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Why Syria's Fragmentation Is Turkey's Opportunity

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As Ankara's longstanding Kurdish conflict continues, its neighbor's breakup could create unexpected allies.

One-and-a-half years into Syria's civil war, the latest chapter is the armed hostility between Syria and Turkey, once a friend of the Assad regime. A century ago, it was Western powers that dismantled and carved up the Ottoman Empire after World War I. Today, Turkey can place itself in the driver's seat of shaping the borders of the emerging Near East map.

Syria's slide into ungovernability suggests that, unlike Libya at the moment, splintering and partition are increasingly likely outcomes, unless the Assad regime falls. If the conflict in Syria continues unabated, leading to full-blown sectarian war between Alawites and Sunnis, and violent ethnic tensions between Arabs and Kurds, the scenario that is more likely to unfold now is more along the Iraq model of de facto zones of semi-independent control.

Aleppo and Damascus would still likely be connected, though they would be pulled in different directions thanks to countervailing trade links. There would be a middling Druze enclave in the south. Alawites, or at least those who survive the impending and unfortunate cataclysm, would retreat to their traditional stronghold around the Mediterranean port of Latakia.

Most relevant to Turkey is the fate of Syria's Kurdish enclaves. Somewhere between 10-20 percent of the Syrian population is Kurdish, creating a strong case for a greater Kurdish zone of control and eventual autonomy together with fraternal allies in Iraq, particularly given that the largest concentrations of Kurds in Syria live in the north along the Turkish border areas and stretching eastward towards Iraq.

What is more, Turkish, Syrian, and Iraqi Kurds (at least the ones that live in Iraq's northwest, across the borders with Turkey and Syria) are linguistically united. These Kurds speak the Kurmanchi variety of Kurdish, as opposed to Iranians and northeastern Iraqi Kurds. They speak the Sorani variety of Kurdish, which is more different from Kurmanchi than Portuguese is from Spanish.

Syria's Kurds would likely turn to Turkey for support. They would appreciate Ankara as a balancing force against Arab nationalism, a lesson they would fast learn from the Iraqi Kurds, who have made Turkey their protector against Baghdad since 2010.

This presents Turkey with a crucial choice. It has traditionally been hostile to an independent Kurdish state or entity anywhere in the region, lest its own Kurdish population make similar demands. But its calculus could be changed by the prospect of chronically unstable Sunni Arab neighbors, and the need to counter Iran's Shiite axis -- currently stretching from Baghdad to the Assad regime to Hizbullah in Lebanon. The Balkanization of Syria presents a once-in-a-century opportunity for Turkey.

There are more immediate reasons for Turkish support of an independent Kurdish entity in Syria. The shelling across the Turkish-Syrian border present an important case for why Turkey might be better served by buffer states such as Kurdistan, rather than the far-less defined geographic realities today.

Also, with Assad's authority collapsing most rapidly in northwestern Syria, he appears uninterested in preventing the usage of Syrian territory by the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) -- the militant group leading the fight for Kurdish independence in Turkey and perpetrators of numerous terrorist attacks there. Thus, Turkey ought to favor a new Aleppo-based government that seeks stability and order on its territory and that would act more responsibly, as Iraq's Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) has, in reining in PKK militias in northern Iraq. Indeed, Kurdish self-defense forces from Syria are now receiving training from Peshmerga forces in Iraqi Kurdistan.

Regardless of the Syrian Kurds' ability (or willingness) to rein in the PKK, Syria's main Kurdish political faction, the PKK-affiliated Party for Democratic Unity (PYD), has learned from watching neighboring Iraq that Sunnis will likely unite against Kurdish self-governance. Thus, ironically, while the PKK would continue to fight Turkey, the group's Syrian franchise might decide to make friends with Ankara.

Furthermore, as in Iraqi Kurdistan, Turkish infrastructure companies would be among the prime beneficiaries of investment in Syria's Kurdish region post-Assad, winning major contracts, as they did in Iraqi Kurdistan after Saddam. Turkish companies have practically built Iraqi Kurdistan, paving its roads, designing its airports, drilling for its oil, and constructing its urban communities -- not to mention being the necessary outlet for Iraqi Kurdistan's energy resources. Similarly, it is a necessary trade partner for any landlocked entity emerging in the post-Assad aftermath. Turkey's competitive advantage in Iraq, as an advanced economy that lies next door, will be its advantage also in post-Assad Syria.

In light of all these compelling reasons to support an independent Kurdish entity in Syria, Turkey may be convinced to reverse its long-standing opposition to any Kurdish autonomy in the region. But one major roadblock stands in the way of Turkey capitalizing on these developments: its own Kurdish population, which has long been agitating for its own autonomy.

As Turkey makes good friends with the Syrian and Iraqi Kurds, it has to keep its own disgruntled Kurds happy. Rising Kurdish nationalism across the region has excited the country's Kurds. Turkey has witnessed a rise in PKK attacks recently, with the group even launching a brazen, if aborted, fall campaign to take over towns in the country's southeast. Politically, Ankara's failed 2009 attempt to provide more cultural rights for Kurds has added to their frustrations. Such sentiments will be voiced prominently in the country's 2013 local elections, when the Kurdish nationalist Peace and Democracy Party (BDP) will likely retain control of major cities in southeastern Turkey.

It will be hard for Turkey to build a strong relationship with the Syrian and Iraqi Kurds when Turkish Kurds are locked in a centrifugal tendency away from Ankara. As it aims for influence in Syria and Iraq, Ankara has to make peace with its Kurdish community. If autonomy is the way to resolve the Kurdish issue in Iraq and Syria, in Turkey the path forward is more democracy. Currently, Turkey is debating whether to write its first civilian constitution. This presents the country with a timely opportunity to create a truly liberal charter that broadens everybody's rights, including those of the Kurds.

Kurdish nationalists have been suggesting lately that this is the Kurds' moment in history. The Kurds may indeed turn the Middle East's post-World War I alignment on its head, but they cannot do this without Turkey. This is in fact Turkey's Kurdish and Middle East moment -- if Ankara plays its hand correctly at home.

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