

# ARMENIAN BATTALION IN SYRIA, CALCULATED MOVE OR BLUNDER?

*Posted on May 10, 2020 by Keghart*



Category: [Opinions](#)



**Karen Mkrtchyan**, Yerevan, 6 May 2020

On April 24, the Martyr Nubar Ozanyan Military Battalion, named after the Communist revolutionary who was martyred fighting ISIS in 2017 at the battle of Raqqa, celebrated its first anniversary. [It was formed on the occasion of the 104th Anniversary of the Armenian Genocide.](#)

While recognized as an Artsakh independence war hero, the formation of an Armenian battalion in his name has resulted in mixed feelings among Armenians. Fighting under the banner of U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), a Kurdish-led military alliance, the Armenian battalion compels us to look into the pages of history. Are we doing ourselves a favor or are we shooting ourselves in the foot?

The idea of forming an Armenian military unit to defend the Armenians of Syria may come as a welcome move, but it also comes with the risk of spoiling the good relations the community has with the Syrian Government. Throughout the war, Syrian-Armenians maintained friendly relations with and supported President Bashar al-Assad, whose rule is seen most beneficial to the community.

It is no secret that other than fighting ISIS and Turkish military forces, SDF aims at attaining recognition for the Kurdish-controlled Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria. The Syrian government is not prepared to grant autonomy to the Kurds.

Where does this leave the Armenian community in the eyes of the Syrian government or the conflict?

The aspirations of the Kurds—in Syria and in Turkey—for an independent homeland are not new. Despite being promised a homeland under the provisions of the Treaty of Sevres in 1920, the Kurds remained stateless as the treaty was not implemented. Having attained a certain degree of autonomy in Iraqi Kurdistan with the establishment of the Kurdistan Regional Government, the Kurds hope to gain independence with a united Kurdistan as their ultimate goal. With a population of about 40,000, the Kurds are one of the ethnic minorities in Armenia with a parliamentary seat reserved for them.

While sympathizing with Kurdish aspirations against Turkey might seem natural for some, we have to be cautious so as not to repeat the mistakes of our forebears.

One may have sympathy for the Kurds since they are currently at the receiving end, but we should not forget that not long ago the Kurds sided with the Turks to suppress, plunder and massacre the Armenians. Many Kurdish leaders, intellectuals, organizations and ordinary Kurds have acknowledged that their ancestors were complicit in the Armenian Genocide and have apologized for their actions, calling on the Turkish authorities to recognize the genocide. However, mere recognition and apologies do not suffice. It is easy for the Kurds to claim they acknowledge the Armenian Genocide when the tables have turned against them, but what guarantees do we have to trust them in the long run? What will their attitude towards Armenians be once they have

established control over coveted territories?

The Armenian government lays no territorial claims against Turkey, whereas much of what the Armenian Diaspora (descendants of the Genocide survivors) considers its homeland lies beyond Armenia's borders. In the absence of a united Diaspora who will come forward to lay claim to the ancestral homeland and strike a deal with the Kurds?

While it would be close to impossible for a united Armenian front to be formed now, all's not rosy on the Kurdish side either. The Kurds find themselves more fragmented and divided than Armenians. There is no single political force that commands the support of the entire Kurdish population. Who do we negotiate with? Any deal struck with the leadership in the Kurdistan Regional Government in Erbil is unlikely to be honored by the Kurds in Syria. Negotiations with the Kurdish population of Turkey might be challenged by the Kurds in Iran, who do not necessarily share the support of their compatriots in other countries.

Other than the divisions of Kurds based on their country of residence, the complicated tribal system within the Kurdish community has been one of the major setbacks in their quest for a united Kurdish state. The continuous and ongoing inter-tribal conflict within the community has weakened Kurdish political unity. The multiple Kurdish political parties, sometimes backed by foreign players for their interests, have further deepened the rift. Other than those living in what they consider Kurdish lands, there are also a high number of Kurdish Diaspora organizations in Europe that can influence Kurdish policy. Another striking fact of Kurdish disunity is in the good relations between the Iraqi Kurds and Turkey. While their brothers in Turkey bear the brunt of Turkey's hammer, the Erbil leadership sells oil to Ankara and improves ties with Turkey. In short, it is politics as usual, even if it means betraying their people.

However, despite the divisions within their ranks, the Kurds are in a more advantageous position than Armenians. This, perhaps, should be our biggest reason to exercise caution. Unlike us, the Kurds have continued to live on and lay claim to lands in Turkey, while we have found solace in the 29,743 km<sup>2</sup> of land, forgetting what we have left behind beyond the River Arax.

The Kurds' presence on the lands gives them an advantage over Armenians. Other than an unknown number of Islamized Armenians, we do not have a sizeable presence to lay claim to what is ours. Should Turkey be fragmented what strategy do we have to ensure that this time we are not robbed off our lands? The presence of active Kurdish political parties in Turkey, some of them influential, also gives the Kurds an upper hand. Armenians have no political influence in the country.

It would be foolish to think the Kurds will let us have our homeland back if we haven't shed our blood. We cannot be naive to think that the Kurds will be willing to shed blood to liberate Western Armenia and present it to us on a golden platter.

Any collaboration with the Kurds should be well deliberated. Kurdish intentions should be made very clear vis-a-vis land ownership. We should be assured, beyond any doubt, that the Kurds lay no

claim to our lands. Even with such assurances, we should always remember, when it comes to our homeland, we have no friends. Whether at the negotiating table or on the battlefield, we should depend first and foremost on ourselves.

**There are no comments yet.**