

THE SECOND “ARAB BELT” IN SYRIA IN THE MAKING?

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Abstract: The war in Syria has reached a new phase, which has turned international focus towards the Kurdish minority and its ambitions to autonomously govern the Kurdish populated areas of Syria. The Kurdish empowerment and the rise of the PYD (Democratic Union Party), closely related to the PKK (Kurdistan Workers’ Party), in the fight against the self-proclaimed Islamic State has resulted in the counter-mobilisation by Damascus and Ankara, the latter of which, in addition to its military incursion, is pushing to relocate millions of Syrian war refugees who have found shelter on Turkish soil back to Syria, more specifically to the envisioned “safe zone” in the border regions. Could this be a revival of the so-called Arab Belt plan of the 1960s and 70s, which aimed at dividing the Kurdish communities in the region?

Keywords: Syria, Kurds, Turkey, PKK, PYD, YPG, Arab Belt, demographic engineering

1. Introduction

The dust is settling after the beginning of yet another phase in the Syrian conflict which brought along entirely new dynamics – the announcement of US President Trump’s administration to withdraw US troops from Syria. The following Turkish invasion of parts of North Syria with the US and Russia’s blessing seems to be leaving the Kurdish community with only a weak leverage in Syria, causing a bitter outcry and accusations of betrayal. Yet, opinions are widely polarized on the Rojava issue (as it is referred to among the Kurds) in the first place: some find it a rightful claim for the Kurdish groups as a step towards independence or at least full autonomy, while others argue that Syrian territorial integrity should by no means be undermined and the area controlled by the Kurdish forces directly connected to the PKK (Kurdistan Workers’ Party), with the help of the United States, far exceeds the territories historically populated by the Kurds. Now that the focus of the war has turned to the east of the Euphrates, it is clear that the Kurdish expansion and unification has resulted in counter-mobilisation,

including a plan by the Turkish government to populate border regions with millions of Arab refugees.

The history of the region on the east bank of the Euphrates has seen demographic engineering before and its recent past proves that it is a territory bound to be disputed, regardless of the fact that it has been a part of the territory today known as the Syrian Arab Republic since the French Mandatory period after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire.

However, in the current war that began in 2011, the opposing regimes in Turkey and Syria might find themselves sharing a common interest when it comes to the idea of forcefully inhabiting the regions in northern Syria with Arab refugees who found refuge in Turkey. Is there a new attempt to revive an old plan known in the region historically as the Arab Belt?

This article will take a look at the region's past, which is tightly connected to the current geopolitical situation, and consider some of the central questions that have triggered the recent military activities on the ground. Firstly, who are the Kurdish groups targeted on the ground and, secondly, what is the reason behind Turkey's recent intervention in Syria? This article will also draw the reader's attention to the parallel from the past: the fact that, in the recent high tide of Kurdish political and military empowerment in Syria, it might be in the short term interest of Ankara and Damascus to repopulate the northern areas of Syria with the war refugees, as was first done in the 1960s. The first attempt at demographic engineering called the Arab Belt, as this article will show, gave no consideration to human rights; and should it ever materialize again, will once again demonstrate the inability of both states to find democratic solutions to the issues concerning their minorities.

2. Historical Background

It has been estimated that the Kurds constitute up to 10% (approximately 2 million people) of the whole population of Syria. Inhabiting mainly the enclaves of the Syrian border regions with Turkey, they are settled in Afrin and Kurd Dagh in the North West, and the Jazira and Qamishli provinces in the North East. The Kurdish population in Syria has, however, different origins. The communities in the North West have inhabited the area for centuries, whereas the Kurds towards the East relocated there from the Turkish territories in two waves: in the 1920s and 1960s. Kurds in the Damascus Kurdish Quarter are descendants of Kurdish soldiers of the Middle Ages, for example, guardians of the pilgrims on their way to Mecca, later recruited by

the *janissaries* (elite fighting forces of the Sultan) during the Ottoman times. Although their tribal formation remained the same, by the time modern Syria was formed, their spoken language had become Arabic and many in the community had been Arabicized. The Kurdish community in Aleppo is mainly from the areas of Afrin and Kurd Dagh. Kurds in Syria are predominantly Sunni and speak mainly Kurmanji, a dialect spoken also in Turkey and Northern areas of Iraqi Kurdistan.¹

Kurdish rifts with other ethnic groups in the region started with the rise of nationalist movements in the Middle East. As the most powerful Kurdish tribes on the soil of modern Syria (just as in Turkey) had been benefitting from the Ottoman system with its patronage and kinship, the rising Arab nationalism and nascent nationalist elites caused concern over the fracturing of the existing power structures. The Kurds, therefore, naturally sided with the powers in Istanbul and later the ITF², passively or actively opposing the Arab revolts and the independence of Syria in 1919³. However, the Ottoman Empire, referred to as the “sick man of Europe”, was doomed to die and, as argued by Hakan Özoğlu, this is the period when Kurdish nationalism spread widely, as evidenced by the Kurmanji-language newspapers that were published and Kurdish societies that were established⁴ alongside the national movements of Turks, Arabs, Assyrians and others in the region. The diversity of the Kurdish identities, in the light of the territorial definition, is also demonstrated by Özoğlu, who shows that the boundaries that define Kurdistan and the perimeters of Kurdish identity have always been in flux, making it hard to establish a reliable link between the modern Kurdish identity and the ancient groups that inhabited Kurdistan.⁵

Five years after World War I ended, the League of Nations gave France a mandate over Syria and Lebanon⁶. The French (similarly to the British

¹ **McDowall, D.** 1996. *A Modern History of the Kurds*. London: I. B. Tauris, pp. 466–467. [McDowall 1996]

² *İttihad ve Terakki Fırkası* (Ottoman Turkish), Committee of Union and Progress, a revolutionary and reformist political movement at the late period of the Ottoman Empire. Please note: I will hence forward refer to the political parties by their names in the original languages and give their translation to English in the footnotes. – *Author’s comment*.

³ In July 1919, the Syrian Congress first passed a resolution on the formation of Syria as an independent constitutional monarchy ruled by King Faysal. – *Author’s comment*.

⁴ **Özoğlu, H.** 2004. *Kurdish Notables and the Ottoman State*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, pp. 35–42.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ The League of Nations assigned France the mandate of Syria and today’s Lebanon in September 1923. – *Author’s comment*.

in Iraq) used and supported the minority groups by arming them when necessary to crush the military strength of populations perceived as a threat to the colonizers' political interests.⁷ The aim of this practice was to divide the groups in the region and divide the larger groups themselves as the recruiting often took place from the various rival factions within the larger identities.

As the newly formed Republic of Turkey emerged with its borders defined by the Lausanne Treaty in 1923, the Kurdish groups from Anatolia made their way across the border to Jazira, populating the areas with growing numbers of people. The influx grew significantly after the failed Sheikh Said rebellion in Palu (in present-day Elazığ) in 1925⁸, when those who feared Turkish revenge and opposed its secularism fled across the border. The existing Arab community naturally viewed the incomers as competition for land and natural resources. Alongside the Kurds, Armenians and other Christian minorities also left harshly nationalist Turkey, resulting in a region that developed into an ethnically and religiously diverse area, with strong communal and tribal rivalries. Yet, this ethnic and religious diversity also constituted a sort of balance between the communities, none of which at the time could dominate the others. The new borders also created new logistical and trade opportunities because of the railway lines, which created new urban settlements in North Syria. The rather remote region developed a form of local autonomy (or at least lesser domination by the central power), until the Syrian Arab nationalist movement started expressing the ambition to form a governing system that would include the state as a whole. Meanwhile, Kurdish intellectuals put their efforts into converging local Kurdish associations into the Xoybûn⁹, or Be Yourself movement, and in 1928, when the election of the constituent assembly and the drafting of the Syrian constitution took place, the first clearer expressions of Kurdish identity appeared. A petition was formed which demanded that the Kurdish language become one of the official languages of Syria, with usage both in the educational system and in the local governing offices of the three regions inhabited by the Kurds¹⁰.

⁷ **Bou-Nacklie, N.** 1993. *Les Troupes Speciales: Religious and Ethnic Recruitment, 1916–46.* – *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 25, No 4, pp. 645–660.

⁸ For further reading, please turn to: **Olson, R.** 1989. *The Emergence of Kurdish Nationalism and the Sheikh Said Rebellion, 1880–1925.* Austin: University of Texas Press. Note that the book is mainly based on British archival materials. – *Author's comment.*

⁹ Xoybûn (full name Xoybûn – Ciwata Serxwebuna Kurd) or Khoyboun translates as Be Yourself movement, which aspired to develop modern Kurdish nationalism.

¹⁰ **McDowall** 1996, p. 468.

These demands were declined – just as the proposal of the constitution was – by the French¹¹. The changes in the power structure brought along new dynamics in the Kurdish populated areas: clashes broke out first between the local groups against the central power, then among each other.

When the French finally fully disengaged from Syria in 1946, the central state under the Arab nationalist government took over and Arabization policies were initiated.¹² Some Kurdish groups in Aleppo readily cooperated with Damascus¹³; however, those in the North East remained unruly, this being somewhat supported by the geographical remoteness and the lack of strategic natural resources. Most notoriously, some of its members developed ties with Israel, whose interest was to weaken the Syrian central state, using cooperation with the members of its minority, a tactic common to the region.¹⁴ This and paranoia in the state structures of Kurds aligning with Western Powers became the reason for the growing Syrian distrust towards the Kurds in Jazira and caused an active opposition to the idea that the Syrian military should have high-ranking officers with a Kurdish background.

Overall, the idea of pan-Arabism and the idea of a homogenized population evolved into various suppressive methods against the minorities and envisioned no special place for them in the political system. In the 1950s, the repressions against the Kurds in Syria started. As a response, some Kurdish groups activated politically and the PDK-S¹⁵ was created, which at first cooperated with the PDK¹⁶ in Iraq. Later, however, as the splits between Barzani and Talabani clans in the Kurdish Region of Iraq took place, the PDK-S also fractioned into different competing parties similarly to Iraq,

¹¹ The Constituent Assembly elected in spring 1928 included the pro-independence National Bloc and proposed the project of a new constitution, but since they insisted on including articles that undermined French mandatory interests, the Assembly was annulled a few months later. – *Author's comment*.

¹² **Tejel, J.** 2008. Syria's Kurds: History, Politics and Society. New York, NY: Routledge Advances in Middle East and Islamic Studies, pp. 47–52. [**Tejel** 2008]

¹³ **McDowall** 1996, p. 471.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 471.

¹⁵ *Partiya Demokrat a Kurdistanê li Sûriyê* (Kurmanji language), Kurdish Democratic Party of Syria, founded in 1956, headquartered in Amuda, al Hasakah Governate, represented the rights of Kurds, demanded their inclusion in the governing of Syria, cultural rights and inclusive rule from Damascus, opposed the creation of the United Arab Republic. – *Author's comment*.

¹⁶ *Partiya Demokrat a Kurdistanê* (Kurmanji language), Kurdish Democratic Party in Iraq, founded in 1946 by Mustafa Barzani in Iran, in the short lived Republic of Mahabad, with the support of the Soviet Union. – *Author's comment*.

which were unable to unite. It is worth noting that while Arab nationalism prevailed in both Iraq and Syria, communism found fertile ground among the Kurds.¹⁷ Meanwhile, the Jazira region also became an increasingly attractive destination for the unemployed Kurds from Turkey who preferred to work in the agricultural sector but had become jobless due to the modernization efforts and increasing mechanization of the agricultural sector in Turkey in the 1950s and the 1960s. Damascus viewed the influx of tens of thousands of "new" Kurds to its territories with great suspicion.

The view that the Kurds in Iraq who were voicing national sentiments and rebelling against the central state¹⁸ were traitors that willingly cooperated with foreign powers against the central government – coupled with the Arab Nationalist Ba'ath party's seizure of power in 1963¹⁹ – resulted in a number of repressive plans such as the displacement of Kurds, expulsion of those originating from Turkey, discrimination in the labour market etc.

3. "The Arab Belt": First Attempt

The most significant of the plans to dissolve the mainly Kurdish populated areas in Northern Syria started in the 1960s. It was the plan to create the so-called "Arab Belt" on the border regions with Turkey and Iraq, with the aim of detaching the Kurdish communities that had rather porous borders between the countries they inhabited. The plan called for the displacement of more than a hundred thousand Kurds and their replacement with Arab tribes. The Arab Belt concept was developed into "A Plan to Establish Model State Farms in the Jazira Province" in 1965, which "envisaged the creation of a band 15 kilometres deep over a distance of 280 kilometres along the Turkish border. The plan anticipated the deportation of Kurds who were living in villages falling inside this band to areas in Syria's interior."²⁰

¹⁷ McDowall 1996, p. 472.

¹⁸ Hanso, H.; Özoglu, H. 2017. Creating an Independent Kurdistan: The History of a Hundred-Year-Long Dream. – Maydan, October 19. <https://www.themaydan.com/2017/10/creating-independent-kurdistan-history-hundred-year-long-dream/> (21.11.2019).

¹⁹ Roberts, D. 2013. *The Ba'ath and the Creation of Modern Syria*. London: Routledge, pp. 51–62.

²⁰ Human Rights Watch 2009. *Group Denial: Repression of Kurdish Political and Cultural Rights in Syria*. https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/syrial109webwcover_0.pdf (22.11.2019).

Lands were taken away from the Kurds who could not prove their citizenship and approximately 4000 Arab families were relocated to the region to run the “modern state farms” project. To de-homogenize the population, between every few Kurdish villages, an Arab village was built. As a reminder that some individual Kurds had cooperated with Israel, the new Arab villages were named after villages taken over from Palestinians by Israel²¹. Although the Arab Belt plan never fully materialized, thousands of Kurdish villagers were dislocated to the South regardless and the lands that were subsequently inhabited by the Arab families were never freed. Demographic engineering continued under President Hafez al-Assad in the 1970s, although the Kurdish national consciousness had formed, but did not clearly formulate separatist ideas.

The relationship between the Kurds and Arabs settled in the region and the central power remained suspicious and unconstructive, resulting in other highly oppressive practices and discrimination. Hundreds of thousands of Kurds remained or became stateless as they were stripped of their citizenship.²² Having no documents which could prove their belonging limited, therefore, any access to public services and also made it seem that the number of the Arabs in the region was more sizable. Kurdish regions were left out of the land reform, celebration of Kurdish festivities like Nowruz was prohibited, and any mention of the Kurdish population was removed from the school books. Speaking Kurdish in public or teaching in Kurdish languages at school was not allowed, although other minorities in the area, like Armenians and Assyrians, could do so. Regardless of all that, the Kurdish groups remained polarized politically. Furthermore, the deep dependency created by the state through its discriminatory methods, such as employment practices that excluded Kurds, encouraged many Kurdish men to choose the Syrian military as their career option. They became, thereby, loyal to the regime; for example, those in the Presidential Guard were commanded by the President directly. Those recruited to the special units played a significant part in the violent crushing of the Sunni Revolt in the 1980s in Aleppo and Hama, further deepening distrust with the Sunni Arab communities. Some Kurdish representatives made it to the Syrian Parliament, belonging to the Syrian

²¹ **Aktan, İ.** 2019. Seda Altuğ: Türkiye, Hafız Esad’ın Arap kemerini genişletiyor. – *Gazete Duvar*, October 17. <https://www.gazeteduvar.com.tr/yazarlar/2019/10/27/seda-altug-turkiye-hafiz-esadin-arap-kemerini-genisletiyor/> (19.11.2019). [Aktan 2019]

²² **Baczko, A.; Dorrnsoro, G.; Quesnay, A.** 2018. *Civil War in Syria: Mobilization and Competing Social Orders*. Cambridge University Press, p. 59.

Communist Party, as the Ba'ath Party did not allow any expression of ethnic identity.

By the 1990s, at least 15 Kurdish political parties existed and they experienced constant schisms and re-unifications. Many of them represented local families or villages, not being able to achieve a broader support base or pose a serious competition to the Syrian authorities.²³

The 1990s was also a period when the Syrian government invited the PKK²⁴ to legitimately operate in Syria. Its leadership escaped from Turkey to Syria as a consequence of the *coup d'état* in 1980 when the Turkish authorities began actively fighting any sort of illicit networks. Undoubtedly, it was the Syrian regime that empowered the PKK by offering its fighters training amenities in Beqaa Valley in Lebanon, having given the organization permission to open offices in a number of cities and regions in Syria including Damascus, Afrin, al Hasakah and other cities in Jazira. With this it had two main goals: on the one hand, to monitor local Kurdish political parties in Syria, and on the other hand, to weaken and destabilize Turkey.

The PKK recruited thousands of fighters under the condition they operate outside Syria, with its leader, Abdullah Öcalan claiming in return that no Kurdistan existed in Syria, that the Syrian Kurds were refugees from Turkey and that they should return to Turkey one day²⁵, causing anger among those Kurds who had been residing in the area for generations by then. The PKK acted upon the opportunity intentionally provided by the Syrian regime and claimed to speak on behalf of the Kurdish community in Syria, which was not welcomed by all Kurds by the 1990s. Yet, it was only in 1998 when its leader, Abdullah Öcalan, was expelled from Syria and subsequently captured in Kenya in 1999 by Turkey, that the al Assad regime, under pressure, turned against the movement and arrested hundreds of its militants, significantly weakening the organization.

²³ McDowall 1996, p. 478.

²⁴ *Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê* (Kurmanji) Kurdistan Workers' Party, a militant political organisation, defined as a terrorist organisation by Turkey, the U.S. and the European Union. – *Author's comment*.

²⁵ Hosheng, O. 2015. The PKK-Assad regime story: harmony, discord and Ocalan. – Now, April 10. <http://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/commentary/565108-the-pkk-assad-regime-story-harmony-discord-and-ocalan> (24.11.2019).

The PKK resumed its activities under a new name, the PYD,²⁶ in 2003²⁷ and adopted its cult of Öcalan and his ideology.

The region saw spontaneous demonstrations (like in Qamishli) in the beginning of the millennium and demands by the Kurds for the recognition of their rights in the following year. Once again, those demands did not resonate with the Arab population and the demonstrations were brutally suppressed by Damascus. In the 2000s, the “Red Card” system was established, and Kurds with the *ajnabi*²⁸ status were formalized. They were denied the right to vote, own property, have a Syrian passport or manage businesses. However, political mobilization remained unsuccessful, partly due to the fact that the areas inhabited by Kurds remained inconsistent, which crippled the political cooperation. Allies in Iraq remained passive and pockets of Kurdish inhabited regions in Afrin, Kobanî, and Jazira were comparatively small, compared to the whole population, and located distantly. As mentioned before, Kurdish districts in Damascus and Aleppo were contained by the surrounding Arab communities.

This brief overview demonstrated how the regions east of the Euphrates became populated by the Kurds, and why and how the Syrian state with its exclusive Arab ethnocentrism and nationalism intended to “divide and rule” the Kurdish communities that had already been divided by the state borders, by implementing repressive methods, such as the Arab Belt plan. In addition to this, it described the rise of the PKK in Syria and its transformation into the PYD.

4. Daesh Onwards

As the previous section described, the Kurds mainly located in Afrin and the Jazira region of the Syrian Arab Republic are those with the strongest expressions of ethnic identity. Although arguably living under somewhat freer conditions than their kin in Turkey or Iran²⁹, they were for decades indeed a community in Syria with severely suppressed freedoms. However, a whole new dynamic was created in the region following the Arab uprisings that started in 2010 and reached Syria in 2011.

²⁶ *Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat* (Kurmanji), The Democratic Union Party, the Kurdish democratic confederalist political party. – *Author’s comment*.

²⁷ **Tejel** 2008, p. 79.

²⁸ Foreign, alien (in Arabic). – *Author’s comment*.

²⁹ **McDowall** 1996, p. 476.

Although the region had been under the tight fist of both Hafez and Bashar al Assad³⁰, the latter, in the fight for his regime's survival, was forced to withdraw from the North and South of Syria in 2012 in order to consolidate forces to protect Damascus. Bashar al Assad had also attempted to reconcile with the Kurds in the area the previous year, offering to reinstate their citizenship, which was, in the light of the revolutionary atmosphere, declined the Kurdish representatives³¹. In the summer of 2012, the PYD acted resolutely and claimed control over mainly Kurdish populated pockets of Syria: Afrin, Kobanî and Jazira. As the Syrian conflict turned into a bloody war with tens of stakeholders, a significant power vacuum in the region appeared, leaving the Kurdish and Christian minorities to face *Daesh*³², which was expanding its territories with fierce force. In 2015 Russia entered the Syrian conflict with boots on the ground, seemingly with the aim of backing the fight against terrorism, in reality aiming to aid the al Assad regime to sustain its power. In parallel, the US stepped up its fight against terrorism in late 2015.

The US initially cooperated with the Free Syrian Army, then chose the Kurdish groups³³, more precisely the military wing of the umbrella organisation Syrian Democratic Forces (officially established in 2015), in essence the YPG,³⁴ as its ally on the ground. The YPG consists mainly of ethnic Kurds (but also some foreign fighters and some Syrian Arabs and Assyrians) and was first formed in 2004, under the PYD.

³⁰ Hafez al Assad served as the President of Syria from 1971 to 2000, his son Bashar al-Assad has been serving as President since 2000. – *Author's comment.*

³¹ **Syria to Grant Citizenship to Some of its Stateless Kurds.** 2011. – Alliance for Kurdish Rights, April 07. <https://kurdishrights.org/2011/04/07/syria-to-grant-citizenship-to-some-of-its-stateless-kurds/> (22.11.2019).

³² Widely used demeaning name for the self-claimed Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, ISIS. – *Author's comment.*

³³ **A look at US involvement in Syria's civil war.** 2018. – The Associated Press, December 19. <https://www.militarytimes.com/news/your-military/2018/12/19/a-look-at-us-involvement-in-syrias-civil-war/> (18.11.2019).

³⁴ *Yekîneyên Parastina Gel* (Kurmanji), The People's Protection Units, was formed when the PYD and Encûmena Nîştîmanî ya Kurdî li Sûriyê (ENKS) or the Kurdish National Council established the Kurdish Supreme Committee. Their combined militias became the YPG in 2011, which initially aimed at protecting the Kurdish dominated areas, but became an offensive power in 2012 when the radical groups affiliated with the al Nusra Front and al-Qaeda advanced to Ras al-Ayn. – *Author's comment.*

With the support of the USA and its allies, the YPG developed into a considerable “archetypal guerrilla army.”³⁵ Its size is estimated to be above 70,000 troops³⁶ and in recent years, supported by US training, supplies and Air Force, it has won decisive battles over radical groups such as the *Daesh*, for example breaking the almost five-month siege of Kobanî, overtaking Tel Abyad and recapturing ar-Raqa³⁷, the capital of the self-proclaimed caliphate.

Overall, the political hegemony rapidly achieved by the PYD³⁸ – grounded in the organisational skills honed in the framework of the PKK – coupled with the military and moral empowerment of its military wing YPG and supported by the cheering of the West, in turn, drove the Kurds towards their aspirations of autonomy. In 2014, after establishing the “Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria” in Western Kurdistan or the Rojava, they claimed to be no longer governed by the Syrian regime and adopted the Rojava Constitution. Subsequently, the PYD began to collect taxes from the local residents, established a welfare system, set up the educational system, the judiciary and other institutions. What is more, some of the legislation adopted there has been approved by the central government.³⁹

Turkey has been adamantly objecting to the cooperation between the USA and the PYD, as the latter was formed largely by the former members of the PKK in Syria⁴⁰, being therefore equal to a terror organisation according to Turkey. In the same light, Turkey pushed for the PKK, the PYD and the YPG to be designated as terrorist organisations in the declaration of the Islamic Cooperation Organisation in 2016, fearing the guerrilla fighters of Kurdish origin coming from Turkey who were becoming battle-hardened.

³⁵ **Stephens, M.** 2014. The YPG - the Islamic State’s worst enemy. – Jane’s Defence Weekly, September 12. <https://www.janes.com/article/43030/analysis-ypg-the-islamic-state-s-worst-enemy> (20.11.2019).

³⁶ **PYD.** – Habertürk. <https://www.haberturk.com/kurum/pyd> (22.11.2019).

³⁷ **About the People’s Defense Units (YPG).** – YPG Rojava Official Web Page. <https://www.ypgrojava.org/About-Us> (21.11.2019).

³⁸ **Tezcür, G. M., Yıldız, H.** 2019. Kurdish politics in post-2011 Syria: From fragmentation to hegemony. – Mediterranean Politics, October 25. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13629395.2019.1671677>. (06.12.2019).

³⁹ **Aktan** 2019.

⁴⁰ **Bradley, M. J., Parkinson, J.** 2015. America’s Marxist Allies against ISIS. – The Wall Street Journal, July 24. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/americas-marxist-allies-against-isis-1437747949> (21.11.2019).

5. The "Safe Zone" in Syria or the Revival of the Arab Belt?

The recent history is well known. The Trump administration decided to withdraw US troops from Syria⁴¹. As expected, the power vacuum opened up a new opportunity for Turkey to enter Syria, which had taken the ethnically Kurdish Afrin region under its control in 2018. According to the following Sochi agreement with Russia and Iran in October 2019⁴², border regions with Turkey, reaching roughly the motorway M4 from al-Bab, Syria, to Rabiya on the Iraqi border, would be cleared from the Kurdish fighters. More specifically, the agreement says that the YPG will have to retreat to 30 kilometres from the Turkish border, including removing any sort of weaponry, and the Syrian army will move to the border regions (except Ras al-Ayn/Serêkanî and Tel Abyad).

Until then, the towns and regions of Deir Ez-Zor, Raqqa, Manbij, Tel Rifaat, Ras al-Ayn/Serêkanî, and Tel Abyad have been the responsibility of the SDF, altogether covering a territory of approximately one third of the Syrian territory east of the Euphrates. Although the consequent activities by Russia and Syria seem to have dwarfed the Turkish ambition (the Russian-Turkish combined patrols will start inspecting a distance of 10 kilometres east and west of Turkish-controlled areas) and the outcome is not yet quite clear, the withdrawal of the YPG will significantly diminish any political or administrative power of the Kurds. It is unclear at this stage if they might achieve some form of autonomy or enhanced cultural right in other areas. Regardless of the Turkish objections, the Syrian Government has been in talks with the SDF leaders and time will tell if the SDF will be engaged in the constitution talks in Syria, disregarding the Turkish opposition to the idea.

In this context, Turkey has recently been increasingly active in enforcing the consensus that the liberated area should become a home for millions of Syrian refugees, whose number amounts to approximately 4 million people in Turkey. Its representatives are vowing to build infrastructure such as housing, schools, and hospitals and to enable people to participate in agriculture, simultaneously pushing for the European Union to partly

⁴¹ **The White House** 2019. Remarks by President Trump on the Situation in Northern Syria, Washington D.C. October 23. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-situation-northern-syria/> (27.11.2019).

⁴² **Korsunskaya, D.; Gümrukü, T.** 2019. Russia, Turkey reach deal to remove Kurdish YPG from Syria border. – Reuters, October 22. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-security/russia-turkey-reach-deal-to-remove-kurdish-ypg-from-syria-border-idUSKB-N1X10ZE> (23.11.2019).

finance the project. Needless to say, the plan strongly resembles the 1960–1970s plan of the Arab Belt, this time possibly concerning two groups of people: refugees who feel obviously insecure about returning to Syria⁴³ and the Kurds who already populate the area. Yet, the belt would be in the interest of the Turkish and Syrian governments.

Turkey would rid itself of the population increasingly seen as a burden by the general public. This change of mind towards hosting the “Syrian brothers” can be partly explained by Turkish domestic politics, where nationalism is enflamed and the Syrians are extensively used by the opposition parties to agitate against the ruling AKP⁴⁴. This is part of the reason why the AKP lost its power to the biggest opposition party in Ankara and Istanbul during the 2019 local elections. By the same token, already separated by the border wall, Turkey is pushing to divide the Kurdish communities, making cross-border connections even more difficult.

Syria, on the other hand, would be taking back control of its Northern border, meanwhile having a leverage in the negotiation for the future of the Kurds who have had to live through a bitter disappointment since the backing of the US stopped. Once again, the Syrian regime has control over what kind of rights the Kurdish community will play in the Syrian future. What has changed this time for the Kurds is that they are politically more homogenised and have control over some water and oil sources. Only time will tell what will be the future of the PYD and the Rojava region in the years to come; however, judging by the areas the Syrian regime has managed to re-take, it is rather unlikely that any special rights will be granted to this minority.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, the parallels with the past and current ambitions to populate the Kurdish regions in northern Syria with an Arabic population are striking. European countries who are reluctant to receive those displaced by the wars in the region face a difficult dilemma. One option is to passively observe another massive demographic engineering taking place in the North of Syria. The expulsion of those in need of protection and the rigid handling of their

⁴³ **Hanso, H.** 2018. Syrians Still Kicked Around – Diplomaatia, October 24. <https://icds.ee/syrians-still-kicked-around/> (23.11.2019).

⁴⁴ *Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* (Turkish) Justice and Development Party, a conservative right wing party with Islamist roots in Turkey, led by the President of Turkey, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. – *Author’s comment.*

minorities is a breach of human rights and causes a never-ending circle of violence. This is, however, a threat for the security in the region and against any long-term interest of Europe to have authoritarian states with deep social cleavages surrounding it from the East and South. European governments should use every leverage to cooperate with Turkey so that it would revive negotiations with its own Kurdish population in order to ease tensions. Meanwhile, in order to achieve lasting peace, Turkey would benefit from a political solution enabling more inclusive political participation, including more flexible forms of patriotism than the exclusive Turkishness. Unless this is achieved, and unless the central power of Syria starts engaging in a more inclusive governing, Kurdish regions will remain a disputed territory for the years to come, creating fluctuating alliances and new military conflicts and clashes that will destabilize the region in the future.

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<https://www.ypgrojava.org/About-Us> (21.11.2019).
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