

Syria: prospects for a political solution after U.S. withdrawal

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In light of the news that the United States is gearing up to withdraw its forces from Syria in the coming months, Turkey has been stepping up its preparations for an invasion and occupation, raising the threat of the new round of ethnic cleansing that could dwarf its campaign in Afrin earlier this year.

According to the AFP News Agency, Turkey sent a convoy of military vehicles to the border on Monday, with reports that some of the vehicles crossed into Syrian territory. At the same time, the Hamza Division – which is part of the Turkish-backed entity calling itself the ‘Free Syrian Army’ – announced that they were preparing for an attack on Kurdish forces.

However, a diplomatic wrench has been thrown into the plans of President Erdogan as a deal between the People’s Protection Units (YPG) and the Syrian government has been struck which will reportedly see the Syrian Arab Army retake the strategically important city of Manbij. Erdogan quickly announced that if that is indeed

that case that “we will have nothing left to do there”.

This does not mean that the threat of a Turkish invasion of Syria is off the table altogether. Ankara still intends to destroy the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria (frequently called Rojava) that it views as being a ‘terror corridor’ on its southern border.

Still, such invasion plans could be further hindered by the diplomatic efforts of the Syrian Democratic Council (the political wing of the Syrian Democratic Forces, the umbrella group led by the YPG).

In light of the new agreement with the Syrian government to ward off a common enemy, could such a military alliance actually eventually lead to a viable political solution for Syria that could finally bring an end to nearly eight years of war?

Cooperation with Damascus and Iranian-backed Forces?

There were already flickers of a possible rapprochement between the YPG and Syrian state earlier this year during the invasion of Afrin.

Although Damascus stopped short of sending regular units of the Syrian Arab Army to aid Kurdish forces, the decision to deploy elements of the National Defence Forces (NDF) showed that there was at the very least scope for military cooperation, even if it didn’t extend to the political realm.

Given the close relationship between Syria and Iran, much of the dissent within U.S. foreign policy circles about Trump’s withdrawal announcement is about how he has apparently gifted control of Syria to Iranian forces. One example of the hysteria around this can be found in a Washington Post headline from December 21, which reads simply “U.S. troop withdrawal from Syria is ‘a dream come true for the Iranians’”.

As the Kurdistan Communities Union (KCK) wrote in its statement on the U.S. withdrawal, “Iran has the political experience of knowing that Turkey has joined forces with the US against its policies. It is clear to Russia, Iran and Syria what the militias, which Turkey wants to station east of the Euphrates, mean to themselves.”

There are signs that some Iranian-backed groups are willing to lend their support to Kurdish forces in light of a possible Turkish attack. Speaking with Al Mayadeen TV, a representative of the Iraqi Shia organization Kata’ib’ Hezbollah said that the group has “continuous and intensive communications” with YPG commanders and would be willing to protect Syrian sovereignty alongside the Syrian Arab Army (SAA) if they are deployed together with the YPG.

A rapprochement with Russia?

Although the Democratic Union Party (PYD) and the Rojava authorities once enjoyed decent relations with Russia, they soured when Russian forces not only abandoned their posts in Afrin in February, but then greenlighted Erdogan's invasion by opening up the airspace to Turkish jets.

Now, with U.S. withdrawal pending, representatives from the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) have been in Moscow to discuss possibilities for stopping a new invasion.

According to Kurdistan 24, "the Russians offered to deploy border guards from the Syrian army in the border area from the east of Euphrates to the Tigris River in the Syrian – Iraqi – Turkish border triangle." At the same time, "the SDF demands Moscow to send regular Syrian army forces and not the Iran-backed National Defense Forces that were deployed on Feb. 20 in Afrin".

It's clear that such potential military cooperation is inextricably tied with the future of governance in Syria. Moscow would almost certainly like to see the whole of Syria brought back under de-facto control of the Damascus government, although Russia has also previously taken a position of advocating more rights for Kurds and other nationalities, such as when it proposed a new constitution for the country in 2016 that would have changed the 'Arab Republic' to 'Syrian Republic' (a move that was rejected by the Ba'athist government).

Deepening of the revolution?

The withdrawal of the U.S. has multifaceted consequences for the potential resolution of the Syrian war. The KCK believes that the U.S. presence – as well as other external powers -- actually hindered the true thrust of the revolution, writing that "the democratic revolution in Syria was distorted [in its character] by the presence of external forces. In this way, all external forces and inhuman gangs such as ISIS have prevented the struggle of the peoples of Syria from taking its original direction."

The KCK also noted that although the U.S. withdrawal is part of a 'plot' to save the Turkish state, it will ultimately "further increase the people's resolve to resist and strengthen the revolution. The interventions of external powers have made it harder for the democratic forces to fight on the basis of internal dynamics."

The primary question seems to be if the revolution in northern Syria will indeed be able to truly be strengthened if a political resolution involves a secession of a certain

amount of autonomy, or territory, that is currently held by the Democratic Federation. Although far from ideal for the Rojava project, negotiations with the Syrian state provide the best possibility for a military alliance that is capable of repelling any attempts by Turkey to infringe on the sovereignty of Syria.

For the sovereignty of Syria

In Erdogan's typically absurd manner, he said in a speech on Monday that a military campaign targeting territory held by the SDF would be done "to return the freedom of our Arab brothers and sisters, to return the freedom of our Kurdish brothers and sisters".

To those with even an elementary understanding of the oppression faced by the Kurdish nation within the borders of Turkey, such a statement is clearly a bold-faced lie that should put anybody concerned about the freedom of the Kurdish masses on high alert.

It also puts the government in Damascus on alert. Turkish-backed mercenaries and remnants of Salafist gangs such as the Islamic State and al-Qaeda still hold territory in the country's northwest in important cities such as Afrin, Jarablus, and Idlib; and unlike the YPG, who are open to negotiations with the Ba'athist regime and have long proclaimed themselves a neutral 'third way' in Syria, these 'FSA' forces are hell-bent on the overthrow of the Assad government, even if that is increasingly looking like a fantasy.

The call issued by the YPG to the government makes clear that the sovereignty of the country is an issue of common concern, speaking of "Syrian government forces which are obliged to protect the same country, nation and borders..."

It remains to be seen as to whether Damascus and Rojava's revolutionaries can find enough common ground in negotiations to come to a resolution regarding how to rectify the country's history of national oppression and exclusion, and also what decentralisation of authority would actually look like post-war.

For the time being, however, this intra-Syrian cooperation looks to have the potential to prevent another bloodbath by staving off yet a new genocidal war of aggression.