

Syria and Turkey: The PKK Dimension

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Brief Analysis

Among Syrian opposition groups, the belief is widespread that Damascus has been allowing the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) -- a group on the State Department's Foreign Terrorist Organizations list -- to operate once again in Syria. Back in 1998, the Syrian regime curbed PKK activity on its soil and cut ties with the organization after Ankara threatened to invade over the issue. Thereafter, relations between Turkey and Syria improved, in line with Turkey's Middle East policy whereby "any country that helps Turkey against the PKK is a friend and any country that helps the PKK is an enemy."

Lately, however, given Ankara's tough stance in response to the Bashar al-Assad regime's crackdown on the Syrian uprising, Syrian-Turkish ties have been unraveling. Further straining the relationship are reports in the Turkish media of Damascus's tolerant attitude toward the PKK and its local franchise, the Democratic Union of Syria (PYD). Yet renewed PKK activity in Syria not only harms bilateral ties, it could also limit the effectiveness of Ankara's policy against Assad. Washington needs to study this issue and take steps to tackle the PKK presence in Syria.

How Ankara Ended Syrian Support for the PKK

The PKK was established in 1978 in Lebanon's Beqa Valley, which was then occupied by Syria. Moscow supported this development in order to destabilize Turkey, a key NATO member during the Cold War. In running a proxy war against Ankara through the PKK, the Soviets and Syrians provided the group with training and arms. The PKK made forays into Turkey from Syria, engaging in terrorist attacks. With the collapse of communism, Soviet support to the PKK ended, but Syria continued to harbor the group to gain leverage against Ankara in bilateral disputes. Namely, Damascus claimed the Turkish Hatay province and disagreed with Ankara on sharing the waters of the Euphrates and Tigris rivers.

In seeking to end Syria's harboring of the PKK, Turkey first took the diplomatic route, attempting to persuade Damascus to end the policy. This approach did not work. The Syrians denied they were sheltering the PKK even as the group's leader, Abdullah Ocalan, gave on-site interviews to the international media from the Syrian capital. Ankara then tried a tougher strategy: buoyed by its strategic relationship with Israel to Syria's south, Turkey threatened to invade unless Syria curbed PKK activity in its territory. This approach worked. Syria kicked Ocalan out of the country, whereupon he was apprehended by Turkish officials, with American assistance, and sent to prison.

Damascus also signed the 1998 Adana Protocol with Turkey, promising to end all its support to the PKK.

In the years that immediately followed, Turkish intelligence and military officers verified the Assad regime's claim that it had, in fact, stopped harboring the PKK. Relations between Turkey and Syria improved in turn.

Reemergence of the PKK Issue

Since the Syrian uprising began in spring 2011, Ankara has taken a firm stand against the Assad regime's crackdown. Turkey first recommended that Assad not use violence. But when this plea went unheeded, Ankara adopted harsher 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, the reports surfaced that Assad was allowing the PKK and the PYD to operate inside Syria. In late 2011, for example, Damascus permitted the PYD to open six Kurdish "language schools" in northern Syria, which the group now uses for political work. What is more, in March 2012 the PKK reportedly moved between 1,500 and 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.

PKK Infrastructure in Syria

Outside Turkey, Syria is the only regional country in which the PKK has recruited significant numbers of Kurds. One reason is that Damascus, which in the past denied many Kurds citizenship, has tried to channel Kurdish nationalist frustration toward the PKK and against Turkey; however, since the beginning of the Syrian uprising, Damascus has tried to recalibrate its policy toward Syrian Kurds, offering approximately 300,000 stateless Kurds "Syrian Arab" citizenship to weaken the opposition. The PKK has enjoyed support among Syrian Kurds also because many Syrian and Turkish Kurds who live across the 560-mile border are relatives, and the group's political message echoes among communities on both sides of this line.

Accordingly, an estimated 20 to 30 percent of the PKK's nearly 5,000 militant members are thought to be Syrian Kurds. The PKK enjoys stronger support in the Kurdish areas of northwestern Syria near Aleppo, in Afrin, and in Jabal Kurd (Kurd Mountain), which abuts the Turkish border. The Kurdish enclave of northwestern Syria is surrounded by Arab and Turkmen settlements, but across the Turkish border one finds Kurdish settlements. The fact that their only Kurdish neighbors live in Turkey has exposed Kurds of northwestern Syria to Kurdish movements from Turkey, including the PKK.

Damascus has a number of reasons for allowing the PKK-PYD to become active again:

- Assad has used the group to crack down on Kurdish demonstrators, such as in Afrin in February 2012. On March 29, Reuters reported that the Syrian opposition had accused the PYD of "acting as enforcers for Assad" by putting down demonstrations in Kurdish areas.
- The Syrian Kurdish opposition has mostly coalesced around the Kurdish National Council (KNC); by boosting the profile of the PKK, the regime hopes to drive a wedge into this unity and offer an alternative that redirects Kurdish ire toward Ankara.
- The PKK may be useful in thwarting a potential cross-border intervention by Turkey to stop the Syrian crackdown -- in other words, creating a booby trap. Such an intervention could occur in the northwestern Syrian province of Idlib, which has witnessed a relatively large number of civilian casualties but also includes Afrin and Jabal Kurd. A Turkish intervention here might boomerang, forcing Ankara to address a PKK-led insurgency over the region's mountainous

terrain. What is more, Jabal Kurd links with the Amanos Mountains across the Turkish border, providing the PKK-PYD with a path to central Turkey. The PKK has vast experience navigating this terrain and, in the past, has used it to transport terrorists into Turkey.

Concerns about a "boomerang" effect and the need to build an international coalition against Damascus will likely moderate a more activist Turkish stance for the time being. In the long term, however, Ankara's Syria policy may harden. Recent Turkish intelligence reports claim that despite the regime's promise to end all PKK activity in Syria, Assad began allowing the PKK to operate even before the spring 2011 uprising. Turkish prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan is reportedly convinced that such a move confirms Assad's insincerity toward Turkey, and flouts Turkey's pre-Syrian-uprising policy of keeping friendly ties with Damascus.

For its own part, the PYD, which has joined neither the KNC nor the SNC, could benefit from the Ankara-Damascus dispute. The group is moving armed members into Syria and building a political base there. The PYD is positioning itself to benefit from Assad's likely fall, hoping to become a key player in the Syrian Kurdish nationalist cause, one uniquely stocked with weapons and militants. At the same time, by cooperating with Assad, the PKK appears to be aligning itself with the Syria policy espoused by Iran and Russia, to curry favor with its erstwhile patrons.

Policy Suggestions for Washington

Given how the PKK issue shapes the Turks' views of their neighbors, media reports on renewed PKK activity in Syria could help mobilize Turkish public opinion to support a more active policy toward Assad. Over the past year, such reporting has been rare. But the stronger anti-Assad line being adopted in Turkey could change this reality. During the April 1 "Friends of the Syrian People" meeting in Istanbul, Erdogan voiced his unwavering opposition to Assad. Washington could view the number of Turkish media stories on Assad's support for the PKK-PYD as a metric of rising Turkish anger and Ankara's willingness to act against Assad.

Washington also needs to study the PKK-PYD presence in Syria. With spring arriving at the high-elevation Qandil enclave in Iraq, the PKK now has tactical ability to move even more militants out of Iraq and into Syria, boosting its presence in Syria while fleeing Turkey's anticipated cross-border operation into the enclave. U.S. partners in the endeavor to tackle the PKK-PYD presence in Syria could include Ankara, Syrian Kurdish groups, the Syrian opposition, and more importantly with the Iraqi Kurdish leadership, which simultaneously has sway over the Syrian Kurds and strong ties with Ankara. The insights gained from such study could help alleviate Turkish concerns about walking into a booby trap and provide Turkey and its allies with room to take the initiative in their Syria policy.

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