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## Kurds to Fight to Death to Stop Turkey 'invading Their Land'

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The Syrian Kurdish leadership vows to defend their de facto state in north east **Syria** to the end, but is fearful of a growing understanding between the Syrian and Turkish governments in opposition to Kurdish separatism at a time when US support for the Kurds is faltering.

In an exclusive interview with *The Independent*, a senior Syrian Kurdish official says that the Kurds will fight to the death to stop **Turkey** “invading the region” and speaks of possible reconciliation between Damascus and Ankara on the Kurdish question.

The Syrian Kurds, who have been the most effective US ally in the war against Isis in Syria, now see themselves as possible victims of international betrayal. The US support for the Turkish military intervention in Syria on 24 August and demand that the **Syrian Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG)**, who had just captured the strategic town of Manbij from Isis after a hard-fought siege, should pull back east of the Euphrates river, were bitter blows to the Kurds. Without whole-hearted US support, they are vulnerable to attacks by the numerous enemies who encircle them, notably Turkey and possibly, in future, the Syrian government.

Sihanouk Dibo, senior adviser to the Syrian Kurdish leader Salih Muslim in Qamishli, the de facto Syrian Kurdish capital, says in an email interview that he views fighting between the YPG and Syrian government forces in the northeastern provincial capital of Hasakah as a sign that Syria and Turkey are increasingly on the same side when it comes to the Kurds. On 18 August, the Syrian Air Force attacked YPG targets in and around Hasakah for the

first time in five years of war. “What happened in Hasakah is not a mere local conflict, it’s a game by regional powers” says Mr Dibo. “More precisely, the Syrian government and Turkey, though currently hostile to each other, are against [any form of Kurdish separatism including local autonomy]. Recently, Turkey has hinted it may move to normalise relations with [Syrian President Bashar al-] Assad. The Syrian government’s response to Turkey’s suggestion was also a hint to return the relations as they were before 2011 not by statements, but by action, which is shelling Hasakah.”

Mr Dibo says he doubts that Turkey has a coherent plan on how to deal with the Syrian Kurds. He believes that a full-scale invasion of the Kurdish region will fail because of the Kurdish resistance and because Turkey has not thought through what it is doing and “acts haphazardly.”

Foreign observers believe that here the Syrian Kurds may be detecting a co-ordinated conspiracy against themselves which does not really exist. But there is no doubt that in August, the Syrian Kurdish leadership, whose forces have been making spectacular advances on the ground since they won the battle of Kobani against Isis in early 2015 so they control a swathe of northern Syria, were in trouble on several fronts. The fighting in Hasakah came after the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), whose main component is the YPG, captured Manbij, a strategically-placed town in north Aleppo province, on 13 August. Four days earlier, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan had met with Russian President Vladimir Putin and appears to have reconciled him to the prospect of limited Turkish military intervention.

In the event, Russia was surprisingly restrained in its reaction to the Turkish action. It may be that the very success of the Kurdish-US military combination – 50,000 YPG fighters on the ground backed by the massive fire power of the US Air Force – had alienated Russia. Its previous reason for supporting the Syrian Kurds was simply that they were anti-Turkish at a time of extreme Turkish-Russian hostility in the wake of the shooting down of a Russian fighter-bomber by a Turkish jet on 24 November last year. Once Moscow and Ankara were reconciled, the Russians had less need for the Kurds.

The Kurds may have been too successful for their own good. Their victory at Manbij and the advance of YPG-led forces north towards the Isis-held town of Jarabulus on the Syrian-Turkish border and west towards the Kurdish enclave of Afrin were steps too far for several of the multitude of powers now involved in the Syrian conflict. The complex mosaic of shaky alliances, tacit understandings, deep-seated rivalries and age-long hostility began to shift. Mr Dibo says that it is significant that the Syrian armed forces attack on Hasakah “came after liberating Manbij and the reconciliation of Turkey and Russia”.

Complicated though this is, the real story of what happened is even more murky. The Syrian Kurds, the much praised ally of the US and the international community against Isis, did not appreciate – and the Americans probably deliberately did not make clear – that there were limits to US protection against Turkish intervention on the ground. This had been on the cards since the summer of 2015, but had been delayed because of US doubts about the project and then Russian determination to punish Turkey at the first opportunity for shooting down its plane.

The fighting in Hasakah, a Kurdish-Arab city close to the oilfields of north east Syria, started for local reasons. The city is mostly held by the YPG which fought Isis in combination with pro-Syrian government Arab militia and Syrian soldiers, but relations between the two was always fraught. Fighting began between the militia and the Kurdish Asayish police force. The Syrian army supported the militia with heavy weapons and the YPG counter-attacked successfully and surrounded the city. The Syrian Air Force then bombed YPG targets, killing several Kurdish civilians while others fled the city.

For over a year the Syrian Army had been co-operating in Aleppo and elsewhere against Isis and the Syrian armed opposition, but both sides now swiftly emphasised their deep-felt and undying hostility. Mr Dibo says the Kurds simply want a decentralised federal system giving them autonomy while the government is a “traditional dictatorship” that has carried out dozens of massacres. He says the two sides can never be allies, though both are fighting Isis.

The war in Syria has been full of “decisive moments” and “game changing events” which turn out to be of much less significance than had been supposed. The murderous conflict continues unabated. But the Turkish military intervention 10 days ago is changing the relationship between the antagonists in the war, with opposition to the Kurds and the US-Kurdish military alliance playing a greater role.

Shadi Ahmed, an economic and political analyst in Damascus, agrees that the ground rules of the Syrian conflict are shifting. He says: “Turkey has now started to understand that Turkey adopted and supported Isis in order to weaken the Syrian government. But this is now reflecting back on Turkey because a weaker Syria means that the Kurds are stronger.” He argues that “the Kurdish factor” is reducing tension between Russia, Turkey, Iraq and Iran, all of whom believe that whatever Kurdish leaders in any country in the region say about autonomy or federalism, in practice they want an independent state.

Mr Ahmed points out that Turkey and Russia have modified their language towards each other. Turkey has always claimed that the YPG and the rulers of the Kurdish enclave in northern Syria are simply the Syrian branch of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) against which the Turkish state has been waging war since 1984. But it was only recently that Syrian military referred to Kurdish forces as “the PKK”. For their part, Turkish leaders are putting less emphasis on the departure of Mr Assad as a precondition for ending the war. But Mr Ahmed says he is sure that Mr Erdogan will not stop supporting and supplying the armed opposition in Syria, some 80 per cent of whom are under his control and are one of his main political cards in the conflict.

There are now so many international players involved in the multiple crises and confrontations being fought out in Syria that everybody’s room for advance – and even manoeuvre – is constrained. Isis will be hoping that so many countries and parties in the conflict are pursuing their own interests, while pretending to fight the jihadis, that Isis will continue to survive. The Syrian Kurds have little choice but to continue with their US alliance and hope that the Americans do not wholly abandon them – though doubtless with much wringing of hands – to Turkey or any future Syrian government.

Mr Dibo says that, despite the US support for a limited Turkish intervention and a YPG withdrawal east of the Euphrates, the YPG attacks on Isis will not be reduced. As for an attack on the Isis Syrian capital of Raqqa, he says that “liberating Raqqa is a strategic goal for the SDF and its [YPG] allies” who would do their best to take the city, though this would be more difficult following the Turkish intervention.

Mr Dibo did not say so, but the danger for the two million Syrian Kurds is that they are isolated apart from the unsteady and largely military relationship with the US. As for Turkey, it may have made itself an important player in Syria through its military intervention, but it has not solved its basic problem. It has stopped Kurdish expansion westwards, but there is a de facto Kurdish state in northern Syria that will be an inspiration and a sanctuary for the embattled Kurdish minority in Turkey. Given that Turkey has chosen a military solution to its Kurdish question at home, it can only hope to win there by also defeating the Syrian Kurds across the border. The Turks may find that they are like the Americans in Vietnam half a century ago, who intervened in Cambodia only to find that they had spread the war rather than ending it. The political kaleidoscope in Syria changes, but looking through it, the prospect is still for more war.