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## **HUFF: PRESIDENT TRUMP'S KURDISH POLICY TAKES SHAPE IN IRAQ, SYRIA**

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Breitbart (11 April 2017)

Just after the election, Breitbart published an analysis arguing that President Donald J. Trump was a cause for hope for Kurdish national aspirations. It has been 81 days since the inauguration, so, has the outlook improved for the American-Kurdish alliance?

As the roll-out of a revamped American strategy to bring a swift defeat to the Islamic State (ISIS) continues, the unanswered question of the Kurdish role looms as one of the largest unknowns.

The calculus of the Trump Administration vis-a-vis Kurdish authorities in Iraq and Syria has not been definitively clear, but has become more apparent as facts on the ground are established.

Confusion reigned as news agencies affiliated with Turkish, Syrian Regime and Kurdish interests vied with competing narratives in attempts to pigeonhole the Administration toward or away from possible options in what was still a to be announced strategy for Iraq and Syria.

Even the Washington Post discouragingly claimed that President Trumps team tossed out President Obamas alleged plan to arm the Kurds.

As Turkey threatened that it would have to broaden attacks on the Syrian Kurdish forces □ which Turkey labels as terrorists □ the Syrian Kurdish forces warned that they would have to cease progress against ISIS in order to respond to any expanded Turkish offensive in Syria. For a moment, it appeared as if America was set to be arming both sides of yet another dimension of the conflict.

During my month-long visit to the Kurdish regions of Syria and Iraq, I went directly to those on the receiving end of American policy in search of clear signs of the direction America would take.

Would America move to align more in favor of the Turkish-led plan to liberate Raqqa, over that of the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces?

Could it be possible that the U.S. is set to downscale military support for the Iraqi Kurds as ISIS nears defeat in Iraq?

The lines are redrawn, and not just in reaction to the use of chemical weapons. In just the time I was in Syria, America sent supporting forces to help the Syrian Kurds secure crucial infrastructure near Raqqa □ days ahead of an announcement that the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces would launch a fresh operation towards Raqqa in April. It was then revealed that the U.S. is training police forces and assembling new civil authorities to govern the former ISIS capital post-liberation □ which is said to soon become part of the expanding Kurdish regional administration. As you read this, fresh deliveries of weapons and equipment are arriving to the front line □ and

these heavy trucks were bumper-to-bumper when I visited.

In response, Turkey expresses dismay and frustration at the U.S. decision to exclude them from Raqqa operations, responding with threats to reevaluate Ankara-Washington relations.

Across the border, in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, there is fresh reason for optimism, as well.

Earlier this month, Kurdistan Region President Massoud Barzani met with United Nations General Secretary Antonio Guterres, who reportedly indicated UN oversight would be provided for the anticipated referendum for Kurdish independence.

Not long later, a bipartisan meeting convened of the two main Kurdish political parties, who presented unified statements on the timeline and mechanism for the independence referendum □ now tentatively scheduled for 2017.

This capped a busy week for the Kurds of northern Iraq, who had just voted for the first time to raise the Kurdish flag in the disputed Kurdish city of Kirkuk, the status of which has remained a major issue for what the final map of the Kurdistan Region will look like.

Meanwhile, back in Washington, President Trump received Dr. Fouad Hussein, chief of staff to President Barzani. Dr. Fouad revealed that President Trump reiterated his commitment to providing military backing to the Kurdish forces.

The highest-level meeting yet between President Trump and a Kurdistan Regional Government dignitary, Dr. Fouad attended President Trump's first conference of participants in the US-led coalition against ISIS. This is notable considering that the Kurds were never officially included in previous anti-ISIS conferences during the Obama Administration.

The selection of Rex Tillerson as Secretary of State was one of the most positive, early signs from the Trump Administration. While at the helm of Exxon, Mr. Tillerson defied Baghdad as Exxon became one of the first oil companies to sign a unilateral deal to export Kurdish oil, disregarding Iraqi claims. Such exports have proven key to funding the Kurdistan Regional Government, which receives none of their share of Iraq's federal budget. During his confirmation hearing, he declared the Kurds as our greatest allies, and we would recommit our support of Kurdish forces.

In word and deed, it is clear that the Trump Administration has increased support to Kurds in the short term. While President Trump is still in the process of developing his long-term strategy and awaits confirmation of his appointees, it appears he has an eye towards a stronger American-Kurdish partnership down the road.

Time will tell.

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Kaynak/Source: