
Never Mind Betrayal: America's Indifference to the Kurds is a Strategic Blunder

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Abstract

Although they have proven themselves to be loyal and capable U.S. partners, America has refused to endorse either independence for Iraqi Kurds or autonomy for Syrian Kurds. That policy has been academically underscored by several Realism-based concepts including an offshore balancing approach to the Middle East. This paper argues that America can adjust to new realities in the region without having to forsake its worthwhile Kurdish partnerships. I first compare and contrast the costs of American support for Kurds and then refute the notion that Kurdish independence in Iraq or autonomy in Syria would cause instability or be nonviable. I then recount recent Kurdish actions that have benefited America and argue that the subsequent U.S. capitulations to Baghdad and Ankara were unnecessary and strategically short-sighted. Lastly, I examine America's relationship with Turkey to discern if it merits impeding U.S. Kurdish policy. This paper concludes that America's endorsement of independence in Iraqi Kurdistan and perpetual autonomy in Northeast Syria would not be merely altruistic, but primarily a realpolitik reassertion of U.S. geopolitical strategy.

Introduction

Despite having their national aspirations long ignored and in-turn being part of the world's largest stateless ethnic group, Iraqi and Syrian Kurds have repeatedly proven themselves as loyal and capable U.S. partners.¹ America's persistent refusal to endorse either independence for Iraqi Kurds or autonomy for those in Syria is not so much a moral conundrum as it is a strategic folly. This policy has been underscored academically by several Realism-based concepts including an offshore balancing approach to the Middle East along with conferring precedence to states over non-state actors.² While they are broadly applicable, these principles have been largely discredited regarding both Iraqi Kurds who have sustained their autonomy since 1992, as well as Syrian Kurds who have done so since 2012. The time has come for the United States to openly endorse independence for the Kurdish Region of Iraq (KRI) and autonomy for those in Northeast Syria.

The Ultimate Contrast and Dual Canard

American foreign engagements since 1917 collectively saw trillions of dollars exhausted, tens of millions stationed abroad, and over 620,000 killed.³ The United States has often subsidized rich allies, received adverse diplomatic results from some that were provided lavish aid, and endangered its servicepeople for many who should have been more militarily proficient. But as America proceeds with its inevitable global role, it must acknowledge how drastically varied those costs were and not overgeneralize. One can understand the offshore balancing approach postulated by Realist-based academics as it seeks to avoid large-scale Middle East interventions and allow for limited military resources to be utilized elsewhere. But the United States can accomplish that without forsaking worthwhile partnerships.⁴ Including its relations with both Iraqi Kurds since the early 1990s and Syrian Kurds since 2014, America spent less than \$8 billion in aid, temporarily deployed at most four thousand soldiers, and suffered less than twenty deaths.⁵ These figures are astonishing when compared elsewhere.

The \$2.5 trillion in U.S. foreign aid since 1946 includes over \$140 billion to Israel, \$85 billion to Egypt, \$70 billion to Pakistan, \$23 billion to

Jordan, \$19 billion to Turkey, and \$10 billion to Palestinians.⁶ On top of the \$815 billion cost of the Iraq war and over \$800 billion spent in Afghanistan, the United States gave over \$70 billion to Baghdad and \$110 billion to Kabul.⁷ Afghan expenses included \$86 billion on a military that crumbled against the Taliban, and \$10 billion on counter-narcotics while Afghan opium still produces eighty percent of global heroin.⁸

America's military spending accounts for seventy percent of North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) expenditures even though it represents only one-third of the alliance's population and half its Gross Domestic Product (GDP).⁹ The United States is treaty-bound to safeguard Japan (which spends only one percent of GDP on its military) and annually allocates over \$30 billion directly toward European defense.¹⁰ America has also since 1985 accumulated a \$5 trillion trade deficit with Europe and Tokyo.¹¹ Over twenty-seven million Americans have been based overseas since 1950, including 1.8 million in either Iraq or Afghanistan.¹² The Pentagon today spends about \$25 billion on foreign bases where roughly 170,000 troops are stationed.¹³ Although the United States did not lose a single soldier in the KRI during the 2003-2011 Iraq War, it suffered over 4,400 killed throughout the rest of Iraq, and 2,400 killed in Afghanistan.¹⁴

Irrespective of the low-cost bolstering of American interests, it is asserted that the status quo must be maintained for stability's sake, and that such Kurdish entities would be nonviable anyway. But the chaos in Iraq and Syria has had little to do with their Kurdish minorities. Iraq's struggle between Sunni Arabs and the Shiite-Arab majority has seen over 150,000 violent deaths since 2003. Syria experienced fifteen coups between its 1946 independence and 1970, and the Alawite regime that has ruled ever since hails from a coastal minority comprising only thirteen percent of the population.¹⁵ Syria's recent civil war brought about 500,000 deaths and the worst economic collapse anywhere since World War II.¹⁶

Along with other traditional International Relations theories, Realism assumes the state to be the preeminent actor in global affairs and this helps explain America's limited support for its Kurdish partners.¹⁷ Though this general principle is less applicable when considering the potential of these chaotic states' Kurdish populations.¹⁸ The KRI already has diplomatic relations with thirty governments, a population larger than seventy countries, and a 150,000-man fighting force.¹⁹ Its natural

resources include the world's eighteenth-largest oil reserves (with \$5 per barrel extraction costs) and the twenty-eighth-largest natural gas deposits.²⁰ Syria's Kurdish-held areas contain the country's most fertile soil and most of its energy resources.²¹

American foreign policy has produced a robust network throughout the world, and U.S. support in and of itself has often been the ultimate guarantor for its allies. This alliance structure has not relied only on regional heavyweights whose local preeminence affords them greater geopolitical maneuvering—such as Iran in 1979 when it went from America's largest arms client to nemesis overnight. As vulnerability dictates the importance of and thus catering to foreign patrons, Kurdish isolation within their immediate vicinity is hardly an impediment to the United States solidifying a longstanding partnership. For instance, the discovery of gargantuan energy reserves in the small Gulf Arab states made their territory quite enticing to their larger neighbors, and they relied on British security guarantees which lasted until the early 1970s.²² With adequate U.S. backing ever since, these four states have for decades accounted for the bulk of America's fixed military presence in the Middle East.

Russia has had either impartial or positive relations with them and was the only major power who remained effectively neutral regarding both the 2016 Syrian-Kurdish push for federalism and the 2017 Iraqi-Kurdish independence referendum.²³ As the KRI's main foreign investor to the tune of \$3.5 billion—over half of which was spent on an ownership stake in its oil pipeline—Moscow has an obvious incentive to help preserve Kurdish energy exports.²⁴ Several major European powers champion the Kurdish cause in order to support moderate forces emanating from their region. Israel endorsed the 2017 Iraqi-Kurdish referendum, while Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and the United Arab Emirates see them as potential Sunni allies against Shiite power centers stretching from Iran to Lebanon.²⁵ These Sunni Arab countries also view Kurds as a possible hedge against Turkey as they have clashed with Ankara over the promotion of Islamist governments, the Libyan Civil War, and hostility in the Eastern Mediterranean²⁶.

There is also no guaranteed unanimity on the Kurdish question amongst their neighbors. Northern parts of Iraq and Syria are significant to Turkey

as they were taken after it had already signed the October 1918 armistice agreement.²⁷ Ankara partially rectified that grievance with its 1938 seizure of the Alexandretta province which cutoff forty percent of Syria's coastline.²⁸ Turkey's recent incursions into both countries have caused serious alarm—particularly in Syria where it exercises de facto military control over nearly thirty percent of the population.²⁹ With its superior economy and military, combined with a massive dam and canal system that controls most of their already-stressed water supply, Syria and Iraq may soon enough have to fear Turkish aggression more than Kurdish secession.³⁰

American Capitulation

Between 2003 and 2014, Iraq's military spent over \$70 billion—\$25 billion of which was covered by American aid.³¹ Thirty percent of the KRI's share of oil revenues was indeed earmarked to Baghdad for such sovereign expenses.³² Iraq's heavily armed forces nevertheless collapsed throughout the country's Sunni-Arab northwest in the face of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), and left the Kurds to fend for themselves along their 650-mile-long border with the terror group.³³ As Baghdad restricts military sales to the Kurdistan Regional Government, when Iraqi soldiers ceded \$1.3 billion worth of sophisticated American-made weapons to ISIS (including 2,300 armored Humvees), the desperately outgunned Kurds suffered major defeats.³⁴ Even still, Kurdish forces managed to rescue the predominantly Kurdish city of Kirkuk as the Iraqi army withdrew and ISIS stood on its doorstep. While Baghdad's primary fields were safely in southern Iraq, the federal pipeline from oil-rich Kirkuk to Turkey was shut down. Kurds salvaged Kirkuk's oil exports via their own alternative pipeline while also depriving ISIS of even more oil resources that already brought in nearly half its income³⁵.

After losing 1,700 fighters leading the ground war against ISIS, Iraq's Kurds finally broke from the postponements forced upon them and held a referendum in September 2017 that called overwhelmingly for independence.³⁶ Kurds make up one fifth of Iraq's population and at the time controlled around twenty percent of its energy reserves and fifteen percent of its landmass.³⁷ This split would have not only been proportional, but would have also left Baghdad with still possessing the world's fifth-largest oil reserves and twelfth-largest natural gas deposits.³⁸

Utilizing American-made Abrams tanks, the Iraqi army then expelled Kurdish forces from Kirkuk and other areas which threatened both their narrow corridor to Syria and their monopoly on Iraq's border with Turkey.³⁹ This was spearheaded by the Iranian-backed Popular Mobilization Units (PMU), with Iranian Revolutionary Guards commander Qassem Suleimani and PMU Deputy-commander Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis both on site helping plan the operation.⁴⁰

Iraq had long claimed parts of northern Kuwait given the British-imposed demarcation left it with a thirty-six-mile shallow coastline as opposed to over 180 miles for tiny Kuwait.⁴¹ Though none of Baghdad's attempts to alter that were tolerated—culminating in its 1991 defeat to the American military—after which it paid wealthy Kuwait over \$52 billion in reparations for the seven-month occupation.⁴² Yet in 2017, Iraq's rule over a distinct ethnic group five-times larger was reaffirmed despite its much more extensive malfeasance against them. Instead of upholding the rightful gains of its hard-fought and war-indebted partners that would have secured them the world's thirteenth-largest oil reserves, America rejected the Kurdish referendum and sat idly by as they lost half their revenue overnight.⁴³

The Kurds were a more durable American ally than Iraq prior to taking Kirkuk and remained so after the traumatic economic loss. Just as Baghdad's instability and Iranian influence endured regardless of regaining Kirkuk. The KRI retained its international crossings, with Turkish trade remaining open throughout the crisis and Iran reinstating its cross-border commerce after only forty days.⁴⁴ As Iraq was still reliant on the Kurdish pipeline for exporting Kirkuk's oil to Turkish and European markets, relations soon calmed with Baghdad as well.⁴⁵ Iraq's endemic corruption and inability to provide basic public services had by October 2019 brought about the deadliest protests in its modern history, which saw over five hundred killed and the prime minister resign.⁴⁶

The United States closed its Basra consulate in 2018 due to security concerns and threatened to do the same in 2020 with its Baghdad embassy—its second most expensive in the world.⁴⁷ America is meanwhile finalizing construction on a massive \$600-million new Erbil consulate in the KRI that is one of the largest and most costly of its over-250 various diplomatic posts.⁴⁸ At the epicenter of Kurdish surrender to Baghdad just

two years prior, Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis's Kata'ib Hezbollah launched an attack near Kirkuk in December 2019 that killed an American contractor. This sparked American reprisal strikes, then violent demonstrations against the American embassy, and ultimately the assassinations of both al-Muhandis and Suleimani—the most serious American military action against Iran in decades.

Syrian Kurds are smaller in both size and proportion compared to their Iraqi brethren and had no prior history of autonomous rule. It was thus even more impressive that they swiftly rose out of the 2011 civil war with an organized military and inclusive democratic institutions while the rest of Syria remained mired between the Assad dictatorship and Islamist-dominated rebellion. At a time when ISIS controlled more Syrian territory than Damascus, Kurds began pushing the group back in September 2014 with the help of American air strikes.⁴⁹ Fighting for more than just Kurdish interests, they merged with Arab groups to form the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in 2015 which suffered most of its casualties liberating Arab-populated cities.⁵⁰ Following an embarrassing \$50-million venture that produced perhaps five reliable fighters, the United States eventually decided in May 2017 to directly arm Kurds.⁵¹ After losing 11,000 fighters leading the ground war against ISIS in Syria, the SDF conquered its capital Raqqa in October 2017.⁵²

With Kurds handling local security and the Euphrates River serving as a natural boundary, U.S. forces stationed there steadfastly held their ground and won decisively on the rare occasions they were challenged. This was notably displayed in 2018 when five hundred regime soldiers and Russian mercenaries attempted to capture an oil field in SDF territory—which resulted in over two hundred attackers killed and zero defender losses.⁵³ The Assad regime pulled its troops from Kurdish towns in 2012 and has ever since had more pressing challenges including protecting itself from the Turkish-backed rebel strongholds right outside of its largest city Aleppo.⁵⁴ Though the SDF held about one-third of Syria, it only contained about fifteen percent of the population, and Syrian Kurds were content with their local federal system so never demanded independence. The Syrian military lacked the resources to challenge them, and Moscow was either ambivalent or reasoned that it did not merit confrontation with the United States. Rather, the Syrian Kurds' paramount post-ISIS threat has come from America's NATO ally Turkey.

Even after multiple Turkish assaults on them west of the Euphrates, Syrian Kurds never retaliated against Turkey.⁵⁵ The SDF relinquished the northwest majority-Kurdish city of Afrin that was seized by Turkey in 2018 and sought to appease Ankara by removing its fortifications along the border as well as allowing joint U.S.-Turkish patrols.⁵⁶ Pressured by Ankara, America withdrew its small contingent of one thousand troops from Northeast Syria in October 2019, and the ensuing Turkish invasion killed hundreds and forced hundreds of thousands to flee their homes.⁵⁷ Kurds were compelled to accept a Russian-backed agreement with the Assad regime that drove their military from the border region where most of their major population centers are located.⁵⁸ Though it did limit the Turkish presence east of the Euphrates to a roughly 75-mile-wide and 20-mile-deep stretch between Tal Abyad and Ras al-Ain.⁵⁹ With the ceasefire broadly holding, there are still nine hundred American soldiers in eastern Syria further south, and the SDF controls twenty-five percent of the country and the majority of its oil resources.⁶⁰

Dealing with Ankara

Following a steady decline, the Ottoman Empire lost most of its remaining territory between 1908 and 1918, and its Anatolian heartland became the modern Turkish state in 1922.⁶¹ Turkey's age-old Russian adversary, with whom it had fought thirteen wars, had become a superpower by 1946 and sought to finally gain unfettered access to the Mediterranean via the Turkish-controlled Dardanelles Straits.⁶² Turkey thus allied with America in 1947 which garnered it nearly half of all U.S. aid to the Middle East over the following twenty years.⁶³ Its 1952 entry into NATO then provided it with Article Five protection. Given Ankara's outspoken role against Kurdish sovereignty in Iraq and Syria, the United States should examine its relationship with Turkey and consider if it merits Ankara impeding American Kurdish policy.

Notwithstanding its other important goals, NATO's primary mission was to deter a Soviet offensive into Western Europe, and this was foremost accomplished by America's firm nuclear posture and minimum-250,000-troop deployment.⁶⁴ Turkey was hundreds of miles east of the Warsaw Pact border, had thawed its relations with the Soviets by the early 1970s, and its only noteworthy military actions during the Cold War were against

its fellow-Western Greek and Cypriot neighbors.⁶⁵ America has stationed military sites in Turkey, but Ankara closed them at times for political reasons and the United States voluntarily shut down most of them right after the fall of the Soviet Union.⁶⁶ Further, the relative value of the remaining bases must take into account the presumption that Kurds would offer a similar arrangement.

Turkey's role in a unified American-led front has diminished while its aggression against its Western allies has grown—particularly under Recep Tayyip Erdogan's leadership since 2003. In addition to imploring Muslim immigrants there to avoid assimilation, Turkey has routinely threatened Europe with unrestricted refugee passage.⁶⁷ It lacks the decency to acknowledge the true extent of its 1915 massacre of at least 700,000 Armenians and intimidates those who do.⁶⁸ Turkey's 1974 invasion displaced nearly a third of Cyprus's population and it has supported ever since the separatist northern government that is not recognized by anyone outside of Ankara.⁶⁹ Turkey bemoans its lost empire and openly celebrates its former conquests—while often unambiguously calling for new ones.⁷⁰ With their ancestors originating from Central Asia, Turks were not present in their current borders until around 1070 CE.⁷¹ So while Greeks settled much of ancient Anatolia long before their arrival, and Turkey possesses a landmass six-times larger than Greece, Ankara still maintains a constant belligerence towards Athens over its presence in the Aegean.⁷²

The United States spent over \$40 billion fighting ISIS, and the violence that erupted out of the twenty million Sunnis in Iraq and Syria could certainly resurface.⁷³ Ankara's repeated coddling of Islamist radicals at the expense of pro-Western Kurds will continue to endanger American interests.⁷⁴ ISIS recruited over forty thousand foreigners, and the majority of them entered unencumbered via Turkey.⁷⁵ The powerful Turkish military stared on nonchalantly in 2015 less than a mile from Kobane where 1,300 Syrian Kurdish fighters died achieving the first battlefield victory against ISIS.⁷⁶ Ankara instead repeatedly attacked Syrian Kurds since 2016, which impeded the fight against ISIS by preventing the consolidation of the separate Kurdish cantons and hampering the SDF's ability to hold thousands of dangerous prisoners.⁷⁷

After a Kurdish Intelligence source confirmed his whereabouts, ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi was killed in Idlib on October 26, 2019—three miles

from Turkey.⁷⁸ Instead of utilizing the much-closer Incirlik airbase in Turkey, the U.S. commandos flew out of Erbil in the KRI and Turkey was not informed of the Baghdadi operation until the last moment.⁷⁹ The next day, ISIS spokesman and likely successor Abu al-Hassan al-Muhajir was killed in a joint SDF-U.S. operation near Jarabulus, which is also adjacent to Turkey and had been occupied by Turkish troops since August 2016.⁸⁰ Turkey always considered Syrian Kurds to be the real terrorists and President Erdogan felt it was necessary to issue an Interpol Red Notice to have SDF commander Mazloum Abdi arrested if he traveled abroad.⁸¹ Meanwhile, the Turkish-secured rebel Idlib province has for years been ruled by an Al Qaeda offshoot.⁸²

Regardless of its diplomatic ambitions elsewhere, modern Turkey's power and prestige has derived from its Western alliance and its junior position therein leaves it highly susceptible to American pressure. Turkish GDP has fallen twenty percent since 2013 and its currency hit a record low in December 2021 after decreasing over seventy percent since mid-2017.⁸³ This leaves Turkey representing less than two percent of both NATO's GDP and military spending—and its fellow-NATO members play an exponentially greater role in its trade than it does in theirs.⁸⁴ Over ninety-five percent of its imported weapons over the last seventy years came from NATO—fifty-nine percent alone from the US.⁸⁵ Although it has reduced its foreign requirements through advancements in its indigenous arms, Turkey still relies on imports for crucial weapons systems as well as components for its domestic industry.⁸⁶

After declining offers for both the American Patriot missile defense system and a European alternative, Ankara spent \$2.5 billion on Russian S-400 missiles in 2019—prompting its immediate barring from purchasing F-35 fighter jets.⁸⁷ The United States publicly refused its plea to deploy Patriot missiles only days before the February 27, 2020 attack by the Russian-equipped Syrian Air Force in Idlib that killed thirty-three Turkish soldiers.⁸⁸ The Turks will miss out on billions in exports of their allotted F-35 parts production, and America has had an easier time inking new deals (including with their Greek adversary) than they will have finding a suitable replacement.⁸⁹ Those who can afford and have access to Western weapons typically prefer them.⁹⁰ Even if one agreed that the Russian Su-35 or Su-57 was a comparable substitute, selecting either would only shift Turkish dependence to Moscow.⁹¹

Though Turkey may disparage such things so as not to undermine its fervent position against Kurdish sovereignty anywhere, the KRI has brought some important assets to Ankara.⁹² Turkey imports ninety-five percent of its fossil fuels which takes up five percent of its GDP.⁹³ This created an overreliance on both Russia and Iran who for years together accounted for over two-thirds of its imports.⁹⁴ Between 2013 and 2016, the KRI was Turkey's largest oil supplier and one of its largest export markets.⁹⁵ With Turkish products then representing eighty percent of all goods sold in the KRI, Ankara recovered a large portion of its outlays on Kurdish energy.⁹⁶ Whereas the KRI essentially has to sell its oil through Turkey, Baghdad does not as most of its exports are done via its Basra port onward to Asian markets.⁹⁷ Further, Ankara's current monopoly on Iraq's piped oil reaching the Mediterranean is not based on any geographic restraint, but rather decades-old Syrian-Iraqi tension that could soon be resolved.⁹⁸ The KRI's loss of Kirkuk cut Turkey's Kurdish oil imports in half and gave Russia a say in what remained.⁹⁹

American Reassertion

The United States does not have to accept the false dichotomy that it must abandon proven allies to avoid bloody and bankrupting occupations. America's recent casualties abroad derived not from its sheer presence, but its caretaker role which required massive deployment and plunged its troops into urban warfare where their superior weaponry mattered little. Patrolling such violent societies put them in constant danger of cheap improvised explosive devices that caused over half of their 7,300 deaths in Iraq and Afghanistan.¹⁰⁰ As exemplified by Iraqi and Syrian Kurds, when the United States backs a loyal and stable population where it does not have to concern itself with their domestic security, it can safely and cost-effectively cultivate valuable long-term partnerships. With the Middle East having experienced its fair share of chaos, the United States should disregard fears that the region will lose its alleged stability with the advent of Kurdish progress. As a superpower whose independent backing has elevated countless weak friends into robust states, America can similarly brush aside concerns of Kurdish self-rule being unsustainable.

While Arabs throughout the Middle East were freed from Ottoman Turks in 1918, Kurds in Iraq and Syria merely had their foreign rulers replaced.

Whatever one thinks of that outcome, Damascus and Baghdad have repeatedly delegitimized their rule over their Kurdish populations.¹⁰¹ The United States does not have to continue forging a fruitful alliance with what should be sovereign Kurds on the altar of those post World War I French-British-drawn borders. Further, this partnership does not have to be constrained by the inevitable whataboutism that arises whenever discussing currently stateless peoples' self-determination versus existing states' territorial integrity.¹⁰² Iraqi Kurds have already been autonomous for thirty years and Syrian Kurds have been so for ten years. Neither independence for the former nor permanent autonomy for the latter would come as some sudden geopolitical shockwave triggering instability or state fragmentation elsewhere.

Iraq holds a commanding position in the list of places where the breadth of American sacrifice is outdone only by how little it has to show for it. What more does the United States owe to those in Baghdad who even with so much natural wealth and American assistance still would not defend the Kurdish citizens they demand to have dominion over. Since Washington rejected the KRI's 2017 call for nationhood and allowed for the loss of Kirkuk, Iranian entrenchment has persisted in Iraq along with attacks against the U.S. embassy. Despite decades of Baghdad altering its demographics to the point of being disputed, Kirkuk remains primarily Kurdish and it is in America's interests for the city to finally carry out its constitutionally-mandated referendum on whether to join the KRI¹⁰³. As America's only reliable ally within the country while simultaneously too small to internally influence the Arab majority, the United States has a strategic imperative to advocate for KRI independence.

America's small investment in Northeast Syria over the last eight years brought impressive gains and the United States ought to cement them by declaring its perpetual recognition of Kurdish autonomy there. Syrian Kurds not only fought bravely against ISIS without the need of vast U.S. deployment but also constructed a sustainable federation with Sunni Arabs to their south which solidified American-aligned forces east of the Euphrates. As prolonged inaction normalizes Turkey's naked aggression against its Syrian Kurdish partners, America should demand that Ankara withdraw from its Northeast Syria enclave that it has occupied since October 2019. Bolstering its Kurdish partners in the face of Turkish hostility would assure those that sacrifice alongside it that they will not be

forgotten just because their collaboration is not treaty-based. It would also remind those graced with guaranteed U.S. protection that anti-American actions will have consequences regardless of existing agreements.

Unlike the hundreds of millions throughout North Africa, the Middle East, and Southeast Europe whose lands were also conquered by the Ottoman Empire, alternating post-World War I treaties concluded with southeast Anatolia's Kurds remaining under Turkish control.¹⁰⁴ Whatever one thinks of that outcome, surely its established dominion over half the world's Kurds does not entitle it to dictate the futures of those residing elsewhere. Iran's Azeri minority is as numerous as Turkey's Kurdish population and America would not acquiesce to an Iranian veto over Azerbaijan's sovereignty.¹⁰⁵ Ankara's demand that Iraqi and Syrian Kurdish political gain be considered an unbearable threat is made more obnoxious considering it will continue to dwarf them both economically and militarily. Turkey's role within America's global security framework has declined substantially and the United States should demand a return to recognizable Turkish contributions—starting with Ankara ceasing its unjustified aggression against America's other regional allies.

Empowering Kurds with whom its wider interests align would not be American altruism but realpolitik. Supporting two cohesive pro-U.S. entities stretching over four hundred miles wide in the Middle East would not be some indulgence on temporary allies but a prudent strengthening of long-term American foreign policy. Constructing permanent military bases in these vital locations amongst those that would warmly welcome them would not be some charitable defense of the Kurds but a clear enhancement to U.S. tactical capabilities. America's continual postponement has not only stymied the progress that would make them far more capable allies but also brought about costly Kurdish losses of land and energy resources. It is long past time for the United States to openly endorse independence for Kurds in the KRI and autonomy for those in Northeast Syria.

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