

Syria, Washington and the Kurds

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With the defeat of ISIS and Nusra, the exposure of the 'White Helmets' and the various Chemical Weapons stunts, and with the collapse of 'Rojava', Washington is fast running out of options in Syria. Syria is winning, but the big power has not yet given up. Knowing that it is losing, it still acts to prolong the endgame and punish the Syrian people.

We are sitting at a joint military command center in Arima (northern Syria, just west of Manbij) with three Syrian Arab Army (SAA) colonels and two uniformed Kurd SDF 'koyal' (comrades). There are Russians here too, but they do not enter our conversation. Yet even in the friendly chat, as we wait for permission to travel on to Manbij and Ayn al Arab (Kobane), some tensions are apparent.

Sharing coffee and food, both the SAA officers and the SDF comrades acknowledge they are fighting and dying together against an invading Turkish army and its proxy militias. The frontline is just a few kilometers away.

When I ask what differences there are between DAESH, Nusra and the 'Free Army', they all respond derisively. "There is no difference, it is a money game, the fighters go back and forwards depending on the pay rates". "Any difference between groups in the numbers of foreigners?" I suggest. "No difference", they repeat. SDF Comrade B passes me a recent video of 'Free Army' fighters at Tal Abiad, to the north-east, protesting conditions and demanding their return to HTS/Nusra controlled Idlib.

But we all know they fight for a different cause. The SAA officers are fighting for a liberated and united Syria, while

the SDF comrades still dream of an independent 'Kurdistan' by cutting out parts of contemporary Turkey, Syria and Iraq.

Separatist Kurds collaborated with US occupation forces in pursuit of their 'Rojava' dream (western Kurdistan), even though Washington never really supported the project. Many Syrians see them as traitors. But the SAA is patient, dealing with one enemy at a time, and at the moment the enemy in north Syria is Erdogan.

The 'Rojava' dream is effectively dead. As both Afrin (in March 2018) and Manbij (in October 2019) demonstrated, no Kurdish militia can defend itself from Ankara, which correctly sees any 'Rojava' statelet as a stepping stone for the bigger game, a large slice of Turkey. Protection by US occupation forces could not last forever. Moreover, Kurdish groups have no exclusive historical claims over any parts of northern Syria. Many others live there. In much of north Syria Kurds are a small minority.

Despite these tensions a close, even affectionate relationship remains in the room. The SAA colonels are all older men, in their 40s and 50s, while the SDF comrades are younger men, around 30 years old. Colonel H offers more coffee to Comrade A while Comrade B tells of Kurdish conquests. "We lost 850 martyrs liberating Manbij", he says, and "2,000 in Kobane". And what about all those in your prisons? one of the colonels asks. "They are reformatories", Comrade B replies.

What Comrade B does not say about the "liberation" of Manbij is that (1) the 2016 battle was effectively a transfer of the city from one US proxy (ISIS/DAESH) to another (SDF), and (2) there were very few Kurds in that mostly Arab city. After the major battles, many from surrounding areas fled to the city, swelling its population. A recent estimate puts its population at 700,000, of which 80% are Arab (Najjar 2019). Of the rest there are other non-Arab minorities, including Assyrians, Circassians and Armenians. There is no real social base for a separatist Kurd regime in Manbij.

Yet even after the departure of US occupation forces from this part of northern Syria, and even though the Syrian and Russian presence constrains Turkish ambitions, the SDF has been allowed to maintain its former administration of both the city and the region.

The bizarre and unsustainable nature of this regime is made apparent when Nihad Roumieh, my Syrian journalist colleague, asks one of the colonels to show us where we are. Colonel A happily rolls out a military map, with friend and enemy troop placements. The first thing apparent is that six Syrian armored units protect Manbij, to the north. Second, although Syrian forces have resumed control of more than 200km of the northern border, it is depressing to see how much of northern Syria remains occupied by Erdogan and his proxies.

The picture seemed even more grim when we later spoke with a Manbij councilor and his lawyer friend. They complained of many held in prison and tortured, under the SDF regime. They said there were only two Kurd villages in Manbij.

Nevertheless, it seems that a transition is taking place. Over November-December both Syrian and Russian flags were raised over previous SDF positions in Hassakah, Ayn al Arab, Jarablus and Tal Jemaa (Syrian Observer 2019; Semenov 2019; SOHR 2019), with suggestions that the SDF was involved in negotiations with Damascus "to reach conclusive solutions". However, SDF leader Mazloum Abadi said that the group wanted "Syrian unity ... [with] decentralized self-administration" including maintenance of the separate SDF militia (Syrian Observer 2019). Damascus is unlikely to accept such terms.

The claim for a Kurdish homeland in Syria is no indigenous movement, claiming the return of ancestral lands. Nor does the debate over Kurds as historical migrants (in Yildiz 2005) or long-standing inhabitants (Hennerbichler 2012: 77-78) resolve

the question. While Kurdish languages are of Iranian origin, and the longer history passes through Mesopotamia (Iraq) and the Ottoman Empire, Kurds are certainly part of the native Syrian population. However at 1.5 million Syria hosts the smallest group in the region, with around 20 million in Turkey (Gürbüz 2016: 31) and another 6-8 million each in Iran and Iraq.

The idea of a 'Rojava' statelet in Syria has been compromised in three ways. First, the Kurdish groups in the north and north-east Syria are only one of several groups (amongst Assyrians, Circassians, Armenians and Arabs), and in some areas small minorities. Second, the Kurdish separatist movement in Syria has been over-determined by the politics of and migration from Turkey. 'Rojava' was seen as the stepping stone for a larger 'Kurdistan' project, driven from the north. Third, intervention by the imperial power raised separatist expectations and has damaged Kurdish relations with other Syrian groups.

In the longer history of Syria, a traditional refuge for minorities, there have been many Kurds, including famous personalities, who did not buy into the separatist dream. Two of them are buried inside the grounds of the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus: the 12th-century ruler Sala'addin and the Quranic scholar Sheikh Mohammad al Bouti (murdered by Jabhat al Nusra in 2013). Many Syrians of Kurdish origin embraced the idea of a wider identity. Before the 2011 conflict Tejel (2009: 39-46) classified Syrian Kurdish identities as comprising Arab nationalist, communist and Kurdish nationalist, with Syrian Kurd leaders Husni Za'im and Adib al-Shishakli campaigning for a non-sectarian 'Greater Syria'.

The Turkish Kurd influence began early in the 20th century, as Kurdish culture was repressed by the post-Ottoman Turkish state. Turkish Kurds first took refuge in Syria, including in Damascus, after their failed rebellion in 1925. The very idea of a Syrian Kurdish party first came in 1956 from the Turkish

refugee Osman Sabri; and another Turkish refugee Nûredîn Zaza, became president of that party (al Kati 2019: 45, 47).

There were multiple splits in subsequent years. The Democratic Union Party (PYD) emerged in the 1980s as a branch of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), loyal to its leader Abdallah Öcalan, who in 1996 acknowledged that “most of the Kurds of Syria were refugees and migrants from Turkey and they would benefit from returning there” (in Allsop 2014: 231). Many of the claims about ‘stateless’ Kurds in Syria have to be read in light of this Turkish influx. However, Öcalan departed in 1998, as part of Syria’s Adana agreement with Turkey (al Kati 2019: 49-52).

The big powers, conscious of the potentially divisive role of separatist Kurds, have used them for decades, to divide and weaken Arab governments. US regional allies Israel and Iran (pre-1979) joined in, with the Shah in 1962 ordering his SAVAK secret police to help finance the Kurdish insurgency in northern Iraq, so as to undermine Baghdad. The Israelis joined in two years later. The CIA offered further help to the Barzani-led Kurds in 1972. One result was that Iraq was unable to join the Arab resistance against Israeli expansion in 1967 and 1973 because a large part of its military was deployed in northern Iraq (Gibson 2019).

The US-led war on Syria in 2011 presented new separatist opportunities. Peoples Protection Units (YPG) were reactivated in 2012, at first with support from Damascus so that Syrians in the north could fight ISIS. However, the US occupation of parts of north and east Syria in late 2015 led to the reorganization of many YPG units into the US-sponsored ‘Syrian Democratic Forces’ (SDF) (Martin 2018: 96). These were sometimes referred to as a ‘Rojava’ force, while at other times the Kurdish component was played down.

According to one US military report in 2017 the SDF in Manbij was only 40% Kurd (Townsend in Humud, Blanchard and Nikitin

2017: 12), addressing the embarrassing reality that Manbij had a very small Kurdish population. In late 2016 US Col. John Dorrian, gave a higher overall Kurd estimate, saying that the SDF “consists of approximately 45,000 fighters, more than 13,000 of which are Arab” (USDOD 2016). Many of the latter came from the fragments of earlier US proxy militia in Syria.

Syrian Colonel Malek from Aleppo confirmed to me that the bulk of SDF members were always Kurdish, including many from Iraq and Turkey. The size of the non-Kurd and foreigner contingents varied according to the money on offer. A report from the London based International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence (ICSR) recognized that both the YPG and SDF ground forces remained largely arms of the Turkish PKK (Holland-McCowan 2017: 10).

The failure of the September 2017 separatist referendum in Iraq dealt a serious blow to the regional project. The KDP and PUK put aside their rivalry to hold an independence referendum (having already pushed for and gained federal status) even though it was not authorized by Baghdad. The proposal was said to have gained 92% approval, but was immediately rejected by the Iraqi Government and Army, which drove Peshmerga forces out of Kirkuk in just a few hours (Gabreldar 2018; ICG 2019). For the first time in decades the Iraqi Army took control of the NE region. Baghdad was showing a political will that had been lacking for many years.

In Syria, US forces did nothing to stop the YPG’s ethnic cleansing of non-Kurds in areas to which they laid claim. In October 2015, the western aligned group Amnesty International accused the YPG (just before the US rebranded them as the ‘Syrian Democratic Forces’) of forcibly evicting Arabs and Turkmens from areas they took after displacing ISIS. Amnesty produced evidence to show instances of forced displacement, and the demolition and confiscation of civilian property, which constituted war crimes (AI 2015). Similar accusations had come from Turkish government sources (Pamuk and Bektas

2015) but also from refugees who said that 'YPG fighters evicted Arabs and Turkmens from their homes and burned their personal documents' (Sehmer 2015; Al Masri 2015).

However, after the US forces became direct patrons of the SDF in late 2015, a UN commission, co-chaired by US diplomat Karen Koning AbuZayd, continued its quest to place most of the blame for abuses on Syrian Government forces. The Commission accused the YPG/SDF of forcibly displacing communities "[but only] in order to clear areas mined by ISIL", and of forcible conscription, but "found no evidence to substantiate claims that YPG or SDF forces ever targeted Arab communities on the basis of ethnicity, nor that YPG cantonal authorities systematically sought to change the demographic composition of territories" (IICISAR 2017: 111 and 93).

Nevertheless, in 2018 there were ongoing reports of the ethnic cleansing of Assyrian Christians from US-SDF held areas in NE Syria. Young men in the Qamishli area were reported to have been arrested and forcibly conscripted into Kurdish militia, alongside property theft by those same militias (Abed 2018). In 2019 the SDF were reported to have closed more than 2,000 Arabic-teaching schools in the Hasaka region (Syria Times 2019) and to have shot, killed, wounded and jailed displaced people who were trying to escape from al-Hawl Refugee Camp in South-Eastern Hasaka (FNA 2019). Nevertheless, once US forces created and adopted the Kurdish-led 'SDF', Amnesty International and the western media muted their earlier criticisms.

Washington in 2012 had looked favorably on the ISIS plan for a "Salafist principality", so as to weaken Damascus (DIA 2012). In September 2016 US air power was used to attack and kill more than 120 Syrian soldiers at Mount Tharda behind Deir Ezzor airport, to help the terrorist group's (failed) efforts to take over and threaten the city (Anderson 2017). But when Russia, Syria and Iraq began wiping out these Saudi clones, USA forces simply rescued their best commanders and replaced

ISIS with a Kurdish-led 'SDF' (Anderson 2019: Chapters 5 and 7), once again to undermine and weaken Damascus. But US occupation forces did not wait around to sponsor the ill-fated Rojava project. In October 2019 President Trump gave the order for a partial withdrawal from northern Syria. Former US diplomat Robert Ford had warned in 2017 that the US would abandon the SDF (O'Connor 2017). So, stripped of US military protection and their main source of arms and finance, the SDF was forced to rapidly put together a new alliance with Damascus and Russia, to prevent annihilation by Erdogan's forces. The Turkish leader saw the Öcalan-led YPG/SDF as a stepping stone to its larger project in Turkey (Demircan 2019).

Western liberals complained the US was 'betraying' its Kurdish allies; but they placed too much faith in romantic myths. Ünver (2016), for example, presented separatist Kurds as recipients of unplanned opportunities in Syria's "civil war" in an "age of shifting borders", as though the big power were not once again using the 'Kurdish card' to divide and weaken both Iraq and Syria. Schmidinger (2018: 13, 16-17) tried to twist Syria's historic diversity into an argument for the 'Rojava' sectarian division – instead of an inclusive unitary state. But, as has been said many times before, imperial powers never have real allies, only interests. Lebanese Resistance leader Hassan Nasrallah told Kurdish separatists in February 2018: "In the end they will work according to their interests, they will abandon you and they will sell you in a slave market."

Meanwhile, with Washington's blessing, Erdogan persists with his plan to control large parts of northern Syria, with the aim of settling many of the refugees in Turkey under a Muslim Brotherhood style regime, controlled by sectarian Islamist militia. Retired Syrian Major General Mohammad Abbas Mohammad told me that Turkey's leader has not given up his ambition of becoming a modern-day 'Caliph' of Muslim nations, and is

working to colonise Syrian minds with his constant Islamist slogans.

Nevertheless, with the help of its allies, Syria is winning the war. ISIS/DAESH and Nusra are virtually defeated, the 'White Helmets' and the Chemical Weapons stunts have been exposed and the Rojava myth has collapsed. But a Washington-driven economic war now targets all the independent countries of the region, aggravating the occupation and the terrorism.

Director of the Syrian Arab Army's Political Department Major General Hassan Hassan, tells us that the US "has the power to destroy the world, many times over, but it has not been able to turn that power into capabilities." That is why US wars are failing across the region.

While we are indeed heading for a multi-polar world, he says, we are not there yet. "Syria still faces the unipolar regime". Erdogan, ISIS, Israel and the SDF are all "puppets" of this dying world order. Authorized by the US, Erdogan still wants to set up a Muslim Brotherhood region in north and east Syria. This is a dying and a "most dangerous" order, General Hassan says. "The US deep state knows that its unipolarity is failing, but that has not yet been announced. The new world system is born, but is not yet recognized. The US wants to prolong this conflict as long as possible, and to punish the Syrian people".

In that transitional phase we see collaboration between the SAA and the SDF, the extraordinary anomaly of an SDF-run Manbij and the ongoing experiment of 'Kobane', the SDF controlled border town which Syrians call Ayn al Arab.

Traveling from rural Aleppo to rural Raqqa on the M4 highway we cross the Furat (Euphrates) river, a huge, semi-dammed expanse of fresh water which appears particularly sweet between two deserts. Turning north we arrive in Ayn al Arab,

at the Turkish border, in less than an hour. Although Erdogan's gangs are attacking Ayn al Issa, deeper inside Syria on the M4, there is no sign of fighting near Ayn al Arab itself. Major General Abbas says that Erdogan is aiming at narrow incursions, which can later be widened.

This small city of perhaps 45,000 people was evacuated during earlier fighting and still shows signs of great destruction, especially on the eastern and northern sides. Less than a tenth of the size of Manbij it is now said to have a majority of Kurds and the SDF comrades seem well organized. We are taken to their small headquarters, a three-story building, to await further security checks and an escort to one of their schools and one of their hospitals.

At the secondary school, as in the headquarters, they seem wary of a foreigner accompanied by an SAA Colonel and a Syrian journalist. That breaks down a little as I ask about their curriculum and the children, who have clearly gone through substantial trauma. The headmaster says they are developing programs to help students deal with their war experiences. The threat is not over, as Erdogan's troops, including sectarian Islamist gangs, are only a few kilometers to the north.

The Kurdish nationalist curriculum has made a break with the centralized Arabic-based system set in Damascus. The headmaster explains that their syllabus is carried out 60% in the Kurdish language, 20% in Arabic and 20% in English. For children from Arab families the syllabus is 60% Arabic, 20% Kurdish and 20% English. They speak of four 'nationalities' in Kobane: Kurd, Arab, Yazidi and Christian. That is how they see it.

The management of the small hospital is also strongly Kurd nationalist. I ask where they get their support and they mention the Americans and some international NGOs. Of course, there is nothing from Ankara. "What about Damascus?" I ask. "Nothing and we want nothing", says one of the managers.

That may be true for this hospital. However Syrian colleagues tell that most of the health centers in SDF controlled areas still get finance and supplies from Damascus. So not only is their security guaranteed by the Syrian state, so are most of their social services.

It remains to be seen how much Kurdish autonomy will remain, under a final political settlement. Federation is not part of the discussion, it is clear that Damascus sees that as a path which would dismember and weaken the country. While the SAA and the SDF jointly fight Erdogan's gangs, Damascus has been calling on Arab leaders in the north and north east, who had collaborated with the US occupation force and the SDF, to return to the Syrian Arab Army. On the other side, SDF Commander General Mazloum Abdi opposes incorporation of the SDF into the SAA (Van Wilgenburg 2019) and wants to hold onto as much local administration as possible (Syrian Observer 2019). The continued US presence and sponsorship of SDF units in Hasaka, Qamishli and Deir Ezzor (Ahval 2019), serves to maintain the illusions of autonomy.

In the Russian media there is some pessimism about an SDF-Damascus reconciliation. One observer suggests that "Russia will eventually force most (if not all) of Turkey's forces to leave Syria ... [but Damascus] and the Syrian Kurds have opposing political and military goals that will not be easily reconciled" (Stein 2019).

However, Damascus has some other cards. The YPG/PKK/SDF grew its influence through US sponsorship and, as that declines, other voices in the north, including Kurdish voices, are likely to re-emerge, especially through the constitutional process in Geneva. Major General Abbas points out that there are now dozens of Kurdish parties in the north east (Syria Times 2018). Given the intransigence of the US-dependent SDF, Russia is said to be recruiting Syrian Kurd youth to a rival group (Duvar 2019), which is likely to be incorporated into the SAA.

In my view, there will likely be some accommodation of Kurdish nationalist demands at the cultural and local administrative levels, but alongside efforts to ensure this does not privilege Kurds above other Syrian groups. That should appear in the amended constitution. The old world order is dying and the new one is still being born. In this transitional world, Washington persists with its losing war, to divide and punish the Syrian people.

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