



Will Kurdish Unity Talks Lead to a More Muscular US Policy on Syria?

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The US is backing Kurdish unity talks as part of a policy centered around appeasing Turkey's national security concerns about the PYD's essential role in Syria. However, all signs indicate that Turkey sees this gesture as no more than a ruse to normalize its enemies. Only a more involved and active US foreign policy will cement any gains around a more stable and unified Kurdish presence.

The news of [Kurdish unity talks in Syria](#), announced in mid-April, raised the question of a shift in US strategy toward the country. The talks had been going on clandestinely for months prior to the announcement that US special adviser to the global coalition forces William Roebuck was taking an active role in backing the talks.

This is not the first time the rival Kurdish parties have tried to patch up their differences. Similar talks were attempted between the PYD, known for its ideological affiliation with Turkey's banned Workers' Party, the PKK, and the Kurdish National Council, with the mediation of Iraq's Massoud Barzani and his Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP).

Those talks failed, and despite the US commitment to help the Kurdish political rivals overcome their differences, many challenges lie ahead. Kurdish politics in general are fragmented and fraught with tensions. Recall, for example, the sharp division between the KDP-led Kurdish Regional Government and the more Iran-oriented party once run by former President of Iraq Jalal Talabani, the PUK. The PUK essentially [stabbed](#) the KRG in the back in Kirkuk shortly after the secession referendum, allowing Iraqi forces coupled with Iran-backed Shiite militias to take over the Kurdish-held oil-rich province and essentially crush Kurdish hopes for independence from Iraq for the foreseeable future. The divide between the PYD and

the KNC is no less deep. The PYD accuses the KNC of backing Turkey, and the KNC accuses the PYD of being pro-Assad.

In reality, the PYD, which arose in Syria following the 2014 massacre in Kobani committed by ISIS, has been largely forced into an uneasy relationship with Assad, in part in exchange for US backing during that stage of the war in Syria and in part thanks to the withdrawal of backing from all other actors. The US under Obama ignored its own “[red line](#)” in Syria, which essentially meant tacit support for Assad in exchange for Iran’s participation in the nuclear deal. (The American desire to coax Iran toward that deal also led to [US silence](#) on Iran’s alliance with the Muslim Brotherhood-backed President of Egypt Muhammad Morsi, and to Washington’s turning a blind eye to many atrocities for which Iran was directly or indirectly responsible.) For a time, the PYD enjoyed the [support of Russia](#), which used the Kurdish card to gain concessions from Turkey and took advantage of what was perceived as unreliable support from the US.

Under Mazloun Abdi, however, it became increasingly obvious that Russia, too, is not a dependable patron. The KNC’s relationship with Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan also has its [limits](#).

Additional challenges and differences between the two parties include potentially disparate visions of democratic federalism; prospective visions for the autonomy; and the relationship with the Turkish Kurds, most of whom, at this point, have some level of affinity for the PKK’s resistance to Erdoğan’s oppression of and dishonest policies toward their population. Further challenges include agreement on the relationship with local Arab tribes, not all of which are friendly; and dealing with Arab-majority areas under Kurdish control like Deir Ez’zor, which has [expressed a preference](#) for Kurdish protection but is being challenged by Iranian influence operations.

In the past, unity talks haven’t gotten past the very early stages—hence the tendency to keep them secret. The new round is already being [challenged](#) by Turkey, which characterizes the talks as a “conspiracy to create international representation space for a terrorist organization based in Syria.”

The US calculus is simple. Following the devastating failure of the US in allowing Erdoğan’s multiple assaults on Kurdish-held cities in Syria, and the decimation of the Rojava project following the US withdrawal from northeastern Syria, the US decided to shift gears. Rather than try to persuade Erdoğan why the PYD is an important ally for the US and should be left alone, Washington decided instead to address Erdoğan’s concern that a PYD-led Kurdish autonomy presents a national security danger to Turkey by creating contiguous Kurdish territory near Turkish borders and encouraging Kurdish separatism inside Turkey.

The idea is that by presenting a united front, the US will help the Kurds diminish the perception that they are associated exclusively with the PYD. This would increase the likelihood of their playing a more integrated role in Syria's future, getting a seat at the table at the Geneva talks denied by Turkey, and pacifying Ankara by presenting the PYD as part of a coalition with a different focus on the Kurdish future—one that is perhaps less threatening to Erdoğan.

The reality, of course, is that Erdoğan is not buying any of this. If this is in fact the central reasoning for this coalition-building, the unity talks might not fail, but the strategy itself surely will. From the outset of Erdoğan's "national security" justification for Turkey's invasion of Syria and attempt to grab territory, he has equated the PYD to PKK and PKK to all Kurds, be they in Turkey or in Syria. Turkish lobbyists successfully used this argument to cement support for the White House's decision to withdraw from northeastern Syria on short notice, leaving the Kurdish population helpless in the face of the Turkish incursion and the mass atrocities and acts of ethnic cleansing that followed, committed by Erdoğan-backed militias.

This argument solidified Western ignorance of internal Kurdish issues and the ideological evolution within various movements to incite fear of radicalized Communists who were allegedly abusive of Syrian minorities—while failing to note that whatever tensions might have existed between the PYD and other Kurdish parties, complaints against them by the locals always came from anonymous sources and used Turkish talking points, and that Erdoğan's own backing of atrocities against civilians was by far the greater. Lobbyists largely succeeded in playing the confusion created by the alphabet soup of Kurdish organizations to create an impression of hopelessly fractured, undemocratic societies that can never build their own future without infringing on the territorial integrity of state actors and other populations. The West swallowed this argument even as Turkey invaded a sovereign country, attacked Yazidi encampments in northern Iraq, and later sent troops and militias to Libya as part of its ever-expanding definition of "national security" and "defense lines."

The strategy of trying to appease Erdoğan's fears through this measure is quixotic at best, as Erdoğan is already intent on dismissing the effort as yet another way of "normalizing" the PYD and giving international legitimacy to Rojava. According to Jonathan Spyer of the Middle East Center for Reporting, while Kurdish unity would ultimately benefit the Kurds by giving them more power to negotiate for autonomy within some future Syrian constitution, the strategy is not good overall. "It looks exactly like they are continuing to seek to accommodate Erdoğan and that the intra-Kurdish negotiations form part of a general strategy where they now want to preserve the current territorial status quo in Syria while maintaining diplomatic and political and economic pressure on the Assad regime to force concessions," Spyer said. He added that while this might contribute to the boxing in of Assad and give

the Kurds more room for successful negotiation, it will do nothing to stop Erdoğan's continued pressure.

Kurdish analyst Kadar Sheikhmous underscored that to ensure any measure of success for this effort, the US needs to have a stable ally in Syria. He compared the situation to Iraq, where the US supported the pro-Iran puppet government. That government benefited from the US presence and investments in its security while simultaneously opening up the US to militia attacks. The US support was in vain, and the pro-Iran Iraqi government repeatedly asked the US to leave.

Sheikhmous added that lending the Kurds symbolic political backing and some measure of limited humanitarian aid is far from sufficient to make this strategy worthwhile. To succeed and to counter the malicious influence of corrupt Assad elites, the self-serving Russian presence, and Turkish aggression and backing of pro-Turkish extremists in Idlib, the US would need to exercise strategic involvement in various aspects of Syria's economy, the energy sector, education, and other sectors, and essentially be fully involved in building up the kinds of allies and partnerships that would benefit its vision in the long term.

Dr. Nasser Haj Mansour, formerly an adviser to General Mazloun Abdo, outlined additional internal and external issues:

Major challenges faced and are still facing these dialogues despite the fact that they have reached significant stages...[T]hese challenges appear on three real levels[. T]he first is the Kurdish level inside Syria and its extensions outside the borders and as a result of historical, geographical and political facts of the Kurdish issue, the difference of political visions between the Kurdish parties and the remnants of previous years of conflicts and what the Syrian and Kurdish political lineups have left on the Syrian Kurdish parties. The role of different political views also cannot be denied between these parties in their composition, roots and nature, and the extension of this contradiction in many points on the community which is the main purpose behind the profound [desire] to push the situation toward the unity.

There are very important regional challenges, especially the Turkish and Iranian stances, and this is a continuous historical fact since WWI, after drawing the international borders, which denied the Kurdish political presence in the global system that formed.

If the US wants to get more out of its partnerships, it will need to show a lot more involvement, a lot more clout, a lot more dedication, and ultimately, a lot more muscle to keep both its enemies and its alleged allies from further destruction under the flag of self-interest. Does Washington's limited role in these talks indicate an

openness toward playing a broader and more active role in Syria? So far, there is no indication of that, but when faced with the extent of the challenges, the US might be compelled to do what it takes if only to avoid further troubles down the road.

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