

Supporting the Kurds as a Stabilizing Autonomous Force in Syria and the Region

A Policy Framework for the United States and the European Union

Leonidas Kapetanakis

(START Services Founder, Leakey Texas, USA)

Copyright: @ 2025 Research Institute for European and American Studies (www.rieas.gr)

Publication date: 30 January 2026

Note: The article reflects the opinion of the author and not necessarily the views of the Research Institute for European and American Studies

Executive Summary

Over the past decade, Kurdish forces in Syria and Iraq have emerged as one of the most reliable and effective partners of the United States and the international coalition in the fight against the so-called Islamic State (ISIS) and al-Qaeda-linked organizations. At extraordinary human cost, Kurdish fighters dismantled the territorial “caliphate,” liberated major cities such as Kobane and Raqqa, protected religious and ethnic minorities, and created some of the most stable zones in war-torn Syria.

Yet, despite this record, Kurdish communities have repeatedly been abandoned by international powers at critical moments. The 2017 collapse of Kurdish control in Kirkuk following the independence referendum in Iraq, the U.S. withdrawal from northeastern Syria in 2019, and the continuing vulnerability of Rojava (the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria) to Turkish military pressure and jihadist resurgence demonstrate a pattern of strategic short-termism.

This paper argues that a revised U.S. and EU strategy is urgently needed. Supporting Kurdish political autonomy, guaranteeing their security, and recognizing their role as protectors of minorities and bulwarks against jihadist extremism is not only a moral obligation, but a strategic necessity for long-term regional stability.

I. Historical Context: A Century of Marginalization and Repression

The Kurds, numbering over 30 million across Turkey, Syria, Iraq, and Iran, remain the largest stateless nation in the Middle East. Since the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, Kurdish aspirations for self-determination have repeatedly been denied through international agreements, regional repression, and violent campaigns.

In Turkey, decades of cultural suppression, village destruction, and counter-insurgency campaigns displaced millions of Kurds. In Iraq, the Ba'ath regime carried out systematic atrocities, including the Anfal campaign and the chemical attack on Halabja in 1988. In Syria, Kurds were stripped of citizenship, barred from political life, and denied cultural rights for generations.

The Syrian civil war created both a catastrophe and an opportunity: Kurdish communities organized self-administration in northern Syria, forming the foundations of what later became the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES), widely known as Rojava.

II. The Kurdish Role in Defeating ISIS and al-Qaeda-Linked Forces

From 2014 onward, Kurdish fighters—principally the People's Protection Units (YPG), Women's Protection Units (YPJ), and later the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)—became the backbone of the international coalition's ground campaign against ISIS.

Key achievements included:

- The defense of Kobane in 2014–2015, a turning point in halting ISIS expansion.
- The liberation of Manbij, Tabqa, and ultimately Raqqa in 2017, the de facto capital of the ISIS caliphate.
- The dismantling of ISIS territorial control across northeastern Syria by 2019.

These victories came at immense cost. Kurdish and allied forces lost an estimated 13,000–15,000 fighters, with tens of thousands more wounded.

Kurdish-led administrations subsequently assumed responsibility for detaining thousands of ISIS fighters and family members, maintaining prison and camp systems that remain fragile and under-resourced. Without Kurdish control, a large-scale ISIS resurgence would be highly probable.

III. Abandonment and Strategic Contradictions: Kirkuk and Rojava

Despite their sacrifices, Kurdish allies have repeatedly been exposed to hostile forces through abrupt policy reversals.

Kirkuk, 2017

Following the Kurdish independence referendum in Iraq—approved by more than 90 percent of voters—pro-Iranian militias and Iraqi federal forces moved against Kurdish-held Kirkuk. Advanced U.S.-supplied weaponry was used in the operation, reportedly coordinated by Iranian General Qasem Soleimani. The United States and its partners stood aside as Kurdish positions collapsed.

This episode sent a powerful message throughout the region: Kurdish partnership did not guarantee political protection. And the USA and the West can be a fickle ally.

Rojava, 2019 and Beyond

In October 2019, the sudden U.S. withdrawal from northeastern Syria enabled a Turkish military incursion, displacing hundreds of thousands and allowing ISIS detainees to escape amid chaos. The Kurdish administration was forced into tactical arrangements with Damascus and Moscow simply to survive.

These decisions weakened the anti-ISIS architecture and emboldened both jihadist networks and regional actors hostile to Kurdish autonomy.

IV. Turkey, Jihadist Networks, and the Problem of Ambiguity

The role of Turkey and certain regional actors in the Syrian conflict, including Qatar and KSA, has been marked by strategic ambiguity (and sometimes direct action) that repeatedly benefited extremist groups.

Between 2013 and 2015, multiple international investigations documented porous Turkish borders, tolerance of foreign fighter transit, and illicit oil and smuggling networks that materially assisted ISIS expansion. While Ankara formally joined the anti-ISIS coalition, enforcement remained inconsistent at best and many on-the ground independent observers claim that Turkish intelligence and military elements actually assisted ISIS and other Sunni jihadist elements with intel, logistics and a safe haven over the Turkish border during the group's peak years.

Turkey has since prioritized military campaigns against Kurdish forces over sustained counter-terrorism cooperation, diverting resources from the fight against ISIS and destabilizing areas previously secured by the SDF.

V. Al-Jolani, HTS, and the Persistence of Jihadist Power

Ahmed al-Sharaa (known as Abu Mohammad al-Jolani), leader of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), represents the continuity of jihadist leadership in Syria.

Al-Jolani was a senior figure in both ISIS and al-Qaeda before forming Jabhat al-Nusra and later HTS. The United States placed a \$10 million bounty on his head, identifying him as a high-value terrorist leader responsible for mass atrocities.

HTS has carried out campaigns of violence against Alawite communities in western Syria and Druze populations in the south. In several instances, external intervention—including Israeli military pressure—helped prevent wider massacres of civilians.

Despite attempts by HTS to rebrand itself, the organization remains rooted in extremist ideology and practices incompatible with any stable political settlement.

VI. Kurdish Protection of Minorities and Religious Pluralism

One of the most under-recognized achievements of Kurdish-led administrations has been the protection of minorities.

Kurdish forces were instrumental in rescuing Yazidis during the Sinjar genocide in 2014. In northeastern Syria, Kurdish authorities created governing structures that included Christians, Assyrians, Armenians, Arabs, Turkmen, and Yazidis, guaranteeing freedom of worship and minority representation.

Christian communities in Hasakah, Qamishli, and the Khabur valley survived largely because of Kurdish security guarantees. In a region marked by sectarian cleansing, the Kurdish model remains one of the few pluralistic governance experiments still functioning. ***This is not hearsay commentary or an aspirational claim as I witnessed many of these events personally while working in the region for a faith based NGO during this period.*** The Kurds saved thousands of Christian and Yazidi lives and welcomed them with open arms into their communities providing safe haven and material support.

VII. Strategic Risks of Continued Neglect

Failing to support Kurdish partners carries severe consequences:

- A renewed ISIS insurgency fueled by prison breaks (or releases) and governance collapse.
- Expansion of Iranian proxy influence in eastern Syria and northern Iraq.
- Strengthening of jihadist enclaves under HTS and similar groups.
- Further displacement and radicalization among vulnerable minority populations.
- A Syria that becomes a national safe haven and base for Jihadists throughout the region with access to Europe and the USA

Abandonment undermines not only Kurdish trust, but the credibility of Western alliances throughout the Middle East.

VIII. A New U.S. and EU Strategy: Policy Recommendations

The United States and European Union should adopt a coordinated strategy built on five pillars:

1. Security Guarantees

- Maintain sustained international military, Intel, logistical and financial assistance to the Kurds in northeastern Syria focused on counter-ISIS operations and border stabilization. No “boots on the ground” are needed—the Kurds have proven that they can fight well enough alone.
- Establish enforceable no-strike and buffer mechanisms to deter unilateral attacks on Kurdish (and Druze)-administered areas and provide air power to make sure they are free of ISIS encroachment.
- Notify Turkey that the Kurdish and Druze areas are no-go safe zones for them and that any military move by them against the Kurds or Druze would be considered a hostile act against US allied forces.

2. Political Recognition and Inclusion

- Formally recognize the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria as a legitimate local governing authority within a future Syrian settlement.
- Ensure Kurdish and minority representation in all UN-sponsored negotiations.

3. Minority Protection Framework

- Create an international monitoring mechanism for Christian, Yazidi, Druze, and Alawite communities in northern and eastern Syria and politically support these communities.
- Provide targeted funding for reconstruction of minority towns and religious heritage sites.

4. Counter-Terrorism Integrity

- Condition military cooperation with regional states (and particularly Turkey, Qatar and KSA) on verifiable counter-terrorism enforcement.
- Expand sanctions against individuals and networks facilitating jihadist financing, recruitment, and transit.

5. Long-Term Stabilization and Development-Eventual Autonomy for Kurdish, Druze and Alawite Regions—Over Time Work Towards:

- **Political Recognition**
Grant formal standing to autonomous administrations in all UN-backed negotiations and future constitutional frameworks.
- **Direct Stabilization Assistance**
Channel development, governance, and security aid directly to autonomous regions, bypassing hostile or predatory central authorities and Turkish influence where legally possible.
- **Contain Jihadist Enclaves**
Reject any normalization of HTS. Maintain sanctions and isolation against Jolani and dismantle extremist governance structures in Idlib.

- **Condition Relations with Turkey and Qatar**
Tie military cooperation and arms transfers to verifiable non-aggression against Kurdish regions and measurable counter-terrorism enforcement.
- **Open Strategic Dialogue on Kurdish Statehood**
Begin coordinated U.S.–EU planning on Kurdish self-determination as a stabilizing regional architecture rather than a destabilizing taboo.

Conclusion

The Kurds have proven themselves indispensable partners in the fight against jihadist extremism and rare defenders of pluralism in the modern Middle East. Their repeated abandonment reflects not strategic wisdom, but a failure of long-term vision.

A stable Syria and Iraq cannot be built on the marginalization of the very forces that defeated ISIS, protected minorities, and demonstrated a viable model of coexistence. Supporting the Kurds is not merely an act of loyalty—it is a strategic investment in regional stability, counter-terrorism effectiveness, and the credibility of Western policy itself.

The USA and Europe can continue alternating between intervention and abandonment, tolerating jihadist enclaves and sacrificing loyal partners to preserve past policies stuck in antiquated historical failure and nation-building. Or they can consolidate a new regional order anchored in autonomous stabilizers who have already proven their capacity to defeat extremists and protect minorities- and in the case of the Kurds-have proven to be loyal allies to the US and the West.

The Kurds, the Druze, and the Christians and Alawites along the coast, represent not a threat to regional stability, but its last viable foundation.

A Syria that includes pro-western autonomous regions that provide a safe haven for these groups is the ultimate answer for stability and prosperity there.

Supporting them and focusing on the Kurds who can maintain their own security infrastructure today- is not an act of charity. It is the most realistic path to preventing the next caliphate, containing Iranian proxy expansion, and restoring Western credibility in the Middle East.

The choice before the United States and the European Union is stark: continue a cycle of tactical retreat and moral compromise, or commit to a durable partnership with the region's most reliable stabilizing force-the Kurds.