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Syria's Kurds Take the Offensive

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If the Syrian civil war wasn't already murky and complex enough, the country's Kurdish minority has added a new element of instability in recent weeks. Kurdish militias have launched offensives against Syrian rebel forces operating in the northeast and have scored significant victories. That development sets off alarm bells with both the Obama administration and the government of Turkey. The Kurdish agenda in Syria is increasingly clear: to establish a de facto independent state in northeastern Syria similar to the self-governing Kurdish region in northern Iraq. Since the authority of Bashar al-Assad's regime is now nearly nonexistent in northeastern Syria, the militia victories over Syrian rebel forces brings the realization of that goal tantalizingly close.

Turkish leaders consider such a prospect anathema. Iraq's Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) has long been a thorn in Ankara's side, and Turkish officials see the KRG as being an inspiration to secessionist Kurdish forces inside Turkey. Indeed, the Turkish military has conducted several offensives inside KRG territory in recent years to root out insurgent forces that established sanctuaries there. The last thing that the government of Prime Minister Erdogan wants to see established is an equivalent of the KRG in Syria. Deputy Prime Minister Bulent Arinc stated bluntly that his country supports Syria's territorial integrity and will not tolerate [3] the creation of another autonomous Kurdish entity on Turkey's border. [3]

Indeed, Turkey worries that a Syrian Kurdish region would soon merge with its Iraqi counterpart, creating an even larger and more powerful de facto state. That is not paranoia. Massoud Barzani, president of the KRG, recently issued a statement that his forces would not stand idly by while Syrian Kurds were brutalized. Iraqi Kurdistan, he pledged [4], "will make use of all of its capabilities to defend the Kurdish women, children and citizens in western Kurdistan." Even his use of the term "western Kurdistan" was likely to foment worries in Ankara and other capitals, since it implies the existence of a larger, unified Kurdish entity. [4]

All of this places the United States in a very awkward position. The Obama administration has gradually but inexorably increased its support for the Syrian insurgents trying to topple Assad's regime. However, Washington shares Ankara's goal of keeping Syria intact in a post-Assad era. U.S. officials also fret that the insurgents include some unsavory Islamist elements allied with Al Qaeda, and have, therefore, tried to confine America's financial and military assistance to secular rebel factions.

The Kurdish factor greatly complicates Washington's already difficult calculations. U.S. leaders do not want to encourage the creation of a separatist Kurdish entity in Syria. Yet the Kurdish population next door in Iraq has been the one consistent, pro-U.S. faction in that unhappy country, and the Syrian Kurds also seem to have a pro-Western orientation. Moreover, several of the victories that the Kurdish militias have scored have taken place against [5] the Al Nusra Front and other militant Islamist factions. By opposing Kurdish secessionism in Syria, the U.S. may find itself weakening an ally that is successfully combatting America's own terrorist enemies.

These latest developments underscore the folly of Washington's entanglement in Middle Eastern affairs. No matter what policy the Obama administration adopts, it is bound to antagonize one or more factions involved in the Syrian struggle. If Washington tilts toward the Kurds, it helps fracture Syria, with all the attendant implications for instability in that country and the surrounding region. Such a policy would also alienate Turkey, a NATO ally and a crucial regional power. Washington's relations with that country have been prickly enough in recent years without adding another grievance to the mix.

Conversely, if the Obama administration continues to oppose the Kurdish agenda in Syria, it weakens an effective adversary of Al Qaeda and its affiliates. Such a move would also anger the KRG in Iraq, damaging Washington's relations with the one region in that country that has been stable, pro-American, and generally democratic. As Iraq's central government in Baghdad drifts ever more noticeably toward authoritarian rule, sectarian violence, and a pro-Iranian stance, undermining the KRG might not be the smartest strategy.

Even without the growing prominence of the Kurdish factor and the complications it causes, Washington's policies in Iraq and Syria are a mess. It would be advisable for U.S. leaders to regroup, rethink and adopt a lower profile for the United States in this volatile region. The current approach is clearly bankrupt and may end up antagonizing nearly all parties involved.

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