After Rojava: The Kurdish card and Washington’s revolving door

When imperial priorities shift, ‘allies’ on the periphery become expendable. The next front is already taking shape.

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The sweeping hopes the western left invested in the “Rojava” experiment have curdled into disillusionment. The promise of “democratic confederalism” and decentralized self-administration collided with the hard realities of power politics.

Rojava did not fall simply because of battlefield reversals. From the outset, it operated within a web of international security arrangements, its survival tied to external guarantees that were always conditional.

When Washington recalibrated its strategic priorities toward state consolidation in Damascus and regional de-escalation with Turkiye, the illusion of permanence dissolved, and the self-administration found itself exposed to the hard constraints of geography and demography.

The collapse was structural rather than sudden. The autonomous administration endured because it served a defined function within the US security architecture during the war against ISIS. Once that function narrowed, so did its political space.

For years, segments of the western left projected onto northeastern Syria an experiment they described as revolutionary. The language was compelling, built around promises of grassroots democracy, women’s liberation, and communal economics.

Yet the project’s durability depended less on ideological coherence than on US air cover and control over oil revenue. When Washington recalculated its position, the margins tightened quickly.

From revolutionary theory to centralized command

Rojava’s intellectual scaffolding rested on the prison writings of Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) leader Abdullah Ocalan and the libertarian municipalism of Murray Bookchin. The model promised decentralized councils and governance rooted in local participation.

In practice, authority consolidated within disciplined cadres aligned with the Democratic Union Party (PYD) and its military arms. Decision-making flowed through centralized structures, while security bodies operated with broad discretion. Military imperatives shaped governance more decisively than communal assemblies.

The contradiction was embedded from the beginning. A project that celebrated grassroots democracy relied on rigid organizational control. Arab tribal constituencies in Raqqa and Deir Ezzor were incorporated into administrative frameworks, but political authority remained tightly managed.

The imbalance becomes clearer when viewed in scale.

Indicator	Data
Kurdish population in Syria before the crisis	Approximately 2 million (around 10 percent of total population)
Strength of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) at its peak	100,000 fighters (including full-time personnel and internal security forces)
Control over Syrian energy resources	Nearly 70 percent of Syrian oil fields
Detention and prisons	Administration of camps holding tens of thousands of ISIS detainees and their families

A minority demographic base presided over extensive territory and the majority of Syria's energy resources. That arrangement could only be sustained under external protection. Without it, the asymmetry would have been politically and militarily difficult to maintain.

Strategic utility and its limits

The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) emerged as Washington's preferred ground partner against ISIS. US airstrikes, intelligence coordination, and advanced weapons transformed Kurdish-led formations into a decisive battlefield force.

US officials repeatedly called the partnership tactical and temporary. The phrasing was deliberate.

Control of oil fields in Hasakah and Deir Ezzor provided the financial backbone of the administration. Revenues sustained salaries, internal security services, and the institutional architecture of autonomy. However, extraction methods remained rudimentary, and civilian living standards lagged. Military consolidation advanced faster than civilian governance.

Yet NATO member Turkiye viewed the consolidation of a PKK-aligned structure along its southern border as an existential security threat, given its decades-long conflict with the PKK. Ankara repeatedly made clear that arming and legitimizing the SDF would carry consequences.

Turkish military operations in northern Syria – such as the operations in Afrin and Operation Olive Branch – were not sudden escalations but calculated moves to prevent the emergence of a contiguous Kurdish belt along Turkiye's frontier. Each intervention exposed the limits of US protection and underscored that Washington was unwilling to rupture relations with a NATO ally for the sake of Kurdish autonomy.

Collapse, integration, and the ISIS dilemma

By January 2026, the US-backed transitional government in Damascus launched a coordinated campaign to restore central authority in the northeast. The move came after

months of political maneuvering and quiet signals that the US was withdrawing troops. The rapid rollback marked the most significant territorial shift since the fall of former Syrian president Bashar al-Assad in December 2024 and exposed the shrinking space for Kurdish-led autonomy.

Government forces advanced rapidly into SDF-held areas in Raqqa and Deir Ezzor, capitalizing on reduced US air cover and intelligence coordination. The speed of the advance revealed how dependent the autonomous administration had become on external protection. Within days, Kurdish forces began withdrawing toward Hasakah Governorate, conceding strategic depth and abandoning key economic nodes.

A ceasefire was reached on 18 January following heavy losses. That understanding laid the groundwork for a broader 14-point framework that provided for the incorporation of SDF military and security forces into Syria's defense and interior ministries, the dismantling of parallel command structures, and the restoration of centralized authority. In practical terms, it marked the end of the autonomous administration as a separate security actor.

Fighting subsided but did not immediately cease, and negotiations continued over implementation. On 30 January, the government announced a comprehensive integration agreement formalizing the process.

The deal required SDF units to withdraw from remaining contact lines, redeploy under the Syrian army, and integrate their administrative and civil institutions into state structures. Prisons, oil and gas facilities, and strategic infrastructure were transferred to Damascus, while provisions were included for Kurdish civil and educational rights.

One issue, however, could not be resolved on paper: the fate of tens of thousands of ISIS detainees and their families held in prisons and camps across the northeast. These facilities had long been administered by Kurdish-led security forces with US backing.

Their transfer to Damascus introduces a volatile security burden for a state still consolidating authority. Managing hardened ISIS cadres, foreign fighters, and sprawling detention camps such as Al-Hawl will test both capacity and political will.

In the weeks following the January fighting, Washington began relocating thousands of ISIS detainees to Iraqi custody, with Baghdad confirming the receipt of nearly 5,000 prisoners.

What began as battlefield pressure evolved within weeks into full institutional incorporation. The autonomous administration ceased to function as a distinct political project and was absorbed into the Syrian state. Yet the security legacy of the war – embodied most starkly in the detainee file – remains unresolved.

The Iranian horizon

The implications extend beyond Syria's northeast. Iran's Kurdish population is estimated at 8–10 million people, concentrated in Kurdistan, Kermanshah, Ilam, and parts of West Azerbaijan provinces.

These regions face chronic unemployment, uneven development, and strained relations with Tehran. The grievances are real, and so is the geopolitical incentive to instrumentalize them. Several factions define the Iranian Kurdish political scene.

Political formation	Ideological roots	Primary operational base	Current external linkages and agendas
Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran (KDPI)	Traditional Kurdish nationalism; social democracy	Iraqi Kurdistan Region (camps and rear bases)	Rapprochement with western capitals; engagement in regional pressure efforts against Tehran
Komala (Abdullah Mohtadi wing)	Marxist-Leninist (historically); liberal democratic (currently)	Iraqi Kurdistan Region; European diaspora	Full alignment with US “maximum pressure”; undeclared intersections with Iranian right-wing opposition abroad
Kurdistan Free Life Party (PJAK)	Democratic confederalism (Ocalanist)	Qandil Mountains (border triangle)	Organic linkage to Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) strategy; reciprocal regional instrumentalization

The Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran (KDPI) remains the most historically rooted faction. Pragmatic in its alliances, it has navigated relations with Tehran’s adversaries when advantageous and now presents itself to western capitals as an organized alternative capable of mobilizing Kurdish constituencies inside Iran.

Komala’s Mohtadi wing has shifted markedly from its Marxist origins toward alignment with western policy frameworks targeting Tehran. Its open support for US maximum pressure strategies and outreach to monarchist and other opposition currents abroad ties its political trajectory to external calculations.

The Kurdistan Free Life Party (PJAK) operates from the Qandil Mountains and maintains organic ties with the PKK. Its military activity inside Iran fluctuates with regional bargaining dynamics, reflecting broader power negotiations rather than an independent strategic path.

The structural lesson

The pattern is consistent. Kurdish movements confronting centralized states seek external leverage, while major powers confronting regional adversaries see opportunity. The alignment begins as tactical cooperation but rarely evolves into a durable partnership.

Rojava demonstrated the limits of dependency. Once strategic priorities shifted in Washington, the burden fell on local actors.

External backing can amplify visibility and resources. It can also bind movements to agendas that dissolve once broader negotiations take precedence. Communities on the ground absorb the consequences, whether through security crackdowns, economic strain, or regional spillover.

Rojava's trajectory was the outcome of structural reliance on a patron whose priorities were never aligned with long-term Kurdish autonomy. Empires cultivate proxies for immediate objectives and recalibrate without hesitation when circumstances change.

History does not repeat mechanically, but certain dynamics persist. The Kurdish question remains central to unresolved state formations across West Asia. Whether it again becomes a pressure point in a wider confrontation will depend less on ideological aspiration than on the balance between local agency and external design.

One chapter in northeastern Syria has closed. Another is already unfolding elsewhere.