



Security Policy Working Paper, No. 25/2017

The Kurds as Allies of the West in Syria and Iraq Effective Partnership or Political Powder Keg?

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The West, notably the United States, has been supporting Kurdish fighters in Syria and Iraq since 2014. The benefit of Kurdish militia in the fight against the so-called Islamic State (ISIL) is obvious: They are performing the dangerous role of ground troops. However, the Kurds in Iraq and Syria are not a homogeneous actor, but are individual groups that have different ideologies and contrary objectives. At the same time, the United States' support for Syrian Kurdish militia directly affects the relationship with NATO ally Turkey. The Kurds in northern Iraq are, by contrast, largely allies of Ankara. They are in danger of being torn apart by internal conflict and of being drawn into a war with the Iraqi government. The long-term problems resulting for the West are regional destabilisation and dispute within NATO. How effective is the cooperation between the West and the Kurds in relation to the risk it involves?

The Iraqi Peshmerga: Allies of the United States and Turkey, but internally divided

The so-called autonomous region of Kurdistan in northern Iraq has its own parliament in Erbil and, with the Peshmerga, theoretically its own armed forces. It is difficult to say how strong the Peshmerga Force actually is; estimates range from 80,000 to 250,000 women and men. It consists of 36 brigades that are commanded separately. They are either under the control of one of the two large parties, the KDP (*Kurdistan Democratic Party*) and the PUK (*Patriotic Union of Kurdistan*), or the *Peshmerga Ministry* of the regional government. There is little coordination between them, as the parties' relationship is marked by tensions. On 25 September 2017, the autonomous region of Iraqi Kurdistan under Masoud Barzani, its then president, held an independence referendum – despite the ban issued by the Supreme Court of Iraq – aimed at achieving the complete separation of the autonomous region of Kurdistan from the state of Iraq. According to the electoral commission, more than 90 percent of the voters voted for a declaration of independence. However, reports by voters suggest that there were irregularities, such as multiple copies of ballot papers being cast. In addition, a large share of the voters within the PUK rejected the referendum on principle.

Both the KDP and the PUK are allies of the West in the fight against the terror organisation ISIL in Iraq. The United States has been supplying arms and equipment and providing military instructors to the Peshmerga in northern Iraq since 2014. Knowledge of a direct involvement of US special forces in anti-ISIL operations of the Peshmerga was first gained with the death of Master Sergeant Joshua Wheeler at the end of October 2015 during an operation in northern Iraq. On 31 August 2014, the German Government decided to follow the example set by the United States and provide Iraq not only food, medical material and blankets, but also military equipment. Initially, Kurdish forces were trained in Germany, with the focus on the MILAN anti-tank missile system, a weapon in high demand. On the basis of the Bundestag mandate issued in January 2015, this was soon followed by German soldiers being dispatched to Erbil on a training mission, which is ongoing to this

day. The current mandate, issued on 12 December 2017, is valid until 30 April 2018 and still includes a personnel ceiling of 150 troops. This German military support is meant to solely boost the fight against ISIL and not least the protection provided for the Yazidi minority. However, politicians critical of the support feel that their fears have been confirmed: Kurdish media have already published videos showing combat between Peshmerga units and Yazidi fighters in Khanasor in which Peshmerga seemed to be using German weapons. Furthermore, research conducted by the German public TV station ARD confirms that there have been at least individual cases of weapons supplied by the Bundeswehr being offered on the Iraqi black market.

Tension is also looming within the autonomous region of Kurdistan in northern Iraq. In 2013 for example, President Barzani, who has since stepped down, and the KDP made the regional parliament extend Barzani's time in office for another two years despite this being against the Kurdish regional constitution. The second initiative to extend his presidency led to a scandal in 2015. The opposition *Gorran party* predominantly voted against an extension of the president's time in office. Barzani reacted by removing political opponents from their government posts and other public offices. It is not clear whether Barzani's resignation on 1 November 2017 defused the situation. A regional parliament study on the situation regarding the Peshmerga also indicates division. In it, there is talk of around 70,000 Peshmerga, who are to a greater or lesser extent under the control of Masoud Barzani, the KDP or the PUK. The parties are constantly vying with each other for supremacy in the Kirkuk area, and this rivalry can only have negative consequences for the coordination of the forces.

The latest tensions between the Iraqi central government and the autonomous region of Kurdistan pose a new dilemma for the West. The Iraqi army is also receiving support from the West, in the form of know-how and arms supplies. The KDP and the Iraqi government disagree on the claim laid by the Kurds to the territories conquered in the fight against ISIL. The conquest of Kirkuk by the Iraqi army in mid-October 2017, a city previously controlled by the Peshmerga, seems to have raised tensions between the Iraqi government and the Kurds to a new high. However, another division is opening up among the Kurds here, too: While the Peshmerga in support of the PUK are withdrawing without a fight, the KDP is trying to mobilise its fighters to halt the Iraqi troops marching in. This is inevitably giving rise to the fear that German arms could now also be used against the Iraqi army. As a reaction to these new developments, the Bundeswehr suspended its Peshmerga training mission in northern Iraq in mid-October. The German contingent recommenced training only a week later, however, after the situation in the region had temporarily stabilised.

The Syrian YPG/YPJ: Allies of the United States, Adversaries of Turkey

The United States' alliance with the Syrian Kurdish YPG militia and its female YPJ units also poses severe problems – above all because experts consider these 50,000 or so fighters an offshoot of the PKK. The PKK is listed as a terror organisation not only by the Turkish government, but also by the United States and the entire EU. The fact that the PKK has again been active in south-eastern Turkey since the summer of 2015 and is regularly skirmishing with the Turkish military and security forces is rendering the situation even more explosive. The Turkish government fears that if the YPG/YPJ gain power, this will result in a further strengthening of the PKK cells in its country. The PKK hopes to realise its vision of a Kurdish order in Syria in the wake of the "Arab Spring" – an objective it has unsuccessfully fought for on Turkish territory for three decades. Ever since its formation, the parent party of the YPG/YPJ, which operates under the logogram PYD, and is a Syrian counterpart to the PKK, has tried to establish a democratic order without full statehood. Such a Kurdish proto-state would pose a direct threat to the security and unity of the Turkish state. In early 2016, an assembly of Kurdish, Turkmen, Assyrian and Arab delegates in fact proclaimed the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria – also known as Rojava – in which the PYD wields power. As early as June 2014, Human Rights Watch noted massive violations of human rights by the PYD. The report lists acts such as unfair court proceedings, disproportionate prison sentences, and the training and employment of child soldiers.

Since the Turkish military offensive in August 2016, there has repeatedly been fighting between Turkish forces and the YPG/YPJ. The German Government already rejected demands for the armament of Syrian rebel groups in September 2014. The German Foreign Office justified the decision with the ideological proximity of the Syrian Kurds to the PKK and the attendant risk of weapons being passed on without authorisation. Then Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier stressed in this context that up to 100 opposition groups were operating in the Syrian civil war and that the situation was therefore much more complex than in Iraq. In contrast, the United States has supported the opposition groups classified as “moderate” in the fight against ISIL since 2014 by providing them both equipment and boots on the ground. In early May 2017, US President Donald Trump authorised arms supplies to the YPG, for which he reaped harsh criticism from Ankara.

Turkey has regularly been bombing YPG/YPJ targets in Syria and PKK positions in northern Iraq, claiming that it intends to prevent arms supplies getting through to the PKK. The situation is particularly delicate due to the fact that the United States has been increasingly integrating special forces and armoured vehicles into YPG combat units. According to a US Armed Forces’ spokesperson, this is to be seen as a deliberate measure to reassure the anti-ISIL coalition members and partner forces, to prevent aggression arising between them and to ensure that they focus on the shared goal. The Turkish government, which warned the United States against taking such measures before it did so, is now threatening to cut its cooperation in the fight against ISIL. Ankara is additionally threatening with consequences if the Trump administration does not immediately refrain from providing military support to the Syrian Kurds. The Pentagon’s only comment on this was that it knows Turkey’s concerns and wants to avoid additional risks arising for the NATO ally. Furthermore, it points out the Kurdish-led militias were instrumental in conquering the ISIL stronghold of Raqqa in October 2017.

In January 2018, the US announced to implement a 30,000 strong border force, consisting primarily of Kurdish fighters, to which Turkey reacted by engaging a military operation in Afrin, titled “Operation Olive Branch”. Afrin is one of three districts founded in 2014 by the PYD and other groups in northern Syria. Ankara claims that the operation aims to prevent further stabilisation of the Kurdish sphere of influence at the Syrian-Kurdish border in order to detain an increasing threat against Turkey. It has been reported that fighters with the insignia of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) are engaging in the Turkish operation. The FSA used to be an opposition group mainly made up of defectors of the Syrian army to overthrow the Assad regime. Today it has become a rather loose collective term which also includes Islamist groups operating under its name. On January 26, the Kurdish administration in northern Syria requested military support from the Syrian government. The Assad regime complied on February 20 and moved Iranian-backed combat units to the areas surrounding Afrin. The current situation is threatening to erupt into open warfare between Turkey and Syria and its supporters, including Iran and Russia. By continuing to support the YPG/YPJ, the US would inevitably side indirectly with the Assad regime and oppose its NATO ally Turkey. It is clear that Ankara will not be deterred by the US presence in northern Syria, a stance substantiated by Erdogan’s statement to attack the city of Manbij, where American troops are stationed, after seizing Afrin.

Iraqi Kurds versus Syrian Kurds

The Iraqi Kurds under the KDP and the Syrian Kurds under the PYD – both of whom are receiving military support from the United States – are not only divided by language, but most of all by ideological barriers. This results in them pursuing contrary objectives and having different concepts of a single Kurdistan. Although the KDP is trying to unite the Kurdish factions and to thus extend its sphere of influence towards Syria, almost all the power on the Syrian side lies with the PKK and its Syrian sister party, the PYD, as it has the majority of seats in the Kurdish National Council. In 2017, members of a Syrian KDP offshoot were arrested and imprisoned in Syrian Kurdish territory. After initial conflicts, the PUK, the Iraqi Kurdish opposition party, again maintains close connections with the PKK.

As a result, the PKK can chiefly maintain its base in the Qandil Mountains of northern Iraq because it is located in PUK-controlled territory. In the meantime, the PKK also gained a foothold on Iraqi territory outside the Qandil Mountains. The conflict between the two Kurdish factions escalated in August 2015 when PKK fighters evacuated Kurdish Yazidis from the Sinja Mountains. As this area is under Peshmerga influence, the KDP in turn ordered the Peshmerga to besiege the Yazidi settlements.

Conclusions

The Western alliance with the Kurds in Iraq and Syria appears to be effective. The short-term goal – the military defeat of ISIL – is reported to have almost been achieved. But what will happen after that? What are the long-term goals of the Western partnership with the Kurdish militias? Will the partnership still be fruitful for both sides after victory over ISIL? What long-term consequences will the Western – and German – arms supplies have for the region? Some of the answers to these questions are already becoming apparent. US support for the Syrian YPG/YPJ is having far-reaching negative effects on the relationship with Turkey and hence on NATO. Turkey's suspicion of the US alliance with the Syrian Kurds is absolutely understandable, as the YPG/YPJ verifiably maintains connections with the PKK, which carries out terrorist attacks on Turkish territory. Furthermore, support for militias that maintain relations with an organisation that is listed as a terrorist association in the United States and the EU is not only symbolically questionable. It is also doubtful whether the long-term goals of the Kurdish factions are still worthy of support from the West's point of view and will be conducive for stability in the region. Ankara's concern that arms supplied by the West might get into the hands of the PKK cells operating in Turkey via the YPG/YPJ and will be used against Turkish targets is justified. The same applies to the German Government's fear that the Peshmerga might use German weapons against the Iraqi army units marching into the Kurdish territories.

There is no denying that the Kurds – both the Iraqi and the Syrian factions – are effective partners in the short term, and with an eye to the military defeat of ISIL. In the long term, however, the West's support for them might lead to serious political problems, as observations already indicate. For the defeat of ISIL will not resolve numerous other political, religious and ethnic tensions and conflicts in the region – as the recent Iraqi military offensive against Kurdish Peshmerga in northern Iraq as well as the current Turkish intervention in Afrin have shown. It would take the partial disarmament of the factions that have been supplied by the West to counteract them. This could be ensured by economic considerations – to put it simply: financial and economic concessions in return for surrendered weapons. It is obvious that this would not lead to full demilitarisation. After ISIL, the Iraqi and Syrian Kurds are already being confronted with new conflicts. Fighting has already broken out with some other Islamist groups and Iraqi government forces and in the case of Syria with Turkish forces and their allies. To ensure that action can be taken to prevent or at least curb the likelihood of an inner-Kurdish and Iraqi-Kurdish “civil war” or – with regard to the Syrian Kurds – a Turkish-Kurdish war, it is essential that the West continues to act as a mediator. An escalation of these Kurdish conflicts would also have direct consequences for the West. In the current situation, in which both the Trump administration and the Erdogan government are increasingly distancing themselves from their commitments in NATO, the potential for tensions extends well beyond the Syrian civil war. It is therefore high-time this political powder keg is kept from detonating.

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