

What Drives Turkey's New Syria Stance? A Fear of Two Kurdistans

by [Soner Cagaptay \(/experts/soner-cagaptay\)](/experts/soner-cagaptay)

May 23, 2012

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Soner Cagaptay \(/experts/soner-cagaptay\)](/experts/soner-cagaptay)

Soner Cagaptay is the Beyer Family fellow and director of the Turkish Research Program at The Washington Institute.



Articles & Testimony

When the Syrian uprising began last spring, Turkey initially stayed behind Washington. It shied away from criticizing the regime of Bashar al-Assad, instead asking al-Assad to reform.

When Damascus refused, however, Ankara moved ahead of Washington, taking an aggressive posture against al-Assad and suggesting it was ready to take action to force him to step down.

Recently, though, Ankara has backpedaled, abandoning its aggression and sliding back toward Washington's position. With this, Turkey has entered the third phase of its Syrian policy, falling nearly in line with Washington's policy of "wait and see and hope for an orderly transition -- for now."

What could explain Turkey's new posture? Many factors come to mind, from the fear of getting bogged down in a war with a neighboring country to being left alone to fight al-Assad. But one key factor is its fear of two Kurdistans.

Syria's restless and well-organized Kurdish minority, for the most part, does not trust Turkey. Instead, the Syrian Kurds are looking to their counterparts in Iraq's Kurdish region, the Middle East's first autonomous Kurdish political entity. Some Syrian Kurdish leaders aspire to gain what the Iraqi Kurds have: their own Kurdistan.

Turkey can deal with one Kurdistan, but two might be too many.

In recent years, Ankara's policy with the Iraqi Kurds has evolved from open hostility in 2003, when the Iraqi Kurds built their Kurdistan, to open friendship today.

In this regard, the Iraqi Kurds have helped Turkey by embracing a crucial strategy: Since 2003, the Iraqi Kurds have gradually abandoned their policy of turning a blind eye to the presence of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), a Turkish Kurdish terror group that fights Turkey inside northern Iraq.

As far as Turkey is concerned, anyone who hosts the PKK is an enemy. Seeing this plain fact, the Iraqi Kurds sacrificed the PKK to ally with Turkey against Iraq's increasingly authoritarian central government in Baghdad.

As soon as the Iraqi Kurds showed good will on the PKK issue, Ankara reciprocated, building good ties with the Iraqi Kurdish Regional Government in Erbil. Today, Turkey has a diplomatic mission in Erbil, and Turkish Airlines, the country's national flag carrier, flies direct from Erbil not only to Istanbul but also to Antalya, carrying Kurdish

vacationers to the Turkish Riviera. And trade between Turkey and the Iraqi Kurds has boomed to such an extent that if Iraqi Kurdistan were an independent country today, Turkey would be its largest trading partner.

So far, so good. But what if there were two Kurdistan, with a second to emerge in Syria after al-Assad's potential fall? Could Turkey deal with the second one with the same ease it has learned to deal with the first?

Maybe, if the Syrian Kurds also denied the PKK safe haven. One could then envision commercial ties cementing the relationship between Turkey and the Syrian Kurdistan, similar to Turkey and the Iraqi Kurdistan.

This could be a tall order, though. While the PKK has had negligible support among the Iraqi Kurds, this has not been the case among the Syrian Kurds. Granted, the Syrian Kurdish umbrella group, the Kurdistan National Council, has excluded the PKK from its membership. But still, some intelligence analysts suggest that the PKK has grassroots appeal inside Syria.

Then there is the Syrian regime's complicity on the PKK issue. Damascus harbored the PKK for years, only stopping in the past decade to improve relations with Turkey. Since the beginning of the Syrian uprising, however, al-Assad has once again allowed the PKK to have an armed presence inside Syria in retaliation for Turkey's support to the Syrian uprising.

The prospect of a second Kurdistan, one with a menacing PKK presence in it, now looms on Turkey's radar screen. The al-Assad regime has caught on to that fear, allowing the PKK ample room to operate inside Syria, speaking to that primal Turkish strategic anxiety and sending a message to Ankara: "Help my opposition, and you might as well help the PKK and build a second Kurdistan in your backyard."

Soner Cagaptay is director of the Turkish Research Program at The Washington Institute. ❖

CNN Global Public Square

RECOMMENDED

BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Unpacking the UAE F-35 Negotiations](#)

Feb 15, 2022

◆
Grant Rumley

[\(/policy-analysis/unpacking-uae-f-35-negotiations\)](#)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

[How to Make Russia Pay in Ukraine: Study Syria](#)

Feb 15, 2022

◆
Anna Borshchevskaya

(/policy-analysis/how-make-russia-pay-ukraine-study-syria)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Bennett's Bahrain Visit Further Invigorates Israel-Gulf Diplomacy](#)

Feb 14, 2022

◆
Simon Henderson

(/policy-analysis/bennetts-bahrain-visit-further-invigorates-israel-gulf-diplomacy)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

[Syria \(/policy-analysis/syria\)](#)

[Turkey \(/policy-analysis/turkey\)](#)