

# THE NATIONAL INTEREST

## **The Rise of Greater Kurdistan**

By: Ted Galen Carpenter -November 25, 2013

The status of the Kurdish people, the largest ethnic group in the world without a homeland, has been a source of instability in Turkey, Iraq, and Iran for decades. But with the onset of the civil war in Syria, a new theater has surged in prominence regarding that issue. For months, Syrian Kurdish militias have battled other—primarily Islamist—factions within Syria’s rebel movement. They have been surprisingly successful, scoring major military victories in the northeastern part of the country against the Al Nusra Front and the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), both affiliated with Al Qaeda. Given the widespread collapse of the authority that Bashar al-Assad’s government exercised in northeastern Syria, the Kurds have been poised for months to expand greatly their power in that area.

Following the latest victories over Islamist forces in late October and early November, Kurdish leaders in Syria finally took the next step. They announced the creation of an “interim autonomous government” for Syria’s Kurdish region. It was quite clear that this was not a temporary measure. The same announcement confirmed that elections for a long-term government would follow shortly.

That development caused uneasiness in neighboring capitals. While Assad seems to have written-off any attempt to regain control of territory in the northeast—at least until he’s able to suppress the larger, Sunni Arab insurgency seeking to overthrow his government, both Ankara and Baghdad are concerned about what the birth of a new, essentially independent, Kurdish political entity might imply for their countries.

Turkish leaders seem increasingly uncertain about how to deal with the Kurdish issue. Ankara has waged an armed struggle for decades against home-grown secessionists, led by the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK). And Turkish officials were noticeably unhappy when Kurdish forces in Iraq exploited the U.S. decision to impose a no-fly zone over northern Iraq during the 1990s to establish a self-governing region there.

But in the past few years, the government of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan has made more serious efforts to address Turkey’s domestic Kurdish problems through the political process rather than mere brute force. And Ankara’s relationship with the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq has become far more nuanced and complex than before. Indeed, economic ties between Turkey and Iraqi Kurdistan continue to grow at a very brisk pace. Turkish businesses see Kurdistan as a most attractive region for investment, and pipelines between northern Iraq and Turkey are essential outlets for Kurdistan’s oil production. The ingredients for a lucrative, mutually beneficial, commercial relationship are clearly present. But security considerations also may be leading Ankara to adopt a more flexible attitude toward the KRG. With the resurgence of violence elsewhere in Iraq, some Turks now even seem

to view a stable, peaceful region governed by the KRG as a possible buffer between Turkey and a chaotic “rump” Iraq.

At the same time, Turkish leaders are not placid about the emergence of yet another de facto Kurdish political entity on their country’s border. Even before the formal proclamation of an interim autonomous government for Syria’s Kurdish region, officials in Ankara warned that such a step was unacceptable. Turkish deputy prime minister Bulent Arinc emphasized that his country was committed to Syria’s territorial integrity and stated bluntly that his government would not tolerate the creation of an autonomous Kurdish region on Syrian soil. Turkish officials especially fear that before long, such a Syrian entity would merge with its ethnic brethren in Iraq to form a greater Kurdistan, and that development might become an irresistible political magnet for Turkey’s own Kurdish minority.

Ankara’s policy regarding the Kurdish issue now seems ambivalent, even a bit muddled. But at least Turkish officials are trying to address the re-emergence of the Kurdish issue as a major concern in the Middle East. U.S. officials, on the other hand, are acting like deer caught in the headlights. There are few signs of a coherent policy, despite growing evidence that the “Kurdish question” is becoming an ever more prominent and potentially disruptive factor. Washington officially continues to support the regime in Baghdad as the legitimate government of all Iraq, even as that government exercises no meaningful authority over the Kurdish north. The Obama administration professes to share Ankara’s commitment to Syria’s territorial integrity and sovereignty, even as the country fractures and the Kurdish region in the northeast moves rapidly toward de facto independence.

Admittedly, the Kurdish issue poses a thorny diplomatic problem for Washington. The Kurdish population in Iraq is easily the most democratic, procapitalist and pro-Western faction in that troubled country. And although it is too soon to tell for certain, Syria’s Kurds seem to have a similar orientation. But existing countries in the Middle East worry greatly about the implications of spreading Kurdish autonomy, and Washington is reluctant to ignore, much less dismiss, their objections.

U.S. leaders need to ask themselves, however, whether the existing policy of insisting on a united Iraq and a united Syria is now devoid of any connection to realities on the ground. Giving consideration to establishing ties with an independent Kurdistan that extends across the Iraq-Syria border would undoubtedly make the governments of Syria, Iraq and Turkey unhappy. But one of the crucial tests of statesmanship is recognizing when an existing policy has become untenable. U.S. leaders must at least begin to consider whether that time has arrived regarding the Kurdish issue.