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Fikra Forum

Turkish Drone Strikes and Building Concerns About Washington in Syria's Autonomous Administration

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Some U.S. allies believe the Biden administration has been noticeably muted regarding Turkey's escalations in northern Syria and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

he alliance between the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and the U.S.-led international coalition in Syria on the one hand, and the government of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) and Washington's representatives in Iraq on the other has come under <u>pressure</u>

%25D8%25A7%25D9%2584%25D8%25AA-3/571867/) at various times due to military actions from neighboring Turkey. However, growing signs of Turkish rapprochement with the Assad regime and ongoing hints at a ground invasion in northern Syria—along with ramped up airstrikes and drone strikes on northeastern Syria—suggest a new phase in the conflict. The muted American response to this development is likely to create a rift in U.S.-SDF relations, and could prompt Washington's partners in Syria to rethink whether they need to find other allies against Ankara.

Turkey has been attempting to target military leaders and local officials in northeastern Syria using drones without any significant response from the United States. Although Ankara has claimed that it is only targeting the leadership of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK)—and points to the deadly mid-November attack in Istanbul as its reason for this latest push, Turkey has targeted local civilian officials and killed leaders from the SDF who had fought with U.S. forces against ISIS for over a year.

Through these attacks, it is understood in the Autonomous Administration that Turkey hopes to achieve domestic political gains for Erdoğan 's Justice and Development Party (AKP) and the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) prior to the elections, which are scheduled for Summer 2023. These attacks are also linked to Turkey's longstanding interest in expanding its control in order to gain access to resources and manipulate the demography of a region that Turkey sees as a threat. Ankara is especially focused on Syria's PYD—a major political group within the SDF that Turkey argues is indistinguishable from the PKK—and concern that Kurdish youth within Turkey will be inspired to lean into their Kurdish identity, which the Turkish government has proved deeply antagonistic against.

On the ground, concern over the U.S. position towards these actions has been building for months. On November 21, the inhabitants of northeastern Syria were shocked to discover that the U.S. consulate in Erbil had issued a statement (https://iq.usembassy.gov/security-alert-u-s-consulate-general-erbil-iraq-november-18-2022/) that it was "monitoring credible open-source reports" of potential Turkish military strikes and warned U.S. citizens to avoid areas near the Turkish border in the KRI and northern Syria.

The consulate's statement caused significant panic in northeastern Syria and proved not far off the mark. Turkey launched brutal strikes on areas under the control of the Autonomous Administration two days later, partially destroying infrastructure that included gas and electricity distribution and production facilities. Many residents of the Eastern Euphrates region considered the consulate's warning to be indicative of some level of cooperation between Washington and Ankara. Residents of these targeted areas are <u>angry</u>

 $\underline{\text{(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VvbMRAY_4E4)}} \text{ and frightened, and have lost } \underline{\text{trust}}$

(https://www.syriahr.com/%25d8%25a7%25d9%2584%25d9%2585%25d8%25b1%25d8%25b5%25d8%25af-

% 25 d8 % 25 a7 % 25 d9 % 25 84 % 25 d8 % 25 a5 % 25 d9 % 25 86 % 25 d8 % 25 b3 % 25 d8 % 25 a7 % 25 d9 % 25 86 % 25 d8 % 25 a5 % 25 d9 % 25 81 - 25 d9 % 25

 $\underline{\%25d8\%25a7\%25d9\%2584\%25d8\%25aa-3/571867/)} \text{ in Washington.}$

Following these major attacks on the night of November 23, there have also been ongoing discussions among residents about the role of the SDF in these attack. More specifically, the question is whether the SDF were aware of plans for the attack and failed to warn the local population, or if Washington had not informed the SDF about Turkey's impending moves, leaving the SDF unable to prepare for the attack or warn residents. These unresolved concerns increase the likelihood of a rift between the United States and its allies, which have previously been dependable partners in counterterrorism efforts. Such concerns also open the door to questions regarding the United States' position on Turkish attacks in Iraq.

The reasons behind the sensitivity Washington displays towards Turkey is clear; Ankara is a key member of NATO and closely aligned with Washington, and its clout with the West will only increase as international conflicts ramp up. This is particularly true in light of ongoing wars over energy and resources, the conflict in Ukraine, problematic Russian interventions from Syria to Donbas, and shifting relations with the Gulf, Iran, and China.

Nevertheless, Washington's continued adherence to its current policies on this matter lends further credence to the camp in the Autonomous Administration already skeptical of U.S. involvement in the region. Some of these figures have called for a parting of ways with Washington—implying a necessary pivot towards Damascus, Tehran, and Moscow. Unfortunately, this move has become increasingly likely as Turkey has expanded the geographic scope of its ambitions and affirmed that it aims to take control of a 30-kilometer-deep security corridor on the border with northern Syria. This comes at a time when Turkey has also justified their intervening actions in the northern areas of the Duhok and Erbil governorates in the KRI as part of its fight against the PKK, which Washington classifies as a terrorist organization.

In fact, the muted U.S. reaction to these attacks—including a failure to mention Turkey in U.S. authorities 'condolences on the July 22 death of SDF leader Salwa Yusuk (https://twitter.com/CENTCOM/status/1551057407882760194). via Turkish drone strike—has led some living in the Autonomous Administration to infer that there implicit U.S. support or at least a promised lack of reprisal existed for these operations.

Washington's approach towards Turkey also stands out to residents in contrast to the administration's hard line with drone, missile, and artillery strikes carried

(https://mubasher.aljazeera.net/news/politics/2022/8/24/%25D8%25A7%25D9%2584%25D8%25AC%25D9%258A%25D8%25B4-

%25D8%25B3%25D9%2588%25D9%258A%25D8%25B1%25D9%258A%25D8%25A7-%25D8%25B9%25D9%2584%25D9%2589) out by groups affiliated with Shia militias and Iran in both Syria and Iraq (https://arabic.cnn.com/middle-east/article/2021/02/26/us-carries-shelling-military-sites-used-iranian-backed-militias). A periodic review of these operations suggests that the U.S. army has taken a strong stan (https://twitter.com/CENTCOM/status/1562262581783498752?

 $\underline{ref_src=twsrc\%255Etfw\%257Ctwcamp\%255Etweetembed\%257Ctwterm\%255E1562262581783498752\%257Ctwgr\%255E62fbdc6737a8f4452339734f7e31a5a792e6db64\%257Ctwcomd8a7d984d8a3d985d8b1d98ad983d98a-d8aad986d981d98ad8b0-d8b6d8b1d8a8d8a9-d981d98a-d8b3d988d8b1d98ad8a7-d8b9d984d989) <math display="block">\underline{ce}$

(https://twitter.com/CENTCOM/status/1562262581783498752?

ref_src=twsrc%255Effw%257Ctwcamp%255Etweetembed%257Ctwterm%255E1562262581783498752%257Ctwgr%255E62fbdc6737a8f4452339734f7e31a5a792e6db64%257Ctwcond8a7d984d8a3d985d8b1d98ad983d98a-d8aad986d981d98ad8b0-d8b6d8b1d8a8d8a9-d981d98a-d8b3d988d8b1d98ad8a7-d8b9d984d989) against potential dangers to either its own forces or the SDF in the southeastern part of the autonomous administration's territory where Iranian affiliates operate, even when no casualties occurred. The U.S. mission in Iraq took a similarly hard line with regard to recent Iranian missile and drone strikes against Iranian Kurdish opposition forces in the Kurdistan region.

The difference in U.S. approach in these two cases is striking to those on the ground. While Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin called for "de-escalation" and expressed opposition to a new military operation in Syria on November 30. At most, the United States expresses (https://iq.usembassy.gov/ar/violence-in-northern-syria-northern-iraq-and-southern-turkey-ar/) its condolences in these cases and makes a general plea for maintaining stability, or sometimes more directly condemns the attack in the case of Iranian involvement. Residents and local officials note that Washington usually employs condemnatory language in statements denouncing Iranian aggression while choosing more diplomatic and indirect language when it comes to Turkey. Even after the Turkish army directly attacked a tourist resort in the city of Zakho and killed civilians, the U.S. embassy still only denounced the attack in general manner, without specifying the perpetrator. U.S. ambassador to Iraq Alina Romanowski's statement (https://www.kurdistan24.net/ar/story/30275-

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%25D8%25A7%25D9%2584%25D9%2584%25D9%2584%25D9%258A) on July 21, for example, did not mention that Turkey had been directly behind this violence and gave no indication of potential repercussions for Turkey.

Meanwhile, Turkey and Iran offer similar justifications for their attacks the Kurdistan Region and northeastern Syria—combating terrorism, separatism, or counteracting Western influences. In reality, in both cases these attacks weaken Washington's allies in the region and erode trust within these coalitions. On a civilian level, they undermine the local economy, destabilize security, and inflict casualties. American equivocation has an impact on the SDF—leaving them to feel that they are isolated and on weaker footing in confronting Turkey.

U.S. passivity in the face of Turkish aggression against northern Syria will have catastrophic repercussions for its longstanding alliance with the SDF, and ultimately U.S. interests in the Middle East. It is unacceptable to have any ongoing threat at the northern border against the SDF given that these forces are combating ISIS and protecting more than four million people in the eastern Euphrates region. Moreover, a potential subsequent shift towards other partners would clearly undermine U.S. strategy in Syria, raising questions about the objectives of the U.S. presence there and weakening the focus on preventing terrorist groups from taking hold once again. Meanwhile, Russia, Iran, and Damascus would be able to fortify their positions, increase their demands, and expand their ability to maneuver in the Syrian arena.

It is therefore important for the United States to establish a new strategy that is consistent with the principle of joint defense among allies rather than selective engagement. Before taking further steps, Washington must open direct channels of communication with local leaders and provide official clarification regarding these alliances so that each side is aware of their responsibilities towards the other. The United States must also endeavor to curtail Turkish aggression driven by domestic electoral interests and expansionist goals, including through direct language indicating that it is serious about protecting its partners in Syria and the government in Erbil, a key partner in Iraq.

It will also be necessary to open channels of communication with various actors in order to resolve issues in a rational manner. However, reengagement should also work towards betting life within the Autonomous Administration as a whole. A serious commitment to protecting local partners should also include promoting and encouraging good governance and development, genuinely supporting civil liberties, and avoiding becoming embroiled in increasingly suspect regional agendas and networks. Such efforts should also involve jumpstarting the local political process, encouraging the political forces that arise from this process to become involved in the larger Syrian political dynamics, and supporting cooperation with the KRI.

As the conflict continues into its second decade, the crisis in Syria has been increasingly overlooked. Nevertheless, a return to pressuring influential forces in this sphere to engage in negotiations in order to reach a lasting solution to the senseless war that has already dragged on for a decade.

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