

PWP Conflict Studies

A Perfect Proxy? The United States–Syrian Democratic Forces Partnership

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The Proxy Wars Project (PWP) aims to develop new insights for resolving the wars that beset the Arab world. While the conflicts in Yemen, Libya, Syria, and Iraq have internal roots, the US, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Iran, and others have all provided military and economic support to various belligerents. PWP Conflict Studies are papers written by recognized area experts that are designed to elucidate the complex relationship between internal proxies and external sponsors. PWP is jointly directed by Ariel Ahram (Virginia Tech) and Ranj Alaaldin (Brookings Doha Center) and funded by the Carnegie Corporation of New York.

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Map illustration page 8: SDF-controlled territory (green) and Turkish-occupied territory (red) in October 2019, April 2, 2020. Image by Editor abcdef. This photo is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 International license. Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Claimed_and_de_facto_territory_of_Rojava.png.

Introduction

In January 2020 General Mazloum Kobani, commander of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF),¹ remarked that outside interests, namely the United States, Russia, and Turkey, had been the determining factor in the search for a political solution to Syria's civil war. These powers, he said, "cast aside the sacrifices of our people in the name of such interests, setting the stage for the betrayal of the Kurds."² His observation came as his militia pivoted from its frontline role with the US-led Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS to a tacit partnership with Damascus and Moscow to expel Turkish forces from northern Syria.³

Why did a militia offshoot of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), a US-designated foreign terrorist organization bent on Kurdish separatists' demands, shift from a partnership with the United States to one with Syria and Russia? General Mazloum's comments underscore the importance of state interests in shaping the landscape in which militias operate. Turkey regarded Kurdish separatism as fundamentally antithetical to its interests. Neither the United States nor Russia was prepared to back a Kurdish region in Syria. But the interests of the Democratic Union Party (PYD), the main political faction within the SDF, also factored into the equation. The PYD's changing preferences for state partners had a major role in shaping the situation in Syria.

Syria's civil war occurred at a critical juncture for US policymakers. An interest in reducing US expeditionary operations, rooted in operational fatigue from waging two counterinsurgencies, collided with a short-term preference for an activist policy in Syria. Population-centric counterinsurgency campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq called for massive numbers of US forces.⁴ By 2009, the Obama administration viewed this approach as overly costly and yielding only marginal gain. However, lessons gleaned from the 2005–2008 Sunni Awakening, when US forces empowered militias in western Iraq to fight al-Qaeda, remained trenchant. Instead of dispatching a large contingent of US forces, the United States would work "by, with, and through" local proxies.

Considered a cost-effective means for fighting insurgents, this model provided the conceptual blueprint for future operations in Syria. It fed into

the United States' equivocal relationship with the SDF. The United States delegated ground force responsibility to SDF fighters, which allowed US soldiers to play a more enabling role.⁵ But the relationship between the United States and the SDF was never stable. The US-SDF partnership broke down when the United States (1) chose to ignore the long-term political interests of the SDF during the proxy-selection process; (2) changed its own short-term preferences for its Syria mission; and (3) failed to reconcile the conflicting ambitions and expectations of Turkey and the SDF.

The US-SDF proxy relationship, therefore, is instructive of what the United States must do to succeed in proxy warfare. When selecting proxies, the United States must ensure that its long-term interests align with those of potential partners, or risk divergence after immediate goals are achieved. Better knowledge about a proxy can help identify ideological core beliefs. The United States must also have realistic expectations about a proxy's ability to deliver. Maximalist US goals are unlikely to be achieved using a minimalist model. If the United States chooses to ignore long-term interest alignments during proxy selection and instead keeps relationships strictly transactional, or makes unreasonable demands, it must be willing to suffer the reputational costs of abandoning proxies and may find valuable partnerships increasingly scarce.⁶

Principals and Proxies, a Selection Imperative

Both the Obama and Trump administrations staked a great deal on the idea of a partnership "led *by* our partners ... *with* enabling support from the United States ... [and] *through* ... partner agreements."⁷ The aim was, as US general Joseph Votel put it, to "keep the ownership of the problem, and its aftermath, with the affected people."⁸ Marketed as both flexible and scalable, the doctrine relies on the comparative advantage of local forces to address local problems, allowing the US military to employ its technological superiority and avoid "owning complicated scenarios."⁹ In this way, US forces can cost-effectively combat insurgency by delegating certain responsibilities to a proxy.

Navigating the delegation process is the crux of any proxy relationship. Principal-Agent Theory

explains the mechanism of delegation to model relationship dynamics between a principal (the state) and an agent (the militia). The sine qua non in delegation is selecting an agent that is willing to fight, militarily capable, politically appropriate, and cheaper than the principal acting alone.¹⁰ However, delegation is not cost free.¹¹ Principals will never have perfect information about an agent's actions, efforts, and interests, as agents keep some information private to improve their bargaining position and extract more resources.¹² Agents will pursue their own interests, even when they diverge from those of the principal. Thus, principals work hard to monitor and track agent compliance. Principals offer rewards to improve capabilities and mete out punishments when agents divert resources from pursuing a principal's interests.¹³ Agents, in turn, hedge against abandonment or micromanagement by diversifying support across multiple principals. These dynamics guarantee that principals lose a certain amount of operational control when they choose to delegate violence to other actors.¹⁴

Principals face significant challenges when assessing an agent's political appropriateness. States want to screen potential militias during the selection process for shared interests, as alignments naturally cut down on the costs of incentivizing agents.¹⁵ Especially when it comes to armed non-state actors and sub-national militias, sponsoring states must rely on a subjective determination of an agent's beliefs, values, and interests. Militias have incentives to misrepresent information to win and maintain state support.¹⁶ If militia leaders curry favor by rhetorically paying lip service to a principal's interests and downplaying their own potentially conflicting interests, it can lead to states making inaccurate assessments.

All actors' long-term interests are more durable than their short-term preferences. A state's assessment during the selection process of militia interests is not static and must be constantly reevaluated in case of divergence from the principal's interests.¹⁷ Preferences often cover immediate threats where alignments are most likely to occur, and tailored rewards can help maintain militia efforts. However, long-term political interests are visions of the future and are far more difficult to sway. If a principal is willing to keep its relationship purely transactional, it may be able

to focus solely on threats. However, it is much more difficult to subsume division of overt political interests in a transactional relationship.¹⁸

The Syrian Democratic Forces Emerge

After the 2011 repression of peaceful demonstrations in Syria, President Barack Obama called on Syrian president Bashar al-Assad to "step aside,"¹⁹ a call echoed by Turkish premier Recep Tayyip Erdogan.²⁰ This initial US-Turkish preference for regime change led both to back Arab nationalist militias that eventually formed under the umbrella of the Free Syrian Army (FSA). Concerns over FSA political goals and disorganization within its ranks spurred the United States to shift to a more hands-on model of recruiting, training, and equipping heavily scrutinized individual militiamen.²¹ However, the US-recruited militias proved militarily ineffective. Turkey actively supported the FSA but also supported a number of Islamist militias that stood apart from the FSA.²²

The emergence of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in Syria changed the calculation for outside actors. President Obama shifted US focus, outlining a strategy to "degrade and ultimately destroy" ISIS in 2014. The United States would provide air cover to "partner forces" on the ground fighting ISIS.²³ However, the FSA and the US-recruited militiamen proved incapable of small operations, much less acting as a ground force for a major US campaign. As the US policy priority changed, the PYD stood as the most viable partner.

The PYD had operated for almost a decade as the Syrian branch of the PKK. The PKK had a long history of operations within Syrian territory. In the 1980s PKK leaders set up offices in Damascus while guerrillas trained in Palestinian-run camps in Lebanon under the protection of Syrian forces.²⁴ Syria used the PKK to pressure Turkey on a host of outstanding issues, including territorial disputes²⁵ and water sharing.²⁶ Ankara, in turn, backed the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood's revolt.²⁷ Syria monitored PKK activities and drew a red line at the group organizing among Syria's own Kurdish population. By the late 1990s, Turkey threatened military action unless Syria relinquished its support to the PKK. Damascus acquiesced, but the PKK was able to build roots within the Syrian Kurdish population along the

border. The PYD itself was formed in 2003. While claiming autonomy, all units practice one-party rule and share an ideology that is democratic and self-governance oriented, as articulated in the political philosophy of PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan.²⁸ The PYD militia, known as the YPG, trained with the PKK fighters in the mountains of northern Iraq. Both militias also continue to share a common command and control structure.²⁹

The outbreak of the Syrian civil war in 2011 marked a transformation in the PYD's relationship with the Syrian government and with other Kurdish factions within Syria. But the war occasioned a kind of tacit partnership between the regime and the one-time dissident group. Soon after the revolt's start in 2011, the government released a number of PYD political prisoners and announced plans to grant citizenship to thousands of Kurds who had been denied naturalization for decades.³⁰ The PYD also moved against other Kurdish factions, most importantly the Kurdish Democratic Party of Syria, an affiliate wing of the Iraq Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), the dominant party in the autonomous Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

When government forces retreated from north-eastern Syria to concentrate on fighting the opposition in the west, PYD and YPG elements seamlessly took over governance and security functions. The PYD proceeded to maneuver against other Kurdish parties, cracking down on activists and reportedly killing prominent opponents.³¹ Some Turkish and US-supported opposition figures accused the PYD of collaborating with the regime. There were clashes between opposition forces and YPG units in PYD-controlled mixed Arab-Kurdish areas.³² Notably, the PYD suppressed anti-government demonstrations among both Kurds and Arabs in areas it controlled while simultaneously funneling energy into pro-PYD counterdemonstrations.³³

In 2013, the PYD proclaimed the establishment of the Self-Administration of North and East Syria (SANES), also known as Rojava (Western Kurdistan). SANES comprised three noncontiguous enclaves along the northern border at Afrin, Kobani, and Qamishli. The YPG made repeated military efforts to capture and link these isolated cantons. In forming Rojava, the PYD made a series of unilateral constitutional gestures. It demanded the

recognition of Kurdish presence within a decentralized and democratic Syria. At the same time, the PYD continued to rely on the Syrian government for services and support.³⁴ It also envisioned a special status for the PYD's militia in securing Kurdish areas.³⁵

Rojava troubled a Turkish government already deeply wary of PYD advances. At the same time, the most effective branches of the Syrian opposition turned increasingly sectarian, espousing a chauvinist Sunni fundamentalism. Both Damascus and Russia, which intervened in 2015 in support of the Syrian government, saw the YPG as a buttress against the spread of Islamist opposition groups, and provided the Kurdish militia with weapons, safe supply routes, and air support.³⁶

Following the dramatic fall of Mosul to ISIS in the summer of 2014, international media attention gravitated toward the plight of the Yezidi sect on the Iraqi-Syrian border. Iraqi Kurdish militiamen backed by YPG units and US airstrikes rushed into the breach. This marked the first time that US forces acted in coordination with the PKK-affiliated militia.³⁷ To support this momentum, the United States and its European allies sent arms and trainers to strengthen the Iraqi Kurdish militiamen in their fight against ISIS.³⁸ The longstanding US antipathy toward the PKK was eroding.

International attention again focused on the Kurdish region when ISIS launched a bid to capture the SANES enclave of Kobani in 2014. The US-led Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS sought to aid the YPG but was hesitant to cross Turkey, one of its key members.³⁹ Calls from the international media to protect vulnerable populations ran up against Ankara's view that any direct US support for the YPG would strengthen its PKK enemy. Eventually, Turkey caved to a combination of domestic⁴⁰ and international⁴¹ pressure to respond in a "crisis moment."⁴² Ankara allowed 150 Iraqi Kurdish militiamen to enter Kobani via Turkey to serve as go-betweens for US weapons drops and close air support for the YPG.⁴³

The SDF came into existence in 2015. It formed as an alliance under US auspices between the People's Defense Corps (YPG), a Kurdish militia, and a number of small Arab militias. US Army General Raymond Thomas coined the name of the group, telling YPG interlocutors, "You have got to

change your brand,” and recommended adding the word “democratic” to the name.⁴⁴

By 2016, the SDF was 30,000 strong, with 24,000 Kurdish and 6,000 Arab militiamen. Many observers, most importantly Turkey, regarded the SDF as a mere continuation of the YPG, despite its name change. Ankara saw no difference between the YPG and the PKK, which US Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter acknowledged when he affirmed its “substantial ties to the PKK.”⁴⁵

In time, the indirect US-SDF coordination mechanism established at Kobani transformed into a close and continuing counter-ISIS partnership. US defense officials spoke of the SDF as “local partners”⁴⁶ whose importance overshadowed and then replaced previous US relations with the FSA.⁴⁷ The SDF recruited a multiethnic and religiously diverse force and, despite criticism that these efforts started as a “symbolic move to help attract western support and training,”⁴⁸ styled itself as a model for pluralistic cooperation. Best estimates for the SDF’s ethnic composition suggested 50–70 percent Arab, 30–50 percent Kurdish, and 5–10 percent other minorities.⁴⁹ However, PKK-trained Kurds dominated military and political leadership positions,⁵⁰ like General Mazloum Kobani, who previously served as head of PKK operations in Europe.⁵¹

The United States encouraged the SDF to attack ISIS outside of majority Kurdish areas, including into the Euphrates River valley and along the Iraqi border. As the SDF prepared to storm the ISIS stronghold at Raqqa, one American official observed that the operation normally would have required “tens of thousands of American troops” with the associated casualties. Instead, the SDF suffered 400 killed and 700 wounded in the battle; not a single American was killed.⁵² By early 2019, US president Donald J. Trump declared that ISIS was defeated. Several military commanders, as well as SDF officials, argued that ISIS remained a potent, albeit diminished, threat.⁵³ However, expanding SDF control of territory liberated from ISIS proved a red line for Turkey and opened a new line of conflict.

Ankara watched PYD consolidation of power in its three northeastern cantons with trepidation. In 2015, Ankara proposed a safe zone to be protected by a combination of US, Turkish, and

FSA militiamen. The idea was to wean the United States away from the PYD, thereby forestalling the Kurds’ bid for self-rule.⁵⁴ When the safe-zone policy failed to gain traction, Ankara launched Operation Euphrates Shield in 2016—with tacit approval from Washington and Moscow.⁵⁵ The operation aimed to clear a section of the border to the west of the Euphrates of terrorists, both ISIS and YPG elements in Ankara’s parlance.⁵⁶ It also sought to isolate the SANES canton of Afrin and prevent its merger with the other PYD cantons. FSA militiamen, formerly part of the US recruitment drive, served ostensibly as a hold force once the Turkish military finished, although their ineffectiveness was again apparent.⁵⁷

The United States gave the green light to the operation and deployed special operations forces to assist with counter-ISIS portions of the mission.⁵⁸ However, Washington balked when Turkish forces advanced south beyond an agreed upon hold point.⁵⁹ Russia, which viewed all US and Turkish support for the Syrian opposition as efforts to weaken Damascus, engaged in horse-trading with Ankara. Moscow acquiesced to the Turkish anti-YPG operation in exchange for Turkey withdrawing its support for the opposition in Aleppo City in advance of a Syrian government assault.⁶⁰

By 2018, US-Turkish relations were frayed as the United States redoubled its partnership with the SDF, particularly using SDF forces as a border security force.⁶¹ To forestall this and further rollback YPG gains west of the Euphrates, Turkey launched another major cross-border offensive, Operation Olive Branch. Turkey established a thirty-kilometer “security belt” stretching deep into former-PYD territory and cleared the canton of Afrin of all YPG forces. Former US-supported FSA militiamen again played a supporting role in the operation.⁶²

The United States acknowledged Turkey’s “legitimate concerns about terrorists” and largely stood to the side as the operation unfolded.⁶³ US forces embedded with the SDF and concentrated to the east of the Euphrates received notice of the operation⁶⁴ but were largely out of harm’s way.⁶⁵ American logic at the time was that SDF militiamen fighting ISIS to the east of the Euphrates were different than the YPG squaring up against the Turkish operation to the west. This logic quickly fell apart as SDF commanders shifted forces

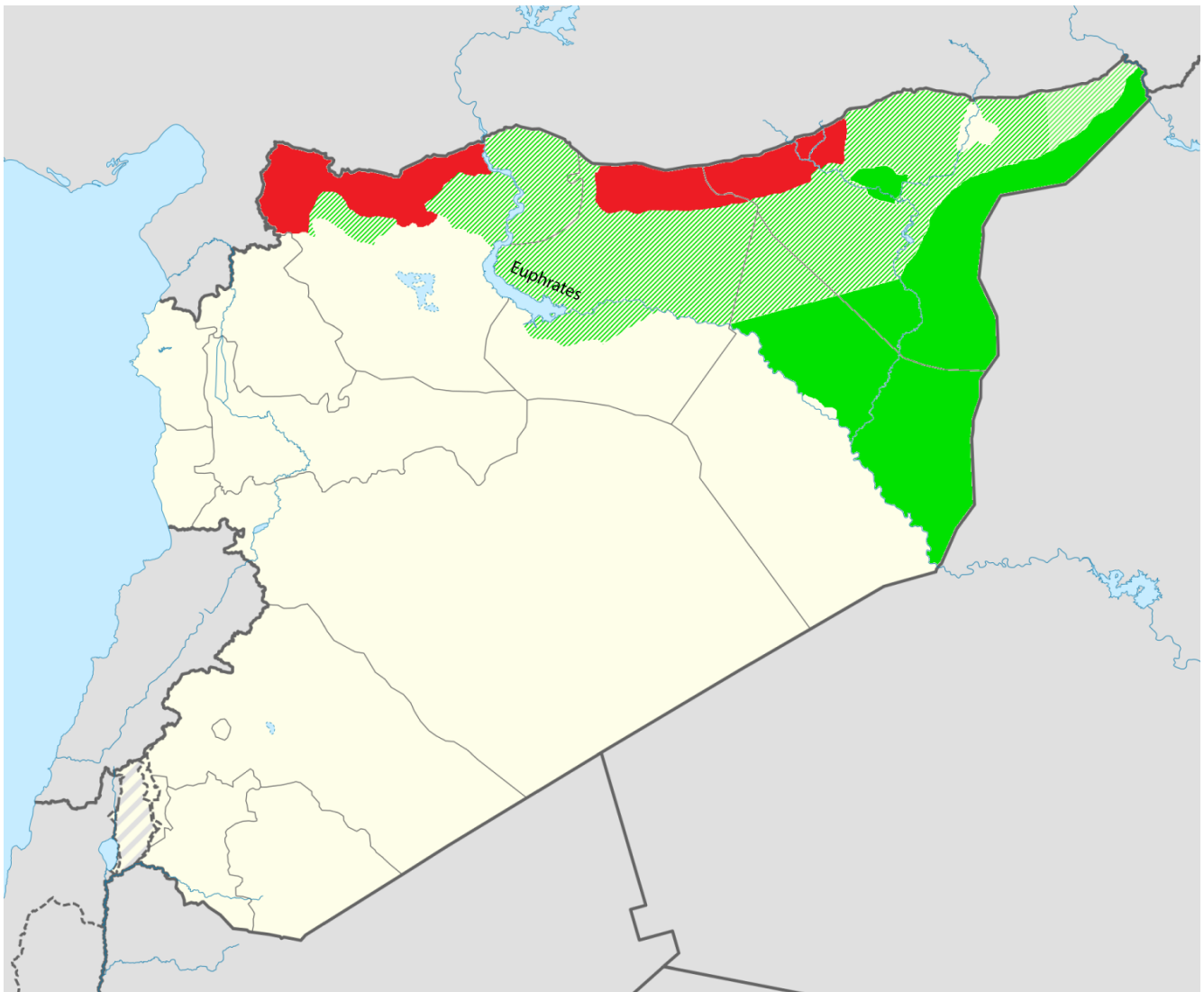
from the counter-ISIS campaign to the front with Turkey.⁶⁶ The YPG initiated a guerrilla campaign against the “Turkish enemy and its [FSA] mercenaries” soon after the loss of Afrin.⁶⁷

Russia again aimed to use this new Turkish operation to advance Syrian government control. It first sought to negotiate a deal between Damascus and the PYD, whereby government forces would enter Kurdish-held territory and reestablish authority. When the PYD rejected this offer, Russia, again in coordination with Turkey, moved its troops out of the area of operations and deconflicted the air space. However, as Turkish advances met success, Damascus and the PYD came to a

rushed understanding and the Syrian government deployed “popular forces” militiamen in support of the PYD as a token show of sovereignty.⁶⁸

“Our Chests Bare to Face the Turkish Knives”:⁶⁹ The SDF Caught between US and Turkish Policy on Syria

In late 2019, after a phone call between President Donald J. Trump and Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan, the White House announced that US troops would step aside as Turkey conducted another operation in Syria.⁷⁰ But the US seemed to backtrack, as it also signaled it would not completely withdraw forces from northeast Syria.



SDF-controlled territory (dark green), contested territory (light green), and Turkish-occupied territory (red) in October 2019.

Turkish officials demanded and were granted nominal leadership of the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS. Ankara sought to split the SDF by peeling off non-Kurdish fighters.⁷¹ Operation Peace Spring launched soon after with continued joint Turkish-FSA clearing operations pushing farther into PYD territory east of the Euphrates.⁷²

US troops deployed alongside the SDF withdrew as Turkish forces advanced. The United States cautioned the SDF that if it fought Turkey it would get “no American protection.”⁷³ However, Washington also halted a joint US-Turkish intelligence collection program to hinder the anti-YPG campaign.⁷⁴ Still, US-SDF coordinated counter-ISIS operations halted temporarily as the United States pulled its security umbrella.⁷⁵ A hastily arranged ceasefire paused Turkish operations and gave YPG fighters five days to quit the border area.⁷⁶ The United States recognized Turkey’s right to clear terrorists out of its safe zone along a portion of the border east of the Euphrates, terminology that allowed the United States to focus on ISIS while Turkey concentrated on the YPG.⁷⁷ Turkey, in conjunction with its FSA allies, launched new local councils and began targeting PYD officials.⁷⁸

A Russian-Turkish deal soon superseded the US-Turkish arrangement. Moscow recognized Turkey’s exclusive sphere of influence in the safe zone. In return, Ankara agreed to joint Russian and Syrian government patrols elsewhere along the border. The deal shielded the Kurdish canton of Qamishli and halted the Turkish advance further east into PYD-held territory. It also returned large formations of Syrian government forces to territory they had withdrawn from at the start of the war. This brought Turkish and Syrian forces into close proximity and partially charged Damascus with controlling YPG operations on the boarder, a proposition that Ankara had little confidence in.⁷⁹

The United States saw its influence in Syria evaporating. In response, it redeployed 1,000 troops to eastern Syria—in a non-Kurdish region away from the PYD’s center of gravity—to control and protect oil fields seized by the SDF from ISIS.⁸⁰ The US force provided a security umbrella for the SDF’s critical source of funding in exchange for the militia’s continued counter-ISIS operations.⁸¹ This renewed US leverage but further estranged Turkey.⁸²

The Russian-Turkish deal strengthened Damascus’s hand around the last opposition stronghold of Idlib. Turkey, sensitive about refugees fleeing north from a final Syrian government push and continued aversion to President Bashar al-Assad, insisted that it would not accept the return to the antebellum Syrian control of the border. This brought Ankara into direct conflict with Damascus, as well as Moscow. Washington, while cheering the breakdown in Russian-Turkish relations, refused to back Turkey in a series of tit-for-tat attacks that saw both sides take casualties.⁸³

This also provided the PYD with a narrow window of opportunity to engage with Russia even as its leverage vis-à-vis Damascus diminished. As the PYD declared its willingness to rejoin the Syrian state, it also expressed a need to be supported by another “international force.”⁸⁴ Throughout its partnership, the United States discouraged SDF engagement with the Syrian government and its Russian and Iranian backers, but accepted that all actors were in communication.⁸⁵ In fact, the PYD maintained a representative office in Moscow, opened in 2016.⁸⁶ It was little surprise then that when the United States decided to defer to its NATO ally Turkey and withdraw its security umbrella, SDF commanders commented that it would reconsider its alliances due to “the existential threat its [Turkey’s] attack poses for our people.”⁸⁷ In response to the United States’ perceived breach of trust, the PYD activated its contacts at a Russian airbase to set up meetings in Damascus. Soon after, party officials met with the head of Syrian intelligence and established “joint committees” to facilitate “negotiations down the road”⁸⁸ sponsored by Russia.⁸⁹

Russian engagement with the SDF allows Moscow to gain influence over the US proxy. It could also neutralize Kurdish political ambitions that might obstruct Damascus’s efforts to re-establish control over northeastern Syria.⁹⁰ SDF officials are well aware of the influence that Russia has in Syria and hope that Moscow is willing to expend political capital to negotiate an agreement between the Kurds and Damascus.⁹¹ However, just as the SDF hedged against the United States, it must also do so in its relations with Russia. When SDF commanders requested Moscow’s assistance prior to the Turkish invasion, they were told that “only the full return of the regime, including its

army and security services” would elicit a Russian bid to deter Turkey.⁹² When the SDF demurred, Moscow refused to act and opened Syrian airspace for the Turkish operation.⁹³ Just like with the United States, the SDF must also be wary of future divergence of interests with Moscow and Damascus.

According to a 2019 Wilson Center survey, 48 percent of the SDP rank-and-file viewed Turkey as the greatest threat, while President Bashar al-Assad barely registered 1 percent.⁹⁴ Views among the cadre on the Turkish threat largely fell along ethnic lines with more than three-quarters of Kurds and less than one-half of Arabs identifying Ankara as the greatest threat.⁹⁵ This, in part, can be explained by the SDF’s Kurdish core and YPG ties to the PKK, which remain unbroken. In February 2020, thousands of PYD members marched in solidarity with Abdullah Ocalan chanting, “No life without the leader.”⁹⁶

A New Proxy Warfare Doctrine in Practice?

There was remarkable policy consistency across US administrations on achieving the enduring defeat of ISIS. But following ISIS’s defeat, more complex and contradictory goals emerged, including achieving a Syria-wide political settlement, the preservation of alliances, and countering foreign interference.⁹⁷ This put the US-SDF partnership on shaky footing and made it challenging to accurately assess its relative success.⁹⁸

At first, the United States explicitly called for regime change when the Obama administration declared that Assad must step down.⁹⁹ Then the United States shifted support from the FSA to the SDF, effectively reprioritizing the war on ISIS. The Trump administration continued to support UN Security Council Resolution 2254, stating that “Arabs, Kurds, Christians, and Turkmen” must be included in a “Syrian-led and Syrian-owned political transition” led by “the Syrian people [who] will decide the future of Syria.”¹⁰⁰ The US military sought to ensure that American diplomats could “negotiate from a position of strength” when participating in discussions to end the conflict.¹⁰¹ This strategy attempted to nest the conceptual groundwork for the SDF partnership within a larger US preference for regime change in Syria.

Divergence in long-term interests was apparent from the start of the US-SDF relationship. As the US maximalist goal of regime change in Syria evolved into a more focused goal on defeating ISIS, it coincided with the PYD’s view of ISIS as an immediate threat. However, the PYD also had its own maximalist goal of post-conflict autonomy from Damascus, an anathema to Turkey. The United States chose to overlook this long-term interest to the PYD’s detriment.¹⁰²

US officials were aware of this misalignment of interests. The issue of political appropriateness was evident by Washington’s initial hesitation to engage with the PKK affiliate directly and the request of a name change to the more politically palatable Syrian Democratic Forces. As one US military interlocutor observed, the SDF’s “linkage to their [PKK] past” made the relationship with the United States “fraught with challenges.”¹⁰³ Nevertheless, a prominent US commander suggested that the observed misalignment could be managed by building “trusting relationships.” If the United States could accurately assess “the SDF’s true motives and intentions,” and communicate what objectives it was willing to support and which it was not, then a balance of interests could be achieved.¹⁰⁴ However, he noted the challenge of “highly transactional relationships with non-state actors.”¹⁰⁵

The partnership’s focal point was with SDF commander General Mazloun Kobani. US officials heaped praise on his strong belief “in the importance of the relationship” and for his “willingness to work with the United States”¹⁰⁶ They emphasized that Washington was “tightly aligned with General Mazloun [and] ... the forces that he has on the ground,”¹⁰⁷ while simultaneously referring to the relationship with the SDF as “temporary, transactional, and tactical.”¹⁰⁸ These mixed messages were in part due to bureaucratic politics, with US commanders and diplomats at times emphasizing different narratives. Yet, whatever trust was built during the counter-ISIS mission was not sufficient to overcome differences in long-term interests.

SDF leadership was unrealistic in its expectations of the United States. Kurdish aspirations for autonomy depended on a balance of interests between Russia, Turkey, the United States, and

potentially Syria. The PYD bet that US support would last long enough for the party to play a role in an internationally mediated peace deal or, at the very least, improve its bargaining position vis-à-vis Damascus. It bet wrong. A name change was not enough to stave off Turkey. General Mazloum understood that the United States did not want to alienate Turkey.¹⁰⁹ Yet, he appeared surprised when US support dried up in the face of Turkish advances, asking, “Is the United States still our ally?”¹¹⁰ The PYD misread, or chose to ignore, US interests. Party officials believed that its “core belief in democracy”¹¹¹ created a long-term alignment of interests, when in fact geopolitics superseded any US-militia partnership.

Placating Turkish interests eclipsed any US commitment to the PYD. American and Turkish positions were fairly well aligned save for the difference in how they prioritized threats. While each held a mutual preference for regime change in Damascus and fighting terrorism, Ankara prioritized its fight against the PKK and the United States prioritized destroying ISIS.¹¹² US officials recognized Turkey’s “legitimate security concerns”¹¹³ and admired the “vigor and even ruthlessness”¹¹⁴ it used in pursuing its priority interest. Once ISIS was destroyed, the United States was content to “let Syria and Assad protect the Kurds and fight Turkey for their own land.”¹¹⁵

At least for a time, the United States tried to strike a balance between its strategic alliance with Turkey and its tactical partnership with the SDF.¹¹⁶ It took a three-stage approach for managing the “strategic stress” created by direct US support to the SDF. First, it tasked deployed US officers with tracking ammunition and weapons provided to the SDF to ensure that it was only used in the fight against ISIS.¹¹⁷ Second, it communicated information collected on the use of weapons provided to the SDF in monthly reports to Turkey for additional verification.¹¹⁸ Lastly, US control of critical oil fields gave Washington some leverage to pressure the SDF to keep resources in the fight against ISIS and not shift all its manpower to fighting Turkey, a prohibited mission.¹¹⁹

The United States also sought to counter foreign interference in Syria. The US view that “ongoing operations” in Syria could “indirectly influence their [Iran’s] activities” points to how the SDF partnership fits into a broader policy context.¹²⁰

This enmeshed tactical decisions regarding the SDF in broader regional objectives outside the scope of what the partnership could reasonably accomplish. For example, the United States’ claims that control over the oilfields makes certain “that oil proceeds do not go to Iran or the Syrian regime”¹²¹ are at odds with the reality that Damascus is the logical buyer and that the PYD is actively courting the Syrian government, as well as Iran and Russia. Furthermore, the PYD will need to propose favorable terms of sale in its ongoing negotiations with Damascus to receive the political concessions it desires.

Navigating Future Proxy Relationships

Why should US policymakers care if a proxy relationship expires after serving its short-term purpose? If policy goals, like destroying ISIS, are achieved at a reasonable cost, is this a negative outcome? The “By, With, Through” stratagem was originally conceived as a replacement for costly expeditionary operations. If the United States seeks to continue to employ this model to address future challenges, it will need to attract reliable proxies. This is not a call to invest heavily in proxy relationships in a misguided bid to secure loyalty, as some have called for. Rather, the United States must be more discerning during the selection process. Developing relationships with proxies that share long-term political interests will increase the likelihood of continued alignment beyond countering an immediate threat. However, if policymakers choose to ignore long-term interests during proxy selection and instead view relationships as expendable, they may find valuable partnerships harder to come by.

Additionally, overly simplistic assessments of proxies and their interests guarantee future partnership dissonance. Prior to backing the SDF, the United States viewed the Iraqi Kurds as “good Kurds” and the PKK as “bad Kurds.” Once the decision was made to back the PKK-affiliated YPG, US officials shifted the narrative to include the newly christened SDF in the “good Kurds” category.¹²² Yet, not all Kurds are the same. Each political party and its associated militia exists in different political contexts and operates under a different set of constraints. When selecting future proxies, the United States should be more sensitive to the ideological foundations of potential partners. A simple rule for this in practice

is “Don’t fall in love.” If there is real ideological overlap, which includes shared long-term interests, a real partnership may emerge. If not, policymakers should keep the relationship transactional and expect the militia to hedge against abandonment, possibly with US enemies.

Cost savings are an important element of By, With, Through. But it would be a mismatch of ends to means to expect an economical model of intervention, like this doctrine, to accomplish tasks that conventional forces arguably could not. Realistic expectations about a proxy’s ability to deliver the desired end-state should be kept front and center. For example, the United States encouraged and supported security cooperation between the SDF and Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) in their fight to secure the international border.¹²³ On the Iraqi side, the government in Baghdad invited US forces to partner with the ISF to retake Mosul, defeat ISIS, and reestablish the government’s authority. On the Syrian side, the United States supported regime change, critiqued Damascus for not effectively combating ISIS,¹²⁴ and then backed the SDF. This logic equates the two forces and their ability to deliver, despite the ISF’s position as the military of a sovereign state and the SDF’s role as the militia of an ethno-nationalist liberation party.

Limited US-SDF coordination on fighting the remnants of ISIS continue but the partnership is winding down. This affords an opportunity to examine the pitfalls and potential improvements to the approach. The main takeaway is that a proxy relationship is not an “engineering problem”¹²⁵ that can be fine-tuned with better management and clearer lines of communication. It is a game of “patron-client politics”¹²⁶ where each side pursues its own fundamental political interests. The United States can use its vast resources to mitigate differences for a period of time, but it cannot alter the identity driven goals of militias selected as proxies.

Endnotes

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