

## Turkey Can Ally with Syria's Kurds Someday

David Pollock

The July 5 headline in Turkey's *Hürriyet* newspaper, quoting Deputy Prime Minister Numan Kurtulmuş reads as follows: "Turkey Says It's Not Declaring War On YPG [Yekîneyên Parastina Gel or People's Protection Units]," the main Syrian Kurdish militia just across the border. But, Kurtulmuş added, "if Turkey sees a YPG movement in northern Syria that is a threat to it, it will retaliate in kind."<sup>1</sup>

That typically tough yet carefully conditional quote raises a crucial, if often overlooked, factual point. The YPG has in fact not threatened Turkey, nor even Turkish forces inside Syria, ever since 2012. It was in July of that year, exactly five years ago, when the Syrian Kurdish militia took over much of the border area. And it was then that it promised, in an agreement brokered by Turkey's ally President Masoud Barzani of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq, to focus on Syria exclusively and refrain from attacking Turkey – or even from supporting attacks against it by the YPG's parent movement, the PKK (Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê or Kurdistan Workers' Party).

All through the past five years, the YPG and its affiliated political party, the PYD, have fulfilled that promise. To be sure, the Turkish government no longer public acknowledges this fact. But it used to, as recently as late 2015, when Turkey's own peace dialogue with the PKK collapsed. That experience suggests that such an entente between Ankara and the PYD (Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat or Democratic Union Party) could come again.

Indeed, Turkey's long-term goal, supported by the U.S. and other friends, should be to nurture a relationship between those two current enemies resembling Ankara's highly amicable ties with the autonomous Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq. Turkey and the Iraqi Kurds were also outright enemies less than a decade ago. But they went through an historic, and mutually greatly beneficial, transformation to get where they are today: the closest of friends in the region, economically, militarily, and politically. In the long run, that is an achievable goal for Turkey and the Syrian Kurds as well. Even a leading AKP (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi or Justice and Development Party) official, Mehmet Şimşek, has publicly acknowledged that this could eventually become the desired outcome of this currently acute conflict.

The trick will be to further increase the distance between the Syrian Kurds and the PKK, thereby moving toward Turkey's acquiescence, and eventually even alliance, with friendly Kurdish-controlled territory to the south. If this sounds utopian, it isn't. Rather, it parallels what has occurred in the past decade, with quiet but strong U.S. support, along Turkey's border with the KRG. The exceptionally warm ties between Ankara and Erbil, even in the face of new public tensions over the KRG's proposed September 25, 2017 referendum on independence, strongly suggest that this particular "age-old ethnic conflict" need not be an insurmountable obstacle to strategic

expedience. Someday, believe it or not, Turkey may find an autonomous Kurdish region on its Syrian border every bit as amenable to its interests as the one on its Iraqi border.

### ***Turkish Views of the PYD: Keeping Up with New Realities***

True, there are major differences between these two Kurdish cases on Turkey's borders. The PYD, unlike the KDP (Kurdistan Democratic Party) or PUK (Patriotic Union of Kurdistan) ruling parties in Iraqi Kurdistan, shared a history and an ideological affinity with Abdullah Öcalan and the PKK movement he founded inside Turkey, which that country's government labels a terrorist group. Moreover, Öcalan himself was active in Syria from about 1988 to 1998, when he fled only to be captured and imprisoned in Turkey ever since. And the PYD still considers itself an offshoot of the PKK, continuing even now to express sympathy and concern over Öcalan's plight, as it did in its latest congress in Brussels in September 2016.

Complicating the situation, from Turkey's perspective, many Syrian Kurds have long had family and other ties with Kurds across the border to the north. The roughly three million Syrian Kurds, unlike the more numerous Kurds in Iraq or Iran, speak the same Kurmanji dialect of Kurdish as do most of Turkey's 15 million or so ethnically Kurdish citizens. Individual members and fighters from the PYD and the PKK continue to drift between the two. And the PKK leadership holed up in the remote Qandil mountains near the KRG borders with Iran and Turkey continues to have some influence on PYD decisions.

Nevertheless, as the PYD achieved military success, U.S. support, and de facto autonomy for Syrian Kurds – its main constituency – over the past five years, it became more and more distinct from the PKK, forming its own structures and geographically defined self-interests inside Syria, outside Turkey's borders. The PYD now has its own political and military chain of command, distinct from its PKK roots. Their leaderships differ not only in personnel but also in policies.

As Salih Muslim, the PYD's co-president (along with the ideologically obligatory but nominal female counterpart) and other officials have described to the author in convincing detail, local PYD chiefs and councils inside Syria function separately not just from any outside fiat but even from each other. Local PYD rulers may be rough, "but at least they don't chop heads," as Muslim memorably wrote to the author. And even if the Qandil crew continues to exert its influence on PYD operations inside Syria, the actual policies they all pursue there are directed at maintaining and expanding their control in Syria, not at attacking Turkey or helping the PKK do that on the other side the border.

Indeed, the PYD-controlled border zones are ones where guns, drugs, and money are not being smuggled into Turkey. This is not just the author's personal opinion. It is a judgment reflecting the evidence presented by Turkey's own intelligence analysts at a private briefing I attended last year. And it is also the judgment of Amb. James

Jeffrey, former U.S. ambassador to both Turkey and Iraq and Deputy National Security Advisor, as expressed in a presentation to the major pro-AKP SETA foundation this year.

The PYD has kept the deal it made in 2012 to avoid attacking Turkey precisely because that reflects the PYD's new self-interest: protect its own turf inside Syria, rather than carry the Kurdish struggle across the border. This makes the PYD and YPG potential partners with Turkey, rather than threats to it, in securing their common frontier against the PKK, IS, or other adversaries. In the long run, this is "mission very difficult," but not mission impossible. To buttress this unconventional wisdom, it is most useful to take a brief look back at a time, not so long ago, when Ankara apparently agreed with this more optimistic assessment.

### ***Recent Background: Turkey-PYD Rapprochement, 2012-2015***

For the four years until late 2015, the Turkish government recognized, at least in practice, the new set of facts regarding the Kurds in Syria. It welcomed Salih Muslim for talks in Turkey on several occasions, and accepted PYD control over most of the Syrian border zone. As recently as September 2015, Turkey allowed several thousand Iraqi Kurdish Peshmerga fighters to transit its territory enroute to helping the PYD/YPG liberate the Syrian border city of Kobane from ISIS rule. Moreover, at the same time, Ankara did not retaliate against U.S. airstrikes and weapons drops on behalf of the Syrian Democratic Forces, a blend of YPG (80%) and local Arab and other militias (20%), notwithstanding loud and continuing public protests.

By February 2016, even Turkey's initial redline of "no YPG west of the Euphrates" was tacitly modified to allow a "temporary" and successful YPG assault against IS in Manbij, a strategic crossroads town across the river and just thirty miles south of the Turkish border. In August 2016, just a month after the failed coup attempt inside Turkey, Ankara did send its troops into Syria to capture an enclave, the Azaz-Jarabulus corridor, dividing the western PYD canton of Afrin from the eastern ones of Jazeera and Kobane, thus preventing the Kurds from controlling the entire Syrian-Turkish border area. But Turkey did not attack SDF forces en masse, and the two sides have settled into an uneasy standoff inside Syria.

### ***Turkey-PYD modus vivendi, 2016 to date***

At the official level, Turkish-PYD relations broke down exactly as Turkish-PKK talks collapsed in late 2015. As Turkey and the PKK entered into armed conflict after two years of promising peace talks, Ankara and the PYD adopted a hostile tone toward each other, reverting to the rhetoric of "terrorists" and "oppressors." But all is not lost. The two sides have for the most part avoided direct clashes across their common de facto and de jure border, even though small-scale, scattered skirmishes between them inside Syria persist. When the PYD belatedly withdrew some of its forces from Manbij, at U.S. and Turkish behest, Ankara publicly acknowledged that positive turn.

And it announced that it could conceivably work with Arab SDF troops, though not with their Kurdish YPG commanders.

Even more to the point, despite continuing vocal objections, Turkey has stood by as the SDF, meaning mostly the YPG, moved in force—and with substantial U.S. support, including direct deliveries of some heavy weapons—against the ISIS capital of Raqqah in mid-2017. Turkey did not send more troops south to confront this major development it had gravely warned against; Incirlik air base remained wide open for U.S. use; and Erdoğan visited President Trump in Washington on schedule anyway. Even now, as previewed at the top of this essay, Turkish warnings are consistently couched in the conditional language of “we will respond if the YPG attacks us,” rather than in terms of absolute opposition.

Thus Turkey’s actions, as distinct from its words, suggest it actually has internalized that the PYD/YPG are not a threat, at least not now. It realizes that the movement of Syrian Kurdish troops south toward Raqqah is vastly preferable to their movement north toward the Turkish border. And Turkey understands as well, again despite angry verbal outbursts, that it best not jeopardize its fundamental American alliance over this particular Kurdish bone of contention. With these facts in mind, let us now turn from the complex past and the murky present to the medium-term future, always so easy to predict in the Middle East.

### ***Future Prospects and Policy Implications***

Turkey’s medium-term options in this arena are, as argued above, heavily influenced both by realities on the ground in Syria and by American policies in that theater. Viewed from Washington, the main rationale for supporting the PYD, YPG and allied Arab and other militias is security, period. It is not an attempt to drive a wedge between the U.S. and our very important NATO ally Turkey. It is simply a way of fighting effectively against ISIS, while also directing Syrian Kurdish aspirations not against Turkey, but in favor of Kurdish autonomy inside Syria. As such U.S. support for the PYD and YPG, even assuming it continues after Raqqah is liberated and ISIS is defeated, is not a threat but actually an advantage to Turkey’s national security. The Turkish government rejects that view today, at least publicly, but I would argue that it is grudgingly prepared to accept it, at least privately. That assessment is shared by a prominent young Turkish scholar and former parliament member, Aykan Erdemir, who recently asserted in a public Washington, DC forum that:

*“Although it is a major challenge to the Turkish government domestically – that is, they do have to keep posturing, they do have to keep up a strong anti-American rhetoric at home – when it comes to global politics, I think they are willing to live with this decision. I think they also see this as tactical because they themselves know what it means to work with PYD and YPG in a tactical manner.”*

So, at least under the most plausible near-term scenarios, Turkey's U.S. connection is likely to weigh in favor of continued tacit acquiescence in some form of Kurdish *de facto* autonomy, under PYD control, in pockets of Syrian territory along the Turkish border. This of course presupposes that the U.S. will keep the PYD firmly on notice that, in return for U.S. military aid and diplomatic support for an eventual "federal" political solution in Syria, the PYD must continue to refrain from any attacks on Turkish forces and any material support for the PKK. Beyond this immediate calculation, Turkey's behavior will probably reflect two other major variables linked to the Kurds, both inside and outside the country.

First, Turkey would do well to keep in mind that Kurdish political and military interests writ large have diverged geographically, especially in the past five years. Just as Syria's Kurds, along with their parties, movements, militias, and institutions, are increasingly distinct from Turkey's own Kurdish citizens, so too are they even more sharply distinct from their Kurdish cousins in Iraq. Indeed, most Kurds in Turkey, Syria, Iraq, and Iran have chosen to downplay the pan-Kurdish dream in favor of separately seeking their rights inside (or, in the KRG case, perhaps outside) their respective countries. This emerging new reality gives Turkey more room to maneuver on these issues, and in particular to work steadily to separate the PYD from the PKK instead of intermittently lumping them together.

But Kurds are still Kurds, and in particular the closely related Kurds in Syria and in Turkey are probably destined to remain linked at least in some indirect fashion. Inside Turkey, for the time being, both Ankara and the PKK have tragically abandoned their halting rapprochement of 2013-15 and resumed outright low-intensity war. The gap between the two, apparently narrowing just two years ago, now seems almost impossibly wide. Yet it might some day be bridged—if not perhaps with the PKK then with other authentically Kurdish parties or popular movements. Any progress here, in addition to its intrinsic value, would also clearly mitigate Turkish fears and suspicions about the PYD across the border.

That one more reason why the U.S. should advise its Turkish friends privately to resume an internal peace process with the Kurds, and to offer tangible American assistance with that, if desired. This is one case where the cliché of "no military solution" really does apply. And even more so in regard to the Syrian Kurds, Turkey has no good reason to seek such a solution, and every reason to pursue peaceful coexistence across a common and potentially even cooperative border.

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