

# Why The U.S. Must Stop Supporting Kurdish Forces In Syria

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**U.S. policy of over-reliance on Kurds in Syria has created resentment among the local Arab population as well as disappointment between Washington and its NATO ally, Turkey. Ahmad Hashemi presents six reasons why the Trump Administration needs to revise its ties with the Kurdish-dominated forces and establish an all-inclusive buffer zone in northern Syria.**

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When the Syrian uprising began about seven years ago, two measures were taken by the former U.S. Administration that further complicated the situation in Syria.

First, former President Barack Obama's drawing of a "red line" concerning the regime of President Bashar al-Assad in Syria and backing away from it after the Assad forces used chemical weapons in August 2013.

Second, and equally damaging, was Washington's decision to exclusively rely on and align with the Kurdish-dominated forces including People's Protection Units (YPG) and Syrian Democratic Force (SDF) fighters in its Syrian policy. The problem with this alignment is that Syrian Kurdish forces closely associate with the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) guerrilla fighters in Turkey who are considered a terrorist organization by the EU and the US.

The new US Administration has tried to reverse some of the ill-planned policies of its predecessor. The Trump Administration, with its words and actions, has made it clear that the Syrian regime's efforts to cross the Obama-era red line of chemical weapons use will not remain unanswered. However, the Trump Administration not only has not altered the policy of relying on one

ally but has exacerbated the situation with the risk of **confronting its NATO ally, Turkey**.

Here are six reasons why it is necessary for Washington to amend its policy in Syria and abandon its exclusive partnership with the Kurds:

### **1. To weaken the Assad regime**

Washington should change its alliance with the Kurdish-dominated militia because Kurds are not interested in countering the Syrian regime as well as its foreign backers including Lebanese Hezbollah and Iraqi and Afghan Shiite fighters. By focusing on expanding territory and fighting Syrian anti-Assad forces, including extremist as well as moderate rebels, Kurds have helped the Bashar al-Assad regime appear strong. Assad-Kurdish cooperation has recently entered a new phase as the Damascus Government has allowed Kurdish YPG militia to use government-controlled territories to cross into the enclave of Afrin to fight Turkish and Turkey-backed Free Syrian Army (FSA) fighters. **Kurds have also asked the Assad forces and other pro-Assad militia groups to take control of the Afrin border**. Thus, for this and other similar reasons, Kurds by their actions and their stance, are strengthening the Syrian regime, Iran, and Russia. This is weakening the opposition forces as well as evaporating US plans to contain the Assad regime.

### **2. To bring Turkey back to the Western alliance**

Turkey has a dynamic role in the Syrian civil war. The country hosts nearly 4 million Syrian refugees and is an important US and NATO ally in a troubled region. Washington cannot afford to lose this key ally to supporting Ankara's main foes, the Kurdish Militia, which Turkey perceives as their greatest security threat. The US support of Kurdish forces in Syria is alienating Turkey and increasing the possibility of a consequential US military confrontation in northern Syria with Turkish forces. Turkey shares a 900-kilometer (559 miles) border with Syria, and Ankara's consent and inclusion is central in mitigating the dire situation in Syria. Turkey has legitimate concerns concerning the US-backed Kurdish forces in northern Syria who share the same structure, goals, and worldview with the PKK terrorist organization. Ankara is willing to offer logistical and military support to the Syrian rebels as it is keen to see the Assad regime overthrown or at least weakened. Turkey has the second-largest NATO army, and the U.S. should view this as an opportunity.

### **3. To keep sectarianism at bay**

By backing Kurds and solely relying on them, Washington adds fuel to ethnic sectarianism in Syria, which is a major driver in perpetuating civil war in this multi-ethnic and multi-faith country. The US support of the Kurds, a tiny minority in Syria, and helping them dominate over Arab majority territories, such as Tal Abyad, Manbij, and Raqqa will only perpetuate the ethnic hostility and sectarian division. Some circles in D.C. might argue Kurds are the best option to fight ISIS and other terrorist organizations in Syria and Iraq, suggesting the US should support their expansionist ambitions at the expense of losing its Turkish and Arab allies. However, now that the war against ISIS is almost over, Washington can help Kurds integrate into a more inclusive, democratic Arab-led infrastructure in northern Syria, focusing on creating a unified opposition front against the regime in Damascus.

### **4. To reconstruct northern Syria**

Kurds lack the infrastructural capacity to help Americans in rebuilding post-war Syria. The US needs strong partners and firm commitments to reconstruct Syria, prevent the reemergence of extremist groups, and confine the Assad regime. In turn, this would help stop the mass exodus of Syrian refugees that has intensified xenophobia giving rise to the far-right populist politics, and providing ISIS an opportunity to infiltrate the West and conduct terrorist attacks. US Kurdish support makes the goal of reconstruction complicated by estranging key allies, such as Turkey, and escalating ethnic strife in Syria. Any initiative based on minority Kurdish empowerment would be interpreted as a foreign plot by Arabs and a security threat by Turkey. Accordingly, an infuriated Turkey would neutralize all U.S. efforts to build peace and security in Syria and further bring Turkey, Iran, and Russia closer on anti-American common ground. Washington does not need YPG Kurdish sectarianism, which does not include other Syrian Kurdish parties. What the U.S. needs is a majority local Sunni Arab approval, Turkish logistic support, and oil-rich Gulf states' financial commitment to rebuild Syria.

### **5. To stop Russian adventurism**

Kurds are a vulnerable regional actor in Syria who are not able to counter powers, such as Russia, and prefer to cope and align with different realities in Syria even if that means U.S. involvement. But, at the same time, Kurds accepted Russia's and Damascus' presence in their territory as it was the

case in the Afrin enclave before Turkey started an incursion. A strong US leadership in northern Syria coupled with Sunni Arab empowerment would deny Russia, Iran, and the Syrian regime, as well as Iranian backed foreign Shiite fighters, access to northern Syria.

## 6. To counter Iranian expansionism

Countering Iran's destructive influence is key in de-escalating conflicts in the entire Middle East. Kurdish forces in both Iraq and Syria, most evident in Iraq, are not willing or able to take on Iranian influence in the Kurdistan region and sometimes see Iran's presence as a balancing force. Kurds in Syria are not willing to counter Syrian regime forces and Iranian-backed militias. Only an Arab-led alliance of local Arab and non-Arab forces, such as Kurds, Christians, Turkmens, etc., would be able to prevent Iran and its ally, Assad, from penetrating and advancing into northern Syria as the last bastion of hope for defying Syrian regime domination and tyranny.

The U.S. Administration needs to reset its ties with the Kurdish-dominated forces and incorporate them into an Arab as well as NATO ally through a Turkish-led alliance. Only after the establishment of this new coalition, it would be possible to create a no-fly-zone containing the northern part of Syria. Establishment of such a buffer zone – advocated by Turkey since the beginning of the Syrian civil war- has the capacity to prevent consequential Turkish-American confrontation. A buffer zone would deter the Syrian regime from further expanding in the north, deny its allies, Russia, Iran and Hezbollah access, help bring Syrian refugees home and resettle them in secured areas, and abate popular support for Sunni extremism. Washington needs to display quality leadership not necessarily further military presence, and not further Kurdish support and training.

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