

Middle East: The Kurdish Crisis in Iraq and Syria

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Afrin

The Kurdish struggle in Syria and Iraq has witnessed a number of recent changes, with clear contrasts in each country. The broad victory of the “yes” in the Iraqi autonomous Kurdistan region’s independence referendum on September 25, 2017 was rooted in the long historical will of the Kurdish people to establish a state. It was also the consequence of a violent history of oppression inflicted upon the Iraqi-Kurdish population by various previous Iraqi nationalist authoritarian regimes.

The massacre by chemical weapons against the Kurdish population of Halabja in 1988 by Saddam Hussein’s Baathist regime [then supported by the U.S. and other Western governments — eds.] is particularly remembered. About 5000 Kurds perished in this massacre. This attack was part of Operation Anfal launched by the authorities in Baghdad during this period, which killed over 182,000 people and destroyed more than 90% of the Kurdish villages.

The Iraqi referendum also demonstrated, once again, the failure of the models of the capitalist, chauvinist and centralized nation-states of the region, which have consistently repressed, erased, and/or denied the plurality of their societies by affirming the supremacy and/or domination of an ethnic group over others, a religious sect over others, or both at the same time.

Kurds at a Glance	
KRG	Kurdish Regional Government in autonomous area of northern Iraq
KDP	Kurdish Democratic Party, led by Barzani family
PUK	Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, led by Talabani family
peshmerga	Fighters affiliated with the KDP and PUK
PKK	Kurdistan Workers Party, left-wing Kurdish Party in Turkey
PYD	Democratic Union Party, which is ideologically and politically affiliated with the PKK
YPG	The armed wing of the PYD
SDF	Syrian Democratic Forces, a coalition of fighters under the leadership of the YPG that includes Kurds, Arabs, Syrians and other smaller groups (e.g. Armenians and Circassians)

In Syria, a solution for the Kurdish issue and for an inclusive Syria cannot be found without recognizing the Kurds as a proper “people” or “nation” and providing unconditional support to the self-determination of the Kurdish people in the country and elsewhere.

The destiny of the Kurdish people in Syria was and remains intrinsically linked to the dynamics of the Syrian uprising and, therefore, its future is in danger, just as with the rest of the protest movement. This is why we should not isolate the struggle for self-determination of the Kurdish people from the dynamics of the Syrian revolution.

Any possibility of self-determination of the Kurdish people in Syria, as well as in Iran and in Turkey, has to go through common struggle with the popular classes of these countries against the various fractions of the bourgeoisie that dominate these states, whether they are from reactionary Islamic fundamentalism or nationalist chauvinism, or a mix of both.

That is why we must support the right of self-determination for 28 to 35 million Kurdish people in Iraq, Syria, Turkey and Iran. We need to denounce these authoritarian regimes, as well as international and regional measures and pressures that prevent Kurdish populations from deciding their own future.

The Iraqi Kurds’ initial enthusiasm following the massive victory of the “yes” vote (at over 92% in favor of independence) on September 25 quickly gave way to multiple threats and military offensives against the autonomous territories under the control of the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) since 1992.

Composed of three provinces of northern Iraq, this broad swath of land stretching from the Iranian to the Syrian border with Kirkuk at its center — and claimed by both Erbil and Baghdad — was lost in mid-October. The loss included the oil-rich city of Kirkuk (see the map below).

Meanwhile the Iraqi government led by the Shia Islamic fundamentalist party al-Dawa, with the support of Turkey and Iran, is continuing its pressure to obtain new concessions from the KRG.

In Syria, the Democratic Union Party (PYD), through its armed wing, the People’s Protection Units (YPG) and the Women’s Protection Unit (YPJ), which dominates the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) coalition of fighters, has accumulated victories and controls new territories in Syria, mostly, but not only, at the expense of the jihadist group Islamic State/Daesh (IS/D). It has accomplished this with the support of both the U.S.-led International coalition and Russia. In November, the SDF controlled nearly a quarter of Syria.

The last major success of the PYD was the expulsion of the IS/D forces from Raqqa in Syria, although not without deep humanitarian cost for its inhabitants. This positive situation, however, comes with threats from various actors including Turkey and Iran, as well as the Assad regime. The latest example being the Turkish military offensive, assisted by reactionary Syrian opposition armed groups, on Afrin since January 20.

Iraq, or the Fallen Dream

On October 16, Iraqi forces and Iran-backed Iraqi Shia militias of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) captured the city of Kirkuk and its surrounding oil fields from the Kurdish forces. This action followed an agreement concluded between Iraqi Prime Minister Abadi and a faction of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) [1], a political rival of the Barzani-led Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP). [2]

Kurdish peshmerga affiliated with the PUK and KDP either withdrew or fled. During his resignation speech on October 29, former President Masoud Barzani accused his political rivals of “high treason” for yielding territory, particularly Kirkuk, without a fight. The referendum and government backlash have also revealed deep divisions among the Kurdish political parties and increased them.

On November 1, President Barzani resigned and passed on many of the powers of his office jointly to his nephew, Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani, Deputy Prime Minister Qubad Talabani, the Speaker of Parliament, and the Judicial Council.

This resignation appeared at first to be a significant concession by Barzani’s KDP, following the failure of the referendum, to relieve the impasse surrounding his extralegal retention of office, and raised the possibility of democratic reforms.

In fact, it is an attempt by the KDP to maintain its domination over the KRG, and for the PUK to hang on to what remains of its long-standing and exclusive power-sharing relationship with the KDP in an increasingly volatile and polarized political environment.

Barzani remains nevertheless influential as head of the ruling KDP and still sits on the High Political Council (HPC), a non-governmental body that emerged after the referendum that can act independently of the KRG’s legally established institutions. [3]

More than 183,000 civilians have been displaced by the conflict, including 79,000 from the city of Kirkuk, which the Iraqi government conquered on the first day of its offensive. The KRG lost about 40% of its previously held territory as its forces withdrew from the disputed areas.



Source: IHS Markit Conflict Monitor

The Iraqi government has continued to threaten the KRG and demand new concessions regarding its sovereignty. It wants control of all border checkpoints, including the Turkish frontier that has been controlled by the KRG since 1992; the Saddam Hussein era.

The KRG sought to defuse tensions with the Iraqi government with a ceasefire on all fronts, continued cooperation in the fight against the IS/D and joint deployments in the disputed territories claimed by both sides.

The Kurdish defense department said the offer for joint control of the frontier was part of a

“deconfliction” proposal made to Baghdad on October 31. One of the border crossings, Fish-Khabur, is strategically vital for the landlocked KRG, as the point where oil from northern Iraq crosses into Turkey.

The Iraqi government also demanded that the KRG stop exporting its own oil and hand over sales to the Iraqi state-oil marketer SOMO. Baghdad is actually discussing with Ankara to let SOMO sell Kurdish crude that arrives by pipeline.

Until mid-October about 530,000 barrels per day (bpd) arrived in Ceyhan, the Turkish terminal on the Mediterranean, via the pipeline. Half came from the KRG’s oilfields, the rest from Kirkuk.

The Iraqi government was supported directly in its military actions by the neighbouring states, Turkey and Iran. Ankara and Tehran actually fear that an Iraqi Kurdish independence process will have consequences for their own Kurdish minorities, who also suffer from the discriminatory and oppressive policies of these regimes.

Turkey, Iran, Russia, and Western Countries

Turkey, which had excellent relations with the KRG and the Barzani family, and is the primary investor in Iraqi Kurdistan, denounced the referendum as a “terrible mistake” and reiterated its support for “the territorial integrity of Iraq.”

Iran pledged to stand by Baghdad and Ankara against the outcome of the referendum for the independence of Iraqi Kurdistan. Ali Akbar Velayati, chief adviser to Iran’s supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, declared that “Muslim nations will not allow the creation of a second Israel.” The conservative press in Iran described the referendum as a “Zionist plot” to destabilize the region.

Political and military collaboration among Baghdad, Ankara and Tehran intensified throughout this period against the KRG.

The Iranian regime benefited directly from its participation through the PMF in the conquest of Kirkuk by positioning itself to take control of oil exports from this region rich in oil. Under a new arrangement with Baghdad, Tehran will receive 15,000 barrels per day worth nearly \$1 million, rising gradually to 60,000 bpd. Iran and Iraq also revived a project to build a pipeline to carry oil from Iraq’s Kirkuk fields to central Iran and onwards for export from the Gulf.

The Iraqi government actually signed a memorandum of understanding with BP (British Petroleum) in mid-January to boost production capacity from 700,000 to 750,000 bpd, while it currently can pump about 450,000 barrels a day, from the northern Kirkuk oilfields, which were taken back in October by Iraqi government forces.

At the same time, the U.S. and European countries opposed the referendum and the idea of independence. Western countries repeatedly reiterated their opposition to both the referendum and the independence of Iraqi Kurdistan. They feared that these developments would lead to more regional instability, weaken the “war” against the IS/D, and lead to unrest in disputed areas such as the multi-ethnic and wealthy city of Kirkuk.

Russia, which invested over \$4 billion in the Kurdistan region’s energy sector, overtaking the U.S. as the largest investor, declared on its side “that the disputes between Baghdad and Erbil must be resolved by dialogue with the aim of finding a formula of coexistence within the Iraqi state.”

On November 6, the KRG declared that it would respect the ruling by the Iraqi Supreme Federal Court, which declared that no Iraqi province could secede. "We believe that this decision must become a basis for starting an inclusive national dialogue between (Kurdish authorities in) Erbil and Baghdad to resolve all disputes," the KRG said in a statement.

However, this did not prevent, on the same day, the Iraqi cabinet from proposing a reduction of the Kurdistan region's share of the 2018 draft federal budget to 12.6 per cent. Since the fall of Saddam Hussein, the region has been entitled to 17 percent.[1] The Iraqi Prime Minister al-Abadi reiterated, at the beginning of January, his refusal to allow the Iraqi parliament to change the KRG's share of the 2018 budget. He insisted that Erbil's demand for 17 percent belonged in the past. The first reading of the Iraqi budget for 2018 was actually boycotted by the Kurdish MPs, mainly over the contentious issue of budget sharing, demanding a return of the KRG share to 17 percent.

The reduced budget would dramatically add to the KRG's financial difficulties and is viewed as a punitive measure. Additionally, the draft budget would distribute the Kurdish region's share directly to the three provinces, further undermining KRG's control over the allocation of funds.

At the time of the writing, negotiations between Erbil and Baghdad have not been successful and are still ongoing, despite the first meeting of the KRG Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani with the Iraqi Prime Minister Abadi after the failure of the September 2017 referendum in mid-January 2018 in Baghdad. They then met a second time at the World Economic Forum of Davos in Switzerland.

In recent months, the economic crisis deepened in the Kurdish areas of Iraq, leading to three days of protests in December in a number of Kurdish towns where government party buildings were set on fire. The KRG security police violently repressed violently the demonstrations, killing six protesters and injuring hundreds. After the protests, Abadi promised to pay some of the salaries of Kurdish civil servants, pending validation of their employment. The Iraqi government formed ten committees to audit the list of KRG's Health and Education Ministries in order to get precise information, expressing concerns about corruption. As for demands for negotiations, Abadi repeated that Erbil has to commit first to the constitution and hand over all border posts to the Iraqi federal forces, as well as withdraw to the pre-2003 borders.

In the beginning of February, the Kurdish MPs reiterated their call for the KRG budget share to be increased to 17 percent and urged Abadi to hasten efforts to send the salaries of employees of the health and education ministries. They also called for the international flight ban on Erbil and Sulaimani airports to be lifted and steps made towards resolving the Kirkuk issue. At the time of writing, Abadi had not answered positively to these demands.

In short, the Kurdish population of Iraq has suffered a new and terrible blow as most countries define their own interests in opposition to Kurdish independence.

Syria After IS/D

Although mostly limited to the military field, the PYD in Syria has developed closer relations with the U.S. and Russia in the past few years. But recently the relations became more tense with the latter.

Within the strategic framework of "IS/D first" and the complete failure to assist Free Syrian Army (FSA) forces to combat the IS/D, Washington increasingly supported the PYD and the YPG-led coalition known as the SDF, where were established in October 2015. They were created officially as a response to fight the "terrorism represented by the IS, its sister [organizations] and the criminal Ba'ath regime" according to its founding statement.

The SDF was actually established to provide a legal and political cover for American military support for the PKK-affiliated group PYD in Syria. U.S. support for the SDF continued in its struggle against the IS/D in 2016 and 2017, while Russia prevented any direct confrontation between SDF and Turkish forces by creating de facto buffer zones between both actors in some areas.

The SDF was seen especially by the U.S. as the best actor on the ground to fight the IS/D. The U.S. notably supported SDF units to expel the IS/D from Raqqa and its surroundings. The military campaign against Raqqa, as previously seen with the Iraqi city Mosul, resulted in destroying more than 80 percent of the city.

There is a humanitarian crisis with a serious shortage of food, medicine, electricity, drinking water and basic necessities. In the four-month offensive on Raqqa, between 1300 and 1800 civilians were killed. [4]

Some 270,000 to 320,000 people have been displaced by the fighting and are living in miserable conditions in overcrowded camps on the outskirts of the city. They will not be able to return until the city is cleared of the mines and explosives scattered by the IS/D, which might take months.

By the end of October, with the loss of Raqqa, the IS/D controlled less than 10 percent of Syrian territory — compared with 30 percent at the beginning of 2017. More than half lies in the province of Deir Zor, close to that of Raqqa. The IS/D was the target of two separate offensives in Deir Zor: one led by the regime's troops and its allies, supported by Russia, the other by the SDF, supported by the U.S..

The province of Deir Zor also suffered tremendously from these offensives and bombings. From September 10 to the beginning of November, between 660 and 880 civilians died, while more than 200,000 people fled the province.

Regime forces took full control of the city of Deir Zor in November. The IS/D proto-state crumbled nearly completely at the end of 2017 under the pressure of multiple offensives in Syria and Iraq.

In mid-November, the Syrian regime's army and its allies, Hezbollah and Iranian-backed militias, with the assistance of the Russian air force, were fighting the IS/D in desert areas near Albu Kamal, the last town the jihadist group held in Syria, near the border with Iraq. Albu Kamal was a major supply and communications hub for the IS/D between Syria and Iraq, and was a big prize for the Iranian-backed militias.

However, this succession of defeats has not prevented the IS/D from multiplying suicide operations and car-bomb attacks in different regions of the country. The jihadist group has also increased the abuses against civilians in the areas from which its soldiers are withdrawing.

The PYD's Moscow representative, Abd Salam Muhammad Ali, declared at the beginning of December that the SDF could be integrated into the Syrian army if a political solution that satisfied all parties was found. However, in September 2017, the leading PYD politician and co-chair of the Syrian Democratic Council, Ilham Admed, revealed that the PYD officials had already met with the Assad regime twice, but the Russian-brokered dialogue went nowhere.

Russia was unable or unwilling to override a Turkish veto of the PYD participation in January 2017 peace talks in the Kazakhstan's capital, Astana, during which both the representatives of the opposition and of the regime rejected any Kurdish autonomy.

The rapprochement between the Turkish and Russian leaders, Erdogan and Putin, following Turkey's shooting down of a Russian fighter jet in 2015, did not improve PYD's situation, following the failed

military coup of a section of the Turkish army in July 2016. That August, the Turkish forces formed a coalition with the Syrian armed opposition forces in a military campaign called "Operation Euphrates Shield." They targeted both the IS/D and the PYD in Syria and their intervention was not opposed by Russia, the U.S. or Iran.

Turkey's Deputy Prime Minister, Nurettin Canikli, even acknowledged in December 2016 that Turkey "would not have moved so comfortably" without the rapprochement with Russia, which effectively controls parts of the northern Syrian air space. This demonstrated that Russian interests were not similar to the PYD. The Operation Euphrates Shield succeeded both in rooting out the IS/D from the Turkish border and in preventing the PYD-YPG from connecting its main territory in north-eastern Syria with the city of Afrin.

Similarly, interactions between the U.S. officials and the YPG commanders remained largely informal. Brett McGurk, the U.S. special presidential envoy for the anti-IS/D coalition, visited the YPG-controlled areas, Rumeilan and Kobani, twice, in January and September 2016. He was filmed with the YPG-PYD and SDF commanders but did not discuss the issue foremost on the PYD group's mind: The U.S. protection and recognition of the self-rule area.

Not wishing to encourage Kurdish autonomist ambitions that would further upset Turkey, Washington also avoided providing economic support to the PYD-controlled areas. After Ankara fumed over a U.S. decision to arm SDF fighters for the offensive on Raqqa, the U.S. Defense Secretary, Jim Mattis, during May 2017 talks with the Turkey's Prime Minister, voiced strong support for Turkey's fight against the PKK militants.

The U.S. has maintained the PKK on its terrorist list throughout these years. This prevented PKK leaders from speaking directly to the U.S. military commanders. (They did so through the PKK's YPG associates, in their capacity as the SDF commanders.) In June 2017, Washington even pledged to Turkish officials to take back weapons supplied to the YPG after the defeat of the IS/D.

The PKK leader, Riza Altun, pointed out that the U.S. behavior towards the Kurdish issue in Syria "is double-edged depending on its interests, and the relationship with Washington is therefore tactical in nature."

On October 31, Major General James Jarrard, the Special Operations Joint Task Force, Operation Inherent Resolve commander declared that the U.S. would continue to support the SDF after the military defeat of the IS/D, but he claimed to not know for how long.

Similarly, he failed to answer whether, in case the Assad regime tried to wrest control from the authorities governing the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria, the United States would support the SDF. On their side, the PYD leaders voiced support for a longer-term role for the U.S. forces in Syria once the IS/D is defeated and until there is a political solution to the Syrian crisis.

The PYD faced the contradiction that Russia and the U.S. were not ready to jeopardize their relationships with Turkey to support any Kurdish autonomy plan whether in Syria or elsewhere.

The rapprochement at the end of 2016 among Iran, Turkey and Russia threatened the PYD's interests even more.

The Syrian regime's military advances also demonstrated Damascus' unwillingness to accept a rival actor in the territories recaptured from the IS/D, as shown by the multiplication of clashes with the SDF. The fact that for tactical reasons both actors avoided each other's major infighting in the past few years, [5] and that there are examples of on-the-ground tactical cooperation, do not change the fact that the two factions are strategically opposed.

In mid-June 2017, U.S. warplanes shot down a Syrian jet in the southern Raqqa countryside because it dropped bombs near SDF positions. In mid-September, Russian air forces targeted positions of the SDF, causing injuries, east of the Euphrates River in Syria near Deir Zor. Although Moscow denied bombing SDF forces, the U.S. coalition and the SDF argued otherwise.

The pressure on SDF forces continued to mount as they suffered a new attack carried out by Russian and regime forces against their positions in Deir Zor province on September 25.

On its side, the Damascus regime has repeatedly declared that it would not allow the PYD to threaten the country's territorial unity and that "Those who will move in those directions know what price they have to pay."

A high Syrian regime official, Bouthaina Shaaban, actually declared that the Syrian government was ready to fight the SDF, characterizing them as an illegitimate foreign force just as is the IS/D. For officials in Damascus, Raqqa is still considered an occupied city.

In the midst of worsening military and political tensions between Damascus and its allies on one side and the PYD, Syrian Foreign Minister Walid Moallem affirmed at the end of September that the Syrian government was open to negotiations with Kurds over their demand for autonomy within Syria's borders. This declaration was merely rhetorical, as it did not provide any political content to the meaning of "autonomy" used by officials in Damascus.

Walid Moallem's ambiguous statement sought short-term understanding with the PYD by possibly providing the Kurdish movement with a sort of political arrangement to try and avoid a scenario of complete separation similar to Iraqi Kurdistan.

It might also pressure the Turkish government, which sees a Kurdish autonomous region under the leadership of PKK's sister organization as a danger. The statement of the Syrian Foreign Minister was made on the same day of the Kurdish independence referendum in Iraq, which was completely rejected by the Syrian regime.

Despite the cautious readiness of some PYD officials to engage in dialogue with the regime, Ilham Ahmed remarked that in both their meetings Damascus officials "did not appear serious" about talks on the future of the autonomous regions and the demand for a federal system for Syria. The Syrian regime through the voice of its dictator Bashar al-Assad has promised to restore the authority of the state over the entire national territory, including Raqqa.

Turkey, Syria, and Afrin military offensive

In October 2017, the Turkish army deployed once again in Syria, this time in Idlib province in northern Syria, setting up observation posts as part of a mission to control the SDF. Initially the mission was officially aimed at dislodging Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), a military alliance dominated by the jihadists of Jabhat al-Nusra.

The HTS actually has agreed not to interfere with Turkish operations along the border and is therefore relatively spared, for the moment, by Ankara. This Turkish military deployment, in collaboration with Syrian armed opposition groups, is part of the so-called de-escalation agreements reached with Iran and Russia. The objective is to isolate the city of Afrin [6] controlled by the SDF.

The Turkish pro-government daily Yeni Safak did not hesitate to use as a headline in one of its editions: "Today Idlib, tomorrow Afrin." The Turkish government also placed opposition armed

groups that it sponsors in the areas.



The Turkish forces continued their incursions into the northern territories of the country throughout the end of 2017, while in mid-November Erdogan declared “We need to cleanse Afrin of the structure there called the YPG terrorist organization.”

In January 2018, the Turkish military assisted by pro-Turkish Syrian reactionary opposition militia groups, mostly composed of Islamic fundamentalist movements, launched a large-scale air and ground offensive, dubbed “Operation Olive Branch”, on Afrin province. The Turkish army used as a pretext an announcement by a military spokesman for the U.S.-led global coalition against the IS/D to build a 30,000-strong border force under the command of the SDF. In Ankara’s opinion, the U.S. decision meant that the U.S.-YPG partnership would not end with the collapse of the IS/D, as the Turkish government had hoped. The National Coalition of Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces (known as the Etilaf), composed mostly of liberal and Islamic conservative and fundamentalist groups and personalities, have not only supported the Turkish military intervention and continued their previous chauvinist policies against the Kurds in Syria, but are also participating in this operation by calling on Syrian refugees in Turkey to join the Syrian armed opposition groups fighting in Afrin.

Videos have emerged since the beginning of the military operation against Afrin showing racist and hatred discourses against the Kurds among some of the Syrian fighters, as well as slogans in favour of Saddam Hussein and Erdogan. They also mutilated the corpses of Kurdish YPG soldiers and displayed it on social medias, notably of member of the Kurdish Women’s Protection Units, fuelling ethnic tensions.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said the Afrin operation would be followed by another against Manbij and all the way to the Iraqi border to clear the YPG from its frontier. Erdogan also threatened any voices in Turkey critical of “Operation Olive Branch”, notably stating in reference to the pro-Kurdish Peoples’ Democratic Party (HDP), “that wherever you go out on the streets, our security forces are on your necks”. Nearly 600 people have been arrested for participating in protests or / and social media posts criticizing the Afrin military offensive in Syria, including politicians, journalists and activists, while Erdogan accused the Turkish Medical Association (TTB), which opposed the campaign and called for peace, of betrayal and of being a gang of slaves and servants of imperialism. The day after Erdogan’s comment, a Turkish prosecutor ordered the detention of 11 senior members of the TTB, including its chairman, under the accusations of “propaganda in support of a terrorist organization, and provoking the public.” With the exception of the HDP, the rest of the main parties in Turkey, including the fascistic National Movement Party (known as MHP) and the Kemalist Republican People’s Party (known as CHP), support Turkey’s military intervention.

Turkish Prime Minister, Binali Yildirim, defended the operation saying it was solely aimed at securing his country’s security and protecting Arabs, Kurds and Turkmens from “terrorist organizations”.

This intervention occurred with the relative passivity and acceptance of the main powers involved in Syria. Despite a statement from the Russian Foreign Ministry expressing “concern” and calling on the parties “to show mutual restraint”, Moscow, which controlled large parts of Syrian air space, gave Turkey the green light for this invasion and withdrew its armed forces from the areas targeted by Turkish forces toward the cities of Nubl and al-Zahraa, both of which were under regime control. Russian officials had demanded that the YPG hand over Afrin to the Syrian regime to “stop” the Turkish attacks on the region. Russia also saw the operation as a way to deepen the wedge between the NATO allies Ankara and Washington in light of the latter’s support for the YPG. Furthermore, Russia probably estimated that, threatened with invasion by Turkey and its proxies, Syrian opposition armed groups, the YPG would become more open to Moscow’s earlier demand to hand Afrin back to the Syrian regime.

On February 6, Turkey’s Foreign Minister, Mevlut Cavusoglu, actually declared that Turkey and Russia have no disagreements over Ankara’s air and ground offensive into northern Syria’s Afrin region and the two countries are in close contact over the operation.

On its side, the U.S. remained rather passive stating that it understood the security concerns of Ankara that gave advance warning of their operation, only urging Turkey to exercise restraint and ensure that its military operations remain limited in scope and duration. On January 31, Turkey urged the U.S. to halt its support for Kurdish YPG fighters or risk confronting Turkish forces on the ground in Syria. In Washington, the Pentagon answered that it carefully tracked weapons provided to the YPG and would continue discussions with Turkey, while adding that Turkey’s operation into Afrin was not helpful and was taking focus away from fighting Islamic State.

Facing this situation, the self-autonomous government of Afrin, under the PYD’s rule, called on Damascus to exercise its sovereign duty towards Afrin and protect its borders with Turkey from the occupying Turkish forces. The Syrian regime has denounced rhetorically from the beginning the Turkish intervention against Afrin and threatened to shoot down Turkish jets in its airspace, but has not moved its armed forces to halt it. Russia’s collaboration in the Turkish military offensive and Damascus’ military weakness prevented it from stopping “Operation Olive Branch”, while it might have been interested to see the Kurdish YPG forces weakened.

In addition to this, a major new incident took place on the night of February 7 to 8 between the U.S. forces and their Syrian Democratic Forces (FDS) allies on one side and the pro-regime forces on the other in the province of Deir Zor, causing between 45 and 100 deaths in the ranks of pro-regime militants. Damascus called this act an “aggression” and “massacre”. After this event, however, a Pentagon spokesman declared that Washington “does not seek a conflict with the regime.” Hostilities began when fighters affiliated with the Assad regime crossed the Euphrates, in violation of the Russian-American agreement that made the river a dividing line: in the west the pro-regimes, supported by Moscow, and is the SDF, supported by the United States.

During the same period, the two main Syrian Kurdish political actors, the PYD and KNC, boycotted the Sochi Conference in Russia, called the Syrian National Dialogue Congress, in order to advance peace negotiations in Syria at the end of January. The PYD considered the Sochi Conference meaningless after Russia did not oppose Turkey’s military offensive in Afrin while collaborating with Ankara. The KNC decided not to participate after Moscow refused to accept their demands, which mainly included the Kurdish cause in Syria to be one of the key agendas of the congress, and in light of Moscow’s cooperation with Turkish offensive against Afrin.

The Turkish military operation against Afrin and the very recent failed Kurdish independence referendum in Iraqi Kurdistan, showed that international and regional powers have no willingness to see any Kurdish national or autonomist aspirations come to fruition. It is evident that the previous

support of Moscow and Washington for the YPG, and the YPG's support for the Russian air and military campaign alongside the Assad regime at the end of September 2015 did not prevent Ankara's military aggression against Afrin.

More broadly, the Afrin operation reflects the weakness of all democratic and progressive actors in the face of the Assad regime in Syria and its allies' destruction of the Syrian revolution, and the consequent renewed power of this regime, which has received acceptance by all international actors.

Conclusion

Support for self-determination, which can take diverse forms such as independence, federalism or recognition of the Kurdish people as an entity with equal rights within a state, must not mean being uncritical of the policies and collaboration with various imperialist countries by the various Kurdish leaderships of the Barzani clan, the PKK/PYD or any other Kurdish political parties.

Of course this is not to say that we consider these forces as similar. We can express, for example, critical support to the PKK/PYD — we can notably talk of positive policies regarding women's rights and secularism, among other things — while progressives should oppose the Barzani clan's neoliberal and conservative policies and their links with Israel.

However, collaboration by some Kurdish forces with imperialist forces can't be used to justify the refusal of the right of self-determination of the Kurdish people, as did some chauvinist leftists in the region. As the Russian revolutionary Vladimir Lenin said:

The fact that the struggle for national liberation against one imperialist power may, under certain circumstances, be utilized by another 'Great' Power in its equally imperialist interests, should have no more weight in inducing Social Democracy [the socialist movement of the time—eds.] to renounce its recognition of the right of nations to self-determination than the numerous cases of the bourgeoisie utilizing republican slogans for the purpose of political deception and financial robbery, for example in the Latin countries, have had in inducing them to renounce republicanism.

What is important to understand here is that Kurds in the past have been used by authoritarian regimes and imperialist actors to serve their interests before being sacrificed when these interests changed. This has occurred before and most probably will happen again.

In this perspective, the unity and independence of the popular and working classes without any forms of discrimination (race, religion, gender, etc.) in the region is of course the only way for the liberation and emancipation of all.

Workers' struggles alone will not, however, be sufficient to unite the working classes. Socialists in these struggles must also champion the liberation of all the oppressed. That requires raising demands for rights for women, religious minorities, LGBT communities, and oppressed racial and ethnic groups.

Any compromise on the explicit commitment to such demands will impede the Left from uniting the working class for the radical transformation of society. This means also supporting the right to self-determination of the Kurdish populations throughout the region.

Joseph Daher

P.S.

* New Socialist. February 9, 2018:

<http://newsocialist.org/the-kurdish-crisis-in-iraq-and-syria/>

* Joseph Daher is a Swiss-Syrian socialist activist, academic, and founder of the blog Syria Freedom Forever. He is the author of Hezbollah: Political Economy of the Party of God (2016, Pluto Press).

Footnotes

[1] The post-Saddam Constitution put in place a system guaranteeing the Kurds self-rule with a share of overall revenue proportionate to their share of the population. Since 2014, while the KRG held nearly all of northern Iraq's oil infrastructure and sold enough crude to fund themselves, Baghdad stopped sending funds. But the Iraqi government offensive that recaptured the KRG oil-producing territory in October meant the Kurdish autonomous region was once again dependent on Baghdad for funds.

[2] Kurdish politics have been dominated for decades by the KDP, led by three generations of the Barzani family, and its main rivals the PUK, led by the family of Jalal Talabani, who died in October. The two parties fought a civil war against each other in the 1990s, but maintained an outward appearance of unity after the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003, with Jalal Talabani serving as Iraq's ceremonial president in Baghdad from 2005-2014 while Masoud Barzani ran the Kurdish autonomous region.

[3] The HPC is the "grand coalition" that succeeded the High Referendum Council, the body established to carry out the independence referendum in the Kurdistan Region. It is comprised mostly of KDP members and a few PUK executives close to the KDP. It has no accountability to parliament or any other official institution, but nonetheless declared it would "protect the stability of Kurdistan from any type of threat" and represent the Kurdistan Region in Baghdad and abroad.

[4] More than 1,000 civilians (1,058) died under U.S.-led coalition bombings, 311 civilians were killed by IS and 191 civilians by SDF. IS jihadists have also used many civilians as human shields.

[5] The PYD policies in Syria have been problematic on some issues such as its non-conflict orientation towards the Assad regime, support for Russian intervention in Syria and even benefiting in the beginning of 2016 from Russian bombing in the countryside of Aleppo to conquer new territories against FSA and Islamic opposition forces. There are also some accusations of human rights violations against Arab populations. In addition, it has practiced authoritarian and repressive measures against other Kurdish rival groups and activists.

[6] Afrin has welcomed many Internally Displaced Persons from other regions of the country which has led to a doubling of its population to 400,000 and 500,000, because it was relatively spared from the war and aggressions of the Assad's regime forces.