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Turkey and Syria: The Kurdish dilemma

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Synopsis

The insurgency against the Syrian regime has sparked moves to create an autonomous Kurdish region in Syria, raised fears of the PKK using that region as a springboard for attacks against Turkey, and revived debate about long-standing Turkish rejection of Kurdish nationalism.

Commentary

As the civil war in Syria continues to spread Turkey is faced with a new dimension to its long-standing Kurdish problem. For decades, modern Turkey has been battling a bloody insurgency in southeastern Turkey, led by the Kurdish Workers Party (PKK) that has left some 40,000 people dead on both sides.

After having virtually squashed the insurgency in a 16-year long war, however, Turkey found the reality on the ground change fundamentally with the emergence of a Kurdish state-in-waiting in northern Iraq, following the imposition of a US-led no fly zone there in 1991 and the toppling of Saddam Hussein in 2003.

Turkey embraced that new fact by forging close ties with the Iraqi Kurdish leadership and investing heavily in the autonomous Iraqi Kurdish region in a bid to prevent it from fostering Turkish Kurdish demands for greater autonomy or moving towards full independence. The takeover of Syrian Kurdish towns along the border with Turkey by armed Kurds of the Democratic Union Party (PYD), the Syrian wing of the PKK, confronts Turkey with a similar dilemma for which, unlike in Iraq, it has no ready answers.

Syrian Kurdish assertiveness raises the question whether Turkey can sustain its opposition to the aspirations of the Kurds on its borders, or whether it would be better served by embracing a pro-active Kurdish policy that would turn Kurdish nationalism across West Asia to its advantage, as it did in Northern Iraq? Turkish opposition to Kurdish aspirations, moreover, despite its support for the Sunni Muslim opposition in Syria, risks putting Turkey alongside China and Russia in the camp of those opposed to the emergence of a post-Assad Syria that is more democratic and pluralistic.

Risking military intervention

Turkish leaders have so far given no indication that they are reading the writing on the wall despite debate in the media about the need to bite the Kurdish bullet. That would involve granting Turkish Kurds full democratic rights of political and cultural expression that would bring the PKK into the fold and extending its approach

in Iraqi Kurdistan to Kurdish communities in Syria and eventually in Iran. Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan however has warned: "We will not allow a terrorist group to establish camps in northern Syria and threaten Turkey. If there is a step which needs to be taken against the terrorist group, we will definitely take this step."

Foreign Minister Ahmet Davitoglu has urged the opposition Syrian National Council (SNC) to ensure that a post-Assad Syria remains united. In a rare joint declaration Turkey and Iraqi Kurdistan warned that they would confront any threat from a violent group or organization that exploits the power vacuum in Syria. The warning addressed to the PKK without identifying it by name came as Turkey launched a military exercise just across the border from Kurdish-controlled Syrian towns.

These moves may persuade the PKK to refrain for now from attacking Turkey from Syrian territory but are unlikely to resolve the increasing challenge Kurds pose to Turkish policy at home and in the region. For the PKK, attacks against Turkey from Syria would be a double-edged sword. Turkish military retaliation against Syrian Kurdish targets in Syria would constitute foreign intervention in the country's civil war; it could accelerate Assad's downfall but would strengthen the hand of PKK's nemesis, Turkey.

Turkish fears of Syrian Kurdish areas developing into a springboard for attacks on Turkey have also revived discussion of creating a buffer zone on the Turkish-Syrian border to counter Syrian Kurdish moves. For now Syrian Kurds are hedging their bets. Their takeover of Syrian Kurdish towns while remaining on the side lines of the effort to topple Assad, gives them leverage irrespective of who emerges victorious from the battle for the future of Syria.

So far Turkish warnings have only a limited impact. The PDY is one of two alliances of Syrian Kurdish groups, the People's Council for Western Kurdistan (PCWK), that are backed by Iraqi Kurdish leaders and have refused to become part of the SNC because of its rejection of Kurdish aspirations, its alignment with Turkey and the role of the Muslim Brotherhood in the council. Syrian Kurdish fighters have so far successfully rebuffed attempts by the rebel Free Syrian Army to enter Syrian Kurdish areas.

The Turkish military and Iraqi Kurdish leaders moreover have been unable to dislodge PKK bases established in the remote Kandil mountains in northern Iraq. The leaders have long counseled their Syrian Kurdish brethren, who account for some 12 per cent of the Syrian population, to remain on the side lines of the conflict in Syria until either the opposition recognizes Kurdish rights or facts on the ground that warrant a Kurdish move.

The Kurds' time has come

That time appears to have come. In a post-Assad Syria that will probably remain volatile and unstable with ethnic and religious groups fighting one another, Syrian Kurds are likely to learn from the success of Iraqi Kurds in carving out a relatively stable enclave of their own while the rest of Iraq tore itself apart. In preparation, Iraqi Kurdish forces have already started training Syrian Kurdish fighters. With Syrian Kurds pushing for greater rights and self-rule rather than independence, Turkey is likely to sit on the side lines as long as it is not attacked from Syrian territory.

The emergence of a second autonomous Kurdish region along its border not only calls into question Turkey's fundamental policy towards the Kurds, it makes more necessary than ever a revision of policy that would put Turkey at the forefront of developments in the region and cement its role as a leader at a time of geopolitical change.

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