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Syria: The Kurdish position

Since the outbreak of conflict in 2011 in Syria, its parties splintered into a large web of internal and external actors. The Kurds and the Autonomous Administration of Northern and Eastern Syria (AANES) have played a key role throughout the conflict. Much change awaits Syria following the coup d'état and issues connected to the Kurds persist; what is the Kurdish position and what challenges face them?



North-eastern Syria, i.e. when the majority of the country's Kurds lives, gained de facto autonomy shortly after the outbreak of conflict in Syria in 2011. Over the years of conflict, the Kurds managed to create a quasi-state, with a constitution, state institutions and an army (Syrian Democratic Forces). By 2024, the Kurdish administration controlled approximately 25% of total Syrian territory, with important cities under Kurdish control including, but not limited to, Hasakeh, Raqqa, Qamishli. It is also important to note that around half of the border with Iraq and a significant chunk of the border with Türkiye, as well as the vast majority of Syria's oil fields, had by that point come under Kurdish control.

Syria's future must be secular and decentralised

Kurdish position

- *Pre-coup d'état*

The AANES administration held that a political – not military – solution, in line with UNSC Resolution 2254, is the only way forward and that this political solution should be based on democracy, societal pluralism, equality of the sexes and decentralised constitutional institutions. It viewed the conflict as a structural one and deemed it impossible for Syria to be governed as a nation-state, considering the ethnic, linguistic and religious differences of various groups within Syria, with an imposed central government. The administration's proposed roadmap for political transition consisted of two parts:

Main first preliminary steps:

- Combatting terrorism and its sources;
- Comprehensive ceasefire under international supervision;
- Engagement in inclusive intra-Syrian political dialogue;
- Full release of all detainees and abductees by all parties;
- Expulsion of all foreign fighters from Syria (this should be based on a UN resolution);
- Cessation of Turkish occupation of Syria and support for all groups resisting Turkish occupation (except Da'esh*, an-Nusra* and related terrorist groups);
- Lifting all sieges and economic sanctions;
- Create conditions for the return of displaced peoples and refugees in cooperation with UN agencies;
- Constitutional recognition of Kurdish and Syriac rights;
- Recognition of the AANES and its incorporation as a subject of the new decentralised Syrian state.

Second main steps:

- Formation of a transitional government, agreed upon by a constituent assembly in which all parts of Syrian society are represented
- Formation of a committee to draft a new constitution, which shall be adopted by referendum
- Integration of fighters into a restructured Syrian Arab Army

The AANES maintained no relationship with the Syrian opposition (mainly Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham*, National Coalition, Syrian National Council), on the contrary; they opposed each other. No internal parties to the Syrian conflict supported the idea of Kurdish autonomy for various reasons. Furthermore, the AANES is a secular structure, something that cannot be said about HTS*.

- *Post-coup d'état*

The recent coup d'état in December, as a result of which Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham* and its leader Ahmed al-Sharaa displaced Bashar al-Assad as the president of Syria and the Ba'ath Party as the ruling party, has automatically satisfied some of the pre-coup demands of the Kurds, namely the release of detainees and abductees. According to al-Sharaa's official statements and promises, a number of other Kurdish demands will be fulfilled: inclusive intra-Syrian political dialogue, conditions for the return of displaced peoples and refugees, constitutional referendum etc.

The main issues, however, is the de jure and de facto recognition of the Kurds. The idea of Kurdish autonomy is not a new one (systematic, organised attempts for autonomy have been ongoing since the 1930s) and will certainly not fade away, especially considering the relative autonomy provided by the AANES for a number of years. On February 3, Mazloun Abdi, the commander-in-chief of the Syrian Democratic Forces, reiterated that “Syria’s future must be secular and decentralised”. He also stressed that the Kurds do not seek independence, rather autonomy, noting that “Syria is not Iraq, and Iraq is not Syria, and northeast Syria is not (Iraqi) Kurdistan”. The SDF sees Syria's future as decentralised, likely a federation – this position has been maintained by the AANES since the beginning of the conflict. In brief, the essence of Kurdish demands has stayed exactly the same.

Kurdish reaction to HTS* taking power

Kurdish media has been rather sceptical vis-à-vis the change in Syrian leadership. The Kurds were for years in open conflict with official Damascus under al-Assad for different views of Kurdish autonomy, so it was not difficult for them to wave goodbye to the ousted president. However, the Kurds are also weary of the new HTS* leadership.

North Press Agency (NPA), a Syrian publication covering Kurdish affairs with a pro-Kurdish tilt, has published numerous articles reflecting Kurdish attitudes since the fall of al-Assad. One article from February 2, for example, details the AANES criticism of the inclusion of terror-listed figures in the new Syrian administration (including, for example, Hatem Abu Shaqra, responsible for the assassination of the (Kurdish) Secretary-General of the (Kurdish) Future Syria Party, Hevrin Khalaf). According to the AANES statement, major decisions like appointing al-Sharaa as the transitional president, suspending the constitution and dissolving the People's Council “should have been made within a national framework that includes all components, sects and groups of Syrian society, with fair representation of women and youth”. AANES deemed the current development illegitimate, as it fails to represent Syria's

diversity, and once again underlined its unfaltering position: **the only acceptable way forward is comprehensive national dialogue that includes all Syrians.**

Another article from February 3 covers a car bombing in Manbij that killed 21, most of whom were women. It cites Mazloum Abdi as condemning the attack and blaming Turkish-backed forces for it. The attack, according to NPA, was one of the deadliest in recent months and has increased tensions in the region (it should be recalled that the Kurdish north-east has been a military target for Türkiye and Turkish-backed groups for many years). Another notable recent attack was the Turkish bombardment of the main water station in Kobani, which left severed the supply of drinking water to around 200,000 people in the city and its countryside. AANES condemned it was a war crime.

These incidents confirm the doubts voiced by Abdi in December, where he expressed the SDF's openness to a ceasefire in the region, but also did not expect Türkiye and the Turkish-backed Syrian National Army to respect it.

Mazloum Abdi confirmed that he recently met with Ahmed al-Sharaa in Damascus and that negotiations between SDF and official Damascus are ongoing with the mediation of the US-led Coalition to Defeat Da'esh* (which includes the US, UK, France amongst others). He stressed that the US presence in Syria absolutely must remain to continue the fight against terrorism, as ISIL* has capitalised on al-Assad's downfall, seizing several military posts and stockpiling weapons. Here it should be mentioned that the Kurds – which includes the SDF – have largely relied on Western, primarily US, support over the years of conflict, which adds another reason for their strong desire for continued US presence.

US support is also paramount in countering the Turkish threat. According to the Kurdish Medya News, Farhad Shami, head of the SDF press centre, stated that Türkiye is sabotaging peace efforts between the SDF and Damascus. Shami claimed that Ankara blocked an almost final agreement on Kurdish-majority areas in Aleppo, while simultaneously employing militias under its control to foster chaos. He also tied Turkish actions to the country's broader geopolitical regional ambitions, saying that Türkiye is attempting to “turn Syria into a front against Arab countries, especially the Gulf states”.

The two greatest challenges for the Syrian Kurds

To summarise aforementioned points, the two greatest challenges facing the Syrian Kurds are the possibility of US withdrawal from Syria and Turkish regional geopolitical ambitions (and both of these challenges are directly linked to each other). The latter challenge has been covered extensively by Alexander Svarants, so I shall redirect the reader to his articles, as well as to the recent talks between Syria and Türkiye.

As for the possible US withdrawal from Syria, this issue is still surrounded by much speculation and uncertainty, as the new US administration has not explicitly answered this question, nor have there been any substantial changes on the ground. The SDF and the Coalition, for example, are still conducting joint patrols and military drills.

The Biden administration's approach to the Syrian Kurds was quite understandable: they Syrian north-east is a fine piece of real estate, rich in agricultural potential and oil, and strategically situated (by the way, the region is littered with US bases). For that reason, support of the Kurds provided the US with considerable influence. Another official reason given by the US for their presence is to prevent a power vacuum and the subsequent resurrection of the Islamic State*. This reasoning, however, seems more like an official, cover-story version... The US has always acknowledged Turkish security concerns in the region and has considered this factor in its Syrian dealings. The Biden administration, however, is no longer.

According to the Turkish Anadolu Agency, Israeli media was convinced that Donald Trump would pull out of Syria militarily, citing senior White House officials. This would, in turn, raise significant security concerns for Israel, who continues to occupy a chunk of Syrian territory in the south-west of the country.

There have also been statements from the White House itself concerning Trump's considerations as to troop withdrawal. "He [Trump], as the Commander in Chief of the United States military, reserves the right to review troop deployments overseas at any point in time", White House spokesperson Karoline Leavitt is quoted as telling reporters. Trump himself stated that he will "make a determination" on US forces in Syria. "We're not involved in Syria", he said, "Syria is its own mess. They've got enough messes over there. They don't need us involved".

A US withdrawal from Syria would be alarming for the Kurds, leaving them without their main source of military support. Türkiye does not conceal that it views the Kurdish issues as one of its biggest national and foreign policy concerns. The Kurdish issue, has long been central to Turkish foreign policy; the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) has been waging an insurgency against the Turkish government since the early eighties. The People's Defence Units (YPG), the Syrian branch of the PKK, are likewise considered by Türkiye to be a terrorist threat and multiple Turkish counterterrorist operations have been carried out in Syria specifically against the organisation.

If we recall, however, Trump's first presidency, he stated that US troops would be withdrawn from Syria. This, however, did not happen; Trump was overruled by the national security and

intelligence bloc within the US government. In his second presidency, Trump has already demonstrated a more aggressive policy towards the so-called 'deep state', most notoriously by exposing USAID. Perhaps this time around, there really might be a deal in which the US withdraws fully or partially from northeastern Syria.

** Organisation banned in the Russian Federation*

Vanessa Sevidova, February 16, 2025

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