

Syria: The Kurdish Issue in the American-Turkish Agenda

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Based on recent events in the region, Washington has refused Ankara's request to disarm the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and dismantle the Kurdish administration of Rojava. Thus, the *de facto* Kurdish autonomy in northeastern Syria has retained the prospect of independence and a special model of subordination to Damascus on the principle of confederation.

Ankara had hoped that after the overthrow of B. Assad, the new U.S. administration would withdraw American troops from eastern and northeastern Syria, thereby allowing Turkey and its affiliated government in Damascus to implement a plan to eliminate Rojava. Turkey expected that the new realities in the Middle East, in connection with the events in Syria, would lead to the unwinding of the American policy on the Kurdish track. Similar expectations existed in Ankara during D. Trump's first term (2017–2021), but he disappointed his NATO ally. The Turkish side, however, formed the impression that the eccentric American president was playing a double game.

On October 7, 2019, Trump announced the withdrawal of American forces from the Kurdish-controlled territories of Syria, implying that after the defeat of the ISIS, the Kurds were no longer needed by the United States and should deal with their problems themselves². In essence, this meant the approval of Turkey's plans to attack Rojava, for which it started preparing for immediately after the phone call between R. Erdogan and the U.S. leader on October 6, 2019. However, a day after announcing the distancing from the "*Kurdish terrorists*", the U.S. president threatened to destroy the Turkish economy if Ankara "*resorts to unnecessary and unprovoked attacks*" on the Kurdish forces in Syria³. Analysts linked the radical change in Trump's rhetoric to pressure from the Pentagon and the Senate on the "*inexperienced president*". Ankara, in turn, concluded that the Kurdish issue could not be resolved solely through agreements between country leaders and that it was represented an essential element of the U.S. long-term strategic plans in the Middle East and Asia as a whole. Subsequently, D. Trump continued to make contradictory statements regarding the Kurdish issue, which, however, did not lead to significant changes in the situation "on the ground".

The "*Peace Spring*" operation, launched by Turkey on October 9, 2019, was essentially limited in scope and did not solve the task of destroying the SDF forces (it was completely halted following the Sochi meeting between V. Putin and R. Erdogan on October 22, 2019), and the American contingent in Syria was not actually withdrawn, but only slightly reduced⁴.

¹ The original (in Rus.) was posted on our website on 22.02.2025.

² "Trump stated that Turkey, Russia, and the Kurds will resolve the regional conflict without the USA". Интерфакс (in Rus.), 07.10.2019, <https://www.interfax.ru/world/679402> (download date: 20.02.2025).

³ "Trump allowed attacking the Kurds – the main allies of the USA in Syria. Then he suddenly changed his mind and prohibited it". Meduza (in Rus.), 08.10.2019, <https://meduza.io/feature/2019/10/08/trump-razreshil-turtsii-atakovat-kurdov-glavnyh-soyuznikov-ssha-v-sirii-a-potom-vdrug-peredumal-i-zapretil> (download date: 20.02.2025).

⁴ "Trump promised to withdraw troops from Syria. But what actually happened?". BBC NEWS (in Rus.), 22.10.2019, <https://www.bbc.com/russian/news-50129624> (download date: 20.02.2025).

Later, immediately after D. Trump entered his second presidential term on January 31, 2025, he stated that he was inclined towards the final withdrawal of American troops from Syria. However, unlike his pre-election rhetoric on this issue, he did not make any sharp accents⁵. At the same time, the day before this statement, Israeli sources disseminated information that Tel Aviv was concerned about the possibility of the withdrawal of thousands of American troops from the eastern and northeastern regions of Syria, as this step would also “*affect the Kurdish minority in Syria*”⁶. Moreover, a month earlier, the Israeli media reported that the Israeli government was considering providing political support to the Syrian Kurds, who had appealed to Tel Aviv for protection from Turkish and Islamist aggression. Apparently, Israel used its influence on the administrations of J. Biden and his successor D. Trump to prevent the possibility of American withdrawal from the Kurdish-controlled Syrian territories after the fall of the “*B. al-Assad regime*”.

Thus, it can be concluded that the issue of the presence of American forces in Syria has always been inextricably linked to the “Kurdish question”, and the withdrawal of the contingent could mean a correction of Washington’s political approaches to the Kurdish issue. It seems that it is finally clear that the USA, despite the threats from Turkey, has chosen to maintain the Kurdish factor in its Middle Eastern policy and to extend its military presence in Rojava and the adjacent Syrian and Iraqi territories.

Throughout December 2024 and January 2025, R. Erdogan demanded that the SDF leadership, led by Mazloum Abdi, self-disband the Rojava administration and lay down their arms. Otherwise, the Turkish leader threatened to launch a large-scale military operation involving the Turkish regular army in addition to the forces of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTSh) and the Syrian National Army (SNA), the backbone of the “*New Syrian Army*”, the Turkish regular army was also to participate⁷. According to experts, Erdogan’s threats were actually addressed not so much to the Kurds themselves, but to the Western community led by the U.S., with the aim of probing their possible reaction to such an operation. Apparently, Washington’s response was extremely negative. Turkey was openly irritated mainly by the fact that the Americans argued the necessity of maintaining the Kurdish administration and extending their military presence near the Kurds due to the threat of the ISIS resurgence based on the remaining terrorist cells along the Syrian-Iraqi border. Ankara assured that it would personally destroy the remaining ISIS fighters and their sleeper cells on the condition of the elimination of Rojava and the restoration of Syria’s territorial integrity. Washington’s refusal was perceived by Ankara as an attempt to monopolize the fight against ISIS, which had become merely a convenient pretext for the USA and its allies to maintain their indefinite military presence in the region. Nevertheless, R. Erdogan’s threats of direct Turkish military intervention remained just statements.

Since early December, the units of the Syrian National Army (SNA), formally subordinated to Damascus but in fact loyal to Turkey, began military operations against the

⁵ “Trump stated the possibility of withdrawing troops from Syria”. Armenpress (in Rus.), 31.02.2025, <https://armenpress.am/ru/article/1210853/> (download date: 20.02.2025).

⁶ “Kan: Israel is concerned about US plans to withdraw troops from Syria”. TACC, 29.01.2025, <https://tass.ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/23000331> (download date: 21.02.2025).

⁷ “Erdogan stated the condition for a military operation on Syrian territory”. PBK (in Rus.), 08.01.2025, <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/08/01/2025/677e31f69a7947a653bc1a8e> (download date: 21.02.2025).

Kurds in Manbij and Kobani (Ayn al-Arab). However, these attacks did not produce any remarkable results, as the Kurdish forces claimed to enjoy broad American support and supplies of Western weapons⁸. In late December, as Kurdish forces counterattacked and regained control over several settlements and the strategic *Tishrin Dam* on the Euphrates River, Damascus requested negotiations with the SDF to find a political solution to the problem⁹.

According to Middle Eastern sources, representatives of the new Syrian leader, Ahmed al-Sharaa, tried to take maximalist positions at the negotiations that started in Doha. However, the Kurdish side rejected all conditions from Damascus that did not correspond to the situation “on the ground”. Although al-Sharaa’s representatives no longer demanded disarmament, their new proposal for the Kurds to merge with the “*New Syrian Army*” under Damascus’s terms was not approved. The Kurds stated that they were ready to join the ranks of the Syrian army but only as a separate division or army corps and without changing the deployment of their forces, which would remain in Rojava. They also demanded the preservation of the Kurdish administration in Rojava. At the same time, the Kurds supported Damascus’s proposal to maintain Syria’s territorial integrity and establish peace and tranquility in the country, which they believe Turkey and its affiliated units of the Syrian National Army are undermining¹⁰.

According to sources close to the Kurdish administration, a peace agreement is close to being reached, and some details of the agreement are currently being worked out. The agreement on the principal points is also indicated by the fact that by mid-February 2025, SDF leader Mazloun Abdi congratulated Ahmed al-Sharaa on his election as head of Syria and invited him to visit Kurdish territories. On February 20, 2025, it was also announced that the SDF forces would receive the status of a separate army unit from Damascus called the “*Jazeera Corps*”, and that the Kurdish administration would retain “*broad self-governance based on democratic confederalism*”. Additionally, there have been reports that Damascus, at the Kurdish side’s request, has initiated a process to try several SNA field commanders to military tribunal for looting, murder, and other crimes against the Kurds.

If the mentioned reports are confirmed, the events can be interpreted as a significant success for the Kurds, as they managed to secure all the rights they initially demanded from Damascus for peace. Accordingly, R. Erdogan’s rhetoric about the inevitable elimination of Kurdish subjectivity within the framework of Syrian sovereignty has lost its meaning. The Kurds of Rojava will retain their combat potential, as well as the actual military and administrative control over the territories of their compact settlement in northern Syria and east of the Euphrates (25–30% of the total territory of the Syrian Arab Republic).

⁸ “The Kurds will defend their lands in case of the US military withdrawal from Syria”. TACC (in Rus.), 05.02.2025, <https://tass.ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/23061563/> (download date: 21.02.2025).

⁹ “The new authorities of Syria are negotiating with the Kurds to cease hostilities in the northeast”. TACC (in Rus.), 29.12.2024, <https://tass.ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/22799661> (download date: 20.02.2025).

¹⁰ “Mazloun Abdi: Agreement with Damascus on Key Issues and Dialogue for Syria”. ANF NEWS (in Rus.), 31.01.2025, <https://anfrussian.com/%D0%9F%D0%BE%D0%BB%D0%B8%D1%82%D0%B8%D0%BA%D0%Bo/Mazlum-Abdi-soglasie-s-Damaskom-po-klucevyim-voprosam-i-dialogu-dla-Sirii-62871/> (download date: 20.02.2025).

Currently, there is no public data on how and to what extent Washington and Tel Aviv contributed to the successful negotiations between the central authorities in Damascus and the Kurdish administration. However, it is evident that the intervention of the American-Israeli tandem occurred and cannot be overestimated. It is clear that the D. Trump administration has finally decided that the Kurdish factor should remain on the Middle Eastern “chessboard”. There are indications, based on still unconfirmed data that the American and French military contingents in Syria are not being reduced, but instead are being discreetly reinforced with additional personnel and military-technical resources.

Thus, Ankara fails to solve the Kurdish problem in Syria, which undermines its position in the context of the global competition for hegemony in the region¹¹.

¹¹ See: “New Middle East” against “Ottoman Caliphate”. ARVAK Center Comment, 10.01.2025, <https://arvak.am/en/new-middle-east-vs-ottoman-empire/> (download date: 12.01.2025).