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Kurds Now Our Best Ally Against ISIS in Syria

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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 Riyadh 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.

BY THE NUMBERS

YPG leaders say that the group had approximately 3,000 fighters at its 2012 declaration and about 700 members in the YPJ. Today, their leaders now state that the former has around 23,650 while the latter has 19,350. Alongside these forces fight an additional 1,500 troops from the Sanadid Forces composed of Arabs from the Shammar tribe (the clan itself claims 5,000 fighters in total) and several hundred Syriac Christians from the Suturu brigade (the sect claims it has more than a thousand). Approximately 300 foreigners have joined their ranks as well, including Westerners and Iranian Kurds.

In addition to regular combat troops, the YPG has a military intelligence branch that gathers information about ISIS, a "special forces" unit tasked with operating behind enemy lines, and an anti-terror unit. Each of these three corps numbers in the hundreds. In total, the YPG claims it can field about 45,000 troops, of which about 15 percent are ethnic Arabs and the rest almost all Kurds.

Commanders estimate that a little more than half of these forces are combat ready. About 3,000 fighters have been killed in action, mostly against ISIS, including 750 in the celebrated battle for Kobane.

The YPG largely relies on light weaponry such as Kalashnikovs, rocket-propelled grenades, and PK machine guns. Most of its heavy weaponry comes from captured ISIS caches. It claims to have six functioning T-55 tanks, which are used sparingly because they frequently break down. Front commanders also complain that the tanks are not very effective. Dozens of non-functioning tanks -- including some destroyed in coalition air strikes -- are cannibalized for spare parts. The YPG has fewer than 10 operational Humvee light trucks. They are not used in offensives, but rather to evacuate the wounded. The YPG estimates that its arsenal contains several hundred heavy machine guns such as DShKs and ZU-23s in addition to 14.5 mm weapons. It uses 62 mm, 82 mm and 120 mm mortars. The units also produce missiles locally and resupply most of their depleted caches from the Iraqi black market.

A FORMIDABLE FIGHTING FORCE

The YPG is operationally divided into seven sectors. The Jazirah, Kobane, and Afrin regions each have two sectors, while Aleppo has one. Most of the fighting takes place in Jazirah and Kobane. Each sector has a command composed of three to five YPG and YPJ leaders who make decisions by committee. Overall, there are about twenty fronts led by junior-ranking tactical officers.

YPG commanders estimate that they control a territory of approximately 30,000 square kilometers. American military officials note the Kurds have captured more than 17,000 square miles from ISIS, much of it on the back of Washington's bombs. They have been able to do so by employing effective combat techniques. Units are highly motivated and imbued with an ideological bent. Unlike the Iraqi forces, which took off their uniforms and fled Mosul when ISIS attacked, YPG fighters fear that doing so would lead to the slaughter of their communities.

The YPG also successfully employs guerrilla tactics, skills it learned from the PKK. Its reconnaissance missions survey enemy territory while its vast spy network provides valuable information on ISIS troop movements and battle plans.

The YPG is also effective at tactical leadership, which many consider the Achilles heel of Arab armies and the reason for many of their defeats. Junior front commanders have a degree of flexibility, but a strong chain of command relies on the upper echelons for many key decisions. In the Tel Hamis region southeast of Qamishli, for example, five local officers -- three from YPG, and two from YPJ -- meet weekly to discuss field developments. If they believe an attack is necessary, they ask the YPG leadership for permission.

Field command, however, varies by sector. Coordination with the coalition provides the best example of this. In the Tel Hamis region, one of the five senior commanders must approve an airstrike request. In contrast, junior officers in the city of Hasaka have leeway to order bombings without having to request their superiors' approval.

As a result, the YPG is the most effective American ally in the fight against ISIS. The Pentagon's "train and equip" program stumbled when the first group was captured by Jabhat al-Nusra. A CIA initiative that arms and funds FSA brigades, known as the Military Operations Command, has not fared much better. These supported units are too small to make headway against an organization like ISIS, which can field upwards of 30,000 fighters. And the FSA's priority is fighting the regime, not ISIS. Most of these brigades have fewer than 500 troops fighting ISIS.

Despite its combat successes, however, the YPG has now established static positions. In the fields south of Tel Brak, they have built impressive defensive fortifications of sand berms and lookout posts to fend off ISIS advances. The organization has thus constructed the local equivalent of a mini-Maginot or Bar-Lev Line which in turn prevents offensive creativity. The YPG has largely reached the end of its thrust because further ISIS territory contains almost no Kurds. It is reluctant to push south into larger Arab urban areas such as Shadada in Hasaka province.

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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