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Islamic State's Threat to the Kurds in Syria and Northern Iraq

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The Kurds in both Iraq and Syria have managed to attain significant degrees of autonomy in the last two decades. With the advances of the Islamic State organization, the Kurds have also become one of the West's most prominent allies against the militant Salafist group. This has made them a target of the Islamic State, whose attacks on the Kurds have led to increased pan-Kurdish cooperation and more Western support for the Kurds despite opposition from Turkey.

Jihadist Movements and Kurds

There are many ideological differences between Kurdish nationalist groups and the Islamic State organization, however, the Islamic State have said that they are not against Kurdish Muslims per se. As Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, the Islamic State's spokesman, explained in September: "We do not fight Kurds because they are Kurds. Rather we fight the disbelievers amongst them, the allies of the crusaders and Jews in their war against the Muslims" (Reuters, September 22). The Islamic State organization, like other jihadist groups, has also recruited some Kurds, largely from Iraq, to fight against the Iraqi Kurdish peshmerga and the Syrian Kurdish Yekiniyen Parastina Gel (YPG – People's Protection Units), a Syrian branch of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK).

In Islamic State operations in both Iraq and Syria, Kurdish jihadists have been used as suicide bombers and foot soldiers and have led operations in Kurdish territories. Reportedly, Abu Khattab al-Kurdi (i.e. the Kurd) was the top commander of the Islamic State's attack on Kobane. An Islamic State Kurdish bomber, Abd al-Rahman al-Kurdi, also blew himself up in Erbil, the capital of Iraqi Kurdistan, on November 19 (AP, November 5). [1] Most of these Kurds have been recruited in the Kurdish Islamist stronghold of Halabja in Iraq, where Kurdish and American forces uprooted Islamist militants in 2003. [2] Recent regional instability has resulted in Kurdish Islamists again posing a threat to the KRG and YPG, now by joining the Islamic State.

Aside from their alliance with the West, other reasons for the Islamic State's enmity towards Kurdish parties and the Iraqi Kurdish government include their preference of Kurdish identity above their Muslim identity, which the Islamic State sees as a threat to the establishment of an Islamic state. Many jihadists have previously accused the Kurdish leadership of being in league with the Israelis and the "Crusaders" to sway people away from supporting Kurdish parties. For their part, the Kurdish parties have been more willing than others in the region to cooperate with the West against jihadist movements, for instance, capturing Osama Bin Laden's his courier in Iraq in 2004 (Rudaw, May 9, 2011). As a result, cooperation between the Kurds and the West against the Islamic State organization is not unexpected.

Syrian Kurds and the Islamic State

As a result of these ideological differences and related political developments, it was no surprise that Islamic State jihadists would battle the Kurds, particularly since most Islamic State held-territories border Kurdish-majority areas, in both Iraq and Syria. In Syria, clashes first erupted between the YPG and Islamist groups in July 2012 over the control of territory and oil resources. In July 2013, jihadists and the Free Syrian Army (FSA) launched their first siege of the Kurdish town of Kobane (Ayn al-Arab in Arabic) in order to break up the Kurdish autonomous cantons in Syria. [3] Until 2014, however, the YPG was able to hold off these attacks without Western support and despite the group's poor ties with Iraqi Kurdistan, the Syrian Arab opposition and Turkey.

However, in mid-September, the Islamic State organization attacked Kobane again, after the YPG announced a joint operations center with the FSA that was intended to target the Islamic State's stronghold of Raqqa and urged the West to support them. According to a November Islamic State video, "Ayn al-Islam became a haven for every enemy of the *Khilafah* [Islamic state]." [4] This latest Islamic State attack on Kobane led to the United States and others delivering weapons to the YPG (VOA, October 20). Although the Islamic State initially captured much of Kobane, foreign air support and the YPG's military resolve managed to prevent the Islamists from taking over the city and the Islamic State's gains in the city have now been partially reversed.

Iraqi Kurds and the Islamic State

Despite its confrontations with the YPG in Syria, initially, the Islamic State did not launch large scale attack on the Iraqi Kurds. Masoud Barzani, the president of Iraqi Kurdistan, also did not want to involve Iraqi Kurds in the war between the Islamic State organization and Baghdad; the Kurds had actually benefited from the Islamic State's advance as Kurds secured more areas after Baghdad lost control over most Sunni areas of the country in June, including oil-rich Kirkuk and parts of Mosul. Iraqi Kurds were therefore overconfident that they could benefit from the Islamic State situation. In July, Iraqi Kurdistan therefore announced that they would export oil from the disputed city of Kirkuk, hold a referendum on Kurdish independence and the annexation of disputed oil-rich territories between Baghdad and Erbil (Rudaw, July 3). Although Barzani was eager to push for more independence from Baghdad, he did not receive any international support apart from Israel. Both Iran and the U.S. pushed the Kurds to fight the Islamic State and Baghdad continued to block Kurdistan's share of the national budget, hurting the Kurdish regional economy. Thus, when a Kurd, Fuad Masum, was selected as the president of Iraq on July 24 and the Kurds promised to rejoin the Iraqi government, the Islamic State organization grew wary of possible Kurdish cooperation with Baghdad against the them and therefore attacked Kurdistan (Middle East Eye, August 7).

With overstretched supply lines and borders, a lack of ammunition and old weapons, the Kurds were not able to repel the Islamic State alone. One reason was that after the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, the Kurdish Peshmerga forces had transformed from experienced insurgent fighters into salaried soldiers without any battle experience. Thus, Islamic State fighters easily pushed through Kurdistan's borders, capturing significant territory, threatening the cities of Duhok and Erbil and causing thousands people to flee (Middle East Eye, August 7). The Islamic State stated that "The [Kurdish] coalition with the Safavid Shi'a and the cross worshippers [Christians] to attack the Sunni Muslims to stop them from their 'project' to create an Islamic state resulted in all the mujahideen standing up and fighting back." [5]

On August 6, the jihadists were within 25 miles from Erbil, which the Islamic State had made clear that it wanted to capture. By August 7, the Islamists had moved an artillery piece close enough to bomb Erbil's suburbs. The group then released another statement assuring Kurdish Muslims that the Islamic State was targeting only those who cooperated with the West and calling on Kurds to join the militant group before it is too late: "the Kurdish government is the agents of the Jews and Crusaders. Have you forgotten that the Kurdish government was the one who offered your daughters to the Crusaders?" [6]

In response, U.S. President Barack Obama announced that the United States would launch air strikes against the Islamic State organization the next day (*Wall Street Journal*, August 8). These airstrikes stopped the advance of the Islamic State fighters and resulted in the Kurds in slowing taking back lost territory, including the Mosul Dam on August 17 (Rudaw, August 17). Although the United States had, in the past, opposed arming the Kurds, the Islamic State's attacks caused the 62 countries of the anti-Islamic State coalition to support the Kurds with weapons, training and air support. Iran also stepped in to support the Iraqi Kurds after Turkey failed to provide military assistance (Press TV, August 11).

Since these events, one important result of the Islamic State's assault has been new unity among Kurdish factions. Currently, the fighters of the PUK, KDP, and PKK are pushing the Islamic State slowly back from Kurdish territory and a new agreement in Duhok has led the PKK and KDP to set aside their differences in Syria in October (Middle East Eye, October 24).

Conclusion

Since the Islamic State's attacks on the Kurds in both Iraq and Syria, the Kurds have once again emerged as the West's best ally in the region. The Islamic State however continues to see the Kurdish regions as a threat to its goals to create an Islamic caliphate. This realization has led to new alliances to counter the Islamic state, including U.S. support to the PKK-aligned YPG, despite of ongoing opposition from Turkey. Given the ongoing threat from the Islamic State both to Iraqi Kurdistan and to Kurdish interests in Syria, and the Islamic State's clear threat to Western interests, the Kurds are correspondingly likely to remain a key partner for the West in its fight against the Islamic state for the foreseeable future.

Wladimir van Wilgenburg is a political analyst specializing in issues concerning Iraq, Iran, Syria, and Turkey with a particular focus on Kurdish politics.

Notes

1. Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi, "Islamic State: Suicide Bombing in Arbil Statement: Translation and Analysis," November 21, 2014, <http://www.aymennjawad.org/2014/11/islamic-state-suicide-bombing-in-arbil-statement>.
2. Wladimir van Wilgenburg, "'With These Guns We Will Return to Kurdistan': The Resurgence of Kurdish Jihadism," *Terrorism Monitor*, February 7, 2014, http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=41925&no_cache=1#.VHGpdleUe9Y.
3. Wladimir van Wilgenburg, "Kurdish Stronghold in Eastern Syria Defies Assaults by Islamic

State”, Terrorism Monitor. Volume 12, Issue: 18, URL:

http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=42880&no_cache=1#.VHG7HFeUe9Y.

4. “The Resolve of the Defiant,” Islamic State documentary, released in November. See also:

http://www.longwarjournal.org/threat-matrix/archives/2014/11/islamic_state_propaganda_video.php.

5. This statement can be read here <http://justpaste.it/tawhidnwe>.

6. This statement can be found here <http://justpaste.it/gif2>.
