

THE PITFALLS OF RELYING ON KURDISH FORCES TO COUNTER ISIS

American over-reliance on Kurdish forces as the primary ground partner in the fight against the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) threatens the long-term success of the anti-ISIS campaign. The U.S.-led anti-ISIS coalition currently provides extensive military support to Kurds in both Iraq and Syria through weapons shipments, advisory missions, and close air support. This cooperation has enabled Kurdish forces to seize large swaths of territory from ISIS throughout 2015, including the majority of the Syrian-Turkish border and key terrain in the vicinity of Mosul. U.S. President Barack Obama lauded the gains as a demonstration of what can be accomplished “when [the U.S.] has an effective partner on the ground.” This partnership, however, faces two fundamental pitfalls that challenge broader U.S. national security objectives. First, the U.S.-led air campaign in Syria supports the expansion of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK), a designated terrorist organization that has conducted an insurgency against the Turkish state since 1984. This cooperation threatens to drive Turkey away from deeper coordination with the anti-ISIS coalition. Second, the U.S. risks fueling long-term ethnic conflict in both Iraq and Syria due to the relative empowerment of the Kurds at the expense of other local powerbrokers, often Sunni Arabs. These pitfalls could promote future regional disorder and prevent the U.S. from successfully degrading and destroying ISIS.

PITFALL #1: SYRIAN KURDISH FORMATIONS INCORPORATE INDIVIDUALS WHO AFFILIATE WITH A DESIGNATED TERRORIST ENTITY

The coalition of Kurdish forces supported by the U.S.-led anti-ISIS coalition in both Iraq and Syria incorporates numerous fighters affiliated with the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK). The PKK waged a protracted [insurgency](#) against the Turkish government from 1984 to 2013 which included the widespread use of targeted killings and suicide bombings. In response to these actions, the U.S. State Department designated the left-wing Kurdish militant group as a [foreign terrorist organization in 2002](#). The violence between the PKK and Turkey, dormant for several years, [resumed](#) in July 2015 after an ISIS-linked [suicide attack](#) against Kurdish activists in southern Turkey led the PKK to [assassinate](#) several Turkish police officers for their alleged complicity with ISIS. Turkey retaliated with an air campaign against PKK positions in northern Iraq and intensified security operations in Kurdish-majority regions of southeastern Turkey. The resumption of hostilities exacerbates the security challenges facing Turkey as the country confronts compounding cross-border threats from ISIS and Russia. The current U.S. partnership with the Syrian Kurdish forces permeated by the PKK thus tolerates the expansion of a U.S.-designated terrorist organization with whom Turkey – a key NATO ally – is effectively at war.

The PKK has gained an unprecedented level of strength through the rise of the affiliated Syrian Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) and its armed wing, the People’s Protection Units (YPG). The [official position](#) of the U.S. denies the definition of the YPG as a terrorist organization and promotes the YPG as an effective partner in the anti-ISIS campaign. Nevertheless, the PYD and YPG are closely linked to the PKK. The PYD formed in 2003 as a [covert political branch](#) of the PKK following former Syrian President Hafez al-Assad’s expulsion of PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan from Syria in 1998. The PYD maintains close [ideological alignment](#) with the political philosophy of the PKK, including the unique use of female fighters and a cult-like reverence for Abdullah Ocalan. The PKK also reportedly exerts significant military leadership over the YPG.



A young boy [hoists](#) a flagpole with (from top to bottom) the banners of Abdullah Ocalan, the PKK, and the YPG in the Syrian border town of Kobani (Ayn al-Arab).

The PKK reportedly [oversaw](#) combat training, implemented battlefield strategy, and commanded combat formations for the YPG by mid-2013. The PKK comprised the [majority of battlefield leadership](#) for Syrian Kurdish forces during operations to recapture Kobani in northern Aleppo Province in January 2015, with fifteen out of the twenty commanders hailing from the PKK headquarters of Qandil in northern Iraq. Turkish rather than Syrian Kurds constituted the majority of all self-reported YPG casualties between January 2013 and January 2016. The distinctions between the YPG and the PKK often appear purposefully blurred. One PKK fighter interviewed by the *Washington Post* stated: “It’s all PKK but different branches...sometimes I’m PKK, sometimes I’m YPG. It doesn’t really matter. [They are all members of the PKK.](#)” Turkish President Recep Erdogan and other senior Turkish officials repeatedly stress that the YPG is a terrorist organization “[equal with the PKK](#)” in the eyes of the Turkish government.

The U.S.-led anti-ISIS coalition nonetheless continues to provide extensive support to the YPG in order to secure victories in the fight against ISIS. The YPG achieved major territorial gains against ISIS in northern Syria throughout 2015 with the assistance of [close air support](#) provided by the U.S.-led anti-ISIS coalition. PKK members directly participated in many of these operations. The PKK provided at least [800 fighters](#) from Turkey, Iraq, Syria, and Iran to bolster Kurdish forces in the four-month-long siege of Kobani (Ayn al-Arab) by ISIS. PKK fighters later [intermingled](#) with the YPG to participate in other campaigns by U.S.-backed Kurdish forces across northern Syria.

This cooperation also extends into northern Iraq, to which the YPG has deployed reinforcements. The Kurdish-led operation which recaptured Sinjar on November 12, 2015 underscored

KEY ACRONYMS

PKK: Kurdistan Workers’ Party – Left-wing Kurdish militant organization based in Turkey.

KRG: Kurdistan Regional Government – Official ruling body of Iraqi Kurdistan.

KDP: Kurdistan Democratic Party – Current ruling party of the KRG, led by Masoud Barzani.

PUK: Patriotic Union of Kurdistan – Political rival of the KDP, led by Jalal Talabani.

DIBs: Disputed Internal Boundaries – Territories within Iraq generally along the border of the Iraqi Kurdish region over which the KRG and the central government seek administrative control.

PYD: Democratic Union Party – Dominant Syrian Kurdish political party.

YPG: People’s Protection Units – Armed wing of the PYD.

the interoperability of the YPG and the PKK. Iraqi Kurdish Peshmerga affiliated with the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), the largest party in the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), constituted the bulk of the forces involved in the offensive to regain Sinjar. The KDP is hostile to the presence of both YPG and PKK in northern Iraq. Both groups nonetheless played a leading role in advances against ISIS-held villages west of Sinjar. [Local media](#) indicated that the YPG and the PKK conducted joint operations to secure the region, with flags displaying the symbols of both groups as well as the face of PKK founder Abdullah Ocalan flying side-by-side. This cooperation in northern Iraq was not a recent phenomenon. YPG and PKK fighters worked together to evacuate Yazidi civilians from Mount Sinjar when ISIS captured the district in August 2014.



(Left Photo) YPG fighters [carrying flags](#) bearing the YPG standard as well as the face of imprisoned PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan through the streets of Qamishli, Syria in January 2013. (Right Photo) A still from a [November 19 Vice News documentary](#) shows a YPG flag and a local Yazidi Sinjar Resistance (YBS) Units flag flying alongside a flag emblazoned with an image of PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan (right). The YBS is an offshoot of the PKK that was [trained by and operates alongside the YPG](#). The image is shown during an interview with a PKK fighter in Sinjar.



YPG (left) and PKK (right) flags *flying side-by-side* during the Sinjar operation.

PITFALL #2: KURDISH EXPANSION INTO ARAB AREAS PROVOKES ETHNIC TENSION IN SYRIA AND IRAQ.

The empowerment of the Kurds at the expense of local Arab populations risks laying the groundwork for future ethnic conflict in both Iraq and Syria. Kurdish forces have advanced into disputed regions in northern Iraq and Arab-majority regions in northern Syria with the support of the U.S.-led anti-ISIS coalition. These gains provided fuel to long-standing grievances between Kurds and Arabs. The Syrian Kurdish YPG has allegedly conducted a [systemic campaign](#) of forced displacement and home demolition against Arab villages in northern ar-Raqqa Province. Iraqi Kurdish security forces have similarly [confined](#) large numbers of Arab civilians to so-called “security zones” in order to prevent them from returning to their homes. The mistrust and hostility towards the Kurds among Sunni Arabs is reflected in the attitudes of Syrian opposition groups towards the YPG. Most opposition factions remain unwilling to partner with Syrian Kurds. Fifteen prominent opposition groups released a joint statement in June 2015 [condemning](#) the YPG for the [alleged ethnic cleansing](#) of Arab villages.

Sunni Arab opposition groups that constitute potential U.S. partners may increasingly align against the YPG and by extension the U.S.-led anti-ISIS coalition in favor of radical groups. The YPG has clashed with Sunni groups in Syria, including both U.S.-backed opposition groups as well as hardline Islamist groups. Several of the most radical opposition factions, including Syrian al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra (JN) and powerful Islamist group Ahrar al-Sham, have engaged in active hostilities against the YPG. Jabhat al-Nusra, Ahrar al-Sham, and other opposition factions – including U.S.-backed [TOW anti-tank missile recipient groups](#) – began [clashing](#) with the YPG and allied opposition factions in the

U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in northern Aleppo Province in November 2015. Free Syrian Army (FSA)-affiliated opposition forces later released a statement in January 2016 calling upon opposition groups to [mobilize](#) against both ISIS and the SDF in order to [protect key supply lines](#) north of Aleppo City. U.S.-backed Arab opposition fighters joining radical groups to fight against the U.S.-backed YPG underscores the complexities of providing continued support to Syrian Kurds during their advances into Arab territories.

The potential long-term consequences of continued Kurdish expansion can be witnessed in the aftermath of the Kurdish-



A Kurdish soldier carrying looted goods in Sinjar, Iraq. The house behind the soldier bears writing marking it as a [Sunni-owned building](#).

led offensive to recapture Sinjar in northern Iraq. The seizure of the disputed town by Kurdish forces soon transitioned into the [looting of Sunni Arab homes](#) and reignited historic political divisions. Both the PKK and the leading Iraqi Kurdish political parties have expressed no interest in returning Sinjar to Baghdad despite attempts by Iraqi Prime Minister Haidar al-Abadi to exert federal control over the region. Leaders from the [KDP](#) and the rival [Patriotic Union of Kurdistan](#) (PUK) proposed the official integration of Sinjar into Iraqi Kurdistan as a province, while the PKK proposed establishing Sinjar as an independent [Yazidi-controlled canton](#). Iraqi Kurds may ultimately intend to annex mixed-demographic territory along the Disputed Internal Boundaries (DIBs) in Iraq into their own region without deference to Baghdad or the Iraqi Constitution.

Kurdish posturing in Iraq has generated increasingly aggressive reactions from Sunni Arabs. Iraqi Sunni officials have raised their concerns over the situation in Sinjar even while expressing gratitude to the Kurdish Peshmerga. The Sunni Arab governor of Ninewa Province requested the preservation of order and urged unspecified “parties” against [occupying government buildings](#) in statements on November 21, 2015. Other Sunni politicians have been less restrained. An Iraqi Council of Representatives member from the Sunni Etihad bloc accused Yazidi forces affiliated with the KDP of

[destroying homes and mosques](#) in Sinjar, while an Arab tribal leader accused Yazidi fighters of kidnapping local Arabs.

These ethnic tensions do not remain exclusive to Arabs and Kurds. The expansion of Kurdish-held terrain has also provoked long-standing tensions with ethnic Turkmen in eastern Salah al-Din Province. PUK-affiliated Peshmerga engaged in a [major confrontation](#) with Turkmen ‘Popular Mobilization’ fighters in the town of Tuz Khurmato east of Tikrit on November 12. The clashes included Shi’a Turkmen members of the [Badr Organization](#), an Iranian-backed Iraqi Shi’a militia. The fighting resulted in the [destruction of large numbers of homes and shops](#) as well as the [mutual](#)



A still from an *Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq* (AAH is an Iranian-backed Iraqi Shi'a militia) media outlet video showing an [AAH convoy](#) entering Tuz Khurmato, ostensibly to protect local Turkmen from the Peshmerga.

[kidnapping of hostages](#). Prominent officials from all parties – including [Iranian proxy militias](#), [the Iraqi government](#), and [Iran](#) – ultimately deployed political delegations and military forces to the region to reestablish calm. The ceasefire between the Peshmerga and Turkmen fighters remains tenuous at best, as both groups persistently accuse the other of violating the peace while the town continues to experience low-intensity clashing. The outburst of violence nevertheless reflected the culmination of persistent low-level skirmishes in Tuz Khurmato which began as soon as the Kurdish Peshmerga secured the town following the withdrawal of the Iraqi Army in June 2014.

MITIGATIONS

The current U.S. strategy in Iraq and Syria favors short-term tactical gains against ISIS over long-term regional stability that could make ISIS's defeat lasting. Continued Kurdish advances will alienate the Sunni Arab populations that would otherwise support and sustain anti-ISIS operations in their territory. The U.S. risks undermining cooperation with key

regional partners, including the governments of Turkey and Iraq, through its pursuit of a campaign in which Kurds constitute the primary ground force. A shortfall in Sunni popular support will eliminate any prospect of establishing a viable holding force capable of preventing the reemergence of ISIS or a similar jihadist organization over the long-term. These complications will come to the forefront in any future operation to recapture ISIS strongholds of ar-Raqqa City in Syria and Mosul in Iraq, which will likely involve heavy participation by Kurdish forces. Syrian Sunni Arab forces and Turkey view Kurdish participation in the recapture of ar-Raqqa City as unacceptable, while Sunni Arabs in Iraq will contest any attempt by the Kurdish Peshmerga to play a leading role in the fight for Mosul.

The ideal course of action to overcome these risks would be for the U.S. to develop credible local Sunni Arab alternatives to the Kurds in both Iraq and Syria. The U.S. would prioritize and resource its efforts to transform Sunni Arab fighters from local tribes or opposition factions into new partners in the fight against ISIS. In Syria, this effort would involve expanded programs to incorporate greater numbers of Sunni Arab opposition groups into the SDF and wean these forces from dependence on Kurdish intermediaries for logistical support. In Iraq, the U.S. would work to establish Sunni Arab partners in northern Iraq capable of independently securing and holding territory against ISIS. The U.S. could pursue the establishment of a new train-and-equip mission across the border in northeastern Syria or Turkey in order to overcome the political difficulties of training vetted Sunni Arab tribal fighters at current sites in Iraq near Baghdad and Arbil. These units would serve as a counterweight to existing Kurdish forces and provide the U.S. with additional options to achieve its security objectives without incurring backlash from local populations or regional governments.

The development of new Sunni Arab ground partners nonetheless remains impractical in terms of resources, time, and political capital. The U.S. will ultimately continue to partner with Kurds in both Iraq and Syria as the most effective available ground force in the fight against ISIS. The U.S. must thus prioritize efforts to mitigate the consequences of its continued overreliance on Kurdish forces and minimize the risk of future ethnic conflict. The ongoing military support provided to the Kurds in the anti-ISIS campaign gives the U.S. a significant amount of unactualized leverage over the actions of Kurdish forces. The U.S. also wields significant influence due to its unique ability to garner political support for the Kurds and their interests within the international community. The U.S. should use these levers to channel its cooperation with Kurdish forces towards a narrow-

ly-defined set of objectives in the anti-ISIS campaign while limiting activities that antagonize other potential partners.

The U.S. faces an immediate challenge to the long-term stability of its counter-ISIS campaign in Syria. The Kurdish-led SDF [crossed the Euphrates River](#) on December 28 after seizing the ISIS-held Tishreen Dam. Arab opposition factions within the SDF later [announced an offensive](#) against the nearby ISIS-held crossroads town of Manbij on January 6. The advances threaten to provoke a military response from Turkey, which previously declared that any attempt to cross the Euphrates River by the Syrian Kurdish YPG would constitute a 'red line'. Turkey holds strong security concerns regarding the potential formation of a PKK-friendly autonomous zone controlled by the Syrian Kurdish YPG along its southern border. The U.S. nonetheless maintains an interest in enabling the SDF to seize Manbij and thereby sever the ISIS stronghold of ar-Raqqa City from its last remaining access to the Syrian-Turkish border. The U.S. should thus set firm limits on the acceptable bounds of Kurdish advances in Aleppo Province by withholding air support from any offensive operations north of Manbij. This decision would allow the U.S. to achieve its strategic objective to deny ISIS its supply lines across the Syrian-Turkish border while preserving a status quo on the ground that remains below the threshold for Turkish retaliation.

The U.S. must act to mitigate the effects of ongoing clashes between the SDF and local opposition factions opposed to further Kurdish expansion in northern Syria, particularly in the isolated Afrin Canton in northwestern Aleppo Province. These persistent tensions deter potential Syrian Arab partners from deepening their cooperation with the U.S.-led anti-ISIS coalition. The U.S. must incentivize the YPG and its allies to refrain from future harassment of supply lines and other key opposition-held territory east of Afrin Canton in order to moderate these negative consequences. The U.S. must also dissuade Syrian Kurds from taking additional action to secure their strategic objective of linking Afrin Canton to the remainder of YPG-held territory – an effort guaranteed to provoke both Turkey and the Syrian opposition. As leverage, the U.S. could offer conditional military support in the form of U.S. Special Operations Forces trainers, defensive airstrikes, or heavy weapons for the YPG to defend Afrin Canton. The U.S. could also offer to use its political weight to reverse the exclusion of the Syrian Kurds from a position at the Geneva Talks to end the Syrian Civil War. This would provide Syrian Kurds with an alternative avenue to achieve their core objectives through diplomatic means rather than conquest. They could be sufficient to halt SDF and YPG raids into opposition-held territory and efforts to link the Kurdish cantons.

The U.S. retains greater flexibility in its ability to shape the activity of the Kurdish Peshmerga in Iraq due to their historically close relationship and the fact that the Peshmerga are less inclined to expand territorially than their Syrian counterparts. The Peshmerga are not currently positioned to recapture critical territory from ISIS that would achieve an immediate battlefield effect. The U.S. also maintains a close partnership with the Iraqi Security Forces as an alternative partner in the fight against ISIS. The U.S. can thus afford to impose strong conditions upon its continued support to the Iraqi Kurds in order to guarantee its long-term objectives for stability in Iraq. The U.S. could expand its presence in Iraqi Kurdistan through forward bases or embedded combat advisors in order to prevent counterproductive or harmful behavior by the Iraqi Peshmerga and allied militia groups. The U.S. should reaffirm its opposition to any drive towards an independent Iraqi Kurdistan and instead push the KRG towards a political agreement with Baghdad. The U.S. must insist upon and as soon as possible facilitate the return of internally-displaced persons to their homes in Peshmerga-held regions, limiting the alienation of local Sunni Arab populations. These courses of action could be incentivized through conditional offers of financial assistance to the cash-strapped governments in both Baghdad and Arbil. The U.S. could also place conditions on its military support to the Iraqi Kurds to secure KRG commitments on these issues if necessary.

The U.S. will inevitably generate resistance from Turkey, Iraq, and local Sunni Arab populations through its support for continued Kurdish advances, no matter how limited. These grievances risk laying the groundwork for future conflict between Arabs, Kurds, and Turks over their [envisioned endstates](#) of the anti-ISIS campaign. U.S. policymakers must recognize these risks and work to mitigate their effects to the greatest extent possible despite the reality that Kurdish forces constitute some of the only viable ground partners in Iraq and Syria. The U.S. retains some options to constrain these tensions before they evolve into dangerous new forms of regional instability. The failure to consider these consequences will serve only to set the stage for a new round of conflict in the Middle East.

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