

A US no-fly zone: the solution to protecting Syria's Kurds

by Hawzhin Azeez - 09/01/2019 16:21



Trump's sudden decision to withdraw US troops from Syria sent shockwaves around the world, particularly for the anti-ISIS Coalition. International media had a field day analyzing the geopolitical implications of this rash decision, announcing the winners and losers of the withdrawal. Regional experts largely agreed that aside from allowing ISIS to revive, Iran, Russia and Turkey were the clear winners of this move. International opinion was unanimous in agreeing that the Kurds (i.e. the PYD party and their YPG & YPJ units), under the banner of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) were the clear losers.

Hours after Trump's decision—which allegedly came after a long phone call with the Turkish dictator Erdogan—Turkey's defense minister Hulusi Akar stated their intention to “bury” the Kurds. According to The Washington Post, Akar went further and stated, “When the time comes [the Kurds] will be buried in the trenches. Of this there should no doubt.”

Trump's hasty decision to withdraw troops did not come without criticism. US Defense Secretary Jim Mattis and Special US envoy to the anti-ISIS Coalition Brett McGurk both resigned in protest. US Senator Lindsey Graham has been the most vocal supporter in condemning the withdrawal from Syria and has openly called for the urgent need to protect the Kurds on the ground against Turkish incursion. This Sunday, Graham met with Trump over lunch and a crucial decision was reached to "pause" the withdrawal in order to "assess the effects of the conditions on the ground."

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Lindsey later tweeted three essential points that were discussed, and apparently agreed on by Trump. The three main focal points involve ensuring that ISIS is permanently destroyed; that Iran does not fill in the power vacuum left by the withdrawal, and finally, that the Kurdish allies are protected.

Though Graham, like McGurk and Mattis, have been vocal about ensuring that the Kurdish allies on the ground are protected, these three points stated by Graham leave many questions unanswered for the Kurds.

If the objective of the US is to end ISIS, then by that token, the US must engage in serious talks with the [Turkish regime](#), which has wasted no time in collecting ragtag Salafist jihadists and ISIS members into its own anti-Kurdish coalition on the borders of Manbij. Turkey has long demanded that the Kurds withdraw from Manbij, after the Kurds lost thousands of their forces in the fiercest fight against ISIS liberating the city. Since then, Manbij has been under Kurdish administration, complete with civil society organizations, democratic bodies, and women's rights laws being implemented. Manbij under the Kurdish administration has flourished into a successful economic hub in the region, which supports and supplies the northern Kurd dominated areas. These northern areas currently face an ongoing four year long humanitarian embargo by Turkey imposed on the north and supported by the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in neighboring Iraq, after Turkey provided a 200 million dollar incentive to the KRG.

Starting earlier this week, Turkey continued to amass its troops along with the remains of the so-called "Free Syrian Army" (FSA), and other jihadist groups such as the Faylaq al-Sham legion that it utilized in invading and annexing the Afrin region from the SDF earlier this year. In response, in a move that allegedly shocked and worried the Pentagon, the Kurds called for the Syrian government to bring its own troops to the outskirts of Manbij in an effort to protect the city's Kurdish and Arab

civilians. Late Saturday, reports emerged that the Turkish backed jihadists were engaging in skirmishes with the Syrian regime leading experts watching the situation to raise further concern for the region.

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From the perspective of the Kurdish position, protection and maintenance of the democratic model and nascent institutions being built is integral to the ongoing survival of the Kurdish-led multi-ethnic revolution in Rojava. In this regard, no serious offer of US protection can be considered without the request for a no fly zone over Rojava. This no fly zone would be similar to the one implemented by the US, UK, and France in 1991, to protect the Kurds and the Shi'ites of Iraq from Saddam's genocidal brutality and chemical weapons.

The no fly zone would go a long way to protect the Kurds, Christians and Yazidis from aerial bombardments, which was integral to the SDF losing the strategic Afrin region. Turkey used consecutive and unrelenting air support and bombing, deliberately targeting civilian infrastructure including hospitals, to weaken the SDF as it was facing spectacular losses on the ground against the Kurds. Had a no fly zone been implemented earlier, Turkey would have faced a long protracted war against the Kurds who in the years fighting against ISIS have become especially apt at ground guerrilla warfare.

More essentially, the invasion of Afrin has led to [massive human rights violations](#) involving rapes and kidnapping of women and young girls, forced conversion to Islam of Yazidi and Christian communities, massacres, looting, burning of olive orchards, and Arabization involving the families of jihadists being chauffeured to Afrin homes from places like Idlib and Ghouta. Over 450,000 civilians have been displaced from Afrin and live in extremely dire conditions. Turkey has barred UN and other international NGOs from entering Afrin region and providing aid, using its own aid organization as a propaganda mechanism to force conversions and indicate the Turkish alternative to the SDF's model of democracy.

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The difficulty that the Kurds face is in being unable to rely on the words of the US and lacking alternatives even in the Assad regime. Likewise, Russia was the main culprit in giving the green light for Turkey to invade Afrin, which makes Putin just as unreliable in providing long-term protection to the Kurds. For this reason, a US-led no fly zone is the closest guarantee of securing long term protection from Turkey.

Indeed, the no fly zone can be the answer in ensuring that ISIS is eradicated long term. The US in its open “war on terror” policy has yet to grasp the notion that ISIS represents an ideology rather than an actual physical entity. In other words, you can illuminate the 5,000 remaining ISIS terrorists, but the vision and values that ISIS promotes for the region remains deeply entrenched across the Middle East. For this reason, and so long as regimes like Turkey continue to provide arms and support to jihadists, there can be no effective ending of the values that continue to promote organizations like ISIS. Furthermore, the Kurdish model of Democratic Confederalism with its strong focus on multicultural coexistence, grassroots democracy, and gender liberation is the best solution to combat the violent ideology of ISIS that has been found thus far. The relative stability of the northern Kurdish regions of Syria is a living example of this model working, allowing long held grievances, inter-ethnic and religious conflict, and tribal prejudices to be addressed peacefully and effectively.

No fly zones are ultimately defensive, not offensive, which fits perfectly with the YPG (People’s Defense Units) and YPJ’s (Women’s Defense Units) namesake. All the Kurds of Rojava want is a space to live with the democratic rights that many in the West take for granted. The least the Western world can do to repay Kurdish forces who have lost over 10,000 martyrs defeating ISIS is protect their families from Turkey’s bombs.