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New Arab-Kurdish front could strengthen Assad

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Clashes between Kurdish militias and armed Syrian opposition groups in Aleppo starting at the end of October in Ras al-Ayn near the Turkish border have raised the specter of a possible Arab-Kurdish civil war in Syria. An Arab-Kurdish civil war would weaken the efforts of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and non-FSA affiliated groups to take over strategic areas in northern Syria such as oil-rich Hasakah province and Aleppo.

Any fighting between the Syrian armed opposition and Kurdish militias trying to establish their authority in Kurdish-dominated areas could strengthen the resolve of the government led by Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. Moreover, the fighting could indicate that Turkey is facilitating the entry of Syrian armed rebels into Syria to prevent the influence of Kurdish groups affiliated to the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK).

Even as Syrian insurgents fighting in the streets of Damascus call for President Bashar al-Assad to flee the country while he still can, there is the possibility that a new front may open in the struggle for Syria as Kurdish nationalists increasingly come into conflict with Islamist militias fighting the Assad regime.

Serious clashes erupted on November 19 between Islamist groups and fighters of the Syrian Kurdish Partiya Yekitiya Demokrat (PYD - Democratic Union Party) in the border town of Ras al-Ayn (Kurdish: Serekaniye), killing at least 18 combatants. This is the second time serious fighting has erupted between Islamist groups fighting Assad and combatants of the PYD, which is affiliated to the larger Partiya Karkeren Kurdistan (PKK - Kurdistan Workers Party) but

publically denies such ties for fear they could lead to placement of the PYD on international terrorist lists.

While Turkey is worried about the increasing influence of the PYD, the PKK is concerned by Turkish support to the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and claims that Turkey is hatching plans to destroy PYD influence in Syria.

The Syrian Kurds are a non-Arab minority that comprise up to 10% of the population and are spread over three Kurdish-dominated enclaves in the provinces of Aleppo and Hasakah. [1] These areas are close to the Turkish border, and since 2011 the PYD has managed to extend its control over large parts of these enclaves through its Yekineyen Parastina Gel (YPG - People's Defense Units) to the despair of Turkey.

The recent clashes came after Massoud Barzani, the president of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, failed in his efforts to prevent PYD influence from spreading in Syria. Barzani supported an agreement in July between Syria's Kurdish National Council (KNC) - a weak coalition of more than 11 political parties and youth groups supported by Barzani - and the PYD in order to prevent a Kurdish civil war.

For Barzani, Kurdish infighting, or Kurdish fights with the Syrian armed opposition could destabilize security in the Kurdistan region of Iraq, and he has warned against this publically. These tensions indicate that a new battlefield near the Turkish border could be opened between anti-Assad Islamist fighters and combatants associated with the PKK, slowing down rebel progress against Damascus and Aleppo.

PYD-FSA war in Aleppo

The FSA and Arab Islamist groups are perceived to be close to the interests of the Turkish state by the PYD, while the FSA and other armed groups have accused the PYD of working with the Assad government. The PYD claims to be neutral and has made unofficial deals with both Syrian rebels and the government to take control of more Kurdish areas. As a result, there have been minor clashes with both security forces of the regime and Syrian rebels.

Major clashes erupted for the first time on October 26 in the Kurdish al-Ashrafiya neighborhood of Aleppo, where dozens were killed and hundreds kidnapped by both sides. Clashes also occurred in Aleppo and near the Syrian towns of Efrin and Azzaz, between the PYD and the 1,200 strong non-FSA affiliated Northern Storm Brigade, which controls the vital crossing from Aleppo province into Turkey. The PKK based in the Qandil Mountains near the Iraqi-Turkish border also threatened to support its PYD affiliate.

Despite media reports that the clashes could lead to sectarian conflict between Kurds and Arabs, the PYD blamed other rival Kurdish groups of being involved in the incident with the support of Turkey. The YPG stated that, of the 19 FSA combatants killed in the clashes, seven were Kurds affiliated to Mustafa Cummaa's Freedom Party, which has been the most critical of the PKK. Deputy FSA commander Malik al-Kurdi claimed the conflict was caused by Kurdish groups pushing the FSA to fight with the PYD.

The increasing success of the FSA and other armed Islamist groups has led to the movement's spread to Kurdish-dominated areas in northern Syria. Thus clashes broke out after Syrian Islamist groups entered PYD-controlled districts, breaking the alleged cold truce between the two groups that said the FSA or other armed Islamist groups would not enter PYD-controlled areas. The PYD was not willing to help the FSA to fight Assad, but was also disinclined to fight the FSA unless the Syrian insurgents entered PYD-controlled areas.

Both the FSA and the YPG realized that fighting between them could benefit the Assad regime (Today's Zaman, October 31). "We and the Free Syrian Army are one side, we are not on opposite sides," PYD-official Sinem Muhammad told Jamestown [2].

The two sides therefore engaged in negotiations over the control of checkpoints and the handover of detainees. On November 1, the FSA announced that it had reached an agreement with the PYD stating that both sides aimed to topple the Assad-regime and would hand over detainees. The PYD's foreign representative Alan Semo told Jamestown that the initial agreement was only meant to stop further fighting while other demands were still negotiated. [3]

One of the primary demands impeding the progress of negotiations was the fate of YPG Commander Nujin Deriki (aka Shaha Ali Abdo), who was captured on October 26. On November 2, the YPG claimed that she had been tortured to death, which led to demonstrations and further tensions. The FSA subsequently announced she was still alive and was supposed to be released.

It seemed that the Syrian regime tried to prevent the FSA and PYD from reaching agreement by shelling the Kurdish districts of Aleppo on November 4, killing three people. On November 10, the FSA released the YPG commander, leading to diminished tensions between the groups in Aleppo.

The new conflict in Hasakah

Just as tensions between the PYD and the FSA were dying down, the Islamist Ghuraba'a al-Sham (Strangers of Greater Syria) Brigade and al-Nusra Front entered the Kurdish city of Ras al-Ayn on November 9 from the Turkish town of Ceylanpinar and the nearby village of Tel Halaf. The area is populated by Kurds and Arabs, leading to fears among Syrian Kurds that the war would spread to Hasaka province.

Initially, those fears proved unfounded as this did not lead to fighting between the Islamists and the Kurdish YPG units, with the YPG retreating to Kurdish districts of the town and the FSA controlling Arab parts of Ras al-Ayn. However, it did lead to accusations from PYD-affiliated media, such as the Kurdish news agency Firat News, that Turkey was behind the entry of armed groups into Ras al-Ayn, trying to involve Kurds in the civil war. A PYD-affiliated group claimed in a statement that they would not allow armed groups into Kurdish districts.

On November 11, the Ras al-Ayn area was bombed by fighter jets, artillery and helicopters,

leading to the death of dozens of civilians and insurgents. The bombing lasted for three days, with most inhabitants fleeing the city for Turkey or the Kurdish-controlled town of Derbisiyye.

After the Islamists moved into Ras al-Ayn, the YPG forced remaining Syrian government security elements from Derik (al-Malikiyah), Amude, Derbisiye and Tel Amir, fearing the arrival of Syrian insurgents and the spread of fighting. The YPG indicated it did not want to give "the regime [or] the FSA any excuse to come here. We don't need anyone to protect us".

Turkey amassed its troops near the border and condemned the Syrian military operations that led to the death of civilians in Ras al-Ayn. Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu stated that the Syrian air bombardment of Turkish border towns was a clear threat to Turkey, adding that Turkey would shoot down Syrian fighter jets if they cross the border.

The PYD's foreign representative, Alan Semo, told Jamestown that the PYD is worried that under the Adana Agreement, Turkey could characterize the ensuing refugee crisis as a threat to the "security and stability of Turkey," leading to a legal path for Turkish intervention in Syria. "You might see the FSA on Turkish tanks coming into Kurdistan. This scenario can happen," he said. [4]

Turkey worried about PKK

Reports emerged on November 14 that Turkish tanks were amassing on the border of Ayn al-Arab (Kobani) alongside FSA units. Others have suggested that Western diplomats fear Turkey is supporting the FSA to prevent an autonomous Kurdish region in Syria. In reality, Turkey is not against Kurdish autonomy in Syria (or in Iraq) since it has good relations with the Syrian Kurdish nationalist parties of the Kurdish National Congress, but it does oppose the increasing influence of the PYD and the PKK in Syria.

The United States fully supports the Turkish position of opposing any PKK presence in Syria. US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton expressed her support at a joint news conference in Istanbul with her Turkish counterpart Ahmet Davutoglu, saying, "We share Turkey's determination that Syria must not become a haven for PKK terrorists whether now or after the departure of the Assad regime."

The clashes that erupted between the armed Islamist groups and the PYD on November 19 further raised PYD suspicions of Turkish involvement. The fact that wounded Islamist fighters were transported to Turkish hospitals showed a certain degree of Turkish support. A temporary truce was made on November 19 to hand over wounded and dead bodies. But on November 20, fighting resumed again between the Islamist groups receiving reinforcements from the Turkish border and the PYD receiving reinforcements from other Kurdish cities in Syria. The fighting stopped after a ceasefire agreement between the two sides on November 23.

Kurdish political parties have argued that the armed Syrian opposition should fight Assad in Damascus or Aleppo, not in Kurdish areas. It is likely that in the current situation more clashes could erupt due to the fact that armed Syrian Islamist groups expressed their intention to expand

their operations outside of Ras al-Ayn to other Kurdish-dominated cities such as Amude, Qamishli and Derik.

However, according to Abdul Basit Sieda, former head of the Syrian National Council (SNC), it is unlikely that Turkey would use this expansion of the conflict to establish a humanitarian corridor in northern Syria without support from the West: "If Turkey wants to move, they need the international community to accept it." [5]

Turkey could, however, facilitate the supply of reinforcements and weapons for the FSA to attack the PYD. Moreover, it could try to use Western support to decrease PKK influence in Syria and try to pressure the United States or European Union to put the PYD on the terrorist list.

The problem for Turkey is that fighting between the PYD and Syrian rebels could increase PYD support in Kurdish communities and make it more difficult for other Kurdish groups not to support the group against the Arabs, especially as some of those fighting against the PYD are allegedly former Arab settlers who were brought to the area by the Syrian government as part of its "Arab belt" policies.

Conclusion

The PYD already has a traditional support base around the Kurdish areas of Aleppo and is increasing its support. Therefore, Turkish attempts to physically eradicate the PYD could prove to be troublesome and lead to an Arab-Kurdish civil war. It seems that Turkey is focused on preventing the PKK from controlling autonomous Kurdish areas instead of supporting the insurgency in Syria to overthrow the Assad government. Continued fighting between Kurds and Arabs in the Hasakah province could weaken Syrian rebel advances against Assad and strengthen the current weak position of the Assad government.

Notes:

1. Jordi Tejel, "Syria's Kurds: Troubled Past, Uncertain Future," Carnegie Middle East Center, October 16, 2012.
2. Author's interview with Sinem Mohammed, head of the PYD-affiliated People's Council of West-Kurdistan (PCWK).
3. Author's interview with PYD foreign representative Alan Semo, November 11-15, 2012.
4. Foreign Minister Davutoglu There is not even a minute to lose, Ministry of Foreign Affairs.
5. Author's interview with Abdul Basit Sieda, November 19, 2012.