

## Our Kurdish Hero...the Terrorist?

Trump wants to fete him in Washington, but the Turks want this SDF general extradited for crimes. How did we get here?

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*In the past month, the name and image of [General Mazloum Abdi](#), the commander of the [Kurdish Syrian Democratic Forces, or SDF](#), has become well known to Americans. The decision by President Trump to precipitously withdraw U.S. forces from northeastern Syria, thereby greenlighting a Turkish military incursion which targeted Mazloum and his forces, prompted a widespread discussion about the American “abandonment” of its Kurdish allies, and General Mazloum quickly became the face of the Kurds.*

After [the targeted killing](#) of ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, by elite commandos from the [Joint Special Operations Command \(JSOC\)](#), General Mazloum’s status as a heroic figure was cemented, given the role he and the SDF played in that effort. But Mazloum has a dark past which makes his relationship with the U.S. highly problematic.

To hear the Kurds tell it, the attack on al-Baghdadi wouldn’t—indeed, couldn’t—have happened without their support.

“Since 15 May [2019],” [Polat Can](#), a senior adviser to the SDF, [declared via Twitter](#), “we have been working together with the CIA to track Al Baghdadi and monitor him closely.”

The operation to kill Baghdadi was supposed to take place a month ago, Mr. Can tweeted, but the decision by President Trump to pull American troops out of northeastern Syria, followed by the Turkish incursion into the evacuated territory, caused a postponement. Eventually, however, the mission was a “go.”

The Genesis of the assault on al-Baghdadi, officially known as [Operation Kayla Mueller](#), in honor of the American aid worker who was captured, tortured and killed by al-Baghdadi, did not originate with the Kurds, but rather in Turkey, where in February 2018 [Turkish intelligence agents arrested Ismael al-Ethawi](#), one of al-Baghdadi’s closest aides. The Turks turned al-Ethawi over to Iraqi authorities, who under interrogation by the Iraqis and the CIA revealed the identities of other close associates of al-Baghdadi, who were in turn detained and questioned.

From this information, the Iraqis and the CIA were able to piece together a pattern of activity used by al-Baghdadi to avoid detection. Armed with this information, the CIA approached the Syrian Kurds of the SDF, whose intelligence service deployed a network of human agents to try and locate al-Baghdadi, which they succeeded in doing in May 2019.

[According to General Abdi](#), his forces were able to identify the house where al-Baghdadi was staying, and then insert an informant who was able to provide critical details about its physical properties. Abdistated that the SDF set up a secret intelligence cell to control the informant and invited the CIA to participate. The intelligence produced by this cell was instrumental in the planning of the assault on al-Baghdadi's compound. According to Abdi, the informant was one of two adult men detained by the assault force and evacuated from the site once the mission was completed.

U.S. Special Operations Forces have a history of close cooperation with Syrian Kurds in carrying out anti-ISIS operations. [This cooperation began in the fall of 2014](#), when Joint Tactical Air Control (JTAC)-qualified U.S. Special Operators, skilled in directing close air support of forces engaged in combat, began controlling coalition air strikes in support of Kurdish forces defending the Syrian city of Kobani from ISIS attack. The Americans had never worked with the Syrian Kurds before, and there was a steep learning curve on the part of both the Americans and their Kurdish counterparts. The arrival of Iraqi Kurdish Special Forces who had a history of working with American JTACs in Iraq helped the targeting process immensely.

Since 2012 both the CIA and the U.S. Department of Defense had been engaged in [dual equip and train missions](#) to field viable opposition forces capable of overthrowing the government of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. By 2014, these efforts had failed abysmally. At the same time, the regime change focus was overtaken by the rise of ISIS, and the need to field a force capable of defeating this new threat.

From the Kobani experience, the U.S. identified the [People's Protection Unites, or YPG](#)—the military arm of the [Democratic Union Party, or PYD](#), as an ideal partner in the counter-ISIS fight. There was, however, one major hitch—the PYD was an affiliate of the [Kurdish Worker's Party, or PKK](#), a Kurdish group that has been fighting a war of independence against Turkey for more than 30 years, and which both the U.S. and Turkey, a key NATO ally, identified as a terrorist organization.

The [U.S. Department of State designated the PKK as a foreign terrorist organization](#) in 1997 under section 219 of the Immigration and Nationality Act; in 2001 the U.S. Government followed up by designating the PKK as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist Entity pursuant to Executive Order 13224. These designations were designed to restrict fundraising opportunities by denying the PKK access to U.S. financial systems, as well as facilitate the capture and prosecution of persons affiliated with the PKK. If the United States were to engage in a train and equip program with the YPG, the Department of Defense would run afoul of U.S. law, [18 U.S. Code sections 2339B](#) and [2339A](#), prohibiting the provision of material support to designated foreign terrorist organizations.

As the saying goes, [therein lies the rub](#); in order to defeat ISIS, the United States would need to ally itself with a terrorist group it was prohibited by law from doing so. Moreover, it would need to provide weapons and training to an organization which had, over the course of 30-plus years, [killed tens of thousands](#) of Turks through hundreds of terrorist actions.

The Turks had witnessed the Kobani fight up close and personally and were able to be persuaded of the necessity of a U.S.-Kurdish alliance in order to defeat ISIS, with one catch—the U.S. needed to keep careful track of all the weapons it supplied to the YPG, and promise to recover them all once the threat from ISIS had been eliminated. By October

2015, President Obama had authorized a force of 50 JSOC operators to enter Syria to work with the SDF; this number soon grew to more than 300.

From its very inception, the U.S.-SDF relationship was a study in contradiction and controversy. The sleight of hand rebranding ploy by the U.S. was a transparent gimmick that fooled no-one; when the elite soldiers of the YPG's anti-terrorism force (YAT) started using [expensive U.S.-made equipment](#), such as night-vision goggles and specially fitted out M-4 assault weapons, the Pentagon was quick to note that it had not provided the equipment, since that would violate U.S. law (the equipment instead made its way to the Kurds via a circuitous route that by-passed Congressional oversight.)

Moreover, the U.S. backtracked from its [assurances that it would recover the weapons it had supplied to the SDF](#), extending the timeline until it became obvious to all the weapons were there to stay.

Most problematic of all was the fact that the U.S., through its interaction with the SDF, was working closely with personalities the Turks reviled as senior leadership figures within the PKK, including General Abdi. While the Turks were able to turn a blind eye to this cozy relationship, when the Kurds proclaimed their own autonomous region within Syria, which they [called Rojava](#), in May 2016, the Turks were quick to [condemn both it and the U.S.-Kurdish military relationship](#).

Abdi, whose real name is [Ferhad Abdi Şahin](#), [participated in PKK attacks on Turkish villages and military outposts](#) in the mid- to late-1990's which killed dozens of Turkish civilians and soldiers. After serving as a PKK fundraiser in Europe, Mazloum returned to northern Iraq where he commanded PKK special operations forces who were responsible for dozens of violent attacks against targets inside Turkey. In 2011 the Turks petitioned Interpol [to issue a Red Notice](#) on Mazloum, designating him as a top tier terrorist who should be detained on sight. Mazloum returned to Syria in 2013 to take command of the YPG.

Today General Abdi finds himself feted by [President Trump](#), [Congress](#) and the [U.S. media](#) for his role in defeating ISIS and killing al-Baghdadi. Trump has indicated [a desire to meet General Mazloum](#), while Senator Lindsay Graham [has pushed the State Department](#) to help expedite a visa so Abdi can travel to the United States.

For its part, Turkey has [drawn up a formal request](#) that the United States arrest General Mazloum, citing the Interpol Red Notice, and extradite him to Turkey to face justice. In a world where hypocrisy and double standards are more commonplace than consistent application of the rule of law, the American relationship with General Mazloum—our man in Rojava—stands out: to wage a war against terror, the United States has allied with a man who, by any measure, meets the definition of terrorist. Consistency has never been the forte of American diplomacy, yet in the coming weeks and months the U.S. will have to decide whether it values its relationship with Turkey, a NATO ally, over a man the Turks revile as a terrorist, and yet has provided the U.S. with yeoman's service in the fight against ISIS.

*Postscript—the status of General Mazloum as a pro-American heroic figure was further cemented [with the killing of al-Baghdadi's alleged successor](#), Abu Hesên al Mouhjiir, on October 29, in a coordinated assault by SDF commandos and U.S. Delta Force operators.*

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*Featured image: The leader of the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces, General Mazloum Abdi.  
(Source: TAC)*

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