

# 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.

The 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 [pressure](#) (<https://www.syriahr.com/%25D8%25A7%25D9%2584%25D9%2585%25D8%25B1%25D8%25B5%25D8%25AF-%25D8%25A7%25D9%2584%25D8%25B3%25D9%2588%25D8%25B1%25D9%258A-%25D9%2584%25D8%25AD%25D9%2582%25D9%2588%25D9%2582-%25D8%25A7%25D9%2584%25D8%25A5%25D9%2586%25D8%25B3%25D8%25A7%25D9%2586-%25D8%25A7%25D9%2584%25D9%2582%25D8%25B5%25D9%2581-%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 [angry](#) ([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VvbMRAY\\_4E4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VvbMRAY_4E4)) and frightened, and have lost [trust](#) (<https://www.syriahr.com/%25d8%25a7%25d9%2584%25d9%2585%25d8%25b1%25d8%25b5%25d8%25af-%25d8%25a7%25d9%2584%25d8%25b3%25d9%2588%25d8%25b1%25d9%258a-%25d9%2584%25d8%25ad%25d9%2582%25d9%2588%25d9%2582-%25d8%25a7%25d9%2584%25d8%25a5%25d9%2586%25d8%25b3%25d8%25a7%25d9%2586-%25d8%25a7%25d9%2584%25d9%2582%25d8%25b5%25d9%2581-%25d8%25a7%25d9%2584%25d8%25aa-3/571867/>) 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.



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