



ISSUE BRIEF

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The Kurdish Question and US-Turkish Relations in a Changing Middle East

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Growing disorder throughout the Middle East has created the possibility for major changes to the status of Kurdish minorities in Iraq, Syria, and Turkey. Turkey's handling of its Kurdish population and its relations with Kurdish groups throughout the region are creating new challenges for US foreign policy and US-Turkish relations. US policy toward the Kurds remains subordinate to wider regional security interests. Officially, the United States does not support the establishment of an independent Kurdish state. In practice, however, US policy is often inconsistent: the United States backs Kurdish groups in some states while opposing them in others.

The Kurds, whose historic homeland is today divided among Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Turkey, are one of the world's most numerous stateless people. Though no exact count exists, the region's roughly 36 million Kurds make up slightly less than 10 percent of the population in Iran and Syria, and between 15-20 percent of the population in Iraq and Turkey. Turkey's 14 million or so Kurdish citizens are concentrated in the east and southeast of the country, adjacent to the Kurdish regions of Syria and Iraq. Following unsuccessful attempts to create a Kurdish state after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, the new Turkish Republic subjected its Kurdish inhabitants to a campaign of assimilation and resettlement. The intensity of this campaign waxed and waned over the subsequent nine decades, becoming more intense following Turkey's 1980 military coup and the outbreak of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) rebellion in the mid-1980s.

The Kurdish issue has normally been a secondary issue in US-Turkish relations. Washington has long backed Ankara's campaign against the PKK. Yet recognizing that the ongoing struggle for Kurdish rights impedes Turkey's full democratization and exacerbates regional insecurity, it also supports

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reconciliation between Ankara and its Kurdish population. Washington remains cautious not to press too hard on an issue of great sensitivity to Turkey, especially given Turkey's importance to US strategy in addressing the challenges posed by the ongoing unrest in the Arab world.

Despite significant cooperation, notably in the first months of the Arab Awakening, US and Turkish priorities vis-à-vis the Kurds in both Iraq and Syria are increasingly diverging. There are tensions over Ankara's attempts to cultivate closer ties with the Iraqi Kurds—who are locked in a dispute with the central government over the control of the region's oil—to bolster Turkey's energy security. Washington fears that Irbil's ability to sell oil independently of Baghdad could undermine Iraqi unity. In Syria, Turkish support for Sunni Islamist groups at the forefront of the military campaign to overthrow the government of Bashar al-Assad is a source of tension with the United States, which remains caught between its desire to be rid of Assad and its fear of what follows. This is reflected in Washington's and Ankara's approaches to the Syrian Kurds, with Turkish-supported Islamist fighters battling the largely secular Kurdish nationalists favored by Washington.

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Background: The Kurds in US Foreign Policy

US engagement on the Kurdish issue goes back to the end of the World War I, when President Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points called for granting autonomy to the non-Turkish peoples of the Ottoman Empire. Although the 1920 Treaty of Sevres provided for a Kurdish state, the consolidation of the Turkish Republic, which rejected the Treaty of Sevres, coupled with the League of Nations' decision to assign the Kurdish-majority Mosul vilayet to Britain's new Iraqi mandate, ended that prospect. American attention then subsided until the early Cold War, when Kurdish ambitions emerged as a useful tool for keeping pro-Soviet governments in Iraq off balance. Working with allies Israel and Iran, the United States provided significant military and financial support for Kurdish rebels in Iraq, especially the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP) of Mustafa Barzani during the 1950s and 1960s.

This backing ceased following the signing of the 1975 Algiers Accord between Iraq's de facto ruler Saddam Hussein (then formally vice chairman of the Iraqi Revolutionary Command Council) and Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi of Iran, which settled a territorial dispute in Tehran's favor in exchange for an end to Iran's support for Kurdish rebels in Iraq. With the signing of the accord, the Ford administration eschewed support for an independent Kurdish state, a position the United States maintains to this day. Washington tilted toward Baghdad during the Iran-Iraq war of the 1980s and stood aside as Saddam massacred Iraq's Kurdish population. Although the United States encouraged a Kurdish revolt to help topple Saddam at the end of the 1991 Gulf War, it failed to intervene when Iraqi forces crushed the uprising.

The strategic alliance with Turkey led Washington to stay out of disputes between Ankara and the Kurds of Turkey. When the PKK uprising broke out in Turkey in the 1980s, the United States remained largely silent as Ankara cracked down on Kurdish groups inside Turkey and Turkish troops crossed into northern Iraq to attack PKK forces and pro-PKK villages (sometimes with weapons supplied by the United States). Washington did not designate the PKK a foreign terrorist organization, however, until 1997. The Clinton administration later provided intelligence and diplomatic support that facilitated Turkey's capture of PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan in 1999.

Washington became more supportive of the aspirations the Iraqi Kurds as tensions with Ankara mounted over the 2003 US invasion of Iraq. With Turkey choosing to sit out the war and preventing US forces from using Turkish territory to establish a northern front, the George W. Bush administration

turned to the Iraqi Kurds as partners in its campaign against Saddam, allowing them to seize control of much of northern Iraq. Turkey was concerned that the new Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG, now headed by Mustafa Barzani's son Masoud) could threaten Iraqi unity, and serve both as a rallying point for Kurdish irredentism inside Turkey and a safe haven for PKK militants. Washington, however, prevented Ankara from deploying troops to northern Iraq and US forces even arrested eleven Turkish commandos who were apparently planning to carry out acts of sabotage against the KRG.

Despite these tensions, Washington continued to back Turkey's campaign against the PKK, which maintained bases in northern Iraq with the KRG's tacit approval. Under growing pressure from Ankara as cross-border PKK attacks intensified, the United States agreed in 2007 to provide actionable intelligence to support Turkish military strikes against PKK positions in northern Iraq. In 2011 the United States announced plans to provide advanced military equipment to Turkey for use against PKK camps in northern Iraq, including Cobra helicopters and Predator drones.

However, Turkish officials continued to voice frustration with the level of US assistance they were receiving against PKK militants sheltering in northern Iraq, especially as clashes between Turkish security forces and PKK fighters inside Turkey intensified throughout 2012. Ankara in particular sought US assistance to arrest PKK members entering KRG-controlled northern Iraq from abroad, but the United States balked, fearing that this would increase tension both with the PKK and the KRG leadership in Irbil.

The United States and Turkey's "Kurdish Opening"

While supporting Turkey's offensive against the PKK, Washington has long believed that Ankara should do more to address the grievances of its own Kurdish population. The United States supported efforts by Turkey's ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) government to loosen restrictions on expressions of Kurdish identity within Turkey and to initiate a peace process with the PKK. US officials have spoken in support of the "Kurdish opening" that Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan announced in the summer of 2009. The State Department still considers the PKK a foreign terrorist organization, but US officials have long maintained contacts with Kurdish political groups in Turkey, including the now-defunct Democratic Society Party (DTP) and DTP's successor, the Peace and Democracy Party (BDP). The latter currently holds twenty-nine seats in the Turkish

parliament (and opened an office in Washington in May 2010). US officials use these interactions to communicate that the PKK should embrace Ankara's offer of negotiations, while reiterating the need for it to disarm and participate in the political process.

Erdoğan's now-stalled efforts to implement a new constitution moved reconciliation with the Kurds to the top of Ankara's agenda, since Kurdish support appears necessary for a draft constitution to pass parliament for submission to a referendum. Nonetheless, the Turkish parliament's Constitution Reconciliation Commission has failed to reach consensus over key issues, while the Kurds have rejected Erdoğan's proposed reforms as inadequate. The Syrian civil war also contributed to Ankara's sense of urgency, given the Assad regime's longstanding ties with the PKK and potential use of the Kurds as a proxy force to deter Turkish intervention. Efforts at reconciliation received a boost in late 2012 when talks between Öcalan and Turkish officials led to the release of a roadmap for peace between Turkey and the PKK. The roadmap contained provisions for a ceasefire, followed by the withdrawal of PKK fighters from Turkey into northern Iraq in exchange for reforms designed to secure political, economic, and social rights for Kurds in Turkey. With the completion of these reforms, including the recognition of Kurdish identity in the Turkish constitution, the PKK would permanently disarm.

The reforms announced by the Turkish government in the fall of 2013 fell short of what many Kurds were expecting. Ankara offered to permit the use of Kurdish in private secondary schools, abolish a nationalist-tinted oath for students, and allow towns in the Kurdish regions to use their Kurdish names. The BDP and many other Kurds argue that the reforms are insufficient because they do not dismantle antiterrorist courts that have been used to jail thousands of Kurds without due process or offer amnesty to those jailed for PKK connections. Many Kurds are also unhappy that the language reform does not apply to state schools, or lower the 10 percent threshold for parties to enter parliament. Moreover, Turkey's political crisis, beginning with the July 2013 Gezi Park protests and escalating with the confrontation between Erdoğan and the followers of exiled cleric Fethullah Gülen has sapped the political will to push through concessions to the Kurds.

While some Kurdish interlocutors have pressed for the United States to act as a mediator, US officials emphasize they have no intention of participating in the negotiations between Ankara and either the Kurdish groups or the PKK. Washington recognizes

Turkey's sensitivities about foreign intervention in its domestic politics. While the Obama administration saw Turkey as its primary partner for coping with the wave of changes sweeping over the Middle East, Washington was especially careful to avoid any steps that might ruffle Turkish sensibilities.

Regional Dynamics: Iraq

Washington's embrace of the KRG in the years after 2003 was always tactical, but Ankara's ties with Irbil have become increasingly strategic. Notwithstanding its backing of the KRG as a bulwark against sectarian strife in Iraq, since the withdrawal of US forces in 2009, Washington has been more concerned about the potential for the KRG to serve as a "Kurdish Piedmont," threatening the territorial integrity of both Iraq and its neighbors. Turkey meanwhile has increasingly embraced the KRG both for its potential contribution to Turkish energy security and to help manage tensions with the Kurds in both Syria and Turkey itself.

As US forces withdrew from Iraq in 2009, they worked with both Ankara and the KRG to prevent PKK incursions into Turkey. Today, Washington strongly opposes the KRG's efforts to sign contracts with foreign—including US—energy companies over the head of the government in Baghdad. Exxon Mobil and Chevron Texaco have already signed oil exploration deals directly with Irbil. Washington's most immediate fear is that the revenue from oil sales would create an economic basis for northern Iraq to break away, leaving behind a weak, majority Shia rump state in the south that would become an Iranian satellite.

By contrast, Ankara and Irbil are seeking to build extensive ties. In part, this reflects Turkey's deteriorating relations with the government of Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri Al-Maliki. More broadly, Turkey's courtship of the KRG aims to secure new sources of oil, allowing it to reduce its dependence on imports from Iran and Russia, and to ensure security along the Turkish-Iraqi border. The United States is uneasy about Turkey's rapprochement with the KRG, which it fears could weaken Maliki and threaten the unity of the Iraqi state. US officials have expressed concerns about a recently completed oil pipeline from northern Iraq to Turkey, expected to feed up to 300,000 barrels a day into the Turkish pipeline system for sales on global markets. This pipeline could eventually free the KRG from its financial dependence on Baghdad, making Iraqi Kurdistan a viable state.

Regional Dynamics: Syria

The outbreak of civil war in Syria forced the United States and Turkey to take a clearer stance on Syrian

Kurdish aspirations. Both Ankara and Washington were initially reluctant to engage the Syrian Kurds, largely because of concerns about the main Kurdish force, the PKK-affiliated Democratic Union Party (PYD). Turkey attempted to build ties with the PYD to support its anti-Assad strategy, while working to ensure that the PYD's growth did not threaten Syria's territorial integrity. However, these efforts bore little fruit, and the PYD refused to join the anti-Assad coalition while relations with Ankara deteriorated.

In July 2012, the PYD seized control of several Kurdish cities and towns in northern Syria after forces loyal to Assad withdrew to concentrate their forces closer to Damascus and Aleppo. The nearly bloodless takeover sparked suspicions of collaboration with the Syrian regime, especially given mounting tension between the PYD and the mostly Arab Syrian rebels, who have refused in principle the Kurds' demands for federalism or Kurdish autonomy in Syria. Alarmed by the PYD's seizure of control in the north, Ankara closed border crossings to Syria and sought to isolate the PYD. Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu described the PYD's actions as "terrorist activity" and warned that Turkey would not tolerate threats to its security. Prime Minister Erdoğan also threatened to intervene militarily to clear out PYD/PKK forces from northern Syria.

Washington is reluctant to engage the PYD, in part because of its experiences in Iraq, where it increasingly views the KRG less as an ally against hostile forces and more as a threat to Iraq's cohesion. US officials warned the PYD against attempts to declare autonomy in northern Syria. The PYD is also implicated in brutality against opposition groups in northern Syria, including a bloody crackdown on Kurdish anti-Assad protesters in the city of Amuda in July 2013 that Washington publicly condemned. Nevertheless, the United States has come to see the PYD as a secular bulwark against the Islamist groups (including some that have received Turkish backing) increasingly dominating the anti-Assad opposition in Syria.

The United States and Turkey have sought, with little success, to bolster the multiparty Kurdish National Council (KNC) as an alternative to the PYD in Syria, while persuading it to join the united opposition to Assad. Some of the KNC's member parties have longstanding ties to Barzani's Iraq-based Kurdistan Democratic Party. Turkey thus sees the KRG-linked KNC as preferable to the PYD, which was formed by disciples of Öcalan in Syrian exile and maintains close ties to the PKK. Despite the best efforts of both Erdoğan and Barzani, the PYD remains largely in control of Syrian Kurdistan (or Rojava), and has the

loyalty of the vast majority of armed Kurdish militias in Syria. Not only is the PYD the most effective actor in northern Syria, the KNC is beginning to voice calls for autonomy in a united Syria as well.

The PYD's military triumph against forces from the al-Qaeda-linked Al-Nusra Front in the strategic town of Ras Al-Ain in July 2013 shifted Turkish and US views of the group. Shortly after the battle, Davutoğlu made a point of stating that Turkey is not against the rights of any ethnic group in Syria, including the Kurds. PYD leader Salih Muslim was then invited to Turkey for high-level meetings later that month. In return for assurance the PYD would not seek autonomy for northern Syria or threaten Turkey's security, Ankara agreed to the formation of a transitional administration in northern Syria that would include representatives of all political, ethnic, and religious groups within Kurdish territories, and promised to start providing humanitarian aid to Kurds in Syria.

Turkey eventually backed away from its engagement with the PYD, partially as a result of the US-Russian agreement on removing Syria's chemical weapons. This deal took the prospect of US military intervention in Syria off the table, seemingly bolstering Assad's hold on power, and thereby reducing chances that the PYD could be brought over to the anti-Assad camp. The aid deliveries promised during Salih Muslim's visit to Turkey failed to materialize. The PYD loudly criticized Turkey for sealing its border with northern Syria, effectively preventing humanitarian assistance from Kurdish groups in Turkey reaching the Syrian side. The PYD also resents alleged Turkish support of radical Islamist fighters, who are increasingly turning their guns on the PYD's militia in the north. Turkey's cooling toward the PYD is also related to the stalling of talks between Ankara and the PKK, since a PYD-controlled zone in northern Syria could provide refuge and political backing for the PKK in the event Ankara's Kurdish opening fails.

In November 2013, the PYD declared it would move ahead with plans to proclaim Syrian Kurdistan independent, a move condemned by both Ankara and Barzani's KRG. In an attempt to reduce the disagreements within the Syrian Kurdish groups in the run-up to the January 2014 Geneva II Conference, talks were initiated in Irbil between representatives of the PYD and KNC, who agreed to attend the Geneva II conference under a united banner. Both Ankara and Washington have sought to keep the Kurdish issue off the agenda at Geneva, however, and the Syrian Kurds were not invited to Geneva as a separate group. The KNC was represented only as part of Syrian opposition delegation, while the PYD was not directly represented.

Washington's reluctance to engage on the Kurdish issue in Syria is largely due to the Obama administration's focus on ending the Syrian conflict. If, as is likely, Geneva-II fails to produce a lasting settlement, the United States may have reason to pay more attention to the conflict's Kurdish dimension. As Salih Muslim argued in an August interview, the United States and the PYD face a common foe in al-Qaeda affiliated jihadists in Syria. The more the conflict drags on and the more the PYD looks like an effective bulwark against the spread of radicalization, the more open to engagement the United States is likely to be, Turkish opposition notwithstanding.

Conclusion

Given the sensitivity of the Kurdish issue inside Turkey, it has been difficult for the United States to balance its strategic relations with Turkey with the flexibility necessary to address the specific conditions of Kurds in different countries. Despite tactical differences, the United States and Turkey have broadly similar goals in Iraq. Both want to head off a Baghdad-KRG military conflict at any cost, and regard Iraq's territorial unity as essential for regional stability. Nevertheless, their contrasting approaches to the KRG and Turkey's aspirations to access northern Iraq's oil without going through Maliki are likely to remain a source of tension.

Prospects for greater US-Turkish coordination on the Kurdish issue in Syria are diminishing as the Syrian conflict is increasingly becoming a source of tension between Ankara and Washington. Both agree on the need to maintain Syria's territorial integrity, but little else. The United States has tempered its enthusiasm for rapid political change in Syria, and all but abandoned the idea of direct intervention against Assad. With few allies on the ground in Syria, Washington increasingly sees its interests aligning with those of the secular PYD. Turkey meanwhile has stepped up its support for anti-Assad rebels, including Sunni Islamist groups that many in Washington view as a threat to US interests, while seeking to limit the growth of PYD influence.

Hanging over all these considerations is the fate of Turkey's own Kurdish opening. With the talks between Ankara and the PKK at a standstill and the withdrawal of PKK fighters into Iraq halted in mid-September over delays to the promised constitutional reforms, the possibility that the negotiations will fail cannot be discounted. In early October 2013, the BDP dismissed the proposed reforms released by the Turkish government, and warned of a possible return to violence. At the same time, the outbreak of large-scale protests in Istanbul and other cities during the summer of 2013, along with the growth of infighting between the AKP and the followers of Gülen leave a now

weakened Erdoğan with less room for maneuver on the Kurdish issue. With local elections approaching in March 2014, a presidential election scheduled for August 2014, and parliamentary elections set for June 2015, Erdoğan is wary of alienating nationalist constituencies.

While the PKK has said it will maintain its ceasefire for the time being, the failure of the peace process in Turkey could pave the way for renewed instability. The longer Ankara stalls, the greater the chances for a renewal of the PKK's armed struggle, which could easily fuse with the ongoing Kurdish uprisings in Iraq and Syria.

The failure to make progress in improving the status of Turkey's own Kurdish population would be a disaster for the country itself and sap Turkey's ability to influence Kurdish movements throughout the region. Given Washington's efforts to work with Ankara since the start of the Arab Awakening, the United States too would find itself less capable of managing Kurdish aspirations while ensuring the territorial integrity of both Syria and Iraq.

The challenge for both Turkey and the United States lies in maintaining coordination as the regional context rapidly evolves, and in balancing approaches to the Kurdish issue with the wide range of other issues in the multifaceted US-Turkish partnership.

Recommendations

- Washington continues to maintain an uncoordinated approach to Kurdish issues in Iraq, Syria, and Turkey, even as the Arab Awakening is creating an increasingly regional dimension to the campaign for Kurdish self-determination. US opposition to the emergence of a Kurdish state—with all the chaos that would entail—will remain, but Washington should supplement its separate policies with a more holistic approach. That could entail appointing a special representative for Kurdish issues and developing a direct relationship with the Syrian PYD.
- Ankara too would benefit from pursuing a more consistent approach. Turkey's policy of isolating the PYD and condemning it for links with the PKK is unsustainable at a time when Ankara is pursuing peace talks with Öcalan at home. It also curtails Turkey's ability to influence events in northern Syria, where the PYD is increasingly becoming a force to be reckoned with. Ankara should therefore resume the tentative overtures to the PYD it made in the summer of 2013. Turkey should also be open to contacts between its US ally and the Syrian PYD,

which could help restrain the PYD's ambitions and help prevent Syria's fragmentation.

- Turkey should seek to engage the Iraqi government in its energy negotiations with KRG, and take a more active role in encouraging reconciliation between Baghdad and Irbil. While US leverage is limited by the participation of US companies in energy deals with the KRG, Washington should nevertheless step up the pressure on Baghdad to reach an accommodation with the KRG, including on revenue sharing from oil and gas.
- Washington also needs to encourage Ankara to get its own Kurdish opening back on track. A resumption of violence between the Turkish state and the PKK would be disastrous for Turkey, the region, and US interests. Washington should encourage Ankara to accelerate its promised reforms and make clear that it expects the PKK (and all other Kurdish groups) to maintain their ceasefire and avoid a return to violence.

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