

Syrian Kurdish Cards

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Upheaval in Syria has given Kurdish groups new opportunities to advance their nationalist agendas while serving as proxies for neighboring states. In Turkey, the Kurdistan Workers' Party or PKK has taken advantage of the rift between the regime of Bashar al-Asad and the Turkish government by turning to the former to help it launch its armed operations. In Iraq, after some delay, Kurdish elites have entered Syrian opposition politics as well, highlighting the ironies and internal tensions of their own position. The Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) is keen to persuade Turkey, its key regional patron, that it can contain the PKK elements based in Iraqi territory and moderate Syrian Kurdish demands, while also assuring its Kurdish brethren that it will support their claims. And in Syria itself, Kurds have created the Kurdish National Council in parallel to the main opposition body, the Syrian National Council (SNC) — a reaction to the possibility that the SNC will morph into a successor regime led by Muslim Brothers under Turkish influence.

Whether or not the Asad regime falls, these cross-border power plays reinforce the increasing regionalization of the Kurdish problem and its destabilizing potential.

Proxies and Patronage Networks

Just as Kurdish groups have been used as proxies by regional states, they also have used those governments to help fight their own battles. The PKK is particularly adept at exporting its radical nationalist, leftist ideology and its war with the Turkish state across borders. For nearly two decades, the group maintained training camps in Lebanon's Bekaa Valley, then under Syrian control, despite ongoing pressure from Ankara and threats of expulsion from then-Syrian President Hafiz al-Asad. [1] The PKK's Syrian support base eventually collapsed: In October 1998, Asad and the Turkish government signed the Adana accords, whereby Syria banned PKK activities and forced PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan out of his Syrian refuge, leading to his eventual capture by Turkey in Nairobi. But the group soon found another makeshift haven in the porous border districts of Iraqi Kurdistan.

Since then, the PKK has had two regional headquarters from which to take direction — one in the Qandil Mountains of northern Iraq, under the leadership of hardliner Murat Karayılan, and one in Öcalan's prison cell on Imralı island in the Sea of Marmara. It also has established networks deep inside Iraqi Kurdistan at the Makhmour camp, which since 1998 has functioned as a self-contained town for nearly 12,000 Kurdish refugees from Turkey, the majority of whom are women and youth. These refugees were first moved into Iraq in 1992, to the Atrush camp in Dohuk governorate. In 1998 the UN High Commission for Refugees gave them refugee status and resettled them to Makhmour, which lies about 60 miles from the KRG's capital of Erbil in a "disputed territory," that

is, an area claimed by both the KRG and the central government in Baghdad. The camp holds municipal elections and maintains educational facilities that teach in the Kurmanji dialect of Kurdish, as well as Turkish and English. The second-generation youth in Makhmour — some 30 percent of the population — are overtly sympathetic to Öcalan.

The Syria crisis has encouraged the PKK to extend its cross-border reach by turning, once again, to the Asad regime for aid. The intermediary is the PKK's affiliate in Syria, the Democratic Union Party (PYD). "It is a historical chance for us," affirmed Salih Muslim Muhammad, leader of the PYD. "We have a right and we are making use of it." [2] Part of the opportunity that the Kurdish groups see comes from the deterioration of Turkish-Syrian relations as the Asad regime cracks down on the Syrian uprising, a development that has reawakened the mutual interest of Damascus and the PKK in using each other against Ankara. The PKK/PYD in particular, but other Syrian Kurds as well, is increasingly concerned about Turkey's growing clout in the region and in Syrian opposition politics. Mindful of Turkey's failure to resolve its own Kurdish problem, they worry that their demands would have little chance of being realized under a new Turkish-influenced government in Syria. This anxiety stems from the belief that the SNC, the presumed heir to power in Damascus if the Asad regime falls, is dominated by Muslim Brothers ideologically friendly to Turkey's Islamist ruling party, the AKP. Syrian Kurds are equally worried about the accession to power of an Arab nationalist opposition, which, they say, would emphasize Sunni Arab nationalism and not Kurdish national interests.

These concerns emanate from the nature of Kurdish nationalism in Syria, which is a byproduct of a secular, Arab Baathist political space that excluded Kurds on an ethnic basis and not necessarily a religious one. Syrian Kurdish demands also reflect the demonstration effect of regional pro-democracy movements and, in particular, the achievement of Kurdish autonomy in Iraq. The bitter legacy of Arab nationalism for Kurds explains why two of their key demands are to "de-ethnicize" the name of the Syrian state, changing it from the Arab Republic of Syria to the Syrian Republic, and to win guarantees of Kurdish self-rule. These demands have persisted past Bashar al-Asad's offer in April 2011 to grant "Syrian Arab" citizenship to hundreds of thousands of Kurds rendered stateless by an earlier regime decree in the 1960s. Some Syrian Kurds even look to the federalism of post-Saddam Iraq as a model for a post-Asad government, despite the very different geographic distributions of the two Kurdish populations. (Iraqi Kurds are about 20 percent of the total population and most of them live in one part of the country, the north. By contrast, the 2 million Syrian Kurds are about 8 percent of the population and many are dispersed among majority-Arab regions.) Still others who worry Kurdish interests would be subordinated to Arab nationalism or who have assimilated to the Syrian state are unsupportive of regime change.

Syrian Kurdish opposition politics also is part of the big picture of cross-border linkages, intra-Kurdish rivalries and competition over control of Kurdish nationalism. There are significant cultural, linguistic and historical ties between Kurds in Syria and Turkey; the nature of the ties differs, however, across groups and regions. Some affiliations are rooted in the refugee flows between Syria and Turkey after World Wars I and II, as well as mutual annexations of territory, which led to considerable resettlement. Ideological affinities exist as well, consolidating groups across borders on political grounds. Over one third of the PKK, for instance, is comprised of Syrian Kurds. These ties further solidified with the lengthy PKK presence in Syria under the elder Asad, which allowed organizational networks to emerge through Syrian Kurdish parties, even after Öcalan's departure.

Competing for influence in Syrian Kurdistan are Iraqi Kurdish parties, whose cross-border patronage networks also run deep. Both Masoud Barzani's Democratic Party of Kurdistan (KDP) and Jalal Talabani's Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), founded in Damascus in 1975, have maintained individual representations in Damascus and the Kurdish border town of Qamishli for over three decades. The KDP and PUK also help to bankroll their Syrian Kurdish party affiliates, the Kurdistan

Democratic Party of Syria and the Progressive Democratic Party of Kurdistan-Syria, respectively. These political ties overlap with tribal and geographic affiliations, particularly among KDP cadres in Iraqi Kurdistan's Badinan region, the Syrian Kurdish Jazira area and the Hakkari district in Turkey, all largely under Barzani family influence.

Iraqi Kurdish party-cum-family patronage networks have grown stronger since 2005, when the KRG's budget and associated revenue accruing to the KDP and PUK expanded exponentially as part of the rollout of the federal Iraqi state. [3] (From 2005-2009 the KDP and PUK each received about \$35 million per month as part of their party budgets from the Iraqi Kurdistan Parliament. [4]) Cross-border revenue flows have fattened the salaries of party cadres in Syria, with the monthly pay of some reaching approximately \$7,000, [5] and paid for operational needs, all without objection from the Asad government and its security apparatus. This tacit understanding between the KRG and Damascus kept the Iraqi Kurdish parties from getting involved in the Syrian opposition movement — initially.

Kurdish Nationalism or Kurdish Interests?

The KRG's position on the Syrian crisis changed, however, with the sharpening world criticism of the Asad regime's repression and emergent challenges to its own political and economic interests. Although Iraqi Kurdish elites had the backing of their party cadres in Syria in their non-interventionist stance, they soon realized that the overall Syrian Kurdish opposition was largely comprised of youth and independents who were critical of the establishment parties. To shape the course of Syrian Kurdish nationalism, therefore, it was necessary for KRG leaders to win over the younger generation and non-partisan communities. Supporting regime change and Kurdish nationalist rights in Syria was one way to do so.

Moreover, as the PKK became active in Syria and Syrian Kurds refused to engage with the SNC, Barzani intervened to quell the concerns of his Turkish patron and bolster the KRG-Ankara alliance. Turkey had reason to worry. The PKK had stepped up its militant campaign and Kurds had become more vocal in their demands for democratic autonomy. There was an active PKK sister organization in Iran, and of course the PKK retained its presence in the Qandil Mountains, inside an autonomous Kurdistan region. Ankara hardly needed a third uncontrollable Kurdish nationalist movement mobilizing on its southern border. Similarly, the KRG could not afford to jeopardize its lucrative commercial and political relationship with Turkey and the international recognition linked to it for the sake of cross-border Kurdish nationalisms. Despite its post-Saddam "autonomy," Iraqi Kurdistan remains a highly dependent region. The KRG receives nearly all of its revenue (nearly \$11 billion in 2012) from Baghdad and produces virtually nothing, making it highly solicitous of Turkish and other foreign goods and investors. Approximately 80 percent of Iraqi Kurdistan's food and clothing imports, valued at \$6-9 billion in 2010, are from Turkey. More than 60 percent of the firms in the Kurdish north, commanding assets worth more than \$620 million, are Turkish. [6] These realities prompted Barzani to try to please Ankara: In February, he convened a conference in Erbil, bringing all the political forces among the Syrian Kurds together, except the PKK/PYD, to establish a unified front that would support the SNC.

KRG efforts have proven effective in moderating some Syrian Kurdish nationalist groups — largely those under Barzani's influence — and may have temporarily pacified the SNC and its Turkish benefactor. SNC leaders have promised to incorporate protections of Kurdish prerogatives into their agenda and the Kurdish National Council has moved closer to the SNC. Still, the alliance is fragile, at best. Most Kurds remain skeptical of the post-Asad governments they envision, fearing that they may further compromise minority rights.

Nor does an interim pact resolve the growing challenges and potential consequences of competing cross-border Kurdish nationalisms. These concerns are salient for the KRG. On the one hand, Barzani must avow to his Kurdish brethren across borders that he supports their rights while remaining committed to the KRG policy of not engaging in warfare against the PKK. Yet, as the PKK becomes increasingly assertive in Syria and Iran, the KRG will find itself in the uncomfortable position of having to quell PKK influence not only in its own domain, but also in neighboring states where Kurdish nationalist interests and those of Turkey are juxtaposed. The pursuit of regional stability is imperative for investment and public relations purposes as the KRG promotes its region as the “other Iraq” and aims to expand its budding energy sector.

The Syrian crisis poses another possible risk for the KRG. Even if Iraqi Kurdish elites can bring the Kurdish National Council into the SNC and check PKK influence in Syria, they are not enthusiastic about the prospect of regime change in Damascus. Like their Syrian Kurdish brethren, many Iraqi Kurds are leery of a Syrian government swayed by the Muslim Brothers and anxious about the spillover of political Islam into their region. These concerns are predominant among independent secular groups and establishment party activists, especially KDP cadres. (Goran, the new party that mobilizes secular discontent with the KDP and PUK, tends to welcome any regime change in the Middle East as a boost for opposition politics.) Barzani and the KDP maintain relatively positive relations with several moderate Islamist party leaders in both Iraqi Kurdistan and Ankara, but they are facing a rising challenge from Islamists at the grassroots.

Over the winter months, there have been serious tensions between the KDP and the Kurdistan Islamic Union in Dohuk governorate, one of the three northern provinces that make up the KRG’s territory. On December 2, 2011, locals in the town of Zakho near the Turkish border burned down several hotels and liquor stores, as well as a massage parlor, all of which were owned by Christians or members of the Yezidi religious minority. KDP cadres responded by massing in the streets and attacking Union offices in four towns, including Erbil. The KDP asserts that Union mullahs incited the mobs in Zakho, while the Union and others retort that one mullah accused of preaching against the establishments, Ismail Osman Sindi, is a KDP loyalist. The incident follows the torching of Union offices in Dohuk by the KDP in 2005, which led to several Islamist deaths. Then, the Union accepted KRG apologies. Today, it refuses to join the KRG government of Prime Minister Netchervan Barzani and remains in opposition, alongside Goran.

The KDP is loath to see the Union acquire strategic depth, particularly as all parties prepare for provincial council elections in September. A post-Asad government run by Muslim Brothers or Arab nationalists also could undermine Iraqi Kurdish interests by lending succor to Sunni Arab groups in Iraq, particularly in the disputed territories of the Ninawa governorate (anchored by the city of Mosul), where key Kurdish oil concessions and mixed populations are located.

In fact, though over 95 percent of Iraqi Kurds are Sunni Muslim, Kurdish nationalism in Iraq remains a largely secular ideology. While coopting moderate Islamists into their government, Iraqi Kurdish elites have made a concerted effort, particularly since September 11, 2001, to redefine the roots of Kurdish identity as Zoroastrian and even Yezidi as a means of differentiating themselves from Sunni Arabs in Iraq. The KRG has also pressed forward with its program to Latinize (“modernize,” in KRG parlance) the Kurdish language. These efforts have had mixed results. While youth have become accustomed to the changes, they continue to be educated in Arabic script. Many Muslims also remain devoted to Arabic script for its utility in reading the Qur’an.

Implications for Regional Stability

The Syrian crisis and its ancillary intra-Kurdish power struggles underline the potential “PKK-ization” of the Kurdish opposition in Syria, assuming that the Asad regime survives, at least for a while. As long as Damascus tolerates the PKK presence and the Kurdish problem in Turkey is unresolved, then the PKK is likely to remain in Syria. Similarly, the Asad regime will continue to use the PKK as a card in its contest with Turkey and as a means of guarding the territorial integrity of Syria. PKK backing, in this scenario, would help the regime reassert its writ across the country. At the same time, if the PKK scores significant gains in its struggle with Turkey, the result could be a PKK problem that permeates the Kurdish zones of four states.

Cross-border Kurdish mobilizations also have implications for a pending regime change in Syria that are messier than competing sectarian interests. The reluctance of most Syrian Kurds to support the SNC confounds the expectation of some Middle Eastern states (and some analysts as well) that regional political forces will line up along a Sunni-Shi'i axis. Though they are predominantly Sunni, the Kurds of Syria will not reflexively embrace the SNC simply because it is a Sunni-identified coalition battling a regime allied with Shi'i Iran. In Turkey, it is true, Kurdish communities have rallied around the AKP and have become some of Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's biggest supporters. Yet Kurdish nationalism in Turkey emerged as an urban leftist movement, and remains largely secular and ethnically defined.

Kurdish historical trajectories demand a more nuanced approach to the Syrian Kurdish opposition and the particular tribal, nationalist and economic interests affiliated with them. Recognizing Kurdish rights in a post-Asad state would certainly be a step in the right direction, and the SNC seems to be taking it. But such an alliance would dissipate, and even degenerate into violence, if the SNC or another successor government did not implement its promises to the Kurds during the transition phase. Turkey's inability to resolve its Kurdish problem, the AKP's recurrent pledges notwithstanding, is a case in point.

Likewise, Kurdish ethno-nationalism should not be seen as the sole or even overwhelming determinant of the stances that individual Kurdish actors will take. Despite the opportunity to plump for a “greater Kurdistan,” KRG elites in Iraq are not about to sacrifice their own region's legitimacy, autonomy or economic gains out of solidarity with their Kurdish brethren in other states. Since the 1990s, the KRG and its precursor authorities have maintained agreements with Ankara and Tehran by which the neighbor states keep the borders open and the Iraqi Kurds manage the Kurdish dissidents from Turkey and Iran based on their soil. The KRG will likely strike a similar bargain with a post-Asad regime in Syria, should one emerge.

The problem with this strategy, however, is the ever more evident gap between what Iraqi Kurds have attained since 2005 and what other Kurdish groups have not. As Iraqi Kurdistan grows in wealth and power, Iraqi Kurdish elites will have a difficult time trying to convince other Kurdish nationalist communities to moderate their demands. In fact, just as Ankara expects the KRG to quiet the pitch of cross-border Kurdish nationalisms, so the Kurds of Syria (and elsewhere) expect the KRG to lobby on their behalf.

This balancing act comes at a time when the Iraqi Kurds need to resolve their own tensions with Baghdad, which escalated in 2011 due to fundamentally divergent views of the nature of power in the Iraqi state. As the KRG consolidates its relationship with Ankara, enhances its image as a regional broker, seeks to annex disputed territories and inks its own oil exploration deals, it may overstep and miscalculate the need for compromise with Baghdad. At the same time, Turkey may continue to build its entente with the Iraqi Kurds to promote economic development, but it is highly

unlikely to support an independent Kurdish state. Misperception of Kurdish leverage and the territorial aggrandizement linked to it could lead to renewed conflict and imperil the political and economic gains the KRG has made thus far.

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CORRECTION: Due to an editorial error, the original version of this article identified the location of PKK training camps as "Syria's Bekaa Valley." The Bekaa Valley is in Lebanon. We regret the error.

P.S.

* From Merip. Published March 20, 2012:

<http://merip.org/mero/mero032012>

* Author's Note: The views expressed are my own and do not reflect the official policy or position of the National Defense University, the Department of Defense or the US government.

Footnotes

[1] Aliza Marcus, *Blood and Belief: The Kurdish Fight for Independence* (New York: New York University Press, 2007), p. 55.

[2] KurdWatch, November 8, 2011.

[3] Interviews with Goran representative and Syrian Kurdish opposition representatives (independent), London, January 24 and 31, 2012.

[4] A list of expenditures is found in this document [Kurdish]:
<http://sbeiy.com/UserFiles/File/2009-1-1/2009%20SAMTAR/listtt.pdf>.

[5] Interview with Iraqi Kurdish party representative, London, January 27, 2012.

[6] Khaled Al-Sharikh, "Erasing the Frontier: Turkey's Trade and Investment in Iraqi Kurdistan," NIMEP Insights 6 (2011), p. 1.