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Kurdish-led forces in Syria have begun a significant regionalisation process as they seek to bolster their influence over local armed groups and diffuse pressure from Turkey and the US. Kurdish voters again appear to have played a decisive role in the outcome of the mayoral election in Istanbul. There are also signs that leadership is slowly shifting in the Kurdish political movement, complicating moves towards a new peace process as violent clashes with the Turkish military continue. Formation of a new government is underway in the Kurdistan Region in Iraq, where manoeuvring continues between the two major political parties. And there has been a renewed surge of clashes involving Kurdish militants in Iran amid rising regional tensions.

Syria

Major reforms to structure of Kurdish-led forces

The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) have begun a significant restructuring process, establishing six new military councils in various population centres across the group's territory in north and east Syria including Tell Abyad, Kobane, Tabqa, Raqqa, Qamishli, al-Malikiyah, Ras al-Ayn and al-Hawl. Further councils are expected to be announced in the coming weeks.

Designed to reflect the diverse make-up of the SDF, each new council is composed of senior SDF commanders alongside officers from the armed fractions operating in the area, and representatives of the local population.

The expansion of the council system comes as the SDF shifts from a narrow territorial campaign against the Islamic State (ISIS) towards a wider emphasis on internal security and counterinsurgency. To facilitate this, the new military councils aim to unify the local forces under the SDF's command, while devolving some decision-making powers to flexibly suit conditions on a regional basis.

The move towards regional decentralisation is driven by a combination of ideology and pragmatism. The People's Protection Units (YPG), the predominantly Kurdish force that forms the core of the SDF, advocates a system of localised democracy in line with the ideas of Abdullah Ocalan. And under the group's influence, the SDF has pioneered the military council system in areas beyond the YPG's traditional strongholds as part of efforts to integrate non-Kurdish actors.

Three of the recently formed military councils have been created in predominantly Arabic regions. This includes the former ISIS capital of Raqqa, which has recently seen popular protests against enforced SDF conscription and a lack of services (see CEFTUS Special Briefing on Kurdish Affairs, May 2019). In such areas, effective and inclusive governance

structures are necessary to stop disaffection amongst the local population fuelling a growing ISIS insurgency.

It is also in the Arabic regions that the SDF alliance is at most risk of further fragmentation, particularly as armed factions are demobilised following the territorial victory against ISIS. Last year, the YPG clashed with a local SDF affiliate in Raqqa in a dispute over internal security and chain of command (see CEFTUS Special Briefing on Kurdish Affairs, June 2018).

The remaining new military councils are strategically located along Syria's northern border. In places like Manbij, the SDF has used existing councils to emphasise the role of local groups in its governance structures as it seeks to delegitimise a potential Turkish military offensive.

Under Turkish pressure, the YPG formally withdrew from Manbij in favour of the local military council in 2016, a move regarded as a potential model by US policy makers seeking to reach a compromise between their partners in the SDF and a key NATO ally.

Should a US-backed deal fail, a decentralised structure also potentially simplifies the SDF's integration into the Syrian military as a border force, a proposal that has been included in negotiations with the Assad regime.

Looking forward: The expansion of the military council system is the natural progression of the logic under which the US supported the creation of the SDF: to integrate Arab groups whilst taking the emphasis away from the YPG in an effort to appease Turkey. By establishing governance structures led by local actors, the SDF hopes to undermine any efforts by Turkey or the Assad regime to force them to relinquish control. However, without the guarantee of US support, they remain vulnerable to expulsion by force.

Saudi Arabian delegation to Kurdish-led administration

The Saudi Arabian minister for Middle East affairs visited Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) controlled areas in the south-east of Syria on June 13. Thamer al-Sabhan met with tribal leaders alongside senior US officials in the strategically significant region of Deir ez-Zor, where he is believed to have reiterated his government's support for the nascent administration being put in place.

The meeting comes as the SDF increasingly struggles to maintain influence over its local Arab affiliates amid signs that crucial US-backing for the coalition will come to an end. Many predominantly Arabic militias joined the SDF on the pragmatic basis that the alliance was a proxy for US influence in the region and therefore likely to be a future powerbroker. However, with US support waning, a significant number of these are now believed to be considering a reconciliation with the increasingly stable Assad regime in Damascus.

The situation is particularly fluid in Deir ez-Zor. Located far from the SDF's strongholds in the predominantly Kurdish north, the province contains much of Syria's energy reserves, giving local groups significant leverage. Recent popular unrest in the area targeted rising fuel prices and disrupted the export of Deir ez-Zor's oil to the SDF's northern regions (see

CEFTUS Special Briefing on Kurdish Affairs, May 2019). Driven by a combination of politically motivated opportunity and genuine popular frustration, the protests highlight the potential limits of the SDF administration's governance of the area.

Al-Sabhan is reported to have called for an end to the protests while seeking to assuage local concerns that the SDF was primarily a Kurdish political project. More significantly, he is believed to have also promised quicker the delivery of the 100 million dollars of Saudi funds earmarked for reconstruction of SDF controlled areas last August.

Looking forward: Saudi Arabia has an interest in maintaining the SDF presence in Deir ez-Zor as a bulwark against Iran gaining access to the region's energy reserves. Iran has significant influence in the area through militias located across both the Euphrates River and the nearby border with Iraq. However, it remains to be seen how much influence Saudi Arabia has with local Arab groups, many of whom have a complex historical relationship with the ruling family in Riyadh. Saudi support alone is unlikely to be enough without continued US-backing for the SDF in one form or another.

Turkey

Kurdish support key to opposition victory in Istanbul despite growing divisions in leadership

The pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) support for opposition candidate Ekrem Imamoglu is likely to have again been crucial to his victory in the rerun of the in the Istanbul mayoral election on June 23. Imamoglu from the Republican People's Party (CHP) emerged with an increased majority, with polls indicating that he secured the overwhelming backing of HDP supporters after the party again decided against fielding a candidate as part of a joint opposition to curtail the dominance of the government.

The ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) has traditionally gained more support from Kurdish voters than the CHP and made a series of concessions aimed at bolstering its appeal, most notably granting imprisoned Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) leader Abdullah Ocalan access to his lawyers (see CEFTUS Special Briefing on Kurdish Affairs, May 2019).

On June 18, a letter from Ocalan seemingly calling on the HDP to remain neutral rather than support Imamoglu was leaked by Turkey's state broadcaster, having originally been unreleased by his lawyers. The letter was given to the media on Ocalan's request by academic Ali Kemal Ozcan, who visited the Kurdish leader on June 21 under the auspices of an undisclosed government department, leading to speculation its release was organised by the government just days before the election.

In response, HDP co-chairs Pervin Buldan and Sezai Temelli reiterated their support for Imamoglu, arguing the statement did not refer specifically to the Istanbul election. Ocalan remains revered as the founding father of the modern Kurdish political movement in Turkey, with his decisions regarded as final. However, after two decades in state custody, there are growing signs of divergence between Ocalan and those tasked with leading the movement in his absence.

This includes former HDP co-chair Selahattin Demirtas, who was crucial to the party's historic success at the 2015 elections and retains significant influence as de-facto leader despite being imprisoned since 2016. And indications that voters heeded the HDP's call to support Imamoglu despite Ocalan's apparent objections has added credence to the theory that the political balance of power is beginning to shift in Demirtas' favour. Senior PKK leaders appear to also have subtly diverged with Ocalan's recent positions, rejecting a compromise with Turkey in Syria, and backing the HDP's stance on the Istanbul election.

Looking forward: While Ocalan's letter may suggest some negotiations with Turkey's intelligence agency (MIT) are underway, predictions for re-opening peace talks must be treated with caution. Although his leadership remains unquestionable, it appears less and less likely that a negotiated settlement could be negotiated with Ocalan alone, with the HDP and PKK leadership in the field increasingly powers resembling a veto. Wider political factors are likely to come into play, most notably the situation of the PKK's allies in Syria (see above).

Notably, Turkish authorities have also begun a renewed cracked down on Kurdish activists in the election's aftermath and violent clashes continue to take place with the PKK in the south-east of the country and Iraq (see below).

Turkish military makes strategic gains against Kurdish militants in Iraq

Clashes between Turkish forces and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) militants have intensified as Turkey's military operation in the Hakurk region of northern Iraq continued throughout June. Since late May 'Operation Claw' has engaged ground troops supported by air and artillery strikes with the view to isolate the PKK's strategic headquarters in the nearby Qandil Mountains. With a reported 60 Kurdish fatalities and over 70 caves and other hideouts dispossessed, Operation Claw has developed into the largest offensive against the PKK since March 2018, which saw Turkey's last attempt to isolate the group's Qandil headquarters.

Ankara's increasingly audacious incursions into Iraqi Kurdistan are unlikely to attenuate. Reports suggest that Turkey is looking to build a permanent base in Hakurk in order to obstruct PKK logistics and supply routes between northern Iraq and northern Syria. Furthermore, Turkish troops have begun moving freely through Duhok city, far from their usual deployments in the border regions.

Despite official condemnation from the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) for Turkish airstrikes which killed eight civilians in the final week of June, Ankara is unlikely to face any substantial resistance. Newly elected KRG President Nechirvan Barzani's trip to Ankara on June 21 – his first foreign visit since taking office – preceded an announcement that Turkey is looking to open a second border crossing into the Kurdistan Region of Iraq to promote trade and Turkish investment in rebuilding projects. While Turkish incursions will continue to incur criticism from the KRG, conserving economic ties ultimately takes precedence in the relationship.

Iraq

New prime minister begins efforts to form government

Masrour Barzani from the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) has been elected as new prime minister of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) at a parliamentary session on June 11. The vote was boycotted by a number of the region's smaller parties that are set to be excluded from power, but crucially not the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), with whom Barzani is now expected to attempt to form a government.

The PUK had refused to endorse Masrour Barzani's cousin, Nechirvan Barzani, as KRG president at a parliamentary session last month amid an ongoing dispute with the KDP over power sharing. Tensions between the two sides remain, with the election of the new prime minister a necessary step before manoeuvring over the allocation of cabinet positions begins. Masrour Barzani has until July 12 to appoint ministers.

The main obstacle to a new government remains the KDP and PUK's failure to reach an agreement over a candidate for the governor of Kirkuk. Although formally lying outside of the Kurdistan region, the two Kurdish parties together hold a majority on the province's local council. The PUK regards energy-rich Kirkuk as within its sphere of influence, but has repeatedly failed to secure the KDP votes necessary for its choice of governor. The KDP accuses the PUK of seeking to exclude it from influence over Kirkuk's energy reserves by allowing Iraqi federal forces to forcibly retake control of the region in October 2017.

The two parties have sought to share power since signing a peace agreement in 1998. However, their inability to reach a deal has raised the prospect of a return to violence. On June 18, senior PUK military figure Mahmud Sangawi referred to the KDP as traitors and threatened the division again into two competing administrations and, comments that were later rejected by his party.

Looking forward: The KDP has enough support in parliament to form a government without the PUK and there remain hardliners on both sides opposed to compromise. However, isolating the PUK, which retains significant influence in the security services, would risk destabilising the region with and jeopardising a status-quo from which the KDP currently benefits. Therefore, while an escalation cannot be ruled out, a deal is likely to be reached in the coming weeks.

Iran

Escalating violence in Kurdish region amid growing international tension

On June 23, IRGC troops at the Hamza Saiyid-al-Shohada military base in in the Chaldoran exchanged fire with an unconfirmed Kurdish group resulting in one fatality. While the insurgent group has not been identified, clashes in the area are commonly associated with the Kurdistan Free Life Party (PJAK), widely considered to be the Iranian arm of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK).

On June 30, further clashes were reported between the IRGC and fighters from the Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan (PDKI) in the border area between Piranshahr and Choman in Iraq. The PDKI reports their fighters attacked IRGC troops which had fired upon kolbars (smugglers) in the border area. As the IRGC retreated, Iranian artillery shelled PDKI positions. No casualties have been reported.

Though attacks on kolbars occur relatively regularly. On June 4, two kolbars were killed and four severely injured near Piranshahr. Later in the month, a further death was reported near Baneh, bringing total kolbar fatalities to 40 since the beginning of January.

June's skirmishes mark a departure from a period of relative quiet since last September, when a missile attack on the headquarters of the PDKI headquarters in Iraqi Kurdistan killed 18 fighters and civilians. Iran appears to have taken an increasingly hard-line stance against Kurdish groups as tensions mount between Tehran and Washington.

Several Kurdish groups have previously indicated they would be willing to support US military action in the country, and Tehran is conscious of US support for the Kurdistan Regional Government in Iraq and the emergent Kurdish-led administration in Syria.

Looking forward: A recent Syrian Kurdish delegation to the PDKI and the Kurdistan Democratic Party-Iran (KDP-I) headquarters promoting co-operation is likely to further harden Tehran's line against Kurdish opposition groups.

This in turn is likely to drive further co-operation between Ankara and Tehran, with the IRGC's crossing into Choman on June 30 bringing them them close to stations where Turkish troops are deployed in Iraq against the PKK (see above).