



Ted Galen Carpenter – August 26, 2013

Kurds Battle Al Qaeda Affiliates

The Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) has had to deal with an array of difficult challenges in recent years. Those challenges include a central government in Baghdad that simultaneously exhibits worrisome authoritarian tendencies and an inability to stem the growing sectarian violence that afflicts much of the country outside the Kurdistan region. The KRG also has had to contend with a flow of refugees fleeing the civil war in neighboring Syria. Many, if not most, of those refugees are inhabitants of largely Kurdish areas in that country.

Now, another worrisome danger has emerged. Groups affiliated with al Qaeda are showing their military muscle both in northern Iraq and as part of the Syrian insurgency seeking to topple the regime of dictator Bashar al Assad. To the surprise of many Western observers, Kurdish forces have become some of the most effective military opponents of the terrorist elements, scoring several significant victories. Unfortunately, both the U.S. and Turkish governments have shown a lack of enthusiasm for the actions taken by the KRG and Kurdish militias next door in Syria. Ankara and Washington suspect that Kurdish leaders seek both to strengthen the KRG's authority at the expense of the Baghdad government and to establish an autonomous Kurdish government in northeastern Syria. That perspective is a short-sighted, unwise response.

Al Qaeda affiliates have launched a number of terrorist attacks in northern Iraq, especially in and around Kirkuk, in the past few months. It is a worrisome trend, and the KRG is taking needed steps to try to prevent the violence from becoming worse and posing a threat to what had previously been gratifying stability and economic progress in the region—in marked contrast to the rest of Iraq.

In Syria, there has now been a showdown between Kurdish militias, primarily those affiliated with the Democratic Union Party (PYD), and such al Qaeda-linked Syrian rebel factions as the al Nusra Front and the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant. Kurdish forces have scored several major victories and now exercise control over much of heavily-Kurdish northeastern Syria.

That development has led to a shrill response from Ankara and uneasiness in Washington. Following a dramatic victory by PYD militias to take control of the town of Ras al-Ayn on the border between Syria and Turkey, Turkish Deputy Prime Minister Bulent Arinc warned that his country would never tolerate the emergence of an autonomous Kurdish region in Syria. Other officials condemned the PYD as "separatist terrorists."

Although less venomous in its response to Kurdish military successes in Syria, the Obama administration

shares the Turkish government's rigid commitment to Syria's territorial integrity. And U.S. leaders were concerned in early August when KRG President Massoud Barzani stated that if reports were confirmed that al Qaeda terrorists were killing Kurdish civilians in Syria, the KRG would "make use of all its capabilities to defend the Kurdish women, children and citizens in western Kurdistan." That was seen as a pretext for carving a de facto Kurdish state out of northeastern Syria and linking it to the KRG. Washington and Ankara are now caught in the awkward position of supporting the anti-Assad Syrian insurgency that contains a troubling amount of al Qaeda allies and other unsavory elements. Yet U.S. and Turkish officials fear that the Kurdish military offensive will weaken insurgent forces and increase the Assad regime's chances of survival. And even if that doesn't happen, they fear that Syria will fragment. In other words, PYD and KRG actions interfere with broader Turkish and U.S. geopolitical objectives.

But Kurdish forces are weakening a dangerous terrorist adversary of the United States and other Western countries. Turkish and American officials should welcome that development, not seek to undermine it. The current policy that Ankara and Washington are pursuing is misguided. If a more enlightened policy requires rethinking their overall geopolitical goals, then it is a step that ought to be taken.

Ted Galen Carpenter, a senior fellow at the Cato Institute, is the author of nine books and more than 500 articles and policy studies on international issues. He is also a member of the editorial board of *Mediterranean Quarterly*.