

In Syria, the Kurdish question

This article is related to General Studies-
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"Who are the Kurds, and why is Turkey attacking them in northern Syria? What role did Kurdish fighters play in the complex war in Syria, and what are the ramifications of US troops' withdrawal from the conflict?"

On Sunday, Kurdish forces who had until recently been America's allies against both the Islamic State and President Bashar al-Assad of Syria, announced an agreement with the Damascus regime, which is backed by Moscow and Tehran, the United States' two great rivals in the region. This happened after President Donald Trump abruptly pulled US forces out of Syria, leaving Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan to simply cross the border into Syria, pummel Kurdish positions, and take over Kurdish-held territory.

The developments mark a remarkable turn in the long-running conflict in Syria. Trump's action, seemingly an effort to end America's overseas wars ahead of his 2020 re-election bid, greatly helps Turkey, Assad, Russia and Iran — and possibly, the battered but still-potent Islamic State. With the US out of the picture, the Kremlin is now seen to be the major player in negotiations between the Kurds, Assad, and Erdogan.

MAIN KURDISH AREAS IN MIDDLE EAST



An old culture, stateless people

The Kurds are the world's largest stateless ethnic group. There are an estimated 25 million to 35 million of them — numbers that are broadly comparable to those of Assam, Jharkhand, Kerala, and Telangana, as well as of Canada and Australia. They live in the highlands of southern and eastern Turkey, northern Iraq, the northeastern Syria, northwestern Iran, and parts of south Armenia, and are a minority in each of these countries. Small communities live in Georgia, Kazakhstan, Lebanon, and eastern Iran as well.

Kurdish nationalists claim a history going back 2,500 years, but they became identifiable as a distinct community only in the 7th century, when most tribes in the area adopted Islam. The majority among the Kurdish people today are Sunni Muslim, but there are adherents of other faiths too, including Sufism and other mystical practices.

They speak a language that is related to Persian and Pashto, although local dialects differ. Kurmanji, which most Kurds in Turkey speak, uses the Latin script; the other widely spoken Kurdish dialect, Sorani, is written in the Arabic script. Kurds have long had a reputation for being fearless fighters, and they have served as mercenaries in many armies over the centuries. The mediaeval warrior Saladin, founder of the Ayyubid dynasty that replaced the Fatimids in Egypt and ruled over large parts of the Middle East in the 12th and 13th centuries, was of Kurdish ethnicity.

Quest for an elusive homeland

Their numbers, and distinct cultural and ethnic identity notwithstanding, the Kurdish people have never had their independent national homeland. At the Versailles peace conference after World War I, the Kurdish Ottoman diplomat Mehmet Sherif Pasha proposed borders of a new Kurdistan that covered parts of modern Turkey, Iraq, and Iran; however, the Treaty of Sèvres (1920), which partitioned the old Ottoman dominions, marked out a much smaller territory, entirely in what is now Turkey. Turkey negotiated with the Allied powers and, in 1923, the Treaty of Lausanne overtook Sèvres and ended the idea of a self-governing Kurdistan.

Over the decades that followed, the Kurds made repeated attempts at establishing a de facto Kurdistan with defined national borders — and in the process attracted massive Turkish repression, including bans on the Kurdish language, names, songs, and dress. In Saddam Hussein's Iraq, Chemical Ali attacked them with chemical weapons, and in Iran, their uprisings of the 1980s and 1990s were crushed.

In 1978, the Marxist revolutionary Abdullah Öcalan formed the Kurdistan Workers' Party (Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê or PKK in Kurdish) with the aim of setting up an independent Kurdistan. PKK guerrillas fought the Turkish army from 1984 until Öcalan's capture in 1999, during which some 40,000 Kurdish civilians were killed. Sporadic terrorist attacks continued until 2013, when the PKK declared a ceasefire. This collapsed when Turkey joined the war against the Islamic State in 2015 and started to bomb PKK targets in Iraq.

Islamic State, Assad, the US

As the Islamic State swept across Syria and Iraq, the only fighters who were able to resist the onslaught were the Syrian Kurdish militias, the most powerful of which was the People's Protection Units, known by its Kurdish initials, YPG. The Kurds, who lived mostly along Syria's border with Turkey, had begun an armed defence of their areas after the civil war started in 2011-12. In 2014, as the US joined the war against Da'esh, it found in the YPG a helpful regional ally. From the US perspective, the Kurds also served as a military counterpoint against the Iranians and Russians, and provided some leverage in a future deal to end the war.

Once the Kurds, backed by the Americans, had forced Daesh out of northern Syria, they took over the re-captured land along the Syria-Turkey border, home mainly to ethnic Kurds, Arabs, and some other groups. The YPG has close links with the PKK, and for Erdogan's regime, this seemed like a serious security threat. For the US, the problem was of balancing decades-old hostilities and suspicion between its two allies — Turkey was part of NATO and an ally against Assad; the Kurds had just helped defeat the Islamic State at the cost of losing over 11,000 fighters.

On the nudging of the Obama administration, the Syrian Kurdish militia sought to cover its links with the Turkish guerrillas, changed its name to Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), and started to enlist larger numbers of non-Kurdish fighters. By 2016, the Americans were guessing that some 40% of SDF fighters belonged to non-Kurd ethnicities. The US also worked to keep the peace on the Turkish border, carrying out patrols both on its own, and jointly with the Turkish army.

But earlier this month, Trump decided to withdraw forces from Syria — an idea he had had in 2018 as well, but had been thwarted. He informed Erdogan on October 6, and within three days, on October 9, Turkey and its Syrian Arab allies launched an assault on Kurdish-held territory in Syria. American troops are now on the way out, and even though Trump has issued dramatic warnings to Erdogan, the Turkish attacks on the Kurds continue.

Expected Questions (Prelims Exams)

1. Consider the following statements regarding Kurdish tribes and identify the incorrect statement.
 - (a) Recently the Kurdish forces have announced an agreement with the Damascus regime.
 - (b) Kurdish people live in southern and eastern Turkey, northern Iraq, northeastern Syria, northwestern Iran, and parts of South Armonia.
 - (c) The majority of Kurdish people are Sunni Muslims.
 - (d) Kurdish have long had a reputation for being fearless fighters, and they have served as mercenaries in many armies over the centuries.

Expected Questions (Mains Exams)

- Q.** How can the position of Kurds in West Asia be politically strong? How will the US military move out of this turbulent region affect the geopolitics of the region? Discuss.

(250 Words)

Note: Answer of Prelims Expected Question given on 14 Oct., is 1 (d).