



A Difficult Balancing Act:

## BACKING THE KURDS IN THE FIGHT AGAINST IS IN IRAQ AND SYRIA

The Kurdish forces now provide the necessary boots on the ground in the framework of Operation Inherent Resolve. However, the strong backing of the Kurds presents a number of challenges and difficult balancing acts for Western and regional actors.


As Islamic State's rapid annexation of large swathes of Iraq and Syria unfolds, the plight of the region's state-less Kurds is thrust into the international spotlight, as the Kurds steadily gain stature as the primary bulwark against further IS expansion. The Kurdish forces now provide the necessary boots on the ground in the framework of Operation Inherent Resolve. However, the strong backing of the Kurds presents a number of challenges and difficult balancing acts for Western and regional actors.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

- Key actors in the Coalition should utilize the momentum provided by the Duhok Agreement to facilitate rapprochement between the Syrian Kurdish parties – and eventually with the Syrian opposition parties.
- If a power-sharing agreement can be made between the Kurdish parties and the Syrian opposition in Kobanê, this may prove to be a stepping stone for a future national Syrian agreement that specifies the political rights of the Kurds
- Denmark and other European powers should continuously engage in dialogue with Turkey and emphasize the regional need of sustaining a viable peace process with the PKK.



# The active role of Kurdish troops in the fight against IS opens opportunities for further Kurdish independence.



After IS there is a real risk that political rivalries and fighting will break out between the various forces, as long as a new accommodation and overall political accord is not found between the two Kurdish factions PYD and KNC, and the Syrian opposition forces.

## CHALLENGES

### The strong backing of the Kurds may strengthen Kurdish bid for independence

In the aftermath of IS advances in Northern Iraq and the fleeing of Iraqi security forces, Western powers – and Iran to a certain extent – started providing training, arms and aerial support to the Kurdish Peshmerga forces. Through a covert programme the US has allegedly also provided heavy weapons. However, the strong backing of the Kurds sits uncomfortable with the West's declared policy of 'One Iraq'. The international support of the Kurds has buttressed the quest of the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) for an independent Kurdish state and already in July, Barzani asked the Kurdish parliament to prepare for a vote on Kurdish independence. Many fear that such a move will spell the final dissolution of the Iraqi state. Moreover, amidst the chaos and fighting with the IS, Kurdish forces have seized new territory in Iraq notably the disputed and oil-rich city of Kirkuk, which both Baghdad and KRG have laid historical claims to. If the Kurds succeed in holding the new territory, this will make a potential Kurdish state more economically viable; thereby strengthening the Kurdish bid for independence further. Although the political situation for the Kurds in Syria is slightly different, the new-found international support and indirect legitimacy that has been granted to the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) may also pave the way for future Kurdish claims to autonomy in a post-conflict Syria equal to that of KRG in Iraq. Given Syria's sectarian and ethnic make-up, this may make it more difficult to hold Syria together and furnish a political solution within existing territorial boundaries.

### The intermingling of Kurdish factional politics and the national agendas of regional powers

Turkey has strong and well-known reservations about letting support come through to the People's Defence Units (YPG) in Kobanê in Syria due to the close ties between the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and YPG, and the fact that the former remains listed as a terrorist organization also by Western governments. For weeks, Turkey closed the border and prevented humanitarian aid, arms and reinforcements crossing into Kurdish-controlled areas. After intense international pressure and an outcry from the Kurdish community inside Turkey, the Turkish government took up an offer from KRG's President Barzani to allow a small contingent of Peshmerga forces into Kobanê. In contrast to relations with the PYD/YPG in Syria, Turkey has deep economic and political relations with Barzani and the KRG. Some therefore view Turkey's agreement to allow in the Peshmergas as an attempt to challenge – or at least not to boost – the traditional stronghold PYD has in Syria, just as Barzani's offer also should be seen on the backdrop of the internal Kurdish struggle for leadership; Barzani supporting the PYD's rival Kurdish parties in Syria: the Kurdish National Council (KNC). Thus, as in the past, regional powers and governments (Turkey, Iran, Iraq and the Syrian regime) might take advantage of internal friction and in-fighting between the Kurdish groups, and the US and European powers need to carefully consider how regional actors' backing of different Kurdish parties and militias inevitably play into internal Kurdish and regional politics.

### **After IS, then what?**

If the Kurdish forces succeed in taking over the whole of Kobanê from IS, it is not yet clear who would rule the area afterwards or the degree to which the PYD would join forces with the Syrian opposition. Since 2012, where the Syrian regime forces withdrew from the Kurdish areas, there have been allegations that PYD is tactically allied with the Assad regime, whereas the rival factions of the KNC officially became part of the Syrian National Coalition in 2013 and dropped their precondition of the SNC recognizing 'Kurdish political demands.' After IS there is in other words a real risk that political rivalries and fighting will break out between the various forces, as long as a new accommodation and overall political accord is not found between the two Kurdish factions (PYD and KNC) and the Syrian opposition forces.

### **OPPORTUNITIES**

#### **YPG-FSA cooperation**

In September, shortly before Islamic State began its siege on the Syrian Kurdish town of Kobanê, YPG and disparate groups from the Syrian opposition FSA – Free Syrian Army – banded together in a new operative command structure under the name 'Burqan al-Firat'. Little media attention was given to this development, but the formation of a specialized joint task force marks a pivotal shift in YPG-FSA operative relations which were stalemated since 2012 due to power struggles between the two groups in Northern Syria. This presents policy makers with a time-limited window of opportunity. With the U.S. Congress' approval of the Obama administration's proposal to start vetting and training Syrian opposition forces, joint forces like Burqan al-Firat could be feasible ground partners as they represent a broad coalition of stake-holders with high public legitimacy in the anti-IS coalition's area of operations. Adding to this, in the



framework of intelligence gathering and surveillance operations, friendly ground forces are needed to decrease the knowledge gap currently limiting the coalition's aerial campaign in Syria.

### **The Duhok Agreement: A Kurdish alliance in the making?**

The PYD and KDP have long been engaged in a feud over power-sharing. However, faced with a common enemy these disparate groups appear to have found common ground in an alliance of necessities. On 22nd of October of this year, the main Syrian Kurdish party PYD signed a strategic power-sharing agreement with other Kurdish Syrian parties which are close to the KDP. By establishing joint military and political councils, this coordinated move could prove to serve as an efficient bulwark towards further IS expansion in northern parts of Syria and Iraq. Utilizing the political momentum provided by the Duhok Agreement's codification of a fragile alliance, the Syrian Kurdish parties may stand stronger in the uncertain future of the Syrian political scene. If this strategic alliance's policy coordination is fruitful, the Syrian Kurdish parties could consolidate their territorial gains in the Kurdish cantons of Rojava – thereby expanding their sphere of political influence in the region.

### **Turkey and the PKK peace process**

The situation in Kobanê is intrinsically tied to Turkey's Kurdish question, which should prompt both PKK and Ankara to seek pragmatic solutions to end a three-decade-long feud. The cost of an unraveling peace process could prove much higher than the political concessions needed to keep it viable. Adding to this, Washington and Ankara's approaches to the conflict in Syria have revealed an overt dissonance between the two allies' regional strategies. By softening their approach to Washington's de facto ground partners in Syria, the PYD, Ankara could get back on track with its strategic allies in Washington.

**FSA:** Free Syrian Army, the Syrian opposition forces

**KNC:** Kurdistan National Council, Syrian Kurdish confederation of parties headed by the main party: KDP-S.

**KRG:** Kurdistan Regional Government, the official ruling body in Iraq's northern governorates: Duhok, Erbil and Sulaimani.

**Mesûd Barzani:** President of the Kurdistan Regional Government in Iraq and head of the Iraqi Kurdish party KDP which is part of the current coalition government in KRG. KDP's Syrian wing is KDP-S.

**PKK:** Partîya Karkerên Kurdistanê [Kurdistan Workers' Party], Kurdish party in Turkey. Currently in stalemated peace talks with the Turkish government. Designated as a terrorist organisation in Turkey, EU and USA. PKK has close ties to the Syrian Kurdish PYD.

**PYD:** Partîya Yêkîtiya Demokratîk [Democratic Union Party], the main Syrian Kurdish party administering the Kurdish-controlled cantons of Rojava in Northern Syria.

**Rojava:** Kurdish term for „Western Kurdistan“. Official name of PYD's self-declared autonomous region in Northern Syria.

**YPG:** Yêkîneyên Parastina Gel [People's Defense Units], paramilitary wing of the PYD.

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