

Kurd Autonomy: Is it Kerry's Plan B or Putin's Plan A?

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On March 17 delegates representing different ethnicities and nationalities—Kurds, Arabs, Assyrians, Syriacs, Turkomans, Armenians, Circassians and Chechen—along with representatives from the Syrian People's Defense Units or YPG, and the YPJ womens' defense units declared a formal Federation of Northern Syria which would incorporate 250 miles of mostly Kurdish-held territory along the Syria-Turkey border. On March 15, two days earlier, Russian President Putin surprised much of the world by announcing "Mission Accomplished" in Syria, ordering Russian jets and personnel to begin withdrawal. The two events are intimately connected.

Combined and Conflicting Goals

Both Russia's beginning of withdrawal and the Kurds declaration of an autonomous federal region within Syria are linked, but not in the manner most western media report. A distinctly different phase in the long-standing US State Department blueprint for a new Greater Middle East Project, first announced by Condoleezza Rice in 2003 after the US invasion of Iraq, has begun.



What is the exact nature of the surprising Obama Administration apparent cooperation with Putin's Russia to redraw the political map of Syria to pre-Sykes-Picot borders, or at least a modern-day imitation of that? Will Russian support for the newly proclaimed federal Kurdish-dominated Federation of Northern Syria lead soon to a Greater Kurdistan that united Kurds from Turkey, Syria, Iraq and Iran? And what is the significance of US Defense Secretary going to Syria in recent days praising the military successes of the Syrian Kurds?

There is clearly a very big, a tectonic shift underway in the geopolitical landscape of the Middle East. The question is to what end?

Five Hundred Years of War

The ethnic Kurd populations, as a result of the deliberate Anglo-French carving up the map of the collapsed Ottoman Empire following the First World War, were deliberately denied a national sovereignty. Kurdish culture predates the birth of Islam and of Christianity, going back some 2,500 years. Ethnically Kurds are not Arab, not Turkic peoples. They are Kurds. Today they are predominantly Sunni Muslim, but ethnically Kurd peoples, numbering perhaps 35 million divided between four adjoining states.

Their struggles with the Turks, who invaded from the steppes of Central Asia during the Seljuk Dynasty in the mid- 12th century, have been long and volatile. In the 16th Century the Kurdish regions were the battlegrounds of wars between the Ottoman Turks and the Persian Empire. Kurds were the losers, much like the Poles over the past century or more. In 1514 the Turkish Sultan offered the Kurds wide-ranging freedoms and autonomy if they agreed to join the Ottoman Empire after the Ottoman defeated the Persian army. For the Ottomans the Kurds served as a buffer against possible future [Persian invasion](#).

The peace between the Turkish Sultanate and the Kurdish people lasted into the 19th Century. Then, as the Turkish Sultan decided to force the Kurds of his empire to give up their autonomy in the early 19th Century, conflicts between Kurds and Turks began. Ottoman forces, advised by the Germans, including Helmut von Moltke, waged brutal wars to subjugate the independent Kurds. Kurd revolts against an increasingly bankrupt and brutal Turkish Ottoman Sultanate continued until the First World War, fighting for a separate Kurdish state independent of [Constantinople](#).

In 1916 the secret Anglo-French agreement called Sykes-Picot called for the postwar carving up of Kurdistan. In Anatolia a traditional religious wing of the Kurdish people made an alliance with the Turkish leader, Mustafa Kemal, who later became Kemal Ataturk, in order to avoid domination by the Christian Europeans. Kemal went to the Kurdish tribal leaders to seek support in his war to liberate modern Turkey from the European colonial powers, notably the British and Greeks. The Kurds fought side-by-side with Kemal in the Turkish War of Independence to liberate occupied Anatolia, and create a Turkey independent from a British-Greek occupation in 1922. The Soviets supported Ataturk and the Kurds against the British-Greek alliance. In 1921 France had handed over another of the four Kurdish regions to Syria, then a French booty of the war of Sykes-Picot, along with Lebanon. In 1923 at the Peace Conference at Lausanne, the European powers formally recognized Ataturk's Turkey, a tiny part of the pre-war Ottoman Empire and gave the largest Kurdish population in Anatolia to the new independent Turkey with no guarantees of autonomy or rights. Iranian

Kurds lived in a state of constant conflict and dissidence with the [Shah's government](#).

Finally, the fourth group of Kurds was in the newly-carved Sykes-Picot British domain called Iraq. There were known oil riches in and around Mosul and Kirkuk. The region was claimed by both Turkey and by Britain, while the Kurds demanded independence. In 1925 Britain managed to get a League of Nations Mandate over oil-rich Iraq with the Kurdish territories included. The British promised to allow the Kurds to establish an autonomous government, another British broken promise in the grim history of their colonial Middle East adventures. By the end of 1925 the country of the Kurds, known since the 12th Century as Kurdistan, had been carved up between Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria and for the first time in 2,500 years was deprived of its [cultural autonomy](#).

Puzzling timing or shrewd move?

With such a history of betrayal and war to extinguish or suppress their people, it's understandable that the Syrian Kurds today would try to take advantage of their very essential military role in fighting ISIS in northern Syria along the Turkish border. However, with the future of Bashar al Assad and a unified Syrian state very much in question, it seems reckless of the Syrian Kurds of Rojava to declare their autonomy and risk a two-front war against Damascus and against Erdogan's military who are conducting a brutal war against their Kurdish cousins in Turkey across the border. Assad has not recognized the proclamation of Kurd autonomy and is reported very opposed to it. There are reports of clashes between the Kurd YPG People's Defense Units and troop of the Syrian Arab Army of Assad.

Here we must come back to the surprise announcement by Vladimir Putin on March 15 to announce the drawdown of Russian military presence in Syria.

The declaration of an autonomous Kurdish-dominated territory along the Turkish border backed by Moscow is a major geopolitical shift in the Syrian situation

On February 7 of this year a curious event took place little noticed by western media. The Syrian Kurds, represented by the Democratic Unity Party (PYD), the main political organization, were welcomed by Russia to open their first foreign office in Moscow. The opening ceremony was attended by Russian foreign ministry [officials](#). Little-known is the fact that Russia's positive relations with the Kurds goes back more than two centuries. From 1804 forward, Kurds played important roles in Russia's wars with Persia and Ottoman Turkey.

Turkey and Washington refused to invite the PYD to participate in the Syrian reconciliation talks now ongoing in Geneva, despite strong Russian insistence to include them as legitimate Syrian anti-ISIS opposition playing a decisive role in defeating the ISIS and other terrorist organizations in the north. On the other hand, Washington refuses to yield to Erdogan and Turkish demands that Washington break off any support to the Syrian Kurds. There is a Washington double game that Russia appears to have intervened in. Does this herald a Grand Design between Washington and Moscow over the "Bosnia Solution" for Syria?

At this point it rather looks like a shrewd judo by Putin, himself an old judo master, with a Judo 8th Dan and sitting as Honorary President of the European Judo Union. It looks like Russia, despite its air force drawdown and troop pull-back, has just established the first "No

Fly” zone in Syria, the most-wanted aim of the US Pentagon and Turkey only five months ago, as the necessary step to topple Assad and the Syrian government and create a weak government presiding over a Balkanized Syria. Only the Russian no fly zone has a quite different aim—to protect the Syrian Kurds from a possible Turkish military attack.

The creation of the 250 mile long Kurdish-dominated Federation of Northern Syria autonomous region, seals the porous Turkish border where ISIS and other terrorist groups are constantly being reinforced by the Turkish armed forces and MIT intelligence to keep the ISIS war going. A Russian de facto no fly zone stops that. While Russia has withdrawn much of its air force planes in the last days, Moscow has made clear Russia will retain its long-standing naval base at Tarsus and Khmeimim airbase near Latakia, as well as its advanced S-400 anti-aircraft batteries to enforce any air attacks from Turkey or Saudi Arabia into the Kurd autonomous region of Syria. As well, Russia has not withdrawn her air-to-air fighters—SU-30SMs and SU-35 from Khmeimim. And as Russia demonstrated in the first weeks of Russian intervention quite impressively, its SU-34s are long-range strike aircraft and they can attack objectives in Syria by taking off from southern Russia if needed. As well Russian cruise missiles, they have a range of 1,500km (Kalibr) and 4,500km (X-101) and can be delivered from the [Caspian](#).

The Kurdish PYD and its armed wing inside Syria have been aggressively expanding the amount of territory it controls along the Syrian-Turkish border. Ankara is alarmed to put it mildly. The PYD is a subsidiary of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (Partiya Karkeren Kurdistanê), or PKK, which is in a bloody war for survival against the Turkish military. Russia recognizes both the PKK, which it supported against NATO-member Turkey during the Cold War, and the Syrian PYD. The PKK was founded by a Turkish Kurd named Abdullah Öcalan in 1978, and was supported by Russia and the Soviet Union from the onset. Russian-Kurdish relations go back to the late 18th Century. During the 1980’s in the Cold War era Syria under Hafez al Assad, Bashar’s father, was a Soviet client state, and the PKK’s most vital supporter, providing the group safe basing inside [Syria](#).

In Syria, the PYD’s armed wing has received Russian arms and Russian air support to aggressively expand the amount of territory it controls along the Syrian-Turkish border in recent months so it’s little surprise it was Moscow, not Washington, that the PYD chose to open its first foreign representative office.

Since Erdogan broke off earlier peace negotiations with the Kurds in Turkish Anatolia before elections in 2015 and began military operations against them, the PKK has resumed its insurgency against Ankara forces across the border from Syria’s newly-declared Kurd-dominated autonomous region. PKK activists have declared Kurdish self-rule in their own Anatolia region bordering Syria, and PKK fighters are holing up in cities, digging trenches and taking on Turkish security forces with everything from snipers and rocket propelled grenades to improvised explosive devices. The PKK took advantage of the collapse of the Saddam Hussein’s rule after 2003 to establish their headquarters in exile in the secure Qandil Mountains of northern Iraq in the Iraqi Kurdish region of that [country](#).

The PKK and Russia have a strategic synergy. Since the Turkish shooting down of the Russian jet late last year in Syrian airspace, Russia has dramatically turned policy to isolate and contain Turkey. That has meant that today the PKK and its Syrian affiliate together with Moscow share common enemies in ISIS and in Turkey, while the US must walk on eggshells because Turkey is a strategically vital NATO member. Working with the Kurds, Moscow can advance the war against ISIS, which is not in the ceasefire agreement, hence fair target, and

punish Turkey at the same time. That, in turn, allows Putin to outmaneuver the US once more in Syria and provoke a rift in Turkish-US relations, weakening NATO.

Israeli President meets Putin

Into this already highly complex geometry comes Israel.

Relations between Moscow and Tel Aviv in recent months are more open than those between Netanyahu's government and the Obama Administration. Immediately after start of deployment of Russian forces to Syria in September last year, Netanyahu rushed to Moscow to create a coordination mechanism between the Russian forces in Syria and the Israeli military.

On March 15, the President of Israel, Reuven Rivlin, came to Moscow to meet Vladimir Putin and discuss Syria and the background to the Russian troop withdrawal. According to Israeli media, the two discussed continued coordination between Jerusalem and Moscow regarding military activities in Syria. In talks with Prime Minister Medvedev, Russia's government also spoke of increasing imports of Israeli agriculture products to replace embargoed Turkish imports. Rivlin mentioned the bonds created as well by the one million Russian-origin citizens today in Israel. The Rivlin Moscow talks were sanctioned by Prime Minister Netanyahu who himself will soon meet Putin to discuss Syria and trade relations. An Israeli official told Israeli media that "over the last few months we had regular contact with the Russians at the highest level, and that will [continue](#)."

A Russo-Israeli-Kurd Alliance?

As with the Iraqi Kurds, the Kurds of Syria are also in behind-the-scenes talks with the Netanyahu government to establish relations. According to Professor Ofra Bengio, head of the Kurdish studies program at Tel Aviv University, in an interview with *The Times of Israel*, the Syrian Kurds are willing to have relations with Israel as well as with Russia. Bengio stated, referring to Syrian Kurd leaders, "I know some that some have been to Israel behind the scenes but do not publicize it." She herself said she has made personal contacts with Syrian Kurds who would like to send the message that they are willing to have relations. "This is like the Kurds of Iraq behind the scenes. Once they feel stronger, they can think about taking relations into the open," she said. In 2014, Netanyahu stated, "We should ... support the Kurdish aspiration for independence," adding that the Kurds are "a nation of fighters [who] have proved political commitment and are worthy of [independence](#)."

When Iraqi Kurds defied Baghdad in 2015 and began direct sale of the oil in their Kurd region, Israel became the major buyer. The oil revenues allowed the Iraqi Kurds to finance their fight to expel ISIS from the [region](#).

Clearly there is more going on between Moscow-Tel Aviv and the newly-declared autonomous Syrian Kurds than meets the ordinary garden variety eye. According to a report in a natural gas industry blog, Israel and Russia are about to agree upon a modus operandi in the East Mediterranean. Israel would agree to end talks with Turkey's erratic Erdogan on sale of Israeli Leviathan natural gas to Turkey to displace Russian Gazprom gas which still supplies 60% of Turkish gas despite sanctions. The report states that the Israeli military establishment "prefers maintaining military cooperation with Russia over potential Israeli gas sales to Turkey if they hurt Russian interests and anger [Putin](#)."

The Israel-Turkey negotiations of Israeli weapons and gas was backed by US Vice President Joe Biden on March 14, in a Tel Aviv meeting with Netanyahu. According to Israeli press reports, Biden pressed Netanyahu to reach an agreement with Turkey to end the six-year stand-off in Turkey-Israel relations. According to *Haaretz*, Biden told Netanyahu that Turkey's president, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, was eager to conclude the reconciliation agreement with Israel and said he, Biden, was willing to assist "in any way possible" to get an agreement between the two allies of the [US](#).

Kerry's Plan B?

If in fact Putin now has managed to bring Netanyahu to cancel the Israeli-Turkish rapprochement negotiations in favor of closer cooperation with Russia in not-yet-disclosed areas, it would throw a gargantuan monkey wrench into US plans for Syria and the entire Middle East as well as US plans to isolate and weaken Russia.

On February 23, US Secretary of State John Kerry told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in a schizophrenic testimony that Russia had played a vital role in getting the Geneva and other peace talks to happen, as well as getting Iran to agree the nuclear deal. Then, without hesitating, he added the curious statement, "There is a significant discussion taking place now about a Plan B in the event that we do not succeed at the [negotiating] [table](#)." Kerry didn't elaborate other than to hint it included the Balkanization of Syria into autonomous regions, stating that it could be "too late to keep as a whole Syria if we wait much longer."

Kerry's 'Plan B' is reportedly a Brookings Institution think-tank report authored several years ago by Michael O'Hanlon, who very recently repeated his plan in the US media. It calls for dividing Syria into a confederation of several sectors: "one largely Alawite (Assad's own sect), along the Mediterranean coast; another Kurdish, along the north and northeast corridors near the Turkish border; a third primarily Druse, in the southwest; a fourth largely made up of Sunni Muslims; and then a central zone of intermixed groups in the country's main population belt from Damascus to Aleppo. The last zone would likely be difficult to stabilize, but the others might not be so tough. Under such an arrangement, Assad would ultimately have to step down from power in Damascus. As a compromise, however, he could perhaps remain leader of the Alawite sector. A weak central government would [replace him](#)."

When asked about Kerry's reference to a US "Plan B" Putin's spokesman, Dmitry Peskov replied that Russia is currently focusing on 'Plan A' in dealing with the situation in Syria.

Given the Janus-faced US policy of support and non-support for the autonomy of the Syrian Kurds, its talk about Plan B Bosnia-style Balkanization of Syria into a group of weak regions, its support for Erdogan's reconciliation with Israel, the recent Russian moves raise more questions than answers. Is Russia ready to renege on its promised delivery of its advanced S-300 anti-aircraft systems to Iran and future relations with Teheran including integration into the China-Iran-Russia economic sphere within the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the construction of the Eurasian New Economic Silk Road, in order to cut a deal with Israel against Turkey as some Israeli media suggest? If not, what is the real geopolitical strategy of Putin after the military draw-down in Syria, support for Kurdish autonomy, and the simultaneous talks with Rivlin? Is a huge trap being baited for Erdogan to go mad and invade the now autonomous Kurdish region along its border, to set the stage to force Turkey to cede autonomy also to Turkish PKK and other Kurds? Is that Washington's intent?

What is clear is that all players in this great game for the energy riches of Syria and the entire Middle East are engaged in deception, all to everyone. Syria is nowhere near an honestly-negotiated peace.

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