

Settling Kurdish Self-Determination in Northeast Syria

By Will Todman

JANUARY 2019

THE ISSUE

- **The United States should facilitate a limited autonomy settlement in Northeast Syria** when the area is formally reintegrated into Assad's territory.
- **Failing to achieve a settlement between Kurdish and regime officials would harm U.S. interests in various ways.** It could motivate a devastating armed conflict with Turkey, impede the campaign to defeat the Islamic State group (ISG), and set the stage for a new bloody, long-term struggle for self-determination in the Middle East with wide-reaching regional implications.
- **The Trump administration should utilize a combination of tools to achieve this aim:** the timing and sequencing of the withdrawal of U.S. troops, offers to continue to provide air support to the campaign to defeat the ISG, limited sanctions relief, reconstruction assistance, and moves toward political normalization.

INTRODUCTION

When President Trump declared on December 19 that U.S. troops in Syria were “all coming back and coming back now,” it plunged the future of the East of the country into uncertainty.¹ Dynamics in Syria were already shifting against the Kurdish-led Autonomous Administration (AA) in Northeast Syria, as threats from Turkey and the regime increased. The impending withdrawal of U.S. forces eliminates the AA's main source of leverage over the Assad regime and increases its vulnerability to the Turkish invasion President Erdogan has threatened. Scrambling to avoid conflict, AA officials have turned to Russia to mediate a political deal with President Assad, hoping to restore regime control to Syria's eastern borders in exchange for self-administration.²

However, the lack of clarity over the timeline of the withdrawal means the United States maintains important

influence in eastern Syria.³ Shaping the outcome of the Kurdish question at this critical juncture and preventing a new conflict in Northeast Syria are among the few remaining positive steps it can take in Syria. Although the Kurdish issue seems tangential to U.S. interests, the United States should invest in its diplomatic and military tools to facilitate a limited autonomy settlement in Northeast Syria when the area is formally reintegrated into Assad's territory. To do so, the United States should work to discourage potential spoilers to such a deal and then forge an international coalition to act as guarantors to the agreement.

Failing to secure an autonomy settlement could sow the seeds of long-lasting instability in Northeast Syria. The experience of autonomy has fanned the flames of Kurdish self-determination, and although the position of Syrian Kurds is now precarious, they are nonetheless stronger and more united than they ever have been. Throughout the

conflict, they have won freedoms which Damascus long denied them and built a formidable army: the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) reportedly numbers over 60,000 troops.⁴ Such self-determination movements do not flare out so easily. A new CSIS edited volume, *Independence Movements and Their Aftermath: Self-Determination and the Struggle for Success*,⁵ shows that from Bangladesh to East Timor, governments' attempts to curb a minority's rights have often accelerated their push for independence.⁵ A U.S. abandonment of Syrian Kurds without facilitating a negotiated settlement could therefore ignite another bloody, long-term struggle for self-determination in the Middle East, with wide-reaching regional implications.

The experience of autonomy has fanned the flames of Kurdish self-determination, and although the position of Syrian Kurds is now precarious, they are nonetheless stronger and more united than they ever have been.

BALANCING THE REGIONAL ENVIRONMENT

The Kurds will have to make significant concessions to reach even a limited autonomy settlement with the Syrian regime because the precipitate U.S. withdrawal

announcement has weakened their leverage. However, the success of agreements related to self-determination often depends as much on external factors as it does on the balance of domestic powers. Examining different autonomy settlements in the Western Balkans, Erin Jenne and Beata Huszka demonstrate in *Independence Movements and Their Aftermath* that a stable regional environment is critical in ensuring the ongoing success of negotiated settlements.⁶ In some instances, the regional environment can be particularly consequential when the minority group has kin in neighboring states. For example, Serbia has represented a thorn in Bosnia's side since it gained independence. The Serb-majority autonomous region of Republika Srpska in Bosnia enjoys close ties with Serbia, which has emboldened it to use its veto powers to obstruct international efforts to strengthen the central state.⁷ Northeast Syria is similarly susceptible to external factors, with large Kurdish populations living in neighboring Iraq and Turkey, as well as further afield in Iran.

Although AA officials have tense relations with their counterparts in Iraqi Kurdistan, the presence of Kurds in Turkey makes Ankara the most likely spoiler of a Syrian autonomy deal. Turkey would consider such a deal to be a domestic threat, stoking Turkish Kurds' own aspirations and mobilizing the terrorist-designated Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). Turkey is especially sensitive to the proximity of the PKK-affiliated People's Protection Units (YPG) to the

Turkish border in Syria. Erdogan has previously proven his willingness to act against the Kurds with the Euphrates Shield and Olive Branch operations and publicly threatened to launch a new operation against the YPG. Therefore, unless significant accommodations are made to reassure Turkey that a limited autonomy agreement in Northeast Syria would not threaten Turkish national security, Erdogan is likely to act again.

In the months prior to President Trump's withdrawal announcement, the United States took various steps to repair relations with Turkey. On November 1, 2018, Turkish and U.S. forces began joint patrols in Manbij, an Arab majority city, which the YPG/SDF liberated from the Islamic State group (ISG). Two weeks later, the U.S. Treasury

Department issued a bounty for senior PKK officials, attempting to demonstrate its continued opposition to



Syrian Kurds demonstrate in Qamishli against Turkish shelling of Kurdish militia posts in northern Syria, on October 31, 2018.

Source: DELIL SOULEIMAN/AFP/Getty Images

Kurdish separatism in Turkey. These confidence-building measures were positive steps in the Trump administration's efforts to balance the regional environment and prevent spoilers to an autonomy settlement.

However, senior Trump administration officials have struggled to achieve guarantees from Turkey that it will refrain from attacking Kurdish fighters when the United States withdraws. Absent Turkish support for the withdrawal plan, allowing Syrian regime forces to retake the Turkish border may be one of the most effective ways of building a buffer between the YPG/SDF and Turkey. The United States should condition the implementation of a coordinated withdrawal on the AA enacting measures to appease Turkey, such as formally cutting ties with the PKK, withdrawing from the Turkish border, and withdrawing from Arab-majority lands west of the Euphrates.

GUARANTEEING A SETTLEMENT

After the United States has worked to balance the regional environment and pushed the AA to come to an agreement with the Assad regime, the United States should continue to act to protect the agreement to ensure its success. The experiences of various autonomy arrangements in the Western Balkans demonstrate the importance of outside guarantors.⁸ External powers can monitor the implementation of the agreement, provide incentives for the parties to adhere to it, and raise the cost of external spoilers. The United Nations,

NATO, the European Union, and the United States all played a role in guaranteeing different autonomy settlements in the Western Balkans to protect minorities, monitor compliance of the deal, and bolster peace. Because the Syrian regime has a track record of breaking agreements and because the threat of ongoing instability is so high in eastern Syria, external guarantors will be especially important.

Absent Turkish support for the withdrawal plan, allowing Syrian regime forces to retake the Turkish border may be one of the most effective ways of building a buffer between the YPG/SDF and Turkey.

As the principal international partner of the AA and an ally of Turkey, the United States is well-placed to bolster an agreement. In particular, it exerts significant influence over the YPG/SDF after years of close cooperation in the fight against the ISG. Although the United States has struggled to influence the Assad regime's behavior throughout the conflict, it can provide political, military, and economic incentives to encourage the Syrian regime's adherence to the deal. The Trump administration's main sources of leverage over the AA and Assad regime at this point are the timing and sequencing

of the withdrawal of U.S. troops from the ground, the continued provision of air support to the campaign to defeat the ISG, the lifting of its stringent sanctions on the Assad regime, reconstruction and stabilization assistance, and political normalization. The United States could therefore condition limited economic sanctions relief on the Assad regime and a phased withdrawal of U.S. troops from Syria on the regime's adherence to an autonomy settlement. Having built a coalition of 79 countries to defeat the ISG, the United States also possesses convening power, and it should work with other powers to achieve these aims.

The United States should cooperate with Russia on this strategy. Russia has emerged as the key powerbroker between the Kurds and the Syrian regime after cementing its close

relationship with the regime and simultaneously developing ties with the Kurds. It has also collaborated closely with



A fighter of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) stands guard on a rooftop in Raqqa on October 20, 2017, after retaking the city from ISG fighters.

Source: BULENT KILIC/AFP/Getty Images

Turkey in the Syrian arena through the Astana process. It is in Russia's interests to reintegrate Northeast Syria into Assad's control, as doing so would prevent Turkey from seizing another large portion of Syrian territory and avoid a further costly military campaign. However, despite Russia's important role in Syria, Russia would be an ineffective guarantor on its own and must not be permitted to act as the sole mediator. There are at least three reasons for this. First, Russia has proven unable—or at least unwilling—to control aspects of the regime's behavior, as demonstrated by Moscow's failure to uphold the terms of the reconciliation deals it facilitated in southern Syria. Second, Russia lacks the economic resources to provide the regime with sufficient incentives to uphold the deal. Finally, in the event of a serious violation of the settlement, Russia would almost certainly prioritize relations with the Syrian regime or Turkey over those with the Kurds.

After having been marginalized during the Syrian conflict, Arab Gulf countries are now reclaiming a role in Syria. In late 2018, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) announced the reopening of its embassy in Damascus, and Bahrain stated there had been “no interruption” in its diplomatic relations with Syria, while the Kuwaiti foreign minister predicted an imminent thaw in relations between Syria and other Gulf states.⁹ As well as re-establishing diplomatic relations with the regime, Gulf states have also increased their interventions in eastern Syria and built their ties with the Kurds. After President Trump froze stabilization funding for areas liberated from the ISG in April 2018, Saudi Arabia and the UAE swiftly agreed to plug the gap.¹⁰ Providing economic incentives for the regime to comply with an autonomy settlement in Northeast Syria would advance Arab Gulf states' broader strategic goals. Having failed to facilitate regime change, their primary aim is now to limit Iran's influence in post-conflict Syria. Enhancing their engagements in Northeast Syria would bolster Arab Gulf states' engagement in Syria and deny Iran those opportunities.

Therefore, various regional and global powers should work together to guarantee a limited autonomy settlement in Northeast Syria as they can each provide different incentives to the actors to uphold the terms of the deal.

ADVANCING U.S. INTERESTS

The Assad regime is brutal, unrepentant, and uncompromising and has defied Western expectations to prevail in Syria. Yet, as unpalatable as it may seem, there are various reasons why it is in the U.S. interest to facilitate the return of Kurdish-majority areas to regime control under the terms of a limited autonomy

settlement, while fulfilling President Trump's wishes to withdraw from Syria.

Various regional and global powers should work together to guarantee a limited autonomy settlement in Northeast Syria as they can each provide different incentives to the actors to uphold the terms of the deal.

First, forging a political deal with the Syrian regime would avoid a devastating armed confrontation in Northeast Syria between the YPG/SDF and Turkey. The YPG/SDF comprises tens of thousands of troops, and so, a conflict would inevitably result in a high death toll and significant destruction in one of the only regions of the country which has thus far been spared the worst of the fighting. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo publicly acknowledged the possibility of a bloody conflict, stating the importance of ensuring Turkey does not “slaughter the Kurds” in a recent interview.¹¹ Conflict would also trigger new waves of migration, threatening stabilization efforts in Syrian and Iraqi territory which remains vulnerable since the expulsion of the ISG.

Second, agreeing on an autonomy deal in coordination with a phased U.S. withdrawal could be the most effective means of ensuring the defeat of the ISG. The YPG/SDF previously halted their operations against the ISG when President Erdogan threatened to invade. Kurdish officials also threatened to release hundreds of ISG detainees and their families if they are abandoned. Reaching a settlement that is agreeable to the AA would therefore allow the YPG/SDF to continue operations against the ISG in the Euphrates valley to achieve the U.S. goal of delivering the ISG an enduring defeat.

Third, an autonomy settlement would reduce the likelihood of Assad retaking Northeast Syria by force and motivating the Kurds to wage an armed rebellion. Kurdish militias have received training from the United States and substantial combat experience in the fight against the ISG, increasing their capacity to challenge the regime. A Kurdish insurgency would destabilize an area which is already vulnerable to a resurgence of the ISG and could also spill over into neighboring Turkey. Although Turkey opposes any move to grant Syrian Kurds autonomy, an ongoing YPG-led insurgency in Northeast Syria could represent a greater threat to Turkish national security than Syrian Kurds being granted limited autonomy, given the organizational links between the YPG and PKK.

A Kurdish insurgency would destabilize an area which is already vulnerable to a resurgence of the ISG and could also spill over into neighboring Turkey.

Fourth, an autonomy deal would protect rights for the Kurds and the territorial integrity of Syria. An autonomy settlement which satisfies certain Kurdish demands would uphold their right to self-determination while also helping deter a future push for independence. Such an agreement would therefore be consistent with the notion of state sovereignty to which the United States commits and would avoid mobilizing secession movements elsewhere with the expectation of U.S. support.



A Syrian Kurdish woman holds up an olive branch and raises the victory gesture while other demonstrators wave signs and chant slogans as they march with Kurdish flags.

Source: DELIL SOULEIMAN/AFP/Getty Images

Finally, the United States has a moral obligation not to abandon a partner on which it relied so heavily in the fight against the ISG. Although it would not be the first time the United States had abandoned a local partner, it would be another stark example of U.S. betrayal which could hinder the U.S. ability to work with local actors elsewhere in the future.

It is therefore important for the United States to create the conditions in which an autonomy deal could succeed before fulfilling President Trump's promise to withdraw completely. It should utilize a combination of tools to achieve this aim: the timing and sequencing of the withdrawal of U.S. troops, offers to continue to provide air support to the campaign to defeat the ISG, limited sanctions relief, reconstruction assistance, and moves toward political normalization. It

should also use its diplomatic power to forge an international coalition, principally comprising the United States, Russia, and Arab Gulf states, all of which would be best placed to act as guarantors. Failing to protect some aspects of Kurds' right to self-determination could motivate long-lasting destabilization. ■

Will Todman is an associate fellow in the Middle East Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, D.C.

This brief is made possible by general support to the CSIS Middle East Program.

CSIS BRIEFS are produced by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), a private, tax-exempt institution focusing on international public policy issues. Its research is nonpartisan and nonproprietary. CSIS does not take specific policy positions. Accordingly, all views, positions, and conclusions expressed in this publication should be understood to be solely those of the author(s). © 2019 by the Center for Strategic and International Studies. All rights reserved.

Cover Photo: -/AFP/Getty Images

ENDNOTES

1. Tweet by Donald J. Trump, @realDonaldTrump, U.S. president, January 19, 2018, 6:10pm (EST), <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1075528854402256896>.
2. Rodi Said, "Syrian Kurds seek Damascus deal regardless of U.S. moves," Reuters, January 4, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-kurds/syrian-kurds-seek-damascus-deal-regardless-of-u-s-moves-idUSKCN1OY1ET>.
3. Lesley Wroughton and Phil Stewart, "U.S. says no timeline for Syria withdrawal as fighting continues," Reuters, January 4, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-usa-syria/amid-us-withdrawal-plans-us-backed-forces-still-fighting-in-syria-idUSKCN1OY1I6>.
4. Ibrahim Hamidi, "US trains 30,000 SDF members East Syria to 'contain' Iran," *Asharq al-Awsat*, November 25, 2018, <https://aawsat.com/english/home/article/1477416/us-trains-30000-sdf-members-east-syria-contain-iran>.
5. See Howard and Teresita Schaffer, "Bangladesh: Two Independence Movements" and Miks Muizarajs, "Timor Leste: A Nation of Resistance," in Jon B Alterman and Will Todman (eds.) *Independence Movements and Their Aftermath: Self-Determination and the Struggle for Success*, (Washington, DC/Lanham, MD: CSIS and Rowman & Littlefield, 2019), <https://www.csis.org/independence-movements/>.
6. Erin Jenne and Beata Huszka, "The Importance of Being Balanced: Lessons from Negotiated Settlements to Self-Determination Movements in Bosnia, Macedonia, and Kosovo," in Alterman and Todman (eds.), *Independence Movements and Their Aftermath*, 131-132, <https://www.csis.org/independence-movements/importance-being-balanced-lessons-negotiated-settlements-self-determination-movements>.
7. Jenne and Huszka, "The Importance of Being Balanced," 127.
8. For more on the relative merits of different autonomy settlements in the Western Balkans, see Jenne and Huszka, "The Importance of Being Balanced," 117-137.
9. Marc Daou, "Thaw in relations between Arab leaders and Syria's Assad," France 24, January 4, 2019, <https://www.france24.com/en/20190104-syria-bashar-al-assad-diplomacy-uae-russia-iran-arab-league-saudi-arabia>.
10. Lesley Wroughton, "U.S. raises \$300 million from allies for Syria stabilization," Reuters, August 17, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-crisis-usa/u-s-raises-300-million-from-allies-for-syria-stabilization-idUSKBN1L21RV>.
11. Michael R. Pompeo, "Interview with John Bachman of Newsmax," U.S. Department of State, January 3, 2019, <https://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2019/01/288315.htm>.