

The SDF's Approach to Erdoğan's Victory

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Brief Analysis

Worried by the implications of Erdoğan's reelection, the Kurds in northeastern Syria need active support from the United States now more than ever.

There is no doubt that Syrians—especially those in the divided north of the country—followed the recent Turkish elections just as closely as the Turks themselves and anxiously awaited their outcome. In many ways, the fate of northern Syria is linked to Turkey's electoral and political trajectory. Now that it is clear that Recep Tayyip Erdoğan will remain in power, Syrians are trying to understand what needs to be done next and how circumstances might evolve with Ankara in the coming years. In particular, the leadership of the Autonomous Administration and its supporters nervously monitored the outcome and are seeking reassurances in the aftermath. Ultimately, there is a need for other interested parties, such as the United States, to encourage dialogue between these parties in order to deconflict the two sides and limit the likelihood of another conflict.

Since 2016, Turkey has carried out successive ground operations to expel Kurdish forces from border areas in northern Syria, and Erdoğan has threatened further incursions. While the U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) led the military campaign to drive out ISIS fighters from Syrian territory in 2019, Ankara considers the SDF's main group—the People's Defense Units (YPG)—to be an extension of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which it has designated as a terror group. The latter has been locked in armed conflict with Turkey since the 1980s as it seeks to achieve autonomous Kurdish rule in southeastern Turkey.

The SDF has realized that barring any significant changes, Erdoğan's victory signals five more years of pressure and threats similar to what has unfolded in the past. In particular, the SDF points to the Turkish occupation from [Afrin to Ras al-Ain \(https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/11/us-again-tries-thwart-turkish-invasion-northern-syria\)](#), attempts to seize Tal Rifaat and Kobane (Ain al-Arab), and constant drone strikes on the population.

Now, however, there is the particular fear that Turkish domestic politics may have echoes. During the elections, the People's Democratic Party (HDP) participated as part of the Green Left Party (YSP), which backed opposition candidate Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu. This has heightened concerns in the eastern Euphrates region that Ankara may retaliate against the HDP by targeting its allies in the region, including in Syria. Turkey has continued to link the [HDP \(https://www.voanews.com/a/kurdish-politician-promises-to-work-on-disarming-pkk-if-erdogan-loses-7059705.html\)](#) and the [Democratic Union Party \(https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/erdogan-says-pkk-pyd-and-feto-entered-nato-records-as-terror-groups-175174\)](#) (PYD) in Syria with the PKK, rhetoric that has stoked fears of potential collective punishment in Syria.

On the military front, the SDF is concerned that Ankara could also intensify airstrikes on those forces' military checkpoints or carry out another military operation in vulnerable areas located further from the SDF stronghold of Qamishli, such as Tal Rifaat and Menagh. There is also the expectation that Turkey will exert further pressure on Washington to reduce its support for the SDF and the Autonomous Administration. There is the suspicion that Turkey might also try to tighten its economic stranglehold on northeastern Syria and make a push to reach out to the Russians, Iranians, and the regime in Damascus to undermine the Autonomous Administration.

Meanwhile, attitudes in northwestern Syria are also impacted by the outcome of the elections. The relationship with Turkey and Erdoğan is different in the Shahba Canton, Afrin, and Tal Abyad than around Idlib, where the [Turkish-aligned Sunni opposition \(https://www.enabbaladi.net/archives/643878\)](#) breathed a sigh of relief. The Syrian opposition had been afraid of Kılıçdaroğlu coming to power in Turkey, especially since he expressed his intention to repatriate Syrian refugees and engage in direct relations with Assad. In contrast, the Russian-brokered rapprochement between Ankara and Damascus was seen by many as a tactical alliance only, linked to Erdoğan's efforts to win more votes by demonstrating an interest in the Syrian question and resolving the refugee crisis.

Many opposition groups believe that normalization with Assad and handing over Turkish-occupied areas to Damascus would be nearly impossible at the moment, whereas new trade-offs between territory controlled by both sides could be made in the district next to Afrin, including much of Idlib, while the northern front of Aleppo will remain stable. Yet Turkish politics may impact this region as well—the [nationalist Turkish blocs](#)

[\(https://thenewkhalij.news/article/295138/%2525D8%2525A7%2525D9%252584%2525D9%252582%2525D9%252588%2525D9%252585%2525D9%25258A%2525D8%2525A9-%2525D9%252587%2525D9%25258A-%2525D8%2525A7%2525D9%252584%2525D9%252585%2525D9%252586%2525D8%2525AA%2525D8%2525B5%2525D8%2525B1-%2525D8%2525A7%2525D9%252584%2525D8%2525AD%2525D9%252582%2525D9%25258A%2525D9%252582%2525D9%25258A-%2525D9%252581%2525D9%25258A-%2525D8%2525A7%2525D9%252584%2525D8%2525A7%2525D9%252586%2525D8%2525AA%2525D8%2525AE%2525D8%2525A7%2525D8%2525A8%2525D8%2525A7%2525D8%2525D8%2525A7%2525D9%252584%2525D8%2525AA%2525D8%2525B1%2525D9%252583%2525D9%25258A%2525D8%2525A9\)](#) now entrenched in the Turkish Parliament and government will not hesitate to either utilize or leave behind extremists entrenched in certain areas if countries such as Russia make the right offer, even if these policies come at the expense of the pro-Turkish opposition or Washington's interests.

At this time, the SDF is looking to Washington and the international coalition's presence in the eastern Euphrates and expecting more than mere symbolic support in times of danger. Otherwise, Washington's partners might seek alternatives to rescue them from Erdoğan's aggression over the next five years, making them vulnerable to overtures from Moscow and Tehran that seek to target Washington and the international coalition. In order to avoid such a major rift and to send a reassuring message to the population of that fragile war-torn region, the following steps should be taken to bridge the gap and provide effective solutions:

First, there should be an effort to relaunch negotiations between the PKK and Turkey. The Kurdistan Region of Iraq could be an entry point for starting negotiations due to its importance within Kurdish affairs and its good relations with relevant stakeholders in these discussions.

Second, mediation should be attempted in order to foster communication between the SDF and Autonomous Administration on the one hand and pro-Turkish Syrian opposition forces—or with Turkey directly—on the other. Establishing a line of functional communication will be necessary to resolve tensions and create the groundwork for pursuing mutual interests that could

benefit both sides.

Third, there should be a greater focus on direct involvement with Russia to put pressure on the government in Damascus to push the latter to come to an agreement with the eastern Euphrates region and achieve a lasting constitutional resolution for that region. Incentives for doing so could include reducing economic sanctions on Damascus to encourage action.

Fourth, military checkpoints should be set up by the international coalition along the northeastern Syrian border with Turkey. Even if these checkpoints are only symbolic, they will provide reassurance to the population of that region that they will not be betrayed again and that deterrents are in place against any threat of another Turkish invasion.

Fifth, the leadership of this region of Syria should be encouraged to strengthen its economy, governance, democratic principles, and diverse representation within its administration. It should also be pressed to avoid becoming involved in any kind of raids that could give Turkey a pretext to engage in dangerous activity in this region. ❖

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