

# Turkey's Kurdish Calculus

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## Ankara is re-embracing its old allies in Washington at the expense of Tehran and Damascus.

**T**he Kurdistan Workers' Party, or PKK, has made a bloody comeback in Turkey. According to a recent report by the International Crisis Group, PKK-related violence has killed some 700 people since the summer of 2011. This deadly toll recalls the horrors of the 1990s, when thousands of civilians were killed in PKK terror attacks and a brutal war in eastern Turkey between the government and Kurdish militants.

The resurgence of PKK violence is no accident. It is directly related to Turkey's defiant posture in support of the Syrian uprising and against the Assad regime and its patrons in Iran. The upside for the West is that Ankara is starting to re-embrace its old friends in Washington.

The breakdown in Turkish-Syrian ties began in the summer of 2011. Since then, Damascus has once again allowed the PKK to operate in Syria. Meanwhile, to punish Ankara for its Syria policy, Iran's leaders have made peace with the Kurdish rebels they had been fighting, letting the PKK focus its energy against Turkey.

This was not Ankara's plan. When the Syrian uprising began in spring 2011, Turkish leaders initially encouraged Bashar Assad's regime to reform. In August 2011, Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu spent six hours in Damascus asking Assad to stop killing civilians.

The Syrian tyrant not only disregarded Turkey's pleas; he also sent tanks into Hama hours after Mr. Davutoglu left the capital. Thereafter, Ankara broke from Assad and began calling for his ouster. Turkey began providing safe haven to Syrian opposition groups, and media reports have even indicated that Ankara has been arming the Syrian rebels.

Assad responded by letting the PKK operate in Syria after keeping a lid on the group for more than a decade. In 1998, Assad's father had cracked down on the longtime presence of Kurdish militants in Syria, after Turkey threatened to invade if Syria continued to harbor the PKK. This spring, Assad allowed the PKK to move some 2,000 militants into

Syria from their mountain enclave in northern Iraq. Assad, in effect, signaled to Ankara: "Help my enemy, and I will help yours."

The Iranian regime has spoken in similar tones. In September 2011, immediately after Ankara started to confront the Assad regime, Tehran reconciled with the PKK's Iranian franchise, the Party for Freedom and Life in Kurdistan. Tehran had been fighting its Kurdish rebels since 2003, as part of a strategy to take advantage of the rift between Turkey and the U.S. at the onset of the Iraq War. By helping Turkey defeat Kurdish militias, Iran had hoped to win Ankara's favor at the expense of its own archenemy: Washington. But Iran flipped this posture last year, and by making peace with Kurdish militants, it gave the PKK freedom to target Turkey.

The new stance on the PKK could not have worked so well against Turkey had the Syrian uprising not excited Kurds across the Middle East, including in Turkey. As Syrian rebels eroded the regime's power in northern Syria this summer, Kurds started taking control of cities there, just across the border with Turkey.

Encouraged by this development, the PKK has tried to wrest control of Turkish towns, targeting especially vulnerable spots in the country's rugged and isolated southernmost Hakkari province, which borders Iraq and Iran. Although the PKK has not yet secured any territory, the battle for Hakkari has caused hundreds of casualties over recent months.

Iran appears to be complicit in this new PKK assault, at least in part. Last month Turkish Deputy Prime Minister Bulent Arinc told reporters that the government had "received information that [PKK] terrorists infiltrated from the Iranian side of the border" before launching a massive assault on the town of Semdinli in Hakkari. Tehran denies this.

Rejuvenated by its welcome in Syria and Iran, and also by Ankara's stunted "Kurdish Opening" -- an aborted effort in 2009 that had aimed to improve Kurds' rights in Turkey -- the PKK is now spreading tension beyond the Kurdish-majority areas of southeastern Turkey. On Aug. 20, the group killed nine people with a car bomb in Gaziantep, a prosperous and mixed Turkish-Kurdish city that had been spared from PKK violence. Once again, the Syrian-Iranian axis cast its shadow over the assault: Turkish officials alleged Syrian complicity in the Gaziantep attack, and when Iranian nuclear negotiator Saeed Jalili met with Turkey's prime minister in Istanbul on Sept. 18, he was also reportedly admonished.

Ankara's Middle East policy rests on one basic premise: that anyone who supports the PKK is Turkey's enemy. It follows that Ankara has a problem with Damascus until Assad falls, and a long-term problem with Tehran even after Assad falls.

Accordingly, these shifting stones in the Middle East are also bringing Ankara closer to its longtime ally the U.S. Turkey has agreed to host NATO's missile-defense system, which aims to protect members of the Western alliance from Iranian and other nuclear threats.

After weeks of attacks and riots against their embassies elsewhere in the Middle East, Americans may well be wondering if the Arab Spring has had any positive consequences at all for the U.S. The severing of Turkish-Iranian ties, at least, can count as one.

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