

Should Turkey Be Afraid of the Syrian Kurds?

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Given the situation along the border and the risk of a Kurdish insurgency, a unilateral Turkish foray into Syria would be extremely risky for Ankara.

Many in Turkey are said to be alarmed by reports over the past couple of days that Syrian Kurds have taken over a string of towns along that country's border with Turkey, including Ayn-al 'Arab and Afrin.

Turkish fears stem from the fact that the Syrian Kurdish group, the Democratic Union Party (PYD), which is reportedly taking over some of the border cities, has a reputation for opposing Turkey and supporting its sworn-enemy, the PKK. Until recently, the PYD advertised itself as being close to the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), a group notorious for leading a decades-long fight against Turkey -- one that has resulted in tens of thousands of casualties.

As the Turks see it, with identical PKK/PYD flags reportedly being raised over Ayn al-'Arab and Afrin, developments suggest that the PKK may be creating a safe haven for itself on Turkey's border with Syria. This has prompted some bad memories: in the past, the PKK has used safe havens such as the territory it occupied inside northern Iraq to launch devastating attacks in Turkey.

What's more, today's alleged developments leave Turkey between a rock and a hard place: will Ankara watch on as the PKK carves out a base in Syria, or will it do something about this development, taking military action inside Syria to deny the PYD/PKK that opportunity?

Hard as it would be for the Turks to bear, Ankara may be forced to accept inaction, given the risks of acting alone militarily.

Syria's restless and well-organized Kurdish minority doesn't for the most part trust Turkey. What is more, the PKK is believed to have considerable support among the Syrian Kurds, many of whom are organized under the PYD.

After the Syrian uprising began in spring 2011, Ankara took a firm stand against the Bashar al-Assad regime's crackdown. Turkey adopted some tough rhetoric toward Assad and began offering refuge to members of the Syrian

National Council (SNC) opposition group. Turkey also provided safe haven to Syrian refugees fleeing persecution, as well as hosting some members of the armed opposition group, the Free Syrian Army.

Simultaneously, reports surfaced that Assad was re-allowing the PKK, which Damascus sheltered in the 1980s and the 1990s, to operate inside Syria. In March of this year, for example, the PKK was accused of moving as many as 2,000 of its members to Syria from the Qandil enclave along the Iraq-Iran border, where the group has maintained its headquarters and camps over the past decade.

So, the more Turkey has increased its opposition to the al-Assad regime, the more the al-Assad regime seems to have allowed the PKK/PYD to establish a base in its territory to gain a card to play against Ankara. This makes a unilateral Turkish foray into Syria extremely risky for Ankara: Turkey would surely face a Kurdish insurgency if it were to enter Syrian territory to prevent the PYD from taking control of the Syrian cities.

But Ankara may not have to suffer the worst. Until recently, the PYD refused to join the Syrian uprising or the broader Kurdish opposition, organized under the Kurdistan National Council (KNC). But now, the KNC and PYD have reportedly reached a deal to unify their efforts. At the reported request of the powerful Iraqi Kurdish leader Massoud Barzani, a friend of Ankara, the PYD is said to have agreed to stop fighting Turkey, focusing its efforts instead in the struggle to unseat the al-Assad regime.

This new Kurdish alliance may help Ankara adopt a more sanguine approach to the emerging Kurdish region inside Syria. For this to happen, the PYD needs to hold on to its part of the deal (a tall order given the close ties between the PYD and the PKK), while the Iraqi Kurds must use their influence over the Syrian Kurds to encourage them to focus their efforts on unseating the al-Assad regime, and not squandering an opportunity by fighting Turkey.

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