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The likelihood of a unilateral Turkish military operation against Kurdish-led forces in Syria has decreased amid growing cooperation with the US and the initial implementation of a buffer-zone along the border. However, the security situation facing the nascent Kurdish-led administration continues to deteriorate elsewhere in the country. In Iraq, competition between the dominant Kurdish parties has resulted in violent incidents, and the local Kurdish authorities have stepped up measures against militants operating in the region. The crackdown against the Kurdish political movement continues in Turkey, where local mayors have been removed and fresh charges brought against imprisoned leaders. Meanwhile, armed Kurdish groups continue to clash with the authorities in Iran.

Syria

Initial buffer-zone created between Turkey and Kurdish-led forces

The initial measures for a proposed buffer-zone between Turkey and Kurdish-led forces have begun to be implemented. In line with a US brokered agreement, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) have removed fortifications and heavy weapons from between Tell Abyad and Ras al-Ayn, paving the way for joint US-Turkey patrols in the area on September 7 and 24.

The move follows US efforts to limit the possibility of unilateral Turkish military action against the SDF, which provided the ground troops in the international campaign against the Islamic State (ISIS). Turkey regards the SDF as a security threat due to the leading role in organisation played by the People's Protection Units (YPG), a militia with close links to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK).

Negotiations between Turkey and the US over the exact nature of the buffer zone had repeatedly stalled. However, escalating rhetoric from Ankara and the continued build-up of Turkish armed forces along the border (see CEFTUS Special Briefing on Kurdish Affairs July 2019) appears to have convinced officials in Washington that the risk of a military confrontation between the two NATO allies was increasingly credible.

In response, a high-level US defence delegation arrived in Turkey on August 3 and subsequently agreed to the establishment of a joint command centre in the Turkish city of Sanliurfa to oversee the buffer-zone on August 7. However, the more controversial details regarding implementing the buffer-zone remain unresolved.

Turkey envisions a gradual expansion of its influence, beginning in the predominantly Arab regions around Tell Abyad and Ras al-Ayn and eventually extending 35km deep along the border. Jointly patrolled by US and Turkish forces, this would allow the zone to encompass the strategically significant M4 road which links YPG controlled territory to the PKK's bases

in Northern Iraq, as well as providing enough space to resettle as many as one million internally displaced people from the Syrian conflict currently located in Turkey.

The SDF have rejected this proposal, arguing it would result in its loss of control over Kurdish majority towns and cities, almost all of which lie close to the border. Instead the group has proposed a 5km buffer-zone excluding urban centres, which will remain under the control of local councils recently set up under their auspices in each region (see CEFTUS Special Briefing on Kurdish Affairs June 2019).

The US is believed to be pushing for a compromise that would see an initial 5km buffer-zone patrolled jointly by US and Turkish troops. This would later be combined with a further 10km deep zone from which the YPG would remove its heavy weaponry but retain a presence on the ground.

In this context, the SDF's recent concessions appear aimed at placating Turkey's demands while drawing Ankara further into a negotiated process with the US. The US continues to control the airspace over the SDF's territory east of the Euphrates River, and the group's leadership believes that, as long a crisis can be avoided that sees this remain in place, Turkey will eventually be forced to recognise the de-facto autonomy of their nascent administration. The precedent for this is provided by the Kurdistan Region in Iraq, which has its roots in the 1991 US imposed no-fly zone.

Notably, several Turkish generals thought to have opposed further cooperation with the US in Syria requested retirement at a meeting of the country's Supreme Military Council earlier this month. The move has widely been interpreted as a rejection of the Syria policy led by Defense Minister and former General Chief of Staff Hulusi Akar, who played a pivotal role in the August 7 agreement.

Looking forward: A unilateral Turkish military intervention against the nascent Kurdish-led administration in Northern Syria on a significant scale is now unlikely and would require an unprecedented confrontation between Ankara and Washington. However, Turkey will continue to test the boundaries of its agreement with the US, possibly by constructing temporary military instalments in the buffer-zone with the aim of making them permanent.

Disturbances, deteriorating security situation at camp for displaced peoples

A woman has been killed and at least seven others injured during unrest at a camp for internally displaced people near the town of al-Hawl. The camp's population of around 69,000 people has been drawn predominantly from areas captured during the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) campaign against the Islamic State (ISIS). Around 95% of the residents are women and children, a significant minority of which are believed to retain an allegiance to ISIS.

On September 30, SDF affiliated internal security forces sought to break-up an alleged meeting of an ISIS-inspired court system in an area of the camp dominated by foreign

nationals. The intervention is believed to have sparked a riot during which an exchange in gunfire between the crowd and camp security resulted in the casualties.

The security situation inside the camp has deteriorated in recent weeks following a call by ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi for its residents to be ‘liberated’. In response, local authorities have placed a greater emphasis on external over internal security, a possible factor in the recent unrest.

Looking forward: The scale of the challenge posed by the al-Hawl camp makes it almost impossible for local authorities to resolve without the support of the international community. Failing this, the situation looks set to continue to deteriorate resulting in growing instability.

Iraq

Violent incidents as competition continues between ruling parties

Shots have been fired at the offices of Kurdistan Region in Iraq’s (KRI) two dominant parties amid rising political tensions. At around 01:30 on September 20, unknown gunmen in a car targeted the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) headquarters in Sulaymaniyah causing only superficial damage to the building. In apparent response, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan’s (PUK) office in Erbil came under fire from unknown gunmen at around 23:00.

The tit for tat attacks appear to be linked to the decision by KDP security forces to temporarily block a prominent member of the PUK from entering the regional capital Erbil on September 19. The KRI is roughly divided into two spheres of influence, with KDP security forces controlling Erbil and the surrounding region and their PUK counterparts overseeing the area around Sulaymaniyah.

The apparent targeting of each other’s offices within their respective spheres of influence comes amid friction over implementing a power sharing agreement signed between the two parties in March. The deal included the creation of a second deputy prime minister position for the PUK to balance the KDP’s control of both the Kurdistan Regional Government’s prime ministry and presidency. However, the decision by Prime Minister Masrour Barzani to appoint several executive assistants has led the PUK to accuse the KDP of seeking to sideline their deputy prime minister and further centralise power.

Looking forward: The incidents in Erbil and Sulaymaniyah have again raised the prospect of competition between the KDP and PUK resulting in the repartitioning of the Kurdish region into two separate administrations. However, both parties continue to share an interest in cooperating and have reached an agreement to field joint candidates in elections scheduled to take place later this year in the strategically significant region of Kirkuk.

Security measures against Kurdish militants increased

The Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq has cracked down on figures associated with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) after the assassination of a Turkish consular figure in Erbil by gunmen linked to the group (see CEFTUS Special Briefing on Kurdish Affairs July 2019). KRG security forces have placed restrictions on entering and exiting Makhmur Refugee Camp where the PKK has long maintained significant influence. And several members of the PKK affiliated Kurdistan Free Society Movement (KFSM) have been detained along with at least two journalists from the ideologically aligned Roj News Agency.

However, senior figures from both sides have sought to downplay the risk of a confrontation between the PKK and the KRG. The PKK has clashed with the KRG's dominant political factions in the past, most recently in January 2001 when its fighters were involved in skirmishes with the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). In May 1997, the PKK fought forces from the Kurdistan Democratic Party in and around Erbil as part of the Kurdistan Civil War. On both occasions, the KRG parties were supported by Turkey, which has long sought to inhibit PKK operations in the mountainous border region with Iraq.

Thus far, the KDP appears to have resisted pressure from Ankara to become directly drawn into ongoing Turkish military operations against the PKK in Iraq (see below). But the KDP is believed to be cooperating closely with Turkish intelligence to limit PKK activities in the region it controls.

Turkey

Turkish military operation targets Kurdish militants' supply routes in Iraq, senior figure killed

Turkish security forces launched the third phase of their operation targeting the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in northern Iraq on August 23. The first two phases, dubbed Claw-1 and Claw-2, predominantly targeted areas in the Hakurk region, aiming to destroy hideouts and cut off supply and communication routes to the PKK headquarters located in the Qandil Mountains. Operation Claw-3 is now focusing on the Sinat-Haftanin areas of Duhok province, with the aim of obstructing movement across and within the Turkish-Iraqi border area.

The Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) has recently hardened its position against the PKK (see above) and is increasingly assisting Turkish operations against the group in Iraq. Last month, light armoured vehicles were deployed to assist in Claw-1 and Claw-2 target areas, and since the beginning of August peshmerga forces have installed checkpoints on routes to Hakurk and Qandil.

Turkey is believed to be seeking to install a permanent base in Hakurk to cut supply and communication routes to Qandil. While Turkey has previously failed in this endeavour, assistance from the KRG and advances Turkish military technology have made success increasingly likely. Nonetheless, maintaining control over a permanent base through the

winter months, with heavy snowfall and poor visibility, would represent a significant challenge.

On August 20, a Turkish airstrike is believed to have killed Layla Karabash a senior member of the PKK's armed wing known as the People's Defence Forces (HPG). Karabash is the latest senior figure from the group to be killed following the assassination of Diyar Garip (see CEFTUS Special Briefing on Kurdish Affairs June 2019), who was responsible for the organisation in Iraq and logistics between Qandil and northern Syria.

Kurdish mayors removed amid accelerating domestic crackdown

Mayors from the Pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) have been removed from their posts and replaced by state appointed trustees in the south-eastern cities of Mardin, Diyarbakir and Van. The dismissed mayors, all approved to run for office prior to the March elections by Turkey's Supreme Electoral Commission, are now under investigation for a number of charges, including propagandising for, and membership of a terrorist organisation. Their replacements are likely to keep their positions until the next municipal elections scheduled for 2024.

The move is a repeat of 2016, when dozens of elected HDP mayors were removed from their posts on terror-related charges after the failed coup. Several mayors won who back their positions in the March local elections have begun reporting on fraudulent and profligate spending by their state-appointed predecessors. While this month's dismissals will stymie embarrassing revelations for state, the move comes amid a broader crackdown on the Kurdish political movement which has effectively ended hopes that President Erdogan may pursue a more conciliatory path with the Kurdish population.

On September 18, new charges were also brought against imprisoned HDP leaders Selahattin Demirtas and Figen Yuksekdag, effectively circumventing recent rulings by a Turkish court and the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) that they should be released.

Since March, 88 HDP municipal officials have been sacked or suspended, and over 500 people have been detained in raids across the country in August alone. On 29 August, President Erdogan indicated that HDP deputies could be detained when Parliament returns from recess on October 1. Nine HDP deputies are currently in prison.

Tough action on domestic threats helps deflect attention from Erdogan's impotence regarding the unfolding crisis in Idlib and a lack of significant progress over a safe-zone in northern Syria. Meanwhile, threats from a budding splinter party led by former Finance Minister Ali Babacan have gathered pace with the resignation of another heavyweight of the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP), former Justice Minister Sadullah Ergin, leaving Erdogan increasingly dependent on his nationalist coalition partners.

Iran

Clashes involving Kurdish groups continue

Skirmishes between the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and armed Kurdish opposition groups along the Iraqi Kurdish border have continued through late August and September. On August 28, two fighters affiliated with the Kurdistan Democratic Party – Iran (KDP-I) were killed in a clash in Piranshahr. The action is thought to have followed the killing of an IRGC member by an unknown gunman in the city. Reports that two people were shot and killed supporting the KDP-I around 10 days later remain unconfirmed. Two further IRGC deaths have since been reported in the near Iran's western border.

On August 6, shortly after officials from the Iranian province of Maku and Turkey's eastern province of Van agreed to enhance border security co-operation, an exchange of fire with the PKK in the border area resulted in the death of two IRGC members. In recent months Turkey and Iran have shown willing to co-operate to tackle the PKK and its Iranian affiliate in the mountainous border regions between Iran, Turkey and Iraq.

Meanwhile, a crackdown on Kurdish political activity has intensified with dozens arrested in recent weeks. The Kurdistan Human Rights Association (KMMK) estimates some 280 Kurds have been detained for political activism this year