



**DOCTORAL DISSERTATION (Booklet)**

**The Changing Dynamics of the Perception of U.S.  
Foreign Policy towards Kurds in Syria: Developing  
Relations in Light of Ignorance, Cooperation and  
Desertion (2011-2020)**

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## Table of Contents

Subjects	Titles	Page No
I	Research background and justification of the topic	2
II	Methodology	9
III	The findings of the dissertation	13
IV	Main references	18
V	List of own (or co-authored) publications related to the topic.	21

## **1. Research background and justification of the topic**

Kurds have played a significant role in the Syrian conflict since the 2011 crisis, mainly through their strong participation in the fight against ISIS. During the war against ISIS, the U.S. made significant gains both under President Obama and President Trump's administrations but did not strive to establish long-term strategies about Syria, especially the Syrian Kurds. After the collapse of the ISIS caliphate in 2019, Trump's decision to withdraw the U.S. forces from Syria left the Syrian Kurds with tough domestic and external challenges. This decision raised the question of whether the United States has a clear policy and strategy for dealing with the Kurds in Syria. Thus, the objectives of this study are to find reasons and factors that have led to shifts in US foreign policy towards Syrian Kurds. In addition to exploring the outcomes of changing USFP dynamics post-2011, this research also investigates the ramifications and implications of ISIS's rise for the US-Syrian Kurdish strategy.

Events following the Syrian war helped the emergence and solidification of Kurdish self-rule in Syria. After the spread of the war, by the end of July 2012, Syrian forces withdrew from many Kurdish-populated areas in northern Syria. This paved the way for the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) and its military wing People's Protection Units (YPG), to control and establish self-rule in the areas called Rojava (Western Kurdistan). The PYD and YPG played a significant role in the war against IS terrorists and this helped strengthen and solidify their power and authority. However, PYD faces many challenges as it attempts to maintain and expand its

authority. A significant challenge Rojava faces is establishing normal relations with its neighbors, especially Turkey. Failure in achieving this aim can lead to an increase in ethnic tensions and even conflict both in Syria as beyond, due to the nature of Kurdish issue in the Middle East. Kurds in Syria are part of nearly 30 million Kurds who live in the Middle East. Kurds have their own distinct language and culture. Kurds are usually referred to as the largest stateless nation in the world as they are scattered mainly in Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria. They have a history of victimhood and struggle for national, as well as civil right demands.

In July 2012, Kurdish political parties overtook most Kurdish cities and areas in the north of Syria. This control was achievable by a commission established by most of the Syrian Kurdish political parties, which governed the areas and retained borders and security. For the first time, these highly factionalized political parties were trying to take control of their future. Their objective was to safeguard their situation and the Kurdish people in the middle of the larger crisis in Syria. This extraordinary situation was the consequence of the specific dynamics of the Syrian uprising, the internal machinations of Kurdish politics and the history of decades of state control of Kurdish identity and struggles to secure political reason.

The Syrian uprising shifted the exchange requirements of the Kurdish political parties, starting significant shifts in Kurdish politics in Syria. During the uprising, the state withdrew from Kurdish areas

enabling the Kurdish political parties to develop as a unified and cohesive society focused on securing Kurdish rights. At the same time, the Kurds were able to create a form of self-rule in many areas and the Kurdish issue in Syria became internationally significant, particularly in regional matters (Harriet Allsopp, 2015, p. 14). Both the George H.W. Bush and Clinton administrations have been criticized for too much U.S engagement with Syria, while critics of George W. Bush's administration complained that the U.S did not engage enough. This second position was reinforced in the 2006 Iraqi Study Group (ISG) Report, co-chaired by George H.W. Bush's secretary of state, James Baker, who defended cooperating with Syria during the first Persian Gulf War. The ISG report called for "a robust diplomatic effort" with all countries interested in the stability of Iraq, in particular Iran and Syria (Sadat and Jones, 2017, p.8). However, the U.S. policy through both Obama and Trump has become one of tolerating Assad over the alternative while not saying so and looking the other way.

It can be argued that from 2012 until President Donald Trump's order to withdraw the U.S. troops from Northern Syria, the US foreign policy towards Syrian Kurds was a cause of their foreign policy in Syria. Trump's last decision in October 2018 to leave some 200 U.S. troops in Syria cannot change much from the multifaceted Syrian crisis. This might be mainly because of their commitment to Kurdish allies (SDF). This is particularly after Turkey insisted on interfering in Syria. Turkish attacks and the U.S withdrawal may lead to more violence in Syria. Meanwhile, both Moscow's anti-Kurdish

and pro-Turkish stance largely stems from the attempts to deprive the U.S. of local allies and to drive a wedge between the NATO powers.

Since the 2011 Syrian crisis, Kurds have been crucial factors in the Syrian conflict, especially in their active role in the war against ISIS. Their active role paved the way to make alignment with the number of regional and superpowers in Syria. Thus, Syrian Kurds have been backed militarily and logistically by the US. The U.S. involvement in Syria has not been stable and so far, Trump's administration does not have a clear foreign policy in Syria. USFP has shifted from working quietly behind the scenes with SDF to overt displays of the U.S. force and towards widening its footprint in an attempt to shape the fight. So, whether the U.S alliance with Syrian Kurds is a long-term strategy or tactical ploy, that does not change from the fact that US foreign policy has changed towards Syrian Kurds from neglecting (2011-2014) to cooperation (2014-2019) and later desertion (October 2019).

### **Aim and Objectives**

In a quest to contribute to this subject, which is yet to be conclusive, the main aim of the study was: to investigate the changing dynamics of the U.S. foreign policy towards Syrian Kurds. The study's specific objectives are stated as follows:

- To determine the key reasons influencing and changing U.S. policy towards the Syrian Kurds from 2011-2020.
- To examine factors that have led to a change in the foreign policy dynamics of the U.S. towards Syrian Kurds

- To investigate the outcomes of recent fluctuations in the relationships between the U.S. and the Syrian Kurds
- To demonstrate that post-2011, has been a significant change in U.S. policy towards the Syrian Kurds and its demands.
- To explore the fallout and implications of the rise of ISIS over the U.S.-Syrian Kurds policy.
- To examine how the convergence of interests between Syrian Kurds and the U.S. affected the direction of U.S.-Kurdish policy in north of Syria.

### **Research Questions**

In this study, the central research question was: what are the changing dynamics of the U.S. foreign policy towards Syrian Kurds? The study's specific research questions include:

#### **Main question:**

- How and why have the U.S foreign policy dynamics developed and transformed towards Syrian Kurds?

#### **Sub questions:**

- How have domestic, regional, and international factors contributed to the U.S. foreign policy towards Syrian Kurds?
- What is the nature of the cooperation between the U.S. and the Syrian Kurds in Northern Syria?

## Hypotheses

A combination of domestic, regional, and international factors in US politics might influence its relations with the Syrian Kurds. However, the emergence of ISIS has been the main driver of the US foreign policy towards Syrian Kurds. There are other factors which this research addresses especially, the US-Russia rivalry, the policy of containing Iran, protecting US allies in the region, and preserving the US hegemony in the Middle East, which has shaped the USFP towards Syrian Kurds. In addition, the U.S. domestic factors, such as the leader's perception and the institutional dynamics, have influenced the US- Syrian Kurds' relation. Although the US-KRG alignment may not be the same as the U.S support to Syrian Kurds, it can be seen in the same context. This is especially in the case of the US involvement in Syria. It could be argued that the USFP has engaged with non-state factors or militia groups to protect its regional hegemony.

It could be argued that the approach of “Building Partner Capacity for Stability” (Jefferson P. Marquis, et. al, 2010), can be helpful in understanding the US - Syrian Kurdish alignment in 2015. The security assistance has contributed to the intensity and frequency of proxy wars—such as those underway or recently wound down in Libya, Yemen, Syria, and Iraq. Several studies are concerned overwhelmingly with the issue of whether or not the United States has achieved its goals through the provision of security assistance, a key component of which is referred to as “building partner capacity”



(BPC). According to the Congressional Research Service (CRS), these goals include victory in war or war termination; managing regional security challenges; indirectly supporting a party to the conflict; conflict mitigation; building institutional and interpersonal linkages; enhancing coalition participation; and alliance-building (McInnis and Lucas, 2015). Thus, the US-Kurdish alignment in Syria can be security assistance to enable the US to achieve its objectives at less cost in personnel and materiel than through direct military intervention in Syria.

Therefore, the hypothesis of this research is that the U.S. relations with the Syrian Kurds started and developed in the framework of the American anti-terror war, and particularly in the war against ISIS. Meanwhile, this research argues that changes in the U.S. foreign policy towards Syrian Kurds result from three main factors: developments in American domestic politics, the impact and policies of regional and international powers present in Syria, and changes in the American war on terror strategies. Hence, the interaction of the above-mentioned factors has repercussions for the U.S. policy in the region and towards the Syrian Kurds. This research investigates the interplay of these factors in formulating and transforming the American policy towards Syrian Kurds.

## **2. METHODOLOGY**

In this chapter, the main aim is to describe the methodology the proposed study adopted while seeking insight into the subject under investigation. Notably, the chapter aims to justify why the study relied on specific research methods and data collection and analysis methods. Similarly, the chapter provides the demographic features of the selected population or sampling frame from which participants were drawn and information collected concerning the aim and objectives of the research. Apart from the primary data, information from secondary sources of data was used to complement the results obtained. Some secondary data sources that aided in complementing primary data include books, e-books, journals, newspapers, magazines, and institutional and government reports.

### **Data collection**

As highlighted earlier, the proposed study is qualitative. This simulated behavioral differences in USFP towards Syrian Kurds. This helped the researcher to get enough details on why USFP dynamics fluctuated in certain ways.

It is imperative to highlight that most previous studies avow that qualitative research is flexible (Punch, 2013). This attribute makes it applicable to the proposed study because it is poised to enable the researcher to collect information in new directions, especially when the selected participants fail to provide reliable or desirable data.

## **Data Collection Methods**

Regarding the specific instruments of data collection, the proposed study used semi-structured interviews. The participating individuals and organizations were presented with direct links to the interview questions. The researcher's plan was to conduct 20 interviews in both Northern Syria and Kurdistan Region of Iraq. Elite interviews provided opportunities to enhance the reliability and validity of generated data.

## **The Methodological Limitations**

This research relied on both primary and secondary data collection methods. One primary method was interviewing U.S. and Syrian Kurds officials from state institutions, political parties and other organizations. The fieldwork of this study was based both in the Iraqi Kurdistan region and the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, also known as Rojava.

The semi-structured interview was a suitable data collection method for this research; the semi-structured interview is a qualitative data collection approach in which the researcher asks informants a series of predetermined, however open-ended questions (See Appendix 1).

Interviewing U.S. officials was a difficult process for the researcher since it is hard to gain acceptance from the White House, Pentagon or other U.S. officials because of the army conflicts in Syria, emerged COVID-19 Pandemic and the unavailability of US visa,

which is why the researcher provided more alternative methods and data for the practical parts of the research as following:

- A. Instead of interviewing the U.S. officials, which is not easy, the researcher made a hypothetical year of coding and formulating the U.S. (White House) Press Releases about the U.S. foreign policies towards Syria or Kurds in Syria.
- B. Instead of interviewing the U.S. officials, the researcher analysed President Donald Trump's official speeches on U.S. foreign strategy towards Kurds in Syria, which were published on White Houses or Pentagon's websites.
- C. The limitation of this study was the inability to interview a reliable sample of American leaders in the government and military. Instead, this study conducted three interviews; the first was with some U.S. politicians, and diplomats in Iraqi Kurdistan, it was easier for the researcher to interview them in Iraqi Kurdistan instead of interviewing the U.S. The second was with a US military commander in both northern Syrian and Iraq and the third with the professor of government who specialized in US foreign policy, especially in the Middle East.
- D. The final alternative was to rely on one data collection method, which was a semi-structured interview with Kurdish Syrian politician, military, academics in Syria and Iraqi Kurdish, as Kurdish Syrian political parties have a basis in Erbil and Sulaymaniyah as well.
- E. As a researcher of this study, one data collection method was preferred, depending on semi-structured interviews with Syrian-

Kurd politicians and academics in Syria and Iraqi Kurdistan. In particular, the researcher tried to interview some official policymakers, especially those in the decision-making circles and who have a role in the political process in northern Syria. Finally, the methods used for data collection in this study were conducted through direct semi-structured interviews with political and military leaders who were related to America, such as Kurdish politicians and forces in northern Syria and secondary data collection of existing information regarding the variables in order to achieve valuable information that helped us to understand the form of the American relationship with the Kurds in Syria. So, in this way, the behavior of the US policy towards the Kurds was concluded to form the framework of the US foreign policy towards the Kurds. This study focused on qualitative analysis to obtain findings for the research question and these methods also enabled to support and check the hypotheses that were drawn by primary and secondary data.

### **3. The findings of the dissertation**

Through This doctoral Dissertation, I have arrived at the following findings: The United States does not have a grand plan for the Syrian Kurds because of their geopolitical status in the region; they are divided between four states (Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Syria). Each state demands its own specific concerns. Furthermore, the Kurdish-majority countries in the region are all more significant to US foreign policy than the Kurds themselves. However, because of its interest in Middle East security and human rights, the US has grown to believe it bears some responsibility toward the Kurds. Nonetheless, the US opposes their independence since it would undoubtedly result in the split of the countries in which they live, causing unwelcome instability in the Middle East.

- The development of ISIL (ISIS) was one of the key forces altering the Middle East political map, but the Kurds swiftly benefited from the Siege of Kobani owing to an international coalition. Indeed, the United States committed air strikes against Jihadists for the first time, resulting in widespread media coverage of the Kobani conflict and the Kurdish cause in general. It also demonstrated to the rest of the world the US's fruitful cooperation with the PYD/YPG, which persisted despite

Turkey's resistance., The Kurds were able to not only destroy ISIL, but also take control of the majority of Syria's border with Turkey. In Kobani, the US, the PYD/YPG, the Peshmergas, and the Free Syrian Army (FSA) have collaborated to demonstrate global support for the Kurdish cause. The PYD's standing as an official US partner has been elevated due to its achievements over ISIL on the battlefield, enhancing the YPG's legitimacy. The PYD was now seen as a respectable ally by the international alliance.

- The People's Protection Units (PYG) – the armed wing of the PYD (Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat/Democratic Union Party) – maintained a successful foreign policy with other non-state actors in Syria (especially after 2011) and managed to secure assistance from regional and international powers, namely Russia, the United States, and European States.
- So, it could be concluded that three factors led to establishing of relations between Syrian Kurds and Washington. The first one was the emergence of ISIL and its success in capturing sizeable territories in Iraq and Syria, which enhanced the value of local actors capable of blocking and countering the IS spread. The second factor was the military success

and strength of PYD (or its military wing YPG), the party's secular ideology, and the nature of its relations with the regional actors. Indeed, the fact that PYD was not the proxy of regional powers paved the way for its relations with the USA. The third factor was a weakness of the Syrian opposition and the extent of leverage Turkey had over this inefficient opposition. These factors eventually led to a dramatic shift in American treatment of the Syrian Kurds, culminating at military aid delivered to Kurdish fighters under IS siege in Kobani. Political relations followed the military cooperation, in that Washington assisted the Kurds to establish an autonomous administration consisting of all Syrian components after the liberation of the territories captured by IS, including Raqa city, the capital of IS Caliphate. It could be argued that realities on the ground, in particular military success in the field and ideological and political flexibility of the Kurds paved the way for a shift in American foreign policy and the establishment of relations with the Syrian Kurds.

The fluctuation of the US foreign policy towards Syrian Kurds has gone through the following stages:



- At the outset of the Syrian crisis in 2011 and under President Obama's leadership, American foreign policy did not pay any attention to the Kurdish factor. Instead, under Turkey's influence, Washington was supporting, training, arming, and providing logistic aid to pro or close to Turkey's elements in the Syrian opposition. In 2014, when ISIS attacked Kobane City, it became a turning point in the US foreign policy to establish relations with the Syrian Kurdish.
- In 2016, under Trump's presidency, American foreign policy towards Syrian Democratic Forces changed, mainly due to Turkish influence. Turkey views the Syrian Democratic Forces as a national security threat, and Trump's 2019 decision to withdraw American forces from Syria gave Turkey a free hand to invade and control areas under SDF's control. The pressure created by public opinion, congress, and allies, especially France, convinced the Trump administration to send some troops back to the Kurdish administered areas in northern Syria.
- The Ascendance of Joe Biden to the presidency resulted in changes in American foreign policy, especially regarding the Middle East and Kurds in Syria. American new engagement in the region demonstrates the rigor of neoclassical realism,

which details the role of domestic factors, including the leader's personality on foreign policy.

- Moreover, regarding the alliances between states and non-state actors, which is another main issue in this research, this research finds that the alliances between states and non-state actors are usually less institutionalized than alliances between states, as they do not follow formal arrangements or accords and do not oblige the parties to constitute shared institutions. As such, there is nothing that keeps them from collapsing. So it could be argued that the alliance between the US and Syrian Kurds was not strategic but tactical. Strategic alliances are characterized by high levels of cooperation and are usually based on shared values and ideology. Hence, these alliances are usually more sustainable and durable. Tactical cooperation occurs when the parties pursue a number of common short-term interests and do not necessarily rely on durable interests and affinities. In an era of instability, tactical alliances seem to have become more prevalent in current Middle East conflicts, with parties aiming to gain power, influence or economic revenues. The case of USA and Syrian Kurds alliance in Syria can be exemplified in this context.

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## 5. List of own and co-authored publications

Titles of the Research Papers	Type	language	Title, year, Volume and Issue number of the journals + DOI
US FOREIGN POLICY GOALS IN THE MIDDLE EAST BETWEEN 2011 AND 2021.	Research Paper	English	FOREIGN POLICY REVIEW (1588-7855 2064-9428): 14 3 pp 164-182 (2021). <a href="https://doi.org/10.47706/KKIFPR.2021.3.164-182">https://doi.org/10.47706/KKIFPR.2021.3.164-182</a>
THE NATURE OF THE ENGAGEMENT OF THE UNITED STATES IN THE SYRIAN CRISIS: A THEMATIC ANALYSIS.	Research Paper	English	<i>Journal of Liberty and International Affairs</i> 7 (3):331-44. <a href="https://doi.org/10.47305/JLIA2137331k">https://doi.org/10.47305/JLIA2137331k</a> .
Christians in the Nineveh Plains: Focusing on Possible Self-Governance for Minorities. Published by: Journal of University of	Research Paper	English	<i>Journal of University of Raparin</i>  Vol: 7 (3), 415–436. <a href="https://doi.org/10.26750/Vol(7).No(3).Paper18">https://doi.org/10.26750/Vol(7).No(3).Paper18</a>
The Future of Minorities in Post-ISIL Iraq. Published by: Journal of University of Raparin	Research Paper	English	<i>Journal of University of Raparin</i>  Vol: 8 (1), 290–309. <a href="https://doi.org/10.26750/Vol(8).No(1).Paper12">https://doi.org/10.26750/Vol(8).No(1).Paper12</a>
Theoretical Analysis of the U.S. Foreign Policy Towards Kurds in Syria After 201	Research Paper	English	<i>Journal of University of Raparin</i>  Vol: 9 (5), 53–71. <a href="https://doi.org/10.26750/Vol(9).No(5).Paper3">https://doi.org/10.26750/Vol(9).No(5).Paper3</a>