

Assad Bombs the Kurds: Implications for U.S. Strategy in Syria

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Brief Analysis

Escalating hostilities between regime forces and Syrian Kurds in Hasaka will likely complicate Washington's campaign against the Islamic State, in which the Kurds and their Arab allies have been its most effective partners.

Last week, heavy fighting erupted between the Syrian Arab Army (SAA) and Kurdish units belonging to the Democratic Union Party (PYD). Washington responded by scrambling fighter jets to the area. The hostilities may signal the emergence of new alliances that could stall the Kurds' westward advance, erode U.S. deconfliction with regime forces, and raise further obstacles to the American campaign against the Islamic State (IS).

NEW ESCALATION

The northeastern city of Hasaka is currently divided, with the PYD controlling the northern Kurdish areas and the regime holding the southern Arab neighborhoods. The Kurds also maintain some points in the southwestern and southeastern sectors. Arabs are believed to comprise 55 percent of Hasaka's population, and the Kurds 45 percent.

Two weeks ago, a regime militia known as the National Defense Forces (NDF) arrested several Kurdish civilians. The Kurds responded with their own round-up, which quickly escalated into clashes. This was only the latest flare-up -- tensions have long been simmering between the PYD and the NDF, and their low-intensity skirmishes have become part of the landscape in war-torn Syria. What made last week's fighting stand out is that the SAA dispatched fighter jets to attack Kurdish positions -- the first time the regime has used airpower against the Kurds outside the Aleppo neighborhood of Sheikh Maqsood.

Until now, the regime and PYD have maintained a de facto **non-belligerence agreement** (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/ascent-of-the-pyd-and-the-sdf>) rooted in their mutual wariness of the Sunni Arab rebellion. In 2012, the regime even facilitated the PYD's takeover of a string of Kurdish villages on the Turkish border. And in a March 2015 interview with Portuguese state television, President Bashar al-Assad claimed that he had armed the PYD's military wing, the People's Defense Units (YPG).

Last week, however, local news outlets reported fierce clashes in Hasaka, particularly in the southwestern neighborhood of Nashwa, the southeastern quarter of Ghawayran, and the center of town around Marshu. The SAA's Mt. Kawkab Regiment -- a unit currently deployed ten kilometers east of the city and believed to house a special forces contingent -- has used heavy artillery against Kurdish positions. *In June 2014, Ara News estimated that the NDF had around 400 fighters in the city, though its current numbers are uncertain. In addition, Kurdish sources have noted that personnel from Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and Lebanese Hezbollah are garrisoned in a museum in the city center.*

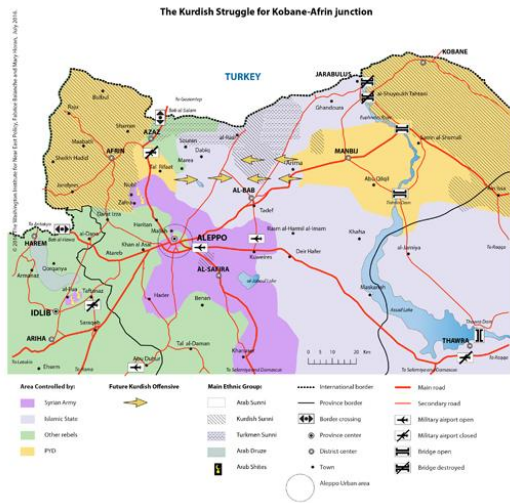
SHIFTING REGIONAL ALLIANCES

The latest fighting came on the heels of Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan's visit to Moscow to mend ties with Russia. Although the Kremlin's views about the regime attacks on the PYD are not clear, Turkey's positions are. Erdogan recently recalibrated his Syria policy: preventing a contiguous PYD-held zone has now taken priority over his erstwhile goal of ousting the Assad regime. In fact, PYD officials argue that Syria and Turkey have decided to collude in order to weaken the group. On August 21, the PYD issued a statement claiming that the attacks "point to Turkish and Iranian coordination with the Baath regime to counter the crystallization of the [Kurdish] democratic project."

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Others believe the regime is signaling the Kurds to reconsider any plans to seize more territory, especially in Hasaka and al-Bab, the next IS-controlled city on the road from Manbij to Aleppo. The YPG has been making significant progress along the Turkish border, and the regime may fear that it will be more difficult to dislodge the Kurds if they gain additional ground. Their advance has also alarmed Turkey because the PYD is the offspring of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), a group Ankara has been fighting since 1984. The PYD insists it is independent from the PKK, but Syrian PKK members control the PYD, and non-Syrian PKK cadres occupy key posts in the YPG. Even so, the United States continues to work closely with the PYD despite designating the PKK as a terrorist group, illustrating that the current administration has drawn a clear distinction between the two.

Thus far, U.S. cooperation has helped the PYD unite the eastern canton of Jazira with the central canton of Kobane. The group's next objective is to link these areas with the smaller Afrin canton in Aleppo province and create a contiguous corridor along the Turkish border. Ankara has consistently voiced strong opposition to this strategy, so any Syrian-Turkish rapprochement would likely emphasize containing and eventually rolling back PYD gains.

U.S. CONCERNS

The YPG joined forces with a number of Arab brigades to create the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), and this group has proved to be Washington's best Syrian ally against IS. As Lt. Gen. Sean MacFarland noted in an August 10 press conference, the Kurdish-dominated SDF has conquered 20 percent of the Islamic State's territory in Syria with the help of American airstrikes. SDF units have received heavy weaponry (e.g., Javelin missiles) and Special Forces training from the United States for this purpose. On August 20, Defense Secretary Ash Carter noted they are "a capable and motivated ground force" when it comes to "taking and holding territory."

At an August 16 press conference, Army colonel Christopher Garver indicated that the Kurdish YPG constituted only 15 percent of the victorious forces at Manbij, with Arab fighters making up the rest. In the past, however, such optimistic American estimates of Arab participation have proved off the mark. In February, for example, U.S. envoy Brett McGurk stated that Arabs comprised 40 percent of the forces that took al-Shadadi south of Hasaka, but local journalists described the contribution of these contingents as negligible. Similarly, Arab SDF personnel who participated in the Manbij fighting have said that the Kurds made virtually all the decisions.

Whatever the case, an all-out regime war against the Kurds could have dire consequences for Washington's anti-IS strategy. The PYD would presumably shift its focus to simply surviving rather than extending its territory, likely redeploying forces from the Aleppo area back east to Hasaka. Such a development would effectively end the American strategy of closing the Manbij pocket, which has given IS access to the outside world via the Turkish border. This was always a complicated strategy because Turkey has resisted PYD control of this area.

Going forward, Ankara may preempt the Kurdish strategy; it has already assembled a number of rebel brigades to launch an offensive on the border town of Jarabulus. Alternatively, if the Hasaka standoff results in occasional skirmishes with Assad's forces instead of an all-out SAA-PYD conflagration, the Kurds would likely still be compelled to shore up their rear flank, effectively tying down the PYD far from the front lines with IS.

WASHINGTON'S PROBLEMATIC MISSION

The shifting nature of U.S. policy in Syria is another major concern. The administration's anti-IS strategy in Syria has never been as coherent as its Iraqi counterpart. Explaining how the United States began supporting the PYD with airstrikes in Kobane in 2014, McGurk told reporters last October, "We never really focused on Kobane when we put the strategy together, and then Kobane became an opportunity for us." Such comments illustrate the tactical nature of the administration's approach, which has focused more on exploiting short-term opportunities than harkening to long-term strategic considerations.

Today, Washington's policy risks mission creep or a change in objectives. In Iraq, for example, its counter-IS policy initially focused on training Iraqi forces in bases far from the front lines. By last November, however, American personnel were directing Iraqi troops less than two miles from IS positions. And this March, IS artillery killed an American soldier close to the front. Meanwhile, the administration dispatched 300 Special Forces personnel into Syria, where it has no agreement with the government; these forces now operate so close to the front lines that Kurdish journalists in Manbij mingled with them. Regarding the Hasaka incident, the Pentagon explained that it dispatched jets there "as a measure to protect coalition forces operating in the area." But it also warned that "the Syrian regime would be well advised not to interfere with coalition forces or its partners."

Washington has tried hard to avoid hostilities with the SAA and eschews operating in areas where it is active. But if American airpower will now be employed to protect Kurdish forces rather than simply supporting their offensives against IS, the deconfliction that has been a hallmark of the anti-IS campaign could end. The regime has rarely considered IS-controlled regions in the east to be strategic areas worth contesting, but it might think otherwise if the PYD tries to take all of Hasaka or continues to eye the northern Aleppo countryside.

Indeed, developments around Aleppo have further complicated an already-fraught situation. In February, when the SAA seized rebel territory north of the city under the cover of Russian airstrikes, PYD forces there made similar moves. More recently, the YPG launched attacks from its Sheikh Maqsoud enclave that greatly facilitated regime efforts to close the rebel route from Aleppo to Turkey, known as the Castello Road. A bitter battle is now underway in Aleppo, with the rebels launching a counteroffensive that has opened a southern road from their areas of control in the eastern neighborhoods, at least temporarily.

U.S. air protection for the Kurds might also anger Arab rebel groups and their Persian Gulf patrons. Washington has refused to attack regime forces when the SAA uses its air assets against Arab brigades, so scrambling jets to Hasaka could bring claims of hypocrisy, or even fuel conspiracy theories that America seeks to divide the Arab world by emboldening the Kurds.

CONCLUSION

In light of the latest escalation, Washington needs to cautiously articulate its Syria strategy and carefully choose its objectives, appreciating the fact that its local allies often have goals that conflict with its own. This means it should avoid further entangling itself in a civil war that has no military solution. If Washington begins to defend the Kurds against SAA attacks, it may not be able to withdraw this protection until it has neutralized the regime threat. This was not America's objective when it began airstrikes in Syria and certainly should not be its policy now. Choosing sides this late in the game would only lead to a long quagmire, not a swift conclusion. Although withholding further protection may draw the PYD's ire, Washington should nevertheless focus on tempering the group's voracious territorial appetite to focus on rolling back IS. The central task for the Obama administration in its closing months is to leave options open for the next president, at a time when various actors -- especially the PYD and the Assad-Russia-Iran axis -- are aiming to create facts on the ground that foreclose more vigorous U.S. humanitarian assistance and military support for the opposition.

Barak Barfi, a research fellow at the New America Foundation, has visited Syria on numerous occasions during the civil war and spent time with Kurdish forces in the eastern part of the country. ❖

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