

SYRIAN KURDS AS A U.S. ALLY

COOPERATION & COMPLICATIONS



PATRICK CLAWSON, EDITOR

S Y R I A N
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U.S. ALLY

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Cover: Kurds near Ras al-Ain wave PYD flags to celebrate the liberation of their village from Islamist rebels. REUTERS/Stringer

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A C R O N Y M S

AKP	Justice and Development Party (Turkey)
FSA	Free Syrian Army (Syria)
HDP	Peoples' Democratic Party (Turkey)
IS	Islamic State
KDP	Kurdistan Democratic Party (Iraq)
KNC	Kurdistan National Council (Syria)
KRG	Kurdistan Regional Government (Iraq)
MHP	Nationalist Action Party (Turkey)
PKK	Kurdistan Workers Party (Turkey)
PMU	Popular Mobilization Units (Iraqi Shiite groups)
PUK	Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (Iraq)
PYD	Democratic Union Party (<i>Partiya Yekitiya Demokrat</i> ; Syria)
SDF	Syrian Democratic Forces
YPG	People's Defense Units (<i>Yekineyen Parastina Gel</i> ; Syria)

P R E F A C E

THIS COLLECTION OF ESSAYS explores how the United States can work with—or, in some cases, around—the various actors in heavily Kurdish-populated northern Syria to advance the fight against the Islamic State (IS) and to create long-term stability.

Successive pieces look at the Kurds themselves, Turkey, Arabs in the Kurdish-controlled area, the Syrian Arab opposition, the Iraqi Kurds, and Russia. All of these parties are engaged in complex interactions; none fully share U.S. interests—although many have interests that overlap with or differ from those of the United States.

The dominant Kurdish actor in Syria is the Democratic Union Party (*Partiya Yekitiya Demokrat*; PYD) and its associated military, the People's Defense Units (*Yekineyen Parastina Gel*; YPG). One of the more contentious issues is the relationship between the PYD and the Turkey-based Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), from which it sprang. The PKK is designated as a terrorist group by the United States and, of course, by Turkey, which has lost tens of thousands dead in the decades-long struggle against the PKK. Rather than disputing how close or how far the two groups are now, the focus here is on the U.S. interest, which is getting the PYD to separate itself fully from the PKK. What should concern policymakers is shaping the future, not waging disputes about the past or even the present.

These essays thus seek to make practical, concrete recommendations about U.S. policies. They contain no magic formulas—only suggestions that, with hard work and skillful diplomacy, may lead to modest progress.

The proposals here seem consistent with President-elect Donald

Trump's statements about his objectives and, though pushing them to the limits, largely in line with President Obama's policies. Defeating IS in Syria is one objective that both Trump and Obama see as a high priority; indeed, both have placed much emphasis on the battle against IS. And although Trump claimed during the presidential debates that he would defeat IS more quickly than Obama has, he faces the same major challenge as his predecessor: from whence will come the ground forces?

Since the two most likely sources of ground forces are the PYD and Turkish-backed elements—if not Turkey itself—presumably aided by U.S. Special Forces,¹ these essays explore how best to work with these two actors who are unfriendly with each other but potentially helpful to the United States. To make good on Trump's pledge to step up the battle against IS, his team will be well advised to find ways to resolve the PYD-Turkey conundrum.

PATRICK CLAWSON, *editor*

NOTES

1. Trump referred to NATO forces and regional states doing more in the battle against IS; for instance, in the September 2016 presidential debate, he said, "I think we have to get NATO to go into the Middle East with us, in addition to surrounding nations, and we have to knock the hell out of ISIS, and we have to do it fast." Earlier, in the March 2016 primary debate, he said about the anti-IS battle, "I would listen to the generals, but I'm hearing numbers of 20,000-30,000," implying that would be the total force needed against IS in both Syria and Iraq. Neither these quotes nor any other statements suggest he was proposing to commit U.S. ground troops (other than Special Forces). And, of course, one of those NATO allies is Turkey.

DAVID POLLOCK

MAKING ROJAVA MORE LIKE THE KRG

IN SYRIA TODAY, the United States faces an extreme variant of a familiar foreign policy problem: how to work together with two friends who dislike, distrust, and even disregard each other. The two friends of the United States, though not of each other, are Turkey and the Syrian Kurds. The former, much the more powerful and vital to U.S. realpolitik in the region, is almost certain to prevail in greater measure, especially since Turkey is now more actively moving against the Islamic State inside Syria. But the Kurds are also very useful and important against IS in the Syrian theater, lately moving with allied Arab militias against the IS capital of Raqqa. So the U.S. goal should be to reconcile or at least deconflict these two significant actors.

In Syria, in stark contrast to Iraq, U.S. and other NATO member-state coordination with the Kurds has been greatly complicated by Turkish objections. But that coordination has proceeded nonetheless. The common long-term goal of all these interested parties—not just for the sake of defeating IS but also for the sake of their larger regional objectives—should be to nurture a relationship between Turkey and Syria’s Kurds resembling Ankara’s relations with the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq. Only a decade ago, Turkey and the KRG were outright enemies, but they have since undergone a historic transformation to get where they are today: the closest of friends in the region, economically, militarily, and politically. This is an admittedly difficult but ultimately realistic goal for relations between Turkey and Syrian Kurds as well.

The trick will be to increase the distance between the Syrian Kurds and the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) inside Turkey, thereby moving toward Turkey’s acquiescence and eventually even

alliance with friendly Kurdish-controlled territory along its border. If this sounds utopian, it isn't. Rather, it is almost exactly what has happened in the past five years, with quiet but strong U.S. support, along Turkey's border with the autonomous Kurdistan Region of Iraq. The recent exceptionally warm ties between Ankara and Erbil strongly suggest that this particular "age-old ethnic conflict" need not be an insurmountable obstacle to political expedience. Some day, believe it or not, Turkey may find an autonomous Kurdish region on its Syrian border every bit as amenable to its interests as the one on its Iraqi border.

BRIEF BACKGROUND

In Syria, the Democratic Union Party (PYD) is the dominant Kurdish party in the country's northern Kurdish strip, which the Kurds call Rojava (Western Kurdistan; and meaning, literally, "west"). Its three self-declared autonomous "cantons" (Afrin in the west, Kobane and Hasaka in the east) stretch along most of the Turkish border, interrupted by a sixty-mile-long strip controlled by Turkish troops inside Syria since August 24, 2016. The party and its militia, the People's Defense Units (YPG), exercise firm control over the roughly 2.5 million people in their jurisdiction, despite the presence of other local parties and some sporadic opposition. As Salih Muslim, the PYD's official leader, told the author earlier this year, PYD law enforcement might be severe, but "at least they don't chop heads." (While Muslim is the formal leader who represents the PYD publicly, a cadre of military officials run armed operations but stay away from the limelight.)

The Kurds concentrated in northern enclaves along the Turkish border remained comparatively quiescent until quite recently. They managed a brief campaign of protest and civil disobedience in 2004–5, only to fall back under Syrian president Bashar al-Assad's harsh repression. But soon after the start of the Syrian uprising in 2011, Assad's forces largely withdrew from the northern Kurdish areas, leaving them with a sort of de facto autonomy that continues today, although some regime forces remained in an enclave in Hasaka, the major city in the Kurdish zone, in a complicated relationship with the surrounding PYD forces.

Ironically, since mid-2014, the Kurds in both Iraq and Syria have on balance benefited from the rise of a new common enemy in their neighborhood: the Islamic State. In Syria, the United States has likewise provided direct military support to the main local Kurdish party and militia fighting against IS, the PYD/YPG. The second year of this tactical military alliance, from September 2015 to September 2016, witnessed the intensification of strategic cooperation in Iraq, plus the start of active cooperation with the Kurdish PYD/YPG party and militia in Syria: to free the key frontline cities of Kobane, Tal Abyad, al-Shadadi, and Manbij from IS control, and thereby to plan for the isolation and ultimate liberation of the major prize, the Islamic State capital of Raqqa, as well. The result, intended or not, has been to strengthen Kurdish autonomy in each country.

Complicating the situation, especially from Turkey's standpoint, many Syrian Kurds have long had family and other ties with Kurds across the border to the north. They speak the same Kurmanji dialect of Kurdish, unlike the more numerous Kurds in Iraq or Iran. Many Syrian Kurds also have some historical or ideological ties with the PKK and its leader, Abdullah Ocalan, resident in Syria roughly from 1988 to 1998 and imprisoned in Turkey ever since. The PYD in particular considers itself an offshoot of the PKK, and continues even now (e.g., at its latest congress in September 2016 in Brussels) to express sympathy and concern about Ocalan's personal situation.

But for four years, after a deal brokered by Iraqi Kurdistan's President Masoud Barzani in July 2012, the PYD fulfilled a promise not to fight against Turkey, and not to help the PKK do so either. The deal stuck precisely because it reflected the PYD's new self-interest in protecting its own turf inside Syria, rather than carrying the Kurdish struggle across the border. And the Turkish government recognized this new set of facts: it welcomed PYD copresident Salih Muslim (the leftist PYD always appoints a woman as nominal coleader at every level) in Ankara for official talks on several occasions, and accepted PYD control over most of the Syrian border zone. Turkish-PYD relations broke down exactly as Turkish-PKK talks collapsed in July 2015. As Turkey and the PKK entered into conflict following two years of peace talks, Ankara and the PYD adopted a hostile view

of each other, escalating mutual tensions in rhetoric. As explained below, the PYD and Turkey have clashed at least once since Turkish troops entered Syria in August 2016, but only in Syria and in what appears to have been an isolated incident.

Nevertheless, when the PYD-controlled Syrian Kurdish city of Kobane, just across the border from Turkey, came under IS attack in summer 2015, faced with international pressure, Turkey was forced to accept its allies' deal with the YPG. In September 2015, Turkey allowed several thousand Iraqi Kurdish Peshmerga fighters to transit its territory en route to helping the PYD liberate Kobane from IS rule. Moreover, at the same time, Ankara quietly began accepting U.S. airstrikes and weapons drops on behalf of the YPG's allied local Syrian Arab militias, which together with the YPG are now collectively rechristened the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). Arabs constitute less than 20 percent of this force; the YPG makes up more than 80 percent.

By February 2016, even Turkey's initial redline of "no YPG west of the Euphrates" was tacitly modified to allow a "temporary" and successful monthlong YPG-led assault against the IS-controlled strategic crossroads town of Manbij, across the river and just thirty miles or so south of the Turkish border on one side, and north of the IS capital of Raqqa on the other. When Turkey thought the SDF forces were not living up to their deal with the United States to fully withdraw east of the Euphrates after Manbij was secured, Turkey reacted in August 2015 by sending troops into Jarabulus, finding itself a favorable geographic position in order to block the YPG should the group move west from Manbij toward al-Bab, thereby connecting its eastern Kobane-Cizre enclave with Afrin to the west. At the moment, Ankara is unwilling to accept a PYD-controlled belt stretching nearly four hundred miles along the Turkish border.

Along with this transformation into a separate Syrian Kurdish rather than pan-Kurdish organization, the PYD developed its own political and military chain of command, distinct from its PKK roots. It is true that individual members and fighters keep drifting between the two movements. However, their leaderships are different not only in personnel but also in policies. In fact, as Salih Muslim and

others have described to the author in convincing detail, local PYD chiefs and councils inside Syria function separately not only from any outside fiat but even from each other.

To be sure, Turkish analysts allege ongoing PYD ties with Kurdish guerrillas in the Qandil Mountains near the Iraqi border, where the most militant PKK leaders are holed up. They fail, however, to note that the Qandil headquarters lies mostly inside KRG territory, and is tolerated by its government—which does not prevent Turkey from having the closest military, political, and economic relations with the KRG. As recently as 2009, the author watched Turkish warplanes bomb KRG territory in the mountains outside Dahuk; in the past year, they have resumed regular bombing runs against Qandil. But Ankara and Erbil remain the best of friends. In principle, then, even if there are some lines between Rojava and Qandil, this is not a good reason why such relations could not be established between Turkey and an autonomous Syrian Kurdish territory and government as well.

TWISTS AND TURNS OVER THE PAST YEAR

Only when Turkey's government abruptly ended its ceasefire and peace talks with the PKK after the AKP's failure to secure an electoral majority in November 2015, and PKK attacks in Turkey resumed, did Turkey rediscover the PYD as a "terrorist enemy." Ankara's fears about a contiguous Kurdish-controlled zone across its border with Syria, however misguided, became even more intense. It was precisely in order to preempt such a contingency that Turkey's army crossed that border in late August and, along with a few thousand local Arab and Turkmen allies, captured the Azaz-Jarabulus corridor separating the Syrian Kurdish cantons to its east and west. Needless to say, this development greatly aggravated tensions between Turkey and the PYD, leading to inflammatory outbursts by leaders on both sides.

The triggers were YPG advances on the town of Manbij, west of the Euphrates in Syria, during April and May 2016, Turkish-Russian rapprochement in June, and then the failed Turkish military coup of July 15, 2016. Within a month, Turkish tanks and troops had crossed

the Syrian border for the first time, pushing back both Islamic State and PYD contestants in the adjacent Azaz-Jarabulus corridor, and attacking these U.S.-supported Kurdish forces from the air as well. Vice President Joe Biden, on a visit to Ankara just then, publicly pressured YPG men and women fighters to withdraw east of the Euphrates, as he said they had promised to do. President Barack Obama appeared to second this emotion at a meeting with Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan in China on September 4. Concurrent official U.S. statements also placed a new emphasis on Syrian “unity,” implicitly disavowing Kurdish aspirations for autonomy under some kind of “federalist” framework. Erdogan was much blunter, vowing to do anything to prevent the establishment of a “terror corridor” along the Syrian-Turkish border.

At lower levels, U.S. officials scrambled to deconflict Turks and Kurds on this new Syrian territorial front. They managed to arrange local unofficial ceasefires but were unable to broker a broader understanding, as isolated clashes continued. The separate American alliances with Turkey and with the Syrian Kurds against IS were in acute danger of breaking down, victims of the renewed Turkish-Kurdish conflict. The reality is that the United States and NATO need both Turks and Kurds to pursue the battle against the Islamic State. For the moment, it appears that the policy balance has swung back toward Turkey’s insistence, suddenly a military fait accompli, that the PYD will not be permitted to take control of the Azaz-Jarabulus salient, which would join its three Kurdish cantons in a contiguous strip along the Turkish border. But the United States continues to count on the PYD to hold its ground and press on against IS in the existing Kurdish enclaves in northern Syria, and maybe beyond.

As if to symbolize reality, and sustain it, Brett McGurk, the U.S. senior special envoy for defeating the Islamic State, again visited both Ankara and Rojava in early September 2016. Kurdish press reports say he reassured the PYD and YPG/SDF about continued U.S. support, despite the Turkish intervention against them. But whether this support and reliance on the Kurds will extend to some future assault against the IS redoubt in Raqqa is an open question.

All is not lost, however. Both the PYD and Turkey have for the

most part avoided direct confrontations across their common border—even though scattered, small-scale skirmishes between them inside Syria persist. As James Jeffrey, former U.S. ambassador to both Turkey and Iraq, very usefully pointed out at a Turkish studies conference last week, the PYD-controlled stretches of Syria actually constitute Turkey’s most peaceful and secure border with Syria these days. Moreover, the PYD has obligingly withdrawn many of its forces from Manbij, at American and Turkish behest, and Turkey has even publicly acknowledged that positive turn. Ankara has also just announced that it could work with Arab SDF forces, though not their Kurdish YPG commanders.

IMPLICATIONS FOR U.S. INTERESTS

There can be little doubt that Kurdish forces, both the Peshmerga in Iraq and the YPG in Syria, are crucial allies for the U.S. and NATO in the ongoing battle against Islamic State terrorists in each of those two countries. That is the considered, public judgment of the most senior responsible American intelligence officers, political leaders, diplomats, and military commanders now involved in this battle.

For many reasons, including their exceptional military discipline, competence, motivation, proven track record of success, and loyalty to their friends, these Kurdish forces represent a vital link in the chain of alliances and informal partnerships currently on the way to defeating the Islamic State in Syria. However, it is not only such qualitative factors that make Kurdish forces so valuable; sheer numbers are also important. Estimates are that the YPG provides 25,000 or so in Syria, in addition to its central role with the 5,000 allied Arab tribal militias as part of the SDF. Taken together, these are clearly among the most effective and substantial forces arrayed directly against IS in Syria.

At the same time, the Kurds, vital as they are, are not the only link in this chain. Rather, they are one of many, including Arabs, Turks, and others. As a result, a top priority and so far still unresolved challenge for the United States and NATO is whether and how such disparate partners can be forged into a coherent coalition—or, at the very least, deconflicted to ensure success in this extremely fractious and fluid military and political arena.

A prime example is the looming battles for the Islamic State “capital” of Raqqa. U.S. and Kurdish officials alike are now saying they plan to coordinate strategy for these onslaughts in the coming months with both Kurdish forces and others. How precisely that complex and contentious coordination can be accomplished is not yet clear. Equally unclear is the crucial strategy for “the day after”: who takes over Raqqa once the Islamic State is expelled, meaning how to sort out the numerous competing claims for control. What must be avoided at all costs is a repetition of the unfortunate episode at Tal Abyad in which the PYD engaged in ethnic cleansing of the local Arab population. The PYD should be pressed to repeat loudly and often its commitment not to play a role in administering Raqqa after its liberation.

As for Russia’s role, the PYD accepts some weapons, intelligence, and diplomatic support from Moscow, which does not serve U.S. interests. Russia has been the only party calling for the PYD to be represented at the Geneva peace talks, but even this position is now in jeopardy due to the recent, abrupt Russian-Turkish rapprochement. Washington can take advantage of the group’s strong desire for additional American support by making clear that the greater the PYD’s distance from Russia, the more generous such support will be. Similarly, the United States can make clear to the PYD that any cooperation between it and the Syrian regime will be a real barrier to U.S. assistance to the PYD as well as undermine U.S. efforts to improve the PYD’s relationship with the Syrian opposition.

The PYD’s relationship with Iraqi Kurdistan is also exceedingly complex, combining elements of affinity, animosity, and therefore plenty of ambivalence in different measure at different times. The bottom line, though, is this: in this arena, as in others, Kurdish political and military interests have diverged geographically, especially in the past five years. Just as Syria’s Kurds, along with their parties, movements, militias, and institutions, are now distinct from Turkey’s, so too are they distinct from their Kurdish cousins in Iraq. Syrian and Iraqi Kurds today are quite distant from each other, literally and figuratively, and for the most part they do not fight together or coordinate policies. It would not be too much to say that the KRG is

now closer to Turkey than to the PYD. More broadly, most Kurds in Syria, Iraq, Turkey, and Iran have chosen to abandon the pan-Kurdish political prospect, in favor of separately seeking their rights in their respective countries.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

For both Turkish and Kurdish forces to contribute fully to successful outcomes, they will need to be not just competent and courageous but also flexible and even cooperative with some of their sworn enemies. This is a very tough but arguably not insurmountable challenge. Following are a few recommendations for how the United States can contribute to a relatively successful outcome:

First, continue to defer any serious push for Kurdish independence. The United States and most other countries, especially nearby Turkey and Iran but also far beyond, plus the weak central governments in Baghdad and Damascus, all remain firmly opposed to such an initiative. Similarly, when the PYD unilaterally announced formal plans for an autonomous “federal” Kurdish region in Syria, it managed the remarkable feat of uniting in opposition every one of its neighbors, and more: the Assad regime, the Syrian opposition, Turkey, the United States, and even the rival Kurdish KRG just across the river in Iraq. Only Russia announced that this might be a reasonable approach to resolving the Syrian civil war.

Second, continue to work militarily against the Islamic State, with Special Forces on the ground and warplanes in the air, alongside both the Turks and the Kurds inside Syria—for purposes of communication, coordination if possible, and at minimum conflict prevention. But this means firmly putting the PYD on notice that, in return for U.S. military aid and diplomatic support for an eventual “federal” political solution in Syria, the PYD must continue to avoid any attacks against Turkish forces and any material support for the PKK.

Third, in the medium term, privately advise the United States’ Turkish friends to resume their internal peace process with the PKK—and offer tangible U.S. assistance with this effort, as desired. For the time being, both Ankara and the PKK have tragically abandoned their halting rapprochement of 2013–15 and resumed outright

low-intensity war. The PKK demands Kurdish autonomy; the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) in Ankara has contemplated at least offering its Kurdish citizens more cultural and local political freedoms. The gap between the two, apparently narrowing just a year ago, now seems almost impossibly wide, but it might well one day be bridged—if not perhaps with the PKK then with other authentic Kurdish parties, such as the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), which is well represented in the Turkish parliament but in many ways on the sidelines of Turkish political life. This is one instance where the cliché of “no military solution” probably really does apply. And any progress here, in addition to its intrinsic value, would also clearly reduce Turkish fears and suspicions about the PYD across the border.

Fourth, publicly advise the United States' few remaining Arab friends in Syria that they should find a way to compromise with the Kurds. Despite the highly charged rhetoric of all sides, the PYD is not an enemy of the Arab opposition. Members of the group have, as noted before, engaged in unfortunate episodes of ethnic cleansing in certain areas such as Tal Abyad, but now the PYD has an allied militia consisting of at least 5,000 local Arabs fighting IS and other common enemies. The group could therefore be a key ally in liberating Raqqa and then leaving it to Arab militias to hold, just as the KRG's Peshmerga could be a key partner in retaking Mosul in Iraq.

For now, the mainstream Syrian Arab opposition suffers from terrible relations with the PYD. If opposition elements had simply been friendly to the PYD, even if not united with it, they could have achieved considerably more together against both IS and the Assad regime. Yet the Arabs remain unwilling to recognize any Kurdish ethnic rights. Their main argument is that the PYD is collaborating with the Assad regime, but in fact the regime recently attacked PYD forces, both in Qamishli and in Hasaka. To be sure, the PYD has generally tried to avoid combat against regime elements, but it has acted this way out of self-interest, not a desire for cooperation with Damascus. And the situation in Aleppo's Kurdish enclave, where the PYD has great influence, is complicated. The Kurdish forces say that they were under attack by Arab opposition groups and so had to rely on supplies coming from the regime side, while Arab opposition groups

reject that explanation and accuse the Kurdish forces of collaborating with the regime. Privately, some Arab opposition members admit that while they cannot formally recognize Kurdish autonomy, they do realize that the PYD will probably have to be accommodated somehow in a post-Assad Syrian government.

Fifth, and finally, in exchange for the preceding moves by regional friends and allies, the United States should make a clear and deliberate decision to increase its tangible support both for the Arab opposition in Syria and for the ultimate prospect of Kurdish rights with an empowered regional government. Such a policy departure may well be the only way to salvage any success from the terrible plight of Syria, and of U.S. policy therein. And even if Syria is lost, this new policy would hold out the long-term potential of improving American ties to both its Turkish and Kurdish partners in the broader region.

SONER CAGAPTAY

U.S. TIES WITH TURKEY & THE SYRIAN KURDS

THE TRIANGULAR RELATIONSHIP between the U.S. government and its two allies against the Islamic State, namely Turkey and the Syria-based PYD, is fraught with tensions. The risk of military conflict between Turkey and the PYD's military arm, the YPG, has increased since the August 24, 2016, Turkish incursion into northwestern Syria. Turkish troops and the YPG militia, both working with the United States to combat IS—U.S. Special Operations teams are embedded with Turkish and YPG forces alike—often operate only miles apart from each other. Following Turkey's August 24 incursion, PYD leader Salih Muslim implicitly threatened Turkey by tweeting, "Turkey is in a Syrian quagmire."

Tensions between Ankara and the PYD require close U.S. attention given their potential to derail Washington's efforts to combat IS, especially in Syria. How, then, can Washington manage this triangular relationship? And, in the long term, can Turkish ties with Kurds in northern Syria evolve toward the "Ankara-Kurdistan Regional Government model" in Iraq, wherein the KRG in northern Iraq also acts as a cordon sanitaire for Turkey, with which it has good ties, against instability, sectarian war, jihadist threats, and civil war emanating from the rest of Iraq?

BACKGROUND

Animosity between Ankara and the PYD is rooted in the group's ties with the Turkey-based Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), a Kurdish movement that has fought Turkey over the years. In 2003, the PKK created the PYD in hopes of fostering a Syrian Kurdish movement.

Although Ankara and Washington consider the PKK a terrorist entity, the Turkish government of then prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan entered into formal peace talks with the group in 2013. In 2015, after Erdogan became president, these talks collapsed, followed by intense fighting between Ankara and the PKK. Since then, the PKK has carried out a number of suicide bombings, killing at least sixty-five people.

The PKK and PYD continue to be close, if not outright branches of the same group.¹ Because of this overlap, Turkey has been hostile toward the PYD since the collapse of the Turkey-PKK peace talks in 2015. Accordingly, Ankara has shelled PYD positions inside Syria a number of times, including in retaliation for the PKK's bombing of Ankara in February 2016. For its part, the PYD has targeted Turkish troops in Syria, killing a Turkish soldier and injuring three others following the recent Turkish incursion into Jarabulus. This state of affairs is a sharp contrast to the 2013–15 period, when Turkey was in peace talks with the PKK: at that time, PYD leader Salih Muslim visited Ankara a number of times, including in July of both 2013 and 2015. In a December 2014 interview, he said, “We genuinely want Turkey to affect the developments in a positive way.” The sudden turnaround in the Ankara-PYD relationship since summer 2015 suggests that Turkey and the PYD see each other through the lens of their relationship with the PKK: when the PKK is at peace with Turkey, so is the PYD. When the PKK fights Ankara, Turkey and the PYD become deeply hostile toward each other, as is the case now in Syria.

SHORT TERM:
COMPARTMENTALIZE
TURKEY-PYD TIES

In the immediate term, short of securing Ankara-PKK peace talks (the dynamics of which are explained below), Washington should focus on preventing further deterioration of Ankara-PYD ties in Syria. Such an effort should be carried out with the understanding that Ankara's campaign against the PKK at home will, by extension, be aimed at preventing further PYD gains in Syria. In 2013, the

PYD took control over parts of northern Syria, declaring an autonomous region—dubbed Rojava—in three territorially noncontiguous cantons: Afrin in the northwest, Kobane in the north, and Cizre in the northeast. In June 2015, the PYD seized from IS the city of Tal Abyad, which lies between Kobane and Cizre, thereby connecting its two cantons east of the Euphrates River. Turkey grudgingly acquiesced to these gains but also said that it would strike the YPG should it cross west of the Euphrates and move toward Afrin, a development that would allow the PYD to control the nearly four-hundred-mile-long stretch of PKK-friendly territory enveloping Turkey from the south.

In June 2016, the YPG, acting under the U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), crossed west of the Euphrates, capturing from IS the city of Manbij, to the west of Kobane. Although the PYD had agreed to turn Manbij over to its Arab inhabitants after liberating it and withdraw east of the Euphrates, the YPG nevertheless stayed in the city. And soon, the Kurdish militia started advancing toward Jarabulus near the Turkish border and west toward Afrin. For a while, the PYD appeared to be on the cusp of connecting Kobane with Afrin, thereby creating its desired contiguous belt. The Turkish incursion into Jarabulus, which has driven a wedge between Kobane and Afrin, has, at least for the time being, exhausted PYD dreams of uniting all its cantons.

Washington is continuing to manage cooperation with Turkish forces as well as the YPG in Syria to keep both on board against the Islamic State. Turkey has already captured more than a thousand square kilometers of territory from IS, roughly the size of Rhode Island. Ankara has signaled that it will continue to support its proxy, the Free Syrian Army (FSA), in taking as much as five thousand square kilometers in northwestern Syria. If the PYD confronts Turkish troops in Syria or tries to block Turkish proxies, Ankara will most certainly strike back, a development that could spark a full-scale Turkish-YPG war in Syria. To prevent such a conflict, Washington should compartmentalize its efforts with Turkey and the YPG in Syria regarding the Islamic State. In his August 24 visit to Ankara, Vice President Joe Biden outlined U.S. policy on this mat-

ter, and hinted at such compartmentalization, saying Kurds “under no circumstances will get American support” if they do not keep a commitment to return to the east of the Euphrates.

In the short term, the best U.S. policy to prevent a Turkish-YPG war is to implement a strict division of labor in Syria: the United States should work with the PYD east of the Euphrates, and with Turkey west of the Euphrates. Washington should relay to the PYD that a failure to abide by this division would mean exposing itself to the Turkish military. Having gained control over large chunks of Syrian territory mostly east of the Euphrates, including non-Kurdish cities such as Hasaka and Tal Abyad, the Syrian Kurds have reason not to overreach. The PYD’s Kobane and Cizre cantons have expanded significantly of late into non-Kurdish areas, giving the group control over not 100 but 150 percent of its desired territory across Syria. Now, the PYD wants to gain 200 percent. Washington should relay to the PYD leadership that if the group confronts Turkey in this regard, it could end up with 50 percent. Turkey could, for instance, back Arab forces in retaking Tal Abyad from the PYD, effectively breaking the link between the group’s conjoined Kobane and Cizre cantons, and quashing Kurdish efforts to control a viable swath of territory inside Syria.

MID-TERM: SECURE FURTHER TURKISH ASSISTANCE AGAINST IS

Washington also appears to maintain leverage over Ankara. The United States should thus express to Turkey its satisfaction over the capture of Jarabulus, a key Islamic State smuggling point for foreign fighters. Washington should add that were Turkey to make a major push against IS, such as toward Raqqa, the United States would be much less interested in the PYD, potentially even east of the Euphrates, although such a Turkish push could produce a lasting peace only if Turkey quickly handed the area over to Syrian Arab opposition forces. In the short term, Ankara’s continued success in its anti-IS operations in northwestern Syria will deepen U.S. trust in Turkey as a reliable ally against the jihadist group.

LONG TERM: ASSIST TURKEY IN DEFEATING THE PKK POLITICALLY

In the long term, one development could almost certainly change the Turkey-PYD dynamic: renewed peace talks between Ankara and the PKK. And the prospects for such talks are closely inter-linked with the broader Turkish political scene and, more specifically, President Erdogan's agenda. In the current Turkish system, Erdogan faces limitations. He is head of state, but not head of government. Moreover, since becoming president in 2014, he has had to formally leave the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) to comply with the constitutional stipulation that the president must be a nonpartisan figure. Erdogan wants to become an executive-style and partisan president. To this end, he needs to change the Turkish constitution, which requires him to win a popular referendum likely to be held in spring 2017. This would allow him to amend the country's constitution, thereby making him head of state, head of government, and head of the ruling party. This is Erdogan's political ambition, and the Turkish leader will do nearly anything to get there.

The problem for Erdogan is that his AKP has maxed out at just under 50 percent, in recent elections in 2011 and 2015. To gain majority support in a referendum, Erdogan needs to expand the AKP's base, and to do so, he has set his sights on voters from the Nationalist Action Party (MHP), a party similar in its right-wing orientation to the AKP.

If Erdogan can deliver a military victory against the PKK, this development would undoubtedly make him massively popular for many MHP voters, bringing some of them into his fold. That, in turn, would almost certainly reward Erdogan with more than 50 percent of the vote, opening the path for an executive and partisan presidency, fulfilling his long-sought dream. Turkey is unlikely to enter into peace talks with the PKK until Erdogan has forced the group into some sort of military defeat, however, which means Turkey-PYD ties will be wracked with tension until Erdogan registers such a victory.

The United States might thus consider delivering aggressive military assistance to Turkey to help bring forth sufficient Turkish advances against the PKK that peace talks would be accepted by both sides, although Washington should point out to Ankara that such assistance would be highly controversial to the extent Erdogan is perceived as suppressing all opposition and consolidating power in his own hands.

In this regard, Erdogan's greatest asset is Abdullah Ocalan, the PKK's founder, who has been serving a life sentence in a Turkish jail since 1999. Ocalan has a great pull over the PKK—and also over the PYD, with telltale signs of PKK-PYD affiliation and a cultlike following for Ocalan being the Ocalan posters in PYD offices and Ocalan badges on YPG uniforms. Erdogan has recently kept Ocalan incommunicado. When he feels he has inflicted enough military damage on the PKK, Erdogan will allow Ocalan to speak, at which point the PKK's founding leader will call upon the organization to lay down its weapons. Ocalan wants to be released from prison as part of a compromise with Erdogan, and in this interest, he will deliver a ceasefire message to the PKK when Erdogan is ready for it. Both the PKK and the PYD will likely listen to this charismatic, founding, and, most important, ideological leader. Indeed, typically, PKK and PYD/YPG orientation sessions for recruits include extensive discussions on Ocalan's ideology. In return for bringing the PKK to the peace table, Ocalan's sentence would presumably be upgraded to house arrest. Thereafter, Turkey-PYD ties would shift back to resembling the post-2013 period, with tensions falling significantly and Ankara and the PYD reestablishing contacts.

As it focuses on helping Turkey against the PKK, Washington should also study ways of preventing PYD backlash against Ankara in Syria. U.S. interests are ill-served when its Turkish ally and its potential PYD friend clash. To the PYD, Washington should emphasize that an autonomous Rojava in Syria would represent great progress for the Kurdish cause if it can secure Turkish backing, with a chance at governing land and people as well as gaining international legitimacy. Some now in the PKK, including a portion of the many Syrian-origin PKK fighters, may be attracted

to joining this venture, which offers better prospects for power than the PKK can ever hope to achieve in Turkey. Washington should likewise relay to the PYD that if it stays with the United States in the battle against IS, while refraining from targeting Turkey inside Syria, it will be able to hold Rojava with Turkish and American support.

CAN TURKEY HAVE A KRG-LIKE RELATIONSHIP WITH ROJAVA?

Along the lines just discussed, peace talks between Turkey and the PKK, once they restart, would help normalize Turkey-Rojava ties. In the long term, Turkey might conceivably build a relationship with Rojava akin to its ties with the KRG. In 2007, the KRG leadership, realizing that it was surrounded on all sides by hostile states—Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Turkey—sought a friendship with Turkey in hopes of ensuring its long-term viability. In the subsequent years, Erbil offered Ankara economic and financial incentives, such as access to KRG markets, as well as natural gas and oil deals. Economic ties became the building blocks of the relationship, establishing confidence, soon followed by closer political and even security cooperation.

Even if Rojava does not have nearly as much oil as does the KRG, Turkish access to its markets and construction sectors would be a definitive sweetener for potential Turkish rapprochement with the Syrian Kurds. More important for Ankara, Rojava could help shield Turkey from instability, sectarian warfare, conflict, and jihadist threats emanating from the rest of Syria, just as the KRG acts as a highly effective cordon sanitaire between Turkey and Iraq's unstable center.

As already established, a budding Turkey-Rojava relationship can only be envisioned against a backdrop of peace talks and good ties between Ankara and the PKK and, by extension, good ties between Turkey and the PYD. For their own part, the Syrian Kurds might eventually decide, following the KRG example, that they cannot survive in a hostile neighborhood surrounded only by enemies, and that they will need at least one friend—Turkey—to survive in the long term. U.S. policy should help Ankara weaken the

PKK militarily in order to usher in Turkey-PKK talks as a precursor to Turkish normalization with Rojava. Even if Turkey's ties to Rojava never reach the level of Turkey-KRG relations—indeed, the KRG is a much larger entity than Rojava and offers Turkey many more economic benefits—Ankara and the Syrian Kurds could still come to a *modus vivendi*.

NOTES

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ANDREW J. TABLER

THE SYRIAN OPPOSITION & THE PYD

IN MID-SEPTEMBER 2016, a video circulated showing rebel fighters in al-Rai, Syria, jeering at a passing convoy of another rebel group and its U.S. advisors. The mocking response owed to the convoy's alliance with the PYD, highlighting the complexity of alliances on the ground in northern Syria.¹ How the United States navigates this divisive environment remains perhaps the biggest challenge as it seeks to destroy the Islamic State.

HISTORICAL TENSIONS BETWEEN SUNNI ARABS AND KURDS IN SYRIA

Relations between Syria's Sunni Arab and Kurdish populations have vacillated over time. While both communities largely follow the same Sunni interpretation of Islam, Kurdish linguistic and ethnic affinity has been viewed with suspicion by various governments in Damascus, whose penchant for Arab nationalism emphasized Syria's Arab identity over all others. After the collapse of the Ottoman Empire in 1918, Kurdish communities fled Mustafa Kemal's centralizing nationalist state to the French Mandate of Syria, where they were settled and granted citizenship in three cantons along Turkey's southern border: Hasaka, Kobane, and Afrin. Given the low population density, the Kurds were able to coexist at first with the Arab tribes of the Jazira region of northeastern Syria. But with greater population growth, as well as the spread of Arab nationalism when Syria joined the United Arab Republic under Gamal Abdul Nasser (1958–61) and subsequently under the Baath Party, which seized

power in 1963 and remains the Assad regime's ideological base, various governments instituted policies to undermine Kurdish communities in northern Syria. In the 1960s, Damascus stripped 120,000 Kurds of their Syrian nationality, rendering them "stateless" and unable to work or own property. Damascus simultaneously resettled Arabs along Turkey's southern border, creating an "Arab belt" to isolate and divide Kurds in Syria.

The regime of Hafiz al-Assad continued the divide-and-rule strategy, using repression of Kurds to bolster the Alawite regime's pan-Arab credentials and legitimacy among Sunni Arabs. Nevertheless, in a bid to gain leverage over his stronger northern neighbor, Turkey, Assad gave shelter in 1979 to the leftist Kurdish leader Abdullah Ocalan and his Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), which organized terrorist attacks in Turkey from Syrian soil. Over two decades, Ocalan and leftist PKK ideology took root in Syria, influencing young Kurds from throughout Syria to aspire for independence. After the regime expelled Ocalan in 1998 following Turkey's threat to invade Syria, the Assad regime resumed its divide-and-rule approach. The regime refused to reinstate the 120,000 disenfranchised Kurds and their families, leading to periodic clashes with the regime. In 2004, for example, the regime used live fire to suppress clashes at a soccer game in Qamishli between Kurds and Sunni Arab fans from Deir al-Zour, leading to further protests throughout the country.

OPPOSITION STATEMENTS ABOUT THE PYD

Following the outbreak of the uprising in March 2011, Syrian Kurds attempted to carve out a precarious third way between the Assad regime and the Sunni-Arab-dominated Syrian opposition. The Assad regime, knowing that it could no longer directly hold Kurdish areas in northern Syria via its traditional means—the Syrian army and Military Intelligence Directorate—began giving concessions to the Kurds, particularly the PYD, the Syrian offshoot of the PKK. This included Assad's decision only a month into the uprising to grant citizenship to those families stripped of citizenship in 1962, as well as allowing Kurdish areas under the direction of the PYD and its mili-

tary arm, the YPG, de facto autonomy in November 2013. Since then, the regime has maintained a token administrative presence in Hasaka and troops in a larger military and air base south of Qamishli, all the while clashing periodically with YPG forces. In the latest such clash, in August 2016, Assad regime forces were partially expelled from Hasaka. Nevertheless, the YPG forces have acted in concert with the Assad regime in the ongoing battle of northern Aleppo, allowing the regime to cut the Azaz corridor rebel-supply route north of Aleppo and to surround and besiege the city.

The YPG's modus vivendi with the regime has infuriated Syria's Sunni-Arab-dominated opposition, seemingly causing the opposition to dismiss PYD clashes with the regime as a ruse to cover up their de facto alliance. In August 2016, Abdul Hakim Bashar, vice president of Syrian National Coalition, said that recent clashes between the regime and PYD militias in Hasaka were designed to "silence any opposition to the PYD's repressive practices." He remarked that "PYD policies do not reflect the aspirations of the Kurds, adding that PYD repressive practices over the past four years are not different to those carried out by the Assad regime."²

Such opposition ire is reflected in the coalition's stance on the PYD in the latest round of peace talks. Former Syrian National Council and High Negotiations Committee member George Sabra stated on January 28, 2016, that the coalition refused PYD participation in the talks because of the Kurdish group's relationship with the regime, saying:

The PYD is not an opposition group and, rather, has strong ties with the [Syrian] regime. This is not a political opinion—that is a fact. Photos of the Syrian interior minister, Muhammad al-Shaar, during his meetings with PYD leaders, at the PYD's headquarters in Qamishli and Hasaka, were leaked just a week ago. No clashes have ever been recorded between the regime and the YPG. So how can we call the PYD an opposition group?³

Sabra also objected to the PYD's participation because it "is the Syrian branch of PKK, internationally recognized as a terrorist group."⁴ The coalition, via the Kurdistan National Council—a smaller rival to the PYD—has also accused the YPG of carrying out atrocities in

Syria, including the reported parading of corpses of Free Syrian Army (FSA) soldiers in the Afrin canton.⁵ Members of the Syrian opposition likewise tout reports from international human rights watchdogs documenting PYD displacement of Arabs from towns and villages in northeastern Syria.

Syria's armed opposition has an even lower opinion of the PYD, often relying on Kurds aligned with the Sunni-Arab-dominated FSA to level criticism against the PYD in a seeming attempt to dodge accusations of Arab chauvinism. In an interview with Syria Direct in January 2016, Masoud Ibo (aka Abu al-Majd Komaleh), a spokesperson for Liwa Ahfad Salah al-Din, a Kurdish FSA brigade in the northern Aleppo countryside, minced no words when asked if the PYD was part of the Syrian opposition:

The PYD party has killed and expelled Kurdish people who are with the revolution in Syria. The party has arrested, pursued and confiscated the assets of those tied to the revolution. It is not part of the Syrian opposition but rather an integral part of Bashar al-Assad's Baathist regime.⁶

The FSA directly criticizes the PYD as well. In an April 2016 FSA statement rich with hyperbolic language about YPG "treachery," titled "A Clarification on the Claims and Lies of the Gangs of the PYD," the FSA leadership accused the PYD of breaking all its promises and carrying out "operations of treachery in all of its forms" in Aleppo, including occupying Arab towns, helping the regime attack Sheikh Aqil, and "cutting off Castillo road."⁷

Salafists opposed to the Islamic State, too, have savaged the PYD. Ahrar al-Sham's Kurdish brigade "denounced, with all the force of the term, the PYD occupation of Arab villages in northern Aleppo."⁸ Then, in September 2016, Ahrar al-Sham issued a fatwa legitimizing working with the Turkish armed forces to fight the Islamic State *and* the YPG.⁹

PYD ON THE SYRIAN SUNNI OPPOSITION

The PYD's leader, Salih Muslim, has been harshly critical of the opposition Syrian National Coalition in particular, claiming in a January

2014 interview that the organization “is not representing all Syrian people. Maybe some . . .” And he questioned the legitimacy of the coalition due to its lack of a ground presence in Syria:

Who is going to stop them if you discuss a cease-fire? For our side, it is OK. Within one half-hour, we can stop all Kurdish forces and they will obey this, but for those groups it is not true...Maybe [Syrian opposition leader] Ahmed Jarba gets arrested when he enters Syria, but we have our area. You have seen me over there [in Qamishli] and I am well protected. Nobody can arrest me; they listen to me.¹⁰

During the 2016 failed rounds of peace talks in Geneva, the PYD, which was kept away from the table, claimed that armed opposition groups fighting the Assad regime are putting “many hurdles” in the way of peace negotiations, particularly from “the Riyadh opposition”—a common term for the opposition High Negotiation Committee, sometimes said to be sponsored by Saudi Arabia.¹¹

Salih Muslim also often characterizes any armed group he is at odds with—whether part of the FSA or not—as a Turkish puppet, allowing him to deny being against the revolution or collaborating with Assad. In 2012, Muslim said that “groups such as al-Nusra Front and Ghuraba al-Sham are all related to the Turkish regime, affiliated, supported and sent by them.”¹²

Following the attempted implementation of the cessation of hostilities in March 2016, the PYD issued a statement on the bombing of Sheikh Maqsoud, Aleppo’s Kurdish district, in which the group specifically called out U.S.-backed factions such as the Fastaqim Kama Umirt Gathering, Brigade 13, and Harakat Nour al-Din al-Zinki:

The Syrian armed opposition that belong to Syrian coalition, which the Kurdish National Council is a part of, have not respected the announced deal, though they stated their agreement on the decision by then. Furthermore, they exploited the truce in other areas and withdrew the fighters from other fronts with ISIS in the south countryside of Aleppo, and gathered all this power around [the] Sheikh Maqsoud neighborhood...The Syrian Coalition along with its partner the Kurdish National Council bear the responsibil-

ity of the results of these inhuman actions for breaching the truce and cessation of hostilities, for these battalions and factions officially belong to them. We hereby demand the Security Council, the United States of America and the Russian Federation to take an immediate action to end these violations committed by the Syrian Coalition and its partner the Kurdish National Council.¹³

BRIDGING THE GAP BETWEEN THE OPPOSITION AND THE PYD

To address the dynamics discussed here, the United States should, in the short term, adopt a dual approach in eastern Syria (east of the Euphrates River), designed to encourage both Turkey and the PYD into alliance with Arab tribes prominent in the area. Washington could then encourage both sides to agree on spheres of influence inside Syria that could be tied to a revived future peace process between Ankara and the PKK.

Turkey's Role

Since the outbreak of the Syrian civil war in 2011, no country has done more to support the Syrian opposition than Turkey. That year, Ankara went from being the region's primary advocate of engagement with Bashar al-Assad to the Syrian regime's biggest enemy. To this end, Ankara allowed thousands of tons of aid and ammunition across its border with Syria to enable the Sunni Arab opposition to defend itself against Assad's attempts to shoot and gas his way out of the uprising and to help the United States and its allies force Assad to "step aside." For years, moreover, opposition to the PYD has united the Syrian opposition and Turkey.

As stalemate divided the country among literally hundreds of factions, Turkey's support for the Sunni opposition had an ancillary impact: to block the national aspirations of the PYD. Turkish support was successful in helping the opposition factions drive Assad's forces southward, but Turkey's open border policy also indirectly contributed to the growth of jihadist groups. By the time the Islamic State declared its existence in 2014, executed a number of Western hos-

tages, and provoked a response from the United States and the West, Turkey suddenly found itself fighting against Assad, the PYD, and IS simultaneously.

A recent spate of IS organized terrorist attacks in Turkey has moved that organization to the top of Turkey's list of enemies in the region. But the PYD falls within this same top tier of Turkish enemies. Turkey's recent incursion into a self-declared safe zone between Marea and Jarabulus (dubbed Operation Euphrates Shield) in support of Sunni Arab opposition marks a logical extension of Turkey's three-front policy, cementing its connection to Syria's Sunni opposition.

The challenge for the United States is to find ways to persuade Turkey to live with the PYD so that both sides can concentrate on the battle against the Islamic State. Only as that effort succeeds is it realistic to think that the Arab opposition, which is increasingly dependent on Turkey for support (and as a conduit for support), will be more willing to work with the PYD.

Role of Arab Tribes

Despite deep animosity and correspondingly acerbic rhetoric between the PYD and the Turkish-backed opposition, both blocs are facing a reality in which the Assad regime will hold on to power for the foreseeable future. The regime's historical tactics, combined with its limited deployable manpower, mean it will likely attempt a divide-and-rule strategy with both the PYD and the opposition. Thus, both PYD and Arab opposition figures now anticipate the Assad regime will reach out to Arab tribes prominent in the Jazira area of eastern Syria as the basis for a future political order. In this case, both the PYD and the Syrian opposition risk losing not only the battle for Syria but also a sustainable basis for continued local autonomy.

With these prospects in mind, the United States has an interest in working with both the PYD and the Syrian opposition to defeat the Islamic State and help encourage a sustainable political order in eastern Syria in which extremism cannot take root. Given the diversity of tribes in eastern Syria, the United States could encourage these tribes to align with either the pro-Turkish groups supported by the

Turkish military in Ankara's de facto safe zone near Jarabulus, under Operation Euphrates Shield, or with the PYD. Both Turkey and the PYD have proven successful in rallying tribesmen to their side with money and material.

But such an approach will only work if the United States also encourages both sides to recognize distinct spheres of influence inside Syrian territory in a post-IS environment. Otherwise, Washington risks an Assad return to the Euphrates. Complicating this effort is the thus-far-secret understanding between Ankara and Moscow over the creation of the Jarabulus safe zone. Russian calculations in support of the Assad regime would seem to imply that Ankara may have agreed to a limited Bantustan pocket allowing YPG/SDF forces to push south and link up with the Afrin pocket. But it is hard to see Ankara agreeing to such an arrangement in the long term, given its fears of encirclement by the PKK to the south.

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FABRICE BALANCHE

ARABS IN THE PYD-CONTROLLED AREA

FROM THE BEGINNING of the Syrian uprising in 2011, the PYD has held considerable power in northwestern Syria—although less so in northeastern Syria, where other Kurdish parties have maintained considerable support. But since the rise of wartime jihadist attacks in 2013, the PYD has grown stronger, emerging as the only group with a military branch—the YPG—in Syrian Kurdish territory. After its victory in Kobane in January 2015, thanks to U.S. support, the PYD has begun to spread to non-Kurdish areas in the province of Hasaka, along with Tal Abyad (Raqqa province) and finally Manbij (Aleppo province).

Yet many inhabitants of the territory now controlled by the PYD are not Kurdish. The group must therefore address any signs of a revolt against its authority. Doing so will require allowing self-government for Arab peoples and refraining from any attempts at forced “Kurdization.” As it stands, the PYD’s governing policy appears flexible enough to accommodate such an approach. But after the defeat of the Islamic State—that is, when the common enemy disappears—the PYD will face a great challenge in building strong relations with the Arabs inside the Syrian Kurdish area known as Rojava.

ARAB ROLE IN THE SDF

Of the total fighters in the war alliance known as the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), perhaps 25 percent are non-Kurds, recruited in peripheral areas of Rojava. In spring 2015 in Afrin, the SDF integrated some 1,800–2,000 Arab fighters who had survived defeat as

part of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) to the jihadist Jabhat al-Nusra.¹ Such “orphaned” FSA fighters, belonging to such subgroups as the al-Hamza Front, were recruited by Kurdish elements from entities such as the Kurdish Front, a former FSA affiliate. Participation of the Christian militia known as Sutoro is anecdotal, used for external propaganda purposes, given that half of the Christian inhabitants of Hasaka province—10 percent of the total population in 2011—have since fled.

In their southward progress toward areas north of Raqqa, SDF forces collected additional backing from anti-IS clans. These extra forces have joined up with the SDF not out of any inherent affinity but rather because the SDF is the single repository for U.S. weapons. If these Arab groups want to receive arms, then they must join the SDF. The U.S. military, for its part, strives to avoid repeating the mistake of training Arab forces, as it did with FSA units, only to see them fall apart.

Whereas Arab tribes, lacking any other option, have supported Kurdish political dominance, the arrival of a new rebel operation supported by Turkey, known as Euphrates Shield, has created dissension within the SDF. Indeed, within the Afrin SDF, Arab fighters belonging to Jaish al-Thuwar are deployed in the Azaz corridor against Turkey-backed Arab rebels. Yet several Arab tribes are leaving the SDF to join Euphrates Shield. Among its objectives in this endeavor, Turkey is seeking to peel away ethnic Turkmen from the SDF, and it has the money and arms to do so.

The extent to which Turkey can rally Arabs previously working with the SDF depends on two main factors: (1) whether Turkey unduly favors ethnic Turkmen fighters over Arabs; and (2) how deep the Turkish intervention goes in Syria. Guiding the second dynamic are concerns about a Russian reaction should Turkey intensify its involvement and the potential for Turkish casualties.

If Ankara courts Arabs as well as Turkmen in the Kurdish areas, the Turks will succeed in advancing their objective to prevent the creation of a formal Rojava, but this approach could delay the fight against IS and, especially, the liberation of Raqqa. Turkish support to some tribes could revive a tribal war for local power.

CAN THE PYD SUSTAIN ARAB LOYALTY?

For the PYD, the day's big question is how to retain the long-term loyalty of its Arab affiliates. As already suggested, the PYD has addressed this issue by permitting Arab self-governance and coopting local leaders in Arab councils while keeping military power for itself. Given intertribal divisions among Arabs, clans in power feel obliged to support the PYD, in view of the group's U.S. support in areas such as Kobane and Hasaka. In Afrin, the PYD appears to be receiving Russian support.

Overall, however, the Syrian opposition regularly accuses the PYD of engaging in ethnic cleansing against Arabs and Turkmen populations living in Rojava. To be sure, Kurds are aiming to strengthen their own demographic weight in this ethnically heterogeneous region. In October 2015, Amnesty International denounced the PYD for disallowing populations of some Arab villages from returning home. For its part, the PYD claims it must first secure the area, with IS proximity making it impossible for civilians to return to Ain Issa, north of Raqqa. Nevertheless, the Kurds have indeed practiced ethnic cleansing in local cases, in response to Islamist fighters aided by local Arabs who expelled Kurds and seized their properties. In spring 2013, after the Kurds briefly captured Tal Abyad, IS fighters destroyed Kurdish villages around the city and expelled the Kurdish civilians from the district. Such acts drew retribution, despite reassurances to the contrary by PYD leader Salih Muslim, when in 2015 the PYD successfully took the city. In a recent interview, the PYD head outlined a clearer policy toward Arabs, saying that the PYD's militias would fight against jihadist groups but would not force out local Arabs, whether transplants or natives:

There are three types of Arabs among us: There are those with whom we have always lived and whom we have fought alongside. We defend the brotherhood with these peoples. There are those who do not belong, Arabs who came from outside...the jihadists who have burned our homes, who have decapitated Kurds. Finally, there are the Arabs who were forcibly moved to Kurdistan by [for-

mer Syrian president] Hafiz al-Assad...to Arabize the area. They are victims...and we advocate a peaceful solution for these populations. Those who can return to their hometowns should do so, and the others can live in peace with the Kurds.²

The population transfer just mentioned refers to an “Arab belt” created in the 1960s on the Turkish border, with populations drawn from the Raqqa area. But only a few thousand Arab Syrians were involved in that transfer—a population that has grown to just over 20,000 today—making in virtually insignificant against, for example, Saddam Hussein’s anti-Kurdish Anfal campaigns of the late 1980s. Nevertheless, the Baathist Syrian government favored Arab residents over Kurds, creating intercommunal tensions.

When Syrian Kurds revolted in 2004, the Ministry of Local Government claimed that half of the villages in Hasaka province had no ties to any municipality. They were directly managed by the provincial administration, which in practice left them without government services. Of course, most of the villages “abandoned” by the Syrian state were Kurdish. In the bigger picture, the Syrian government hoped that by underserving such communities, it would encourage their members to leave the countryside for the cities, where they would be more privy to Arabization. However, this discriminatory approach spurred much frustration in Hasaka. For this reason, the Syrian army is still present south of Qamishli in Arab villages where the population aided in the repression of the Kurds in 2004. Elsewhere today, PYD authority is indispensable in preventing old Kurdish-Arab conflicts from bloodily returning.

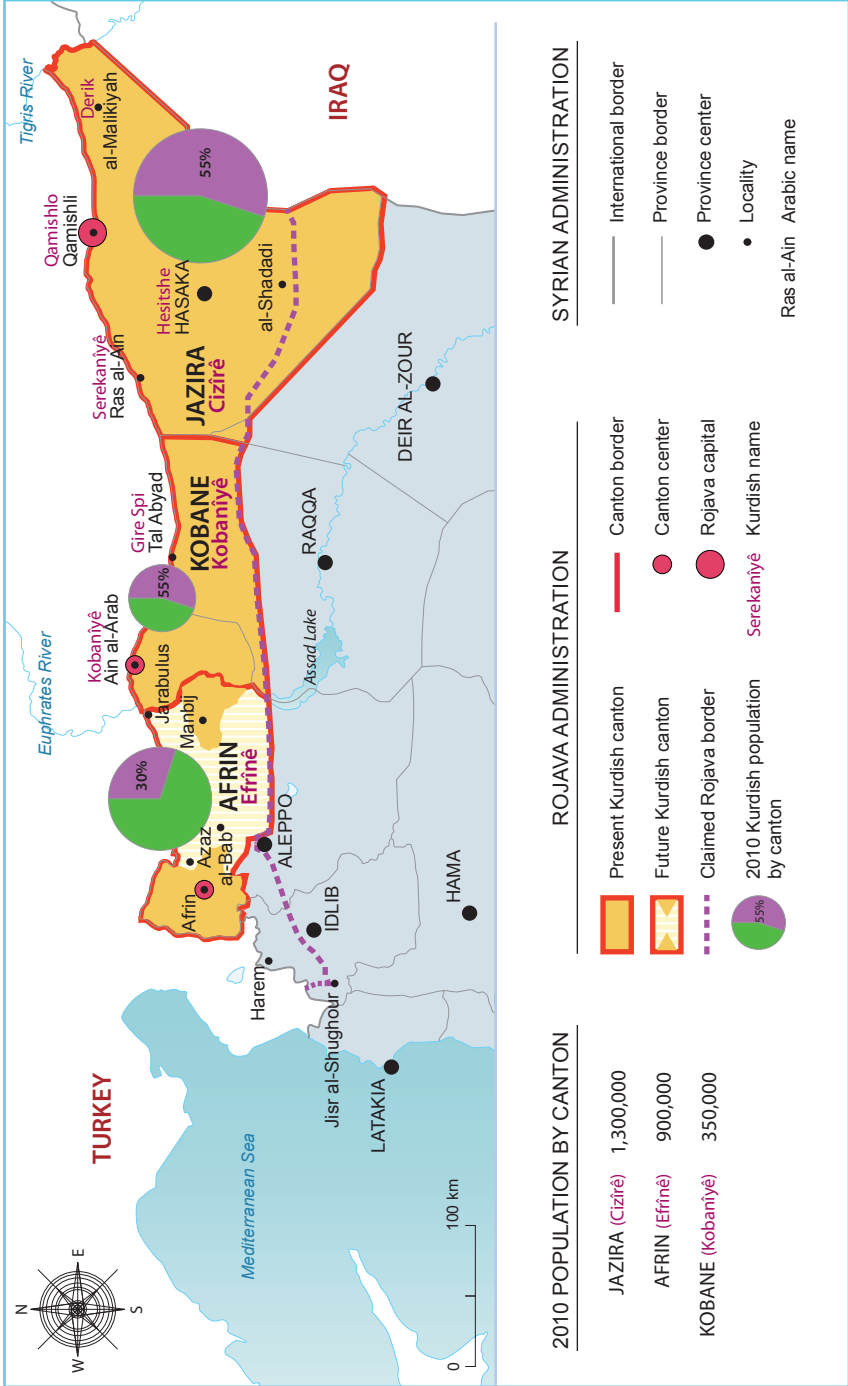
PYD CONTROL OF TERRITORY

Further guiding Hasaka Arab tribal leaders’ willingness to stay within the Kurdish camp is the issue of agricultural landownership. A half-century ago, Hasaka was the only province in Syria where land reform had never been fully implemented. Whereas land in other parts of Syria was expropriated for the benefit of peasants, In Hasaka, even though expropriations were partially realized, the land remained in the hands of the state, pending official redistribution that never took

(continued on p. 37)

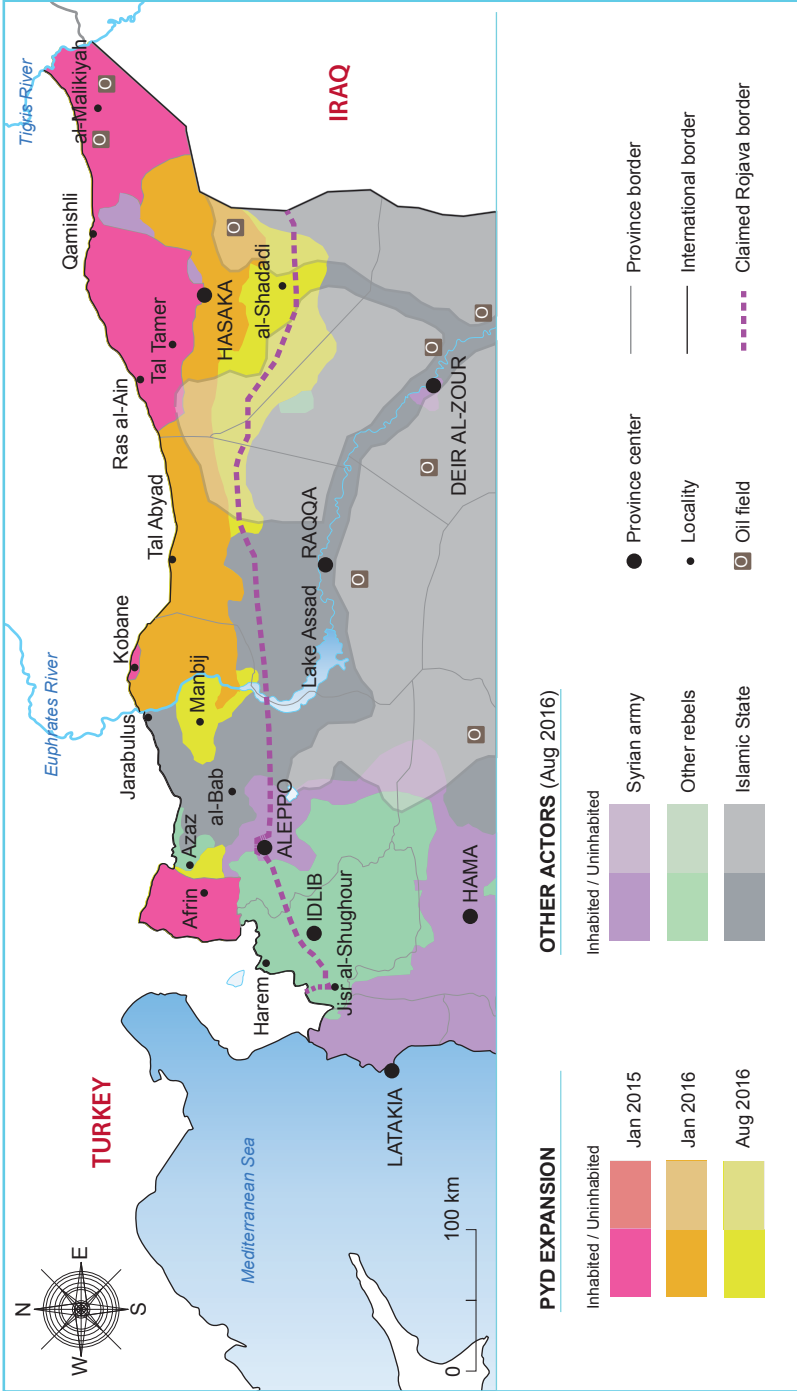
MAPS

Rojava: Population and Future Administrative Organization



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PYD Expansion in Northern Syria



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PYD EXPANSION

Inhabited / Uninhabited	Jan 2015	Jan 2016	Aug 2016
Inhabited			
Uninhabited			

OTHER ACTORS (Aug 2016)

Inhabited / Uninhabited	Syrian army	Other rebels	Islamic State
Inhabited			
Uninhabited			

	Province center		Province border
	Locality		International border
	Oil field		Claimed Rojava border

place. The public land was leased to the former large landowners, mostly Arab and other tribal leaders, because Hafiz al-Assad did not want the Kurdish peasantry to control land in this sensitive region.

In the years before the Syrian uprising, a drought forced many small farmers to abandon their farms because they lacked the financial means to irrigate fields. These departures benefited the large landowners, who scooped up cheap land. Other tracts fell back into the public domain, in line with Syrian law, since they were no longer cultivated. Now, the PYD leadership, rather than the Damascus regime, effectively holds sway over the Hasaka land, and the only way for existing property owners to maintain and sometimes expand their property is through loyalty to the new authorities. In some cases, with populations displaced, property titles have disappeared. Altogether, the PYD can use land control to maintain Arab allegiance, just as the Baathists did before—with control of water resources marking another key lever of manipulation. Today, this land question also applies to Raqqa province in areas of PYD rule.

CONCLUSION

At present, Rojava is suffering under an economic embargo maintained by Turkey and the Kurdistan Regional Government, a dynamic pushing the middle classes to emigrate. With these departures, the PYD leadership gains strength, pursuing control over a working-class economy rooted in handicrafts and agriculture. Kurdish PYD backers, meanwhile, accept material sacrifices in order to live in a state ruled by their kinsmen. To be sure, the Arab population does not share this same goal. They will therefore more willingly abandon the PYD if a political and economic alternative arises. Critics of Kurdish rule are emerging in Manbij, which the SDF seized from the Islamic State in summer 2016, and where Turkey is restricting humanitarian access. By comparison, in Jarabulus, where Turkey itself defeated IS in August 2016, such humanitarian access is being encouraged. For residents of PYD-held Manbij and Tal Abyad, Turkey wants to suggest that a better quality of life exists under non-Kurdish leadership. A further means of lur-

ing tribal leaders away from Kurdish dominion is through financial support, which in turn could quickly weaken the SDF outside the Kurdish area.

In short, the local environment is complex and any actions by outside players can have unforeseen repercussions. While arms and money might hold together a coalition against the Islamic State, once that common enemy is defeated, establishing stability would be a great challenge. Building better relations between the Kurds and Arabs will not be easy, but it is the only way to forestall later clashes.

NOTES

1. Now Jabhat Fatah al-Sham.
2. Agence France-Presse, "Kurds Seek Autonomy in a Federal Syria: Top Official," December 2, 2013, available at <http://www.mei.edu/content/kurds-see-autonomy-federal-syria-top-official>.

BILAL WAHAB

IRAQI KURDS & SYRIAN KURDS

AS THE CIVIL WAR rages in Syria, the PYD and its military wing, the YPG, have carved out a comparatively stable autonomous region dubbed Rojava—formally, the Federation of Northern Syria. After their brethren in Iraq, the Kurds of Syria could be next in line for a chance at self-governance. While emboldened and inspired by the experience of the Iraqi Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), Syrian Kurds have trod a different path. Creating splits with potential Iraqi allies, the PYD has sidelined other Syrian Kurdish groups closer to Iraqi Kurdish leader Masoud Barzani. Rather than raising hopes for pan-Kurdish nationalism, the rise of Rojava has deepened a rift within Iraqi Kurdistan’s parties, which have exploited the PYD for political gain.

KRG DIVISIONS

In Iraq, Kurdish politics remains divided. Although mainly centering on power and wealth, the Kurdish political fracture is becoming increasingly geographic and regional. The Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), led by Barzani, is dominant in Erbil and Dahuk. Its rivals, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) and Gorran (Change) movement, dominate Sulaymaniyah. Decades of Kurdish rule, peppered with civil wars and dysfunctional governance, resulted in a scenario in which political parties reign supreme at the expense of state institutions. Because of a dispute with his rivals over his tenure as KRG president, Barzani has, in effect, shut down the Kurdish parliament since October 2015. Meanwhile, the PUK and Gorran are politically schizophrenic—although part of the KRG, they support antigovernment strikes and demonstrations in Sulaymaniyah.

Kurdish divisions stretch beyond Iraqi Kurdistan's borders. Since 2003, Iraqi Kurds had been closely unified when it came to negotiating for Kurdish demands, or promoting Kurdish interests, in Baghdad. More recently, however, Iraq's Kurdish parties have started to take sides in Iraqi politics, with the PUK and Gorran cozying up to former prime minister Nouri al-Maliki, who enjoys significant influence with the Shi'ite Popular Mobilization Units (PMUs), while the KDP tries to shore up current prime minister Haider al-Abadi and his embattled government. For example, when Maliki's bloc in parliament called for a vote of no confidence against Hoshiyar Zebari, Iraq's finance minister, who is also Barzani's uncle, most PUK and Gorran members voted in favor of the motion.

These fissures are emerging outside Iraq as well. By way of geography, the PUK and Gorran share borders only with Iran. During the Iraqi Kurdish civil war (1994–98), the Iranian military supported the PUK against the KDP. The KDP, for its part, has become increasingly dependent on Turkey, which supported it during the civil war. Warming Ankara-KRG ties culminated in a pipeline deal that carries KRG oil into the Mediterranean through Turkey. For the KDP, control over the KRG's oil exports yields an upper economic hand vis-à-vis its rivals.

As the Syrian war intensifies and continues to draw in regional powers, the Kurdish Rojava territory has become an arena for Iraqi Kurdish partisan jousting for leverage. In the big picture, the KDP stands in opposition to the PYD, while the PUK and Gorran strike a more supportive tone. As leftist movements, the PUK and the Turkey-based Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) share some ideological affinity, although as a former Marxist group, the PKK lies farther to the left than does the PUK. Nevertheless, owing to these affinities and intra-KRG rivalry, the PUK facilitated initial ties between the U.S. government and the PYD.

KDP-PKK: THE REAL RIVALRY

Both Iraq and Turkey have long been home to indigenous Kurdish liberation movements and armed rebellions. In Syria, the pan-Arab Baathist regime oppressed its own Kurdish population and denied

most of them citizenship. At the same time, the Assad regime sheltered Turkish and Iraqi Kurdish movements, mainly as leverage against its neighbors to the north and east. Consequently, the PKK and KDP have a support base among Syrian Kurds.

The PYD was established in 2003, a few years after Syria evicted PKK founder Abdullah Ocalan from its territories under Turkish pressure. Following his departure from Syria, Ocalan was captured by Turkey, with U.S. assistance, where he remains imprisoned. Today, the PYD retains strong ties to the PKK leadership and its regional vision for Kurds. Unlike the PKK, which never held territory, the PYD has been governing large swaths of Syrian land since 2012.

The relationship between the PKK (and its associates) and Iraqi Kurdish factions has been tortuous. Although most Kurdish liberation movements have socialist or tribal roots, the necessity for governance has diluted ideology in favor of pragmatism. Beyond ideology, a power struggle has played out, most pertinently that between Barzani and Ocalan over leadership, even if symbolic, of the broader Kurdish nationalist movement. The KDP and PKK have had little success in establishing a foothold in their rival's sphere of influence—that is, Turkey and Iraq, respectively. However, both have a sizable following in Syria.

Before his eviction from Syria in 1998, Abdullah Ocalan had lived in Syria since 1979. Sometimes described as the Assad regime's Kurdish paramilitary, the PKK was tolerated and even used to pacify Syrian Kurdish towns. Despite Ocalan's departure, the PKK remained active in Syria until the 2003 formation of the PYD, which, with its YPG military arm, is now dominant in Rojava. Having overpowered its rivals using its superior organization and fighters, the PYD governs the territories liberated from the Islamic State and the Assad regime in a federation comprising three cantons.

As for the PKK's unsuccessful attempts to establish a presence in Iraqi Kurdistan, every such move has met with resistance and often violence. For example, in 1993, aided by Turkey, both the PUK and KDP used force to push back PKK fighters. Nevertheless, during the bloody KDP-PUK civil war, the PKK at times sided with the PUK. In September 1998, the United States mediated a peace agree-

ment between the two Iraqi Kurdish factions, whereby they agreed, among other things, to deny PKK entrée in Iraqi Kurdistan. Thus, in 2000, the PUK clashed with the PKK in Ranya, Iraq, over the latter's attempts to gain leverage. The PKK could see an opportunity in internal Iraqi Kurdish divisions for a foothold in the KRG.

In Turkey, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has been presenting Barzani as an alternative to the PKK. The Iraqi Kurdish leader thus received red-carpet treatment and appeared with Erdogan at a Justice and Development Party (AKP) rally in Diyarbakir. KDP media also seeks to win audiences among the Kurdish population in Turkey.

Like the PKK, the KDP has been active in Syria and attempting to build support among Syrian Kurds. In 1996, Barzani was received by a jubilant crowd when he visited Qamishli. Under Barzani's patronage, an amalgam of fifteen groups formed the Kurdistan National Council (KNC), which opposes the PYD and the Assad regime. Despite Barzani's efforts, the PYD has sidelined the KNC from power in the Rojava cantons. Hence, the KNC and KDP do not recognize the PYD government.

COOPERATION BETWEEN THE KRG AND ROJAVA

A common enemy, the Islamic State, has helped refocus the attention of Iraqi Kurds and their Kurdish brethren in Syria and Turkey. When the jihadist group marched on Erbil in 2014, PKK fighters descended from their hideouts in the Qandil Mountains to help rescue the KRG capital. In Kirkuk too, PKK and Iraqi Peshmerga fighters fought side by side against the Islamic State. When IS captured Sinjar, YPG units opened a safe corridor for the Iraqi town's entrapped Yazidis to flee to Mount Sinjar. Similarly, Peshmerga crossed from Turkey into the besieged Syrian town of Kobane to fend off an IS attempt to capture the city. The wounded from Rojava find treatment at KRG hospitals. Such Kurdish solidarity has been well received by Kurds in Iraq, Turkey, and elsewhere, including in the diaspora, as well as in the media.

However, enthusiasm for transnational Kurdish solidarity has been brief and episodic. Overall, power struggles and competing parochial interests have kept Kurds in Iraq and Syria apart.

DIVERGENCE BETWEEN THE PYD/PKK AND KDP

In Syria, the main goal of the PYD/YPG is to connect its three cantons. Absent contiguity, autonomy for Rojava would not be viable. Toward this end, the PYD has been pragmatic: it has appointed officials from ethnic and religious minorities to run local governments and recruited from the local population for its police force and bureaucracy. Given the PYD's near achievement of a contiguous tract, the Turkish military intervention in September 2016 looks unsurprising. Moreover, the PYD seeks international recognition and legitimacy through its military campaign against the Islamic State. To win this support, the PYD has struck a balance between its relations with the United States and Russia. As a consequence of Turkish pressure, though, the PYD has not had a seat at Syrian peace talks in Geneva.

The PYD will likely spare no political or military effort to preserve the land it currently controls. This control, by extension, marks the first such success for the PKK, which has failed to do the same in its home Turkey.

KRG POLITICS AND THE PYD

Given the fractured politics of Iraqi Kurdistan, one cannot speak of a KRG policy toward Rojava. Instead, one must consider the positions of the region's major parties: the KDP on one side and the PUK and Gorran on the other.

For its part, the KDP seeks to establish a foothold in Rojava and, in doing so, bolster the KNC and pressure the PYD to share power with it. However, the PYD has adamantly refused such KDP attempts and, at times, arrested KNC activists. The YPG overpowered the Syrian peshmerga through its sheer size advantage—30,000–40,000 in the YPG, versus only about 2,000 KNC fighters—establishing, in effect, a monopoly on the use of force. As for Barzani in particular, the PYD views him skeptically given his close ties to Ankara. Yet to govern, the PYD needs to foster an economy, an area in which Turkey has greatest leverage and can most easily hurt the PYD.

In reaction, as already noted, the KDP refuses to recognize the PYD government in Rojava. Reinforcing its stance, the KDP closed the Faysh Khabur border crossing between Iraqi Kurdistan and Rojava, hence establishing a trade blockade.

Although Barzani has often been accused of acting under Turkish pressure, his tough stance against the PYD follows personal attempts to bring closer together the rival KNC and PYD, including through ultimately failed negotiations in July 2012 and later in October 2014. These talks were aimed at allowing for power sharing and focusing military attention on rolling back the Islamic State.

The PUK-Gorran axis, by contrast, has opened channels to the PYD and recognized its government in Rojava. This connection includes travel by the respective party members between the Qamishli and Sulaymaniyah airports. The two Iraqi parties have touted their stronger ties to the PYD as an expression of Kurdish solidarity and as leverage in their domestic power balance with the KDP. Thanks to stronger internal cohesion and Turkey's patronage, however, the KDP has tactically translated its slight electoral majority into real political strength. The key KRG positions of president, prime minister, and national security director are also held by KDP officials. Also facilitating KDP hegemony are matters such as the PUK rivalry with Gorran over ruling Sulaymaniyah, where the key security and political positions are held by PUK members.

An episode of controversy escalated when a PUK commander of Yazidi origin, Haider Shasho, formed a Yazidi militia and registered it as a PMU, making it eligible for funding from Baghdad. To the ire of both the PUK and PYD, KDP forces arrested Shasho in April 2015.

At times, the PKK has embarrassed its backers in the KRG. For example, the KDP accused PKK affiliates of blowing up the KRG-Ceyhan oil pipeline in separate incidents in July 2015 and February 2016, resulting in hundreds of millions of dollars in lost revenue for the KRG's already cash-strapped economy. The PKK denied sanctioning the attack.

WHAT TO EXPECT

After two decades of rule and the consequent entrenched patronage networks built by the PUK and KDP in Iraqi Kurdistan, little political legroom remains for the PKK. Feeble attempts by the PKK to create political parties in the region have resulted in electoral failure. During the last KRG election in 2013, the PKK informally instructed its supporters to vote for PUK candidates.

However, the Iraqi Kurdish population is increasingly weary and angry with its rulers, mainly over their utter failure on the economic front. Accused of corruption and mismanagement, the KRG is months behind in dispensing public payrolls. Public demonstrations are on the rise. For the PKK, such public discontent could offer an opening to enter Kurdish politics. Many already sympathize with and indeed romanticize PKK and YPG fighters.

The PKK has also made inroads with the Yazidi population, winning hearts after the Peshmerga alone could not defend the town of Sinjar. In addition to helping spawn the Shasho-led “Sinjar Protection Units,” the PKK and PYD may field Yazidi candidates in Iraqi elections. Not only the KDP but also the PUK and Gorran could lose votes to a PKK-affiliated candidate.

The PYD may also participate in the liberation of Mosul. An IS-free Mosul would open a new border crossing with Iraq and alleviate the trade embargo imposed on the Syrian Kurdish group by Turkey and the KDP. However, the PYD and PKK remain suspicious that the KDP might support a Turkish attack on Qandil and the PYD forces in Sinjar.

Improved future PYD-KRG relations will hinge on open trade relations, better coordination in the war against the Islamic State, and greater political inclusiveness in Rojava. For Kurds on both sides of the Iraq-Syria border, the KRG’s blockade against Rojava is unpopular. Trade between Rojava and the KRG would be mutually beneficial. The PYD, for its part, could reduce tensions by working with the KNC parties and sharing power with them. Yet the ultimate means of alleviating PKK-KDP mistrust would be resuming the peace process in Turkey.

ANNA BORSHCHEVSKAYA

RUSSIA, SYRIAN KURDS, & THE ASSAD REGIME

AS THE UNITED STATES considers its near-term options in Syria, it must continue seeking to understand the relationship between the Kurds and other major actors in the conflict. One such actor is Russia, which has a centuries-long relationship the Kurds.

KURDS DURING CZARIST RUSSIA AND THE SOVIET UNION

Moscow has maintained close relations with Kurds for roughly two centuries, through the czarist, Soviet, and post-Soviet periods. For the Russian czars, Kurdish tribes were useful in fighting the Persian and Ottoman Empires. In return, Moscow supported the Kurdish goal of self-determination. Indeed, by the early 1900s, the Kurdish elites saw Moscow as a critical supporter of their cause, and they collaborated closely with Russia on multiple levels. Moscow helped the Kurds revolt against the Ottoman administration in eastern Anatolia, leading to a brief uprising in 1914 in Bitlis. When the effort collapsed, most rebels took refuge in Russia.

Czarist Russia fell three years later, but its successor, the Soviet Union, continued to work with the Kurds. Moscow did so by exploiting ethnic identity issues through so-called liberation movements, using these to try to weaken the West and its allies of the time, specifically Iran, Iraq, and Turkey. Declassified KGB documents, and memoirs of former KGB officers and such key Middle East Soviet officials as Yevgeny Primakov, suggest that the Kurds featured prominently in the Soviet leadership's thinking. For example, KGB documents describe how the Kremlin used the Kurds, and in particu-

lar Barzani, to foment Kurdish rebellion against the central Iraqi government in 1961, at the height of the Cold War.¹

Thus, in January 1946, a group of pro-Soviet Iranian Kurds declared an independent “Red Kurdistan,” the Republic of Mahabad, in northern Iran—a useful client state for Joseph Stalin. The republic collapsed by the end of the year, but Kurdish nationalists remained captivated by the prospect of a state. One such nationalist was the Iraqi Kurdish mullah Mustafa Barzani, a general in the Mahabad army who founded the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) in August 1946. When the Mahabad Republic collapsed, Barzani and his compatriots took refuge in the Soviet Union. Following his arrival in 1947, Barzani stayed in the Soviet Union for well over a decade before returning to Iraq, where he led a rebellion against the central government. When the Baath Party took power in Iraq in 1973, the KGB no longer needed the Barzanis and the family sought an alliance with the United States and its allies.

In the late 1970s, a Turkish Kurd named Abdullah Ocalan founded the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) in the Syria-occupied Beqa Valley, in Lebanon. The party ascribed to a largely Marxist-Leninist ideology and used violence, including against other dissenting Kurds, to further its goal of a Kurdish state. Syria was at the time a Soviet client state, the Kremlin’s top ally in the Arab world, so a Soviet proxy created the PKK. Several years after founding the PKK, Ocalan and his supporters fled to Syria proper, where they met and trained with militant Palestinian Marxist groups. The PKK planted itself firmly in Moscow’s orbit—and therefore in a broader geopolitical Cold War struggle, as well as under Syrian president Hafiz al-Assad’s patronage. For Moscow, close ties with the Kurds who fomented unrest provided useful leverage over Turkey, a critical NATO ally.

KURDS AND POST-SOVIET RUSSIA

After the fall of the Soviet Union, Russia’s first democratically elected president, Boris Yeltsin, largely retreated from the Middle East. The PKK, for its part, kept a representative office in Moscow throughout the 1990s, but the Cold War was over, and the Krem-

lin's support slowly withered. The PKK adapted to these new realities but continued its violent struggle in Turkey's southeast. In 1997, the U.S. Department of State designated the PKK a terrorist organization.

Even so, one episode highlights the PKK's remaining importance to Moscow after the fall of communism. In 1998, when Syria expelled Ocalan under Turkish pressure, the PKK leader first sought a haven in Greece. When Athens refused, the Russian Duma (parliament) passed a resolution granting Ocalan refuge. His stay in Moscow was brief—at the time, Moscow did not want to anger Turkey, given rising economic ties with Ankara. Ocalan then went Italy, led by Prime Minister Massimo D'Alema, a former senior official in the Italian Communist Party. However, his stay there soon invoked European and Turkish outrage, and under pressure Rome asked that he leave. Although Russia allowed him to return, the Kremlin eventually sent him to a military base in Tajikistan in order to create deniability. Ocalan feared he would be kidnapped, however, and soon left the country, eventually finding himself in Kenya, where Turkish authorities captured him in February 1999.

When Vladimir Putin came to power in 2000, he chartered Russia's return to the Middle East, seeking to build relations with virtually everyone, including the Kurds. In Iraq, Moscow worked with both Erbil and Baghdad and pursued energy deals with the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), even if such moves angered the central government in Baghdad. Putin knew that, in the end, Baghdad's desire for Russian weaponry would outweigh its concerns about Russia's behavior toward the KRG. In 2012, Gazprom Neft signed two agreements with Erbil, making the Russian firm the fourth major oil company to enter the Middle East, on par with the American ExxonMobil and French Total.

In February 2013, KRG president Masoud Barzani made an official visit to Moscow to strengthen ties—the first such visit by the KRG president. Upon its conclusion, Gazprom Neft signed an agreement to enter a major energy project in Kurdistan known as the Halabja block.

IMPROVED TIES WITH SYRIAN KURDS

With the Syrian civil war, Putin perceived an opportunity to improve ties with the PKK. Unlike the United States and many European countries, Russia had never designated the PKK as a terrorist organization. As the war raged in Syria, Moscow began pushing for inclusion of the PYD, the PKK's Syrian Kurdish subsidiary, in the Geneva peace talks.

In December 2013, on the Russian Defense Ministry's invitation, PYD leader Salih Muslim visited Moscow, where he stressed that the Geneva II talks, as they were known, could not succeed if the Kurds were excluded. As part of his visit, Muslim also reportedly attended a Kurdish-organized birthday celebration for Abdullah Ocalan in the Russian capital.

These moves fit Putin's calculus of seeking to divide and weaken the West and prop up Assad. The inclusion of the PYD in the peace talks, from Moscow's perspective, would dilute the Syrian opposition with individuals who did not insist on Assad's departure as a precondition for negotiations. This move also reduced Turkey's—and therefore NATO's—influence in Syria and created broader leverage for Moscow against Turkey, while exacerbating tensions between Turkey and the United States.

The year 2013 also marked an important change in U.S. policy, whereby the State Department began refusing PYD leaders visas, even as the PYD and its military arm, the YPG, had proven the top fighting force against the Islamic State in Syria. Indeed, the most secure areas in Syria were those won by the Kurds. In this context, Moscow began to look especially attractive to the Kurds. Spotting this opportunity to reassert itself, the Kremlin certainly did not deny the PYD visas.

After Ankara shot down Russia's Sukhoi Su-24M bomber jet in November 2015, when the aircraft entered Turkish airspace, Moscow began arming the PYD and providing it with air support against Turkey-supported rebels. Moscow also sent S-400s to its own Hmeimim Air Base, in Syria, creating a de facto safe zone for the Kurds against Turkish operations.

In December 2015, shortly after the downing of the Russian jet, Selahattin Demirtas, leader of Turkey's Kurdish opposition Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), visited Moscow, where he criticized the shoot-down. Demirtas, a critic of Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan, was the highest-level Turkish politician to see a Russian counterpart since the bilateral standoff. Moreover, Erdogan reportedly believes the HDP is connected to the PKK. Broadly speaking, the visit signaled to Erdogan that Moscow would leverage the Kurds within Turkey to weaken his rule.

In February 2016, the PYD formally opened a representative office in Moscow—its first such office in Europe. At the opening ceremony, Merab Shamoyev, chair of the International Union of Kurdish Public Associations, reportedly described the event as a “historical moment for the Kurdish people.” In July 2016, Erdogan apologized to Putin for downing the Russian jet, and the two leaders began to mend ties. Yet in response to Erdogan's request to close down the Moscow PYD office, Andrey Karlov, Russia's ambassador to Turkey, reportedly said on September 6 that Russia does not consider the PYD a terrorist organization and that the office will remain open. Simultaneously, Moscow's air support allowed the PYD to expand eastward and to cut off Aleppo from Turkey-based rebel groups.

CONCLUSIONS

Given the long history of close Kurdish ties with the Kremlin, it is not surprising that the Kurds feel comfortable working with their Russian counterparts. In many ways, the Kurds understand the Russians better than the Americans do. After all, no one working with Russia needs to worry about the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act.

But Moscow is not a true supporter of the Kurdish cause. The Kremlin simply pays lip service to such support as it uses the Kurds to destabilize Turkey, drive a wedge between NATO allies to weaken the alliance, and keep Bashar al-Assad in power. The United States could remind the PKK and PYD that, in the end, Putin will not protect them if he sees no benefit in the transaction. For its part, Washington should reduce the PYD's reasons for going to Moscow, such as by starting to issue visas to PYD leaders.

At the same time, the United States must work with Turkey to encourage reinstating the ceasefire with the PKK that began after Ocalan declared a truce from prison in March 2013. The truce collapsed in mid-2015, largely because of Turkish actions. If Turkey has peace with the Kurds domestically, Moscow would lose leverage over the country.

The United States also should point out to Ankara that Turkey lives in complete peace with the PYD east of the Euphrates River along the Turkish border, suggesting that Turkey surely has an interest in finding a way to live similarly with the group west of the Euphrates. Here, U.S. officials could explore options for reinstating contacts held between Salih Muslim and Ankara in 2014–15. To that end, Washington should keep Ankara well informed about the assistance it provides to the PYD and consult with Ankara about controls needed to ensure no munitions are diverted to the PKK.

Finally, the United States should work with the KDP to strengthen the party and its democratic appeal both within the KRG and outside its borders as it competes with the PYD and PKK in Syria, Turkey, and potentially the KRG. A more transparent and democratic KRG will directly aid in the fight against the Islamic State.

NOTES

1. See Kamal Said Qadir, “The Barzani Chameleon,” *Middle East Quarterly* 14, no. 2 (Spring 2007): pp. 87–88, <http://www.meforum.org/1681/the-barzani-chameleon>.

PATRICK CLAWSON

U.S. POLICY & THE PYD

THE PYD IS ONE of the few actors in the Middle East that puts a high priority on combating the Islamic State. It has an unsavory past, however, beginning with its origins in the Turkey-based Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), a Marxist-Leninist terrorist group. Meanwhile, Turkey has the most potent military in the region and is in a key position to block IS access to the outside world, especially for foreign fighters. Then there are the Arab rebels, whom the United States pledged to help but left hanging, in the view of many.

The challenge is how to get the various parties to work together—a goal that should not be impossible. Consider how Turkey, after years of suspicion and hostility toward the Iraqi Kurdish parties, now works closely with the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). A shorthand way of looking at the challenge is this: how does Washington get the PYD to be more like the KRG rather than the PKK, and how can Washington persuade Ankara that this can be the case?

BACKGROUND

Much of the reporting and analysis about U.S. Syria policy emphasizes how little the United States has done to assist the Syrian opposition. Such an assessment has certainly been true of U.S. relations with the Arab rebel forces fighting against the Assad regime. However, the United States has been quite active working with the PYD, in large part because of the priority the PYD places on fighting IS, as distinct from attacking the regime.

U.S. airstrikes were central to the PYD's campaign, spanning September 2014 to January 2015, to take Kobane from the Islamic State. In effect, the United States provided continuous close air support to

that campaign. Since then, the United States has frequently acknowledged that coalition airstrikes were in support of operations from the PYD or the largely Kurdish Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), including in Hasaka province in February 2015, Sarrin in July 2015, al-Hawl in October–November 2015, at the Tishrin Dam in December 2015, in al-Shadadi in February 2016, and in Manbij in May–August 2016.¹ The United States has also frequently announced anti-IS airstrikes in locations where the PYD/SDF are the only active ground forces fighting the jihadist group, including near Hasaka every month from September 2014 through April 2016 as well as in August–September 2016; near Tal Abyad every month from June through September 2015; near Ain Issa every month from July 2015 through September 2016 (except October 2015); and near al-Hawl every month from August 2015 through March 2016.² Such activity can only be described as an active U.S. air campaign in the areas where the PYD/SDF is operating on the ground.

When conducting such airstrikes, especially when engaging in close air support of ground combat forces, the strong U.S. preference is to have forward air controllers on the ground spotting what the strikes will hit—the most effective way to prevent collateral damage. Indeed, in the PYD/SDF operations area, reports of U.S. collateral damage are infrequent. Such evidence would be consistent with, but not proof of, the ground presence of forward air controllers—presumably U.S. or coalition special forces or covert operatives, since the task requires considerable training and close coordination with aircraft overhead.

Since October 2015, reports not disputed by the U.S. government have stated that U.S. Special Forces were on the ground in northeastern Syria.³ An April 2016 Reuters article reported that an extra 250 U.S. Special Forces personnel were being sent to Syria. In May 2016, U.S. personnel were seen providing training, targeting assistance, and artillery fire in support of SDF forces. In July 2016, three U.S. soldiers, described as “advisors” supporting the SDF, were killed near Manbij. In short, the United States has a robust presence of Special Forces working with the PYD/SDF.

Since October 2014, the United States has also been widely

reported to be providing arms to the SDF, with such stories appearing in the *Wall Street Journal* in October 2014, in McClatchy in October 2015, on Al Jazeera in December 2015, and in the *Guardian* in September 2016.⁴

Finally, senior U.S. officials have visited the SDF/PYD in northern Syria, with U.S. envoy Brett McGurk acknowledging two such trips there, in January and September 2016.⁵ Nor has Washington disputed reports that U.S. Central Command commander Gen. Joseph Votel visited the SDF in northern Syria in May 2016.⁶ While in Turkey in September 2016, Vice President Joe Biden spoke openly of U.S. support for and assistance to the SDF in the assault on Manbij.⁷

In sum, the United States has been actively supporting SDF/PYD military operations inside Syria, requiring a rephrasing of the usual reports that the Obama administration has refrained from an active military role in Syria. In fact, the U.S. government has vigorously supported those in Syria fighting the Islamic State, as distinct from those fighting the Assad regime.

WHERE U.S. INTERESTS LIE

The essays in this volume have laid out the challenges to a continued close U.S. relationship with the PYD as Turkey becomes more actively involved in fighting in Syria. The question is how can Washington facilitate anti-IS actions by both the PYD and Turkey despite deep distrust between the two and, for all their shared anti-IS agenda, many sharply divergent objectives. As the essays here have also made clear, better ties between Ankara and the PYD or between the KRG and the PYD will be much more easily achieved through improved PKK-Turkey relations—i.e., through the resumption of peace talks. Such a development would allow Washington to work closely with three regional actors, all of which are committed to the battle against the Islamic State.

It is clearly in U.S. interests to see Turkey seal its border with the IS-controlled areas, a step Washington has long encouraged Ankara to take. In effect, this goal is being served by Turkey's deployment of its own fighters and support of Syrian rebel

forces to control a zone along the border between the two PYD cantons, although of course smuggling will continue. More problematic is how the United States would respond to a deeper thrust by Turkey into Syria, such as Turkish participation in taking Raqqa from IS, reflecting the statements to this effect made by President Recep Tayyip Erdogan while in New York for the UN General Assembly. Much as Washington would welcome the Islamic State's defeat, the victory would be pyrrhic if it generated such resentment toward the new authorities from local residents that they threw their support to the next incarnation of Islamist extremism.

It is also clearly in U.S. interests to see the PYD continue to actively combat IS. The PYD's commitment to combating the jihadist group is second to none in the region; were the PYD to shift to confronting the Turkish-led forces, it would be a grave setback for the anti-IS cause. Moreover, having invested much effort in a good relationship with the PYD/SDF, U.S. interests would suffer if those organizations perceived Washington as betraying them. The United States is better served when it has a reputation of standing with those who stand with it.

Finally, U.S. interests would be better served if the Arab rebels could develop a modus vivendi with the SDF, if not with the PYD. The more credible the Arab character of the organizations that take over in Arab-populated areas liberated from the Islamic State, the more likely the locals are to accept those organizations as an improvement over IS rule, and therefore the less likely that some new incarnation of Islamist extremism would take root. Thus, a strengthened Arab rebel connection with the SDF could allow for bolstered resistance to the Syrian regime and Russia, potentially making those state actors more willing to return to the negotiating table to discuss a post-Assad future for Syria. This outcome would be even more likely if the Arab rebels developed a working relationship with the PYD.

No magic formula will achieve all these U.S. objectives. But it is important to be clear about what the objectives are. Choosing the right road is impossible if the destination is an unknown.

PRACTICAL POLICIES FOR WORKING WITH THE PYD

Even with hard work and skillful diplomacy, backed up by U.S. military assistance as appropriate, the best possible outcome one can hope for in Syria is modest progress. To use a baseball analogy, Washington should go for singles and doubles, not swing for the fences. In that spirit, here is a series of modest steps that largely fit with the existing U.S. approach and may help improve relations with the various actors:

Arrange redline agreements with the PYD, Turkey, and the Syrian opposition, and explore whether such an agreement is possible with Russia.

The aim of such a move would be to illuminate for all parties what actions by others would provoke a strong reaction, as distinct from actions that would be unappreciated but tolerated. Any such redline agreements would almost certainly be tested; the record to date by various parties is to probe how much they can get away with. As facts on the ground change, agreements may well need to be renegotiated. In the meantime, however, all sides could benefit from considering just how far they can go without provoking the other. After all, certain potential solutions may result in shared unhappiness but not necessarily the compulsion to attack. For instance, one could imagine a Turkish/rebel zone in Syria south of the Turkish border between the two PYD cantons, a PYD zone even farther south linking the two cantons, even if only along a road, and a regime-held zone farther south still. Nevertheless, whether the various parties would accept what Washington might regard as a workable compromise remains in question.

Arrange meetings among the various U.S. friends, along the lines of those between the PYD and Turkey in 2013.

Such dialogue would be highly useful, allowing each side to better understand the others' concerns.

Counsel each side to consider its true interests.

Assuredly, it is in Turkey's interest for Syrian Kurds to separate themselves from the PKK. How does Turkey propose to accomplish that end? Similarly, it is assuredly in Syrian Kurds' interest if they have an easy route to the outside world (e.g., for trade). How do they propose to reach that goal if their relations with Turkey are poisoned by military cooperation with the PKK? And assuredly, it is in the interest of the Arab opposition to have an alliance with a potent military force like the YPG, the PYD's military arm. How do these Arab forces propose to accomplish that goal while refusing to support a federal Syria?

Provide briefings to all U.S. friends about the activities of the others.

Given the suspicions between the Turks and the Syrian rebels, on the one hand, and the PYD, on the other, the United States will likely be viewed as more credible than the other side. Here, showing the true character of the PYD-PKK relationship is vital, as is illuminating PYD-regime links. By enhancing clarity on such dynamics, the United States may be able to spark a dialogue on what shifts would be necessary for greater cooperation to emerge.

Emphasize that U.S. assistance is conditional on helpful steps.

In particular, Washington could offer to provide more arms, more training, and more frequent air support dependent on various indicators of progress. For the PYD, that means:

- *Standing up Arab forces that work with it.* Those forces have to be political as well as military. They should have direct relations with the U.S. government, in addition to their role in a PYD-dominated coalition.
- *Keeping modest relations, at most, with Moscow.* Given the increasingly unhelpful role Russia is playing in Syria, the United States cannot justifiably provide the PYD with much assistance if the PYD is working closely with Russia.

- *Staying away from the Syrian regime.* The perception that Kurdish groups coordinate with the regime in Aleppo and in Hasaka poisons relations between the PYD and the Arab population, complicating efforts to field a truly independent Arab militia force allied with the PYD.

For the Arab opposition, Washington can urge various steps that could help on the Kurdish front—primarily, the development of some kind of working relationship with the PYD. Washington could also help clarify that Arab players will support certain Kurdish cultural demands, such as language rights. With the Turks, the most effective way for the United States to secure cooperation may be to link strong Turkish action against the Islamic State to an issue they care about intensely—the extradition of Fethullah Gulen, who lives in Pennsylvania and has been tagged by Erdogan as the culprit in the July 2016 coup attempt. Needless to say, the U.S. legal system complicates meeting that demand.

NOTES

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In Syria today,
the United States faces
an extreme variant of
a familiar foreign policy
problem: how to work
together with two friends
who dislike, distrust,
and even disregard
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