

THE CLASHES IN NORTHERN SYRIA AND THE POSSIBLE EFFECTS

SURİYE'NİN KUZEYİNDEKİ ÇATIŞMALAR VE OLASI ETKİLERİ

الإقتتال الدائرفي شمال سوريا وتأثيراته المحتملة

CENTER FOR MIDDLE EASTERN STRATEGIC STUDIES
ORTADOĞU STRATEJİK ARAŞTIRMALAR MERKEZİ

مركز الشرق الأوسط للدراسات الاستراتيجية



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STRATEGIC INFORMATION MANAGEMENT AND INDEPENDENT THOUGHT PRODUCTION

CENTER FOR MIDDLE EASTERN STRATEGIC STUDIES

History

In Turkey, the shortage of research on the Middle East grew more conspicuous than ever during the early 90's. Center for Middle Eastern Strategic Studies (ORSAM) was established in January 1, 2009 in order to provide relevant information to the general public and to the foreign policy community. The institute underwent an intensive structuring process, beginning to concentrate exclusively on Middle affairs.

Outlook on the Middle Eastern World

It is certain that the Middle East harbors a variety of interconnected problems. However, neither the Middle East nor its people ought to be stigmatized by images with negative connotations. Given the strength of their populations, Middle Eastern states possess the potential to activate their inner dynamics in order to begin peaceful mobilizations for development. Respect for people's willingness to live together, respect for the sovereign right of states and respect for basic human rights and individual freedoms are the prerequisites for assuring peace and tranquility, both domestically and internationally. In this context, Turkey must continue to make constructive contributions to the establishment of regional stability and prosperity in its vicinity.

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Assist. Prof. Dr. Serhat ERKMEN

Serhat Erkmen, who was born in 1975 in İstanbul, graduated from Ankara University Faculty of Political Science Department of International Relations. He completed his master's degree and doctoral study at Ankara University Institute of Social Sciences. Working as Middle East Researcher in Center for Eurasian Strategic Studies between the years 2000-2008, Erkmen has been working as ORSAM Middle East Advisor since 2009. Also, Erkmen has been Head of Department of International Relations at Kırşehir Ahi Evran University since 2009.

PRESENTATION

Syrian Kurds took control of the Kurdish-populated regions on Turkey-Syria border on July 19, 2012. It occurred without any clash after Assad's regime decided to withdraw from the region. Kurds achieved to stay away from the clash to a great extent for more than a year during this process, and aimed at protecting their regions and securing their positions. The process was led by PYD, which is the most organized and armed wing of Syrian Kurds.

Another development that has taken place across Syria for a year now is the fact that radical Islamists have grown stronger in Syria's armed opposition. Declaring their loyalty to Al-Qaeda under the name of Al-Nusra Front, those groups took advantage of the authority gap in the north of country; and they seized control of the areas near Kurdish settlements and also some settlements where Kurdish, Arab, Turkmen people live together. Ar-Raqqah has been the most important part of the control seized in the neighborhood. Ar-Raqqah has a strategic importance for Kurds since it is located between Jazira, the eastern wing of the Kurdish settlement, and Ayn al-Arab (Kobani) in the center. The clashes erupted between YPG and al-Nusra Front in Ras al-Ayn (Serekani) and spread to a considerable part of the Turkey – Syria border before long for reasons such as; the control of the region, ownership of oil fields, border-crossing control, namely income control, and ideological differences. The incidents, killing Turkish citizens because of ricochet of bullets as the clashes take place near border towns, are so important that it can change the course of the civil war in Syria. Turkey has been following the process closely for various reasons such as; border security, disputes on Kurdish autonomous region, and its potential impact on the civil war in Syria.

This report was prepared due to the significance of the situation. We believe that the ORSAM Report, prepared by Serhat Erkmen, will help understand, foresee the process and establish right policies in an environment where the clashes and disputes still continue. The report deals with the process leading to the outset of period of clashes; the point arrived in the Syrian civil war and its impacts on Kurds; the power struggle among the Kurdish parties; and the influences of clashes on the peace process in Turkey. At the end of the report, you will find the chronology of developments regarding Syrian Kurds from 19 July 2012 until 19 July 2013. We bring the report to the public attention and extend our thanks to everyone who contributed.

Hasan Kanbolat
ORSAM Director

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THE CLASHES IN NORTHERN SYRIA AND THE POSSIBLE EFFECTS

Abstract

- PYD, the strongest Kurdish party in Syria, pursued an ambivalent policy for a long time following the eruption of uprisings. It maintained a “private relationship” with the Assad administration despite the fact that it argues discursively against the regime’s practices. PYD, which adopted a stronger anti-Assad rhetoric after seizing control of certain regions in the north of Syria on July 2012, sought to establish dialogue and cooperation with other Syrian opposition groups. In the meantime, an open clash did not take place between different Kurdish parties, Assad administration, nor between SNC- and FSA-affiliated groups. Kurds kept away from being dragged into the clash and focused on establishing a stable region free from clashes.

- The stronger the civil war became in Syria, the harder it became for Kurds to implement the tactic of not directly being a party to an armed conflict. The events in Qamishli and Aleppo indicate that Kurds are now between warring groups and have not become a party to the clash yet. However, the fact that PYD and FSA are in conflict both in political and military terms in both cases has driven a bigger wedge between the Arab opposition and Kurds in Syria. This situation has boosted the idea that especially PYD within SNC and FSA are pro-Assad, or they do not support the revolution in parallel with their own interests. The clash between the government and the opposition forces has paved the way for new areas of conflict in Aleppo and in strategic points of northern Syria in the future.

- Considering in terms of internal dynamics of Syrian Kurds, it might be suggested that PYD, of which the realm of activity is generally limited with the Kurdish-dominated north of the country, with Afrin and Kobane in particular, has also increased its power in Aleppo so far. It has been observed that other Kurdish parties (considering the insufficiency of the parties, under Kurdish National Council especially rubbing elbows with SNC, in the face of latest events) have lost grassroots support since they have resisted to the clashes with an organized structure and remained distant to FSA from the very beginning.

- In the “Political Attitude Manifest”, released in the 9th General Assembly of Kongra-Gel, there is a very important point regarding the Syrian Kurds. Even though the congress is dealt in the context of the solution process and organizational change within PKK in Turkey, it draws attention in terms of the developments in Iraq and Syria as well. Regarding Syria, the expressions such as; “To declare the temporary election administration by further developing the policy pursued so far on the basis of becoming the third line in Rojava and to increase it to the level of creating a Kurdish local administration,” should be regarded as the indicator that a very important development will take place among Syrian Kurds soon.

- While disputes regarding where the solution process in Turkey stands now are on the rise, PKK’s effort to find a new area where it can create a strong grassroots in a new geography is important. This situation should not be regarded only as PKK withdrawal from Turkey. In a sense, PKK wants to show that it can expand its area of influence in different parts of the Middle East through PKK-affiliated groups. Within this framework, emergence of a new Kurdish region, organized on the basis of “democratic autonomy” in Syria, might also bring a discursive, physical, psychological and political superiority to PKK before and during the congress which is planned to be held in Erbil.

Introduction

The clashes which erupted in northern Syria on 16 July 2013 brought forward the region, which came to the fore in Turkey a year ago, with a greater significance this time. Although the conflicts still continue, it would be good to remind the roots of the event in order to have an idea regarding the course of events. Therefore, first of all, the clashes that took place on October 2012 will be analyzed in the report.

The Events Which Are the Herald of Clashes

As is known, Kurds joined the opposition from the beginning in Syria, but they never seemed as one. Some Kurdish parties joined the Syrian National Council (SNC), and then left the group on the grounds that it did not meet the demands of Kurds and established their own group. PYD, the strongest Kurdish party in Syria, pursued an ambivalent policy for a long time following the eruption of uprisings. It maintained a “private relationship” with the Assad administration despite the fact that it argues discursively against the regime’s practices. PYD, which adopted a stronger anti-Assad rhetoric after seizing control of certain regions in the north of Syria on July 2012, sought to establish dialogue and cooperation with other Syrian opposition groups. In the meantime, an open clash did not take place between different Kurdish parties, Assad administration, nor between SNC- and FSA-affiliated groups. Kurds kept away from being dragged into the clash and focused on establishing a stable region free from clashes. Their efforts to keep away from the armed conflict between the regime and the opposition succeeded to a large extent. As a matter of fact, except for small-scale events that took place between the government forces and Kurds during the period, when Kurds

seized control of some cities in July, as well as the FSA’s threatening Kurds and some other small-scale clashes; Kurds achieved to stay away from clashes. This was also caused by the fact that conflicting parties which want to “control the center” avoided facing opposition of Kurds. The Assad administration preferred PYD’s taking control of some regions in the north, rather than FSA’s taking control of those regions. Thus, while it kept some regions – especially al-Hasakah – away from the control of FSA, it also aimed at hitting the weak spot of Turkey. FSA, on the other hand, avoided facing the opposition of Kurds while there was a more important power it should deal with. Although FSA states on every occasion that they are against creation of a Kurdish region in Syria, they have always avoided an open conflict with PYD, supported by the government, or with Syrian Kurds. Nevertheless, the point arrived in the Syrian civil war has thrown off the triple balance.

It might be suggested that the balance started to be thrown off on September 30, 2012. A suicide bombing occurred on September 30 in Qamishli, a city in al-Hasakah governorate that is still under the control of the Syrian government but de facto ruled in accordance with an agreement between the government and Kurds in the region, and a FSA-affiliated group assumed the attack. The suicide car bomb killed 4 and injured 15 people. The main factor making the attack important is that it was the first important indicator that the Kurdish-dominated regions, which were believed to be stable and safe until then, could turn into an area of conflict between the government forces and the opposition. Not long after this incident, first serious clashes started to take place between Kurds and the opposition. Those clashes occurred in Aleppo. The clashes that increased after the opposition set Aleppo as strategic target to break the resistance of the government both materially

and morally turned various parts of the city into a war scene. During this process, Kurds pursued a policy similar to what they wanted to do in the north of the country, and strived to keep Kurdish-dominated Sheikh Maksud and Ashrafiya neighborhoods in Aleppo away from clashes. Of course, it was not always possible to do so. In those operations, in which the government forces alleged to have targeted the opposition, those settlements as well as others were damaged from time to time. On 26 October 2012, on the other hand, an event that could later be regarded as a milestone of the civil war in Syria took place.

On October 25, a FSA-affiliated group of armed opponents attempted to set up a base in Ashrafiya, and were strived to be dismissed by the Kurdish opposition in the region. The following day, on October 26, the government forces carried out a bomb attack on opponents that set up a base in Ashrafiya; and the attack killed 15 people, of whom 9 were Kurds, and injured some 20 people in addition to opponents. People, alleged to be from FSA, opened fire on the group which protested the Syrian army and also staged demonstrations to dismiss the opponents from the neighborhood; and the attack left 10 people dead and some 20 people injured. But, as far as understood from the footages during the incident (some Syrian Kurdish opponents shared the footages on web), it is seen that the protestors carried small arms and chanted pro-PKK slogans as the fire was opened. The next day (on October 27), the People's Protection Units (YPG), under the same umbrella with PYD (also known as the armed wing of PYD), attacked on the FSA-affiliated opposition groups which opened fire on demonstrators. The clash left 22 people killed and lots of people injured on both sides.

However, the latest clashes in Aleppo created those three facts:

1- The stronger the civil war became in Syria, the harder it became for Kurds to implement the tactic of not directly being a party to an armed conflict. The events in Qamishli and Aleppo indicate that Kurds are now between warring groups and have not become a party to the clash yet. However, the fact that PYD and FSA are in conflict both in political and military terms in both cases has driven a bigger wedge between the Arab opposition and Kurds in Syria. This situation has boosted the idea that especially PYD within SNC and FSA are pro-Assad, or they do not support the revolution in parallel with their own interests. The clash between the government and the opposition forces has paved the way for new areas of conflict in Aleppo and in strategic points of northern Syria in the future.

2- Considering in terms of internal dynamics of Syrian Kurds, it might be suggested that PYD, of which the realm of activity is generally limited with the Kurdish-dominated north of the country, with Afrin and Kobane in particular, has also increased its power in Aleppo so far. It has been observed that other Kurdish parties (considering the insufficiency of the parties, under Kurdish National Council especially rubbing elbows with SNC, in the face of latest events) have lost grassroots support since they have resisted to the clashes with an organized structure and remained distant to FSA from the very beginning.

3- The axis and grounds of the on-going clashes in Syria are quite slippery. The longer the civil war has got, the more complex the attitudes of the Parties have become and the more complicated the alliances are becoming. As a result of this tendency, it appears that the possibility of the emergence of multiple civil war in Syria in the long term (e.g. central control struggle, inter-community war, regional civil war) should not be underestimated. The fact that the civil war had partially sectarian

dimensions (It is not right to put forward that the civil war is completely on a Sunni-Shiite or a similar ground. But completely ignoring the sectarian factor does not seem realistic.) is already an acknowledged fact.

The Period of Clashes: July 2013 Events

The reasons of the clashes, which erupted on 16 July 2013 and have further expanded and become more important in terms of time and geography compared to previous clashes, can be mainly dealt in three categories:

1. The Point Arrived in the Syrian Civil War and Its Impacts on Kurds

The deadlock in the civil war in Syria leads to fractions in the opposition front. The move of regime forces, making progress against the opposition with the support received from Hezbollah and Iran, affect the internal dynamics of the opposition or those alleging to be the opposition. In this context, the power struggle between the opposition and PYD, which had an implicit or explicit ceasefire as from January 2013, re-erupted. The opponents do not believe that PYD has switched sides to them, and they believe that the regime is using PYD to protect critical areas in the north, especially the oil fields, or to prevent the areas from being seized by the opposition. The fact that PYD has not clearly declared its position despite its standing with opposition from time to time (its choosing the third line) reinforces the suspicion. It was seen that the opposition resorted to truce with PYD during periods, when the opposition made strides in Aleppo and Damascus against the regime, and concentrated its resources and attention on different regions. Similarly, PYD sought a settlement with the opponents both to overcome the problem of resource stemming from the problems with IKRG (especially with KDP), and also to have

an access to materials that could facilitate the life in the regions it seize control. Thus, the truce in early 2013 was important for both Parties to meet their own periodical needs, indeed. PYD recognized the FSA-affiliated forces in border crossing points on Turkey border because of Turkey's reaction; and after getting their share from trade carried out via Turkey, FSA let PYD pass through the regions it seized control. However, it is observed that the relationship has gone bad since late May (despite the fact that some problems occurred in April). The FSA-affiliated groups accused YPG, and YPG accused FSA of breaking the truce and of attacking. Within this framework, large and small-scale clashes took place in Afrin, Ras al-Ayn, Dirbasiya, Tirbespi as from 25 May 2013. The clashes that continued at intervals until the end of June turned into a testing process of each group. However, the fact that YPG declared it would clean the Hasakah-Dirbasiya route at the end of June, and clashed with al-Tawhid Brigade around Afrin two weeks later was the herald of approaching storm. Tension in Ras al-Ayn increased again in early July, and the expectations regarding a potential eruption of clashes between the opposition and PYD-affiliated armed groups got stronger. Finally, the spark ignited on July 16 turned into a total clash in Ras al-Ayn, and PYD completely seized the control of the district. However, all the more amazing is that the clashes between the military units under the Syrian army and the opposition accelerated around al-Hasakah like a year ago, as those developments take place. Not long after the rise of those clashes, Ras al-Ayn was completely seized by PYD. This situation resembles the developments that occurred in the midst of last year and beginning of this year and ended up with PYD's seizing control of some region. To sum up, the clashes between the opposition and YPG in the north of Syria should not be assessed independently of the clashes in the rest of Syria. While the

opponents want to concentrate on expanding their areas of influence in the north of the country and seizing a complete control of the area, PYD endeavors to create their own control areas in case of a potential victory of the Assad's regime or the opponents' strengthening their areas.

2. The Power Struggle among the Kurdish Parties

The polarization among the Kurdish parties in Syria rapidly increased almost in a parallel timing with the period when the tension between the opposition and PYD was on the rise. Disagreements have been increasing within the Kurdish Supreme Council, created with an agreement under the supervision of IKRG in Erbil last year. Furthermore, some parties within the structure, also known as the Kurdish National Council, have changed sides; and implicitly or explicitly established closer relationship with PYD. In a sense, PYD endeavors to become politically the sole authority in Kurdish regions, predominantly controlled by itself for a year now. Within this framework, a severe distance between KDP and PYD draws the attention. As a matter of fact, the Syrian Kurdish party leaders who attended the conference held in Erbil were arrested by YPG as they entered Syria, and even some of them were kidnapped on the grounds that they had education in northern Iraq. However, the most important turning point during the whole process was the fact that 74 people from KDP in Syria were arrested by YPG on May 18 as they crossed the border from North Iraq to Syria. The Semalka Border Crossing was closed by IKRG two days after this event. It is seen that the distance between KDP and PYD has peaked since that day. Even the talk held between the senior officials of PYD and Massoud Barzani in Erbil on July did not completely decrease the tension. In addition to developments in May, the devel-

opments that took place in Amuda on June 27 shows the level where the political struggle among Syrian Kurds has reached. Not long before the aforesaid date, some young people were detained by YPG in the district; and then YPG intervened in a demonstration staged on June 27 leaving 7 people killed and tens of people injured. The event was strongly condemned by many Kurdish parties. After the event, the struggle among the parties became severer upon the raids conducted on the offices of other parties in the district. To sum up, PYD took advantage of the disagreements among the parties within KNC through political moves and reinforced its political power; and in parallel with this, engaged in a major power struggle with KDP and other parties close to KDP. So that, while it had tense relations with FSA-affiliated opposition groups; it also strived a lot to win the power struggle among the Kurdish parties. Despite currently being at odds with KDP, it became physically the only significant political group among Syrian Kurds.

3. Peace Process and the Kurdish Problem in Syria

In the "Political Attitude Manifest", released in the 9th General Assembly of Kongra-Gel which convened during a period when the disputes regarding the solution process in Turkey are on the rise, there is a very important point regarding the Syrian Kurds. Even though the congress is dealt in the context of the solution process and organizational change within PKK in Turkey, it draws attention in terms of the developments in Iraq and Syria as well. Regarding Syria, the expressions such as; "To declare the temporary election administration by further developing the policy pursued so far on the basis of becoming the third line in Rojava and to increase it to the level of creating a Kurdish local administration," should be regarded as the indicator

that a very important development will take place among Syrian Kurds soon. Like the 19 July events took place in Erbil last year a week after the Syrian Kurdish parties held a meeting and decided to create a Kurdish region, also in this case, it is likely that important developments will take place in the Kurdish-populated areas in Syria soon. What is inferred from this point is that a process, which would pave the way for elections in Kurdish-dominated regions under the control of PYD in Syria for a year now, could be launched; and Kurds could declare autonomy at the end of this process. In a sense, it is important for PKK, as it sets an example that the model it has been suggesting in the recent years would become real. The legitimacy aspect of the autonomy and its recognition in Syria or in the Middle East would spark new debates. However, the developments which have taken place in Iraq since 1990s make people think that the declaration of autonomy might lead to new actual circumstances in the future, if not today. While disputes regarding where the solution process in Turkey stands now are on the rise, PKK's effort to find a new area where it can create a strong grassroots in a new geography is important. This situation should not be regarded only as PKK withdrawal from Turkey. In a sense, PKK wants to show that it can expand its area of influence in different parts of the Middle East through PKK-affiliated groups. Similarly, another point in the same "document" is significant in terms of the developments in North Iraq. "To maintain a more active struggle that puts forward our difference and democratic modernity in Bashur. For democratic powers to win the elections, and to strive for the Kurdistan National Conference to convene." It might be understood from those expressions that in the parliamentary elections to be held in North Iraq on 21 September they will take a stance against KDP. Within this framework, emergence of a new Kurdish region, orga-

nized on the basis of "democratic autonomy" in Syria, might also bring a discursive, physical, psychological and political superiority to PKK before and during the congress which is planned to be held in Erbil.

4. The Process of Clashes between PYD and the Opponents in Syria

The clashes between the opposition groups and PYD-affiliated armed groups, which erupted in Syria on 16 July, is not only limited with local forces' trying to prevent creation of settlements on Turkey's border in geographical terms, and a Kurdish region in Syria in political terms. As we have mentioned before, it is not right to consider the developments in the north of the country independently of the civil war dynamics in Syria. In this context, analyzing how the clashes evolve between PYD and the opponents could help understand the subject.

Although the history of events dates back to a few months ago, the latest developments erupted in Ras al-Ayn/Serekani on 16 July 2013. In fact, 10 days before the outbreak, there were certain signs that clashes could take place. During that period, it was asserted in the news from the region that things got tensed up in the area, the opponents were preparing to attack and that PYD was getting ready to seize total control of the region. Hence, the following day of the outbreak of clashes in Serekani, YPG seized control of the town to a great extent. It took control of lots of areas, including the border crossing on Turkey border. It also seized the control of the neighborhood, where the opposition set up a base. But the clashes spread to Tal Tamer on 17 July. The conflict that broke out in a village (Dawudiya) of this town, which is an important settlement on the Serekani-Qamishli route lasted relatively short. The next day (18 July), on the other hand, the clashes spread

further to Al-Mabada/Girke Lege in the east. From that day on, it was no more a local clash in a settlement on Turkey's border, and rather turned into a conflict between YPG and the opponents. It might be suggested that there are two reasons the 18 July is regarded as the milestone:

1. The clashes has spread to the villages of Girke Lege (until Tel Kocher on the Iraqi border), namely to the oil fields of Rumeylan and its neighborhood, since 18 July. There is some 170 km distance between this area and Serekani (where the clashes erupted), it has different demographic characteristics, and also it is situated around significant oil fields. It is seen that the same day, clashes erupted also in Al-Jawadiyah/Çil Axa, near Girke Lege.

2. As from 18 July, the clashes were not only between YPG and Al-Nusra Front or between Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), but also a great number of local and general opposition groups that support FSA became involved in clashes.

It can be said that the clash has been divided into two axes as from 18 July. The 1st axis is the Girke Lege-Çil Axa (Al Mabada-Al Jawadiya) line, namely the settlements in the oil field near the Iraq-Syria border. In this area, it is observed that the war still continues slowly. As a matter of fact, the opponents (probably someone from Al-Nusra Front) carried out a suicide attack here. The current data shows that many more people have been killed in the aforesaid axis than those who were killed in Serekani. 20 July is another milestone in terms of geographic expansion of the events. A clash broke out in Tel Abiyad, situated right across Akçakale on 20 July. Tel Abiyad is on the opposite direction of the expansion line of clashes (despite the fact that on 16 July, YPG took control of the road between Serekani-Tel Halaf including a settlement on the way

to the west) and it is 100 km away from the starting point of clashes. It can be suggested that there are three important characteristics of the spread of clashes to Tel Abiyad in terms of the course of events:

1. Many opposition groups, especially Ahrar al-Sham, provided support to Al-Nusra Front here. On the other hand, Kurdish armed groups and political parties other than PYD, especially Jabhat al-Akrad in FSA, started to support YPG. Thus, despite the signs from the very first day, the clash was no more only between PYD-Al Nusra Front as from the beginning of Tel Abiyad events on 20 July, and it turned into a clash between the Islamist opponents and Kurds.

2. The fact that heavy weapons, including tank, started to be used in the clashes in Tel Abiyad shows the importance of dimension of the conflict for the opponents.

3. Roughly stated, Tel Abiyad is the most strategic point of the north-south direction at the center of two Kurdish regions, where Kurdish population is not sparse. Therefore, it appears that the clash might spread to Kobani-Afrin (at least towards the west) in the upcoming days, and it seems like the indicator of the fact that it is aimed to create a potential Kurdish autonomous region. Considering the buffer some and local demographic dynamics, it is quite important that the Kurdish population in the area, which is already few, is forced to leave their homes due to pressures. Thus, there might be a geographical disunity between a potential Kurdish autonomous region as a result of the Tel Abiyad events.

While Syrian Kurds currently seek to draw a new border for themselves (or at least seeks to establish full authority over the new settlements), we can say that opponents pursue the possibility of growing stronger by benefiting

from opponents' local resources. Especially for the opposition, the local control over the oil and food resources is very important. Opponents both want to prevent the regime from producing oil, and also aim at completely toppling the regime in the north by depriving the pro-regime groups of the resources. Hence, opponents want to make up for their decline in other regions, at least by cleaning the hinterland.

Conclusion

The consequences of clashes between the opposition and PYD-affiliated groups in Syria, which date back to October 2012 and have been going on at intervals so far, can be listed as follows:

The extension of the clash might have an impact on power balance across the country, not on whom will take control of some villages, towns, districts and cities in the north of the country. As mentioned before, it is not possible to think the independently of the general course of the civil war in Syria. The timing of events makes one think that the groups which paradoxically maintain war, rivalry and cooperation at the same time have been clash with each other. The civil war in Syria has taken a different shape for the last two months than the previous period. The regime has been progressing in Damascus and Homs with the support of Hezbollah. A fraction has emerged within FSA. Although this fraction has not turned into an open clash, there is a tension between the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and some wings within FSA is beyond disagreement. (Contrary to the common view on this subject, there has not been any conflict between the two groups yet. And the events are discrete.) However, while the progress of FSA towards the south has stopped except for Daraa, it is seen that FSA has been trying to progress towards al-Hasakah. PYD, on the

other hand, has been seeking an opportunity in the midst of this clash. PYD reversed Al-Nusra's efforts to consolidate its control over Ar-Raqqah, and seized full control of Ser-ekani, which it had asserted to have "saved" a year ago. Meanwhile, PYD took advantage of FSA's clashing with the Syrian army, and went down to the oil fields through al-Hasakah. PYD expanded its control, limited with certain areas, towards strategic points. Thus, while the regime and the opponents clashed with one another, PYD took advantage of relatively weak Al-Nusra in the region and turned the balance into its own favor. Nevertheless, this time Al-Nusra and FSA turned towards the west in a doubtful cooperation. Thus, the clash headed towards Tel Abiyad, and probably to Kobane. In other words, in Syria, the regime attempted to proceed to Damascus and Homs; FSA to Idlib, Aleppo and Qamishli; Al-Nusra to Aleppo and Ar-Raqqah; and PYD to al-Hasakah and oil fields. Even though none of the Parties considered each other an absolute and reliable ally during this process, the strategic priorities in the clash will determine the alliances. In fact, although this process further weakens each of them, the result will be determined by the end of clashes. The current clash might end up with Kurds' expanding the region they already have control over, or with their losing Kobane and many others. Because while PYD proceeds to the east on the one hand, it also shifted a significant force to keep the control of Tel Abiyad. (Reportedly some 500-person armed force was shifted) Opening a new front in Kobane might lead to a clash, in which PYD would have to maintain at intervals in an area of more than 300 km-width. This situation might cause to problems for PYD, which has set its strategy on concentrating it on certain regions. However, a similar problem might also apply to the opposition. Those clashes will give an important clue regarding priorities of the regime opponents. For instance, will ISIS and FSA-affili-

ated groups leave the rising rivalry and competition of sharing the regions aside and act in unison again? Will they leave their organizational, ideological, strategic, tactical and leadership differences aside and consider the Kurdish formation a threat despite the fact that they act in unison against the regime? If opponents join their forces against Kurds, it comes to mean that it will go beyond being political and become an ethnical issue. This situation would create a new Kurdish-Arab dissidence in the opposition front (or it could deepen the current dissidence). Besides, such a clash, whether between Kurds and Arabs or between FSA-PYD-ISIS, would serve the purpose of the regime. If the week-old clash extends and deepens, the regime would have a good and needy ally in the north, and also it could advance more fastly to the south and west of the country. In fact, if the clash between FSA-PYD erupts in Afrin and Kobane and deepens, the regime might gain success even in Aleppo. Hence, extension of the clash might have an impact on power balance across the country, not on whom will take control of some villages, towns, districts and cities in the north of the country.

The most important consequence of clashes so far has been regarding the internal balances among Kurds. Although even KNC-member parties, which are closest to PYD, did not want to be seen close to PYD after the Amuda events on 27 June; even the parties which were most problematic with PYD such as the Freedom Party and KDP in Syria had to support PYD in rhetorical and political terms following the clashes. The struggle between PYD and other parties, of which disagreements came to the fore at every opportunity in the past year, has come to an end. It is no more possible for the parties other than PYD to dominate among Syrian Kurds. PYD established legitimacy inside not by using its armed force against Kurds, but by using it

against the threats against Kurds. Thus, this advantage which became clear after the first Serekani clashes in late 2012 has now turned into an explicit superiority. Although other political parties attempted to form armed force of their own to support FSA, they will further lose their prestige from now on. During this process, YPG is becoming the armed force of all Kurds. Besides, the events bring prestige to PYD before Europe as well. Due to Christians who cooperated with Kurds for fear of Islamists, PYD will be able to give an image of a power which fight against Al Qaeda and the likes and protects Christians. To sum up, if PYD can keep the regions it has been controlling so far until the end of this process of clashes, it will have 3 important advantages:

- a. Having the only legitimate armed force among Kurds
- b. Completely eliminating other political dissidents and receiving a major political support thanks to its rescuer role. This would make it easier for PYD to implement its democratic autonomy plan.
- c. Eliminating its external rivals, KDP in particular. Today, KDP seems to have lost its power struggle in Syria to a great extent due to the closure of Iraq's border crossing, weakness of the parties under its administration, significant developments in the relations with Baghdad, and the internal political tension caused by the legal modification regarding the term of office of the KDP leader. It appears that KDP has lost its chance to expand its area of influence due to the latest events

However, it should not be forgotten that everything could become reversed if PYD heavily lost the clash. But even this situation would create an irrecoverable anti-Arab hostility in the national identity of Syrian Kurds. There-

fore, those who cooperate with them would end up a loser in the long term.

The process that has been going on for a week now in Kurdish regions in Syria also affects the democratization and reconciliation process in Turkey. Also in the statements of officials, it is seen that Turkey is clearly against PYD's attitude and creation of a Kurdish autonomous region in Syria. This attitude is considerably a reflection of mistrust of PYD-PKK. What is inferred from the rhetorics, used so far, is that Turkey considers PYD a threat. PYD, on the other hand, seeks to create a region under

the control of PKK in Syria; despite the fact that it has been careful with the rhetorics it uses. The process regarding PKK in Turkey continues, if problematic and slowly. The mutual debates and statements will not disrupt the process in Turkey. However, it gives a major damage to trust building, which is one of the most important factors to maintain the process. Furthermore, it is a major problem in tensing the relations between Turkey and Kurds before the congress, of which preparations continue in Arbil. In this context, developments in Syria have a negative impact on the ongoing process in Turkey.

CHRONOLOGY

20 July 2012: Syrian security forces and government officials left Amuda. While the Syrian security forces kept the Military Intelligence Service, Security Directorate and Political Security Directorate; PYD took control of the majority of government offices.

21 July 2012: The government handed over the control of service offices, schools and state hospitals in al-Malikiyah to PYD. PYD temporarily took control of the Syrian security offices until the intervention of Syrian security forces. Also, PYD seized control of Faysh Khabour which is the only border crossing between Iraqi Kurdistan and Syria.

28 July 2012: PYD supporters in Afrin took control of electricity, water, education and health services from the government officials.

6 August 2012: The regime forces handed over the control of Al-Malikiyah central prison to PYD following the prisoner transfer.

17 August 2012: PYD commemorated PKK's first attack, carried out on Turkey on 15 August 1984, through demonstrations across the country.

27 August 2012: The Amuda local office of Kurdish National Council asserted that PYD used the state infrastructure for its own interest, and thus cancelled its joint activities with PYD.

3 September 2013: PYD forced shopkeepers in Qamishli to go on strike to protest compulsory military service.

13 September 2012: Members of Arab Bani Sab'a tribe staged anti-PYD demonstration in Qamishli as a result of PYD's attacking a member of the tribe.

19 September 2012: YPG, armed wing of PYD ended its cooperation with Kurdish National Council.

20 September 2012: PYD's armed wing YPG carried out attacks on headquarters of Kurdish Union Party (Yekiti) in Syria; Kurdish Democratic Party (al-Parti), led by Abdul Hakim Bashar; and Kurdish Freedom Party (Azadi), led by Mustafa Juma, in Al-Ma'bada. YPG alleged that the only authority to bear arms belonged to them.

24 September 2012: PYD abducted a member of Kurdish Future Movement, led by Jangidar Muhammad, in Qamishli.

5 October 2012: The Local Council of Kurdish National Council in Ayn al-Arab ended its cooperation with Kurdish Supreme Council for not abiding by the Erbil Agreement.

12 October 2012: PYD commemorated Öcalan, who was arrested in 1998, through the demonstrations across the country.

25 October 2012: FSA's achievements against the regime forces made it possible for PYD to enter Kurdish-populated Ashrafiya, situated in central Aleppo.

26 October 2012: A clash broke out between FSA-affiliated Salahaddin Ayyubi forces and YPG in Ashrafiya neighborhood

28 October 2012: FSA Brigade of Northern Storm seized control of many PYD checkpoints near Afrin.

1 November 2012: FSA abducted the commander of YPG. And PYD announced that the commander died.

3 November 2012: Syrian Army withdrew from Afrin, and PYD took control of the city.

8 November 2012: Due to the achievements of FSA, the Syrian Army handed over the control of many Kurdish cities to PYD.

9 November 2012: PYD raised its flag next to the FSA flag in Ras al-Ayn.

10 November 2012: The Syrian Army handed over the control of security headquarters in Tall Tamr, ad-Darbasiyah and Amuda.

11 November 2012: The YPG commander, who was abducted by FSA and alleged to have died by PYD, was released.

12 November 2012: the Syrian army handed over the control of security buildings in al-Malikiyah to PYD.

19 November 2012: After it was ordered to remove all PYD flags in al-Malikiyah and Ra's al-Ayn, a heavy clash broke out between PYD and FSA in Ra's al-Ayn.

25 November 2012: An agreement was signed between the Kurdish National Council and the People's Council of West Kurdistan.

1 December 2012: PYD and Tay tribe opened fire on each other to take control of the Al-Mamnun Private University in Qamishli. And the Tay tribe withdrew at the end of the clash.

6 December 2012: FSA and PYD announced a truce.

12 December 2012: FSA carried out a missile attack on YPG for three days.

15 December 2012: The negotiations between FSA and PYD were relaunched.

16 December 2012: The negotiations between FSA and PYD were concluded with another ceasefire and withdrawal of armed groups from Ras al-Ayn.

21 December 2012: PYD staged demonstrations against the FSA's embargo on Kurdish regions.

28 December 2012: Many Arab tribes attacked the YPG positions on the grounds of being in cooperation with the regime.

1 January 2013: YPG held a 5-day-long plenary meeting entitled, "Fundamental step toward the creation of a national army for West Kurdistan.

3 January 2013: A clash erupted between PYD supporters and Yekîti Party members. Four members of Jiwan Qatna Battalion of Yekîti were abducted by YPG.

5 January 2013: YPG raised the 1948 freedom flag, also used by FSA, next to its own flag in order to develop peaceful relations.

6 January 2013: The truce between YPG and FSA was broken in Ras al-Ayn. Both Parties resorted to heavy weapons in the clashes.

9 January 2013: YPG seized control of the oil field Tall Adas, under the control of the government. And clashes erupted between two Parties.

11 January 2013: YPG attacked the military drill field of Yekîti near Ali Farou.

18 January 2013: Kurdish National Council urged to stop the clash between YPG and FSA.

21 February 2013: YPG seized the control of Tall Adas oil field after the withdrawal of Syrian forces.

2 February 2013: YPG laid siege to the Kahf al-Assad village due to the fire, opened by unidentified people in the village.

5 February 2013: YPG ended the siege of Kahf al-Assad. Local people alleged that YPG wanted to disarm them for supporting Barzani.

8 February 2013: YPG and the regime's forces clashed in Aleppo, Ashrafiya for three days.

14 February 2013: PYD and FSA clashed with each other to take the control of the cattle farm in Tall Tamr.

17 February 2013: YPG and FSA signed an eleven-article agreement for ceasing fights.

21 February 2013: Syrian security forces and military personnel left Al-Jawadiyah/Çil Axa. PYD and YPG took control of the city without fighting.

25 February 2013: FSA seized control of Arab- and Kurdish-populated Tall Hamis.

1 March 2013: PYD and supporters of Kurdish Democratic Progressive Party in Syria besieged security headquarters and many public buildings in Al-Qahtaniyah (Tirbesipî). The Syrian security forces left the city and PYD and supporters of Kurdish Democratic Progressive Party in Syria seized the control without fighting.

2 March 2013: YPG took control of Rumeilan, the largest oil field in Syria.

8 March 2013: YPG attacked Kurdish villages such as; Basuta, Burj Abdullah and Kimar. Those villages were considered the main headquarter of the Kurdish Freedom Party (Azadi). The clashes left three people dead and many people injured.

15 March 2013: The Kurdish Freedom Party (Azadi), led by Mustafa Juma, withdrew from Kurdish National Council (KNC). Mustafa

Mahmoud Ati stated that the withdrawal was caused by the fact that Kurdish National Council didn't take any step regarding the abduction of party members by PYD.

29 March 2013: The clashes in the neighborhood of Sheikh Maksud, Aleppo, have been going since 29 March. Regime's forces have fired missiles to the neighborhood at intervals. As for the lines of battles; the regime was on the one side, and FSA, PYD, YPG and Kurdish Front Brigade were on the other side.

18 April 2013: The Syrian government decided for Kurdish literature to be taught at Syrian universities in the future.

20 April 2013: The Iraqi Kurdistan Regional Government (IKRG) started to build a temporary bridge over Tigris, at an intersection point of western al-Malikiyah (Dêrik) all along the Faysh Khabour border. The Syrian side of the border is officially under the control of the Kurdish Supreme Council.

26 April 2013: Asayish, PYD's internal security unit, handed out leaflets and stated that all organizations in civil society should apply for staging protests.

28 April 2013: The President of Iraqi Kurdistan Regional Government Massoud Barzani invited all party leaders within the Kurdish National Council in Syria and PYD representatives to Erbil; and urged to find a solution to the problems among themselves. Representatives of PYD and Kurdish Democratic Progressive Party in Syria gave negative response.

29 April 2013: In many Kurdish cities, Kurdish Supreme Council replaced the Syrian license plates with Kurdish plates.

19 May 2013: The YPG militants abducted sixty-seven members of al-Partî.

22 May 2013: Abdulhakim Bashar, secretary-general of the Kurdish Democratic Party of Syria (al-Parti), stated that four political parties under Kurdish Democratic Political Union will be dissolved and will be gathered under a single umbrella as a new political party.

20 May 2013: After the Faysh Khabour border crossing was closed by the Iraqi Kurdistan Regional Government, the relations between PYD and IKRG grew tense.

23 May 2013: Clashes erupted between PYD, YPG and FSA in Shiite villages of Nubal and Zahra, situated in 20 km south of Afrin. FSA seized control of all connecting routes in Afrin.

24 June 2013: Yekîtî Party declared its withdrawal from the Kurdish Democratic Political Union.

7 July 2013: The Kurdish National Council in Syria withdrew from Kurdish the Supreme Council's local committees in Amuda, Ayn al-Arab (Kobane), al-Hasakah, Ra's al-Ayn (Serêkani), al-Qahtaniyah (Tirbesipî) and al-Ma'bada (Girkê Legê) due to PYD's attacks on activists and politicians. Besides, they suspended their membership to three local committees in Qamishli.

16 July 2013: A clash erupted between YPG and radical Islamist al-Nusra Front in Serêkani. YPG gained advantage over al-Nusra Front, and seized the control in the district.

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