

CEFTUS Special Briefing, Kurdish Affairs, March 2019

Having defeated the Islamic State in Syria, the Kurdish-led administration faces an emergent humanitarian crisis amid uncertainty over its future. Pro-Kurdish voters have proven crucial to the opposition's gains in local elections in Turkey, whose military has continued its campaign against Kurdish militants beyond its borders, including cooperating with Iran for the first time. In Iraq, political deadlock continues in the Kurdish region amid growing mistrust between the dominant parties.

Syria

Kurdish-led forces face humanitarian challenges following territorial defeat of Islamic State

Kurdish-led forces have declared victory over the Islamic State (ISIS) after clearing the jihadi group's remaining territory in south-east Syria. Following the resumption of operations on March 1, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) captured ISIS' final encampment at the edge of Baghuz Fawqani on March 19, confining the jihadi group's remaining fighters and their families to a small area on the banks of the Euphrates River and caves within nearby cliffs. The riverbank was secured on March 22, allowing the SDF to announce the official end of their campaign against ISIS on March 23. A small but significant ISIS contingent is, however, still believed to be sheltering within the complex cave system, resulting in intermittent clashes and ongoing airstrikes by the US-led coalition.

As in previous weeks, SDF advances were slowed by a higher than anticipated number of non-combatants in the area, leading to a pause in the assault between March 3 and March 10 to facilitate evacuations. According to SDF sources, 66,000 people have fled Baghuz Fawqani and the surrounding area since the final stage of operations began on January 9. Of these, the SDF believes 29,000 are ISIS fighters and their families. The remaining 37,000 are thought to be civilians, including a high number of Iraqi Sunnis who recently crossed the border fearing reprisal attacks from Shia militias arriving in the area to block ISIS' retreat.

With the region's infrastructure largely destroyed by the conflict, the scale of this newly dependent population risks a growing humanitarian disaster that SDF authorities have limited capacity to deal with. The crisis is centred on the al-Hawl refugee camp in north-east Syria. Originally designed for 20,000, the camp now contains more than 73,000 displaced people, 85 per cent of which have relocated from around Baghuz Fawqani since January, with more than half arriving within the last six weeks.

International agencies have begun providing emergency aid in al-Hawl but can only provide a temporary solution. The camp's inhabitants are overwhelmingly women and children, but many are believed to retain sympathy with ISIS. This includes a significant proportion of foreign citizens whose future remains unclear amid a reluctance by their national

governments to repatriate them. The notable exception is Iraq, which has begun to take back significant numbers of former ISIS fighters, many of whom now face trial and execution.

Looking forward: Al-Hawl presents an acute example of the challenges facing the SDF following ISIS' defeat. With limited resources of its own, the SDF is now responsible for a dependent but potentially hostile population in areas that lie beyond its initial sphere of influence. Without sustained international support to rebuild infrastructure and provide basic services, growing local grievances risk fuelling an emergent ISIS insurgency (see below).

Growing pressure on Kurdish-led military coalition amid incoherent US policy

The territorial defeat of the Islamic State (ISIS) comes as the future of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) remains uncertain. Backed by a US-led international coalition, the SDF's three-and-a-half-year campaign against ISIS has seen the Kurdish-led group take control of around one-third of Syria, including much of the Iraqi and Turkish borders and the largest oil and gas reserves in the country's south-east. However, the Washington has refused to commit to long-term support for the SDF, with President Trump declaring in December 2018 that ISIS had been defeated in Syria and that US troops would therefore begin to withdraw.

Although the SDF has proved a coherent and reliable ground force, the group's battlefield success has relied heavily on international air-support. Without US air-cover in particular, the SDF is also vulnerable to attack by Turkey, which regards the SDF's key component, the People's Protection Units (YPG), as an extension of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK).

Under pressure from the US military and congress, as well as international allies, the US has since indicated it will retain a small deployment of around 200 troops to guarantee a buffer zone between Turkey and SDF areas. However, the plan developed by US Special Representative for Syria Engagement James Jeffrey continues to face issues over which forces would control the buffer-zone.

Turkey continues to insist that its military should be present in the zone, a prospect rejected by the SDF. The SDF has instead pushing for an international force, mostly likely consisting of France and the UK, but has been unable to secure the support of London and Paris, which regard the deployment as unviable without a greater US commitment.

Uncertainty over the role of the US appears to be having a corrosive impact on the coalition that comprises the SDF, with Arabic elements less wedded to the ideological underpinnings of the project becoming increasingly open to reconciliation with the Assad regime. This trend is likely to be compounded by ISIS' return to insurgency-based tactics that it has previously used to successfully exacerbate discontent among Sunni Arabic populations by destabilising local administrations.

ISIS is believed to have a significant number of sleeper cells in areas now controlled by the SDF and has already begun a campaign of assassination attempts targeting local officials (see CEFTUS Special Briefing, Kurdish Affairs, February 2019). On March 26, seven SDF fighters in the predominantly Arabic region of Manbij were killed in an ambush claimed by

ISIS, part of what is likely to become an on-going strategy to demoralise the SDF's Arabic components.

Looking forward: The predominantly-Kurdish YPG has sought integrate Arabic groups at all levels of the SDF's new civilian administrations, but these steps remain shallow. Without the prospect of US-backing providing guarantees for the future, many of the YPG's Arabic allies, which joined with the SDF primarily for pragmatic reasons, will increasingly look to the Assad regime. Such a drift adds to the pressure on the YPG to conclude its own deal with Damascus, although a continued relationship with the US remains the favoured outcome.

Turkey

Main opposition makes gains in key cities amid support from pro-Kurdish voters

The Turkish ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) has suffered a significant set-back in the March 31 local elections amid a demonstration of unprecedented unity by the country's opposition, with pro-Kurdish voters having a decisive impact in several key races.

Under an informal agreement, the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) did not field candidates in 49 out of Turkey's 81 cities in order to not split the vote with the 'Nation Coalition' of the main opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) and the Good Party (IP), both of which come from a Turkish nationalist tradition.

The HDP's decision appears to have helped facilitate the CHP's victory in Istanbul, where CHP candidate Ekrem Imamoglu surpassed AKP candidate and former Prime Minister Binali Yildirim by fewer than 30,000 votes. Similar results were replicated in several other big cities outside the Kurdish region such as Ankara, Adana and Mersin, where the HDP accounts for as much as 5-11 per cent of the vote.

However, the success of the HDP's strategy in western cities was not replicated across the Kurdish region, where the party suffered set-back amid continued political repression. Over the past three years, hundreds of HDP mayors have been removed from office on terror-based charges and replaced by government appointed officials. Although the party succeeded in winning back the majority of these districts, it lost its previous strongholds of Sirnak, Agri, and Bitlis to the AKP.

The defeats are likely attributable to a tripartite of factors. Firstly, clashes between the Turkish army and the outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) after the breakdown of the peace process in 2015 has resulted in major displacement of the local population and an influx of security forces more likely to vote for the AKP. Secondly, an ongoing clampdown against HDP activities and a heavy police presence in polling stations is likely to have pressed the party's vote in several areas. Finally, the government's strategy of 'starving' Kurdish-led municipalities of funding and then replacing them with AKP administrators furnished with much greater resources may have led voters to vote pragmatically rather than along party lines.

Looking forward: The decisions in Ankara and Istanbul are set to be appealed amid government claims of irregularities and could still be overturned by AKP influence in the courts, a move that has the potential to trigger significant public and international backlash.

Alternatively, the government could concede the result in an effort to bolster its democratic credentials and international credibility amid a growing economic crisis. However, this is unlikely to result in a significant shift in direction from the AKP, which responded to election defeat in 2015 by ramping up its crackdown against the Kurdish opposition.

Similarly, it remains to be seen how long the unity amongst the opposition will last, with the CHP candidates in Ankara and Istanbul both coming from a nationalist tradition that remains sceptical of the HDP.

Kurdish militants focus operations outside Turkey in run up to local elections

The Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) has continued to remain relatively inactive in Turkey, resulting in few notable incidents other than a Turkish soldier killed by an improvised explosive device in Sirnak on March 20. The Turkish government has credited this to an aggressive stance taken by the military. This includes a greater emphasis on precision airstrikes and drone technology, both of which were used to target senior PKK figures on March 21, resulting in the deaths of three mid-level members and injury to alleged head of the group's external affairs, Riza Altun.

The PKK's quiescence is also likely to include a significant strategic component. Ahead of the local elections, PKK operations in the southeast have the potential to risk isolating voters from the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), which is often accused of being linked to or uncritical of the militant group.

The PKK is also likely seeking to not undermine negotiations on the future of the region controlled by its allies in the People's Protection Units (YPG), which with US assistance through the Syrian Democratic Force has recently defeated the Islamic State (ISIS) (see below). The SDF is currently seeking to secure on-going US support, the prospects of which would be damaged by the PKK attacks in the territory of a NATO country.

However, clashes have continued in Northern Iraq, where the Turkish military is seeking to isolate the PKK's headquarters in the Qandil Mountains. On March 16, PKK fighters attacked a Turkish military base near the Barmiza village on Mount Chyadel, resulting in the deaths of two Turkish soldiers and six PKK fighters.

Kurdish activists escalate hunger strikes

Momentum behind Kurdish activists refusing food in protest against the isolation of the proscribed Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) leader Abdullah Ocalan is translating into increasing international support. 171 Kurds are understood to be on hunger strike within Turkish prisons, with a number of solidarity strikes taking place elsewhere, including 14 who have based themselves in Strasbourg to focus the attention of the Council of Europe. Several Members of European Parliament have come out in support of the strikers, and on March 20, a Welsh Assembly passed a motion stating that Ocalan's isolation is not in line with human rights law.

Activists have faced pressure at home, however, with seven hunger strikers arrested after police raided offices of the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) in Diyarbakir. A

Diyarbakir court ruled that HDP MP Leyla Guven, who has led the hunger strikes and was released from prison to house arrest in January, should be taken by force to attend her court hearings. Her lawyers argue that the lawsuit filed her against her parliamentary immunity, and that she is in too poor health to attend the court hearing in Urfa. On March 18, police fired water cannons at supporters who had gathered at the grave of a hunger striker who passed away.

Guven, alongside HDP co-chair Pervin Buldan has also called for an end to a spate of suicides committed by Kurdish activists in prison, also protesting Ocalan's isolation. Since March 17, five activists have taken their own lives. In Germany, a sixth died of his wounds after setting himself on fire.

Iraq

Divisions continue to block formation of new administration in Kurdish region

The political crisis in the Kurdistan Region in Iraq continues to deepen amid the failure of the two main political parties to overcome their differences and form a new joint administration. An accord signed on March 4 initially appeared to have paved the way for renewed cooperation between the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) but has failed to break the deadlock.

Since forming a unified administration in 2005, the PUK and KDP have sought to share power on the basis of a deal known as the 'Strategic Agreement'. This deal divides key positions in the national and regional administrations between the two parties, but has been gradually eroded by growing competition on both sides.

Attempts to reach a renegotiated agreement between the KDP and PUK are crucial to the stability of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) but have repeatedly broken down amid mutual mistrust. This includes the failure of the most recent accord which, despite being hailed as a successor to the 'Strategic Agreement', appears to have left the main issues of contention unresolved, allowing tensions to quickly resurface.

These tensions are rooted in the interlinked issues of competition over the region's energy resources and security forces. The March 4 accord is believed to have not guaranteed which ministries would be allocated to the PUK in a KDP-led administration or explicitly resolved the issue of the energy-rich region of Kirkuk.

Kirkuk's ethnically-mixed population means the PUK will need the KDP's support for its Kurdish candidate for governor. However, while the KDP has an interest in maintaining Kurdish influence in the disputed region of Kirkuk, the party is reluctant to back the PUK candidate without gaining significant concessions, particularly over the security forces.

The KDP accuses the PUK of undermining the efforts of Kurdish forces to stop Iraqi federal troops from forcibly retaking control of Kirkuk in October 2017. During the federal offensive, commanders linked to the PUK are believed to have withdrawn their units, breaking the Kurdish defensive line and forcing the rapid retreat of fighters loyal to the KDP.

By facilitating the removal of KDP security forces from Kirkuk, the PUK sought to reassert its position in a region traditionally regarded as within its sphere of influence and limit its larger rival's claim over local oil reserves.

The KDP retains an interest in maintaining Kurdish influence in Kirkuk but is reluctant to back the PUK candidate without gaining significant concessions in return. Simultaneously, while the PUK's priority remains Kirkuk, the party is wary of ceding too much power to the KDP, particularly in the security forces, and is therefore seeking control of the interior ministry in any future joint administration. Tensions have been exacerbated by the existence of hard-line factions in both parties which no longer believe cooperation to be in their interests and see negotiations in zero-sum terms.

Looking forward: The KDP and PUK's dominance of the KRG's institutions means they have a shared interest in maintaining a status-quo that ultimately allows both to perpetuate their influence. This means a split between the two continues to be unlikely, before a compromise is ultimately reached. However, growing mistrust on both sides leaves potential for a rapid escalation, which could quickly draw in their respective security forces. A violent confrontation between the two parties leading to a division of the Kurdistan Region into their old spheres of influence cannot be ruled out.

Federal troops confront Kurdish militia-linked group over strategic border area

Iraqi federal forces have clashed with a militia linked to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) near the Syrian border in Sinjar. On March 17, Iraqi government units are believed to have attempted to stop fighters from the Sinjar Resistance Units (YBS) crossing the border in the Hasawik area, leading to an exchange of gunfire that resulted in two fatalities on each side.

Following the incident, federal reinforcements comprised of three infantry brigades were deployed to the region. After federal demands for the YBS to hand over their weapons and withdraw from the area were rejected, a further confrontation near Bab Shilo on March 19 saw an Iraqi soldier killed. However, subsequent talks between federal commanders and senior YBS figures appear to have eased tensions, with both sides subsequently seeking to publicly downplay the significance of the clashes.

The YBS has had a complex relationship with federal authorities since its formation under the auspices of the PKK in 2007. The group largely comprises members of the predominantly-Kurdish speaking Yazidi ethnoreligious minority and has previously been regarded by Baghdad as a useful counterbalance to the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), which dominates the nearby Kurdistan Region in Iraq and has sought to extend its influence into the strategically significant Sinjar province.

However, Baghdad's strategic aims have since shifted, leading it to take an increasingly hard-line stance against the YBS. An Iraqi army offensive in October 2017 saw KDP-linked forces withdraw from several disputed territories, including Sinjar, leaving the YBS as the only local actor in the area operating outside of Baghdad's influence.

Since then, Baghdad has also come under pressure from Turkey to clamp down on PKK activity in the country, with YBS control of border crossings in Sinjar providing crucial access between the PKK's bases in Iraq and territory controlled by the group's People's Protection Units (YPG) allies in Syria.

The Turkish air force has previously targeted the area, notably using Unmanned Ariel Vehicles to kill a senior Yazidi PKK figure Ismail Ozden last year in an operation that is likely to have been coordinated with Iraq (see CEFTUS Special Briefing, Kurdish Affairs, August 2018). Turkish threats led the PKK to formally withdraw from Sinjar in March 2018 but the group maintains influence in the area through its strong links to the YBS.

Looking forward: The YBS is likely to come under sustained pressure to withdraw from Sinjar, but retains significant influence in the local community for the role played by the PKK in stopping an Islamic State (ISIS) campaign of ethnic cleansing against the Yazidis in August 2014. This is counter-balanced by the reluctance of many Yazidis to be drawn into intra-Kurdish political competition between the KDP and the PKK, with the federal government offering a potentially more stable alternative.

But despite the clashes, there appears to be little appetite in Baghdad for an armed confrontation with the YBS, which would destroy much of its goodwill in the Yazidi community. A tense stalemate is therefore likely to continue.

Iran

Iran participates in Turkish operation against Kurdish militants

Iranian forces have participated for the first time in a Turkish military campaign against the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in the mountainous border region in which the militant group is based. The Turkish-led operation lasted from March 18 to March 23, with conflicting reports regarding the level of Iranian involvement.

The move was trumpeted by the Turkish government, which has long been pushing for a joint operation against the PKK headquarters in the Qandil Mountains, which are located partially within the Iranian border. However, Iranian sources have been more cautious, with state media confirming the cooperation but military sources denying involvement.

The operation is therefore believed to have been limited to intelligence sharing and the coordination of simultaneous but separate action on different sides of the border and involving Iranian border guards under command of the interior ministry rather than the military.

In the last 12 months there has been an increase in clashes between Iranian forces and Kurdish separatist groups, but these have largely not involved the PKK and its local affiliate the Kurdistan Free Life Party (PJAK). Tehran is thought to be reluctant to antagonise a group that has significant influence in the Kurdish regions in Iran as well as in Syria through the rise of the PKK-affiliated People's Protection Units (YPG).

However, the YPG's cooperation with the US in Syria through the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) may be beginning to change Iran's perception of the PKK, with Tehran conscious of the threat posed by groups that could act as American proxies amid the increasingly aggressive stance of the Trump administration.

Looking forward: The joint operation is symbolically significant, but Iran's attitude to the PKK continues to be governed by wider strategic factors rather than a significant shift in Tehran's stance. Tehran has long been reluctant to tackle the PKK and risk triggering a backlash, without securing significant concessions from Ankara, with which it remains at loggerheads over Syria. And despite its public pronouncements, Turkey also has reservations about the impact a full-scale joint military operation with Iran would have on its NATO membership.

Limited cooperation on a temporary basis secured Ankara a propaganda victory prior to highly contested local elections (see above), while allowing Tehran to send a message to the PKK over cooperation with the US. Further action on a significant scale remains unlikely.