

Kurdish Wins...Turkish Worries

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As the Syrian civil war grinds on, new facts on the ground in the north and northeast of the country are increasing Turkey's worries about the future plans and fortunes of Syria's Kurds. Despite the still-fluid security situation south of the border, there are clear signs that the Kurds are consolidating their hold on their areas in what is seen in Ankara as steps towards full autonomy. As Syrian President Bashar al-Assad clings to power despite his regime's losses and gradual collapse, the best Turkey can do is hope to prevent a de facto partition of Syria that could help the establishment of a strong Kurdish entity on its southern border.

The Kurds' Auspicious Circumstances

Undertaking and supervising the Kurdish consolidation effort in Syria is the Democratic Union Party (PYD) and its Popular Protection Units (YPG) which participate as a serious force fighting the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) on the Syrian-Turkish border. They also are partners to Syrian opposition moderates and Islamist factions currently driving south – after conquering the border town of Tal Abyad – towards ISIS's capital al-Raqqah. This pincer movement is hoped to change the shape of the battlefield in northeast Syria and possibly thwart ISIS' plans for the country as the organization's military commanders shift their forces east to defend al-Raqqah instead of concentrating on population centers in Aleppo, Hama, and Homs to the west.

Since mid-2012, Kurdish areas in Syria – extending for about 700 miles west from the Turkish-Iraqi-Syrian border – have mostly been under the control of a Kurdish

Supreme Committee established by the Democratic Union Party and the Kurdish National Council. In early 2014, the committee declared the region autonomous and established a basic governmental structure that deals with security and administration. As the PYD exercises overlordship in the areas, however, some Syrian army troops remain around the cities of Qamishli and Hasakah and Syrian moderate opposition forces, Islamist fighters, and ISIS jihadists operate in different parts from east to west. The Democratic Union's success is a fortuitous outcome of a combination of factors. First, besides benefiting from its alliance with moderate opposition and Islamist forces, its proximity to Iraqi Kurdistan assures it of continued support from the region whose leaders, despite generally cordial relations with Turkey, cannot in all conscience prevent brotherly assistance. Second, the Popular Protection Units have the welcome aid of the US-led international coalition to fight ISIS that has since last summer launched over 1,000 sorties against Islamic State positions in Syria, especially in the north, restricting its fighters' movements and forcing them into hiding.

Third, the Democratic Union is benefiting from the Syrian regime's seeming readiness to collapse the entire edifice of the unified Syrian state and allow centrifugal forces to flourish as its hold on power weakens. With President Assad refusing to fathom a Syria without him, and with his forces losing one battle after another in the south, north, and near the regime's historical popular `Alawi base in the west, Syria's Kurds allow themselves to take responsibility for their own areas lest ISIS expand at their expense. But since facts on the ground are generally hard to erase, especially in fluid political and security situations, this is likely to extend into post-conflict Syria when transitioning to new state structures and institutions becomes the order of the day.

Turkey's Worry

The conditions that allow the Democratic Union to augment its control of Kurdish areas are precisely what Turkey sees as detrimental to its national interests. But what really worries Ankara is the close relationship between the Democratic Union and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) whose leader, Abdullah Ocalan, spends a life

sentence for terrorism in a Turkish jail. The PKK is still considered to be a serious threat to security and state control in southeastern Turkey.

The Union's military force, the Popular Protection Units, has since the summer of 2014 been augmented by PKK insurgents operating out of Iraq's Qandil Mountains as the Kurdistan Regional Government of Mass'oud al-Barazani turns a blind eye. These fighters were instrumental in the defense of the city of Kobane (Ayn al-'Arab) against ISIS extremists in the autumn of 2014, remained essential to the recent battle to re-take the city of Tal Abyad from ISIS, and are currently assisting in the push southward toward ISIS' capital al-Raqqah.

The battle for Kobane is instructive as to how Turkey sees Kurdish moves. For weeks, the city's defenders of Protection Units fighters and Syrian and Islamist opposition troops were subjected to a ruthless assault by ISIS and came very close to surrendering the city. The Turkish army and armor stood idly by but a few hundred yards away despite Turkey's clear anti-ISIS stance. Only when the United States applied the requisite pressure did Ankara yield and allow for fresh reinforcements to the besieged. To Turkish political and military leaders' chagrin, these reinforcements were none other than PKK troops mobilized under the guise of the Iraqi Kurds' *peshmerga* force. These troops were instrumental in beating back the ISIS assault and holding on to the strategic town.

There is arguably no doubt that Turkey's stance regarding Kobane and the fate of northern Syria's Kurds was an important factor in the phenomenal rise and success of the Kurdish People's Democratic Party (HDP). The HDP won 13 percent of the popular vote in the country's recent parliamentary elections, entering the Turkish Parliament with 79 representatives and helping to deprive the long-governing Justice and Development Party of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan of its absolute majority to govern the country alone. With HDP's old close connections to Ocalan's Workers' Party, the Kurds are more than ever feared by officialdom in Ankara for possibly demanding more rights or even working for self-rule.

What to Do?

There can be no escaping the conclusion that the brighter fortunes of Syria's Kurds will continue to send warning signals to state and government institutions in Turkey, especially the military and security services. But short of an outright Turkish intervention in northern Syria – looking increasingly unfathomable – Ankara's choices are very limited in arresting the rise of Syria's Kurds. Its best option may only be to help opposition forces, including the Kurds, arrive at an acceptable, democratic, and allocative system in which all of the country's communities have proportional representation and equal rights before the law.

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