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The leader of the Kurdish political movement in Turkey has had his isolation in prison ended, raising hopes of a return to peace talks as the basis for a settlement that could extend to Syria. However, the has been tempered by escalating clashes between Kurdish militants and the Turkish Armed Forces across the region.

Elsewhere, Kurdish-led forces in Syria have launched significant security operations amid a continued insurgency and growing social unrest. The Kurdish administration in Iraq has selected a new president despite ongoing political deadlock. And irregular forces from Iraq appear to be playing a growing role against Kurdish groups in Iran.

Turkey

Access granted to leader of Kurdish militants, hunger strike movement ends

Kurdish activists have ended hunger strikes after imprisoned leader of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) Abdullah Ocalan was granted access to his lawyers for the first time in eight years. Over 3000 inmates across nearly 100 Turkish prisons have participated in the strikes led by pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) member of parliament Leyla Guven, who began forgoing food on November 8, 2018. At least nine activists have also taken their own lives in recent months to protest Ocalan's isolation.

Ocalan has been held on Imrali Island since being captured in Nairobi by American and Turkish intelligence services in 1999. Since July 2011, he has been refused access to lawyers, and following the breakdown of the peace process between the Turkish government and the PKK in 2015 has been held in almost complete isolation.

After more than 800 denied requests, Ocalan's lawyers were granted a visit on May 2, after which they conveyed a statement that appeared to prepare the ground for ending the hunger strikes. However, this did not go far enough to be accepted by Guven or the Kurdistan Communities Union (KCK), the umbrella organisation that includes the PKK.

Ocalan was subsequently seen by a delegation from the Council of Europe's Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CPT) before Justice Minister Abdulhamit Gul announced that the visitation ban would be lifted on May 16.

Ocalan's lawyers returned to Imrali prison on May 22 and released a second statement explicitly calling for the hunger strikes to end. This was recognised by Guven on May 26, bringing the strikes to an official halt. Dozens of hunger strikers who had been refusing medical treatment have since been hospitalised.

The government's decision to grant access to Ocalan comes as the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) seeks to court Kurdish voters ahead of the rerun of the Istanbul mayoral election on June 23. The AKP's narrow defeat last month came amid the HDP's unprecedented call for its predominantly Kurdish supporters to back the main opposition People's Republican Party (CHP) candidate Ekrem Imamoglu. Even a small HDP swing to the AKP, which has traditionally taken a less hard-line stance on Kurdish issues than the CHP, could prove crucial to the vote's outcome.

As well as calling for an end to the hunger strikes, Ocalan's statements also noted his desire to play a "positive role" in Syria, where the People's Protection Units (YPG), a militia founded on the basis of his ideology, now controls nearly one third of the country. The YPG's rise has come on the back of US support through under the banner of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), a multi-ethnic coalition formed to fight the Islamic State (ISIS). But Turkey considers the YPG and the SDF an existential threat due to the groups' links to the PKK and is threatening to launch a third military operation against the Kurdish-led forces in the wake of the US' decision to withdraw from Syria, an outcome Washington is seeking to avoid.

Ocalan's apparent intervention on Syria has added to speculation that a US facilitated agreement is being negotiated, and back channel talks between the YPG and the Turkish government are believed to be on-going. Despite efforts by the US to cleanly separate the YPG from the PKK, Ocalan's influence remains largely unchallenged, making him key to any future settlement.

Looking forward: A historic agreement between Turkey and the PKK/YPG remains unlikely in the short to medium term. The AKP remains dependent on its ultra-nationalist allies to pass legislation through parliament. And the Turkish military has recently stepped up operations against the PKK's headquarters in Iraq (see below), while supporting recent attacks by rebel groups against the YPG in Syria (See Syria). However, ending Ocalan's isolation is a first step back towards peace talks.

Escalation in violence between Turkish and Kurdish forces

There has been an upsurge in clashes between the Turkish military and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) both inside and outside of the country. On May 27, Turkey launched Operation Claw across its border in Hakkari, northern Iraq, the latest in a series of interventions aimed at isolating the PKK's headquarters in the nearby Qandil mountains.

Turkey has expanded its presence on the ground in recent months, building a series of military outposts aimed at disrupting the movement of PKK fighters throughout the mountainous border region. However, it has repeatedly struggled to secure its influence over the area and has been forced to instead rely on airstrikes.

Operation Claw therefore represents a further escalation, with special forces deployed in an effort to hold positions on the ground. This has reportedly been aided by growing cooperation with Iran, which appears to have stepped up efforts aimed at blocking PKK fighters from retreating across the border (See CEFTUS Special Briefing on Kurdish Affairs March 2019). 34 PKK militants have reportedly been killed or injured. The deaths of at least five Turkish soldiers have been confirmed.

Operation Claw also marks Turkey's first deployment of a ballistic missile against the PKK, representing a first in the 30-year conflict. The use of the locally built Bora-1 tactical short-range ballistic missiles, comes as Turkey seeks to test a range of new technologies, including drones, manufactured by its domestic arms industry.

Meanwhile, fifty-four people have been detained in Turkey's south-east following clashes with the PKK in Sanliurfa province on May 18 which saw a policeman killed. Reports have since surfaced that some of the detainees have been subject to torture and refused medical treatment, including three children. On May 5, clashes in nearby Sirnak province resulted in the deaths of two Turkish soldiers and one PKK fighter. In a separate incident, two civilians were killed by a roadside bomb.

Syria

Kurdish forces repel Turkish-backed military operation

Turkish-backed rebel groups have launched a brief assault on positions controlled by the predominantly Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) in north-east Syria. On May 4, forces from Jabhat al-Shamiah, a coalition of militias that form the core of Turkey's National Army (NA) initiative, announced the beginning of a campaign to capture the town of Tal Rifaat in the north-west of the country.

Advancing from Turkish controlled areas in the north-east, NA units backed by Turkish special forces briefly entered the villages of Maraanaz, Malikiyah and Shawarigat at the edge of Tal Rifaat amid an apparent YPG withdrawal. However, these gains were rapidly reversed after forces loyal to the Assad regime in the city held their ground, allowing the YPG to organise a counter-offensive that ultimately met little resistance. Tens of casualties have been reported on both sides, including Turkish military personnel.

Tal Rifaat has been the focus of speculation of a potential deal between Moscow and Ankara that would see Turkey take control of the area in return for ending its opposition to the Russian backed-regime offensive against the last rebel stronghold in Idlib. It remains unclear as to whether Turkey thought such an agreement was in place, and that Assad regime forces would withdraw, or was simply seeking retaliation for recent Russian escalations in Idlib.

Strategically located on the main road between the Turkey and Aleppo, and with Menagh Military Airbase in close vicinity, control of Tal Rifaat has been regularly contested throughout the conflict. The YPG captured the city from Syrian rebel groups with the help of Russian air support in February 2015. However, as relations between Russia and the YPG cooled, Moscow sanctioned a Turkish military operation against the group in the neighbouring region of Afrin. To block a subsequent Turkish move into Tal Rifaat, forces loyal to the Assad regime were deployed to the city in March 2018 and it has since been jointly administered with the YPG under Russian auspices. There are around 185,000 internally displaced people located in the area, predominantly originating from the Afrin region.

Looking forward: Tal Rifaat is the last remaining example of previously widespread cooperation between Russian and the YPG and represents a bellwether for relations between the two actors. Russia's apparent failure to sanction a new assault on the YPG in the city seemingly indicates a continued commitment in Moscow to facilitate a deal between the Kurdish group and the Assad regime. However, this may change if there is any indication of the YPG securing long-term US support under the banner of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF).

Operation by Kurdish security forces targets growing insurgency

The Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) have launched a major operation against elements linked to the Islamic State throughout the south-eastern province of Deir ez-Zor. Beginning on May 15, the five-day mobilisation saw significant numbers of SDF ground troops and armoured vehicles, backed by international coalition air support, raid targets throughout the region, arresting suspects and confiscating weapons. Further operations are expected in the coming weeks.

The operation comes amid a sharp increase in insurgency activity linked to the so-called Islamic State (ISIS) following the group's territorial defeat by the SDF in the southern pocket of Euphrates River

Valley in March (see CEFTUS Special Briefing on Kurdish Affairs, March 2019). ISIS has since sought to prevent the stabilisation of the region under SDF control through the use of improvised explosive devices and targeted assassination attempts.

The SDF's efforts appear to have led to a short-term decline in incidents in Deir ez-Zor. But ISIS-linked attacks have continued elsewhere. Most notably, explosions killed a senior SDF commander in Tell Abyad and a civilian in Manbij on May 16. Both towns are predominantly Arab cities that have been under SDF control since 2015 and 2016 respectively.

In recent weeks, ISIS has also claimed responsibility for numerous arson attacks that have disrupted the seasonal harvest of the wheat and barley, a key source of income for local rural communities. Under-equipped SDF authorities have struggled to contain the fires, causing resentment amongst the local population. In some areas, residents have reported extortion attempts, with unknown individuals believed to be linked to ISIS demanding money under the threat of burning crops, a tactic the group has previously used to generate finances.

Protests against Kurdish-led administration

A new wave of popular unrest has spread through parts of Deir ez-Zor province in south-east Syria. The protests followed the alleged killing of seven civilians by members of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) during a security operation targeting the Islamic State (ISIS) in the town of al-Shuhayl on May 8. The following day, SDF members are believed to have opened fire on protestors attempting to storm the group's headquarters in the town, resulting in one fatality, the first of its kind since similar street demonstrations erupted across the region last month (see CEFTUS Special Briefing on Kurdish Affairs, March 2019). Further protests were subsequently reported in a dozen nearby towns and villages.

In response, the SDF has sought to make concessions, meeting with local powerbrokers, including senior figures from influential al-Uqaydat tribe, and undertaking a series of prisoner releases, one of the protestor's key demands. Efforts are also believed to be underway to lower the price of fuel across the region, which is home to the majority of the country's energy reserves.

Accusations that the SDF is seeking to profit by selling Deir ez-Zor's oil and gas, particularly to the Assad regime, at the expense of local residents has been a key driver of popular frustration in one of the least developed parts of the country. Syria's fragmented energy market means oil and gas are sold through a complex network of intermediaries, making it difficult to control the destination. But under pressure from its US allies, the SDF has taken initial steps to limit smuggling directly into regime-controlled areas.

Elsewhere in the country, there has been growing tensions in SDF areas amid a renewed conscription drive. Around 20 young men are believed to have been detained in the north-eastern province of Raqqa on May 18 for failing to complete military service with the SDF. The arrests were made by the SDF's internal security forces, which have stepped up the monitoring of checkpoints throughout major towns and cities.

Looking forward: The interlinked issues of continued security threats and growing social unrest poses a major challenge to the SDF's long-term rule. Many local Arab groups joined the SDF for practical rather than ideological reasons, seeing it as a vehicle for US support. With no guarantee of continued US backing, and with limited resources of its own, the SDF looks likely to struggle to

overcome the perception that it is a Kurdish project in an Arabic region, fuelling resentment and the ISIS insurgency.

Iraq

New president takes office in Kurdish region, political deadlock continues

Nechirvan Barzani of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) has been elected president of the Kurdistan Region in Iraq, ending a 19-month vacancy in the position, a significant step towards the return of a fully functioning regional administration. But lawmakers from the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) chose to boycott the parliamentary session on May 28, a sign of continuing tensions between the region's two dominant political forces.

The KDP and PUK have traditionally sought to negotiate a deal to divide the different offices of state under their control at various levels. However, they have repeatedly failed to reach a permanent agreement following the political crisis that saw former President Masoud Barzani step down in October 2017.

Masoud Barzani had been the architect of the strategy of using an independence referendum to strengthen the Kurdistan Regional Government's (KRG) influence over a number of regions also claimed by the Iraqi Federal Government, most notably the energy rich province of Kirkuk.

KDP-linked Peshmerga fighters helped fill the security vacuum left in the Kirkuk by the withdrawal of Iraqi troops following the Islamic State's (ISIS) rapid offensive across the north of the country in June 2014. Under KDP influence, a growing proportion of Kirkuk's oil was pumped directly to Turkey through a pipeline largely under the party's control, bypassing Iraqi government structures and sidelining the PUK, which traditionally regards the province as within its sphere of influence.

Tensions came to a head following the KRG's decision to include Kirkuk in the independence referendum, and Baghdad ultimately retook control of the province by force in October 2017. The offensive by Iraqi federal troops and allied militias was eased by the apparent withdrawal of Peshmerga fighters linked to the PUK. A faction of the PUK's leadership is believed to have ultimately favoured a return to federal control in Kirkuk over the prospect of growing KDP dominance.

The PUK now requires the KDP's support to see its candidate selected as governor of the multi-ethnic province. However, the KDP remains reluctant to see its rival regain all its influence in Kirkuk and has instead sought to nominate an independent Kurdish figure, leading the PUK to withdraw its support for new President Nechirvan Barzani. Both sides are set to return to negotiations following the upcoming religious holiday.

Looking forward: The election of Nechirvan Barzani demonstrates that the KDP could seek to rule in coalition with the region's smaller parties. However, seeking to do so could potentially undermine the precedent of unity government that has been in place since the KDP and PUK signed a peace accord in 1998. At present, both parties still benefit from maintaining the status-quo and are likely to reach a deal. But the risk of a confrontation that could escalate into violence continues.

Kurdish region fails to meet federal oil quota, risks return of tensions with Baghdad

The Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) has again failed to fulfil its obligation to the Iraqi national oil company, raising the prospect of another dispute with the government in Baghdad. Under the

terms of the federal budget law, agreed in part as a reset in relations between the Kurdish and federal authorities, the KRG is required to deliver 250,000 barrels of oil per day to the State Organization for Marketing of Oil (SOMO). In return, the federal government is committed to the transfer of regular budget payments to cover the salary of KRG employees, which make up a large part of the region's workforce.

In 2014, the KRG's move to expand its efforts at exporting oil independently from Kirkuk (see above), saw Baghdad suspend budget payments to the region. The halting of federal funds was offset by access to Kirkuk's substantial energy resources, but losing control of the region saw the KRG face a significant financial crisis until budget payments from Baghdad were restored in January.

The issue has continued to be a source of tension, with the Iraqi parliament moving to cut the KRG's allocation of the federal budget. The KRG's failure to meet its obligations is, however, related to temporary efforts to repay foreign loans rather than a fundamental dispute. The KRG is believed to have sought a period of grace with the authorities in Baghdad, leveraging its influence on Prime Minister Adil Abdul-Mahdi's fragile administration. This also appears to have gained the acquiescence of Iran, which is seeking the KRG's support against US sanctions targeting the country's access to oil.

Looking forward: Abdul-Mahdi's government is under pressure to ensure the KRG complies with its legal obligations and will have to take stronger steps eventually. Likewise, the KRG cannot risk the ending of federal budget transfers without triggering a significant financial crisis. The issue is likely to be resolved, rather than escalate into a new crisis.

Iran

Irregular forces from Iraq playing growing role in Kurdish regions

On May 1, two Kurdish civilians were shot and killed in Oshnavieh province after members of the Popular Mobilisation Units (PMUs) are reported to have opened fire on passing vehicle. Originally formed as irregular forces to combat the rise of the Islamic State (ISIS) in Iraq, a number of PMUs with close links to Iran were recently deployed in the country to ostensibly assist in relief efforts after flash flooding in mid-April. They have since taken a role in security in several provinces, with reports indicating that a sixty-strong outfit of PMU militiamen have replaced a garrison of local forces in Oshnavieh.

The growing presence of PMUs in Iran's border regions comes amid an apparent hardening of Tehran's stance against Kurdish militant groups operating in the area. On May 28, two Kurdish smugglers, known as kolbars, were shot near the city of Piranshahr. Although such incidents occur regularly, some reports have notably pointed towards the involvement of PMU forces.

In the past, Iran had tacitly accepted the movement of fighters linked to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) moving across the mountainous border to evade Turkish military operations, while focusing on targeting its own Kurdish separatist movement. This now appears to be changing as Iran looks to pressure the PKK over the growing links between its affiliates in the region and the US.