The Fractious Politics of Syria's Kurds

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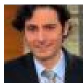

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Brief Analysis

The dominant power in Syria's Kurdish regions, the PYD, is deeply problematic but shares some common interests with the United States.

On November 12, the Democratic Union Party (PYD), a Syrian Kurdish group affiliated with the Turkish Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), announced the creation of an interim government in areas under its control in northeastern Syria. The plan has the potential to increase rifts within the opposition and exacerbate regional tensions. To minimize them, Washington should help forge a pan-Kurdish coalition that can devote all of its attention to fighting al-Qaeda elements seeking to exploit Syria's civil war.

BACKGROUND

Concentrated in three noncontiguous areas in the northeast, Syrian Kurds constitute some 10 percent of the country's population and have long faced persecution. Various governments instituted repressive, Arab-centric policies against them, including a special census in 1962 that stripped approximately 20 percent, or 120,000, of them of their citizenship; today, that number has swelled to around 300,000. But these actions were only a prelude to the harshest measures, introduced after the Baath Party came to power. In 1973, President Hafiz al-Assad approved the creation of an Arab Belt along the northern border to separate Syria's Kurds from those in neighboring countries, expelling thousands of them from their villages and repopulating them with Arabs. Today, Kurds are denied entry into certain professions, refused subsidies provided to Arabs, and often forbidden to celebrate Kurdish festivals.

Despite their shared oppression and ethnoreligious homogeneity, Syrian Kurds have proved unable to create strong political parties with mass appeal. Currently, they have at least fourteen parties, but most are marginal one-man bands in which the leader makes most of the decisions. The strongest factions have ties to foreign Kurdish leaders such as Masoud Barzani and Jalal Talabani in Iraq and PKK chief Abdullah Ocalan in Turkey. Arrests and infiltration by regime security services have greatly weakened them, however, and the older generation's choice of accommodation over confrontation has further blunted their impact. Such issues have led many Kurdish activists to avoid the party framework altogether.

These frustrations led to the emergence of three new parties at the beginning of the millennium that took a vocal stance against the regime. The Kurdish Union Party (Yekiti) has sponsored a number of protests since its creation in 1999, and in 2009 it boldly declared that its goal was autonomy -- an unprecedented demand in Kurdish politics. The Kurdish Freedom Party (Azadi) played a key role in mobilizing Kurds during riots that erupted in Qamishli in 2004 and has tried to bridge the gaps between parties. The Kurdish Future Movement often took a bold stance as well, though it lost much of its direction following the 2011 assassination of founder Mishaal al-Tammo.

THE PYD'S MILITANT ROOTS

Since its creation in 2003, the PYD has chosen to remain outside mainstream Kurdish politics, in part because of its roots in the militant PKK. Despite oppressing Kurds at home, the Syrian regime has a long history of cooperation with the PKK. In 1977, Turkey announced the establishment of the Southeastern Anatolia Project to exploit the Euphrates and Tigris basins in a manner that would reduce Syria's water access. Hafiz al-Assad responded by inviting Turkish guerrilla groups to use his country as a base of operations. Ocalan fled to Damascus in 1980, and Assad later allowed the PKK to establish training camps in Lebanon's Beqa Valley under Syrian control.

Such cooperation was not only a means of pressuring Turkey, but also a tool for deflecting Syria's own Kurdish problem. The Assad regime encouraged Syrian Kurds to join the PKK, and an estimated 7,000-10,000 did so, shifting their focus to fighting Turkey rather than working for change in Syria. In the process, Ocalan became the preeminent Kurdish figure in Syria.

By the late 1990s, however, Turkish military threats spurred a process of reconciliation that led to Ocalan's expulsion and the closure of PKK offices in Damascus. In 2003, sensing the fight was over, Syrians in the PKK established a political party, the PYD.

REVOLUTION AND AUTONOMY

When the revolution erupted in 2011, most Kurds were wary of jumping on the bandwagon. With the security crackdown that followed the 2004 riots still fresh in their minds, they feared a similar backlash if they joined the uprising. They were also concerned that the revolution was merely a fig leaf for reestablishing Sunni Arab rule. The pre-revolution opposition had never addressed Kurdish concerns before, and some opposition leaders, such as Haytham al-Maleh, explicitly rejected them. In addition, many viewed Kurdish aspirations with suspicion, believing they centered on establishing an autonomous region similar to the one in Iraq.

For these reasons, the PYD has refused to join the rebel Free Syrian Army (FSA) or the umbrella organization known as the National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces. In turn, the coalition has barred PYD institutions from joining as unified blocs and refused to promise future constitutional recognition of the Kurdish people. Although Kurds have cooperated with FSA units, the Ahfad al-Rasul Brigades, and Ahrar Suriya on a limited basis, they have also clashed with the FSA at times.

Meanwhile, President Bashar al-Assad has sought to co-opt the PYD in various ways since the revolution began. On April 7, 2011, he issued a decree promising that some of the Kurds stripped of citizenship in 1962 could apply to have it restored. And in July 2012, the regime ceded Qamishli and the surrounding areas to the PYD to better focus on quelling the FSA's major advances. Although the PYD lacked grassroots support at the time, it quickly established a local parliament, an armed militia (the People's Protection Units, or YPG), and an internal security service (Asayesh). The PKK bolstered the latter two organizations by transferring some 1,000 fighters from Iraq to Syria in 2011, with approval from Damascus.

Yet these moves did not signal the beginning of self-rule for the PYD. In fact, the regime still provides most of the area's services and pays civil servants' wages. It also controls about 10 percent of Qamishli, including the airport, the

security quarter housing the intelligence services, and several buildings to the south. Regime security services move unfettered around the city and the surrounding Arab villages. In many ways, the PYD is little more than a front for a regime desperate to maintain quiet in the Kurdish regions and willing to cede a modicum of authority to obtain it. Even so, the YPG has sporadically skirmished with regime units for control of checkpoints. Each side knows the modus vivendi is only temporary: Assad will likely turn his attention to subduing the Kurds if he can crush the FSA and other rebel groups, and the PYD is well aware of this looming future fight.

For now, though, the group is focused on beating back jihadists encroaching on Kurdish areas. The YPG has battled al-Qaeda's Syrian affiliate, known as the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), in Tal Abyad, Ras al-Ayn, and Aleppo. And last month, an ISIS suicide bomber targeted an Asayesh station in Qamishli. Fears of an al-Qaeda takeover have persuaded many apolitical Kurds to support the PYD despite their unfamiliarity with its ideology.

Meanwhile, the PYD's police powers have allowed it to sidestep the regime's control of municipal affairs, consolidate its grip on Kurdish areas, and settle accounts with political foes. Individual activists and members of other parties have been arrested; some have even been assassinated. To counter this onslaught, the opposition created the Kurdish National Council (KNC) under the stewardship of Masoud Barzani. The KNC and PYD then agreed to form the Supreme Kurdish Authority (SKA) to administer Kurdish areas. Yet the SKA ceased functioning earlier this year after the PYD made unilateral decisions and took control of a border crossing with Iraq.

U.S. INTERESTS

Unlike the FSA, the PYD backs international efforts to convene a peace conference in Geneva. It also advocates a strong secular ideology that is lacking in other rebel groups. And as described above, it has demonstrated a willingness to take on ISIS even as FSA units cooperate with the al-Qaeda affiliate. For these reasons, the United States should reach out to the PYD. Yet Washington must condition such recognition on the PYD's willingness to work with the KNC to revive the dormant SKA rather than setting up a purely PYD-run government. In doing so, the United States can test the PYD's commitment to pluralistic democracy.

The group must also address Turkish concerns about its ambitions. Ankara has fought a twenty-nine-year battle against the PYD's patron, the PKK, and fears the emergence of a new PKK safe haven on its border with Syria. Thus far, the PKK has not conducted any cross-border raids, and the PYD has gone to great lengths to ensure a calm frontier. Nevertheless, Turkey has sought to stem the PYD's growing influence by propping up the KNC, though to no avail.

Perhaps the right mix of incentives from Washington and Ankara could nudge the PYD toward becoming a reliable ally. In a revolution that has witnessed the proliferation of jihadists, the emergence of secular moderate elements should not be shunned.

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