

The PKK Announcement: Can Turkey Build a Kurdish Cordon?

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Brief Analysis

Washington should work with Ankara, the Syrian opposition, and Baghdad to ensure that new PKK peace talks alleviate their mutual concerns about Syria's future and the Kurdish question.

On March 21, Abdullah Ocalan, jailed leader of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), announced that his organization would withdraw its militants from Turkish soil after more than four decades of waging war there. The announcement follows recent news that Ankara has begun official peace talks with the PKK aimed at ending the long conflict in the southeast. A successful resolution would deliver peace to Turkey and bring the Syrian Kurds -- some of whom have at least indirect ties to the PKK -- closer to Ankara. This in turn would strengthen Ankara's hand as it strives to unseat Bashar al-Assad's regime next door. Alongside Turkey's rapprochement with the Iraqi Kurds, the process could help Ankara build a "Kurdish axis" in the Middle East, or at least a friendly cordon. Yet rivalries with Iran and Baghdad could complicate any such plans.

BACKGROUND

The new peace talks are based on the premise that Ocalan holds sway over the organization he founded and can therefore deliver a deal. After Turkish forces captured him in 1999, he was tried and sentenced to death, but the sentence was later changed to life imprisonment when Turkey abolished capital punishment in 2002 in order to qualify for EU accession. Accordingly, he has spent more than fourteen years in solitary confinement. Initial discussions have already made his imprisonment more bearable, however (e.g., Turkish media reports indicate he

was recently given cable television).

Although Murat Karayilan became the PKK's leader after Ocalan's capture, the founder still holds sway over the group and is revered as a cult figure by the rank and file. Hence, many members would likely comply if he told them to lay down their weapons. For now, the PKK has pledged to withdraw its fighters, and Turkey will reciprocate with a broad amnesty for the rank and file. Ankara will probably also grant Ocalan house arrest; Deputy Prime Minister Bulent Arinc came close to conceding as much during a June 2012 television interview.

There are potential stumbling blocks, however. In addition to Karayilan, the PKK's leadership circle includes three other important names: Cemil Bayik and Duran Kalkan (Turkish Kurds who are seen as Karayilan's equals), and Fehman Huseyin (a.k.a. Bahoz Erdal, a Syrian Kurd). Whereas Karayilan is known to be malleable to Ocalan's views, Kalkan and Bayik have an operational partnership that is not fully under Ocalan's control. And Huseyin, who is in charge of training militants, is known to act on his own initiative. Although none of the three seems likely to challenge Ocalan at the moment, Kalkan has expressed some reservations about the talks, stating, "If you want to stop the fighting, you need to talk to us [the fighters in the mountains]." He is also known to be close to Tehran, which opposes a Turkey-PKK deal. At the same time, Bayik has good ties with the Iranian Kurds, while Huseyin has broad appeal among the Syrian Kurds.

All of this suggests that even if Ocalan delivers large parts of the PKK under a peace deal, the other leaders could form splinter groups in the mid to long term, most likely with support from Iran. Just as radicals broke away from the Irish Republican Army after a ceasefire was reached in the late 1990s, forming the "Real IRA" and continuing to fight the British government, a "Real PKK" could arise in response to the talks with Ocalan.

THE IRANIAN ANGLE

For Tehran, Turkey's emerging rapprochement with the PKK raises acute questions. Ever since Ankara threw its lot behind the Syrian uprising in late 2011, Iran has encouraged the group to target Turkey. Indeed, a number of last year's PKK attacks in southeastern Turkey are known to have originated from Iran; if the PKK disarms, Tehran will be deprived of this lever.

A Turkey-PKK entente would also make it easier for Ankara to reach a better understanding with one of the group's affiliates, the Democratic Union Party (PYD), the main Syrian Kurdish militia based south of the Turkish border. This in turn could help Turkey and the Syrian Kurds work together against Assad, whose regime Tehran still strongly supports.

In light of these concerns, Iran will likely step up its support for diehard anti-Turkish PKK splinter factions. It might also cultivate new Syrian Kurdish proxies who would be willing to turn against either Turkey, anti-Assad Kurds, or both. In addition, Tehran could increase its aid to (and instigation of) a variety of smaller terrorist cells opposed to Turkey or moderate Kurds, both in the region and beyond. For instance, many Turks and Kurds suspect that Iran was behind the recent assassination in Paris of three top Kurdish PKK activists, in an abortive effort to derail the Ankara-PKK rapprochement.

THE IRAQI ANGLE

In Iraq, two distinct reactions to the peace talks are now in prospect. For Iraq's Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and its president, Masoud Barzani, a full-fledged Turkey-PKK accord portends a substantial political and personal victory. In addition to cementing the strong political, economic, and security bonds that have developed over the past few years between Ankara and Erbil, it would advance the KRG agenda of helping Syria's Kurds achieve greater freedom by working with Turkey against the Assad regime, instead of the other way around.

Conversely, a Turkey-PKK deal would pose problems for Iraq's central government in Baghdad, especially for Prime

Minister Nouri al-Maliki. His relations with Ankara have soured greatly in recent years, with serious disputes over oil, Assad, and Turkish ties with the KRG. Thus, he will look askance at anything that accelerates the trajectory of Turkish success at his perceived expense.

Even so, there are ways to bridge these rival views. For example, knowledgeable Iraqi journalists report that the United States has begun working more directly with Baghdad to contain jihadist spillover from Syria. This could convince Maliki that Turkish-Kurdish cooperation against the Assad regime need not threaten his own government, at least not directly. He may then be less inclined to tolerate Iran's increasingly desperate efforts to sow discord between Turks and Kurds while sending aid across Iraqi territory to Assad's tottering dictatorship.

ENTER THE SYRIAN KURDS

Syrria's 2.5 million Kurds, who dominate patches of territory along the northern border with Turkey, present a bewildering array of parties, factions, personalities, local councils, militias, and coalitions. Assad's regime has largely lost control of this region, but most Syrian Kurds are focused on running their own affairs rather than joining the mainstream opposition, which refuses to accept their aspirations for autonomy or even "political decentralization." Symptomatic of this split was the PYD's announcement this week that it will not recognize the selection of Ghassan Hitto as prime minister of the opposition's fledgling shadow government, even though he is of ethnic Kurdish origin.

Further complicating the picture are internal divisions among the Syrian Kurds. The PYD militia continues to harass and even kill other Kurds, most recently in villages near Afrin, north of Aleppo. Moreover, according to well-informed sources, some PYD elements have reportedly made secret, self-serving local deals with both the regime and the opposition, including jihadist rebel elements such as Jabhat al-Nusra; they may even be working with Iraqi and Iranian agents. These sources also indicate that Ocalan privately told the PYD to cease and desist, but neither he nor its nominal chief, Saleh Muslim, really controls the group. At least some PYD members respond more to the extremist PKK elements ensconced across the Iraqi border in Qandil, who have reportedly vowed not to disarm for at least another two years.

Nevertheless, Turkey's emerging rapprochement with the PKK presents a new opportunity to stabilize relations with and among the Syrian Kurds. Given Ankara's ascent and Assad's decline, they could turn more decisively against the regime and toward Syria's main opposition coalition. Such a shift would solidify the promising but incomplete understanding that Barzani brokered between rival Syrian Kurdish factions last July. This in turn would promote the Turkish and U.S. objectives of overthrowing Assad, averting subsequent internecine strife in Syria, and minimizing spillover into neighboring countries. In the best case, a cordon of friendly Kurdish communities could emerge on Turkey's long, porous borders with Syria and Iraq, each boasting some measure of local self-government.

U.S. POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Washington has been commendably quick to welcome the new Turkey-PKK declarations. Less clear, however, are what steps it can take to help consolidate the historic initiative and build on its larger regional implications. In broad terms, the United States should enhance its support for Turkey and the Syrian opposition, with a view to bringing the Syrian Kurds on board with this common cause. At minimum, that means quickly coordinating enhanced, direct humanitarian and other aid with all three parties, contingent on their willingness to avoid conflict with each other.

A more ambitious but still-realistic approach is to broker a better political understanding among the three regarding current and future phases of the Syrian crisis. This step, following Turkish-PKK detente, would likely entail an agreement in principle to maintain local Kurdish administration of the border regions that Kurds currently control, both in the short term and after Assad's ouster.

Washington should also give Baghdad more incentives to abandon Assad. That means offering additional assurances and tangible support for Iraqi efforts to secure the border with Syria. If Baghdad follows suit by curbing its active and passive backing of Damascus, Washington should offer further assurances that it will oppose any Turkish-KRG attempts to exact an undue political or economic price from Baghdad in terms of oil concessions or territorial claims.

Finally, the United States should prepare for the possibility of preempting what will surely be a concerted Iranian effort to sabotage these new moves. This means urgent, stepped-up monitoring and, whenever possible, joint preemption of Iranian-sponsored terrorist operations or other preparations against any of the initiatives discussed above.

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