

Handout:
Kurds & the Conflict in Syria



Background

The Kurdish fight for a land of their own goes back centuries. The immediate roots of the current conflict date to 2011, when multiple forces in Syria rebelled against the autocratic rule of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. In 2012, Syrian Kurds (the country's largest ethnic minority) formed their own small self-governed area in northern Syria.

In 2014, at the same time as a bloody civil war was raging in Syria, the group ISIS began taking over territory in Iraq and Syria in its attempt to create a fundamentalist Islamic state. The Kurds joined the fight against ISIS and became an essential partner in the U.S.-led coalition battling ISIS. As the Kurds captured ISIS-held territory, suffering enormous casualties, they incorporated the area into their self-rule.

Turkey is home to the largest population of Kurds in the world—about 12 million. The Kurdish minority has faced severe repression in Turkey, including the banning of the Kurdish language in speech, publishing, and even song. Even the words “Kurd” and “Kurdish” were banned. The fight for civil and political rights combined with a push for an independent state and erupted into an armed rebellion in the 1980s. The response from the Turkish state and military has been overwhelming and lethal. Tens of thousands of Kurds have been killed in a lopsided on-again off-again war.

The self-governed Kurdish areas in Northern Syria came together in 2014 to form an autonomous region with a decentralized democratic government. Rojava, as it is commonly called by Kurds, has de facto independence, but is not recognized as a nation by any other countries. Rojava is organized under loosely defined libertarian socialist ideals—emphasizing local control, individual liberty, and especially the equality of women and men. All institutions are run by a man and a woman, and women are well-represented in the army and a separate women's militia. Women's equality has been introduced into economic and social relations as well.

Turkey has confronted the semi-autonomous Kurdish state on their southern border. The Turkish government has viewed the Kurdish-controlled area as a potential safe haven for the Turkish Kurds and as a launching area for attacks across the border into contemporary Turkey. Ever since the establishment of Kurdish control, Turkey has threatened to attack the Kurdish-controlled parts of Syria and establish a “buffer zone” under Turkish control which would exclude Kurds. With the Syrian Army weakened by its civil war, the only obstacle to a Turkish invasion was the presence of American troops in the area.

Those U.S. troops, numbering around one thousand, had grown close to their Kurdish allies in the fight against ISIS. The Kurdish troops had proven themselves effective and determined combatants in the fierce fighting. The Kurds played a key role in recapturing vast territory from ISIS—and lost over ten thousand soldiers in the process.

President Trump's decision to abandon the Kurds was unpopular among the American troops as well as among many elected officials from both major political parties. It was also unpopular among Pentagon and State Department officials who were willing to speak out.

Trump defended his actions by insisting that the United States has no vital role in the region. He tweeted:

I held off this fight for almost 3 years, but it is time for us to get out of these ridiculous Endless Wars, many of them tribal, and bring our soldiers home. WE WILL FIGHT WHERE IT IS TO OUR BENEFIT, AND ONLY FIGHT TO WIN. Turkey, Europe, Syria, Iran, Iraq, Russia and the Kurds will now have to figure the situation out...

Anyone who wants to assist Syria in protecting the Kurds is good with me, whether it is Russia, China, or Napoleon Bonaparte.

"[O]ur soldiers are not in harm's way, as they shouldn't be, as two countries fight over land that has nothing to do with us. And the Kurds are much safer right now. But the Kurds know how to fight, and as I said, they're not angels. They're not angels. ...

U.S. foreign policy officials strongly opposed Trump's sudden move for several reasons:

- In order to maintain its influence around the world, the U.S. depends on its allies. If those allies cannot count on a reciprocal loyalty, America is at a disadvantage in future conflicts.
- U.S. foreign policy also strives to maintain stability. President Trump has established a personal foreign policy that is often at odds with longstanding traditions. Trump's policies include friendliness with a number of foreign dictators, discord with friendly countries, and disruptive trade wars, all with little or no consultation with State Department experts. The sudden disengagement from Syria was one more example of his ignoring the advice of his military and diplomatic advisors.
- As a result of Kurds' military successes in battle, they had captured thousands of ISIS fighters. The Turkish attack might result in the freeing of these prisoners still considered dangerous to the US and Europe. (It is reported that some ISIS prisoners have escaped.)
- Leaving Syria would leave a power vacuum in its wake. Powers that the U.S. sees as adversarial were likely to take advantage of the opening.

The Turkish Invasion

The consequences of the American withdrawal were immediate. The Turkish invasion began soon after the October 6 phone call between Trump and Erdoğan. Within days, tens of thousands of civilian refugees began fleeing the aerial bombardment and ground attacks. Turkey, with one of the largest militaries in the world, has the overwhelming military advantage.

On October 13, it became clear that the Kurds had been forced to make a deal with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad in order to withstand the Turkish assault. Syrian troops began entering cities and towns controlled by the Kurds. In addition, Russian military police were patrolling areas along the border. (The Russian government has been allied with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.) This not only hampers the Turkish offensive, but deals a blow to U.S. influence in the extremely volatile area. Assad's allies, Russia and Iran, are eager to extend their own influence as the Americans bow out.

President Trump's controversial withdrawal has had domestic consequences as well. The combined humanitarian crisis and foreign policy debacle has drawn condemnation not only from Democrats, but from Trump's supporters in Congress, the media, and even the evangelical community. Trump responded with warnings to Turkey's Erdoğan and threatened financial sanctions against some Turkish leaders. On October 16, 2019, the U.S. House of Representatives voted overwhelmingly to rebuke Trump's actions.

While the details of the deal the Kurds were forced to make with the Syrian regime are not public, as of this writing, it's clear that the brief period of Kurdish autonomy is likely over. They were forced to ask the Syrian regime to help defend them against the Turkish attack, and to allow the Syrian army into the territory they controlled. As Mazloum Abdi, the Commander-in-Chief of the Kurdish army put it, "If we have to choose between compromise and genocide, we will choose our people."

Discussion

1. What questions do you have about the reading? How might they be answered?
2. President Trump's "America First" foreign policies have led him to suggest withdrawing American troops from Afghanistan, South Korea, Europe, and now Syria. Do you agree with this view of the world?
3. Progressives and anti-war activists have also advocated an end to the U.S. role of policing the world. Is there a difference? Why or why not?
4. There are about 28 million Kurds spread among Turkey, Iraq, Syria, Armenia, and Iran. There are ideologically different Kurdish parties in each country. Should they be allowed to form their own country? Why or why not? How might this happen?
5. The conflict in Syria is complicated by the presence of other countries: United States, Russia and Turkey. How do you imagine the current crisis could be solved? How could it be solved without the use of force?
6. Given the many conflicts in the world, how can a wealthy, powerful country like the United States be a good global citizen and promote peace without entering into the conflict itself?