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Syria's Kurds Unite against Assad, but Not with Opposition

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A sudden political shift among Syria's three million Kurds, who now control much of the country's border with Turkey, provides an opportunity for the United States to better coordinate its policy with regional allies and to encourage the Syrian opposition to respect minority rights.

While world attention focuses on bombings and clashes in Damascus and Aleppo, Syria's Kurds buried their internal differences in mid-July, with Iraqi Kurdish help and Turkey's blessing, and then promptly kicked Syrian regime forces out of their territory. This is a major blow to the regime, potentially clearing the northern approaches to Aleppo for opposition forces. But Kurdish relations with the rest of the Syrian opposition remain a deeply divisive issue.

SYRIA'S RIVAL KURDISH MOVEMENTS

Syria's Kurds have lately been sharply split between two major movements: the Party of Unity and Democracy (PYD), founded in 2003, which collaborated both with the Bashar al-Assad regime and with the violently anti-Turkish Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK); and the Kurdish National Council of Syria (KNC), an amalgam formed in October 2011 of fifteen local parties opposed to both Assad and the PKK. Over the past year, as the wider Syrian revolution intensified, these two movements often came to blows in Syria's Kurdish regions. Previous attempts to reconcile them, notably in January and again in May 2012, came to naught; their differences were simply too deep, and their supporters too evenly matched, to make a lasting agreement possible.

Against this inauspicious background, in early July the president of the neighboring Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq, Masoud Barzani, summoned Syrian Kurdish leaders from both main rival factions to his headquarters in Salahaddin, Iraq, just outside Erbil, in yet another attempt to hammer out an accord. This time the attempt succeeded,

despite reported opposition from die-hard PKK supporters both inside the PYD and among the Syrian Kurdish PKK fighters in the Qandil mountains near the Iraq-Turkey-Syria borders. Underlying this surprising success is the increasingly prevalent perception, even among his erstwhile allies, that Syria's President Assad is losing his grip on power.

The PYD-KNC agreement signed July 11 has not been officially published, but its main points were read out to the author in Istanbul two days later by one of the senior participants in the negotiations. First, the PYD and the KNC will stop fighting each other, and instead join together in a new Supreme Kurdish Council for their region of Syria. Second, the PYD will henceforth focus exclusively on the Kurdish issue inside Syria, not across the border in Turkey -- clearly implying that the party now promises to cease any practical support to the PKK. Third, the newly unified Syrian Kurds will expel Syrian government officials and security forces from their area -- where, until just two weeks ago, many regime institutions had been operating almost normally, despite the turmoil elsewhere in the country.

So far, against all previous expectations, this intra-Kurdish accord is largely holding. Syria's Kurds have stopped fighting against each other. The PYD's break with the PKK is not definitive, but events and interested onlookers are pushing in that direction. And within the past two weeks, Syrian regime forces withdrew or were expelled from one Kurdish town after another, although some skirmishes are still being reported in Qamishli and other eastern border areas. Some local Kurds are helping Aleppo resist the Syrian regime siege, though on the whole Syria's Kurds are now concentrating on securing their own areas.

THE SYRIAN OPPOSITION BALKS AT KURDISH DEMANDS

The Syrian opposition and the Kurdish parties, however, remain sharply at odds over Kurdish demands for recognition as a distinct people inside Syria, with their own cultural and linguistic rights under some form of "political decentralization." According to senior Syrian opposition figures, tribal sheikhs, and Free Syrian Army (FSA) commanders in Antakya and Istanbul, if the Kurds get autonomy, then what about Syria's multitude of other minorities? Moreover, these figures say, Turkey will strive to block any such Arab-Kurdish agreement in Syria.

So far, the Syrian National Council (SNC), still the main organized opposition group, shows no sign of budging from this position. On July 22, its president, Abdulbaset Sieda, himself of Kurdish origin, met with Turkish foreign minister Ahmet Davutoglu and then issued a contemptuous and misleading declaration: "The Syrian regime has handed over the region to the PKK or the PYD. The areas where these Kurdish factions have raised their flags are those Bashar al-Assad gave them. The Kurdish people are not on the side of these two groups, but on the side of the revolution. But some sides have their own agenda which does not serve the Syrian national issue."

To some extent, according to private accounts of Syrian opposition deliberations, this attitude reflects deference to perceived Turkish wishes. But that is precisely why there is now some hope for greater SNC flexibility on this issue: Turkish policy toward the Syrian Kurdish question is quietly shifting, away from automatically associating Kurdish political activism in that country with the PKK terrorist threat to Turkey.

ANKARA'S NEW "WAIT AND SEE" POLICY TOWARD THE SYRIAN KURDS

Any Kurdish issue is a very sensitive one in Turkey, and the new developments right across the Syrian border are no exception. The Turkish media are, as usual, sharply divided on this matter. Reporters and columnists who support the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) stress the potential benefits for Turkey of a rapprochement with Syria's Kurds, while the opposition press is raising the specter of another hostile, pro-PKK front. Official Turkish statements promise to respond firmly to any Syrian-based PKK provocations, and the local press has reported additional military movements southward from Sanliurfa, toward the Kurdish areas across the Syrian border.

But Turkish official statements also subtly suggest that Ankara will tolerate advances by Syria's own Kurdish groups – if it sees clear signs that the PYD has abandoned the PKK. On July 22, a Turkish government source was quoted as saying that "we will closely monitor whether the PYD acts with other Kurdish groups or not." Similarly, on July 25, for instance, Turkish prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan declared that "We will not allow the terrorist organization to pose a threat to Turkey in Syria; it is impossible for us to tolerate the PKK's cooperation with the PYD." This relatively cautious and discriminating response can be partly credited to Turkey's excellent working relationship with Masoud Barzani, who brokered the latest Syrian Kurdish agreement and continues to play a key role in its implementation. Accordingly, this week Davutoglu is scheduled to meet with Barzani in Erbil to discuss coordinating the next steps in this very delicate policy adjustment.

IMPLICATIONS FOR U.S. POLICY

It is good news that Syria's Kurds are moving to patch up with each other and with two neighboring U.S. friends -- with the KRG, and even with Turkey -- while turning against Assad's regime. Ironically, however, this important positive shift is also raising tensions with the majority Arab groups inside the Syrian opposition, and between the KRG and the Arab-dominated central government in Baghdad, which has sent forces to the border area to confront local KRG units.

U.S. policy should do more than just urge Arabs and Kurds to reconcile their differences in each country. Ideally, Washington should advise Syrian opposition figures that, since they need to attract the country's minorities, their best course is to engage more creatively with those groups -- not try to impose on them some particular "vision" of a future Syria, however "pluralistic." Conversely, the United States should encourage Syrian and Iraqi Kurds to support the Syrian opposition in every possible way. The price, well worth paying, is for Washington to adjust its policy by prodding the Syrian opposition toward greater recognition of Kurdish rights -- and offering increased U.S. support to the Syrian opposition as a crucial incentive.

Looking further ahead, U.S. help in planning for a post-Assad transition should pay urgent attention to deconflicting Arab and Kurdish political claims and aspirations inside Syria. This is every bit as acute an issue as the much more widely recognized Alawite one; the Kurds are about the same percentage of Syria's total population, and many millions more Kurds in Iraq and Turkey make the involvement of Syria's neighbors much more likely. At a minimum, working with Turkey, the KRG, and others, the United States should strive to

avert violent Turkish-Kurdish or Arab-Kurdish conflict in Syria or on its borders. At the same time, despite its more limited leverage, the United States should urge Baghdad more forcefully to defy Iran, reconcile with the KRG, and abandon support for the Assad regime.

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