



## Battle for Kobane: Turkey, USA and the Kurdish future

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By Afro-middle East Centre

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*The Syrian town of Kobane has become a symbol for a number of geopolitical dynamics involving the USA, Iraq, Turkey, Syrian and various Kurdish groups. This article explores those dynamics, the manner in which the various roleplayers have positioned themselves on Kobane, and the broader significance of the battle of Kobane.*

The [battle](#) for the Kurdish Syrian town of Kobane, resulting from a [siege](#) of the city by the Islamic State group (IS) since 2 July, has become the iconic battle in the USA-led international coalition's war against IS. Despite IS having fought its way to within a few kilometres of Baghdad, a city of far more strategic [importance](#) than Kobane, the latter has become the focus of international media attention. There are various reasons for this. First, the initial inaction and the subsequent [hyperaction](#) by the USA have generated much discussion and criticism. Second, the Kurdish population in Turkey, Iraq and Europe have successfully kept Kobane in the headlines for weeks through methods such as large, widespread [protests](#). Third, the use of [women](#) fighters, even as suicide bombers, by Kurdish militias has also sparked more than a few conversations. However, the most significant aspects of the battle for Kobane relates to the geopolitical dimension of the conflict, especially in the way it intersects with the interests of Syrian and Iraqi Kurds, Turkey and the USA.

Despite US attempts to militarily disengage from the Middle East, as evidenced by President Barack Obama's vacillation over striking the Syrian regime after its alleged use of chemical weapons, it entangled itself in a battle with IS since it came to the defence of the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq in August. Obama has tried unsuccessfully to decrease direct US involvement through a number of measures, including building an international anti-IS coalition. The USA has also attempted to give

the coalition a Sunni Muslim face by enlisting the more-than-eager Sunni monarchies such as Saudi Arabia and Jordan. Understanding that the coalition would not be credible without active Turkish participation, the USA wants to entice Turkey into the coalition. Turkey is important because not only is it a democratic Muslim country, but it is also a NATO member with the largest [military contingent](#) in the alliance after the USA; it controls the longest international border with Syria, bringing its troops closest to IS havens; it can offer airbases for coalition jets to target IS positions inside Syria; and Turkish intelligence assets reach deep into IS territory, as evidenced by their rescue of Turkish citizens held hostage by IS.

### **USA-Turkey differences**

However, the USA has been [unable](#) to get Turkey to join the anti-IS coalition in any meaningful manner. The Turkish parliament was slow to [authorise](#) the deployment of troops against IS, with the Turkish government citing the Turks held hostage by IS as the reason. The US vice president, Joe Biden, criticised Turkey for laxity in controlling its border with Syria, and for allowing the passage of IS recruits into Syria. This resulted in strong criticism of Biden's remarks by the Turkish president, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, and Biden was forced to [apologise](#). The state of Turkish-USA relations is not clear to the public, though it seems that they could [worsen](#). It is clear that the USA delayed in getting involved in Kobane, because it waited and hoped for Turkey to act first. With Turkey not responding to IS advances in Kobane, though allowing the [passage](#) of refugees and humanitarian aid, the USA was forced to unilaterally strike IS positions in Kobane. Turkey, meanwhile, saw massive Kurdish protests in Ankara that led to the deaths of forty civilians. It justified its inaction on Kobane by saying that the Kurdish groups fighting IS for control of Kobane, the [PYD](#) (Democratic Union Party) and its militia the [YPG](#) (People's Protection Unity), were extensions of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), a formerly separatist Kurdish group based in Turkey. Since the Turkish state views PKK as a terrorist group, any group affiliated to it is similarly regarded.

With US airstrikes not entirely successful in substantially pushing back IS, the tense scenario between Turkey and the USA reached new heights on when Obama decided to [airdrop](#) weapons for YPG fighters in Kobane. This was contrary to the expectation of the Turkish government, which was not only unhappy about arming and supporting the YPG, but had conditioned its involvement in the anti-IS coalition on the removal of the Syrian government, and the creation of a safe haven inside Syria for the training of a Syrian rebel force of Turkey's preference. By directly arming YPG fighters, the USA had effectively spurned Turkish demands, and the Turks likely viewed the US tactic as tacit support for the Assad regime in Syria, since the Turkish government believes that the YPG had collaborated with the Syrian regime in taking over the cantons of Efrin, Kobane and Cizire in northern Syria.

To further add to the confusion over the state of Turkish-USA relations, Turkey followed up the news of US airdrops with the creation of a passageway for Syrian Kurdish fighters trained in Iraq to cross into Syria to help the YPG fighters already fighting against IS in Kobane. Turkey's apparent about-turn came after an Obama-Erdogan [telephonic](#) conversation. Turkish sources have tried to save face and defend

this decision by [arguing](#) that Turkey had not changed its policy, but that the YPG that reversed its position, since the latter was initially resistant to the idea of Iraqi reinforcements. That initial resistance was related to [divisions](#) among Syrian Kurds.

### **Kurdish turf and ideological battles**

For the YPG, receiving support from forces trained in Iraq (even if they are also Syrian Kurds) could allow Masoud Barzani, the president of the Kurdistan Regional Government in Iraq, gaining more leverage and control over the political group that speaks for the majority of Syrian Kurds, the PYD, and its YPG militia, which is the most active force in the anti-IS battle in Kobane.

The basic issue of contention between Barzani and the PYD is a philosophical and ideological disagreement over the [vision](#) for Kurdish 'independence'. Barzani is [close](#) to the Turkish government – which regards the PYD as a terrorist group, and his vision of Kurdish 'independence' is a Kurdish nation state, like other states in the region. Additionally, when confronted by IS – and in general, he has been [satisfied](#) with operating within the nation-state/federalism framework that the central government in Baghdad has been willing to allow for Iraqi Kurds. The PYD, on the other hand, inspired by the vision of PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan, imprisoned in Turkey, has a vision of '[radical democracy](#)' that seeks to abolish the [border](#) that arbitrarily divides Kurdish towns along the Syrian-Turkish border. This is a deep philosophical and political divide between the PYD and Barzani, and has already resulted in frequent [fights](#) between the two groups, such as those that were witnessed in 2013 for the control of the border crossing between Iraq and Syria. The two political forces detest each other to such an extent that they allowed their fight to prevent relief aid from reaching war-ravaged civilians on the Syrian side of the border.

### **Win or win for Turkey?**

Thus, there might be some truth to the Turkish claim that the change in position was not Turkey's but that of the PYG, which has now signalled its approval for the arrival of Barzani-trained forces and Barzani's peshmerga soldiers into Kobane. More important, perhaps, is the question of what will happen once the anti-IS fight is over. In the event of a Kurdish victory, it is likely that the two Kurdish forces will turn on each other politically, and perhaps even militarily. That would be an implicit victory for Turkey, since Barzani-affiliated fighters are likely to prevail over PYD-affiliated fighters due to their superior military strength, and Barzani remains close to the Turkish government.

In the case of an IS victory, the first experiment in self-autonomy that the Kurds have been able to practise, the declaration of an autonomous Kurdish Rojava region in Syria, will fail. Again, it will result in smiles in Ankara since Turkey believes that the Rojava experiment increases Kurdish separatist tendencies within the Turkish Kurdish population along the Syrian-Turkish border. That Turkey is trying to undermine the PYD (and YPG) resistance in Kobane can also be gauged by the fact that it succeeded in encouraging Free Syrian Army (FSA) fighters to deploy to Kobane, although the move had initially been

rejected by the YPG.

Thus, whether Kobane falls or not, Turkey will likely win this Machiavellian battle for the control of Kobane. From Turkey's perspective, two of its enemies are facing off in the fight between Syrian Kurds and IS, and, regardless of which one is victorious, Turkey will be able to tick off at least one adversary as weakened and wounded, if not altogether defeated. The US battle against IS, however, is largely symbolic. If Kobane falls to the IS, this would severely dent US public relations efforts against the group. A larger US loss in the battle for Kobane would be an even more strained USA-Turkey relationship, but it seems the USA is more willing to suffer this than a symbolic defeat at the hands of IS.



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