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Turkish Army troops on the Syrian-Turkish border overlooking the besieged city of Kobane.

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HOUTHIS CONTINUE TO CONSOLIDATE CONTROL IN YEMEN

James Brandon

During the last fortnight, Yemen's Houthi movement has continued to expand and consolidate its control over the country's central and western regions, as well as in the capital Sana'a. In particular, the group pushed further southwards to capture Radmah in Ibb province on October 29, and eastwards to Marib, on the fringes of the Empty Quarter desert. The group had earlier captured the western Red Sea port of Hodeidah on October 15. In a sign of their growing confidence, Houthi leaders have also brushed off threats of UN sanctions. "We are not afraid of the United Nations or any tyrant entity," said Abdul-Malik al-Houthi in a public speech (Press TV [Tehran], November 4).

As well as seizing territory, the Houthis have also continued to attack and harass their long-time Sunni rivals, Islah (the Yemeni branch of the Muslim Brotherhood). In Ibb city, on October 31, Houthi fighters attacked Islah's provincial headquarters, leading to fighting in which at least three people were killed (Middle East Online, November 1). Two days later, on November 2, armed Houthis raided two Islah buildings in Sana'a, kidnapping three students. A Houthi spokesman said that the various raids had been conducted as part of a search for weapons. In a related move intended to strengthen their support in Sana'a at the expense of Islah and its supporters, the Houthis have also been offering tours of General Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar's opulent house to demonstrate the wealth enjoyed by the former regime. Mohsen, a pro-Islah ex-ally of former president Ali Abdullah Saleh and a long-standing opponent of the Houthis, had fled to Saudi Arabia when the Houthis seized the capital in September. Separately, the Houthis' political coalition, the Joint Meeting Parties (JMP), has sought in recent days to strengthen its overall political position by building stronger relations with southern separatist groups, notably offering them increased ministerial positions in the government (*Yemen Times*, November 4).

At the same time, however, the Houthis have continued to encounter significant resistance during recent weeks as they move beyond their traditional, mainly rural, strongholds in Yemen's remote north. In the Jebal Ras area of Hodeidah governorate, in western Yemen, several days of fierce fighting took place in early November between the Houthis and hardline Sunni militants (al-Bawaba, November 4). Heavy fighting with militants from al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) also occurred in late October in al-Baydha governorate, notably around al-Manaseh (*Yemen Times*, October 27). Meanwhile in the key central city of Taiz, Houthi fighters were deterred from entering the city after the local military commander entrenched his forces in the area and the city's governor refused the group's requests to enter the city (SABA News Agency [Sana'a], October 27]. In another blow, Muhammad Abdul-Malik al-Motawakal, a centrist politician from the Union of Popular Forces party, who had recently mediated between the Houthis and the country's government, was assassinated in Sana'a on November 2. In southern Yemen too, the Houthis' overtures to local leaders have not been always welcomed; a group of 15-20 Houthi tribesmen were arrested by local militias as they arrived in Aden governorate on October 31 and they remain detained by the local authorities (*Yemen Times*, November 4). These developments underline that while the Houthi movement continues to make significant territorial and political gains throughout much of Yemen, it is facing increasing political and military resistance as it moves out of its traditional strongholds, a trend that is likely to continue in coming months.

ISLAMIC STATE SUPPORTERS SURFACE IN AFGHANISTAN

Waliullah Rahmani

On October 20, Afghanistan's Ministry of Interior (MoI) announced that several individuals had been arrested for writing "Long Live ISIS [the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria]" on the walls of Kabul University in the capital and at some other locations and that investigations were underway (Bokhdi News Agency, October 20). A month earlier, officials in Ghazni province had reported the presence of groups of insurgents with Islamic State flags and uniforms in the province's Andar district. Ghazni's deputy governor, Muhammad Ahmadi, said that these groups had taken control of some roads and had searched travelers (Tolo News, September 21).

Although the extent of any nascent Islamic State influence in Afghanistan remains unclear, members of the group, including the leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, were present in Afghanistan in the late 1990s when al-Qaeda had training camps in various parts of the country. Sources close to Afghan officials have said that al-Baghdadi had traveled to Afghanistan along with Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the leader of al-Qaeda in Iraq until his death in 2006 (Tadbirkhabar.com, July 15).

These long-standing links between al-Qaeda and Afghanistan, dating back to Arab jihadists' involvement in fighting against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan during 1980s, mean that the emergence of an Islamic State branch in Afghanistan cannot be dismissed. In addition, given that the Taliban and its affiliated groups such as the Haqqani Network, have adopted the most radical salafi-deobandi interpretations of Islam during the last decade – as evidenced by their widespread use of suicide attacks – it is indeed possible that some of these groups may swear allegiance to al-Baghdadi if Islamic State influence continues to spread in the country.

Already a video has been distributed through social media purporting to show a group of 20 Afghans announcing their loyalty and allegiance to al-Baghdadi, saying that their total group of 5,000 fighters will be the Afghan branch of the Islamic State organization (Shafaf.ir, October 19). However, while the Islamic State's online supporters have welcomed this announcement, their opponents – such as the Syria-based al-Nusra Front and Musa al-Ghanami, a prominent Saudi pro-jihadist preacher – have cast doubt on the video's claims. For instance, they question why only 20 of the purported 5,000 militants appeared in the video.

Regardless of the video's authenticity, these developments nonetheless give clear notice that the Islamic State organization's influence may be spreading to Afghanistan, including Kabul. While the emergence of potential Islamic State supporters in the country is unlikely to have any short-term implications, it raises questions about the longer-term trajectory of Afghanistan after the planned withdrawal over the bulk of international military forces from the country in the coming months. It also underlines that during the last few years the shift of Afghanistan's society towards increasingly conservative forms of Islam and away from the traditional Hanafi school of Islam, may be making the country even more receptive to radical forms of Islam in the years ahead.

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Iran and the Anti-Islamic State Coalition

Nima Adelkah

On September 15, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran, announced on national TV that he had ruled out Iran's participation in the U.S.-led military coalition to combat the Islamic State organization, previously the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria – ISIS (IRIB, September 15). Khamenei's rebuff came as the U.S. Secretary of State, John Kerry, also ruled out the possibility of Iran joining the coalition, although he said he recognized that Iran could play an important role in defeating the militant organization (al-Jazeera, September 19). While the United States took issue with Iran's support for the Syrian government, the Iranian leader questioned the real objective of the U.S.-led military alliance. He described Washington's strategy as a "hollow and self-serving" move to exert power, which, he also said on his Twitter account, has in fact ironically undermined Washington's own interests in the region: "If the United States enters Iraq and Syria without permission, they will go through the same problems as they did over the past ten years in Iraq." [1]

The reality behind the above public statements is more complex. It should be noted from the outset that, while it is highly likely that the United States sought Iran's cooperation, as Khamenei claimed, it is also unlikely that it invited Iran to officially join the coalition. However, Washington and Tehran continue to indirectly cooperate in Iraq, with the commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, Qasem Soleimani, leading a coalition of Iraqi and Iranian ground forces to push back the Islamic State organization and clearing the way for U.S. airstrikes. Regardless of such unofficial cooperation, an Iran-U.S. alliance would not have been possible without consent from Saudi Arabia, which would have refused to join the coalition with Iran overtly on board. As a Shi'a-majority country and an ally of Syria, Iran would also obviously complicate Washington's attempt to reach out to Sunni Arab states in order to win a "coordinated military campaign" against the Salafist organization (*Jerusalem Post*, October 20). In many ways, the Sunni presence remains central to legitimize the coalition. Another major push back against Iran overtly joining the coalition would have come from the U.S. Congress, a development that could have certainly complicated the ongoing nuclear deal as the negotiations enter a crunch time with the looming November 24 deadline.

Equally important to note is that Iran's refusal to join the coalition appears less ideological and more pragmatic. First off, Iran views the Islamic State organization as a military and a sectarian threat and it also sees the Salafist group as a terrorist organization with a radical anti-Shi'a worldview. Second, similar to the United States, Iran views the Islamic State organization as a major danger to regional security, in particular, due to the potential for sectarian violence to be unleashed by the radical militants. That said, Iran is equally concerned with the return of the U.S. military in Iraq. From Tehran's perspective, the anti-Islamic State coalition serves as a cover for a renewed U.S. military adventure in the region (Shafaqna, September 10).

With memories of 2001, which saw the United States fail to recognize Iran's significant contribution to the downfall of the Taliban, still fresh in minds of many in Tehran, Iran is wary of a hidden U.S. agenda (Fars News, September 27). It views anti-Islamic State military operations as a smokescreen for a broader conflict, which is to overthrow Bashar al-Assad and ultimately undermine Iran's influence in the region (IRNA, October 11; *Keyhan*, October 10). As the Iranian president, Hassan Rouhani, has argued, the coalition airstrikes are primarily "theatrical" displays which have not curtailed the spread of the Islamic State organization in the Iraqi territories (*Jerusalem Post*, October 18; Tasnim, October 12; Yalasarat, October 10).

While such claims confirm a conspiratorial perspective among Iran's officials, the above also echo similar concerns Tehran had when another coalition was organized in 2003. The earlier coalition toppled Saddam Hussein, Iran's archenemy, but it also provided the United States with a new military base to contain Iran. Yet, it is not the containment of Iran that remains a problem for Tehran, but, more importantly, the instability that the U.S. military intervention causes in the region as a result. If anything, the American military operations in Iraq and Syria have in fact increased the threat of terrorism – as the rise of the Islamic State organization best exemplifies – and more importantly the prospect of sectarian conflict in the region.

Finally, while Tehran views the anti-Islamic State coalition, which includes Iran's main rival, Saudi Arabia, as a means to sideline Iran and its influence in Syria, and in turn weaken the Assad regime, it is on the domestic domain where Iran's anti-coalition politics ultimately play out. With hardliners entrenched in the country's intelligence and military complex, with a further base of support in the parliament, the decision to cooperate with the United States would entail too much of a political risk for the Supreme Leader. Moreover, with the new presidency of Rouhani, the attempt to reach a nuclear

deal with the United States and its allies has already been a difficult challenge, as the hardliners continue to resist all forms of negotiations with the West. Although Tehran exerts a great deal of influence in Iraq and Syria, best demonstrated by its recent push for a more stable and inclusive government in Baghdad, the faction-ridden politics in Iran involve considerable risks on the domestic level with increased strife over key foreign policy issues, including a temporary military alliance with the United States (Quds Online [Iran], October 6).

As an implicit rule, it may best serve both Washington and Tehran if their joint fight against the Islamic State organization continues on the level of indirect and unofficial military and intelligence cooperation, since both have too much to risk by forming an alliance.

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Note

1. Please see www.twitter.com/khamenei_ir.

Al-Shabaab to Face Different Direction after Appointment of New Leader

Sunguta West

In recent months, Somalia's main Islamist militant group, Harakat al-Shabaab al-Mujahideen, better known as al-Shabaab, has suffered serious setbacks in its conflict with African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) troops. Since al-Shabaab's establishment in 2006, the organization had successfully entrenched its authority in central and southern Somalia, where it has implemented a hardline form of Shari'a or Islamic law. However, on October 6, its grip on the region appeared to falter after the militants lost the southern coastal town of Barawe to AMISOM forces in Operation Indian Ocean (Sabahi Online, October 6). The coastal town, one of the group's most significant strongholds since it lost control of the capital Mogadishu in 2011 and the lucrative port of Kismayo in 2012, had served as an economic hub for the movement, especially for the illegal export of charcoal, as a transit point for arms imports, and as a logistical center. Situated about 125 miles southwest of Mogadishu, Barawe was also the last Somali seaport under al-Shabaab's control.

Nearly a month before, however, the militant group had suffered another major blow when a U.S. airstrike killed its leader and most prominent ideological figure, Ahmad Abdi Godane (a.k.a. Mukhtar Abu Zubayr) on September 1. Godane, who was 37-years-old, had overseen the growth of al-Shabaab from a local Somali jihadist group to a regional and international one. Rejecting Somali government overtures for a ceasefire, Godane, in 2009, had also notably declared allegiance to al-Qaeda. Godane's predecessor, Shaykh Adan Hashi Ayrow, was killed in a similar airstrike in 2008 (Somalia Report, September 2).

On September 6, al-Shabaab named a little known cleric, Shaykh Ahmad Umar (a.k.a. Abu Ubaidah) as its new leader (*Daily Nation* [Nairobi], September 6). Umar is believed to be in his early 40s and is known to be a hardliner within the movement (WardheerNews, September 10). He was born in the Kalafe area of the Ogaden region before moving to southern Somalia, where he helped establish Islamic schools. He also served as al-Shabaab's governor for the Bay and Bakool regions (Somali Current, September 6).

Umar's appointment will play a key role in shaping the direction of the militant group. It could be argued that al-Shabaab's loss of its key leader, its main sources of income and

significant amounts of territory signals the beginning of the end of the movement. However, a closer look at the militants' recent actions after the death of Godane indicates that al-Shabaab remains a very lethal and capable organization. The final defeat of the group will therefore likely remain elusive, despite the surge against it by AMISOM, and military actions, especially by foreign armies, are unlikely to bring this about singlehandedly.

Al-Shabaab's manpower illustrates the group's continued survival and its enduring military potency. Al-Shabaab's intelligence wing, Amniyat, and its military wing, known as Jabhad, have an estimated force strength of 5,000 fighters (Panapress, January 12). Some security organizations estimate that it has about 1,000-4,000 fighters of which at least 200-400 are believed to be foreigners. By comparison, at its inception eight years ago, the group boasted of thousands of fighters. Many of these fighters have been killed, while others have defected, but the group nonetheless clearly continues to command a considerable force.

In addition, al-Shabaab has displayed a remarkable flexibility, adapting militarily and politically to a wide range of events, especially when under pressure. Indeed, al-Shabaab is itself a consequence of such flexibility and adaptation, having emerged eight years ago as an offshoot of the Union of Islamic Court (UIC) after the courts' defeat by an alliance led by the Transitional Federal Government (TFG) forces and Ethiopian troops.

Such adaptability has been evident in al-Shabaab's ongoing conflict with AMISOM troops. In the last few years, the militant group has largely avoided head-on contact with AMISOM's 22,000 strong forces, withdrawing its fighters and weapons from advancing forces. Its fighters, instead of directly confronting AMISOM, typically melt away, splitting into small groups and then returning to launch often devastating guerrilla attacks. The groups carry out suicide bombings, small arms attacks and detonate remote controlled bombing, which are usually planted on road sides.

Godane had widely used such tactics with some great successes within Somalia. Although Umar, since his appointment in September, has not announced publicly how he plans to lead the group and has not issued any address to al-Shabaab's fighters, operationally may have little choice but to continue al-Shabaab's strategy of guerrilla warfare (Sabahi Online, October 22).

The group has escalated its assassinations of government officials and opposition members. As well as striking in Mogadishu, al-Shabaab has also cut supply lines to towns liberated by AMISOM, in addition to stopping aid from reaching these towns, forcing to residents to move elsewhere in search of food. This has undermined the government's promise that the removal of al-Shabaab from such areas would lead to a better life (Standard Media, October 10).

Al-Shabaab has also continued to carry out bomb attacks in urban areas. On October 15, five people were killed and several wounded in a car bomb explosion linked to the militants in a busy street in Mogadishu (Hiiran Online, October 16). According to news reports, several shells had been fired by the militants before the blast. Four days earlier, another car bomb had exploded at the entrance to a restaurant in the city killing seven people and injuring several others. Al-Shabaab also took responsibility for an attack on a hotel located near the Somali parliament, which targeted government officials and prominent Somali leaders. In addition, on September 8, days after the killing of Godane, the militants had carried a twin attack on AMISOM forces in Mogadishu, killing at least 12 people (Xinhua, September 8).

Godane had tried to pursue a wider jihadist agenda by carrying out attacks across the region, shifting the battleground from "wild jungle" to the "concrete" or "urban jungle." As a result, suicide attacks occurred in towns and cities in Kenya, Djibouti and Uganda. Most notably, on September 21, 2013, al-Shabaab attacked Westgate, an upscale shopping mall in Nairobi's Westlands area, killing 67 people. Godane took responsibility for the assault and also threatened more attacks. In July 2010, the group had carried out suicide bombing against crowds watching the screening of a FIFA World Cup match in Kampala, Uganda (*Guardian*, July 12, 2010). Smaller attacks targeting churches, public places and public transport have also occurred in Kenya and attacks on foreigners have occurred in Djibouti.

The group under Umar appears to be following a similar regional agenda; on October 18, Kenyan soldiers killed five al-Shabaab militants and recovered 100 kilograms of TNT explosives and six suicide bomb vests when the militants attempted to cross into Kenya by car using Ethiopia's Dolo border crossing point near Moyale town (*Daily Nation* [Nairobi], October 19).

Similarly, from an ideological and political perspective, Umar will probably not implement a major shift in al-Shabaab's relationships with the Somali government or with al-Qaeda and a large element of continuity should be. [1] At the same time, however, some significant changes can be expected. While Godane's high handedness resulted in deep divisions within al-Shabaab and even defections, there are growing reports that Umar is reaching out to formerly

dissenting leaders with a view to bringing them back to the fold, again underlining the enduring flexibility of the movement (Somalia Newsroom, September 22).

In conclusion, while Umar has remained silent about his plans for the future direction of al-Shabaab, it would be wrong to assume that the group's recent setbacks and the death of its long-standing leader mean that the defeat of al-Shabaab is imminent. Instead, although the group will likely continue to lose territory to AMISOM, its fighters are likely to continue to melt away in the face of military offensives, before attacking again elsewhere. At the same time, clan rivalry will remain the peg on which the Somali conflict hangs and the tactics and direction that al-Shabaab will take in the post-Godane period will depend largely on Umar's management of clan politics. In the past, al-Shabaab has depended extensively on the support of clans to win the control of areas of central and southern Somalia and the clans are likely to prove equally essential to it in the future.

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Note

1. "What changes for al-Shabaab after the death of Godane?," Institute for Security Studies, October 8, 2014, http://www.issafrica.org/iss-today/what-changes-for-al-shabaab-after-the-death-of-godane.

Understanding Turkey's Hesitation over the Kobane Crisis

Nihat Ali Ozcan

In recent weeks the crisis over the beleaguered Syrian city of Kobane has been a major focus of world headlines, leading to increased scrutiny of Turkey's policies toward Syria and Kobane in particular. To understand Turkey's reluctance to intervene in Kobane, it is important to retrace the steps of Turkey's evolving stance on Syria and to examine its regional interests.

Background

When the Arab Spring reached Syria, decision makers in Turkey, just as everywhere else, talked about the future of Bashar al-Assad's regime and whether or not it would survive. The Erdogan government, for its part, saw developments in Syria as an opportunity for regime change and anticipated the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood across its border. As the Assad regime continued to survive in the following months and years, the government in Ankara often encouraged the Syrian government to make reforms to allow for a peaceful regime change (*Hurriyet Daily News*, May 17, 2011).

Syria was however dragged into a bloody civil war, which rapidly activated the dormant ethnic, religious and sectarian fault lines in the country and led rapidly to rival groups turning violently on each other. Thinking that Assad would fall quickly, the Erdogan government opened its borders to refugees and provided a safe haven for opposition groups. However, the Assad regime defied these predictions and did not fall. Though its influence within Syria is now limited, it has managed to maintain control over Damascus and several other regions of the country. As the civil war ravaged the country's infrastructure, close to 200,000 persons died and more than 9 million people were made homeless (Rudaw, October 9).

Syria's Kurds and the Civil War

A brief historic background is required to understand the competition between various Kurdish groups in Syria's civil war and their choices and strategies. Organized political movements among Syrian Kurds started in the 1960s with Molla Mustafa Barzani's illegal Syrian Kurdistan Democracy Party. The Syrian government, not wanting this movement to grow in strength, instead created space for an alternative Kurdish movement to take shape. This opportunity was seized by Abdullah Öcalan's Marxist/Leninist, pro-Soviet

armed group, the Kurdistan Workers' Party (Partiya Karkeren Kurdistane – PKK). The PKK was established in Turkey in 1973 and subsequently expanded its influence into Syria, particularly following Öcalan's flight from Turkey to Syria in 1979. Ocalan would live in Syria for the following 20 years. During this time, his group was active among Syria's Kurds, recruiting, expanding its logistical links and developing powerful networks among Syria's Kurds, with minimal interference from Damascus. It also sent young Syrians into Turkey to fight against the Turkish Army and gave them positions of responsibility in the PKK.

While Turkey pressured Syria to expel Ocalan in 1998, the PKK's relations with the Syrian Kurds and the Syrian regime went through several ups and downs until the advent of the recent civil war. In addition, in 2003, Turkey had a falling out with the United States because the Turkish government did not allow coalition troops passage during the invasion of Iraq. The PKK used this opportunity to form various groups that would conduct activities in Iraq, Iran and Syria. The Syrian group, effectively the Syrian arm of the PKK, was called the Democratic Union Party (Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat - PYD).

PKK Involvement

When the Syrian civil war came, it would be no exaggeration to say that of all the Syrian opposition groups, the PKK was the only one to have a clear reading of developments, a defined set of goals and the knowledge and capabilities to achieve them. In part, this was because the group had followed Mao's famous "protracted people's war" strategy since its foundation in 1973. This meant that it had a well-developed understanding of an insurgency's organizational, timing and spatial (geographic) aspects. The movement also had a well-trained, experienced and fully indoctrinated militia cadre behind it, seasoned by the PKK's 40 years of waging guerilla war against Turkey from inside Syria.

The PKK accordingly seems to have established its Syria strategy on four basic pillars. The first was to continue an implicit relationship with the Assad regime. The second was to sideline any Kurdish groups that rejected the PKK's authority. The third was to occupy a territory that was as large as possible while still being militarily defensible and to defeat or pacify any Arab tribes that would oppose this. The fourth was to politically organize the villages and cities in this area according to the people's protracted warfare strategy.

The PKK has to this day not been in direct armed conflict with the Assad regime and the Assad regime still maintains a military presence in some PKK controlled areas. The roots of this arrangement can be traced back to the above relations developed during the Cold War between the PKK, Syria and the then Soviet Union. The other likely reason that the PKK did not direct its resources against the Assad regime in the first days of the uprising was that it remained comparatively weak from a military and political standpoint. Instead of fighting, it instead used the time to strengthen its organization. It was also not important to the PKK whether the Sunni rebels or Assad would win in the civil war. According to the PKK's political calculation, if Assad won, the PKK would reap the rewards of its implicit cooperation. However, if the Sunni Arabs won, the PKK calculated that by then it would have grown strong enough to defend its interests.

From the first days of the Syrian uprising, however, the PKK fought against any other Kurdish groups that might have opposed it in the area where it intended to establish its authority. These other Kurdish political organizations numbered around 14, including some that had been largely inactive for some time. During this initial period, the PKK's greatest opponent in this race for the leadership of the Syrian Kurds was Masoud Barzani, the leader of the Kurdistan Democrat Party (KDP) in Iraqi Kurdistan, whose bid for the leadership of the Syrian Kurds was supported by Turkey. Gradually, however, Barzani lost out to the PKK in this competition.

The Kurds compose a local majority in three areas in northern Syria, Jazeera, Kobane and Afrin. The PKK viewed these areas from the perspective of military geography and tried to broaden the areas under their control in to make them more military defensible. While the civil war was going on, the PKK declared these three unconnected areas to be its "cantons" and sent many of its men from Iraq to these cantons to provide military and administrative support (*Hurriyet Daily News*, January 29). Knowing that Sunni Arabs would become militarily engaged against Assad's largely Shi'a forces, the PKK took the opportunity to drive them out of some of their villages and towns. That some of these Arabs had already fled for Turkey made the PKK's job all the easier. But in the months ahead, a great part of the Sunni Arabs from these areas came to support the Islamic State organization, also known as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), which by then was fighting the PKK.

Despite the above, Syria and Syria's Kurds do not constitute the main strategic political priority for the PKK as the Syrian front remains of secondary importance to the group. For the PKK, the primary strategic battlefield is Turkey. However, the Syrian civil war offered the PKK unexpected opportunities and has created the following benefits for the group. Firstly, the war enabled the PKK to expand and develop its military capacity. Second, the PKK gained legitimacy in the

international arena and won new support. Third, the decline of the Syrian regime gave the PKK geopolitical depth along the Turkish border. Fourth, the PKK gained cross-border military logistical options from inside Syria. Lastly, the PKK is also obtaining experience in political governance through its Syrian cantons.

The Rise of Islamic State

The Islamic State's occupation of Mosul in June was a turning point for the PKK, which, in the immediate term, caused it to cease fighting inside Turkey in order to consolidate its control over its Syrian cantons. Meanwhile, as a result of the rapid defeat of the Iraqi Army by Islamic State fighters, Barzani's military force, the peshmerga, quickly left the Mosul area (E-Kurd, August 6). Only a few PKK militants remained in the region to defend the Kurds, including the Yazidis. The PKK's defense of these civilians led to the PKK being seen more positively by Kurds, as well as by the Western media. The PKK was now viewed as an ally of the West against the Islamic State.

Soon afterwards, Islamic State forces attacked Kobane, a Syrian canton under PKK control. By attacking the isolated canton, the Islamic State aimed to disrupt the positive view of the PKK, to win the support of local Arabs who had been displaced by the Kurds and to take advantage of the fact that the United States was not then using Syrian air space (in contrast to Iraq). Attacking Kobane also allowed the Islamic State organization to legitimize its jihadist ideology by fighting the Marxist/Leninist PKK and to gain the sympathies of the Turkish public, which are broadly anti-PKK. In the days following the jihadists' attack, about 200,000 Syrian Kurds left their homes to take refuge in Turkey (Rudaw, September 20).

Unexpectedly for the Islamic State, the PKK and its Syrian arm, the PYD, made Kobane into a matter of prestige from the start, despite Kobane having no clear military significance. Meanwhile, the Turkish Army at this stage took security precautions along its border, but did not intervene. When it seemed like Kobane might fall into the hands of Islamic State organization, the PKK asked Turkey to open a corridor to allow for the flow of Kurdish militants and heavy weapons from Syria's Kurdish enclaves and northern Iraq (Rudaw, September 20). It also reportedly asked its supporters in Turkey to stage violent street protests in its support, with the aim of pressuring the Turkish government (Kurdpress, October 8).

The Turkish government did not look kindly on the request. Still, President Erdogan asked the United States to increase its air strikes on Islamic State targets around Kobane (*Hurriyet Daily News*, October 18). At the same time, he also provided "secret" supplies of men, heavy weapons and ammunition (*Milliyet Daily*, October 12). Turkey also quietly evacuated the wounded to care for them in hospitals across the border (*Hurriyet Daily News*, October 15). On October 19, U.S. authorities announced that they had provided weapons, ammunition and medical supplies to the PYD (*Hurriyet Daily News*, October 20). At the same time, Turkey permitted Iraqi Kurdish peshmerga forces and heavy weaponry into Kobane to fight alongside the PYD (Rudaw, October 21).

Concurrently, when Kobane appeared to be in danger of falling to the Islamic State organization, PKK sympathizers in Turkey initiated public protests along the Turkey-Syria border. These protests turned violent from October 4-5 in many cities. Approximately 40 people were killed, mainly in clashes with the security forces. The government responded by trying to stem the violence through new laws, while on the other hand accelerating the domestic peace process it was conducting with Ocalan in an attempt to resolve the PKK problem in Turkey (*Today's Zaman*, October 19). As result, although Kobane was not of strategic military importance, it became a major psychological and political headache for Turkey.

Turkey's Kobane Problem

The Islamic State organization's jihad in Syria has been overshadowed in Turkey by the events in Kobane and the PKK problem. It has also distracted the Turkish government and left it in a dilemma in its negotiations with the Western coalition made up of Turkey's NATO partners. On one hand, Turkey has been severely criticized for not directly taking action to prevent the events of Kobane. There are, however, various reasons why Turkey did not become directly involved in Kobane. Both sides fighting in Kobane are officially considered by Ankara to be terrorists. Moreover, another factor complicating Turkey's position is that the country is approaching general elections, which will begin next summer. Despite its ongoing negotiations with Ocalan, the Turkish government did not want to openly supporting the PKK because of this, not least because many Turks are highly sensitive to this very issue. In addition, the Turkish military, which has fought the PKK extensively, was extremely uneasy with the idea of executing an order to assist the PKK because it feared it lacked a legal basis to do so. This situation could also create new problems in the already strained civil-military relations inside Turkey. In addition, the protests on October 4 sorely divided public opinion in Turkey, leading many Turks to lose sympathy for Kobane, while also straining Turkish-Kurdish and Arab-Kurdish tensions. The Kobane

protests also increased tensions between the pro-PKK and pro-Islamist Kurds, leading to several killings and exposing the potential for a micro-version of the Syrian civil violence. In addition, the events surrounding Kobane led the Turkish government to believe that an "invisible hand" was trying to force Turkey to enter the coalition against the Islamic State organization.

An additional challenge is the perception among many in Turkey that the United States was openly intervening in Turkey's PKK/Kurdish problem and was acting as a champion of Syria's Kurds. It also seemed to many that even if Turkey was unwilling to join the coalition, the United States would continue with its Kurdish policy regardless, potentially tarnishing the image of the United States among Turks and endangering U.S.-Turkish relations. On the other hand, the Turkish government had unexpectedly consented to the peshmerga's passage to Kobane to fight alongside their ethnic brothers. This move was intended to overshadow the PKK's military success in Kobane vis-à-vis the Islamic State organization, to address international criticism and to strengthen the position of Barzani's KDP among the Syrian Kurds. It was also hoped that establishing a corridor to Barzani's Iraqi peshmerga, instead of the PKK, would lead to less domestic criticism of the Turkish government. At this moment therefore, the ultimate outcome of the "Kobane issue" will likely play a key role in Turkey's domestic Kurdish peace process and also for the U.S.-Turkey relationship.

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