

Iran's Warming Relations with the PKK Could Destabilize the KRG

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Their emerging confluence of interests will only exacerbate the internal problems caused by factionalism and failed governance in Iraqi Kurdistan.

With the U.S.-led push against the Islamic State moving forward in Iraq and Syria, the Kurdistan Workers Party is looking to maximize its gains. In addition to its military progress against IS forces, the PKK is gaining ground politically in Iraqi Kurdistan, capitalizing on the region's internal divisions while bracing for potential escalation in Turkey and Syria. The group's interests are increasingly converging with those of Iran, which has long sought to weaken Turkey's influence and bolster Baghdad's leverage on the Kurdistan Regional Government in Erbil. For its part, Ankara seeks to preserve its good ties with the strongest faction in the KRG, the Kurdistan Democratic Party.

Distracted by their rivalry, the PKK and KDP have essentially allowed themselves to be used as proxies by these regional powers, sidetracking the Kurds from opportunities to unify and stabilize the KRG. Meanwhile, other Iraqi Kurdish parties have grown angry at the KDP's unilateral governance and are beginning to jump on the PKK's bandwagon, helping it gain local popularity.

REGIONAL CONTEXT OF THE PKK-KDP RIVALRY

Initially, the war against IS breathed new life into the transnational Kurdish movement. When IS forces attacked Erbil in 2014, PKK fighters from Turkey and Syria came to the city's defense, while KRG Peshmerga forces helped the PKK's Syrian offshoot, the Democratic Union Party (PYD), fend off IS in Kobane. On the nonmilitary front, many Kurdish youths from Iran, Syria, and Turkey have found jobs in Iraqi Kurdistan, helping their families with remittances and creating economic bonds between Kurdish communities in different countries.

Any optimism about Kurdish transnationalism was short-lived, however, as Iranian and Turkish influence began to exacerbate rivalries between the KDP and PKK and within the KRG. Tehran and Ankara's regional interests steadily diverged due to the war in Syria, the collapse of Turkey-PKK peace negotiations in 2015, and the IS onslaught in Iraq. Despite the mounting IS threat at home, the Turkish government continued to regard the PKK and PYD as enemy number one. Ankara now seeks to contain Iran and undercut any attempts at consolidating Kurdish territories in Syria.

In contrast, Iran has reawakened its historic ties with both the PKK and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), the KDP's main rival. Tehran also seeks to undermine the KRG's autonomy from the Iraqi central government in Baghdad, where Tehran exerts sizable influence. Separately, the PKK's Iranian branch, the Party for a Free Life in Kurdistan, ended hostilities against the Iranian regime in 2011, suggesting a honeymoon of sorts with Tehran.

The current situation in the northern town of Sinjar illustrates these trends. Iran has a strong interest in ensuring that the Iraq-Syria border is not exclusively controlled by pro-Turkey factions such as the KDP and Sunni Arab militias, and the persistent PKK/PYD presence in Sinjar serves that goal. When the KDP lost Sinjar to IS in 2014, the PKK/PYD opened a safe corridor for the town's Yazidi-majority residents to escape. Although the KDP eventually regained the city, the PKK did not leave; rather, it created a local Yazidi force, the Sinjar Resistance Units, which registered with the Iraqi government in June 2015 as a Popular Mobilization Unit, allowing it to receive funding from Baghdad. Given Iran's sway with the overall PMU command, the Yazidi force likely has Tehran's blessing.

PKK VS. KDP IN IRAQ

The PKK's military presence in KRG territory is not new -- the group has maintained forces in the mountainous border areas of northern Iraq for years. According to estimates published by Rudaw in April 2016, the PKK controls some 650 villages inside the KRG, mainly in eastern territories nominally under the KDP's jurisdiction (though it should be noted that many of these villages are unoccupied during winter).

Recent developments have made the two Kurdish factions more wary of each other, however. The PKK fears that the KDP may help Turkey attack its bases in northern Iraq -- a concern exacerbated by Erbil's strong economic and energy ties with Ankara. For its part, the KDP feels increasingly encircled by PKK guerrillas now that they have established themselves in Sinjar to the west. The latter situation has political implications as well; of the KDP's twenty-six members in the Iraqi parliament, six come from Ninawa, the province that contains Sinjar.

Indeed, the standoff in Sinjar is complicating the rivalry over symbolic leadership of the broader Kurdish nationalist movement. Although the PKK and KDP both command sizable followings in Syria, they have found it more difficult to establish a foothold in each other's sphere of influence -- Turkey and Iraq, respectively.

In Syria, the PKK has longstanding relations with the Assad regime, and Damascus essentially allowed the PYD to control Kurdish territories along the northern border once the war started. The PYD has since refused to share power with KDP affiliates in Syria, angering the Iraqi Kurds. As a result, the PKK is now concerned that the KDP will support Turkish efforts to undermine the Syrian Kurds.

Coupled with the confluence of interests with Iran, this growing Kurdish factionalism is creating new opportunities for the PKK to establish a political presence in the KRG, especially in anti-KDP strongholds such as Sulaymaniyah and Kirkuk. Due to geography and history, Iran exerts sizable influence in Sulaymaniyah, where it helped the PUK fight the Turkish-backed KDP in the late 1990s. Subsequently, the two Iraqi Kurdish parties maintained a strong grip on their separate fiefdoms. But a perfect storm of challenges in 2014 -- low oil prices, budget cuts by Baghdad, and the IS onslaught -- exposed the KRG's governance deficiencies. The resulting fiscal shock crippled the Kurdish economy and the government's ability to dispense public payrolls. Much of the Kurdish public has since become embittered by the KRG's corruption and its failure to translate the revenue windfall during the fat years into sustainable development.

GORRAN SIDELINED

Led by the Gorran (Change) Party, the Iraqi Kurdish opposition has been happy to deflect all of this public anger toward the KDP, which for some years has used its greater wealth and organizational structure to dominate KRG politics and, at times, oppress its rivals. In October 2015, facing calls to end his expired presidential term, KDP leader Masoud Barzani shut down the Kurdish parliament and expelled Gorran ministers from the cabinet. Gorran remains confined to Sulaymaniyah today, unable to deliver the wider reforms it promised. Accordingly, the opposition has acquiesced to, even supported, the PKK's increasing presence in the KRG.

For its part, the public has seemingly romanticized the PKK, whose utopian socialist goals have yet to be diluted with the realities of governance. The group has therefore been gaining in popularity, recruiting members at the PUK and Gorran's expense, creating the KRG-based Roj News Agency, and establishing numerous youth groups. In September, politicians in Kirkuk formed a new political party with ties to the PKK, the People's Democracy Front.

The Kurdish infighting has regional geopolitical implications as well. KDP rivals have denounced Ankara's policies toward the PKK/PYD on various occasions and supported Kurdish nationalist factions in Turkish elections. At the same time, PUK officials have been in talks with Tehran about building a pipeline to export oil from Sulaymaniyah to Iran. The KDP, feeling cornered politically and geographically, has doubled down on its ties with Turkey despite Ankara's failure to rescue Erbil when IS first attacked.

THE PRICE OF FACTIONALISM

Despite a historic opportunity for greater autonomy, Iraqi Kurds are about to lose it yet again due to divisive politics, failed governance, and subversive neighbors. The KRG is paying the price for not investing in its democratic and state institutions, and for governing with insufficient transparency and accountability. Against this backdrop, the PKK's military and political presence in the KRG -- which is growing with Iran's apparent blessing -- is disruptive and could lead to armed conflict. Even if the current tensions in locales such as Sinjar are deescalated, a new actor may be entering KRG politics in the form of a PKK-affiliated party, with uncertain consequences for Iraqi Kurdish unity.

Ultimately, the KRG's security and stability depend on continuing the path of democracy and institution building. Without these institutions, the Kurds will find themselves serving as perpetual proxies to actors with interests of their own, eroding years of hard-won autonomy. The burden of returning to this path falls primarily on the KDP, which has done little to govern in an inclusive fashion.

For its part, the United States retains significant leverage over various Kurdish factions. If it hopes to fend off Iran's influence and avert another Kurdish civil war, Washington will need to bolster the KRG's democratic institutions and help reform its economy. Functioning institutions would alleviate KDP-PKK tensions as well, perhaps by opening trade routes between the KRG and the Syrian Kurds. In contrast, a PKK attack on Turkey from KRG territory would undermine [U.S. support for the PYD](#) in the fight against IS. Above all, unless the relevant actors prove willing to reinvigorate the Turkey-PKK peace process and pursue a holistic approach toward post-IS governance in Iraq and Syria, they will likely spawn even more instability among U.S. allies.

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