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The US decision to halt its withdrawal from Syria has again shifted the balance of forces in the Kurdish-led autonomous region, leaving the local administration with a strategic dilemma as low-level clashes continue with Turkey-backed proxies. Similarly, Iranian missile strikes in Iraq pose difficulty for the Kurdistan Regional Government's efforts to balance Washington and Tehran. Meanwhile, crackdowns on the Kurdish movements in Turkey and Iran continue unabated.

Syria

US consolidates presence in Kurdish-led region

US forces have intercepted a series of Russian military patrols in Northern Syria, adding to indications that they are set to remain in the country on a medium-term basis following a period of uncertainty.

Early last October, the Trump administration ordered a rapid withdrawal of troops from the area controlled by the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) known as the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES). This was, however, partially reversed weeks later amid apparent US concern to retain influence over Syria's oil and gas reserves at the expense of the Assad regime and its allies.

US troops now appear to be consolidating their presence in the AANES' energy rich provinces in Eastern Syria: Deir ez-Zor to the south and Hasakah in the north. In the most significant incident, on January 25 US armoured vehicles blocked their Russian counterparts from entering Tall Tamr, a town strategically located at the junction between the main road to Hasakah's provincial capital and the M4 motorway, which functions as the key transport route through Northern Syria

The move is an apparent attempt to place a buffer on Russian efforts to fill the vacuum left by the US' withdrawal from bases further west, and limit access to the Rmelan oil fields in Northern Hasakah. Notably, a US military base located 20km east of Tall Tamr along the M4, near the village of Tell Beydar, is reportedly being significantly expanded.

The SDF has played a role in mediating the confrontations as it attempts to balance the interests of both powers. This strategy, however, remains unsustainable in the long-term, with the SDF's continued control of Syria's energy resources with US-backing incompatible with Russia's aim of securing the viability of the government in Damascus.

Russia played a crucial role in limiting the Turkish incursion into the AANES following the US' withdrawal last October, overseeing the deployment of Assad-regime forces to SDF areas. A continued US presence in the region shifts this dynamic, potentially making the SDF, rather than Turkish proxies, the main obstacle to restoring Damascus' authority across Syria.

In response, Russia is likely to further step-up pressure on the SDF to end relations with the US and reach an agreement with Damascus, or face the prospect of renewed Turkish military action. The current stalemate in the AANES is being maintained in-part by Russian

and Turkish differences elsewhere, including over the Syrian opposition's last strong-hold in Idlib and the escalating conflict in Libya.

However, there are growing signs that Ankara is preparing the ground in Syria for a deal with Moscow. Credible although as yet unconfirmed reports indicate that Turkey has told its armed proxies in Afrin to prepare for the arrival of Russian military police to the area. Turkey has controlled Kurdish-majority Afrin since launching an incursion against the SDF in January 2018, and such a move would represent a significant step towards the region transitioning back to the authority of Damascus.

Ankara is unlikely to cede influence over Syrian territory without Russian support against the SDF, but this may now also be in Moscow's interests. As precedent, the 2018 Turkish military operation in Afrin was greenlighted by Russia to penalise the SDF for the group's ever-closer relationship with the US.

Looking forward: A Moscow-brokered settlement between the SDF and the Assad regime remains the most likely outcome. The basis of a deal is already de-facto in place as the two sides work together against Turkish influence in the region (see below). And Kurdish sources are increasingly alluding to on-going back-channel negotiations.

The question remains how much the SDF can leverage the renewed US support against Russian threats of further Turkish intervention to secure favourable terms. The unpredictability of the Trump administration makes this difficult, with the growing questions over the US presence in Iraq also having a destabilising influence.

Skirmishes along the frontlines of the Turkish incursion, ceasefire largely continues to hold

The most significant incidents have taken place along the eastern axis. Syrian and Turkish artillery positions have repeatedly exchanged fire around Tall Abu Raysan and Turkish proxies launched an unsuccessful attempt to capture the town from the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) on January 26. Similar clashes have taken place further south around Tall Tamr, centring around the village of Umm al-Keif. Syrian Air Force strikes against Turkish-backed militias in the area are reported to have resulted in significant casualties on January 29.

The western and southern axis have seen markedly fewer incidents. This is likely attributable to the presence of Russian forces, which are supporting the Assad-regime's efforts to constrain Turkish influence in Syrian. In contrast, while the US military is consolidating its position in the east, most notably in Tall Tamr (see above), it has not sought to intercede against Turkish advances. This reflects both Washington's reluctance to challenge Ankara and a hostility to the Assad-regime forces that have been deployed to support the SDF.

Looking forward: The contrast between the Russian and US spheres of influence illustrates the potential challenges facing the SDF should there be a decline in relations with Moscow or Damascus. Ain Issa, which functions as the organisation's military and civilian headquarters, is particularly at threat. Turkey has made several attempts to take the city before the substantial deployment of Russian Military police. It would likely be the first target of any Russia-Turkey deal in the region.

Iraq

Iranian missiles target US in Kurdish region

Five of the 22 ballistic missiles fired by Iran at US military facilities in Iraq on January 8 are believed to have targeted positions in the Kurdish region. At least one projectile failed to detonate, landing near the village of Saydan on the outskirts of the regional capital Erbil, while four others are reported to have been intercepted before they could reach a US base close to the city. The remaining missiles hit Ain Assad Air Base in western Iraq, injuring as many as 50 US personnel.

The strikes follow a number of tit-for-tat incidents that have seen tensions escalate between Washington and Tehran in Iraq but represent the first time that Iran or its local allies have targeted US positions in Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) territory. And the high-profile nature of the attack, an act of public revenge for the US killing of Iranian general Qasem Soleimani, carried out by the Iranian military rather than a local proxy force, appears politically calculated.

The KRG has close historical relations with the US and would likely oppose recent moves by pro-Iranian factions in the Iraqi parliament to have American troops expelled from the country, possibly by offering to host them within the Kurdish region. The Iranian show of strength is likely a warning to the KRG that siding with the US would have consequences.

Notably, local media reports indicate that the US is planning to expand its presence in the Kurdish region, increasing its number of bases from two to five, and scaling up troop numbers from 450 to 2000. This is said to include a base at Halabja, less than 15km from the Iranian border. This has not been possible to independently verify.

Looking forward: The KRG has little option but to maintain good relations with Iran, which borders its territory and is a key powerbroker in Iraq. Simultaneously, an increased US military commitment in the country potentially strengthens its position against both Tehran and Baghdad. However, given the often-erratic nature of the Trump administration, the KRG's interests are likely best served by a de-escalation between its two allies.

Turkey assassinates commander aligned with Kurdish militia

A Turkish airstrike has killed the commander of a Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) affiliated militia near the Syrian border in Sinjar. A vehicle carrying Zardasht Shingali was targeted by a Turkish jet near the village of Dugure at around 11:30 am on January 15. Three other members of the group known as the Sinjar Resistance Units (YBS) are also believed to have been killed in the strike.

Sinjar is the historic home of the Yazidi religious minority and was overrun by the Islamic State (ISIS) in August 2014, prompting an intervention by the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and the formation of the YBS. The town's strategic position provides a crucial link between the PKK's leadership in Northern Iraq and their People's Protection Unit (YPG) allies in Northern Syria.

This is the second time Turkey has successfully targeted the YBS leadership, having killed founding member Ismail Ozden with a similar strike in August 2018. Although Turkey

continues to engage in military operations against the PKK in Northern Iraq, strikes so deep into Iraqi territory remain uncommon. However, the current instability elsewhere in the country may have provided the necessary opportunity, with the government in Baghdad currently in little position to object.

Turkey

No-change in political realities facing Kurdish movement

Repression of the Kurdish political movement in Turkey continues, with the government's room for manoeuvre effectively bound by domestic and foreign realities. President Erdogan's Justice and Development Party (AKP) remains reliant on the far-right Nationalist Action Party (MHP) and has sought to appease its junior partner by hardening its stance against the Kurdish movement in the south-east.

Meanwhile, Erdogan has maintained that Kurdish groups in Syria pose a threat to Turkey's national security during negotiations with Presidents Assad and Putin, in which he seeks to secure a deal that will dismantle the Kurds' fledgling statelet in Syria. So long as this remains the case, any hope of reconciliation with Kurdish groups at home is unlikely.

Repression in the south-east has continued to target members and officials of the predominantly Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP). Over 30 HDP mayors elected in local elections last March have been dismissed on terror-related charges and replaced by state-appointed trustees. Several remain in prison following their removal, including the former mayor of Diyarbakir Selcuk Mizrakli, who faces a sentence of up to 15 years. Former HDP deputy Caglar Demirel, who was arrested in 2015 and charged with membership of a terrorist organisation, has been sentenced to 7 years and 6 months in prison. Dozens of councillors, party members and activists have also been sacked, detained or jailed in recent weeks.

In response, the HDP has sought to build greater co-operation with other Kurdish parties it formed an alliance with to After three mayors were removed in August, a high profile HDP delegation visited the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), calling for greater regional co-operation between Kurdish groups. More recently, in an attempt to diffuse intra-Kurdish rivalries, prominent HDP MP Leyla Guven has argued Masoud Barzani, leader of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) in the KRI, must play a greater role uniting the Kurds regionally. In Turkey this month, the HDP held a two-day conference to bring together the eight parties it formed an alliance with to contest Turkey's March 2019 local elections.

Looking forward: The HDP have called for early elections, arguing that by dismissing dozens of mayors the ruling coalition has lost legitimacy. A vote is not due until 2023, but Erdogan may feel compelled to pre-empt a fallout from Turkey's deepening economic crisis by calling them early. Whenever the next election comes, the political outlook for the Kurds will likely depend on whether Erdogan must once again rely upon an electoral pact with the MHP, or whether he courts the Kurdish vote in an attempt to secure an outright AKP majority.

Potentially significant military activity in Kurdish region

There are growing reports of unseasonably high levels of Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) activity in South-East Turkey, with significant numbers of Turkish troops being deployed to the area in response. Heavy snow around PKK bases in the mountainous border region with Iraq traditionally sees a lull in operations by both sides in the winter months. However, there are signs that the armed group has sought to continue to supply its forward operating bases in the region.

This is potentially points towards a large-scale PKK offensive in the spring, a possible effort to relieve pressure on their Syrian allies facing a Turkish offensive (see above). However, it may also be a response to on-going efforts by the Turkish military to cut-off access to the group's headquarters in Northern Turkey, which continue in limited form despite the weather.

Iran

Protests in Kurdish region

Renewed anti-government protests in Tehran have spread to the Kurdish cities of Sanandaj and Kermanshah, seeing dozens of Kurds arrested. Extra security forces have been deployed to the areas since November, when widespread social unrest swept the country in response to a hike in petrol prices. They were quelled by a severe police response which resulted in some 1,500 civilian deaths over two weeks of unrest.

Arrests and fatalities are understood to have been disproportionately high in the Kurdish provinces. A number of Kurdish activists remain in prison on a range of charges in raids following the protests, including cooperating with a Kurdish opposition party and protesting Turkey's incursion into Northern Syria.

In response, five major Kurdish parties issued a joint statement in December calling for Kurds to boycott the upcoming Parliamentary elections, which will take place on February 21. The five parties comprise the Cooperation Center of Iranian Kurdistan's Political Parties, which was formed in 2018 to facilitate Kurdish unity and co-ordination, after Iranian missiles killed 14 people in a missile strike targeting the headquarters of the Kurdistan Democratic Party-Iran (KDP-I) and the Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan (PDKI).