

# Damascus and SDF: the possibility for successful negotiations

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The Syrian civil war seems to be approaching its end, and in the efforts for Assad to finally recapture large swathes of territory that his government had lost to the Syrian opposition in 2012/13, he finds two territorial obstacles in the way of his plans to bring the whole country under the sovereignty of his Baathist Government. Firstly, There is the area controlled by Turkey and its Islamist proxies which stretches from the northern outskirts of Aleppo and towards the entire border strip of the western Euphrates and Idlib. Secondly, there is the triangle area east of the Euphrates river controlled by the US partners against ISIS known as the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) led by the Kurdish YPG.

In May, Assad confronted the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria (the political body governing territories held by the SDF) with an ultimatum: either they prepare themselves for negotiation or war.

Assad's government is probably frustrated. With U.S backing, the Syrian Democratic

Forces have taken control of territory that accounts for 70% of Syria's oil production. Areas they seized from IS are significant sources of energy, particularly for oil production, but which also includes Dams and agricultural crops.

The SDF has, thus far, had no political recognition for its self-administration, and only seeks to be rewarded for its tireless efforts to defeat terrorism. The SDF has also significantly proposed a peaceful solution to the Syrian conflict, keeping channels of communication open with all of Syria's key decision-makers including the Assad regime. Just in June for example, the movement for a democratic society (one of the political wings of the SDF) declared its availability for the beginning of talks without any preceding conditions. These calls have remained unheeded.

And no negotiation with the Assad regime will pave the way for genuine dialogue, unless firstly, the Kurdish question in Syria is taken seriously, and secondly if this dialogue takes place under the oversight of the international community. Assad has consistently demonstrated a refusal towards any kind of political concessions his government could give to the Kurds and he has shown an unwillingness to understand their current predicament. Years ago, when the Assad regime was at its lowest point, when it was desperate, Assad did not even think it was necessary to provide Kurds with any concessions: be that a constitutional recognition of Syria's Kurdish people, or a willingness to decentralize the state and abandon the chauvinistic Arabism upon which the Baathist government is built.

That was when he was at his most desperate moment. Now this violent and vicious regime, especially with its Russian and Iranian military support, would likely be even more arrogant if such negotiations were to even take place.

The Assad government, furthermore, does not even show a willingness to resolve the problems that have been plaguing the country for years since the civil war began. It deals with its rebel problem by moving it around: uprooting them and civilians in one area, and bussing them to another (recently this has been to the Northern Province of Idlib).

Kurds, on their part, however, find dialogue as an opportunity for building mutual understanding, and bringing an end to a war that has shed far too much Syrian blood since 2011. But negotiations will never take place, unless, they are contingent upon the guarantee that the main player on the side of the Syrian government, Russia, engages in the dialogue. Only then will it be certain that negotiations would lead to concrete results on the ground.

Otherwise, Assad has a tenacious conviction that any type of negotiation means obedience to his authority by coercion, an attitude he hints at in every speech

mentioning the Kurdish question in Syria. Assad does not believe in a political philosophy in accordance with the concepts of political participation or recognition. On the contrary, his political actions show a worldview based on the principles of superiority and subjugation.

At the end of the day, the SDF will not waste much effort if Assad does not show a willingness to negotiations.

Perhaps a point that both parties can discuss is their shared discontent with the Turkish presence in Syria, and the ongoing threats and allegations that its involvement is mainly concerned with fighting a so-called Kurdish statelet alongside its border. The only approach to neutralizing Turkish intervention in Syria is to prove that the country is indivisible and that Syria is willing to nationally recognize the existence of a Kurdish issue on Syrian soil.

Assad's alternative of a military solution will only lead to more bloodshed. Besides, it would not bode well with his government either. As the US Secretary of Defense has warned, such a move will not take place without costly repercussions should Damascus decide to take that route. Only a willingness to compromise with the SDF coupled with a political process could lead to favourable outcomes for both parties.

One thing is for sure, successful negotiations leading to a peaceful solution must be done under the oversight of an external power with the ability to assure Syrians that foreseeable and hopeful outcomes will be made on the ground. It's too early to judge whether or not this is possible, but as most Syrians can attest to, there seems to be no hope on the horizon