

ABANDONED ON THE BATTLEFIELD

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U.S. President Donald [Trump's recent decision to pull American troops out of Syria](#) is a body blow to the Syrian Kurds, the unsung heroes of the war against the Islamic State (IS). The U.S. began bombing the IS in September 2014 after the jihadist group announced a new Caliphate with territories spread across the Iraqi-Syrian border. But the bombing campaign remained largely ineffective till the U.S. found a partner on the ground to take on IS positions.

The decline of the IS actually began in Kobane, a largely Kurdish-populated Syrian town on the Turkish border, in January 2015. At that time, the group was fast-expanding from eastern Syria, where it established its de facto capital in Raqqah, to the border towns in the northeast. The Turkish-Syrian border remained porous, allowing the IS to transport militants in and out of Syria freely. It was the height of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the self-declared Caliph's bloodbath campaign. It laid siege to the city of Kobane. After a six-month-long battle, the People's Protection Units (YPG), the militia of the Syrian Kurdistan, recaptured the battered city and ousted the IS. The U.S. provided air cover. It was after the battle for Kobane that then U.S. President Barack Obama realised the real strategic potential of the Kurdish rebels.

Controversial exit: U.S troops withdrawal from Syria

The Kobane experience was repeated in nearby towns. The YPG freed Tal Abyad in July and moved to oust the IS from the Syria-Turkish border region. After these initial victories, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), a coalition of Kurdish, Arab and Assyrian militias and led by the YPG, was formed in 2015 with the blessings of the U.S. It has since become the official defence force of the Syrian Kurdistan (commonly known as Rojava). The U.S. doesn't have a major troops presence in the region. Since Mr. Obama sent some 50 commandos to advise the Kurds in 2015, the number of American troops has grown to at least 2,000. But in the territories east of the Euphrates that are part of the Rojava, the U.S. has built massive military infrastructure — it has at least a dozen military bases, including four airfields.

This American-Kurdish partnership has been a success story. Within three years of its formation, the SDF has defeated the IS in most of the territories the group held. After capturing the (Kurdish) border areas, the SDF moved to Arab-populated towns in the east such as Raqqah and Deir ez-Zor and freed them one after the other. The IS, which once claimed territories as big as the United Kingdom, has now been confined to some narrow pockets on the Iraqi-Syrian border. But the U.S.'s support for the Kurds and their military victories has irked another country in the region — Turkey, a NATO member and an American ally. The YPG (the main component of the SDF) has close ties with the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), the Kurdish militant group on the Turkish side which is seen as a terrorist organisation by both Ankara and Washington. Abdullah Öcalan, one of the founding leaders of the PKK who has been imprisoned in Turkey since 1999, is revered in Rojava as well. So Turkey fears the military mobilisation of the Rojava would embolden the PKK. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoan has also been upset that the U.S. has been backing the Kurdish rebels, who he often refers to as terrorists.

Turkey's attack on Afrin, a predominantly Kurdish town on the Syrian side, in January this year was born out of this security concern. Mr. Erdoan wants to create a buffer between the Turkish border and the Rojava. The plan is to capture the border region from Kurdish militants and hand it over to pro-Turkey rebel groups — there are Turkmen and Arab rebels in Syria who get aid from Turkey. And if Turkey occupies parts of Syria on the border — Turkish-backed militants operate in Idlib, a rebel-held territory — it will also give Turkey a seat on the high table to find a

solution to the Syria crisis. But a major impediment to execute this plan has been the continuing U.S. presence in Rojava. The Afrin attack was limited in scale. Since then, Mr. Erdoan has on several occasions made empty threats to send troops to other areas, including Manbij, where U.S. troops are present. With the U.S. pulling out of Syria, it's a green light to Mr. Erdoan to make his moves freely. His Defence Minister Hulusi Akar has already threatened to "bury them (Kurdish militants) in ditches".

The U.S. has a history of supporting and betraying the Kurds. After the First World War, U.S. President Woodrow Wilson backed the idea of autonomy for non-Turkish minorities of the Ottoman Empire. But the Allied Powers never pushed for it. When the post-Ottoman boundaries were redrawn, the Kurds were split among four countries — Turkey, Syria, Iraq and Iran. In all these countries, they have been a persecuted minority. In the 1970s, the U.S. backed the Iraqi Kurds in rebelling against the pro-Soviet Baathists. But they abandoned them after Iran, an American ally, signed the Algiers Accord to settle border disputes with Iraq in 1975. In the next 15 years, the Kurds in northern Iraq would see the worst form of repression by Baghdad, including a chemical attack in 1988. The U.S. looked away when thousands of Kurds were slaughtered by Saddam's regime. They would come back to Iraqi Kurdistan during the first Gulf War.

Unfortunately, the Syrian Kurds face the same fate. Syrian Kurdistan is not a constitutionally recognised autonomous entity like Iraqi Kurdistan. They are surrounded by enemies, the remnants of the IS, a vengeful, insecure Turkish military and the blood-soaked Syrian regime. In theory, the U.S. pulling out of an illegal war is fine — the American intervention has neither congressional approval nor the UN Security Council's nod. But in practice, since the U.S. intervention has already started shaping the reality on the ground, the pull-out should have been an orderly one. The U.S. has the moral obligation to ensure the safety of the Syrian Kurds. It could have used the pull-out as a bargaining chip to get concessions both from Ankara and Damascus. Instead, Mr. Trump's abrupt decision to pull out of Syria leaves the Kurds twisting in the whirlwind.

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The inclusion of forest rights in its campaign helped the Congress in Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh

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