

# ISSUE BRIEF **02.16.17**

## An Uncertain Future for Syria's Kurds

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President Donald Trump has pledged to roll back many of his predecessor's programs and initiatives. One area where he is likely to shift tack is the Syrian conflict. He has promised to work with the Russians and the Syrians to defeat the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). The odd man out in this equation will likely be the Syrian Kurds, a reliable ally against the jihadists but one whose usefulness is reaching its limits.

### BACKGROUND

The Syrian Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) was the first insurgent group to fight the jihadists, beginning with Jabhat al-Nusra in November 2012. By the summer of 2013, the PYD was preventing ISIS' encroachment east of the Euphrates River. At this time, the United States took a lukewarm view of the PYD, cautioning it not to pursue its autonomy plans while admonishing against its ties with the Turkish Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), a group that has been fighting Turkey's government since 1984. The PYD is the PKK's Syrian affiliate and all of its leaders served in the PKK.

But after ISIS killed American hostages in 2014, fighting the jihadists became an imperative and Washington sought allies in Iraq and Syria. When ISIS besieged the PYD-controlled town of Kobani in September 2014, then-President Obama first ordered airstrikes in defense of the Kurds and later commissioned an airdrop of supplies. After the administration ended a train-and-equip program for rebels in October 2015, it turned to the PYD to stand up an Arab contingent, known as the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF),

that could take the fight to ISIS. By the end of 2016, around 500 U.S. special operations forces advisors were dispatched to Syria to support the SDF with training and weapons, advising an estimated 3,000 fighters.

Despite Obama's positive view of the PYD, support for the party has always been shallow in Washington. While the Pentagon backs the SDF, the CIA supports Arab factions at odds with the Kurds. Today, the PYD- and CIA-sponsored groups frequently clash in northern Syria. Key members of Congress, including Sen. Lindsey Graham, have also come out against the PYD—viewing the benefits it provides as insufficient to mitigate the costs to the U.S.-Turkish relationship.

### A PAWN AMONG QUEENS

The Turks have always been wary of the PYD given its links with the PKK. Days after the Syrian government ceded control of Kurdish regions to the PYD in July 2012, Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan vowed that his country would "not allow a terrorist group to establish camps in northern Syria and threaten Turkey" ([bit.ly/2jZqH9u](http://bit.ly/2jZqH9u)). The Turks fear that the PYD will allow the PKK to open a new front on the country's southern border. They also allege that the PYD has transferred weapons to the PKK, charges Washington has been unable to substantiate. For these reasons, Ankara launched Operation Euphrates Shield on August 24, 2016. Ostensibly initiated to dislodge ISIS from Turkey's border, the real impetus was to prevent the PYD's continued capture of frontier territory. Since August, the Turks and Kurds have occasionally clashed.



**The odd man out in President Trump's Syria policy will likely be the Syrian Kurds, a reliable ally against the jihadists but one whose usefulness is reaching its limits. Despite the Obama White House's positive support of the PYD, support for the party has always been shallow in Washington.**

**Machiavellian politics may, however, shield the Kurds in the short-term. The Russians will likely want to preserve an asset that can pressure both the Syrians and Turks to acquiesce to their demands.**

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Turkey would have never been able to enter northern Syria without Russia's acquiescence. Ankara's downing of a Russian jet in November 2015 severely strained relations. Before the incident, Moscow had a favorable view of the PYD. Supported by the Syrian government, the Kurds had consistently denounced the rebels and occasionally clashed with them—policies Moscow backed. But following the jet crash, Russia upped the ante. Russia began to vocally support the PYD and in February 2016, allowed it to open an office in Moscow. The Russians viewed the Kurds as a convenient tool to be used against the Turks.

Today, the two countries have not only patched up their differences, but are working closely to further mutual goals. The Russians have supported Turkish operations against ISIS in al-Bab with airstrikes, a gesture the U.S. was late to match. Along with Iran, Turkey and Russia have achieved a ceasefire and have held peace talks. In doing so, the Russians and the Turks have emerged as the major powerbrokers in Syria, brushing aside the Americans, Europeans, and the United Nations.

The big loser in the Russian-Turkish rapprochement will be the Kurds. The Turks view them as the chief threat emanating from Syria. The Russians, focused on ending the war and emerging as the paramount power in Syria, will deem them expendable. And the Syrian government will shed no tears if the Kurds suddenly find themselves on the defensive. Damascus viewed the PYD with alarm as it blossomed into a Western darling. The regime only ceded the Kurds territory because it believed they were internationally isolated; their initial strength was totally dependent on Damascus' largesse. The PYD could never have held remote territories surrounded by rebels, such as the Afrin pocket and the Aleppo neighborhood of Sheikh Maqsud, without government help. Damascus also provides PYD-controlled regions electricity and has provided spare parts for oil facilities. Machiavellian politics may, however, shield the Kurds in the short-term. The Russians will likely want to preserve an asset that can pressure both the Syrians and Turks to acquiesce to their demands. The Syrians rely on the PYD to keep

ISIS in check, attrite rebel forces, and hector Turkey when needed.

## TRUMP: A NEW ERA FOR THE KURDS

Given President Trump's inclination to disengage from the Syrian civil war, he is likely to back the Russian-Turkish ceasefire and prospective peace talks. To this end, his administration will have little incentive to back the PYD. Since he inherited Obama's PYD program and did not initiate it, he would have little to lose by curtailing it. Indeed, Trump has already cancelled an Obama initiative to directly arm the PYD.

The PYD has largely exhausted the benefits it can provide its American patrons. It has taken large swaths of uninhabited territory on the Turkish border and a string of small towns from ISIS. In November 2016, it began a campaign to take its biggest prize yet: Raqqa. But with around 13,000 Arab fighters, the SDF does not have the Arab manpower necessary to take Syria's sixth largest city.

The PYD never appreciated its tenuous position in Washington and its lack of support across the bureaucracy. Its leaders were never willing to countenance severing ties with the PKK to placate Turkey because they view their party as a PKK appendage. A new Syria policy that is not PYD-centric is likely to accompany a Trump presidency. The PYD will be squeezed by greater powers with narrow agendas that do not appreciate the Kurds' increasingly marginal contribution to the battle against ISIS.

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