



US Pushes Syrian Kurds to Join Rebellion

By Scott Stearns – 11/16/12

WASHINGTON — As the Obama administration pushes to solidify Syria's political opposition, it also is working to improve ties between Syrian Kurds and groups battling Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.

Concentrating control in their own areas of northwest Syria, Kurdish leaders have been slow to join the broader rebellion against Assad, preferring to seek greater regional autonomy with Kurds in neighboring Iraq and Turkey.

Before the rebellion accelerated, Assad granted new political freedoms to Syrian Kurds who have long sought greater autonomy inside and outside of Syria.

Malou Innocent, a Middle East analyst with the Cato Institute in Washington, said that move put Syrian Kurds in a bind.

"This really put them on their heels, sort of said: 'Well, should we continue our assistance to the rebellion or should we actually stick this out and see if Assad continues to hold onto power?'" Innocent said.

Kurds reluctance

Kurdish leaders have quit previous efforts to unite the Syrian opposition, saying there has not been adequate regard for their autonomy. Opposition leaders outside Syria say Kurds have not sufficiently committed to a unified post-Assad state.

"The relationship between the mainstream opposition in exile and Syria's Kurds has been largely antagonistic and very, very tense," said Steve Heydemann, a senior adviser for Middle East initiatives at the U.S. Institute of Peace. "And that gets back to this question of this mutual lack of trust."

U.S. State Department spokeswoman Victoria Nuland says the Obama administration encourages Assad opponents to include Kurdish colleagues.

"There are a number of reports from inside Syria of some of the liberated areas where Kurdish populations and Sunni populations are working well together," Nuland said. "That's certainly the direction that we encourage."

U.S. policy varies

The U.S., however, varies its policies on Kurdish communities depending on their country.

In Turkey, there are concerns because Syria's largest Kurdish group is tied to the Kurdistan Worker's Party, which the European Union and Washington consider a terrorist organization.

And in Iraq, U.S. forces protected Kurds from Saddam Hussein, allowing the creation of a bustling Kurdistan over the past two decades.

Analyst Heydemann said Syrian Kurds have been slow to fully commit to the anti-Assad rebellion because they have broader goals involving Kurds in Turkey and Iraq.

"I don't think they intend to play the regime against the opposition," he said. "But they do feel that they have an opportunity to use this moment to try and advance some of their long-standing concerns that they don't feel either side has really responded to yet."