



The Syrian Kurds in the US foreign policy: long-term strategy or tactical ploy?

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Photo de couverture prise par Kurdish YPG Fighters, septembre 2015.

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Introduction

During the Syrian conflict, the Kurds appeared to be a vital ally for the US and even stronger, a secular bulwark in the fight against the Islamist groups dominating the anti-Assad opposition. As the Syrian Kurds pushed ISIL (Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant) back in ruthless battles in first Kobani and later Raqqa, Rojava or “The land where the sun sets” began to take shape. Rojava was declared as an autonomous state in 2014 and the Democratic Party Union (PYD) with its military organization - People’s Protection Units (YPG) - remained largely in control of three main Syrian cantons: Jazeera, Kobani and Afrin. While Assad’s government or the United Nations never officially recognized it, Rojava had the backing of the US since 2014, as the Americans provided Kurdish fighters with air cover and weapons in their fight against ISIL. This was a huge advancement of the Kurdish cause in Syria, “where the Ba’ath regime restrained any form of Kurdish political activity and mobilization” during years (Federici, 2015). Dynamics of the Syrian conflict offered a new chance for Syrian Kurds to affirm their rights and find self-government in Syria. Since then, Kurdish aspirations and hopes for autonomy were high before quickly realizing that they were facing once again American abandonment.

The Kurds have had a long historical fight to sustain an identity of their own. As an ethnic community, the Kurds have long been discriminated against for being non-Arab, non-Turk or Sunni by major authorities surrounding them. In 1516, the Kurds were divided between the Sunni Ottoman Empire and the Shiite Safavid Empire of Persia (Meho et al., 2004). However, the Kurds began to be really dispersed among four countries with the Treaty of Lausanne in 1923. The agreements, which were about the partition of the Ottoman Empire during World War I between France and the United Kingdom, led to the division of 35 million Kurds among Syria (3%), Iraq (16.5%), Iran (39%) and Turkey (42%) (Federici, 2015). Today, the Kurds constitute one of the oldest communities in Middle East and the world’s largest nation without a state. Being neglected in the international system has made the Kurds a “stump” easy to influence, especially by major powers. In fact, the Kurds are often abandoned, once used, to face the domination of their own local authorities.

One of the last examples could be President Trump’s decision, on October 2019, to pull US troops out of Syria. After this announcement, the Syrian Kurds discovered that “their important role in the fight against ISIL may not have secured Washington’s help in their struggle against their other enemies” (Hiltermann, 2018). This declaration marked a harsh turn for the Kurds. Indeed, the days of Kurdish autonomy in Syria were numbered with Turkish President Erdogan’s main purpose: to crush the PYD/YPG and Kurdish nationalism in a more general way. The US-Turkish relations have been tense because of the US support for the Kurdish PYD. Turkey views the Kurdish political party as a terrorist group and an extension of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) that has for decades threatened Turkey’s national security

with a separatist insurgency (Butler et al., 2019). But the only thing stopping President Erdogan was the presence of US troops and removing them have left the Kurds extremely exposed. Without US soldiers as a buffer, the Kurds were stuck between Assad's regime and Turkey's desire for revenge. The agreement between Washington and Ankara was fraught with consequences for the Syrian Kurds who have faced extreme violence, ethnic cleansing, war crime and confrontations. It is a tragedy for a population which has already paid heavily for its commitment in the fight against ISIL.

I- The PYD's ascent to power in northeastern Syria

When the popular uprising began against Assad's regime in 2011, a Syrian opposition quickly took place represented by the Syrian National Council (SNC) and associated anti-government Syrian groups. With the outbreak of the demonstrations, the PYD decided to join the Kurdish Patriotic Movement and not to cooperate with the Syrian opposition because in the first place, the Kurds saw this civil war as an intra-Arab struggle (Thornton, 2015). Moreover, the SNC was accused by the PYD of acting in Turkey's benefits. Finally, the refusal of the Arab opposition to officially recognize the rights of the Kurdish minority and the radicalization of the armed rebellion helped to keep definitely Kurdish opponents away from the Syrian opposition.

1- The Syrian Kurds: the Outsider in the Syrian conflict

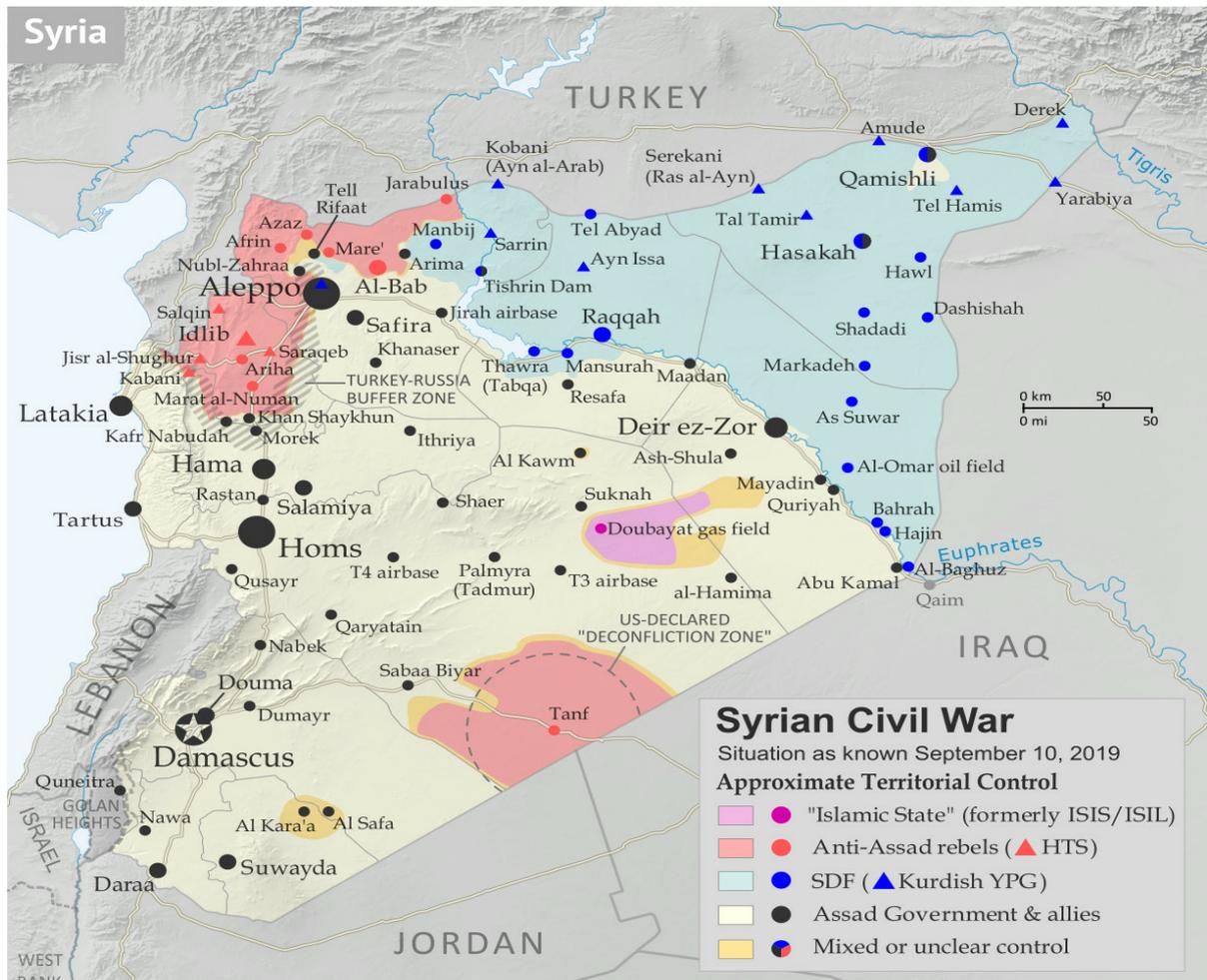
Being denied and repressed by the Baathist regime since 1962, the Syrian Kurds joined for the first time the popular uprising against Assad's regime on the 1st April 2011 in Qamishli, Amouda and Hassake. But the PYD, the Kurdish democratic political party established in 2003, decided to stay out of the war and to wait for appropriate conditions in which to take action. The PYD's success in northeastern Syrian did not seem certain from the outset since the Syrian Kurds were divided into three main factions - the Kurdish National Council, the National Coordination Body for Democratic Change and the Syrian National Council. The PYD was just one of the many political groups among Syria's Kurds. However, the one who controlled almost the whole length of the Turkish-Syrian border was the PYD.

In July 2012, the PYD, the only political organization with military force, seized the opportunity of Assad's ground forces withdrawal from several border towns in northern Syria. Assad's decision was taken as an implicit agreement to the PYD to conquer the region and take control of the abandoned military and administrative structures, in order to destabilize Turkey. This takeover by the PYD was sometimes violent, especially against its Kurdish opponents, as explained by a Human Rights Watch report published in June 2014 (Desoli, 2015). In this report, Human Rights Watch showed abuses committed by the PYD's security army, the Assayish, which it found guilty of "summary judgments, arrests and torture" against

opponents. According to the document, nine politicians have disappeared "or were killed in areas controlled by the PYD/YPG".

In this way, the PYD captured several Kurdish-majority towns nearly without a fight. This strategy provoked allegations of opportunism and suspicions of treason by the opposition, especially given rising tensions between the PYD and the mostly Arab Syrian rebels. Many parties accused the PYD of complicity with Assad's regime in exchange for an autonomous region in northeastern Syria. Neither friend nor enemy, relations between the PYD and Assad's regime were very ambiguous. The PYD's credibility was damaged because it had agreed a non-aggression pact with the Syrian regime that has permitted it to focus on the fight against ISIL (Plakoudas, 2017). This arrangement was essential for both actors; it allowed the Kurds to escape aerial bombardments while Assad could keep his image of minority protector in Syria. Even Ankara accused Damascus of having directly given several parts of northern Syria to the Kurdish Workers' Party (PKK), since the PYD is considered as the Syrian branch of the PKK, which is listed as a terrorist group by Turkey, the US and several other states and organizations.

That is how the PYD and the YPG were a kind of third camp of the conflict between regime and opposition. The complicated alliance between the PYD and the opposition collapsed in July 2013 and confrontations began with a new non-state actor.



Base map by Koen Adams of onestopmap.com, with territorial control by Evan Centanni and Djordje Djukic. Reproduced with permission from www.polgeonow.com

2- ISIL and Kurdish heroism

In the first six months of 2014, the Syrian Kurds were deeply harassed by ISIL, a new jihadist group that views the Kurds as ideological opponents as well as enemies for control of territory and resources. For the first time, the YPG, the PYD's military organization, began engaging militarily in the defense of Kurdish towns and villages, and it appeared to be a more efficient actor on the ground than their Iraqi Kurdish neighbors, the Peshmergas (Gunes et al., 2015). The Syrian war has definitely shaped a new dynamic in the region that was the militarization of the Syrian Kurds' struggle.

The 13th September 2014, the city of Kobani was targeted for the second time by ISIL; this attack predestined the end of the Kurdish presence in the region for the Jihadists. The abrupt loss of a dozen villages during the first days of fight immediately put the YPG in a difficult position (Desoli, 2015). The rise of ISIL was one of the main factors changing in the Middle-East political map but thanks to an international coalition, the Kurds quickly benefited of the Siege of Kobani. Indeed, the US targeted the Jihadists with air strikes for the first time, which led to the media coverage of the Kobani fight and the Kurdish cause in general. Furthermore, it showed to the world the successful cooperation between the US and the PYD/YPG that

persisted despite the disapproval of Turkey. The US support enabled the Kurds to fight ISIL but also to gain control of most of Syria's border with Turkey. The cooperation between the US, the PYD/YPG, the Peshmergas and the Free Syrian Army (FSA) in Kobani showed the international support for the Kurdish cause. The victories on the field of battle against ISIL have upgraded the status of the PYD into an official ally of the US and enhanced YPG's legitimacy (Plakoudas, 2017). The PYD was finally perceived by the international coalition as a respectable ally.

After the siege of Kobani, the YPG was easily allowed to capture the city of Tell Abyad, thus uniting the Kobani and Jazeera cantons. Since then, Rojava, or the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (NES) began to take shape and to weight in the dynamics of the Syrian civil war.

3- The rise of Rojava: establishment of a Kurdish autonomy

By early 2016, the future for the Syrian Kurds was very encouraging: they had banished ISIL, benefited US protection and created a political project in Rojava. Before the Syrian uprising, the notion of Kurdish autonomy was inconceivable but since 2013 local self-governance by Syrian Kurds has become a reality. Benefiting from a weakened regime and a divided Kurdish opposition, the PYD had the possibility to govern authorities in northeastern Syria (Federici, 2015). After establishing control over the Kurdish regions, the PYD proclaimed the creation of Rojava gathering 1.5 million inhabitants (Desoli, 2015).

This rise to power is explained by the party's organization, discipline and ability to take advantage of the Syrian crisis dynamics. The PYD owes much of its influence and power to the fact that it is the only political organization with its own militia, the YPG with its 65 000 fighters (Thornton, 2015). The close relations between the PYD and the PKK have also permitted necessary training, well-trained fighters and weapons supplies. The success of the PYD has driven the Syrian Kurds to support the political organization that offers security, services and employment (Plakoudas, 2017). Without necessarily approving the PYD's authoritarian methods, many Kurds see this party as the only one capable to keep Kurdish areas out of Islamist forces. The numerous threats have pushed many Syrian Kurds to join or support the YPG as their only protection that is why the YPG may be stronger than the PYD.

However, many Syrians see the PYD's success as part of Assad's plan to destabilize the Syrian opposition and not as a true Kurdish political project. Indeed, the Syrian regime has not given up its full power in northeastern Syria, it has continued to pay the incomes of its public employees and many state structures continue to have their budgets from the government, weakening the Kurdish authorities' legitimacy. In fact, Rojava is far from consolidated as a complete political entity (Kaya et al., 2017). That is why not all members of YPG follow PYD's ideas. But how to blame a party like the PYD who gave "so many martyrs to save the Kurdish cause"?

II- US foreign policy toward the Syrian Kurds (under Obama's administration)

1- Background: the Kurds in US foreign policy

Relations between the US and the Kurds date back to the First World War. With the Treaty of Sèvres in 1920, the American President Wilson called for autonomy to the non-Turkish peoples of the Ottoman Empire, as the Kurds or the Armenians. Rejected by the new Turkish nationalist regime, the Treaty of Sèvres was substituted by the Treaty of Lausanne in 1923 and the plan of a Kurdish independence was rapidly aborted, leaving the Kurds without their promised country.

Throughout the 20th century, the US has alternated between supporting the Kurds and ignoring them. For years, the US administration has considered the Kurdish people as a tool in order to guarantee their national interests in the Middle East; the Kurds have been exploited several times by the US to destabilize regional regimes. For example, America's attention towards the Kurds increased during the Cold War, when Kurdish ambitions was a useful mean for keeping Communist governments in Iraq out of power. That is why, during the fifties and sixties, the US sent important military and financial support for Iraqi Kurdish rebels and the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP) of Mustafa Barzani. This backing stopped in 1975 when Iraq and Iran signed the Algiers Accord, which settled a territorial dispute in Tehran's favor in exchange for an end to Iran's support for Kurdish rebels in Iraq. Then, the Ford administration avoided support for an independent Kurdistan (Küçükkeles et al., 2014). That is why in 1988, during the Iran-Iraq war, when Saddam Hussein decided to attack chemically the city of Halabja, killing between 3200 and 5000 Kurds, the US decided to stand aside. However, three years later, the US encouraged once again a Kurdish revolt to help fall Saddam Hussein at the end of the Gulf war, which failed to intervene because Saddam Hussein's forces crushed the uprising.

Meanwhile in Turkey, the US stayed out of the clashes between Ankara and the Kurds because of its strategic alliance. One more time, the US remained silent when Turkey cracked down on Kurdish groups during the PKK's uprising. Later, Clinton administration even provided intelligence and diplomatic support to capture PKK's leader Abdullah Öcalan in 1999. In 2003, Washington became, suddenly, more supportive of the Kurdish objectives as tensions with Turkey mounted over the 2003 American invasion in Iraq. Bush's administration turned to Iraqi Kurds as partners against Saddam Hussein's regime. That is how Iraqi Kurds were allowed to seize control of much of Northern Iraq. But at the same time, Washington pursued to back Turkey's campaign against the PKK (Küçükkeles et al., 2014).

Concerning Syrian Kurds, the Ba'ath government deprived them of the rights to be employed, to own property, to enter into a legal marriage or to participate in elections, and the US simply closed its eyes. Things were completely different when the Syrian conflict began. Since then, the Kurdish elite had been hoping to attain their national rights for a long time through American support but it did not realize that it was only fighting a proxy war on behalf of the US. Their ignorance encouraged the US to exploit the Kurds repeatedly. However, the surprising truth is that the Kurds never learned "to restrain themselves from being pawns of interests for the US" (Meho et al., 2004). This Kurdish curious behavior toward American opportunism found itself once again during the Syrian conflict.

2- US-Kurdish alliance

The US-PYD/YPG alliance flourished under the administration of former President Barack Obama, who was ready to support the direct armament of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), a coalition of Kurdish and Arab forces fighting against ISIL. The specific interests in the region leading them to cooperate jointly easily explain this US-Kurdish alliance.

a. Kurdish aspirations

The first purpose of the Kurds was clearly political that is to say a Kurdish State in northeastern Syria. For this, the PYD/YPG faced two possibilities: keeping control of Rojava with American protection or restoring the region to the Syrian regime in exchange for Russian protection against Turkey (Balanche, 2018). The Kurdish party has obviously leaned for the first solution.

As said earlier, the liberation of Kobane played an essential role in reviving aspiration among Syrian Kurdish nationalists to claim more sovereignty. On a strategic level, the fight against ISIL has led to a better cooperation between the US and the YPG. This has lent support to the legitimacy of the PYD and its Rojava project, allowing the Kurds able to present themselves as a key American ally with regional impact. The PYD hoped to achieve an influential role in the region through its fight against ISIL, as the Iraqi Kurds did in 2003 after supporting the US presence in Iraq. There is evidence the PYD's strategy has produced results. Western media has often described the PYD/YPG as the American most effective local partner in the fight against ISIL. The US has relied on intelligence delivered by the YPG and did not label the PYD as a terrorist organization, despite its relations to the PKK. In addition, Kurdish officials revealed that the US and the PYD, along with Turkey, have held weeks of secret talks to plan Kobani's defense. It comes as no surprise that in 2015 the US decided to airdropping weapons directly to the YPG.

The Syrian Kurds were very conscious of the vital American role in the conflict and were deeply like to appeal US' attention (Gunter, 2015). Therefore, the PYD deliberately positioned itself as democratic forces in order to attract international support, particularly from the US. The PYD rapidly presented itself as a pluralist and democratic party, which includes all other

Kurdish parties as well as different ethnic and religious groups in Syria. Kurdish leaders definitely used the role of Kurds fighting ISIL as an example of fighting authoritarianism. They promoted the idea that Kurdish liberation was synonymous with greater democratic rights in Middle East (Kaya et al., 2017). The PYD governing plan rooted in values of democracy has worked and given hope to many Kurds who desire an emergency exit from the damages of Assad's regime and ISIL.

Adding to its political aspirations, the PYD/YPG had a second strategic interest in northeastern Syria: hydrocarbons, which the Syrian government wants at all costs to recover this region. This region produces between 50% and 70% of the oil of Syria, and Assad needed it to regain its energy independence and limit its reliance from Iran and Russia. An attempt to remove the YPG by force in February 2018, failed due to the strong American aviation. Therefore, governing this region was an economical asset for the PYD/YPG.

However, the tactical fault of the Kurdish PYD/YPG was to be entirely dependent on the US, which led Russia to abandon it to its fate and it is known that Moscow holds more levers than Washington does in the Syrian theatre. Did the PYD really believe that the Americans would fly to its rescue every time? That Washington would take the risk of a major confrontation with Turkey, an ally of NATO?

b. America's interests:

As known, the US does not officially support the creation of a Kurdish state. But in practice, US policy is unpredictable and indistinct. Washington was first reluctant to engage the Syrian Kurds, especially the PYD/YPG forces because of its last involvement in Iraq, where the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) was perceived as a threat to Iraq's unity. US officials even warned the PYD against attempts to declare autonomy in northern Syria. Furthermore, the PYD was implicated in violence against opposition groups in northern Syria, including a bloody repression on Kurdish anti-Assad protesters in the city of Amuda in July 2013 that Washington had openly condemn. Nevertheless, the US regarded the Kurdish party and its army as valuable partners in helping rout ISIL from Syria, the original purpose of the US military deployment (Hubbard, 2018). Since 2014, the YPG was receiving arms and military advice from the US (Küçükkeles et al., 2014). Washington's hesitancy to engage on the Kurdish issue was largely due to Obama administration's aim on ending the Syrian conflict. The outbreak of the civil war forced the US to take a clearer position on Syrian Kurdish aspirations. Therefore, the US has never expressed a foreign strategy towards the Kurds since they are living across four different countries (Gunter, 2015).

At first, the American strategy was to strengthen the Kurdish National Council while convincing the PYD to join the anti-Assad opposition. Despite these efforts, the PYD stayed largely in control of Rojava and had the faithfulness of the majority of armed Kurdish militias (Küçükkeles et al., 2014). Rapidly, the US came to see the PYD as a bulwark against the Islamist

groups as ISIL or Jabhat al-Nusra. That is how the US quickly faced a delicate position: cooperating with the PYD/YPG, which is crucial for the political transition in Syria, while preserving Turkey as an indispensable ally against Russia and Iran.

The main question for the US was therefore to find a plan to keep Turkey in the American camp without losing the Kurdish military support. If the US loses the YPG, they would be forced to leave the north of Syria that would leave the arena open to the Syrian regime and its Iranian ally. Even if the Kurds proved to be the most effective allies in the fight against ISIL, they had ousted ISIL from more than 99% of the territory it had occupied; the US had to avoid an ethnic conflict in northern Syria. Indeed, the Arabs did not support the inversion of power for the benefit of the Kurds (Nordland, 2018) and it was not realistic to think that the PYD/YPG could rule Arab provinces. However, according to American officers, Kurdish forces were needed to guarantee that ISIL was gone for good. They warned if the US stopped cooperating with the Kurds, ISIL would regroup and regain parts of Syria.

The American presence in Syria was also justified in order to stem Iranian expansionism in the region and the achievement of “Iranian corridor” from Teheran to Beirut that could threaten Israel (Balanche, 2018). That is why the US needed Turkey as an ally but also other Syrian actors in the region in an anti-Iranian struggle. The US knew that they cannot count on Arab Sunni tribes as they keep local interests. Therefore, the only remaining ally was the PYD. This did not mean that the Kurds are necessarily more reliable than the Arab tribes of the Euphrates valley are, but they are less likely to change the cooperation if its rivals are outbidding.

Nevertheless, US officials were pursuing more motivated goals. As long as US forces remained on the ground in Syria, the Trump administration wanted to use them to preserve a foothold in the country. Rather than trying to help the Syrian Kurds achieve their dream of an autonomous region within Syria, Trump and his administration were trying to exploit the revolution in Rojava to attain regime change in Syria. US special envoy James Jeffrey has described the US-Kurdish relationship as “tactical and temporary”.

c. International dimensions

Uniting with the US allowed the PYD to be safe from the Turkish threat. Being an American ally permitted the Kurds to increase their influence in Rojava despite Turkey’s worries over the Kurdish issue. Indeed, Turkey was deeply reluctant to see a continuous Kurdish belt along its border. Turkey shared fears that the PKK aims to form a second base of operations in neighboring Syria. This would allow the PKK to increase its power as a regional actor and put weight on Turkey to make political concessions to its Kurdish minority. The YPG’s military efficiency and the PYD’s strong links to the PKK were seen as a direct threat to Turkish national security. President Recep Tayyip Erdogan made it abundantly clear that Ankara considered the fight in Kobani as including not one but two terrorist organizations. Even if the US

bypassed Turkey's opinion about the US-YPG alliance, the US decision in 2016 to side with Turkey when Syrian Kurds attempted to cross the Euphrates was a reminder that the international community is more likely to choose Turkey's interests over the Kurds' aspirations.

The US-Kurdish alliance was also a way to discourage Assad's forces from invading the Kurdish region even as they regained major areas elsewhere from anti-Assad fighters. Indeed, Russia wanted to see Assad regain control of Syria's oil fields to help fund the country's reconstruction while Iran wanted to geographically connect forces it supports in Syria and Lebanon with those in Iraq (Hubbard, 2018). But on the other hand, Moscow, Teheran and Damascus needed the PYD/YPG in order to exert a threat on Turkey. That is how the Syrian civil war became definitely vulnerable to foreign interference. The different proxy battles between these main powers complicated the situation. But while Russia, Turkey and Iran have a clear goal in Syria, the US policy goal remained less clear.

III- Consequences of the US withdrawal announcement (under Trump's administration)

The Syrian conflict presented a new dimension when President Trump announced, for the first time, the complete and immediate withdrawal of US forces from Syria with a tweet and a video in December 2018, surprising his generals, alarming Congress and allies and causing his defense secretary to quit in protest (Gearan, 2019). High-level US officials were taken aback by this announcement and persuaded President Trump to delay the withdrawal, justifying that it would leave a "vacuum in Syria" (Hunt, 2019). Dissonance between Trump and his advisers has weakened the US position and was already seen as a signal of Assad's victory. This statement was also seen as a betrayal of the Kurds and Turkey interpreted this withdrawal as a direct green light to carry out its threatened invasion of northeastern Syria, and days later, Turkey invaded Afrin, a Kurdish enclave. Controlling a Syrian territory gave President Erdogan negotiating power to discuss the end of the war.

Considering this first announcement, the US was on the edge of a second historical betrayal (Nordland, 2018). In 2017, Iraqi Kurds had a sample of what can happen when you ignore Washington's wills. Iraq's Kurdish region held an independence referendum, hoping to gain an eventual separation in negotiations with Baghdad. The Trump administration warned them not to proceed, citing poor timing, as the fight against ISIS was still current. The US administration then did nothing when Baghdad imposed heavy sanctions on the region and took disputed territories back from Kurdish control. The Iraqi Kurdish leaders learned that a global power would not rush to their aid if they threaten its interests. In this case, protecting the fight against ISIL and preserving a unified Iraq as a bulwark against Iranian influence were the priority. From this, the PYD/YPG should have known that they will possibly face a similar predicament (Hiltermann, 2018). The American withdrawal which allowed the Turkish

invasion was not a surprise; but the Kurds believed to the end that the Americans were going to protect them.

President Trump's administration guaranteed that Kurdish fighters would be protected from Turkish military threat. In January 2018, American officials proposed the creation of a 30 000 Kurdish-led border force that would stay at least two years to protect the Kurds but the plan was refused by Turkey. At this moment, it seemed that President Trump realized that giving up the YPG was a disastrous idea in terms of trusting the US in the region. This supposition was clearly wrong since on the 6th October 2019, after a phone call with President Erdogan, President Trump suddenly ordered, for the second time, the American troops in Syria to withdraw and go back home. In the midst of impeachment proceedings, his voters could only approve. President Trump did not see the strategic error; he saw it as a good electoral coup but it was clearly a dangerous bet. This time, President Trump paved the way for President Erdogan to invade Syria and that is how, on the 9th October, Turkey invaded Rojava. Since then, Ankara has conducted several military operations in Syria targeting YPG fighters, despite President Trump's tweet declaring that the US would "devastate Turkey economically if they hit Kurds", before adding "likewise do not want the Kurds to provoke Turkey".

1- The end of the Kurdish dream

When Trump announced that he was ordering the withdrawal of US troops from Syria, the Syrian Kurds directly feared Turkey would increase its attacks against them and these fears were justified. Many US officials agree that Turkey is an important threat to the stability of the region. That is how the Kurds, feeling betrayed, asked the Syrian government to protect them. This request surprised some US officials since there was no consultation or organization between the Kurds and the US. With this request, the PYD/YPG invited Assad into some of those areas that he has coveted. The Syrian Kurds had no other possibility than reconciling with Assad's regime. The reason the Kurdish command has reached an agreement with the Syrian regime, it is to try to avoid the massacre of civilian populations by the Turkish forces. The PYD has asked Assad for a compromise that could include a certain degree of Kurdish autonomy in exchange of the sharing of oil wealth. However, Assad refused the full autonomy of the PYD/YPG. That is why Kurdish leaders considered handing over Kurdish administration to Assad but they insist that the YPG's police remain in Kurdish areas. This agreement benefited the Syrian forces to win back Rojava, which was the big step to Assad's goal of reclaiming all of Syria (Hubbard, 2018). But Assad did not appear to be in a hurry to reach a solution. Actually, he had time since he had Russia and Iran on his side, both have interests in the outcome and could find common ground on the Kurdish question.

In early October, the US suddenly allowed Turkey to attack, despite "promises" that American forces would remain in Syria until the defeat of the Islamic State and a political solution to the

Syrian crisis had been reached. President Trump also threatened Turkey with economic sanctions but it appears that the American President changed his mind. On October 14th, President Trump praised his Turkish Counterpart by saying he is a “big fan” of President Erdogan.

As Turkey continued its military assault, on the 17th October, the US persuaded President Erdogan to "pause" Turkey's offensive to allow it to "facilitate the withdrawal of YPG forces from the Turkish-controlled safe zone" (BBC News, 2019). The ceasefire largely held. Normally to get a ceasefire, you have to negotiate with both parties. With President Trump, the method was different: he got along with one of the two camps, in this case Turkey, he gave it what it asked for, and he proclaimed that it was a great diplomatic victory. Indeed, the terms of the agreement gave President Erdogan exactly what he wanted: a buffer zone at its frontier with northern Syria. Turkey claimed that the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) had to retreat twenty miles along three hundred miles of the Turkish border, in order to create a safe zone for Turkey.

The main point of a safe zone is to protect civilians fleeing from conflict. Human Rights Watch defines safe zones as "areas designated by agreement of parties to an armed conflict in which military forces will not deploy or carry out attacks". The notion of “safe zones” for refugees to return to has always been a fraught one. During past conflicts, “safe zones” have rarely been safe (Nevett, 2019). “Without adequate safeguards, the promise of safety can be an illusion when “safe areas” come under deliberate attack, as they did in Srebrenica in 1995” (Fakih, 2019). Further violence could pave the way for ethnic cleansing, forcing hundreds of thousands of additional Kurdish civilians to flee their homes and letting Turkey resettle the safe zone mainly with Syrian Arab refugees.

On 23rd October 2019, President Erdogan and President Vladimir Putin announced a new plan in Sochi to end the offensive (BBC News, 2019). The agreement reached for a new “safe zone”, that secures a goal long sought by Erdogan (Lang, 2019).

They agreed on these main points:

1. Turkish forces would be allowed to keep the 120km-long strip of territory they had captured between Tal Abyad and Ras al Ain
2. Russian and Syrian troops would take control of the rest of the border area and ensure YPG fighters pulled back 30km from the border
3. Turkish and Russian troops would start joint patrols inside a 10km-deep zone along the border on the 29th October
4. Turkey and Russia would facilitate the return of volunteer refugees to Syria

- Kurdish-led forces
- Turkish military and Turkish-backed Syrian rebels
- Syrian Government
- 10km-deep zone patrolled by Turkish and Russian militaries
- 30km-deep zone controlled by Syrian and Russian militaries
- Motorway



Source: *Conflict Monitor by HIS Market, ISW (Turkey/Russia deal), 28th October 2019*

This new alliance between Ankara and Damascus was perceived as strange. Indeed, it is a turnaround because it must be remembered that in 2011, President Erdogan had done everything to bring down his "friend" Bashar el Assad. Ankara was betting on a rapid overthrow of Bashar el Assad and the coming to power of the Muslim Brotherhood. Eight years later, renewing ties with Syria amounts to admitting the Turkish failure (Andlauer, 2019).

Relations between Syria and Turkey have been restored since President Putin dusted off the Adana agreement in 1998 to convince President Erdogan to restore friendly relations with his Syrian neighbor. "Putin has obtained from Erdogan the promise that from now on the whole process will be managed in collaboration with Syria," says editorial writer Murat Yetkin. This agreement obliged Damascus to prevent its territory from serving as a rear base for the PKK. Thus, the Turks always considered that this document authorized them to carry out limited

incursions in Syrian territory. And the 4th article of the Sochi agreement reaffirms the importance of the Adana agreement (Andlauer, 2019).

However, there are questions about this deal, such as how long the Turkish forces can stay and what will happen to the tens of thousands of people being detained by the SDF on suspicion of links to IS. But there is no doubt it has cemented Russia's role as the pivotal player in Syria.

The US could have used its presence to provide the Kurds with time, space and security to reach an agreement with Assad's regime on questions of control and governance, one that is also acceptable for Turkey, but it didn't (Hiltermann, 2018). Instead, President Trump's lack of strategy has facilitated Turkey's victory in the region.

2- Ankara's increasing bargaining power

The US initially told Turkey that its alliance with the PYD/YPG would be temporary and that the weapons supplied in Kobani would rapidly be reclaimed. But things turned out to be different since there was a need to field an effective force against ISIL. Initially, American diplomats avoided publicizing their contacts with the YPG but rapidly the US military was eager to praise their battlefield prowess. More and more weapons were supplied to the Syrian Kurds and Turkey's anger was increasing, especially when the YPG, backed by the US, took over the city of Manbij in 2016.

With Turkey threatening to launch a military operation against the YPG, the US dealt with a devil's bargain: watching the Syrian Kurds collapse or fuelling a crisis with Turkey. At first place, the US chose a temporary solution. With tens of thousands of Turkish troops massed near the border, US officials decided in July 2019 to propose an offer to calm Turkey's concerns. The proposal included a joint US-Turkish joint military operation to secure a strip of the border from which the YPG would be withdrawn. Turkey rapidly rejected the offer insisting on a "safe zone" to control it alone. Ankara wanted a 30km wide corridor along the Syrian border that would displace 90% of the Syrian Kurdish population (Kurdistan 24, 2019), and has pushed the US to disarm Kurdish militias. The Turkish government was also seeking to establish areas that would allow the safe return of the 3.6 million Syrian refugees living in Turkey. Any significant population shifts would be very destabilizing and compound the danger posed by ISIL's resurgence. (BBC News, 2019). The Turks have understood that with each threat of invading northeastern Syria, they are able to force the US into agreeing to more of their demands.

At the same time, the Kurds have warned that a fight with Turkey may leave them unable to guard ISIL prisoners captured. Aldar Xelil, a Kurdish politician, has announced, "Either we will fight Turkey or guard the prisoners but we can't do both together". The Kurds are using ISIL

prisoners as a card because they know that a victory against Turkey is an illusion. The Turkish attacks have given the opportunity for roughly 600 Islamic State suspects to escape SDF-guarded prisons and camps (Kurdistan 24, 2019).

Things went further when President Trump officially confirmed the removal of American troops in northeastern Syria. Turkey immediately decided to attack the YPG in order to “counter terrorism”. Indeed, Ankara did not lose its time, the Syrian Kurdish territories were quickly transformed into hunger grounds. Thousands of Kurds found themselves in exodus and the Kurdish political and military authorities declared a state of emergency and general mobilization. According to the United Nations, at least 130 000 civilians fled the fighting in less than a week. Ilhan Ahmed, the co-chair of the Syrian Democratic Council (SDC), confirms that “at least 300 000 people were displaced, 250 people were killed with most of them being children. Furthermore, 300 people were unaccounted for and went missing” (Kurdistan 24, 2019).

Considering these events, it is clear that the failure of the US has thrown the already devastated region into even deeper turmoil, endangering effort to rout ISIL remnants and to counter Iran’s expansionism. Moscow, Teheran and Damascus were eager for American removal from northern Syria.

3- US out, Russia in

The decision made by President Trump undermined America’s credibility around the world. The abruptness of the decision took nearly everyone by surprise; no one had time to prepare. Russia and its allies could not dream of a better scenario. The complete withdrawal of the American forces made disappear from the landscape the only power able to compete with Russia and to influence the future of Syria. When Vladimir Putin enlisted in Syria in September 2015, "his main goal was to prove that he could put a stop to what he sees as US policy to bring down unwanted diets," writes Russian journalist Konstantin Eggert. “All the rest - to show the Russian military presence in the eastern Mediterranean, to test new weapons, to prove to his few allies that the Kremlin was reliable - was secondary "(Dorman et al., 2019).

The Turkish operation in Syria was perceived as an operation for Russia because it involved the withdrawal of Western forces, considered as the main obstacle to the Russian-Iranian-Syrian axis. Moreover, this operation increased tensions between Westerners and Turkey, which Moscow could benefit from by posing as the most reliable ally for Ankara. And finally, the Turkish offensive threw the Kurds into the arms of the Syrian regime, facilitating the direct contact between Turkey and Syria. "Russia prefers to see the Assad’s regime controlling Rojava than the Kurds who have been reluctant to cooperate with Damascus," said Timur Akhmetov, Turkey's expert on the Russian Council for International Affairs.

If the Syrian army has sent troops into Rojava to counter the Turkish offensive, it's a safe bet that there will be no fight. It is rather a distribution of the control of the zones under the aegis of Russia. The Turks are preparing to continue their operations towards the south while the Syrian regime is moving towards the west.

For the moment, Russia is playing its score perfectly: it has allowed the Syrian regime to win the war without deploying enormous resources and has self-assigned the role of referee in the region, able to speak to all parties and to always decide in the interest of his interests. Moscow wants to convert its military victory into a political victory (Samrani, 2019). "It is undoubtedly the "Putin moment" in the Middle East. With this case, Russia has shown that it is the actor who determines the orientations and the balance of power ", explains the sociologist Adel Bakawan, member of the Institut de recherche et d'études Méditerranée Proche-Orient (iReMMO). Russia is clearly returning to the status of power in the Middle East that it enjoyed during the Cold War while Syrian Kurds see their dream of independence buried.

4- President Trump's foreign policy shift

As said earlier, President Trump announced the complete withdrawal of American forces from northern Syria in October, but since he has declared that the US would retain around 500 troops to guard oil facilities, along with Kurdish-led forces (BBC News, 2019). Indeed, the US military started reinforcing its position around oil fields in eastern Syria and has returned to six bases they previously abandoned, saying "the new deployments are part of its continuing counter-terrorist mission" (Borger, 2019). But experts are questioning the credibility of this mission. "Following the last withdrawal and the whiplash of reinserting, by what credibility can we continue to be there?" asks Melissa Dalton, a senior fellow at the Center for Strategic and International Studies. The adjusted military presence has also raised legal questions about a deployment focused on another country's natural resources (Geltzer, 2019). Stephen Vladeck, a national security law professor at the University of Texas at Austin, said there is no solid legal argument the Trump administration can make for claiming Syria's oil (Burns and Baldor, 2019).

This decision is a contradiction with Trump's decision to abandon the SDF, saying it was not "America's job to police a longstanding conflict between Turks and Kurds" (Borger, 2019). But the Pentagon has persuaded President Trump to expand the military mission because it knows that "his eyes have always been on the upcoming elections, he wants to boost support from his political base", and it worked since Pentagon's view is supported by some Trump allies in Congress. President Trump has only one priority: to "repel the Democratic assault" and win the election next year. Foreign policy is only an instrument at its disposal. While the Secretary of Defense, Mark Esper, claimed that the objective of the deployment is to guard the oil fields to prevent the revenues benefiting ISIS, President Trump said he expects the US

to benefit from Syria's oil revenues: "We're keeping the oil, remember that. We want to keep the oil 45 million dollars a month" (BBC News, 2019). By contradicting the Pentagon, President Trump complicates the diplomats' work. Indeed, Mark Esper had to correct the President and to add that the military deployment was to keep the oil fields out of Syrian regime or Russian control, so that benefits go to the SDF (Borger, 2019). The Pentagon sought to bring clarity by insisting that the mission was unchanged, and that US troops were in Syria exclusively to defeat ISIL in partnership with the SDF (Borger, 2019). "We want to make sure that SDF does have access to those resources in order to guard the prisons, in order to arm their own troops, in order to assist us with the defeat of ISIS mission", Esper said. The Kurds are currently the main beneficiaries of the oil production, "SDF and allied tribes are currently in control of approximately 70% of Syria's national oil resources and a number of valuable gas facilities", explains Charles Lister, a senior fellow at the Middle-East Institute. But the US presence in eastern Syria complicates the Kurds' position since they were forced to negotiate a deal with the Syrian regime for protection against Turkey (Seligman, 2019). In recent days, the Kurdish withdrawal seems to have halted, even in Kurdish forces have already withdrawn from the frontier. It led Russia, angered, to warn that the Kurds should uphold their commitment and not rely, once again, on US aid (Bar'el, 2019).

By claiming a right to Syria's oil, President Trump has added more complexity to a military mission he has twice affirmed he was ending so the troops could go back home (Burns and Baldor, 2019). The explanations concerning the adjusted military mission in eastern Syria contradict Trump's recent declaration that the Islamic State has been defeated, particularly after the killing of its leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi which reminds that American hard power still exists. It seems that ISIL is an excuse for President Trump "to backtrack on his decision to withdraw from Syria given the criticism in Congress, including from Republicans who were furious when the Kurds were abandoned", (Bar'el, 2019).

Conclusion

The Syrian conflict presents both regional and global challenges due to the involvement of the major powers. The struggle for regional influence between these different actors contributed to the uniqueness of the conflict. As a stateless people sandwiched between

major powers, the Syrian Kurds had to trust the US to give them some freedom and autonomy. However, it appeared that the US was, once again, an inconsistent friend. Its “lead from behind” strategy failed because of the weak American presence in Syria, which limited its influence about local politics and regional issues. The Kurds’ alliance with the US turned them from a marginalized minority into temporary powerful actors for a large part of Syria. The pressure on the Kurds has settled everyone. The US used the Kurds to keep their interests in the region while the Russians wanted it to maintain the Damascus regime.

President Trump’s last announcement concerning the Syrian oil fields’ protection by the US was “emblematic of the chaos that has set in the American foreign policy process” (Al-jazeera, 2019). The US foreign policy is less clear than ever, President Trump kept contradicting his advisers – and himself. Discord and disunity will certainly continue since the American President doesn’t know enough what he wants. The absence of a clear American strategy led to a period of uncertainty and turbulence, an uncertain future for the Syrian Kurds and has let Russia to be the dominant actor in the region. Many have perceived Russia as the new arbitrator and mediator in the region. The Russian-Turkish agreement buried the Kurdish political project, that is to say the establishment of an autonomous Kurdish territory in northern Syria and “solidified the diplomatic marginalization of the US in an area where it had been a stabilizing force for years” (Lang, 2019). On the whole, the Syrian landscape is transforming. The current deal carries challenges of its own.

The case of the Syrian conflict illustrates the limit of the hegemony of the United States in the new international context. Now, the United States (hegemon) is obliged to take emerging powers into account in international politics. Every decision will now have to be agreed on by three parties: Russia, the US and Turkey. But the fact that the plan has been endorsed by Russia and the US conveys a message that Turkey can do whatever it wants (Barber, 2019). Furthermore, Turkey also received help for its “safe zone” plan from the European Union since President Erdogan has “repeatedly threatened to “open the gates” to Europe” (Bathke, 2019).

President Trump’s recent decisions have also left American allies as Israel newly worried that they could be left in the wind, just as the Kurds have been. This betrayal of the Kurds has an impact on the other American partners in the world. This turnaround will further damage relations with European allies, who have not been consulted. It is important for the US to re-establish its credibility and the image of being a reliable partner. Indeed, if the US does not want to be the world’s policeman, it needs allies.

Regarding the Syrian Kurds, the old Kurdish expression “the Kurds have no friends but the mountains” has regained such value among them lately “that it is worth noticing why the Kurds now have the US foremost in mind when they say it” (Glavin, 2015).

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L'analyse des éléments déclencheurs des conflits et des instruments de leur gestion - sanctions et incitants économiques comme moyens de politique étrangère; crises et interventions humanitaires; rôle de la mémoire dans un processus de réconciliation, par exemple - est combinée à l'étude empirique de différends internationaux et de processus de paix spécifiques.