

Turkey's Kurdish Buffer

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Articles & Testimony

By maintaining close ties with Iraqi Kurds, continuing the peace talks with Turkish Kurds, and developing security relations with Syrian Kurds, Ankara can help stave off the threats now looming on its southern borders.

If anything good comes out of the turmoil in Iraq, it will be improved ties between Turkey and the region's Kurds. Until recently, they were bitter enemies. Ankara had never been able to stomach the idea of Kurdish self-government -- in Iraq or Syria or Turkey -- and it had generally refused to give in to Turkish Kurds' demands for cultural rights. Instead, it preferred to crack down. Meanwhile, the region's Kurds had never been able to stomach Iraqi, Syrian, or Turkish rule and, taking issue with Ankara's treatment of Kurds within Turkey's borders, threw their support behind the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), a violent separatist movement in Turkey.

The Syrian civil war and developments in Iraq have started to change all that. These days, from Turkey's perspective, Kurdish autonomy doesn't look half bad. The portions of northern Iraq and Syria that are under Kurdish control are stable and peaceful -- a perfect bulwark against threats such as the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS). And that is why Turkey has been on good behavior with the Iraqi Kurds, is working on its relations with the Syrian Kurds, and might finally be breaking the impasse with the Kurds in its own territory. It is a tall order, but the stars may be aligned in favor of a Turkish-Kurdish axis.

BACK TO IRAQ

Relations between Turkey and the Iraqi Kurds started improving just after the Iraq War, when Iraqi Kurds pivoted toward Ankara to counter Baghdad's centralizing pull. To the Kurds' dismay, post-Saddam Iraq remained an Arab country to the core; the power only shifted from Sunni Arabs to Shia Arabs. In those days, Iraqi Kurds started offering assistance to Turkey in its fight against the PKK and also opened markets in Iraqi Kurdistan to Turkish exports and companies. Turkey reciprocated, sending merchants, airlines, and consumer goods into the area. More recently, Iraqi Kurds opted to start selling their oil through Turkey, bypassing Baghdad and giving Ankara a huge gift

in transit fees and tax revenue, as well as boosting Turkey's claim to be a regional energy hub.

ISIS' advances in Iraq -- including a June 11 attack on the Turkish consulate in Mosul, during which the group took Turkish diplomats and security officials hostage -- has added urgency to the drive to improve relations between Turkey and Iraqi Kurds. It also made Turkey go back on some clear redlines it had previously set for the Kurds; back in 2005, Turkey had threatened military action should they occupy Kirkuk, an oil-rich city in northern Iraq. Kirkuk's oil reserves would have given the Kurdish regional government independent income (it relies on Baghdad for financial transfers), which would have been a first step toward full sovereignty. But on June 12, when Kurdish forces moved to occupy Kirkuk, Ankara did not utter a word.

It now seems safe to say that if the Iraqi Kurdish regional government declared independence, Ankara would be the first capital to recognize it. In today's Middle East, in other words, ISIS is a bigger threat to the Turks than Kurdish independence in Iraq.

SYRIAN SITUATION

Whereas Turkey's ties with the Iraqi Kurds have improved in recent years, Ankara's relations with the Syrian Kurds have remained rather bitter. This is because, unlike in the KRG where Iraqi Kurdish groups hold more sway than the Turkish PKK, the PKK is very popular among the Syrian Kurds. (Assad's father allowed the PKK to grow inside Syria to use the group as a proxy against Turkey.) When the group's Syrian branch, Party for Democratic Unity (PYD), which is not shy about its ties to the PKK, took control of Kurdish areas in northern Syria in July 2012, Ankara feared that it was witnessing the birth of a PKK-led state on its doorstep. In response, it stopped shipments of aid and supplies into the Kurdish enclaves.

As the war against Syrian President Bashar al-Assad heated up, though, Turkey saw an opportunity. Wishing to take advantage of all opposition factions in Syria, Turkey reached out to the PYD and invited the group's leader to Ankara. The PYD demurred, though. All along, the Kurds' strategy in the Syrian civil war has been simple: take over Kurdish areas and let the others fight among themselves. At times, the PYD has even collaborated with the Assad regime, for instance by allowing supplies to flow into regime-controlled enclaves. In return, Assad has not targeted PYD territory. It didn't make much sense, then, for the PYD to cooperate outright with Turkey.

But with the emergence of ISIS, the Syrian Kurds' calculations might be changing. The PYD and PKK have strong secular tendencies and oppose ISIS and its austere version of Islam. The PYD now controls three Kurdish exclaves in northern Syria, all of which are flanked by Turkey to the north and ISIS to the south. And unlike the Assad regime, ISIS has shown no inclination to trade favors with the Kurds. In other words, the Syrian Kurds' future could now be in Turkey's hands. It could allow more aid and supplies to flow to the Kurds to support their defensive lines against ISIS and, if the Syrian Kurds play nice, full military and security cooperation could be forthcoming.

Over time, Turkey believes, the Syrian Kurdish exclaves could become forward operating bases against ISIS -- a friendly force that guards over 450 miles of Syria's 540-mile long Turkish border. The idea is appealing: the PYD is the only force, Assad regime included, that has been able to win any battle against ISIS in Syria. For instance, in March 2013, PYD fighters successfully pushed back an ISIS advance to take over Kobani, one of the three Kurdish exclaves in Syria.

TURKISH TROUBLE

Turkey cannot grow closer to Iraqi and Syrian Kurds without making peace with its own. After decades of battle, the PKK could still easily derail any rapprochement between Turkey and other Kurdish groups, especially the Syrian Kurds, by telling the PYD to reject Turkish offers. What is more, the PKK could launch attacks in Turkey if it feels that it is being left out of a potential deal between Turkey and the Iraqi Kurds.

Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan has a personal stake in this as well. He is facing a presidential election in August. In local elections in March, his party received 43 percent of the vote. The support of the pro-PKK Peace and Democracy Party, which won about 6.5 percent of the vote in March, could help him clinch the presidency. Enter ongoing peace talks with the PKK. Through those negotiations, Turkey has granted the Kurds additional rights to use their own language in public, which had long been seen as a threat to Turkish nationalism. Kurdish language is now ubiquitous in universities and city governments in southeastern Turkey, where the Kurds dominate. More recently, on June 26, Erdogan declared a new reform package that promises amnesty for thousands of PKK fighters should negotiations with the PKK conclude successfully.

Erdogan will try to keep Turkish Kurds happy while building deeper security ties with the Iraqi and Syrian Kurds, to which Turkey will guarantee de facto autonomy. This turn of events is rather ironic. Soon after Erdogan came to power in 2003, he launched a policy, called "strategic depth," which aimed to make Turkey a major power in the Middle East, with allies and influence across the region. A decade later, Ankara's only allies in the Middle East might just be the Kurds. Likewise, the Kurds' main ally might soon be Ankara. Working together, they will try to escape the old politics of the Middle East and stand alone as peaceful and stable success stories.

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