**UN EXCLUDES ONE THIRD OF SYRIA, MOSTLY KURDS, FROM CONSTITUTION COMMITTEE**

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A new UN committee tasked with writing a Syrian constitution has excluded voices from one third of the country and may be given foreign powers a veto over which Syrian voices are allowed, according to reports. Despite claims by the UN’s Geir Pedersen that the UN would have “Syrians sitting together,” including voices from the diaspora, large groups appear to be excluded.

The committee was announced last week by UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres and will meet in Geneva on October 30. The committee is supposed to include “members of President Bashar al-Assad’s government and opposition representatives,” according to reports. The agreement was made between the “Syrian Arab Republic” and the Syrian Negotiations Commission and is intended to be a “credible, balance and inclusive Constitutional Committee that will be facilitated by the UN.”

Unfortunately, like many UN actions it is the precise opposite of the language embodied in its formation. Critics say it is neither balanced or inclusive, excluding voices from the larger Kurdish groups in eastern Syria and largely excluding most Syrians from the process, erring instead on the side of Assad and Turkish-backed opposition groups to have a veto over the participation of others. Turkey’s desire to exclude SDF-linked groups is because Ankara argues they are linked to the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) which Ankara views as a terrorist organization. Similarly the Syrian regime describes many Syrian groups, particularly religious extremists, in Idlib as terrorists and will not want them represented.

A tug-of-war is taking place, in which the government in Damascus may pay lip service to this committee but will never allow it real power, instead trying to pack it with its own representatives. The committee will have 150 members. 50 of these members will from the Syrian government side, 50 from the opposition and 50 “chosen by the UN and members of Syrian civil society.” Oddly it seems almost no representatives will come from eastern Syria, an area controlled by the Syrian Democratic Forces, the main partner of the US in fighting ISIS. The SDF have their own political organizations, yet across the board they have all been excluded, even though they liberated millions from ISIS.

SDF spokesman Mustafa Bali said that the UN “must know that having a couple of Kurds from northeast Syria who are allied with Damascus or the opposition doesn’t mean Kurds are represented in the committee.” The Syrian Democratic Council, which is linked to the SDF, has also been excluded. No Kurdish voices from Afrin, an area under military occupation by Turkey, appear to be included as well. Bassam Ishak of the SDC wrote that “Turkey has vetoed Syrian Kurds representation in the UN Syrian constitution committee. Few Syrian Kurds and Syriacs [Christians] are chosen as members of the Syrian opposition.”

The US has worked closely with the SDF to defeat ISIS but Washington has never appeared to support its partners in any kind of political process. This is because the main US mission in eastern Syria was to defeat ISIS but unlike Turkey or the Syrian regime the US has never sought to support Syrians from eastern Syria to have any representation in the future of Syria. This is convenient because it means that it doesn’t have to be beholden to any of these groups politically and can walk away more easily from eastern Syria at a time of its choosing and still say that it accomplished its mission of defeating ISIS. This is because the US has gotten out of the state building and democratization business that it once championed during the 20th century and first years of the 21st century. Today’s US policy is built on silos of military mission and state department mission, sometimes working at cross-purposes. In Syria the military works “by, with ad through” the SDF to defeat ISIS while the US State Department works with Turkey. Unlike other countries that do hybrid diplomacy, working with states and groups they support, the US works with states and has a weak track record working with or consistently supporting others. That is partly why the US effort to support Syrian rebel opposition ended up training few fighters and largely abandoning all the groups it worked with in Turkey and Jordan. Turkey stepped into the vacuum and appears to be more invested in its friends.

But Turkey and the Syrian regime also exclude many voices from Syria, preferring those that are dependent on their leadership to be at the UN on the committee. This creates a potentially lopsided committee excluding vast swaths of the Syrian public. The US has largely squandered its role in the Geneva process, paying lip service to it but doing very little and enabling Turkey, Iran and Russia to work closely on the future of Syria. With a crisis in Washington over impeachment the US is even more beholden to Turkey and others to be its voice on Syria, preferring that to speaking up for its partners because the US has narrowly tailored its military mission to work with these partners, and largely ignored them in every other way possible. For instance the SDF or SDC has been largely excluded in Washington, and the US has reduced the diplomatic presence it once sought to send to eastern Syria. This is because US president Donald Trump decided to withdraw from Syria in December 2018. He was retrained in carry out the decision. But US commanders never know when the President might change his mind. One result is that the thousands of ISIS fighters the US helped “defeat” are today relaxing in camps in eastern Syria plotting their return and ISIS supporters in Al-Hol camp have reorganized and begun murdering civilians again. Of course, those civilians in Al-Hol don’t seem to have much representation on the UN committee either.

In the end the UN committee will be so large and complex that its chances of success are slim. If it succeeds it will only set in stone the historic discrimination in Syria against the Kurdish minority in the east and north. Excluded for most of the 20th century, they seem to have been sidelined again, even though many of their fighters helped defeat ISIS. In a bizarre outcome, if the Syrian Kurds in the east had only allied with the Syrian regime they would likely have more representation at the UN committee. They chose to partner with the US and have ended up out in the cold. It is hard to see how the Geneva process will not result in either failure or a rubber stamp on the partition of Syria between Turkey and the Syrian government in Damascus, which has backing from Russia and Iran. Washington has taken most of its chips off the table.