided; all we want is the democratization of Syria; its citizens must live in peace, and enjoy and cherish the ethnic diversity of the national groups inhabiting the country.

Despite its attractive discourse on democracy, the YPG leadership has yet to fulfill its promises for diversity and free speech. Amnesty International's documents show that Rojava has long been multiethnic and that the YPG militia not only engaged in ethnic cleansing to change demographics of the region, but also expelled Syrian Kurds who were critical of the YPG regime. The YPG is accused of assassinations of Kurdish leaders including Mish'al Tammu, Mahmud Wali, and Ahmad Bunjak, and the group's repressive measures have been especially successful when they targeted the Syrian Arab opposition, which is considered the number one enemy of the Asad regime.

All Kurdish Cantons are Equal, but Some are "More Equal" than Others

Managing to secure deals with both the United States and Russia, the Syrian Kurds plan to set up a fourth Kurdish canton – called the Shahba region – that would mostly consist of divided parts of the Azaz and Manbij Districts, which are now separated by Syrian opposition forces. On March 12, the Manbij Civilian Assembly declared self-governance in the town of Manbij and elected an Arab civil engineer, Ibrahim Kaftan, and a Kurdish woman representative, Zeynep Kender, as co-chairs.

Nonetheless, if the Syrian Kurdish dream of autonomy is realized, the Jazira and Kobani Cantons – which are located on the eastern side of the Euphrates – will be relatively well-positioned and resource-rich for two major reasons. First, Kurdish territorial claims in the western Euphrates, i.e. the Afrin and Manbij regions, are surrounded by Turkish forces who are dedicated to remain in order to curtail the PKK's influence. The Asad regime may have neither the will nor the power to push Turkish forces away from the Azaz-Jarablus line, as their presence would serve as the sword of Damocles hanging over the YPG – a reality on the ground that the regime may utilize as leverage in its negotiations with the Syrian Kurds in the future. In this regard, Turkey's focus to protect its gains in the Manbij region will mean uneven development and discrepancy among the Kurdish cantons.

Second, the Jazira region has been the hub of Syrian Kurdish life for decades and historically connected to Turkey's town of Cizre (Jazira in Turkish language), a Kurdish populated restive town. Moreover, the envisioned Jazira Canton also includes the larger Hasakah region where some of Syria's major oil fields are located. For

example, before the civil war started in 2011, Sweidiyeh in northern Hasakah – the largest oil field in Syria – was producing about 100,000 barrels per day, out of a national total of 380,000 barrels per day. The state-owned Syrian Petroleum Company was mainly relying on the mature fields of Hasakah, which were producing 195,000 barrels per day. In addition, Gulfsands, Sinopec, and the China National Petroleum Corporation were producing 56,000 barrels daily from different areas of the Hasakah region.

Major Challenges for Washington

Washington's strategic decisions will shape the nature of Syrian Kurdish autonomy in the near future. The first test will be whether to directly arm the Kurdish YPG for the Raqqa operation. Proponents of this idea argue that Syrian Kurds have proven to be the best effective force for ground combat operations against the Islamic State. Antony Blinken, former deputy secretary of state under the Obama Administration, claims that the United States should arm the Syrian Kurds and ask their group to "commit to not use any weapons against Turkey, to cede liberated Raqqa to local forces, to respect Syria's territorial integrity and to dissociate itself from the PKK." Perhaps knowing how difficult it would be for the Syrian Kurds to disassociate from the PKK, Blinken added that Washington "should double down on support for Turkey's fight against the PKK."

If the Trump Administration follows Blinken's advice to arm the PKK-affiliated YPG, and simultaneously to support Turkey's war against the PKK, the nuts and bolts of specific conditions will have paramount importance. Pointing out the challenges in providing arms directly to military groups, Michael O'Hanlon of Brookings suggests that Washington should

not give the weapons for free but "loan" a necessary arsenal for exclusive use in the Raqqa operation, then take it back when the operation ends. O'Hanlon believes that Washington may utilize the allocation of US foreign aid for the reconstruction of Rojava, conditioning such aid on the return of loaned weapons, as promised.

The end of the Raqqa operation may even invite more challenges for Washington's diplomacy toward the Syrian Kurds. The governance and distribution of oil fields in northeastern Syria may cause mayhem among Kurds and various Arab tribes, especially if YPG forces overstretch by moving deep into eastern Syria. For the YPG, such territorial expansion may become tempting not only for financial reasons but also for strategic purposes because of the PKK's recent gains in the adjacent Iraqi side of the border, the Sinjar region – which attracted global attention after the Islamic State's attacks on Yazidis in 2014. The Arab tribes, on the other hand, long complained that they never benefited from the development of oil reserves in Syria, and thus amassed deep grievances about the lack of refineries and other oil- or gas-based industries in their relatively rich lands.

Moreover, the Sinjar region has become an arena of bitter political conflict between the PKK and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in recent years. As the main ally of the KRG, Washington may disapprove of the YPG's ambitions to control the al-Houl area and southern Hasakah for the protection of the PKK's interests in the Sinjar region. In particular, Iran's rising influence in Iraqi Kurdistan draws the ire of the Trump Administration. Nonetheless, Washington's ability to maneuver in supporting the YPG for the Raqqa operation, and later, curbing the group's influence for the sake of the region's stability, is questionable. If the YPG envisions a

Kurdish autonomous zone that moves deep into eastern Syria, the group may obtain Iran's support for strategic purposes.

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