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Syria's Kurds in Play as Turkey Ponders Options

[*David Pollock*](#)

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Yet another dimension of the Syrian imbroglio is the role of the Kurdish population.

The startling news about Syria's downing of a Turkish aircraft last Friday has overshadowed the reality of a larger, longer-term pattern of Syrian-supported lethal attacks against Turkey: the rising number of assaults inside Turkish territory by the militant nationalist Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK). Syrian president Bashar al-Assad's regime supports the PKK, which the United States officially considers a terrorist organization, both directly and indirectly through its Syrian Kurdish affiliate, the PYD. In recent weeks, skirmishes between Turkish troops and PKK irregulars inside Turkey have greatly intensified, taking dozens of lives on both sides. And armed confrontations inside Syria between the PYD and local Kurdish groups opposed to Assad's regime have also accelerated sharply.

BACKGROUND

Kurds constitute roughly 20 percent of the population in Turkey and 10 percent in Syria -- more than 15 million in the former country and more than 2 million in the latter. Most are neighbors across the border from each other, sharing the same Kurmanji dialect written in the Roman alphabet (and largely unintelligible to most Iraqi or Iranian Kurds speaking Sorani or other dialects, which are written in Arabic characters). Syria's Kurds are heavily concentrated in the far northeast of the country, around Qamishli and a few other major towns. Almost all are Sunni Muslims, and their aspirations for greater freedom and recognition of the Kurdish language and culture have long been ignored or suppressed by the Assad regime to an even greater degree than the discrimination faced by Kurds in Turkey.

Nevertheless, Syria's Kurds have so far played only a limited role in the Syrian uprising. While almost daily anti-regime protests occur in the remote area these Kurds inhabit,

Syrian forces have largely refrained from direct action against them. Instead, the pro-regime Kurdish PYD militia has stepped in as an enforcer with increasing frequency. A special case in point lies well to the west of the main Syrian Kurdish areas, in a Kurdish enclave around the large town of Effrin, between the Turkish border and the northern approaches to Aleppo. There, as many as several thousand PYD militants maintain a reported two hundred or more checkpoints. Over the past few months, these militants have intercepted numerous forays by the opposition -- both by the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and by Syrian Kurdish dissidents. This little-known PYD patrol function, far from the main centers of Kurdish mobilization on either side of Syria's civil strife, helps explain why Aleppo, Syria's second-largest city, has so far seen less anti-regime activity than the capital, Damascus.

On the opposite side of the Syrian Kurdish political spectrum, the diverse anti-regime groups, most of them loosely organized in a Kurdish National Council (KNC) of Syria, have tended to feel marginalized by other Syrian opposition factions and alienated from the latter's Turkish sponsors. In April, the KNC formally pulled out of the umbrella opposition Syrian National Council (SNC) in the course of a highly contentious conference in Istanbul, at which the SNC refused Kurdish requests for "political decentralization" in a post-Assad Syria -- reportedly at Turkish insistence. In May, a KNC delegation was received in Washington by U.S. officials who privately counseled these Syrian Kurds to concentrate on ousting Assad first, and to postpone any discussion of Kurdish autonomy or even cultural rights until much later.

NEW TENSIONS ON KURDISH ISSUES ROIL THE REGION

But tensions in and around Syria's Kurdish regions are now rising, and the larger picture is changing accordingly. Syria's regime, trying to pressure Turkey, has intensified its support for the PKK -- to the point that many of its fighters on the Iraqi side of the border, in the mountainous Qandil no man's land, reportedly come from Syria. Some, according to knowledgeable local sources, have lately been brought back from Iraq to help enforce PYD control inside their original homeland of "Western Kurdistan" (i.e., Syria).

As overall PKK activity against Turkey has increased, Turkey has reacted with typical force. Just one day after the Turks lost an F-4 jet to Syrian fire, Turkish warplanes went into action over Iraq to pound PKK positions there. The key difference from the Syria situation, of course, is that Turkey has been operating against the PKK in Iraq for many years, almost never eliciting more than a pro forma protest (if that) from either the Iraqi government in Baghdad or Iraq's Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Erbil. Turkey therefore increasingly views Iraqi Kurds as partners, and Syria as an antagonist, in the fight against the PKK.

Meanwhile, the Syrian opposition, both armed and unarmed, is making new overtures to the Kurds. On June 10, the SNC unexpectedly selected a Syrian Kurd, Abdulbaset Sieda, as its new chairman. While he is widely considered a compromise candidate rather than a champion of Kurdish rights, his selection at least helps counter the intemperate anti-Kurdish statements of Syrian Muslim Brotherhood leader Riad al-Shaqfa. More important, on June 19, the FSA for the first time publicly called on "our Kurdish brothers" to join its ranks and "work hand in hand to...end discrimination against all Syrians, whatever their religious or ethnic background."

Although Syria's Kurds are not yet visibly heeding this call en masse, the Assad regime and its Kurdish proxies are taking no chances. The PYD quickly set up checkpoints all around Qamishli, at which they kidnapped and beat suspected anti-Assad activists or other perceived opponents. On June 25, PYD agents detained high-level members of a KNC delegation on its way to meet with sympathetic Kurdish officials and others across the border in Iraq.

The KRG position toward Syrian Kurds is yet another ambiguous piece of this complex puzzle. KRG officials at all levels, and probably most Iraqi Kurds overall, are staunchly opposed both to the Assad regime and to its Kurdish PYD allies. Over the past year, the KRG has hosted two large Syrian Kurdish opposition conferences in Erbil, hundreds of Syrian anti-regime activists in indefinite exile, and thousands of ordinary Syrian refugees. At the same time, KRG leaders are necessarily wary of offending two more powerful neighbors along the common border with Syria: the Iraqi central government in Baghdad, which still supports Assad; and the Turkish government, which supports the Syrian opposition and acts friendly toward the KRG, but has so far rejected Kurdish political ambitions inside Syria (and inside Turkey as well). If, however, Turkey reassesses those attitudes, the KRG may well shift position too and act more boldly in line with its own preferences: namely, greater support for the Syrian Kurdish opposition.

CAN TURKEY WORK WITH KURDS AGAINST ASSAD AND THE PKK?

That is precisely where things seem headed today. First, regarding its own 15 million or more citizens of Kurdish ethnicity, the Turkish government continues to rethink its approach, albeit incrementally and unevenly. Ankara recently announced new regulations allowing more Kurdish-language education and authorizing more Kurdish-language media broadcasts. From a Kurdish perspective, these gestures represent but one additional small step toward meeting their mainstream requests for recognition and equal cultural rights. Nevertheless, the moves suggest a further favorable recalibration of official Turkish policy on some Kurdish issues, even as Ankara's attitude toward the PKK continues to harden.

Change is also afoot regarding Turkey's position on Syrian Kurdish issues. Until now, Turkey has hesitated to confront Syria unequivocally, in part for fear of contrary Kurdish reactions: more PKK attacks against Turkey, backed by a desperate Syrian regime; and more demands by other Kurds for another autonomous Kurdish region, this time inside Syria, as that regime weakens. But given the latest Syrian provocations, the Turkish government may decide to work with Syria's Kurds against Assad, not the other way around -- or at least not to stand in the way of certain Syrian Kurdish democratic political aspirations. Notably, Turkish prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan's internal consultations about the aircraft shoot-down included an unusual and very symbolic photo-op with leaders of Turkey's own main Kurdish political party, the Peace and Democracy Party (BDP).

IMPLICATIONS FOR U.S. POLICY

For the United States, this rapidly changing dynamic offers an opportunity for adroit diplomacy. Now is the time for Washington to step up its efforts to broker better

understandings among Turkey, the KNC, and the SNC, FSA, or other Syrian opposition institutions. The payoff in stronger Kurdish participation could be the straw that breaks the Assad regime's back, especially if their example also helps convince Syria's other key minorities to switch sides. And now that Turkey appears more inclined to play this Kurdish card, it has little diplomatic downside for any of Washington's other efforts to organize a broad international consensus for an urgent Syrian transition.

David Pollock is the Kaufman fellow at The Washington Institute.