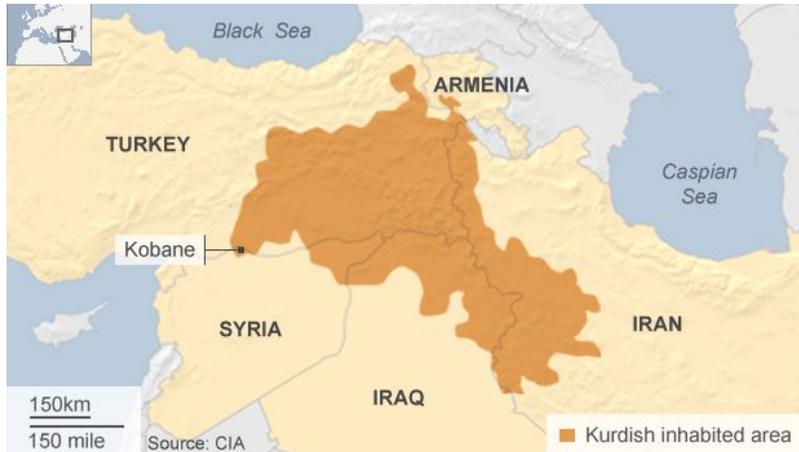


Kurds in Syria

Background: Who are the Kurds

- The Kurds are an ethnic group numbering between 25 and 35 million.
- They inhabit a mountainous region straddling the borders of Turkey, Iraq, Syria, Iran and Armenia (SEE MAP BELOW).



- The Kurds are mainly Sunni Muslims. They make up the fourth-largest ethnic group in the Middle East, but they have never obtained a permanent nation state.
- Post World War One and after the fall of the Ottoman Empire there was an agreement to allow the Kurds to create their own state, then to be known as Kurdistan. This was annotated in the treaty of Sevres in 1920.
- 3 years later, the treaty of Lausanna which outlined the borders of Turkey, there was no provision for the Kurdish state. Any and all attempts since then by the Kurds to create their own state has failed.

Background: Why is Turkey threatened by the Kurds?

- First fact: The Kurds make up about 15-20% of the Turkish population
- There were some Kurdish uprisings in the 1920s (same decade that saw their promised Kurdistan plan dashed).
- The Turkish authorities harshly dealt with these uprisings. Many parts of Kurdish culture were banned during this time, to include their language, festivals and even namesake (They were referred to as mountain Turks instead of Kurds).
- Fast forward to 1978, the PKK (Kurdistan Worker's Party) is established with the intent of creating an independent state within Turkey.

- Within 6 years time, the PKK would become an armed struggle causing the death 40,000 people and hundreds of thousands of displaced persons.
 - This struggle is where Turkey really started to view the PKK as a terrorist organization.
- Important point to clarify is that along the way, the PKK altered their end state goals in the early 1990s, calling instead for greater cultural and political autonomy.
- In 2013 a ceasefire was called after secret talks were had between the PKK and Turkey. This cease fire lasted all of 2 years. IS killed 33 activists in the Kurdish town of Suruc near the Syrian border.
 - The PKK accused Turkey of being complicit in the attack and retaliated against the local Turkey Soldiers and Police. Turkey at this point launched what they call a “synchronized war on terror” against the PKK and IS.
 - Turkey considers YPG (People’s protection unit) and the PYD (Democratic Union Party) to be an extension of the PKK, therefore they too must be eliminated.
 - *Key quote "For us, the PKK and Isil are the same," said President Erdogan this week, using another term for Islamic State.*

Background: Kurds in Iraq (For Dennis 😊)

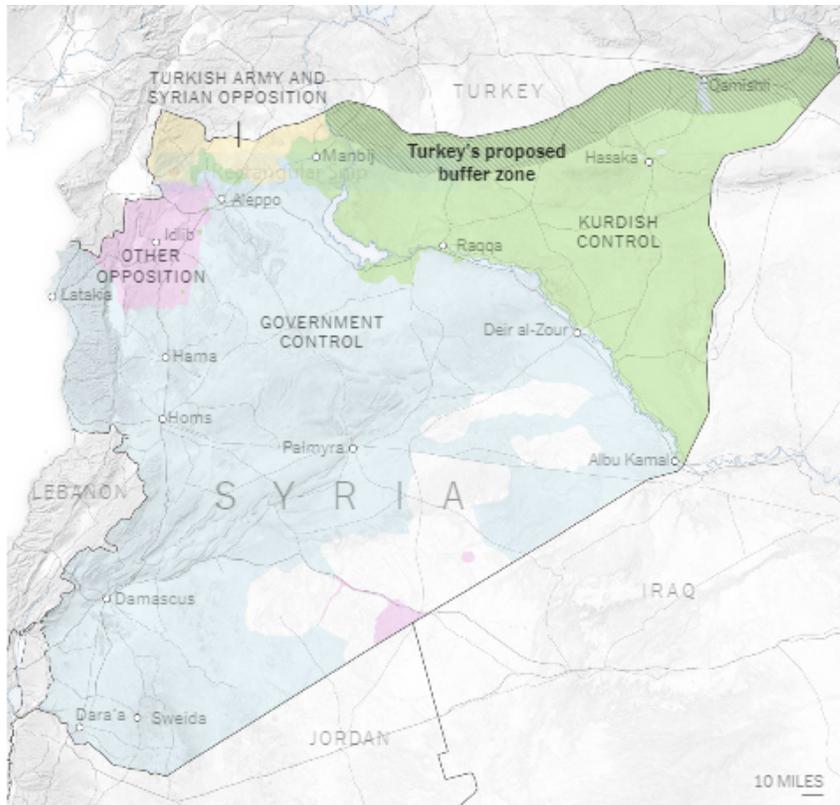
- Just like in Turkey, the Kurds began to fight for autonomy in Northern Iraq in the early 1960s via armed conflict.
- One of the retaliatory measures by the Iraqi government later in the mid 1970s was to reallocate Arabs into the Kurdish areas forcing the Kurds to relocate.
- This relocation was accelerated in the 1980s during the Iran/Iraq war.
- One of the lower points for the Kurds in Iraq was in 1988 when Saddam Hussein unleashed a massive campaign against the Kurds that included a chemical attack on Halabja.
- Fast forward to 1991 and the Iraq is on the losing end of the Gulf war due to the 100 hour ground war that routed Iraqi forces.
- This prompts the Kurds to raise another rebellion in hopes of attaining autonomy.
 - It was suppressed violently ny.
 - A Key thing to note here is that President Bush at the time urged the Shiite and Kurdish insurgents to rise up against Saddam Hussein only to leave them hanging post 1991 to fend for themselves against Saddam Hussein.

- This led to thousands of deaths against the Kurds.
- The only assistance the US gave was the emplacement of a “no fly zone” in Northern Iraq to allow the Kurds to gain some semblance of a semi-autonomous region
- *Interesting Quote: "To occupy Iraq would shatter our coalition, turning the whole Arab world against us, and make a broken tyrant into a latter-day Arab hero," Bush later said. "It would have taken us way beyond the imprimatur of international law, ... assigning young soldiers to a fruitless hunt for a securely entrenched dictator and condemning them to fight in what would be an unwinnable urban guerrilla war." – President Bush Sr.*
- Side note, Gulf War enabled the long term presence of US bases in the middle east in places like Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. The presence of US troops near muslim holy sites is cited by Osama Bin Laden as one of America’s biggest transgressions against Islam.
- In 2003, the Kurds assisted the US in toppling Saddam Hussein and created a regional government in 3 provinces.
- Recently (2017), The Kurdistan region in Iraq held a referendum on independence. The vote was opposed by the Iraqi government and shortly thereafter Pro Iraqi government forces took control of the region.

The Kurds and their fight with ISIS

- The first conflict the Kurds had with ISIS was in the mid 2013s as ISIS began to attack three Kurdish enclaves that bordered ISIS territory in Northern Syria.
- ISIS was finally repelled in mid 2014 by the Syrian Kurdish Union Party’s armed force, The “People’s Protection Units” (YPG).
- Around the same time ISIS was repelled in Syria (Mid 2014), ISIS began to advance into northern Iraq. This caused Iraq’s autonomous Kurdistan region to employ the Peshmerga forces (Kurdish military force in Northern Iraq) to areas that were abandoned by the Iraqi Army.
- A surprise offense by the Jihadist led to the Peshmerga having to withdraw and relinquish security/control over numerous towns.
- This was the trigger for the US to lead multinational coalition air strikes in Northern Iraq. Military advisors were also sent to the Peshmerga. The YPG (mentioned earlier) and the Kurdistan Worker’s Party (PKK) also came to the aid of the Peshmerga.
 - Reminder, the PKK is the Kurdish party fighting for Kurdish autonomy in Turkey for the past 3 decades.

- So in effect, we have Kurdish ground forces fighting IS in Northern Iraq with the support of a US led multinational coalition of air strikes. The Kurds identify ISIL fighters and the coalition employed the air strike.
- An important thing to note here is that, with regard to Syria, Turkey never sought to attack the Islamic State despite the extremely close proximity to its borders.
- Turkey more than anything impeded the ability of Turkish Kurds to move across the border to defend their Iraqi counterparts.
- The only time Turkey deems it necessary to attack IS in Syria is in the town of Jarablus. The taking of this key border town was really only so the YPG-led SDF would be unable to seize the key terrain that would have enabled them to link up with the Kurdish enclave of Afrin to the West.
- The Kurds, with the backing of the US military, its allies, and a handful of other Arab militias, steadily throw ISIS out of Northern Syria and establish control over a large stretch of terrain along the Turkey border.
- The Kurdish fight against ISIS culminated in March 2019 when the last pocket of the caliphate lost its final piece of territory in the village of Baghouz.
- The Kurds hailed this as a “total elimination” of the caliphate but were also quick to warn that Jihadist sleeper cells remained a “Great Threat” to the world.
- Important to note, SDF was left to deal with the thousands of suspected IS militants captured between 2017 and 2019.
 - Also important to note are the displaced women and children associated with the captured militants.
 - The US called for the repatriation of foreign nationals among them, but most of their home countries refused to do so.
- Turkey, saw that the terrain formerly controlled by ISIL is now in the hands of the Kurds under the banner of the SDF. This prompted Turkey to now wants to create a deep “safe zone” (20 mile wide) inside north-eastern Syria to protect its borders.



Source: Conflict Monitor by IHS Markit

- Turkey absolutely does not want the Kurds to retain any land because this may become the Kurdistan, the Kurds have been wanting for Decades.
- This desired safe zone is also where Turkey plans on emplacing the Syrian Refugees that found their way into Turkey.
- The Russian backed Syrian government has also continued to promise that it will retake control over ALL of Syria. Here is where it gets worse.....

US Pulls out.....

- On Oct 6, President Trump gave his endorsement for a Turkish Military Operation that would sweep across Kurdish forces near the Syrian Border.
- As stated earlier, Turkey views the Kurdish fighters under the Syrian Democratic Force (SDF) along the border to be a terrorist organization.
- While they are viewed as a terrorist organization to Turkey (due to their history discussed earlier), the Kurds in Syria operating under the SDF have been the United States' most reliable ally in fighting the Islamic State in the northern region of Syria.
- On Sunday, after a brief discussion with Turkey's president (Pres Erdogan), President Trump, through his officials, announced that the 100-150 military

personnel in Syria would be pulled back prior to any Turkish military operations against the Kurds.

- Pulled back being a relative term as the personnel are not leaving Syria, just the northern portion currently under Kurdish control.
- This is seen by many as an obvious betrayal. Turkey as predicted is now actively attacking the Kurds in Northern Syria with the goal of exterminating all Kurds they view as terrorists.
- Interesting enough is that the US Backed Kurdish forces in Northern Syria have actually begun to displace away from the Turkish border beginning this past August. This was done to basically appease the Turkish government
 - However, the pace of the retrograde was not fast enough for President Erdogan's liking therefore he planned to launch an incursion across the border.
- While many view the US Stance as one of just staying out of the way between the Kurds and the Turks, there is reason to believe the US may have assisted Turkey in their advance against the Kurds by sharing intelligence with Turkey as part of a counterterrorism partnership.
- Another component to this story that is interesting is the fact that President Trump appears to be operating against the advice of his military personnel, diplomats, and advisors.
- At the most recent UN General Assembly summit in late September, American officials, including Trump, were in consensus on ensuring the welfare of the Kurdish forces and warding off Turkey's persistent desire to attack those forces.
- President Erdogan and his officials perceived a sharp division between the president and the rest of his team, most notably his generals in Central Command.
 - Side note: Central command or CENTCOM is the Geographic Combatant Command that oversees all military operations in the Middle East. The whole world is divided up into Geographic Combatant Commands, the one involved here just happens to be CENTCOM due to its location.
- Despite, Turkey buying Russian S-400 missile defense, President Trump appears to favor President Erdogan.
- One component that is flying under the radar is the fact that even though President Trump announced the total defeat of the Islamic State, this is not true.

- Yes, the caliphate has lost its territory but the terrorist group is still present and regrouping.
- So we have two major issues here.
 - 1) The start of a possible Kurdish massacre at the hands of the Turks and
 - 2) The fact that IS is a relevant threat that is not entirely defeated. Another major issue to add is the fact that the Kurds in northern Syria, with the backing and support of the US has been thousands of IS prisoners. The Kurds are not able to both survive the ongoing Turkish attacks AND maintain security over their prisoners.
 - Prisoners are already escaping their captors during Turkish airstrikes on PKK forces.



^Former American Diplomat and Special Presidential envoy for the Global Coalition to Counter ISIL

Where are we now?

- With the US betrayal, the Kurds have now decided that the key to their survival may be in partnering with Assad and Putin.
- The SDF has announced that they will allow the Syrian military to move into Kurdish controlled areas in Northern Syria in order to regain Syrian Sovereignty.
- The SDF sees this as the only way to stop the Turkish aggression against their forces. The deal between the Syrian government and the Kurds was brokered by the Russians of course.
 - While giving up their land to the Syrian government and allowing Assad to reign over northern Syria again is not preferable to the Kurds, in terms of survival they don't have many other options.

- The last interesting thing of note is the story about US troops coming under Turkish Artillery fire. Turkish backed rebels have set up checkpoints near Ain Issa, cutting off U.S. troops in bases to the west, in Manbij and Kobane.
- Those troops came under Turkish artillery fire Friday night in what some U.S. soldiers suspect was a deliberate show of force.
 - This may have been an attempt to get the US Troops to back up even further away from Northern Syria.
 - Turkey of course states that the artillery fire was an accident.
 - Given the situation, it isn't clear that our troop presence is still tenable given the chaotic situation and severed supply lines.
- Defense Secretary Mark Esper has already announced that due to the pending agreement the Kurds are making with the Syrian/Russian government, the remaining US troops will be withdrawing from N. Syria.
 - Key Note, as of today (OCT 14) the troops are not withdrawing from Syria, just northern Syria where the Turkish forces, Syrian forces, and Kurdish forces will be colliding.

Source to read in full or skim: <https://www.nationalreview.com/2019/10/turkey-and-the-kurds-its-more-complicated-than-you-think/> *“Turkey and the Kurds: Its more complicated than you think”.*

- THIS IS A GOOD READ OVERALL. Some good discussions to be had based on some ideas presented inside such as the PKK being on the terror watch list, Turkey being a NATO Ally, and it gives a devil's advocate approach to the idea of backing away from our support to the Kurds.
- BELOW ARE SOME Key POINTS FROM THE SOURCE. It is not all inclusive to the article. Most of this is directly cut and pasted from the source. I definitely did not agree with all of this article at all but it was the best article I could find that was “For” Trump's decision.
- “Some U.S. military officials went public with complaints about being “blindsided.” The policy cannot have been a surprise, though. The president has made no secret that he wants out of Syria, where we now have about 1,000 troops (**down from over 2,000 last year**). More broadly, he wants our forces out of the Middle East. He ran on that position. **I've argued against his “endless wars” tropes**, but his stance is popular. As for Syria specifically, many of the president's advisers think we should stay, but he has not been persuaded.”
- “The president's announcement of the redeployment of the troops in Syria came on the heels of a phone conversation with Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. As has become rote, the inevitable criticism was followed by head-

scratching tweets: The president vows to “totally destroy and obliterate the Economy of Turkey,” which “I’ve done before” (*huh?*), if Turkey takes any actions “that I, in my great and unmatched wisdom, consider to be off limits.” We can only sigh and say it will be interesting to see how the president backs up these haughty threats now that Erdogan has begun his invasion.”

- The first support given to the pullout of US troops in N Syria presented in this article is the fact that President Trump wants U.S. forces out of a conflict in which America’s interests have never been clear, and for which Congress has never approved military intervention.
- The author also takes note of the fact that everyone keeps referring to N Syria as Kurdish territory but it is still Syrian Territory at the end of the day.
- The article also notes that the PKK is technically on the foreign terrorist organization list under US law for its insurgent warfare against Turkey for the past 30 years.
- While the PKK is on the terrorist list, Turkey is a NATO ally.
 - Should both these things remain the same? Should Turkey remain in NATO for its strategic value and/or should the PKK remain relegated to the ranks of known terrorist organizations?
 - The author states that While it is a longer discussion, he would be open to considering the removal of both the PKK from the terrorist list and Turkey from NATO.
 - For now, though, the blunt facts are that the PKK is a terrorist organization and Turkey is our ally. These are not mere technicalities.
 - There are two allies in this equation, and our support for one has already vexed the other. The ramifications are serious, not least Turkey’s continued lurch away from NATO and toward Moscow.
- “Without any public debate, the Obama administration in 2014 insinuated our nation into the Kurdish–Turk conflict by arming the YPG. To be sure, our intentions were good. ISIS had besieged the city of Kobani in northern Syria; but Turkey understandably regards the YPG as a terrorist organization, complicit in the PKK insurgency.”
 - “Our intervention in Syria has never been authorized by Congress. Those of us who opposed intervention maintained that congressional authorization was necessary because there was no imminent threat to our nation.”
 - “Having U.S. forces “deter further genocidal bloodshed in northern Syria” is not a mission for which Americans support committing our men and

women in uniform. Such bloodlettings are the Muslim Middle East's default condition, so the missions would never end."

- "A congressional debate should have been mandatory before we jumped into a multi-layered war, featuring anti-American actors and shifting loyalties on both sides. In fact, so complex is the situation that President Obama's initial goal was to oust Syria's Assad regime; only later came the pivot to fighting terrorists, which helped Assad."
 - "That is Syria: Opposing one set of America's enemies only empowers another. More clear than what intervention would accomplish was the likelihood of becoming enmeshed, inadvertently or otherwise, in vicious conflicts of which we wanted no part — such as the notorious and longstanding conflict between Turks and Kurds."
- "The Kurds, however, are very capable. There was clamor on Capitol Hill to back them. We knew from the first, though, that supporting them was a time bomb. Turkey was never going to countenance a Kurdish autonomous zone, led by the YPG and PKK elements, on its Syrian border. Ankara (Turkey's capital) was already adamant that the PKK was using the Kurdish autonomous zone in Iraq to encourage separatist uprisings in Turkey, where 20 percent of the population is Kurdish. Erdogan would never accept a similar arrangement in Syria; he would evict the YPG forcibly if it came to that."
- "Yes, we had humanitarian reasons for arming the Kurds. But doing so undermined our anti-terrorism laws while [giving Erdogan incentive](#) to align with Russia and mend fences with Iran. ISIS, meanwhile, has never been defeated — it lost its territorial "caliphate," but it was always more lethal as an underground terrorist organization than as a quasi-sovereign struggling to hold territory. And al-Qaeda, though rarely spoken of in recent years, is ascendant — as threatening as it has been at any time since its pre-9/11 heyday."
- "Those of us opposed to intervention in Syria wanted Congress to think through these quite predictable outcomes before authorizing any further U.S. military involvement in this wretched region. Congress, however, much prefers to lay low in the tall grass, wait for presidents to act, and then complain when things go awry."

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