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# The United States in Northeastern Syria

GEOPOLITICAL STRATEGY CANNOT IGNORE LOCAL REALITY

**FABRICE BALANCHE**

The United States plans to maintain its military presence in northeastern Syria until 2021 for three reasons: to prevent the return of the Islamic State, to influence the political transition in Syria, and to block the construction of the Iranian “land bridge” to the Mediterranean. Because of this commitment, the United States decided to keep two thousand men on the ground and to seek help from the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), including the YPG, which is the military branch of the Democratic Union Party, usually referred to as the PYD, or *Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat* in Kurdish. (YPG, translated as People’s Protection Units, stands for *Yekîneyên Parastina Gel* in Kurdish.) This decision provoked a major crisis, as Turkey—historically a strong US ally—considers the YPG as the Syrian branch of its decades-long domestic foe, the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK). The United States therefore faces a dilemma. On the one hand, the YPG is indispensable to the military and political structure ruling northeastern Syria. On the other hand, without the active support of Turkey, the American strategy of countering Iran and Russia is seriously compromised. With the Turkish army’s offensive against the YPG, the United States risks losing its indispensable local ally.

How did America get into such an uncomfortable geopolitical situation?<sup>1</sup> It seems that the strategy of “leading from behind” does not work in Syria. The local allies are not mere mercenaries—they have their own logic that does not coincide with US regional strategy. America’s weak presence on the ground has not allowed it to influence the local political situation or to solve economic, ethnic, and social problems, all of which cause damage to US strategy in Syria. What is currently happening in northeastern Syria proves that geopolitical calculations should not be undertaken without close attention to local issues.

## **The Interest of the American Presence in Northern Syria**

The strategic presence of American troops in both northeastern Syria and the al-Tanf pocket in southern Syria restricts the completion of the Iranian corridor to the Mediterranean. Currently, the provinces of Deir al-Zor in Syria and al-Anbar in Iraq are unstable, as both the Islamic State and YPG are exacerbating the conflict. In these areas, the Islamic State remains present and many Sunni Arab tribes are hostile toward the return of the regular Syrian forces as well as to occupation by Shiite militias. The presence of the YPG Kurdish militia in the area also lacks legitimacy since the area is far from its militant base and (from



an ethnic point of view) is a predominately Arab region. Thus, YPG participation in the offensive against the Islamic State in the lower Euphrates Valley is less justified than its presence in Raqqa, where there was at least a Kurdish minority before the war. However, the YPG has a strategic interest in eastern Deir al-Zor because it contains al-Omar, an oil field that produces over 50 percent of Syria's oil. The Syrian regime wants to recover it at all costs in order to regain its energy independence and thus limit its dependence on Iran and Russia.

The Syrian regime's most recent attempt to dislodge the SDF in February 2018 was unsuccessful due to US air support.<sup>2</sup> With respect to this issue, the YPG has two options. Plan A is to maintain control of the area as long as the United States maintains its presence in the area and protects the YPG from Turkey. However, if America withdraws from northeastern Syria and/or does not provide protection against Turkey, the YPG could instead try to give back most of its Arab territories to the Syrian regime in exchange for Russian protection against Turkey and to maintain YPG sovereignty in Kurdish territories.

There is also speculation that Sunni Arab tribes in the region have similar options in mind. They can count on continued profits from energy production as long as the Syrian regime does not regain control of the oil fields. They also expect the United States to continue sending financial support. However, America must not forget that it cannot buy permanent loyalty. Vis-à-vis Baghdad, the Sunni tribes of Iraq's al-Anbar province rely on the American presence only to negotiate a more balanced relationship on the political front and a better redistribution of oil revenue. Because Sunni Arab tribes have only local and material interests, the United States should not expect unconditional support for its larger anti-Iranian crusade.

The YPG has a more long-term vision that views the PKK and its material interest as secondary for its organization.<sup>3</sup> This does not mean that the YPG is necessarily more reliable than the mercenary tribes of the Euphrates River, but that the Kurdish militia is less likely to switch alliances. The YPG's foremost purpose is political, and currently both the United States and the Iran-Russia axis are equally unable to offer a Kurdish state in northern Syria.

When then secretary of state Rex Tillerson announced in January 2018 that US troops would remain in Syria until 2021, he ended a period of uncertainty for local allies.<sup>4</sup> In terms of military presence, the allies have witnessed US investment in on-the-ground military infrastructure. The US military has doubled the capacity of Rmeilan's airport (southeast of Qamishli) and rehabilitated the airport of Ayn Aissa (north of Raqqa), allowing easier access to the entire north of Syria. However, 2021 is quickly approaching. Local allies need to be reassured that the US presence will remain even after the 2020 presidential election. The uncertainty of a continued US presence in the region contrasts sharply with Iran and Russia, both of which have built permanent military bases in Syria. Until now, American resolve has been tested only by attacks against the SDF. This will likely be tested again by terrorist

attacks against American bases that may mirror the attack against the Marine barracks in Beirut in 1983 or the daily harassment that occurred in Iraq. The United States must prepare for these attacks.

Russia frequently attacks the legitimacy of the US presence in Syria through the United Nations. The mandate of the American-led International Coalition will stop once the Islamic State is eliminated and European allies will be able to withdraw from the area. Some countries have already done so (Denmark in December 2016). If others follow, the United States will be left alone. In this scenario, Turkey will likely increase its pressure on the Kurds because it does not want the Kurds to benefit from the American settlement in northern Syria. While Turkish troops are also “illegally” in Syria, Turkey’s alliance with the Iran-Moscow axis guarantees the security of its troops. In terms of negotiation between the United States and Turkey, one of the challenges for the US administration would be to rally Turkey to its cause. More specifically, it will be difficult to convince Turkey that it will gain more in the Middle East by siding with the United States than it would by siding with Russia and Iran. Turkey does not want to be a victim of Western idealism and the application of the “right of peoples to self-determination” in the UN Charter.

### **Turkey Is Scuttling the US Strategy in Syria**

We must stop maintaining the illusion of a distinction between the PKK and the PYD (and its military branch, the YPG). PKK militants founded the PYD in 2003. In 2012, Syrian PKK veterans from the Qandil Mountains (the PKK base and headquarters in northern Iraq) organized the YPG, which is officially the PYD’s militia. As is the case of Sinn Fein and the Irish Republican Army in Northern Ireland, the PYD is only the political wing of the YPG. The “comrades” of the YPG control all local administrations and political bodies, from simple local councils (*kommun*) to the leadership of the “Democratic Federation of Northern Syria” and on to the civil councils of Manbij and Raqqa. Civilians are considered screens or simple technicians. The PKK veterans from the Qandil Mountains control the area with an iron fist: they monitor Syrian Kurds and “reeducate” those who have strayed from the Qandil Mountains academies. In the Arab zones, Syrian Kurds are in charge of governance because the Arabs are considered incapable of building the “democratic, socialist, ecological and multi-sectarian” society of tomorrow. This domination, of course, exasperates Arab populations, especially the tribal leaders whose power has been marginalized.

Turkey’s concerns about the political evolution of northern Syria are therefore legitimate because the PKK is present from Afrin to the Tigris River. This does not mean that the United States should approve the Turkish offensive against the Syrian Kurds, because that operation is damaging to US strategy in northeastern Syria. There are several consequences to the Turkish offensive against Syrian Kurds. The first consequence is that the offensive against the Islamic State in Deir al-Zor stopped in January 2018. The Kurdish fighters have left this front line because if they do not have US protection against Turkey, they do not feel



inclined to pursue the American objective in Syria. The second consequence is that Kurds feel betrayed by the United States. This would be the case even if they knew that Russia gave the Turkish government the go-ahead to attack Afrin in order to punish the Kurds because they refused to break their alliance with the United States. The Kurds expected the Americans to protect them against Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan for their sacrifices in Raqqa and they have been disappointed. The YPG thought itself indispensable to the United States. "They cannot abandon us, we are their only ally. If they do that, no one will believe them in the area," a Kurdish official said to me during my visit in 2017.<sup>5</sup>

If Erdogan has started his anti-YPG offensive with Afrin, it is because with no American troops in Afrin, there is no risk of killing Americans. Moreover, the United States has clearly stated that it is not concerned about Afrin. The Turkish president justified attacking Afrin as a matter of restoring the territory to Arabs, claiming that with successful attacks, the legitimate inhabitants would consist of 55 percent of the population, while the Kurds would be only 35 percent.<sup>6</sup> This is state-sponsored propaganda. In reality, the population of the Afrin district (175,000 in 2011) is currently more than 90 percent Kurdish and the countryside is almost exclusively Kurdish. An Arab community exists in the city of Afrin (60,000 in 2011). Many refugees are arriving from Aleppo (126,000 in January 2018, according to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs), but most of them are Kurds.

It is also true that Afrin has been a stronghold of the PKK since the 1980s, when Kurdish leader Abdullah Ocalan, now imprisoned in Turkey, lived in Syria. More than half of the Syrian fighters who joined the PKK in the 1980s and 1990s came from the Afrin district.<sup>7</sup> However, the Afrin Kurdish population was less than 10 percent of the Syrian Kurds.<sup>8</sup> Volunteers who survived more than twenty years of fighting against Turkey returned en masse in 2011–12 and created the YPG. They are now the executives of the organization and run the entire SDF area.<sup>9</sup> Afrin therefore has a political importance that goes beyond this portion of territory. By eliminating the YPG and perhaps even the Kurdish population of Afrin, Turkey sends a strong signal to the YPG and the Kurdish population. Since the YPG has been unable to defend Afrin, how can it imagine that it can protect the rest of the region of Rojava? This is all the more the case in an area where the population is mixed (Arab and Kurdish) and the physical geography is much less favorable to defense. This defeat of the YPG in Afrin could be the beginning of a split between the Syrian Kurds and the United States.

Tillerson returned from Ankara in February 2018 with a Turkish proposal concerning Manbij, an area west of the Euphrates River that is controlled by the YPG. Erdogan proposed that a Turkish-American force would control Manbij and the YPG would withdraw to the east of the Euphrates River. However, will Erdogan be satisfied with this proposal? Will he promise to curtail his attacks on the YPG after Manbij? Will he let the Kurdish inhabitants return to Afrin? Whatever the case, this condition is unacceptable to the YPG. The Kurdish

militia lost more than five hundred fighters driving out the Islamic State from Manbij and took back the city without destroying it, contrary to what Turkey did with al-Bab or the International Coalition did with Raqqa. Why should the YPG give way to the Turkish army? Moreover, such actions will acknowledge the YPG's weaknesses and could lead the Arab tribes to insist on its departure from nonexclusively Kurdish territories: Raqqa, Deir al-Zor, Hasaka, and especially Tel Abyad. This last city is essential for the junction between the Kurdish cantons of Kobane and Qamishli.

If the YPG is forced to evacuate Manbij, it will come to believe that the alliance with the United States was a wrong choice. Furthermore, leaders of the PKK, through its YPG offshoot, will see that it is time to negotiate with Moscow and Tehran before they lose everything in Syria and perhaps in the rest of the Middle East. In this case, Russia will not let the YPG control its existing territory. Russian president Vladimir Putin must take into consideration Russia's agreement with his Turkish equivalent. Instead, Manbij, Raqqa, and Hasaka areas would return to the Syrian army while the YPG could hope to maintain a shared sovereignty over the last Kurdish territories (Afrin, Kobane, and Qamishli). This is because Putin and Syrian president Bashar al-Assad would like to keep the YPG half alive, unable to threaten Syrian unity but still able to pose a threat to Turkey. Is America able to guarantee more to the YPG to keep it on its side? Or does it prefer to sacrifice the YPG and to rebuild a strong relationship with Turkey?

We need to ask why Turkey is scuttling US strategy in Syria and the Middle East. Turkey's offensive against the YPG serves the interests of the Moscow-Tehran axis and not those of its NATO allies. Turkey could have deferred its offensive because the YPG does not represent an immediate threat to its security. However, the European Union and the United States have been particularly conciliatory toward Erdogan because they do not want him to turn definitively toward the Russian side.

The United States must therefore find a way to keep Turkey in the Western camp without losing the military support of the YPG. At present, the Arab militia within the SDF does not represent an alternative force to the YPG. Therefore, if America loses the YPG as its principal proxy, US troops could be pushed out of northern Syria, giving the Syrian regime and its allies free rein. Iran will then control the entire Syrian-Iraqi border and the corridor between Tehran and the Mediterranean Sea.

With regard to Turkey, the United States should not cede a portion of the YPG's Manbij territory, as that would only encourage Erdogan to push for more. Instead, the administration should explain to Erdogan that if US troops are forced to leave Syria, he will be alone in the Moscow-Tehran axis. This would make it more difficult for him to obtain any new benefit in Syria, such as neutralization of the YPG and creation of a buffer zone at the Syrian border. The American presence, with the danger it represents for the success of the Russian and Iranian projects, assures Turkey of a privileged geopolitical situation. Meanwhile, Russia and



Iran have a strong interest in keeping the YPG, and hence the PKK, as a potential threat to Turkish internal and external security. It is therefore preferable that the YPG remain allied with the United States, as it can thus freeze its action against Turkey and ultimately promote a peace process with the PKK. In any case, without the cooperation of Turkey, the American presence will likely be unsuccessful in northern Syria where, furthermore, the potential of a conflict between Kurds and Arabs continues.

### **The YPG's Political Hegemony in Northeastern Syria**

In the “Democratic Federation of Northern Syria,” the YPG is designated officially as the armed wing of the PYD. In reality, the PYD is the political arm of the YPG. The political power is in the hands of the PKK in the Qandil Mountains, and the YPG's local staff manages the areas under its control.

Various political organizations—such as TEV-DEM (led by the PYD), the Kurdish Alliance, and Arab and Assyrian parties—are umbrella groups without power. The SDF also has a political branch via the Syrian Democratic Council (SDC). The SDC was created in December 2015 in Dayrik (al-Malakyia). At that time, one of the famous Syrian opponents to Bashar al-Assad, Haytham Mana, was the copresident, but he resigned in February 2017 because he was merely a puppet. He was replaced by Ryad Darar, an activist from Deir al-Zor, who accepted the role of the Arab in this fiction of multi-sectarian structure which is actually ruled by Kurds. All political branches of SDF military organizations are in the SDC. The military councils of Manbij, Tabqa, etc. send representatives to the SDC. It also includes representatives of the TEV-DEM.

It seems that the integration of various SDF Arab militias may be occurring in order to widen the Kurdish umbrella group. The Rojava force folded officially in December 2016 to give way to the Federation of North Syria. Then the local administration announced the creation of an army of the federation in fall 2017. The integration of Arabs poses a problem for Kurdish society, which accuses the PKK-PYD of having lost its “Kurdishness” and of being more concerned about Arabs than Kurds. The Arabs, however, do not trust Kurdish governance. The “Kurdification” of education in Qamishli and Hasaka shows the limits of equality between Kurds and Arabs. The advantage for the PKK is that the Arabs are a divided population. They have no mobilizing political project: the Baathist version of the Syrian national project has failed, the Syrian revolution has failed, and the Islamic project of the Islamic State has been eradicated. None of these systems has actually kept its promises or proved satisfactory to the Arabs. The Arab populations have thus fallen back on traditional tribal solidarities and are content to live from day to day. In contrast, the Kurds have a unified political project. To bring the Kurds and Arabs closer together, it may be useful to integrate non-Kurds into the YPG. However, that would require that Arabs have access to the command functions of YPG officials and not merely positions as spokespersons. If this did occur, the PKK would then risk losing its power over the YPG.



Will the future army of northeastern Syria be the new identity of the SDF? Can this create a real process of Kurdish and Arab integration? It is hard to imagine that the YPG could simply dissolve. It is difficult to imagine also that Arab militias built on a tribal base could accept a real military hierarchy and discipline where tribal leaders could be under the orders of a simple peasant. However, this army is a necessary step for the stabilization of northeastern Syria once the Islamic State is eliminated—if the YPG wants to continue to receive Western military aid. Without the integration, the links between the YPG-PYD and the PKK would eventually block the continuation of collaboration after the eradication of the Islamic State.

The political system set up by the PKK-PYD in northeastern Syria aims to create a Kurdish state under the guise of a “Democratic Federation of Northern Syria.” The goal is to continue gathering Western support, as Westerners want to use the Kurds as leverage against the al-Assad regime and Iran. If this support is lacking, then the YPG could turn toward Moscow. The PKK understands that it can take advantage of the America-Russia rivalry in Syria and that it could neutralize the hostility of Turkey and Iran. However, it has been too confident in US influence and Russian patience, as we have seen with the Turkish offensive against Afrin (January–March 2018).

The PYD project remains a Kurdish project, which is a part of the PKK’s strategy against Turkey. Until now, the PKK has not used Rojava as a military base against Turkey. However, by creating a model of an independent Kurdish region, different from the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG), it encourages Turkish Kurds to secede. More broadly, Rojava is considered the only way to open up Kurdish territories by offering an outlet to the Mediterranean. This may seem unrealistic, but it is a part of the PKK’s mobilizing utopia. The different maps of Rojava and Kurdish territory identify Alexandretta, Turkey, as the maritime port of Kurdistan.

The PKK wants to maintain its dominance of Syrian Kurds. It will therefore continue to exercise its monopoly of appointing civilian and military cadres. There is a risk of Rojava breaking away from its tutelage after a few years with the promotion of Syrian Kurdish commanders who could question the connection with Qandil. After a few years of peace and economic prosperity, the Kurds of Syria may want to devote themselves to their local area, rather than to the Kurdish cause, and to see the specter of a conflict with Turkey disappear. The PKK in Syria must therefore guard against several enemies. Inside northern Syria, there are the non-PYD Kurds, “nationalist” PYD Kurds, and revanchist Arabs. Outside northern Syria, there is the Syrian regime that wants to regain control of the entire area. Turkey wants to destroy a Syrian Kurdish statelet, Russia and Iran are wary of the PKK’s excessive inclination toward the United States, and America wants to see the Syrian Kurds break their allegiance with the PKK. It must therefore maneuver between all these obstacles.

The integration of Arabs into the PYD-YPG political and military system is therefore a perfect means to gain acceptance internationally and locally. But in this scheme, the Arabs





must remain subordinate. In the “Kurdish historical territory” of Rojava, Arabs must either be “Kurdified” or treated as a minority. In the conquered areas, where the Kurds are absent or in the minority, the YPG supports “proxy” Arab allies that constitute a buffer zone between the “Kurdish historical territory” and the rest of Syria.

### **Money and Land are the True Motivations of Arabs Who Join the YPG**

Many Arabs want to join the YPG for monetary reasons and because it is the only job available. Some of them want to escape tribal control of the Arab militias. Some “Arab” recruits have a Kurdish origin through one of their parents or grandparents. For them, integration into the YPG is a means of recovering their Kurdish identity, which is now on the winning side, rather than being second-class citizens. Now it is no longer shameful to be a Kurd. The integration of Arabs into the YPG is part of the policy of Kurdification. Tribes encourage its men to join the YPG for political reasons. They want of course to be on the winning side. This is what drove Sheikh Hamidi, the leader of the Shammar tribe in Hasaka province, to join the YPG early on. While his men are in a tribal militia (Sanaded), he works closely with the YPG and the PYD because he is the vice president of al-Jezira canton. Because of this, the Shammar militia keeps its independence and organization and receives modern weapons. These privileges within the SDF are denied to other tribes who later made alliances with the YPG, like the Sharabyeh of Qamishli. The Shammar militia is integrated into the YPG and the Asaych (Kurdish police) under strong Kurdish control.

The Kurds remain distrustful of a strong Arab militia, which could rebel against the YPG and switch to the side of the Syrian regime or eventually to the Rosh Pesh, the Syrian PDK militia, in exile in Iraq. Competing militias could one day return to Syria, taking advantage of a crisis between Arabs and Kurds in Hasaka or Dayrik.

In Hasaka, land is a major criterion for integration of the tribes into the YPG. Unlike in the majority of Syria, the agrarian reform of 1963–70 was not fully implemented in Hasaka province. The state confiscated only part of the main estates, leaving their lands to the tribal leaders who had pledged allegiance to the Baathist regime. Confiscated lands were not redistributed to the farmers because Hafiz al-Assad did not want to create a class of small Kurdish landowners. State properties (*amlak al-daouleh*) have therefore been leased to the former landowners and to members of the Syrian regime at a low price.

The Kurdish population is eagerly awaiting agrarian reform in Hasaka province. This is especially true of the PYD, which consists of very small landowners and landless peasantry. It is their children who make up the YPG troops and who sacrificed their lives for Rojava. Once peace is restored, the Kurdish peasantry understands that the PYD will redistribute the land. The peasants hope for favorable treatment, given their sacrifices made during the war. So far, the PYD has decided to suspend decisions on the land issue until the end of hostilities in order to mitigate any internal conflicts. However, those who fought in the ranks of the

YPG will obviously be favored. Therefore, Arab tribes in Hasaka province have a strong interest in sending men to the YPG so as not to be excluded from future land repartitions.

### **Arab Protests Increase**

In the Arab territories of Manbij and the Euphrates Valley, Kurdish rule is increasingly unpopular. In January 2018, the main Arab tribes of Manbij protested against the Civil Council of Manbij (CCM). The assassination of two members of the Bou Ana tribe, the main tribe of the city and its surroundings, ignited protests. Thousands of demonstrators protested against compulsory conscription and what they called the “CCM dictatorship.” The YPG co-opted members of the CCM and YPG officers now head various CCM councils. The same situation prevails in Raqqa, but there is no open opposition because the population is so traumatized by the war that it accepts the situation. However, disputes will arise if the Kurds do not share power with tribal leaders.

Tribal Arab leaders attend local assemblies, but are not leaders. Hamidi, the leader of the Shammar tribe, is an exception. The YPG deliberately chooses second-class families to maintain competition among the tribes, viewing this as a strategy to maintain control. Certainly, this choice will pose a risk if the Syrian regime succeeds in staying in power. However, most Arabs who are working with the YPG expect a future agreement between the Syrian regime to let the YPG negotiate an individual rapprochement with Damascus. Furthermore, the coexistence between the Syrian army and the YPG in Qamishli and Aleppo ultimately shows that the two actors are not enemies and could eventually share sovereignty in northeastern Syria.

The PKK wants to change society in northeastern Syria, including Arab society. It does so by trying to promote a new generation through the SDF and through an administration giving jobs and responsibilities independently of the traditional tribal hierarchy. The goal is to break those tribes that collaborated with the Islamic State, who repressed the Kurdish uprising of 2004, and who still maintain strong ties with Damascus. Some tribes, like the Shammar (southeast of Qamishli), enjoy special status because they early on helped the YPG in its fight against the Islamic State and they never repressed the Kurds. The PKK also tries to play one tribe off against another in order to strengthen its own power. Ultimately, the YPG fears the unification of the Arab tribes against it, as is already the case in Manbij.

The Arab tribes will probably not rise up against the YPG, but they will not support it if the Syrian army or Turkish army goes on the offensive. Their alliance with the Syrian regime is well documented; Arab tribal leaders regularly go to Damascus to seek support from Bashar al-Assad and all major Arab tribes in northeastern Syria were represented at the January 2018 summit between the Syrian regime and Russian officials in Sochi. The latter bought them influence, as well as promises of land, political positions, administrative jobs, money, and so on. The process is efficient and effective, as the war has impoverished



the northeast Syrian population. Rojava does not receive financial assistance from the International Coalition to compete with the Syrian regime, which is generously endowed by Iran. It should not be difficult, however, to counterbalance financial and technical influence. Yet the United States does not seem to have realized the intensity of the economic crisis in the area and the consequences of its military presence. A Marshall Plan for northeastern Syria would thwart the Syrian regime strategy of destabilization.

### **Northeastern Syria Is in an Uncomfortable Geographical Position**

Before the war, northeastern Syria was the agricultural heartland of Syria. Now, local agriculture is dependent on fertilizers and agricultural equipment produced in western Syria. Northeastern Syria also has three-quarters of the national hydrocarbon resources.<sup>10</sup> However, it has voluntarily abandoned these resources, leading to industrial underdevelopment. Oil is also exported to western Syria, where there are refineries and power stations. In northeast Syria, the Tishrin and Tabqa dams do not provide enough electricity for the region. Rmeilan power station (close to Qamishli) is the only one in northeastern Syria, but it has a very low capacity. Manufacturing and agro-food industries are negligible, except for the old and inefficient state industries. Therefore, northeastern Syria's economy is extremely dependent on western Syria, which is under the control of the Syrian regime. The Syrian regime would need the cheap raw materials produced in the SDF territory to rebuild the country, although Iranian aid partly compensates for these deficiencies. Meanwhile, the International Coalition is not sufficiently supporting northeastern Syria. The United States speaks about stabilization but not reconstruction, and it has not created a plan to support the local economy or to rebuild the infrastructure. Furthermore, the geopolitical isolation of the SDF does not facilitate Western support.

The Fesh Khabour floating bridge provides the only access for the International Coalition to supply northeastern Syria. Currently, the Kurdish Regional Government on the Iraqi side controls the border crossing. However, Baghdad wants to regain control. No one knows what will happen in the near future with the relationship between the United States and an Iraq increasingly under Iranian influence. To the south, with the presence of the Islamic State, the Iraqi army, and Shiite militias, it is difficult to open new routes to supply SDF's territory. To the north, the Turkish border is closed. Turkey has built a wall along its border with northern Syria to prevent infiltration and smuggling. Nevertheless, Turkish goods arrive in northern Syria via the Turkish zone of influence between Azaz and Jarabulus. In the past, the border between the SDF's territory and the Syrian army was open within Syria, allowing civilians and goods to move freely. However, the destruction of some of the bridges over the Euphrates River has now impeded this flow, as only three bridges remain. Elsewhere, it is possible to cross the Euphrates by boat.

In conclusion, the territory of the "Democratic Federation of Northern Syria" could be blockaded very easily. Damascus, Baghdad, and Ankara could decide to cut off the area

from the world. The Iraqi government could close Fesh Khabour as it has done in the past, when it closed Erbil and Sulaymanyeh airports to international flights for six months after the Kurdish referendum. While contraband could partially address the basic needs of the population, an economic blockade would seriously halt reconstruction.

### **The Structural and Geopolitical Problem of Water Scarcity**

Last but not least, Turkey has control of water access in northeastern Syria. It controls the upper Euphrates River as well as smaller rivers, all of which are indispensable for irrigation. Additionally, Turkey has a dam system, especially the Ataturk Dam. Since the beginning of the Syrian crisis, Turkey no longer supplies five hundred cubic meters of water per second to Syria, as is required according to the international agreements between Syria and Turkey.<sup>11</sup> Increased pumping north of the Syrian-Turkish border dramatically lowered the groundwater level on the Syrian side, and the cost of irrigation rose. Water scarcity in Syria now threatens agriculture, the most important resource of the area. However, the authorities of the Northern Syria Federation seem to have no plans to modernize its irrigation with sprinklers or drip systems, which would reduce consumption. The authorities subsidize the fuel for water pumps, so farmers can pump deeper and deeper into the groundwater instead of buying modern irrigation equipment. However, this is a very short-term solution. With the drought in 2018 and the resulting scarcity of water, harvests will be disastrous in the spring. Syria may need to import wheat to feed its population.

If northeast Syria returned to regime control, it would find it difficult to solve the irrigation problem. Lack of financial means and widespread corruption would defeat any initiative, as was the case before the crisis. Because of this, the United States and its partners have an opportunity to gain the support of the population and to revive the regional economy. The current traditional gravity-based irrigation mode is too wasteful in terms of energy and water. It takes three times more water than using sprinklers and seven times more than for drip irrigation. In the irrigated perimeters, the dilapidated canals and the low cost of irrigation make the modernization of irrigation by the farmers themselves impossible and unnecessary. In Hasaka province and in northern Raqqa, individual wells dominate. The cost of traditional irrigation is no longer sustainable and many lands are no longer cultivated. The investment in modern irrigation should be a priority of the US stabilization plan for northeastern Syria. But apparently, there is no willingness in Washington to do that because it goes beyond simple “stabilization.”<sup>12</sup> However, a change of irrigation modes is a concrete factor of social development. Making farmers more autonomous of the state and more responsible for water resources would contribute to the democratization of society.

### **The Support of the Population Goes through Economic Development**

The economic disaster in northeast Syria is prompting some of the population to contemplate the return of the Syrian regime. To deflate this aspiration, a significant improvement in the



standard of living would have to occur. The return of the regime frightens many Syrians who have supported the opposition and especially any young men who have refused to perform military service. When the Syrian army took over the southern side of the Euphrates Valley, thousands of young men fled to the northern side, avoiding conscription. Syrians also have sought refuge in SDF territory because the YPG has a reputation for treating refugees humanely. However, this sympathy needs to be supported by significant improvements in living conditions. The SDF has effective control of the region and corruption (at least petty daily bribes) has been banned. This provides a solid foundation for boosting economic activity, but still would require outside aid.

The Kurdish people finally feel free. They can openly speak their language and they do not suffer any more harassment from the state apparatus in the administration because they control it. However, they should take care to avoid duplicating the former Baathist system of oppression to their profit, harassing the Arabs. They want to preserve this long-awaited and hard-won freedom after decades of fighting against the Baathist regime and then against the Islamic State. Kurds do not necessarily agree with the ideology of the YPG, but they are grateful that it has protected them from the Islamist threat. For the moment, the YPG does not impose its collectivist economic program, which makes the Kurdish population believe that the YPG is pragmatic and will not change the economic system. If the YPG were to change that system, the Kurds would reject the YPG because most of them are attached to the capitalist system and do not believe in Ocalan's ideology—Ocalan's ideology is influenced by the writings of Murray Bookchin (1921–2006), a post-Marxist American philosopher who founded his own libertarian socialist ideology called Communalism. This is the case even if they consider "Apo" (Ocalan's nickname means "uncle") as the Kurdish leader. Here again, the United States should support private initiatives so that a powerful entrepreneurial middle class can challenge the YPG political hegemony. A plan to rebuild northeastern Syria would help create this counter-power and would also prevent the return of the Syrian regime.

The Raqqa population complains about the absence of reconstruction. These complaints go directly to the authorities in charge of the city and the International Coalition. However, the Syrian regime does not have the means to rebuild the city. Although Damascus and Aleppo are getting money from members of the Syrian diaspora who want to invest in real estate, this is not the case for Raqqa. Further south, Deir al-Zor, which is in a situation similar to that of Raqqa, is also not rebuilt. Neither are the smaller towns in the Euphrates Valley such as Maskene or Mayadin, which are under the control of the Syrian army. Therefore, it is not necessarily in the interest of Damascus to return to other areas quickly and show its inability to rebuild the country. This leaves time for the West to make Raqqa a model of reconstruction. However, an ambitious plan should be presented quickly in order to give hope to the Syrians. The plan should support the Syrians and not leave the city in ruins and the inhabitants fending for themselves. For decades, images of destruction in Gaza or Baghdad caused by Western weapons have disheartened the Syrians. We must give

them another image of the West. It is the best weapon not only against the return of the Islamic State but also against Iranian influence.

The first condition for the success of US policy in northeastern Syria is an end to the Turkish offensive against the YPG. If the United States is unable to stop Turkey, then it is useless to think about reconstruction or to even stay in the area. The YPG is the backbone of the SDF. Its discipline and organization ensure the cohesion of the Arab militias. Without the YPG's active support, the United States would have to send tens of thousands of new troops to northeastern Syria. The weakening of the YPG in the Euphrates Valley is likely to cause the fragmentation of Arab forces. The pro-Assad forces could take advantage of this to regain ground, particularly in the province of Deir al-Zor, where there are important hydrocarbon fields.<sup>13</sup> Pro-Assad forces would enlarge also the Iranian land bridge and suppress indefinitely the US threat to the major Iranian project in the Near East. Making territorial pledges is the best way to influence the resolution of the Syrian crisis and to thwart Iran's plans. In order for the United States to keep its allies and compete with Iran, it must have a direct presence on the ground. The strategy of leading from behind quickly finds its limits, as it deprives Americans of the ability to understand local issues and therefore to find appropriate solutions.

Returning to realpolitik also means looking at the socioeconomic conditions of the population. After a war, the ideal situation would be for the population to rebuild the country by relying on its own strength. This would create a much more sustainable process than by having massive financial investment from external sources. However, do we have time to wait in a context of exacerbated geopolitical competition? The Marshall Plan was designed to protect Western Europe from Communist outcomes and was the *raison d'être* of development aid throughout the Cold War. The principles of self-development may only be valid in a context of peace and the absence of serious geopolitical competition. It is indispensable to take into consideration the domestic situation if we want to understand the spread of Iranian influence in the region.<sup>14</sup> In general, we need to be more interested in "the street" (the socioeconomic situation of the population) in geopolitics. Unless we pay attention to social developments on the ground, higher level strategy will not be effective.

## NOTES

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## The Working Group on Islamism and the International Order

The Herbert and Jane Dwight Working Group on Islamism and the International Order seeks to engage in the task of reversing Islamic radicalism through reforming and strengthening the legitimate role of the state across the entire Muslim world. Efforts draw on the intellectual resources of an array of scholars and practitioners from within the United States and abroad, to foster the pursuit of modernity, human flourishing, and the rule of law and reason in Islamic lands—developments that are critical to the very order of the international system. The working group is chaired by Hoover fellows Russell Berman and Charles Hill.

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