

Towards war's end: on Syria peace talks

Talks between representatives of Syria's Kurdish rebels and President Bashar al-Assad's regime in Damascus bring a ray of hope to hundreds of thousands living in the country's north and east. After the talks last week, leaders of the Syrian Democratic Council, the political wing of the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces, said they were ready to work with the regime towards creating "a democratic, decentralised Syria with a new system and a new form". This was the first time since the outbreak of war that a delegation was sent by Kurdish rebels to Damascus. During the course of the war, both sides have more or less refrained from targeting each other. While the Assad regime withdrew troops from the Kurdish areas in the early days of the civil war to defend its coastal stronghold against the rebels, Kurdish fighters consolidated their position to establish autonomous rule. When the Islamic State moved to Kurdish towns in 2015, the rebels, with help from the U.S., successfully resisted them. Now they control almost a third of Syria, the largest chunk of territories outside government rule. The talks also took place after the regime recaptured Deraa in the south, the birthplace of the Syrian rebellion, after the rebels, apparently abandoned by their regional and western backers, agreed to surrender as part of a Russia-mediated deal. Most of Syria's population centres are now controlled by the regime. In the south, rebels retain some presence in parts of Quneitra. In the north, rebels and al-Qaeda-linked jihadists run the Idlib province, while in the east the Kurds are in control.

Damascus's strategy appears to be to seize the entire south and then move north. Before attacking Idlib, the last stronghold of anti-regime rebels, the government is seeking to engage the Kurds, and Kurdish militias say they could join the Idlib offensive with the government. Their political leaders have also made it clear they are not seeking independence from Syria, and only want to protect their autonomy. A recapture of the Kurdish areas by force is not a feasible option for the regime. Some 2,000 U.S. soldiers are deployed in the Kurdish autonomous areas, and both Russia and Syria would prefer not to get into a direct exchange of fire with U.S. soldiers. However, a deal with the Kurds could upset Turkey, which sees Syrian Kurdish rebels as an extended arm of the Kurdistan Workers Party, which it calls "terrorist". The Syrian regime therefore has to do a balancing act here, with support from Russia. In the battle for Deraa, Russia managed to convince the U.S., Jordan and Israel that the regime's capture of the province was the best-case scenario for the region. Likewise, it could bring the U.S. and Turkey into a larger diplomatic attempt to end the war in the east and the north, which would more or less stabilise Syria.

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