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Turkey must find peaceful solution to Kurdish problem

By MANISH RAI

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The recent Turkish air strikes on Kurdish positions in north-eastern Syria killed at least 28 members of the YPG (People's Protection Units), the armed wing of the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD), and wounded 18 others.

Since then there have been regular clashes between the YPG and Turkish forces in several areas in northern Syria. The operations against the YPG were not coordinated with the US-led coalition, to which the Turkish military gave only 52 minutes' notice to get its forces out of harm's way.

Turkey's unilateral move provoked deep anger among Pentagon officials and prompted the US military to increase its deployment in an unprecedented show of solidarity with the YPG. In a bid to deter Turkey from carrying out further attacks against its Syrian Kurdish ally, the US also deployed special forces along the Turkey-Syrian border.

Turkey could be putting its ties with the United States at risk by targeting the Syrian YPG, which it considers a terrorist organization because of its links to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), a group that has been waging a bloody insurgency inside Turkey since the mid-1980s. But the Turkish authorities need to seriously consider whether the YPG is a real threat to the country or if it is merely portrayed as such by ultraconservative nationalist Turks.

The PYD/YPG's alleged closeness to the PKK is not the only reason Turkey has been attacking its forces inside Syrian territory. Its shadowy relations with the Syrian regime, Russia and the United States mean that the PYD is perceived as a "pawn" by the Turkish state.

Turkey is ignoring the fact that the YPG's aggressive operations against Islamic State have earned it the respect of the international community and galvanized its relationship with the United States. This will make Turkey's strategy to weaken the YPG very costly unless the US changes its stance on the insurgent group.

Turkey must understand that the United States relies on the Kurdish YPG to fight against IS in Syria. This wasn't America's first choice. Its preferred partner was the Free Syrian Army (FSA), a coalition of Arab forces that Turkey also supported. However, the FSA was ineffective, riven by infighting, and at times elements within it were allied with extremists. Turkey, meanwhile, was reluctant to deploy ground forces. The United States finally turned to the Kurds only when it had no other options.

Ilham Ahmed, co-president of the PYD, wrote in an op-ed for the *Washington Post*: "Turkey claims that the YPG is the same as the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), which is currently fighting the government inside Turkey. This claim is based on the fact that we share a founder and many intellectual values with the PKK, but this is equally true of the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), a legal political party in Turkey with 58 members in the Turkish parliament. They are no more PKK than we are, and any attempt to equate us with the PKK is disingenuous."

The YPG was formed by the PYD and not the PKK. The PYD has ex-PKK members, but so does the peshmerga and other groups. In Rojava there are individual PKK fighters who come to fight IS, just like there are foreign fighters from elsewhere. Unlike foreign fighters who join the YPG, PKK fighters often remain separate from the YPG. It should also be noted that there are restrictions on what PKK fighters can do in Rojava.

The YPG and PKK are truly separate. The PKK and the PYD/YPG are ideologically distinct, although there are some similarities. Moreover, the recent rise in violence inside Turkey perpetrated by Kurdish insurgents is a direct result of the failure of the Turkey-PKK peace process, which started in 2013 and broke down during the summer of 2015.

Turkey must examine the Kurdish problem at a grassroots level to find a way to resolve the conflict. It needs to engage with the PKK through peace talks and stop attacking Syrian Kurdish militias that do not pose a direct threat to it.

Ankara's only long-term solution is to achieve peace with the Kurds. After all, they aren't going anywhere. The good news for Turkey is that the Kurds are the easiest people in the entire Middle East to make friends with. The Americans have managed to do so almost effortlessly. So have the Israelis.

The PKK may be intransigent, but if reasonable Kurdish grievances were addressed, including Turkey's hostility toward besieged Kurds in Syria, then support for the PKK in Turkey would likely evaporate.

