Kurds Now Our Best Ally Against ISIS in Syria

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Fikra Forum
October 9, 2015

The Kurdish forces fielded by the YPG remain at the vanguard of the anti-ISIS fight in Syria, so providing them with GPS technology, faster airstrike coordination, and other assistance would greatly further U.S. interests.

New reports of a U.S. decision to expand coordination with Syrian Kurdish forces come hard on the heels of Russian airstrikes against U.S.-backed Arab rebels in that country. Those airstrikes complicate the battle against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Merely trying to stay alive, these factions will be unable to stop jihadist encroachment into north-central Syria. Despite these setbacks, the United States can ensure that the fight against ISIS continues. Syrian Kurds have consistently beaten back the group with American air support. Increasing aid to them at this crucial junction could help offset the losses moderate rebels are experiencing.

BACKGROUND

Understanding the recent geopolitical history of the Syrian Kurds helps explain the dilemmas they face in fighting ISIS. Syria's northern Kurdish areas are now ruled by the Democratic Union Party (PYD), founded in 2003. The group is the Syrian offspring of Turkey's Kurdish Workers Party (PKK). But while the United States, Turkey, and the European Union consider the PKK a terrorist organization, Ankara has hosted PYD leaders in past years. These formal discussions ended several months ago, as the Turkish-PKK peace talks soured and ultimately collapsed.

In the 1980s, the Syrian regime encouraged many members of its Kurdish community, constituting about 10 percent of the population, to join the PKK. This move was intended to both pressure Turkey and thwart local Kurdish nationalist aspirations, and an estimated 7,000 to 10,000 Syrian Kurds did so. Of these, approximately 1,500 were later killed in action. And somewhere between 200 and 2,000 PKK fighters crossed into Syria at the beginning of the current conflict.

In June 2012, the People's Protection Units (YPG), a paramilitary group dating roughly from 2004, began erecting checkpoints in northern Syria. The next month, large parts of Kobane (Ayn al-Arab), Afrin, Amuda, and al-Malikiyah in northern Syria fell in rapid succession to the Kurds during limited engagements against regime forces. In 2013, a female fighting force known as the Women's Defense Units (YPJ) was created. The YPG consistently denies that it answers to the PYD, but realities belie its claims.

The Kurds have a convoluted relationship with the Syrian regime. In 2011, the latter facilitated PYD and YPG expansion by releasing Kurdish politicians and fighters and reportedly abandoning weapons stockpiles. And although control of northern cities such as Hasaka and Qamishli is divided between the Syrian military and the YPG, the guns generally remain silent, with the regime even expanding its presence since July 2012. The two sides have, however, sporadically clashed.

In late 2012, YPG skirmishes against rebel units from the moderate Free Syrian Army (FSA) and more radical groups including the Salafi group Ahrar al-Sham and al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra erupted. The FSA refused to accept Kurdish aspirations in the area. The group's then leader Riyad Asad noted in July 2012 that the FSA would not leave Qamishli to the agenda of any Kurdish faction. Battles ensued in the city of Afrin as well as the Ashrafiyya and Sheikh Maqsoud neighborhoods of Aleppo.

One of the FSA units marshaled against the YPG was a small Kurdish brigade, but ethnic differences only partially explained the underlying hostility between the groups. The FSA was more concerned about the YPG's cozy relationship with the regime, and some other politically conscious Syrians were put off by the PYD's refusal to join the Syrian political opposition.

Most recently, the YPG's fight against ISIS has captured international attention. Since mid-2013, the YPG has battled the jihadists, even as FSA groups shunned engagement. However, as ISIS became a larger nemesis, most FSA groups buried the hatchet with the YPG. A number of small FSA brigades even joined the Kurds in pushing ISIS back from Kobane earlier this year. The battle highlighted the key role the Kurds are playing in the fight against ISIS and led to high-level meetings in Europe.
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Moreover, though the YPG is a professional fighting force, it sometimes acts as a PYD militia. It has kidnapped
anti-PYD politicians and activists. In June 2013, it fired into a crowd of demonstrators in Amuda, killing three. And it
has accepted minors into its ranks, though it has pledged to end the practice.

WASHINGTON SHIFTS COURSE

Initially, the United States distanced itself from the PYD. In a nod to Turkish concerns, Secretary of State Hillary
Clinton declared in August 2012, "Syria must not become a haven for PKK terrorists." However, when Washington's primary interests in Syria turned to fighting ISIS, the YPG's role increased. A crucial turning point occurred when Washington began bombing ISIS positions during the battle for Kobane on September 27, 2014, and air-dropped weapons the next month. In total, there were 606 airstrikes around Kobane. Indirect talks with the PYD, which began in 2012, were transformed into high-level discussions in October 2014.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Given the YPG’s crucial role in the battle against ISIS, Washington should consider providing it nonlethal aid. For example, front commanders lack GPS devices. Improving air asset coordination is also a priority. Some airstrikes require up to an hour, giving ISIS fighters enough time to retreat or move. The United States can enhance coordination by supplying sophisticated GPS applications to provide accurate coordinates with synchronized maps. The YPG would benefit from secure communication equipment for direct communication with American forces. Gas masks would minimize the threat of ISIS chemical attacks. And YPG field commanders would welcome night vision goggles and rations such as MREs.

Washington should also increase its very limited intelligence coordination with the PYD's Internal Security services -- known as the Asayesh -- to prevent ISIS infiltration, since it has employed a number of sleeper cells to carry out a series of car bombings in PYD territory.

Furthermore, ISIS heavy weapons currently provide a qualitative edge over the YPG. If a strategic relationship with the YPG develops, Washington should also consider providing armored vehicles and spare parts for captured Humvees to allow their use in offensives.

Building a better relationship with the PYD and YPG would give Washington leverage to pursue political objectives. It should nudge the PYD to create a more inclusive political environment, encourage better ties with Iraqi Kurdish leader Masoud Barzani, and ensure that the rights of Arabs living in Kurdish areas are protected.

With Russia now focused on degrading and ultimately destroying Washington's Syrian allies, the United States needs all the collaborators it can muster in the battle against ISIS. And with the YPG at the vanguard of that fight inside Syria, bolstering its forces would greatly further American interests.

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