

# Syrian Kurds remain steadfast in seeking autonomy

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The majority-Kurdish areas east of the Euphrates in Syria are holding out for a deal with Damascus on autonomy. *Jonathan Spyer* reports from the region on its strategic importance for the country's future

## Key Points

- As the civil war in Syria and the campaign against the Islamic State enter their closing phases, the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria (DFNS) is the largest area of the country remaining outside government control.
- If the United States withdraws from the region, DFNS fears about a Turkish incursion would likely result in the leadership accepting terms laid down by Damascus for reincorporation into national territory.
- US withdrawal is nevertheless far from certain as Washington struggles to contain Iran, and the long-term aim of the DFNS to achieve autonomy within Syria may therefore yet be realised.

After 2014, two conflicts defined Syria's civil war. The first was the war between the government of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and the largely Sunni Arab rebellion against him, and the second was the conflict between the Islamic State and the US-led global coalition assembled to destroy it.

Both these conflicts appeared to be in their final stages by early August 2018. The fall of the rebel-controlled southern provinces of Deraa and Quneitra in June and July 2018, respectively, marked the end of the Syrian rebellion as an independent force. At this point, Sunni Arab insurgent groups remained on the ground in two parts of Syria: an area stretching from Jarabulus on the Turkish-Syrian border to northern Idlib province in the northwest of the country and an area in the south of Syria surrounding the US base at al-Tanf.

In al-Tanf, the rebels have become sub-contractors employed by the US-led coalition and dependent on it. In Idlib, they remain able to prevent the retaking of the area by Syrian government forces and their Russian and Iranian allies but only because of the presence of Turkish forces. The Syrian rebellion as an independent phenomenon has therefore ended.

Meanwhile, the Islamic State by mid-2018 was similarly ceasing to exist as a quasi-sovereign entity. The 'caliphate' proclaimed on 29 June 2014 by Islamic State leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in Mosul, Iraq, had dwindled to the group's control of a few villages and desert areas in the Middle Euphrates river valley.

Nevertheless, the Islamic State remains potent as an insurgent and terrorist group, as shown by multiple attacks by the group in villages around the southwestern city of Suwayda on 25 July, which left more than 220 people dead, according to local healthcare services. However, as a territory-controlling entity, the Islamic State by this point was close to extinction in Syria.

With the imminent conclusion of these conflicts, the issue of post-war political arrangements in Syria has entered the agenda. By mid-2018, the Syrian government – in alignment with Russia and Iran

– controlled approximately 60% of Syrian territory, encompassing 70–75% of the population. Having ensured its survival, the stated goal of the Assad government is to re-extend its rule to encompass the country's entire territory.

### **Eyes northeast**

The largest enclave outside government control is the area east of the Euphrates controlled by the US-aligned, Kurdish-dominated Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), with at least 2,000 US military personnel on the ground, according to Pentagon sources quoted by Foreign Policy on 6 December 2017. At the time of writing, it was administered by the structures of the self-proclaimed Democratic Federation of Northern Syria (DFNS), although this de facto entity had been recognised by no country.



*Destroyed buildings in Raqqa, formerly the 'capital' of the Islamic State's so-called 'caliphate', on 24 July 2018. (Jonathan Spyer)*

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In an interview with Russian international television network RT on 30 May, Assad clarified his intentions regarding this area, saying that he had “opened the door” for negotiations, but if those negotiations failed, “This is the first option. If not, we’re going to resort to ... liberating those areas by force. We don’t have any other options, with the Americans or without the Americans”. In response, a US Department of State official told Reuters on 31 May that the US would use “necessary and proportionate force” to defend US and partner forces.

Consisting of two regions – the Jazira and Euphrates cantons – the DFNS came into being with the retreat of Syrian government forces from a large area of northern Syria in June–July 2012. A third and isolated canton, Afrin, was occupied by the Turkish army's Operation Olive Branch in January

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2018. The DFNS area has a population of approximately 4.6 million people, and covers 35,000 sq km of Syria's surface area of 185,000 sq km.

The majority of the DFNS population is Kurdish, although Arabs form a majority in parts of the Euphrates region. Its military force is the SDF, formed in late 2015, which comprises 45,000 personnel, according to a December 2016 statement by Operation Inherent Resolve spokesperson Colonel John Dorrian.

**[Continued in full version...]**

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