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The apparently linked killings of a senior Kurdish militant and a Turkish official have threatened to draw the Kurdistan Region in Iraq into a conflict being increasingly played out across all four countries. In Syria, Turkey is stepping up preparations for a new military operation against the Kurdish-led autonomous region but continues to be thwarted in its ambitions by the US. While in Iran, the government has entered formal talks with the armed Kurdish opposition, but clashes continue.

Iraq

Turkish official and senior Kurdish militant killed, growing threat of instability

A Turkish consulate official has been killed in the capital of the Kurdistan Region in Iraq. Osman Kose was shot at close range by three gunmen armed with silenced pistols as he met an associate in a restaurant in Erbil at around 12:00 on July 17. Three gunmen appear to have carried out surveillance of the building from a passing vehicle before returning, taking up two separate positions and then acting in unison.

Two other men sitting at an adjacent table were simultaneously targeted and killed. They have been named locally as Iraqi Kurds Nariman Osman and Beshdar Ramazan. Their relationship with Kose remains unclear. Osman appears to have previously worked as a bodyguard and may have been acting in that capacity to Kose's associate, believed to be a local businessman, who was not targeted.

No group has claimed responsibility for the killing. However, the choice of target and relatively sophisticated nature of the attack would suggest the involvement of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). Two suspects have been arrested by Iraqi Kurdish authorities. This includes the brother of Dersim Dag, a member of the Turkish parliament representing the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP).

The PKK's involvement in the incident appears to have been partially confirmed by a senior commander on July 24. Speaking to sympathetic media, Bahoz Erdal denied any direct PKK role in the killings but referred to the perpetrators as "sympathizers of the movement". He further accused Kose of being a Turkish National Intelligence Agency (MIT) agent involved in the recent assassination of leading PKK figure Diyar Garip. It appears credible that Kose was working for MIT, although the exact nature of his role could not be confirmed.

Garip, an executive member of the Kurdistan Communities Union (KCK), the cross-national umbrella organisation that includes the PKK, was targeted by a Turkish precision airstrike on July 5. Also known as Halmat Diyar, he is believed to be the first high-ranking PKK figure to be killed in the Qandil Mountains, where the near impenetrable terrain has traditionally provided the group's leadership with a safe-haven. On July 24, the Turkish Defence Ministry claimed a similar targeted strike had killed Erdogan Unal, the PKK member they accuse of orchestrating the Erbil attack. This has not been confirmed by the PKK and could not be independently verified.

In recent months, the Turkish military has sought to step up pressure on the PKK's key bases around Qandil in the mountainous Iraq-Iran border, launching a sustained air campaign and a growing number of ground incursions (see below). The clashes and resulting instability have brought growing

condemnation of the PKK by local Iraqi Kurdish authorities, which have accused the group of dragging the region into an external conflict.

Notably, PKK-affiliated news outlets recently reported the foundation of a new group in the Iraqi border region drawn from the local population. Nominally independent, the Southern Kurdistan Self-Defence Forces' stated aim is to counter Turkey's on-going cross-border military operations. The new group's relationship with the PKK remains unclear, but it would be unable to operate in the area without the latter's consent.

Looking forward: Together, the incident in Erbil and the formation of a new affiliated militia in the border region mark a possible shift in the PKK's operations in Iraq. Amid unprecedented pressure on its Qandil headquarters, the group appears increasingly ready to go on the counter-offensive, with the killing a high-value Turkish target in Erbil's government district demonstrating the scale of the security threat the group can pose in the region.

This presents several challenges for the local Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), which has sought to cultivate an image of safety and stability for international investors, and remains reluctant to be drawn into an into an unpopular and potentially volatile intra-Kurdish conflict.

However, the Erbil incident has strengthened a growing tendency within the KRG to side with Turkey in taking a stronger stance against the PKK. The military dynamics driving the expansion of PKK activity in the region are also likely to continue, increasing the potential for future crises to escalate.

New cabinet named amid growing rift in leading party

Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) Prime Minister Masrour Barzani's first cabinet has been ratified by a parliamentary vote on July 10. Cabinet positions have been allocated on the basis of individual agreements reached between Barzani's Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the region's two other largest political groupings. The KDP will control a majority of the most senior ministries, including interior, justice, health and education. Qubad Talabani of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) has been made deputy prime minister, with his party given a number of smaller ministerial posts. And the Gorran Movement (Gorran) will hold the finance and Peshmerga ministries, alongside three other junior positions.

The influential position of energy minister has been left vacant amid an ongoing dispute between the prime minister and President Nechirvan Barzani. The President is believed to favour Ashti Hawrami continuing in the post, having served as energy minister previously during Nechirvan Barzani's term as prime minister. The current prime minister, however, is believed to be keen to appoint a loyalist. The KRG's revenues are derived almost entirely from oil and gas extraction, making the energy ministry of key political importance.

The rift is the first public sign of tension between the KRG's most powerful figures since internal KDP politicking saw Masrour Barzani put forward as prime minister and Nechirvan Barzani moved to the presidency. The new prime minister has since sought to bolster his authority with his cabinet appointments, removing many of the ministers associated with his predecessor. In response, the president is believed to have increasingly sought support from Turkey, with whom he built close political and economic links by expanding oil exports as prime minister.

Looking forward: This month's shooting of a Turkish consular official in Erbil (see above) is likely to be a pivotal moment in relations with Ankara and has the potential to strengthen President

Nechirvan Barzani's position. The incident is particularly politically embarrassing for Masrour Barzani who, prior to becoming prime minister, chaired the KRG's security council with responsibility for intelligence and counter-terrorism. Masrour Barzani is therefore under pressure to take a strong stance against the PKK, raising the risk of escalation.

Syria

Further Turkish military build-up along border with Kurdish-led region

Turkey has continued its military build-up along the Syrian border amid renewed threats from Ankara against Kurdish-led forces in the region. Leave for Turkish military personnel in the south-east of the country has been cancelled, while armoured divisions and special forces have now been deployed near Suruc and Akcakale, which lie opposite the Syrian Democratic Force's (SDF) controlled cities of Kobane and Tell Abyad respectively.

Turkish sources indicate that preparations are underway for a new military operation as the first step in the creation of a buffer-zone along the Syrian border. A southward advance from the Suruc-Akkakale axis would be combined with an eastward movement from the Syrian city of Jarabulus, which Turkey has controlled since its first intervention into the country in August 2016. The offensive would aim to reach the city of Ayn Issa which, at just under 40km from the Turkish border, is located within range of the military's T-155 Firtina Howitzers.

Turkey has threatened to launch a similar operation on several previous occasions, most recently in January this year, but was blocked from doing so by the ongoing presence of US forces in the area, including a military base in Ayn Issa. Turkey's military strategy would also likely depend on the advantage of close air support, effectively requiring permission from the US, which controls Syrian airspace east of the Euphrates River. However, US attitudes to Turkey's role in the region continue to harden (see below).

On July 22, a rocket fired from SDF-held territory in Hasakah injured six in the Turkish city of Ceylanpinar. Turkey responded with artillery fire targeting SDF positions directly across the border in the city of Ras al-Ayn without resulting in casualties. SDF officials have been quick to condemn the incident as an attempted provocation and local security forces have arrested an alleged perpetrator. On the same day four years earlier, the killing of two policeman in Ceylanpinar provided the pretext for Turkey ending its ceasefire with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK).

Turkey – US negotiations over Kurdish-led region falter

On July 21, US Special Envoy to Syria James Jeffrey arrived in Ankara for further talks aimed at avoiding a confrontation between Turkey and the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). However, there was no agreement in ongoing talks over a proposed buffer-zone along the Syrian border between Turkey and SDF territory, with growing indications that the US is taking an increasingly strong stance in negotiations.

In comments published on July 8, James Jeffrey went further than ever before in committing US troops to a long-term role in Syria. In doing so, he appears to have ended Turkey's ambitions to replace the US presence in the region and removing the SDF in favour of its own local allies. The SDF remains reliant on the US military support it began to receive as part of the campaign to defeat the

Islamic State. But Turkey regards the SDF as an existential threat due to leading member's links to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK).

The US officials are now believed to be proposing to take the lead in overseeing the buffer-zone. However, this would likely require a military force beyond the Trump administration's commitment to a substantial withdrawal from the country. The question of airspace is therefore likely to be crucial. The SDF is pushing for a US-imposed no fly-zone, which would remove much of the threat of a Turkish assault (see above). But this is likely to be strongly opposed by Turkey, with a US no-fly-zone over the Kurdish areas in Iraq forming the basis for eventual regional autonomy.

Looking forward: A new Turkish operation in Syria remains unlikely but cannot be ruled out. With Turkey-US relations close to a historic low, Ankara may conclude that it has little left to lose, and a show of force may strengthen its hand in negotiations in other areas. Turkey's 1974 intervention in Cyprus against the wishes of the US provides a possible precedent.

Turkey

Government resumes crackdown on Kurdish opposition

A wave of arrests has targeted political activists in Ankara and the predominantly Kurdish south-east. Dozens of members and politicians from the pro-Kurdish Democratic Peoples' Party (HDP) have been detained, including several recently elected mayors. Commemorations of the July 20, 2015 Suruc bombing which killed dozens of pro-Kurdish activists, were obstructed and mourners detained by police.

In the lead up to last month's re-run of the Istanbul mayoral election, the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) had taken an increasingly conciliatory stance towards Kurdish groups, a key voter demographic. However, having failed to secure a victory for its candidate, the government appears to have reverted to repression

Prior to the June vote, imprisoned Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) leader Abdullah Ocalan was granted visits from his lawyers, breaking his near five-year isolation on Imrali Island. The AKP's decision to end Ocalan's isolation gave rise to hope they could restart the peace process with the PKK, likely as part of a wider deal with the group's Syrian affiliate. Yet even this rudimentary progress toward negotiations has been all but reversed, with visitation requests by Ocalan's family and lawyers being denied since the AKP's electoral defeat.

The AKP's hardening position has seen a step-up in military operations targeting the PKK in Turkey's south-east. Troops have been deployed in Diyarbakir and 'security zones' declared in Hakkari and Bitlis. While security zones are ostensibly imposed to aid operations against the PKK, restriction of political activity is often concomitant. At least four Turkish soldiers have been killed in Hakkari and Siirt in July, while five PKK fatalities have been reported in operations across the provinces of Hakkari, Diyarbakir, and Siirt.

Further Turkish military operations against Kurdish militants in Iraq

On July 12 the Turkish military launched the second phase of its operation targeting PKK locations in Iraqi Kurdistan. While operations under Claw-1 in the Hakurk region have continued, Claw-2 has focused on caves and shelters in the Zap, Gara and Medina regions, employing fighter jets, drones, and laser-guided missiles. Some 400 villages have been evacuated across the border areas, and while

civilian casualties continue to draw the ire of Baghdad and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), a response beyond rhetoric is unlikely.

On July 29 Iraqi Kurdish peshmerga linked to the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), one of the main parties in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), were reportedly deployed to areas targeted by Claw-1 and Claw-2 within Duhok and Erbil Provinces to assist with the Turkish campaigns. Bringing major roads around PKK bases in Duhok and around Qandil under peshmerga control would assist Turkish aims to sever vital supply and communication routes and appropriate them to facilitate trade with the KRI.

Military assistance from Iraqi Kurdish forces would represent a significant escalation in the conflict and a marked shift from the status quo. The two groups have not directly clashed since 1997, when the KDP assisted a major Turkish offensive to remove the PKK from Erbil.

Iran

Authorities open negotiations with Kurdish groups, violence continues to escalate

Iran has entered mediated talks with multiple local Kurdish opposition groups for the first time since the Islamic revolution. Kurdish parties met with Iranian officials in Oslo under the auspices of the Norwegian Center for Conflict Resolution (NOREF) in May and June, with a third meeting believed to be scheduled for August. The meetings come as growing tensions between Iran and the US have raised the potential for armed Kurdish groups to become American proxies in a future conflict.

Meanwhile, clashes have continued to proliferate along the border with the Kurdistan region in Iraq. Three members of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) were shot dead in Piranshahr on July 9. In response Iranian artillery targeted a key road near opposition groups' bases in the Barbazin Heights located in the Iraqi district of Sidakan. This was followed by drone strikes on July 12, with the PDK-I reporting damages and Komala reporting one fatality.

At least one IRGC member was killed in clashes with the Kurdistan Free Life Party (PJAK), widely considered to be the Iranian arm of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), in the Sarvabad area on July 26. Since May, extensive military deployments to Sarvabad, Paweh and Kamyaran to quell militant activity have been reported, coinciding with Turkish military operations in the region (see above).