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## **Syria's Civil War: Kurdish Success, Turkish Dilemma**

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The start of the operation to liberate al-Raqqa, the de facto capital of the Islamic State in Syria, including battles over the city's important supply route through the Manbij region in Syria's northwest, pushes Turkey close to the point at which it will be compelled to make a strategic decision. This area is the last Islamic State-controlled area bordering Turkey, and it is likely that at the end of the day, the Kurds will be left in control. Turkey will have to rethink its moves, and in particular decide how to enforce the red line it drew, namely not allowing a Kurdish conquest of the area between the Euphrates and Azaz (located north of Aleppo). Were that to happen, the Kurds could complete their seizure of most of the Syrian territories on the Turkish-Syrian border, a situation that is unacceptable to Ankara. Turkey's next moves will have a significant impact on the future of the federal region of Rojava-northern Syria, announced unilaterally by the Kurds in March 2016, the future of Syria, and the Kurds living in Turkey.

The success of the Syrian Democratic Forces with its Kurdish majority (especially the YPG, i.e., the People's Protection Units, the armed wing of the Democratic Union Party) and other Sunnis in liberating parts of al-Raqqa's suburbs from the Islamic State and in the battles to liberate the Manbij area are a necessary link in the effort to drive the Islamic State physically out of Syria. In May, while the Syrian Democratic Forces were busy liberating Raqqa's suburbs, the Islamic State chose to advance to the northwest, in the region north of Aleppo on the Turkish border (the Azaz-Marea corridor).<sup>1</sup> In the early days of the attack, the Islamic State managed to defeat the Free Syrian Army (FSA) forces in the region with the help of the nearby Kurdish forces. Turkey, which already in late 2015 reversed its open-door policy and closed the border crossings fearing the entrance of Islamic State activists, did not open the border to refugees. This resulted in some 100,000 displaced people, including families of FSA fighters, to flee to Afrin in Syria's northwest.

The Kurdish forces have won the support of many of the principal actors in the Syrian arena: the United States and the international coalition fighting the Islamic State, Russia,

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<sup>1</sup> <http://bit.ly/1XE2Jit>.

and even to a certain extent the Assad regime, to which the Kurds represent a relatively small problem and even potential allies. The support is manifested in many ways, including weapons supply, intelligence, training, operational advice, air support by the coalition for Kurdish attacks, and the opening of a mission in Moscow, as well as the possibility of coordinating transfers of aid, forces, and food with the Assad regime. Equally important is how the Kurds are perceived: as a winning force that has consistently succeeded in defeating the advance of the Islamic State. The international support for the Kurdish forces in Syria gives them the legitimacy to entrench their control of the entire northern strip from Jazira (in northeast Syria) to Kobani (in north-central Syria). The Kurds hope that in the near future they will also succeed in creating a link to the Kurdish autonomous canton of Afrin. Nonetheless, it does not seem that they have an intention of creating a bridge to the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) in northern Iraq, partly because of internal Kurdish differences and the KRG's extensive dependence on Turkey. For example, in March 2016, the KRG ordered the closing of the Semalka border crossing between the two Kurdish entities, a blockage that created a shortage of food and supplies to the Syrian Kurds, and only on June 7 was the border crossing reopened.

Among the external players, Turkey remains the most significant obstacle to the Kurdish advance in northern Syria, as Ankara fears the creation of a Kurdish autonomous region in Syria's north, not unlike the precedent set in Iraq. Kurdish autonomy in northern Syria would represent a base of operations for the PKK, the Kurdish underground operating inside Turkey; the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) is in effect an extension of the PKK. Furthermore, the growing strength of the Syrian Kurds has boosted the drive and the morale of the Kurds in Turkey, encouraging greater demands in the internal Turkish arena. Moreover, the Kurdish seizure of most of the territories adjacent to the Turkish-Syrian border is likely to reduce Turkey's influence on events in Syria. The supply lines of the rebels and the Islamic State cross the Turkish-Syrian border, giving Turkey an opportunity to pressure these forces. Turkey has also hoped for the establishment of a safe zone under international control in northwest Syria where refugees of the war in Syria could find a haven. The area is also home to some of the Turkmen minority, whom Turkey regards as under their protection.

In practical terms, Turkey's opposition to the Kurdish seizure of the Syrian land along its border is primarily manifested in the pressure it has applied on the United States to stop the Syrian Kurds' westward advance. Militarily, most of Turkey's bombing is aimed at PKK fighters taking refuge in the Qandil Mountains of northern Iraq. Only some of the bombing is aimed at Syrian Kurds.

The Kurdish successes are impressive compared to the weakness demonstrated by various Sunni forces and organizations that since the start of the Syrian civil war have

been supported, trained, and financed by the Gulf states (especially Saudi Arabia and Qatar) and Turkey. It has become clear that these organizations are too weak and divided to confront and repel Islamic State forces on their own at the same time that they are battling the Assad regime. Saudi Arabia and Turkey are hesitant to dispatch ground troops to help the rebel groups they support. By contrast, the Kurds, focused on fighting the Islamic State rather than Assad, are scoring impressive successes and are also managing to build their strength and liberate lands they consider to be part of the federal region of Rojava-northern Syria. The successes of the Kurds and the failures of the Turkish-supported Sunni rebels now compel Turkey to rethink its path.

Unless Turkey stops the Kurds from completing their seizure of most of the Syrian areas adjacent to the Syrian-Turkish border, this area may turn into a buffer zone that could present also several advantages to Turkey. First and foremost, the danger posed by the Islamic State would be distanced from Turkey, though the Islamic State has many sleeper cells within Turkey that could continue to carry out attacks on Turkish soil. Furthermore, the Kurdish areas may be a de facto safe zone for displaced Syrians and could reduce the pressure on Turkey to accept more refugees. Still, Turkey is concerned that such a development would have a positive impact on the Kurds' image in the international arena and on international support for further Kurdish demands, and could also amplify the criticism of Turkey's policy toward its own Kurds. In terms of Syria's future, the entrenchment of the Kurdish entity and the control of all the territories the Kurds view as their own could raise the chances of a federative solution within the state's existing border or its division into independent entities.

