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**Recent developments in Syria continue to test the Kurdish-led autonomous administration's ability to balance the interests of both Russia and the US. One of the main Kurdish political forces in Iraq appears to be stabilising under new leadership, but profound divisions remain. In Turkey, the pro-Kurdish opposition has selected new co-chairs under continued conditions of state repression. While Kurds in Iran have boycotted national elections to protest an ongoing crackdown.**

**Syria**

**Turkey-Russia cooperation poses potential challenge to Kurdish-led administration**

Turkey and Russia have agreed a ceasefire in Idlib, where escalating violence had threatened to result in a direct military confrontation. A Russian-backed offensive by forces loyal to the Assad regime had increasingly resulted in casualties amongst Turkish troops deployed to the region. This includes credible reports of the Russian air force's involvement in an incident on February 27 that killed 34 Turkish soldiers. In response, Turkey has sought to push back against the Assad regime, using drone technology to circumvent Russian control of Idlib's airspace and successfully target Syrian assets on the ground, inflicting significant losses.

On March 5, an agreement was reached in Moscow between Presidents Erdogan and Putin to bring a rapid end to the fighting and establish a security corridor 6km on either side of the strategic M4 highway, the main target of the Assad regime's campaign.

By effectively resetting relations between Turkey and Russia, the deal has significant potential implications for the Kurdish-led Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES). Last October, Russia played a key role in halting the advance of Turkish forces into AANES territory following the partial withdrawal of US troops. And renewed cooperation between the two countries has again raised the prospect of Ankara accepting concessions over Idlib in return for being granted gains against the AANES. In 2018, Russia sanctioned a Turkish military operation against AANES allies in the Syrian province of Afrin.

The situation facing the AANES is further complicated by the ambiguous stance of Washington, which has sought to capitalise from Ankara's tensions with Moscow over Idlib, issuing a series of public statements in support of their NATO counterparts. But with little influence on the ground, US lobbying appears to have had minimal impact on Turkey's decision to reach an accord with Russia. Instead, Washington's efforts to rebuild relations with Ankara has cast more doubt on the US' long-term commitment to the AANES and its armed wing, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which Turkey regards as an existential threat due to the groups organic links the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK).

The AANES has carefully sought to maintain a working relationship with the Assad-regime, Russia and the US, all of whom maintain a presence in their territory, but the shifting

dynamics in the region has made this increasingly difficult to sustain. On February 12, minor clashes between US troops and forces loyal to the Assad regime resulted in US fighter jets striking positions near a Russia-controlled airbase in Qamishli, the AANES' capital. Kurdish authorities have sought to downplay the implications but appear increasingly unable to prevent such incidents taking place.

***Looking forward:*** Russian-Turkish cooperation in Syria undermines the AANES/SDF's preferred outcome of a Moscow-brokered deal with the Assad regime on the basis of limiting Ankara's influence in the country. In the short term, the Kurdish-led administration therefore remains dependent on US support to balance its interests against Russia and Ankara.

However, while the Turkey-Russia relationship appears remarkably durable, the ceasefire agreement remains dependent on keeping in check forces over which neither Moscow nor Ankara has full control. Turkey is also likely to step up pressure on AANES territory where Russian and Assad-regime forces are also present. And any incident involving casualties amongst Russian personnel has the potential to rapidly alter the situation.

#### Water supply cut from areas under Kurdish control

The Kurdish-led Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) has accused Turkey-backed rebels of deliberately halting the water supply to areas under its control. On February 24, gunmen are believed to have halted work at the Alok pumping station in Ras al-Ayn, a city that has been under Turkish control since last October, cutting off water to the nearby town of Al Hasakah and the surrounding region.

Approximately 460,000 people are believed to have been affected. This includes nearby camps for the internally displaced such as al-Hawl, where the shortages are contributing to a volatile security situation amongst family members of Islamic State (ISIS) fighters. The AANES is now distributing water in the region via tankers, while pushing the US and Russia to pressure Turkey into reopening the plant.

## **Iraq**

### Leading Kurdish party selects new leadership

Bafel and Lahur Talabani have been selected as the new leaders of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) at a meeting of the party's General Leadership Committee on February 8. The cousins will share the title of co-chair under a newly inaugurated system aimed at reducing the tensions within the party since the death of its founder, Jalal Talabani, in 2017.

The victory of Bafel and Lahur, the son and nephew of Jalal Talabani, comes at the expense of figures from the PUK's older generation, most notably former acting leader Kosrat Rasul and current President of Iraq Barham Salih.

The outcome is a particular blow for Rasul, who's efforts to block the move to a co-chair system were hindered after he was forced to seek medical treatment abroad during the party's constitutional congress. And his allies in the PUK-affiliated security forces have again accused the Talabanis of collaborating with Iran to undermine Kurdish troops defending Kirkuk from an Iraqi federal government offensive in October 2017.

The stance of Salih is less clear. Salih left the PUK to form his own party in 2017, before re-joining in September 2018 after reaching an accommodation with the Talabanis, and became the party's candidate for president of Iraq, a post traditionally held by the PUK. Initially, it appeared that both Bafel and Lahur could accept his leadership as a compromise to their competing ambitions. However, both emerged stronger than expected from the party's conference last December and appear to have calculated they can operate independently without Salih's support.

**Looking forward:** In the short term, the resolution of tensions between Bafel and Lahur has ended a period of instability that put the future of the PUK in doubt. However, while central authority has been strengthened, competing power centres remain, including around Bafel and Lahur, whose affiliated security forces appear to have clashed this month over control of domestic gas production (see below).

Rasul's legacy of support within the security forces also means he will continue to maintain influence despite his waning political power, although his deteriorating health will continue to be a limiting factor. Salih also continues to exert independent power from Baghdad, where he will play a crucial role in the formation of the next government (see below), but is under pressure from his relatively sceptical stance on Iranian influence in the country. A new leadership crisis remains only a matter of time.

### Gas dispute highlights inter and intra party divisions

Transportation of liquid natural gas from a key regional facility was halted between February 1 and 3 after unidentified armed gunmen threatened staff and fired on vehicles leaving the facility overnight. Despite being relatively brief, the disruption led to shortages and a price hike across the Kurdistan Region in Iraq, where businesses and households are predominantly reliant on cannisters of liquid gas for heating and cooking.

The incident is believed to stem from a dispute over the right to distribute gas from the Khor Mor field in Chamchamal. Until January 31 the contract had been held by Golden Jaguar, but a new tendering process implemented by the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP)-controlled Ministry for Natural Resources saw the company replaced by competitor Sur Gas.

Sur Gas is believed to have close ties to the Barzani family which dominates the KDP, and the move is likely to have caused tensions with figures in the PUK linked to Golden Jaguar, including Lahur Talabani, who has since been selected as the party's co-chair.

Khor More is located in the PUK strong hold of Sulaymaniyah, traditionally putting it beyond the KDP's sphere of influence. However, the region's largest party appears to have sought to

capitalise on divisions within its smaller rival, with unconfirmed reports that Lahur's fellow party co-chair, Bafel Talabani is set to benefit from a share of Sur Gas' profits.

**Looking forward:** Competition over Khor Mor is indicative of both the underlying tensions between Bafel and Lahur and the resulting potential for violence. Conversely, coming just days before both sides agreed to share power, the episode also demonstrates the durability of a relationship that ultimately benefits from maintaining the status quo. Just as significant is the KDP's success dividing the PUK to its own gain, extending its influence further throughout the region, a trend that looks set to continue.

### Kurdish parties fail to support the formation of a federal government

A lack of support from the main Kurdish parties has seen Muhammad Tawfiq Allawi's efforts to form a ruling coalition in the Iraqi parliament collapse. Both the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) are believed to have rejected Allawi's proposal for ministerial appointments to be made independently of party blocs in an effort to overcome factionalism.

Traditionally, the KDP and PUK are allocated five ministerial positions for which they put forward their own nominees. As part of a wider effort to overcome the factionalism that has paralyzed Iraqi politics, Allawi has reportedly offered to let President Barham Salih from the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) make the selections. But this remained unacceptable to the KDP and the new leadership of the PUK, which ultimately views Salih as a rival.

The Kurdish parties' refusal to compromise has caused tension with the other major blocs in parliament, most notably the Sairoon alliance headed by influential Shia cleric Moqtada Al Sadr. Al Sadr has now threatened to renominate former prime minister Haider al-Abadi, under whose premiership tensions between Erbil and Baghdad over oil revenues resulted in a violent confrontation in the energy rich Kirkuk region.

### Pro-Kurdish party selects new leadership

The predominantly Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) held their annual congress in Ankara between February 22-23 under aggressive state scrutiny. Simultaneous police raids across the predominantly Kurdish city of Diyarbakir saw 20 people arrested, including senior HDP figures prior to the meeting. And on February 23, 14 congress attendees were arrested in relation to a presentation screened which featured photographs of imprisoned leader of Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) Abdullah Ocalan.

Pervin Buldan and Mithat Sancar were unanimously elected under the party's gender balanced co-chair system. Sancar replaces Sezai Temelli and becomes the first ethnic Arab to lead the party. Traditionally one co-chair is Kurdish with the other coming from one of Turkey's other ethnic groups.

Temelli had initially been expected to continue in his role. However, Sancar's background is notable given the current salience of Syrian issues in Turkish politics, and his selection is a likely signal that, despite tensions, the Kurdish political movement is seeking to build diverse coalitions.

In his first public remarks as co-chair, Sancar echoed imprisoned former HDP co-chair Selahattin Demirtas strategy of building upon the broad anti-Justice and Development Party (AKP) coalition that saw the HDP tacitly support the main opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) at the 2019 local elections. A new 'Enlargement Commission' will be established to negotiate election alliances and encourage people from outside the Kurdish movement to become involved with the HDP.

Following the relative success of the anti-AKP coalition, President Erdogan has sought to buttress his party's position amongst the electorate by ramping up fears of internal enemies. More than 30 senior HDP officials have been detained, including Mardin provincial co-chair Perihan Agaoglu on February 29, and dozens of HDP mayors have been removed from office.

Notably, the first CHP mayor was removed from office on February 27, potentially strengthening solidarity between two parties which have traditionally been opposed over the question of Kurdish autonomy.

#### Imprisoned militant leader granted visitation

The family of imprisoned Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) leader Abdullah Ocalan have been granted access to the 72-year old for the first time in seven months. The visit on March 3 follows months of denied requests by Ocalan's lawyers, but was granted after days of demonstrations demanding proof that the PKK leader was still alive following a forest fire on the island on which Imrali prison is located.

Ocalan has been in state custody since 1999 but retains widespread reverence in the Kurdish political movement. In the past, the government has sought to time visitations to its own political ends, often in an attempt to draw attention to his continued popularity among HDP supporters as a wedge issue with the traditional CHP base's strong aversion to the Kurdish separatist movement.

With Turkish involvement in Northern Syria also reaching a decisive moment, the government may be hoping that Ocalan's influence amongst the region's Kurdish political movement can be used to its advantage. Ocalan has increasingly taken a conciliatory position towards the Turkish state, which diverges from the more hard-line stance of the day-to-day PKK leadership and their allies amongst the Peoples' Protection Units (YPG) across the Syrian border.

## **Iran**

### Crackdown on activists continues as Kurds boycott parliamentary elections

A widespread boycott of February's parliamentary elections saw a landslide victory for Iranian conservatives. Voter turnout was the lowest since the establishment of the Islamic Republic in 1979, with rates lowest in the Kurdish region after Iranian parties advised Kurds to withhold their votes following a severe crackdown on anti-government protests in November.

Arrests for participation in the protests have continued through the New Year. In February, 19 Kurdish activists were sentenced on a range of charges including 'membership of opposition parties' and 'protesting and preparing against the national security', receiving sentences of between one and 10 years.

Dozens of deaths caused by Covid-19 have been reported in the predominantly Kurdish cities of Kermanshah, Saqqez, and Baneh. Demonstrations have followed reports of the death of one Kurdish prisoner in Urmia, demanding their family members be released on bail to reduce the risk of contagion.