



Rojava — « The people reject Turkey's presence and the return of the Syrian regime »

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What is left of the Autonomous administration of North East Syria — more commonly referred to as Rojava — following the Turkish invasion of October 2019 and the announcement of the return of the Syrian regime in this region it had abandoned at the beginning of the civil war? During their last reporting on the ground, journalists Chris den Hond and Mireille Court had a rare opportunity to meet Mazlum Abdi and Polat Can near the front line. Both are Syrian Kurds. The former spent time in Assad's prison while he is also wanted in Turkey: he is general and commander-in-chief of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), a joint Kurdish, Arab, Christian and Syriac military coalition known for defeating ISIS. The latter is a former journalist and one of the founders of the Kurdish self-defense units known as the YPG. He currently serves as a commander within the SDF. We publish their exchange as a way to shed some light on the ongoing situation in North-Eastern Syria.



How do you explain that Turkey now occupies a large perimeter between Tall Abyad/Girê Spi¹ and Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê after they had also invaded the province of Afrin back in 2018?

Mazloun Abdi : Turkey's invasion of Tall Abyad and Serê Kaniyê is linked to the question of Idlib. While Russia and the Syrian regime were attacking Idlib and reclaiming highways M5 and M4, Turkey negotiated to obtain control over Tell Abyad and Serê Kaniyê as a compensation. It's a political bargain.

Polat Can : First of all, there were agreements concluded between Turkey and Russia with the approval of the United States. At that time, we were deeply affected by the fact that the international powers did not establish a no-fly zone. It hurt us a lot. We know that NATO members will not fight against Turkey, but still. There should be a way to contain it. Turkey kills Kurds with European weapons: its drones come from Italy. The Leopard tank is German while some of its technology is French or British. If Turkey doesn't get the green light from NATO, it couldn't come here to fight against us in Syria. In Afrin, we resisted for 58 days. More than 1100 combatants were killed. We were well prepared but we couldn't do anything against carpet bombings. This is why a no-fly zone is crucial for us. The same happened last October in Serê Kaniyê. To be honest with you, as a YPG commander, I can tell you that if we obtain a no-fly zone right now, we could reclaim Tall Abyad and Serê Kaniyê in one week. We know these mercenaries pretty well. They are ex-al Nosra and ex-ISIS fighters. We fought them and defeated them in the past. Turkey, and by extension NATO, are helping them and putting them back on the



saddle

Has the Syrian regime returned to SDF²-held areas after the Turkish invasion of October 2019?

« As long as these demands are not met, there will be no global agreement because they are red lines we won't negotiate upon. »

Mazloun Abdi : Following an agreement with Russia, the regime redeployed on the Turkish border in a few minor border outposts. It is more of a political presence than a military one. It's merely symbolic. It is the result of an agreement between Turkey and Russia to prevent Turkey for annexing additional territory to those it already controls between Tell Abyad and Serê Kaniyê. In other parts of the area, the regime doesn't have more presence than before: no more than a few neighborhoods in Qamishli and Hassakeh, but not in any territory controlled by the SDF.

What are your demands to the Regime before accepting any agreement?

Mazloun Abdi : There are two essential things we require from the Regime in order to find a lasting solution in Syria: First: that the [administration]'s autonomy be enshrined in the Syrian constitution. Second: that the SDF be guaranteed by constitution to be part of the defense forces of Syria. As long as these demands are not met, there will be no global agreement because they are red lines we won't negotiate upon. We say that the SDF will need a special status within the Syrian defense system. The protection of the North of Syria will have to remain SDF's responsibility. Its fighters will have to do their military service here. Finally, the SDF will have its headquarters in this region.



□Near to Serê Kaniyê, April 2014, by Loez□

Polat Can : Before anything: Rojava cannot go back to the pre-2010 situation. It will never happen. Second of all, the SDF will not disappear. Thirdly, we will not allow for the Kurds to be deprived from their rights. Four: We will not allow for the destruction of the relations between Kurds, Arabs and Christians. Apart from that, we can negotiate anything they want — the name of the region, the flag, the border, everything. It is true that we have lost two important cities, Tal Abyad and Serê Kaniyê, but our autonomous administration remains intact in the area and it's working. There is a military agreement with the Syrian regime to secure the border, but in other parts, it's the SDF that is still in control of the North Eastern region of Syria — in Manbij, in Kobane... in Raqqa, Tabqa, Qamishli, Hassakeh, Derik.

Why despite the Turkish aggression, the Syrian regime didn't do anything to support you?

« The Regime wants to rule all of Syria! It thinks it can reestablish its grip as it was before 2010. »

Polat Can : The Regime wants to rule all of Syria! We have two major problems with the Syrian regime: it has a very chauvinistic mentality and it thinks it can reestablish its grip as it was before 2010. In the North and East of Syria, Arabs and Kurds are currently living



together and it's getting better and better. It should be known that most Arabs do not want a return of the Syrian regime here. When we thought of allowing the Regime to take some military positions in Deir ez Zour and Raqqa, some Arabs came to us and clearly stated: « You shouldn't let the Regime come back here. » These Arab clans are mostly Sunnis and the regime is Alawite. Iran is Chiite. A tribal leader once told me: « You are Kurds, we don't like you, but in the end you are Sunnis like us, so we're going to collaborate with you. » If they have to choose between a Chiite Iran, the Alawite regime or Kurds, they will choose Kurds.

How do you assess the role of the United States and Russia in Syria?

Mazloun Abdi : The American policy has been terrible and was detrimental to the whole region. It played against Kurds, Arabs and Christians. But the Syrian crisis is an international crisis and the solution can only be international, with an involvement of those international powers.

Polat Can : What did the United States obtain from withdrawing from Syria following Turkey's invasion? Before October, 35 % of the Syrian territory was under U.S. control. Now, Russia replaced them. The Kurds and the people of Middle East in general do not trust the United States. During the recent uprising in Iran, Syrian Kurds supported the Iranian Kurds while saying: « Be careful. Do not trust the United States. » This is why the U.S.A has lost more than us here. Regarding Russia: it is clear that it can play a more important role than the U.S. in order to find a lasting solution. The policy of the United States is very peculiar: if their president is having an argument with his wife, he will tweet about it. If he decides to withdraw his troops from Syria one bright morning, he sends a tweet too. And this man leads the United States! He is an arrogant person.



[Kobané, April 2018, by Loez]

Mazloun Abdi : For now, in terms of political process, Russia's role is important. Moscow is pushing for a solution between us and the Syrian government. President Putin pressured Damascus to strike a deal, but we do not believe that putting more pressure will bring any true solutions.

Polat Can : Russians want to work with us and find solutions with Damascus, but seen how they also negotiate with Turkey, we don't really trust them. Russia want to reclaim control over all of Syria and she's quite angry about the relationship that we, the SDF, enjoy with the international coalition led by the United States. Moreover, the bargaining between Russia and Turkey troubles us. It's as if they would say to Turkey: take this part of Syria, we'll have that other one. This is what happened in Sochi³.

Was coexistence weakened or strengthened following the Turkish invasion?

« Our conclusion is unambiguous: Kurds and Arabs resisted together against a Turkish invasion. »

Mazloun Abdi : One of the objectives of the Turkish military attack was to shatter the existing unity of Kurds, Arabs and Syrians living in this region. But it's the opposite that took place. The populations here understood that their fate were connected, that it's not

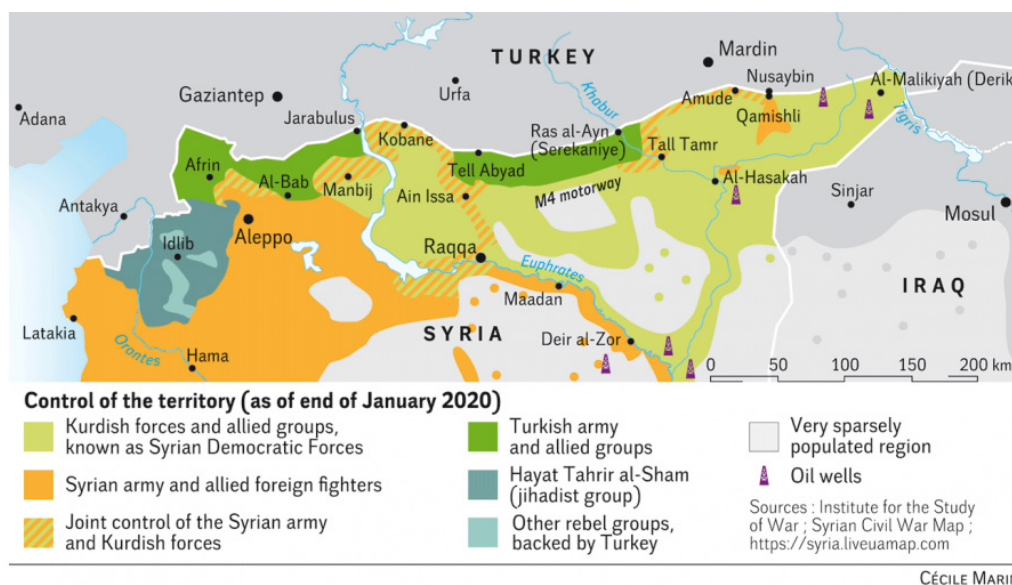


only the Kurds that were targeted. This brought the people closer and made them more united than before. There is more solidarity. The Turkish attack was a challenge for us. Many hoped that the work we had set up in the last eight years would be annihilated and that the SDF would disappear, but we have proven in these last months that the opposite was achievable. We are stronger than ever, as are the ties between the different communities here. The population doesn't want Turkey nor the return of the Regime.

Polat Can : Our relationship with the Arabs is not just a tactical cooperation. Rather, it is a strategic interaction. In the past, the Syrian regime tried to convince Arabs that Kurds were pro-Israeli Zionists, atheists and capitalists. Now, in Raqqa and Deir ez Zour, Arab tribes request that we bring young Kurdish fighters to protect the region together. When I was in charge of liberating the Deir ez Zour province, I had 13 000 soldiers under my command. Only a hundred of them were Kurds. All the others were Arabs. The vast majority of the 1000 martyrs we had were Arabs. We live together, we are compelled to mutually respect one another. It's tough, but we are changing the mentalities. The Turkish invasion was a big test for us. Everyone was watching to see if Kurds and Arabs were capable of sticking together or if on the contrary, Turkey was capable of destroying what we had established here in the last years. Our conclusion is unambiguous: Kurds and Arabs resisted together against a Turkish invasion. In the 100 % Arab areas of Deir Ez Zour and Raqqa for example, there was not a single Arab uprising against the SDF. Hundreds of young Arabs from these areas came to Serê Kaniyê to fight against the Turks. Our forces didn't scatter. The Arab clans didn't say: « We secede from the SDF. » Even the Arab communities of Ras al Ayn and Tall Abyad didn't rally the Turks. They [left their houses] and came to the territories held by the SDF. Our administration functions as before and its economy has more or less remained as it was prior to the Turkish assault.

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[Cécile Marin, for *Le Monde diplomatique* (January 2020)]

You can find the report, in French, of their stay in the columns of *Le Monde diplomatique* (February 2020).

Translation from French: Sylvain Mercadier, for Ballast magazine.

Banner photograph: near to Kobané, April 2018, by Loez.

1. Arabic and Kurdish names.[↵]
2. The SDF are a military coalition founded on October 10th 2015 during the syrian civil war. The SDF focus on uprooting the Islamic State from the area. The Kurdish YPG/J units are part of them as well as Arabic and Christian Syriac militias.[↵]
3. In November 2019, Presidents Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Vladimir Putin signed the so-called Sotchi agreement on Syria: Turkey promised to suspend its military operations and Russia proceeded to monitor the withdrawal of Kurdish self-defense units located on the Syrian-Turkish border.[↵]