

Turkey and the Battle for Kobane

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

Turkey's primary objective in Syria is to oust the Assad regime, so it is unlikely to materially help the besieged enclave without U.S. and Kurdish commitments toward that goal.

In the past week, the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) launched another major offensive against the Kurdish-declared canton of Kobane (a.k.a. Ain al-Arab) in northern Syria. The group is now threatening to overrun this area, which is controlled by the Democratic Union Party (PYD), a Syrian Kurdish faction affiliated with the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), a militant Turkish group. In response, the United States has launched airstrikes against ISIS military assets around Kobane. Yet Turkey, which nominally joined the U.S.-led coalition against the group on September 5, has been watching the battle from the sidelines. Ankara is also refusing to allow PKK members to cross into Syria to prevent Kobane's fall.

In July 2012, the PKK and PYD assumed joint control of the Kurdish regions of northern Syria -- Afrin, Kobane, and Jazirah -- declaring them as cantons. Flanked by ISIS on three sides and bordering Turkey to the north, Kobane is the most vulnerable of these regions, and forces from the self-styled "Islamic State" have been pressing to capture it for over a year. ISIS has bolstered its efforts in recent days, hoping to offset its recent losses in Iraq with a potential victory in northern Syria.

Yet Turkey has been conspicuously absent from the battle for Kobane and is shying away from confronting ISIS at the moment. This is because Turkey's Syria policy has one key objective that takes priority over others: ousting the Assad regime. To this end, Ankara wants to use the battle for Kobane to make the PKK/PYD recognize that they need Turkey to survive in Syria, thus folding the Kurds under its strategic vision for Syria's future.

Prior to entering peace talks with Ankara this year, the PKK fought Turkey for decades. And during the Syrian war, the PKK/PYD have noticeably avoided fighting Assad, choosing to wrest control of Kurdish areas and stay out of the war until ISIS targeted Kobane. Ankara now appears bent on making the Kurds request Turkish security assistance on its terms -- namely, it wants the PKK/PYD to forgo autonomy plans in Syria and join the anti-Assad coalition.

Additionally, it wants to see the PYD weakened in Syria so that the PKK comes to the ongoing peace talks with Turkey in a position of desperation. In short, Ankara seeks to reshape the PKK/PYD into a client of Turkish security interests in Syria.

Yet this strategy may have adverse implications for Kobane. To be sure, a Turkish deal with the PKK/PYD would alleviate some pressure on the canton, since Ankara would presumably allow PKK sympathizers to cross the border and enter the fight. Yet in order to fully defeat ISIS, the PKK/PYD would need heavy weapons currently missing from their arsenal. Short of a comprehensive, final settlement with the PKK at home, Ankara is unlikely to allow such weapons to pass into the PKK/PYD's hands, even if the Kurds agree to act as Turkey's proxy in Syria.

In other words, Ankara is fast approaching a choice between deploying heavy weapons to defend Kobane or accepting an ISIS takeover of the enclave. The latter eventuality would increase Turkey's exposure to ISIS, which already controls nearly half of the 510-mile border with Syria. At the same time, Kobane's fall would send around 300,000 additional Kurdish refugees into Turkey, bringing the total number of displaced Syrians there to nearly 2 million, over a quarter of them Kurdish. Pro-PKK Kurds in Turkey would then likely agitate against Ankara, which they would hold responsible for Kobane's fall. Demonstrations have already taken place in several Turkish cities to protest the government's inaction; if the enclave does in fact fall, it could create significant unrest among pro-PKK Kurds in southeastern Turkey and threaten the country's stability.

IMPLICATIONS FOR WASHINGTON

Turkey has signaled repeatedly that it is more strongly committed to ousting Assad than to defeating ISIS. Hence, before it will take concrete steps to roll back ISIS or help defend PKK/PYD-controlled areas, Ankara will expect a plan from Washington to weaken the Assad regime -- namely, one that involves boosting support to the non-ISIS elements of the Syrian opposition. It will also expect the PKK/PYD to commit to fighting the regime. As described above, Turkey's primary objective in Syria is to oust Bashar al-Assad, so it is unlikely to fully embrace a U.S. policy that degrades ISIS without targeting the regime as well. Ankara's hope is to work with Washington on implementing policies to degrade both actors concurrently, so that the non-ISIS Syrian opposition and a Turkey-compliant PKK/PYD can fill the void left by ISIS and Assad.

Soner Cagaptay is the Beyer Family Fellow and director of the Turkish Research Program at The Washington Institute, and author of [The Rise of Turkey: The Twenty First-Century's First Muslim Power](#)

(<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-rise-of-turkey-the-twenty-first-centurys-first-muslim-power>) (Potomac Books). ❖

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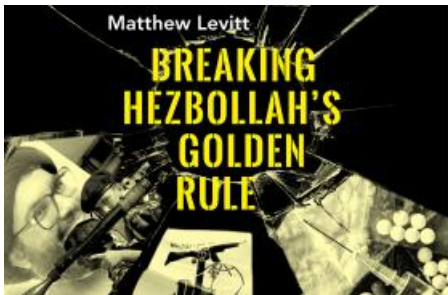
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