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Fair-weather friends

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James Snell



Assad was never going to save Syria's Kurds from the Turkish army. That the Kurds sought a devil's bargain with him anyway was a mistake in more than one way, argues James Snell.

Turkey's campaign to capture the Syrian-Kurdish district of Afrin appears to be entering its final stages. The complete encirclement of Afrin city itself by Turkish forces and their Free Syrian Army (FSA) rebel allies is reported to be imminent, with just two villages yet to be taken, **according** to FSA sources.

If Afrin is captured it will represent a sincere problem for Syrian Kurdish leaders. Not only has a state mounted a campaign against Kurdish-controlled territory. It has done so successfully, while Kurdish pleas for international support have gone largely unanswered.

The United States, bound to the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), had, before the last week, **armed the People's Protection Units (YPG) directly**. American diplomats, political leaders, and military men contended that this was an essential measure, despite Turkish fears. They said it was vital for the fight against ISIS, which the United States is pursuing with absolute, **monomaniacal focus**.

This American loyalty to its favoured proxies was seen to count for something. It was even apparently placed above American ties to Turkey, a NATO ally. Turkish leaders expressed real disquiet at the possibility of American arms ending up in the possession of a group with significant links to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which has mounted a campaign of terror pursued with secessionist intent.

But American loyalty is hardly inexhaustible. In recent weeks, it has been exposed as cheap and flimsy. When Turkey began its campaign in Afrin, the United States could scarcely have been expected to intercede physically to

prevent its NATO ally from taking offensive action.

This is, however, exactly what Kurdish leaders hoped might happen. They begged for international support, decrying the perceived aggression of the campaign and the casualties left in the wake of the Turkish advance. There was sporadic but real international outrage at Turkey's actions in foreign capitals. But nothing was done.

Now Kurdish leaders are left contemplating what many have already written off as another betrayal of the Kurds. This is an essential component of modern Kurdish history, both real and imagined. Allied states cannot be counted upon consistently to aid a stateless minority. Nations cannot be relied upon to act with internationalism.

In such an event as this, when nominal friends have failed to materialize in response to plaintive requests, it must be tempting to seek out other allies. Friends of convenience may be better than no friends at all.

The ally of convenience to whom Kurdish leaders turned is the regime of Bashar al-Assad. Regime forces were presented as **standing ready** to come to the Kurds' aid, prepared to hold the line against an infringement of Syria's nominal sovereignty. That this idea fitted with the regime's pretence at legitimacy, and with its stated ambition of reconquering and dominating every inch of the country, was presented as happy coincidence.

Assad-supporting militias **arrived in Afrin** last month, after Kurdish groups gave permission for regime forces to enter the canton.

From the beginning, the regime's movement into Afrin was

unserious. The forces it deployed would not check the Turkish and rebel advance. Pro-regime fighters seem mainly to have been marshalled from the nearby towns of Nubl and al-Zahraa. Some of them appear **very young**. But in any case, the chance of any real conflict breaking out between Turkish and regime forces, beyond **minor exchanges of fire**, is profoundly unlikely.

This apparent joint operation was more than an alliance of convenience. It was a devil's bargain. The Assad regime's stated commitment to its temporary Kurdish friends, never seriously undertaken, has become over time less secure, less sincere.

The regime is not coming to the YPG's aid in Afrin city. It is instead happy to **move into territory which is not threatened**, reaping rewards from the travails of those who its stated ambition is to aid.

This alone tells observers all they need to know about the sincerity of its promises. If, on top of this, the regime eventually withdraws from the area (as some pro-Assad media outlets have **suggested** it will), this will underscore that the regime's support for Afrin's defenders was at best partial and at worst a consistent deception.

It will mean that all the rhetoric of allying with the YPG to challenge Turkish aggression was a lie, an effort which saw the defence of Afrin as nothing more than a political and military opportunity. This is ultimately unsurprising. It takes its place as part of a consistent trend in regime policy.

That strain of thought is not new. It was recently manifested in plans for a federal Syria, which, the regime says, would **afford Kurdish groups autonomy within a**

federal system under Assad. These would instead have resulted in temporary friendship and eventual subjugation.

It is a consistent feature of regime policy. Assad and his allies are happy to cloak themselves in ideas of a pluralist Syria, secure against foreign incursion. But this is contradicted by regime policy, and its own stated aims.

The regime makes use of Syria's Kurds when possible—as de facto allies, rhetorical props, symbols of unity—but never truly helps them, never meaningfully comes to their aid, never means it when claiming to have their interests at heart.

The regime wishes, ultimately, not to support, but to subjugate Syrians of all cultures. It may notionally adopt the cause of a minority group to serve its own purposes, but when the merits of that action diminish, the regime will lose its interest and discard whatever moral imperative it had previously claimed.

Syria's Kurds are unwise to trust the Assad regime, even in desperate situations. The regime seeks not government but domination, not peace but the quiet of the graveyard, and will not let any moral scruple stand in the way of either objective.

Abandoned by allies, Syria's Kurds may rationally believe that a fair-weather friend in the Assad regime is better than none at all. But when the weather turns, and the temporary friend decides friendship is no longer in its interest, the result is the same.

Syria's minorities ought to disabuse themselves of the fiction that they can rely on the regime. Better this than

realizing, when confronted with circumstances of real danger and strife, that an alliance built on a friendship of convenience is a remarkably fragile thing.

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