



By: *Harvey Morris*

Europeans must press Trump to stand by Syria's Kurds



Turkey has confirmed that its top priority in what Donald Trump this week termed its “unfriendly takeover” of Syria is the dismantling of a US-backed Kurdish militia that a decade ago was in the frontline of halting the advance of ISIS.

The Turkish defence minister Yasar Guler **told** journalists at the weekend: “Our primary agenda is the dissolution of the PKK/YPG,” using Ankara’s designation for the predominantly Kurdish force that has controlled much of the Kurds’ homeland in northeastern Syria since the start of the country’s civil war.

Its units provide the backbone of the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which have been on the defensive since Turkish-backed rebels spearheaded the lightning advance that led to this month’s collapse of the Assad regime.

The **fall** of the murderous dictatorship has been celebrated throughout Syria, including the Kurd Dagh, and beyond. But it has all sparked concerns about whether the Kurds will once again be the losers from the latest seismic change in the Middle East.

Will the emerging leadership in Damascus reach an accommodation with the Kurds or will it set out to crush the latest experiment in securing Kurdish autonomy in an ancient homeland that straddles the borders of four modern nation states?

And how far will other countries go, in particular the incoming administration in the US, in standing up for the rights of their Kurdish allies?

Turkey’s role in Syria

Donald Trump gave few clues in his first public remarks on the Syrian situation this week in which he appeared to praise Turkey’s role in the collapse of the Assad regime. “I think Turkey is very smart,” he **told** a press conference. “Turkey did an unfriendly takeover, without a lot of lives being lost.”

He declined to be drawn, however, on the future of a 900-strong US force that has been stationed in Syria in support of the Kurdish militia.

Trump’s remarks came amid reports of the breakdown of a US-brokered ceasefire between the Kurdish-led SDF and the armed factions of the Turkish-backed Syrian National Army that opposed the Assad regime.

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Turkey makes no distinction between the Kurdish forces that provide the backbone of the SDF and the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) that waged a decades-long insurgency against successive Turkish administrations. The PKK is designated a terrorist organisation by many countries, including the US, UK and members of the European Union.

Assad’s downfall came after a period in which Turkey’s President Recep Tayyip Erdogan had sought Russia’s support in facilitating a rapprochement with the Assad regime, aimed in part at constraining the Kurds.

At the same time, a prominent political ally of Erdogan proposed that the jailed PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan might be freed if he were to publicly declare the dissolution of the armed group. That initiative rapidly foundered when the PKK, or a faction of it, responded by bombing a state building in Ankara in October.

The Kurds are facing continued aggression

With Syria’s Iranian and Hezbollah allies weakened by the conflict with Israel, Turkey evidently concluded that Assad’s replacement by a Turkish-allied administration in Damascus was the preferred option for pursuing its campaign against the Kurds.

Abu Mohammed al-Jolani, the erstwhile jihadist leader of the Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) who has emerged as the key figure in post-Assad Syria, has called on all armed factions to disband and join a national defence force.

But will that include the Kurds at a time when they are facing continued aggression from Turkish-aligned forces and the Turkish military itself?

Since the start of the Syrian civil war more than a decade ago, the Kurds have established an autonomous self-governing zone in the northeast, known as Rojava.

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Its image, somewhat romanticised by the European left, is of a fiercely secular haven of libertarian socialism in which men and women play an equal role, including on the battlefield.

It is unlikely that such an entity, if undefended, would survive in a Syria dominated by former al-Qaeda adherents such as al-Jolani, however much he has reformed, and the new regime's Turkish backers.

The Syrian Kurds, perhaps one tenth of the national population, must now contemplate the historic fate of their more numerous brethren in Turkey, Iraq and Iran who have at one time or another attracted the support of rival powers only to be abandoned when they were no longer useful.

The 30-40 million Kurds in the region have been described as the world's largest nation without a state, having been denied statehood in the post World War I settlement in the Middle East.

A price for abandoning a Kurdish ally

European states, including the UK, should now use whatever political capital they have with the incoming US administration to persuade Trump not to abandon the Kurds. They managed it to an extent during his first term, when he contemplated pulling all US forces out of Syria.



European capitals should remind Washington that there would be a price to pay for abandoning its Kurdish ally in its time of crisis - Donald Trump with Recep Tayyip Erdogan

They should put the argument in terms of self-interest. The Syrian Kurds in 2015 reversed the ISIS tide at Kobane, on the border with Turkey, after an almost one-year battle and with the belated support of US and allied air strikes. Peshmerga forces from Iraq's Kurdish autonomous region joined in the city's defence.

Since the defeat of ISIS, the Syrian Kurds have been holding thousands of its former fighters in camps they warn they might have to abandon amid the current uncertainty.

Turkey has tried to downplay the likelihood of an ISIS insurgency but European capitals should remind Washington that there would be a price to pay for abandoning its Kurdish ally in its time of crisis.

Another issue of self-interest for European governments is that of refugees. Are they ready to confront a further exodus from Syria if the current tensions deteriorate into a civil war between Damascus and the Kurds?