

PROXY WARS INITIATIVE

SECURING A DURABLE PEACE.
A Carnegie Corporation Project
Dedicated to Peace and Security in the Middle East.



The US and Rojava: A Fluid Patron-Client Relationship

Through repeated radical shakeups of the state system in the Middle East over the past ten years, state authority has weakened and various forms and degrees of political order have emerged. The lack of international legal protection for various non-state territories which have emerged in the region, including in Syria, Libya, Yemen and Iraq, as well as a new space for regional intervention, have contributed to the emergence of a wide range of patron-client (or sponsor-proxy) relationships in the region.

As much of the existing patron-client literature was developed in the context of the Cold War and its inter-state conflicts, new conceptual and analytical insights and frameworks are needed to unpack the complex relationships of the intra-state conflicts in the Middle East. The dominant image of the patron-client relationship in independence movements or intra-state wars has been the image of the client as a “puppet” in the hands of the patron. The suggestion that it is a question of either dependence or independence, rather than a question of degree is in many ways a simplification, hiding the fluid and complex nature of many relationships. Not only is the level of the client’s dependence a matter of degree, but so too is the level of patronage (support) provided by the patron.

Clients, or various types of non-state entities, may acquiesce to strong links with their patron(s), yet the outcome of patron-client relations may be more nuanced. The relationship between the US and the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (Rojava), which will be explored in this piece, is a good example of a fluid and complex relationship existing in a fragmented and volatile landscape. A view of such complexity is lost if this relationship is seen as one of simple dependence on the part of local Kurdish authorities.

The forms, dynamics and degrees of the patron-client relationship vary depending on the variety and goal of the political governance of the client in question, whether it is a recognized state (the Syrian government), a state-like entity (Iraqi Kurdistan), an organized rebel movement (the Houthis in Yemen), or disparate bands of militias/proxies (such as the many groups operating in Turkish-controlled areas of Syria). While this variation presents analytical challenges, taking it into account enhances our analysis of conflict, and



Kamaran Palani
Lecturer & Doctoral Scholar, University of
Leiden; Salahaddin University-Erbil

the possibility of effective action towards the resolution of conflict. However, this variation does not mean there are no common features in patron-client relationships across all these contexts. All forms of patron-client relationship are characterized by asymmetry in power and the significant impact of the patron's support on the client's survival and/or success.

"The forms, dynamics and degrees of the patron-client relationship vary depending on the variety and goal of the political governance of the client in question, whether it is a recognized state (the Syrian government), a state-like entity (Iraqi Kurdistan), an organized rebel movement (the Houthis in Yemen), or disparate bands of militias/proxies (such as the many groups operating in Turkish-controlled areas of Syria)."

The US-Rojava Relationship

Through highlighting five issues, I will demonstrate the existence of the abovementioned fluidity and complexity in the US-Rojava patron-client relationship.

The goals of the Rojava leadership

The kind of entity which has developed in northeast Syria, dominated by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)-led administration, demonstrates significant fluidity and complexity in its patron-client relationship. Rojava is reliant on the US for military and financial assistance, and would not have emerged victorious in the fight against the Islamic State without the US support. However, its goals are by no means a reflection of the US's aims in Syria. The grand objective of Rojava is the establishment and consolidation of an autonomous political entity within the context of a fragmented Syria. Notwithstanding the US and other external support, the Syrian Kurds have their own rationale for seeking autonomy, with strong indigenous roots.

Although external influence has played a major role in the consolidation of the Kurdish-led administration, Rojava's model of political governance is not an outcome of the US intervention in the Syrian civil war. Instead, it is shaped by the political ideology of the dominant Kurdish force in Rojava, the Democratic Union Party (PYD). Since 2014, the Kurdish authorities have engaged in de facto state-building, demonstrating their own legitimacy. In northeast Syria, alternative forms of governance have emerged, including institutions built around the need to provide public services including health and education. These developments do not derive from the wishes of the patron state, and in fact in some cases explicitly diverge from the official policies of the US, lending a degree of complexity to the patron-client relationship in this context.

The degree of patron support

While US support to Rojava has not been full-fledged, and has fluctuated over time, it has nonetheless been crucial. The US's primary strategic objective of defeating the Islamic State greatly relied on Rojava's military and political capabilities on the ground. Despite the

power asymmetry between patron and client, both sides benefited from the relationship. The US has had no major rivals to be the patron for Rojava, so no matter how unpredictable and unreliable the US has been, Rojava's survival requires some measure of its support. In the context of Syria, which is highly characterized by patron-client networks, Rojava faces hostility and challenges from other external actors. Russia's grand objective is to restore the Assad government's territorial control across the country, including the dissolution of the Rojava administration, and to widen the gap between Washington and Ankara. For this reason, if the US was to openly support Rojava's goal of autonomy, this would put it at complete divergence with the priorities of Ankara, Damascus and Moscow.

In addition, the events of last autumn illustrated that other European players can only provide external patronage within the framework of the US-led support and presence. After Donald Trump's controversial decision to withdraw American troops from northeast Syria last October, currently only some 600 US troops remain in the SDF-controlled areas of Rmelan, al-Shadadi, and southeast of Deir al-Zour. This small presence provides enough deterrence against any military plans of the Assad regime to establish its control over the SDF territory, and also contains the conflict between Turkey and the SDF.

Uncertainty over US commitment

The future of the US presence in Syria is unclear, and there is no political agreement in place to preserve the region's autonomy. Whilst the support of the US is of great importance, without some sort of institutional arrangement or protection for autonomous Rojava, the administration will not be a viable entity in the long run. Fabrice Balanche's detailed piece shows that limited patron support is not sufficient for Rojava's viability, as the administration faces multi-sectorial and existential threats. Without greater support, a significant resource gap can be expected. Maintaining political autonomy and building state-like institutions require significant resources.

Threats to the entity's survival

Rojava faces existential threats from Turkey, the Syrian regime and its patron Russia, and the remnants of the Islamic State group in northeast Syria. Movement into and around Rojava is limited, as most of its borders are controlled by the abovementioned forces. To address its isolation and vulnerability, in the absence of a good relationship with Turkey, Rojava's prospects of survival and sustainability may require working with Russia and the Damascus authorities. In the long-term this poses a serious challenge to Rojava's autonomy and, in the short-term, has complicated the vitally important relationship between Washington and the Kurds.

Relations with Damascus

Finally, the SDF's leaders believe that the current US assistance makes forceful reintegration of the de facto autonomous entity of Rojava less likely. As long as there is even partial American support for Rojava, Damascus's entry into negotiations with the Rojava leadership will be contingent on Damascus's acceptance of an autonomous Rojava. In other words, Rojava's survival depends on its capacity to balance militarily against Damascus, which currently is only possible with US patronage. If the policy of Rojava's isolation shared by Moscow, Damascus and Ankara continues, this will further force the entity into reliance on the US. In general, shifts in the balance of power in Assad's favour are injurious to Rojava's prospects of survival. Assad's ability to regain control over northeast Syria peacefully depends on whether Damascus can, or wishes to, accommodate Rojava's goal. In the absence of US support, and with a continuous threat from Turkey, a forceful reintegration of areas currently under Kurdish control is a possible outcome. Yet with US support, forceful reintegration of Rojava is the least likely scenario. If the leaders of the SDF/PYD had certainty

over future US commitment to Rojava's autonomy, there would be no incentive for them to accept a settlement giving them anything less than the status quo: a de facto autonomous entity with its own administration system and army.

More from **PWI**

Covid-19 & Middle East Proxy Wars

David Pollock
Bernstein Fellow, Washington Institute
[Read now...](#)



PROXY WARS **INITIATIVE**

[back to the home page... >](#)

© 2020 Proxy Wars Initiative