

What is America doing in Syria? – a weekly news review

While people discuss if and when the United States will pull their troops out of Iraq and Syria, Sarah Glynn examines what brought America there in the first place, and the hard realities of US imperialism. The article also looks at the other countries intervening in Syria.

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Sarah Glynn

Last week I looked at the ongoing discussion about the possibility of an American withdrawal from Syria. The US has stated that they are not planning to leave Syria, but speculation about their continued role in Syria and Iraq has

not gone away – especially now that one of the attacks by pro-Iranian militias on America's Middle East bases has proved fatal. Rather than attempt to add to that speculation, or the worries about an escalation in the fighting, I thought I would look instead at how America became involved in Syria in the first place.

When the Arab Spring spread to Syria – whose government had a friendship treaty with the Soviet Union, and subsequently with Russia, and a strategic alliance with Iran – the United States saw the possibility of regime change. In their determination to make this happen, they began to supply weapons to an assortment of anti-government groups, with little concern about what they were promoting. Billions of dollars' worth of weapons [were given to Islamist militias](#) on the premise that they were fighting the Assad Government. And it was American dollars that ensured the rise of Jabhat al-Nusra, the Syrian Branch of Al Qaeda, which has now morphed into Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS). As Jake Sullivan of the US State Department [observed](#), without comment, in an email to Hillary Clinton, "AQ [Al-Qaeda] is on our side in Syria".

The American's were initially quite sanguine over the rise of ISIS, believing that it would help destabilise Assad and could later be contained. Then-Secretary of State John Kerry [told Islamist opposition](#) groups in 2016, "We were watching. We saw that Daesh was growing in strength, and we thought Assad was threatened. We thought, however, we could probably manage, that Assad would then negotiate. Instead of negotiating, he got Putin to support him." Only when their chosen partners proved problematic and not capable of doing the job that America had assigned to them, did America turn their attention to the Kurds.

Kurds had been particularly oppressed under the Syrian Government and had taken advantage of the political vacuum created by what had become a civil war to establish independent authorities in the areas of northern Syria where they were dominant – areas they call Rojava, or Western Kurdistan. Their autonomy was achieved with very little resistance from Syrian Government forces, though that doesn't mean that President Assad accepts the loss of control. The Kurds saw themselves as separate, and not aligned to either the Islamist opposition or to the government. They used their new freedom to

attempt to create a radically different system based on Abdullah Öcalan's ideas of women's rights, multi-ethnic co-existence, and grassroots democracy.

Rojava had not long been established as an autonomous entity when it came under attack from ISIS, which was sweeping through Iraq and Syria. In the autumn of 2014, it looked as though ISIS would swallow Rojava too, as they laid siege to the city of Kobanê, which was defended only by the determination of the massively ill-equipped Kurdish forces. The Kurds' defence of Kobanê persuaded the Americans that it was them that America should be backing. This was both to destroy the ISIS threat that the Americans themselves had allowed to emerge, but also as part of their plan to oust Assad. America brought in their air force, and American planes helped the Kurds retake Kobanê and turn the tide against ISIS.

This was the beginning of a growing collaboration that allowed the Kurds to retake their land and to continue to drive ISIS from Syria. With American air support, and – from late 2016 – increasing amounts of American weaponry, they liberated adjacent regions from ISIS and brought them under the umbrella of their Autonomous Administration.

This move beyond the Kurdish majority regions was a consequence of US involvement. The administration in Rojava didn't want ISIS on their doorstep, but, in addition, as Wladimir van Wilgenburg [explains](#), "the United States pushed the SDF into Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor as a strategic move, and the SDF obliged in order to preempt the possibility of the United States endorsing a concurrent Turkish-proposed alternative."

Turkey

Although they talk in terms of attacking "terrorists", Turkey's main target has always been the Kurds and the SDF, not ISIS. From the start of the Syrian Civil War, they armed and trained the Islamist groups opposing Assad; and they helped ISIS. International ISIS recruits entered Syria through Turkey, and wounded ISIS fighters were treated in Turkish hospitals and sent back to fight again. Turkey has been reported allowing [weapons](#) for ISIS to be taken

through their border; and [evidence of Turkish help](#) has also come from confessions of captured fighters.

Turkey's first large-scale invasion of Syria began in August 2016. By occupying Jarabulus, they blocked the SDF from linking the Kurdish canton of Afrîn with the rest of Rojava. In January 2018 Turkey began their unprovoked invasion and occupation of Afrîn, and in October 2019 they invaded and occupied the strip of land from Serêkanyê to Girê Spî.

The occupied areas have been put under the day-to-day control of the Islamist militias supported by Turkey, whose [brutality](#) appears to have no bounds. At least 32 people were [abducted](#) by the occupying authorities in Afrîn just in the last month.

Turkey has not carried out another ground invasion because neither Russia nor the United States has moved their troops out of the way, but they have been allowed to destroy the infrastructure, lives, and hopes of North and East Syria from the air.

After Turkey's latest bombardments, much of the region has been left without the most basic services. In a recent [report](#), two women described to Firat News Agency the conditions in their district. There was no electricity and no fuel for heating, and, without working pumps, people had been forced to rely on tankers to deliver water. Shops, and workshops, and schools had all had to close, and people were living in the dark. A hundred Syrian NGOs have made an [urgent appeal](#) for international aid.

This has not stopped President Biden from pushing forward the sale to Turkey of American F16 fighters, and US Under Secretary of State, Victoria Nuland, was in Ankara this week, ["revitalising" America's relationship with Turkey](#), arranging further arms deals, and discussing cooperation in fighting terrorism.

In Turkey's eyes, the only "terrorists" that count are the PKK, and Turkey claims that the SDF (America's strategic partner in Syria) is a part of the PKK. Nuland [told CNN Turk](#), "One of the issues we talked about was re-strengthening cooperation in the fight against terrorism and establishing a

dialogue on what path to follow in Syria because both sides have important interests there, especially in the fight against terrorism.” At the same time she admitted that “we do not always agree on how to conduct this fight”.

Iran and Russia

In criticising the United States, we can still also criticise the self-interested motives of other powers active in Syria, including those who can claim they are there legally because they were invited in by the country’s dictatorial president. Iran has helped Assad from the start of the uprisings against him, providing equipment and technical support, and increasingly troops. Russian military intervention in support of Assad’s government began in September 2015 and put paid to dreams of regime change. Besides boosting their power in the region, Iran and Russia have been [taking over](#) control of Syria’s economic wealth.

American leverage

The Americans now claim that the only reason they are in Syria is to fight ISIS, yet, as an increasingly exasperated SDF point out, in doing nothing to stop Turkey’s attacks they are playing into ISIS’ hands. They are creating the instability on which ISIS thrives, and also increasing the chances of a breakout of ISIS prisoners and detainees from the prisons and camps that the rest of the world has left the Autonomous Administration to manage. These terrifyingly under-resourced places have been referred to many times as a ticking time bomb. This week, North and East Syria’s security forces completed another [operation to clear militant activity](#) from Al-Hol Camp, which houses the families of ISIS prisoners. They captured 31 ISIS militants, as well as discovering explosives and other military materials and a hidden tunnel. However, as we have seen, America has shown themselves in the past to be untroubled by a limited amount of ISIS activity.

Although the United States may now have had to resign themselves to the idea that Assad is not going away, they are still determined to weaken Syria through crippling sanctions that have devastating effects on the lives of the

Syrian people. And they are comfortable knowing that Assad does not have access to the oil wells and wheatfields of North and East Syria. [In a startlingly frank statement](#), Dana Stroul, co-chair of the Syrian Study Group of the US Government-funded Centre for Strategic and International Studies, explained America's thinking at a public meeting on 31 October 2019 (just after Turkey's 2019 invasion that had been greenlighted by President Trump). She talked about American "leverage" to "shape an outcome that was more conducive and protective of US interests"; and her first form of leverage was North and East Syria. This, she described as "owned" by "the US military and our military presence," and she explained that the region was Syria's "economic powerhouse", due to both oil and agriculture. Her other forms of leverage were the political and diplomatic isolation of Assad, economic sanctions, and the prevention of reconstruction aid and technical expertise to a land that she described as "rubble". She also happily pointed out that this American "ownership" of a third of Syria had been achieved with only a "light footprint on the US military".

The Autonomous Administration has made clear that they see themselves as an integral part of Syria, and that Syrian resources belong to the whole country, but they are not prepared to make a deal with Assad that would return their areas to the authoritarian centralised control that incited the initial uprisings against him; and Assad has so far refused to make any compromises.

Meanwhile, Turkey has bombed those oil fields to destruction, and also attacked grain silos. And Deir ez-Zor, which the SDF took with US support, has become the Autonomous Authority's Achilles' heel.

Deir ez-Zor is a region that had no significant Kurdish population or previous encounter with Öcalan's ideas. It is characterised by a deep tribalism, which Félix Legrand, who has made a study of it, [portrays](#) as riven with intra- and inter-tribal conflict. He explains that, like al-Nusra and ISIS before them, the SDF has tried to work through tribal leaders. Initial stability soon gave way as this made them enemies as well as friends, and the institutions they established became paralysed by tribal competition for influential posts. Representatives from the Democratic Union Party (PYD) found it difficult to

impose order. When the tribal power struggles turn against the SDF, as they did last autumn, the Syrian Government, Iran, and Turkey are all ready to encourage unrest, though Legrand found that the SDF has been given some leeway because most people don't want to return to Syrian Government control. ISIS exploits the gaps in governance and has been able to recruit, assassinate, and even, in places, collect "taxes", though Legrand claims that they are waiting for the United States to leave before becoming more active. All this is very different from the image of democracy made famous by the Rojava project.

For a brief while, it seemed as though the United States had, in Syria, unwittingly, found themselves on the right side of history. When the Kurdish forces found American support during the battle of Kobanê, the alternative was probable annihilation under ISIS. But, as ever, America has proved a fickle friend. While seeming to help the Kurds and the SDF, it has left their administration isolated and vulnerable from all sides, its vital infrastructure in tatters. America could have used its leverage to put pressure on Turkey not to attack a region that posed them no threat. They could have afforded the Autonomous Administration international recognition and so increased their bargaining power; and they could have included air defence in the SDF's weaponry so that they weren't so vulnerable to attack. But that's not how imperial powers behave. At the very least, and in their own interest, they could provide adequate resources and assistance to secure the ISIS prisons and to help establish a system to try those detained.

A rare positive development in this genocidal world is that people are becoming aware of the real nature of US imperialism – or at least those people who are not still blinded by Western propaganda.

A news round-up

I am short of space and time, but this is a news review so I will just run through some of the other events that have happened this week.

In Turkey, the parliament has [ignored the decision of the Constitutional Court](#) and stripped Can Atalay of his MP status, ensuring that the recently

elected Turkish Workers' Party MP will remain in prison. And Kurdish culture and landscape is being [threatened by yet another dam](#).

The head of Turkey's secret service has been in Erbil, in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, [trying to ensure](#) that any coalition government formed in Kirkuk excludes the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), which won five of the sixteen seats in the recent local election.

In Iran, four young men, all members of the Komala Party of Iranian Kurdistan, [were executed](#) by the state on the basis of forced confessions made after severe torture. The only visit allowed for their families in their eighteen months of detention was just the day before the men's deaths, and the Islamic Republic [refused to release their bodies](#). Their deaths were marked by a [general strike](#) that closed the shops in at least twelve cities. Last month, an average of two people [were executed](#) in Iran's prisons every day, almost half of them Kurdish.

Also last month, Iranian border guards [shot dead](#) six kolbars (mountain porters) and injured forty more.

In the UK, Mark Campbell and Beritan Silemani were given [12 month suspended](#) sentences under the Terrorism Act for holding a flag associated with the PKK at a demonstration in 2022. They intend to appeal. More positively, the UK Home Office has [told Prime Minister Rishi Sunak](#) to shelve plans for a deal to send back Turkish nationals seeking asylum, arguing that they would not be safe.

In the run-up to the anniversary of Öcalan's abduction and imprisonment, marches are taking place in Turkey and in Europe. Already, the long march from Paris to Strasbourg is on day thirteen, and the [Great Freedom March](#) left Kars and Van on Thursday for Öcalan's birthplace in the village of Amara in Urfa. More start soon.