



CLAWS

Syrian Kurds and the Kobane Resistance

■ Shweta Desai

In the beginning of September when militants from the ISIS advanced north from Aleppo, using tanks and heavy weaponry to take over the strategically located Kurdish stronghold of Ayn al Arab (Kobane in Arabic) within the striking distance of Turkey, many believed that the town 'will certainly fall soon.' Fearing mass slaughter and atrocities at the hands of ISIS militants, thousands of Kurdish civilians fled on the other side of the Turkish border; the remaining picked up guns and spread across to fortify Kobane. After holding on for weeks on its own, the Yekîneyên Parastina Gel or the People's Protection Units, an armed wing of the Syrian Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) has transformed the siege of Kobane to a prolonged resistance and has emerged as the strongest military resistance force against ISIS in Syria.

The dominant Kurdish political faction has been defending the territory of Kobane against the ISIS offensive when militants first started to attack in March this year. Since then the ISIS forces have continued the attack with a heightened offensive being launched from September 6 with additional reinforcements and heavy armour to seize Kobane. If captured, the town will mark a significant victory giving it a control of land running from its self-declared capital of Raqqa, Syria, on the Euphrates River to the Turkish border, more than 60 miles away. Coupled with airstrikes by US coalition forces and deployment of Iraqi Kurdish Peshmerga fighters, the

Syrian Kurds are leading the fight preventing the hard-line Sunni group from turning the Kurdish region into an Islamic State.

The Kurdish faction and YPG

The Kurds in Syria are one of the ignored minorities, suffering abuses and discrimination at the hands of the Assad regime. Residing around the Turkish border in the cantons of Efrin, Ayn-al-Arab, Ras-al-Ayn and Yarabiya crossing with Iraq, the Syrian Kurds make up around 10 percent of the population totalling about 2.5 million. However, around 50,000 of them have been issued with Syrian citizenship, while the rest continue to be registered as foreigners. The abuse against Kurds reached its peak in 2004 during the riots in the north-eastern Syrian city of Qamshili in 2004 when a fight between Arab and Kurd fans during a football match killed 15. The Kurdish population rose in an uprising which was clamped down by Assad's government with violence, looting and brutal severity during the mass protests and demonstrations. The YPG or Popular Protection Units was formed soon after by the Kurdish youth to defend the ethnic group against any hostility.

For over seven years, the YPG remained inconspicuously low and only came to the forefront after the people's uprising began in Syria. Seeking to extend the territory under the opposition's control, rebels from the Free

Syrian Kurds...

Syria Army attempted to capture the Kurdish region of Ras al Ayn in 2012. They were however rolled back as the YPG militia fought back to win its first successful battle. Later in the year, as the war spread to Damascus, Assad decided to concentrate his armed strength to secure the capital and withdrew forces barring al Hassakah and Qamshili from Syria's Kurdish areas. The al Hassakah governorate on the Turkish-Iraqi border is an important road junction. Its rich oil resources and agricultural growth makes it strategically attractive for the Syrian regime to keep it under its control. The withdrawal by the government forces without any violent clashes led many to believe that the Kurds and Assad had reached consensual agreement which effectively ceded control of those territories to the PYD. By leaving the Kurdish-populated areas under the control of Kurds, Assad was free to use his forces elsewhere in the country to stifle out the moderate opposition. Following the withdrawal, the PYD grabbed the opportunity and declared the Kurdish areas in northern Syria as autonomous and established independent governance in Afrin, Ayn-al-Arab (Kobane) and Hassakah since 2013. The Kurdish areas under PYD control extend for 848 km from Al-Malikiyah (also known as Dayrik) in northern Iraq to Afrin, which is north of Aleppo. The YPG—which acts as a front line defensive force—has set up checkpoints at the entrance of these enclaves which enables it to control movements of people and goods, collecting taxes on oil shipments crossing the Syrian border. These checkpoints have also for the most part tried to prevent the violence and the atrocities unleashed by the Syrian war from entering the Kurdish region, barring a few erratic attacks. This had been true until the ISIS launched a major attack on Kobane in September.

As the intensity of the attacks grew and the reinforcements of the militants swelled, the YPG tacitly aligned with the FSA to form joint counter-operations called Euphrates Volcano on September 10 against ISIS in areas surrounding Kobane. This move, following the initial hostility with the FSA rebels during the Ras al-Ayn conflict, has strengthened the YPG's ability to counter ISIS. As of mid 2014, the YPG's strength numbered between 30,000- 50,000 Kurdish fighters, including

the female fighters' unit called Yekiniyen Parastina Jan or the YPJ which forms twenty percent of the force's strength and also represents the largest number of female combatants fielded in the Syrian war. The YPG-FSA alliance also marks a significant shift in the political ideology of the PYD, which until the ISIS attack on Kobane, refused to take any external military help, as it seems to project the YPG in a vulnerable position and thus threatens the supremacy of PYD in the region. The overlapping interests of various Kurdish factions and political parties in West Asia have also cast a lead in the battle for Kobane, with each watching the game as it unravels to further their own goals.

Turkey's Dilemma

Turkey, which continues to have major stakes in Kobane, on the other hand has been sitting on the fence. The battle between ISIS and YPG-FSA rebels so far has caused a spillover effect on neighbouring Turkey which saw wide-scale displacement on both sides. In a matter of last two months, more than 130,000 Syrian Kurds have taken shelter in Turkey and the border has since been closed while 160,000 Turkish citizens have been displaced internally. According to Dr Burak Akçapar, the Turkish ambassador in India, the bombing by ISIS and attacks by the YPG and the Syrian regime has caused casualties of more than 82 Turkish citizens at its border with Syria. Preventing illegal transportation of logistics and manpower across the Turkey-Syrian border is becoming more and more of a challenge, he said.

In an effort to push back ISIS the US military, coordinating with the Kurdish forces on ground, has conducted air strikes targeting the militant positions in recent days, but these have remained inadequate. While a number of militants were killed, it has not stopped the ISIS advance. Turkey refuses to use its own military power or provide its Incirlik air base in the south-eastern city of Adana to the US coalition for launching airstrikes. "Without a comprehensive and integrated strategy to defeat the ISIS and stabilize the situation in Syria, the airstrikes by themselves cannot be a solution; it can only be a factor. It is a waste of resources" said Akçapar in

a recent talk in Delhi. He added that using the Turkish army in Kobane will only exacerbate the situation leading to wider implications in the Syrian war. “The ISIS has become an imminent and clear danger threatening Turkish borders. It is a national security issue. There can be no military solution for the conflict in Syria, it has to be a political solution (with no Assad).”

Turkey has supported the opposition in Syria since the beginning of the insurgency in 2011 and before by providing logistical base to the fighters. A number of armed groups used Turkey’s Antakya as a base to launch attacks against the Assad regime. The more than 900 km of porous border was used for supplies of arms, armaments and fighters into Syria. In 2012, it hosted the ‘Friends of Syria,’ a coalition of Arab and Western countries set up to provide some support for the Syrian opposition and ease Assad out of power.

Turkey’s inaction in the battle for Kobane also emanates from its insecurity against the Kurds. There are more than 30 million Kurds in West Asia who constitute one of the world’s largest ethnic groups without a country of their own. Scattered and geographically split around the border regions of Turkey, Iraq, Syria and Iran, the Kurds have been waging armed nationalist movements to fight for greater autonomy. The Syrian regime has been a covert supporter of the Kurdish Workers Party or the PKK in Turkey in the past which is listed as a terrorist organisation by the US, NATO countries and the European Union for waging an armed resistance against Turkey for self-determination. The PKK aims to form autonomous Kurdish administrations in Iran, Iraq, Syria and Turkey, without necessarily threatening the territorial integrity of these states. While PYD is closely allied with Turkey’s PKK, Iraq’s Kurdistan Democratic Party supports the Kurdish Nationalist Council (a coalition of 15 smaller parties), the other dominant force which is part of Syria’s main opposition the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces. Both the PKK and the PYD have accused Iraq’s KDP of working in coordination with Turkey to close the Kurdistan Regional Government border severing logistical links and affecting supply chain from Turkey’s

Kurdish areas to Syrian Kurdish areas. The Syrian PYD remains mistrustful of Turkey’s intentions, accusing it of trying to dilute the YPG’s influence in Kobane. The KDP in turn accuses the PYD of working with the Syrian government. Turkey is also apprehensive of helping the YPG or the PYD as it will send a signal to the PKK of aiding its cause. If ISIS captures Kobane, it will weaken the Kurdish resistance force not just in Syria but also in Turkey; however, victory of the YPG will spur demands of autonomy from the Turkish Kurds. The PYD is also seen by Ankara as a potential threat as it increases apprehensions about renewed guerrilla attacks against Turkey from Syrian territory. Giving in to international pressure for its inaction so far, Turkey has reluctantly facilitated the entry of Iraqi Kurdish Peshmerga forces through its territory into Kobane in Syria on October 28. The entry of Peshmerga fighters has bolstered YPG forces and boosted moral support but has failed to weaken ISIS.

The Rise of Syrian Kurds

Kobane was the first city that was liberated from the Assad regime in 2012 and declared autonomous by the Kurds in Syria. The region is home to rich oil resources, fertile agriculture and forms a connecting route to other Kurdish territories in Turkey, Iraq and Iran making it strategically important for militant group like the ISIS to control it. It forms a connecting route between other Kurdish areas of Efrin on the west and Yabiyah on the East. The fall of Kobane in the hands of ISIS will indisputably put the other Kurdish regions equally in danger of the Islamic radicals. It will also seriously mar the autonomous project of the Kurdish areas in Syria putting their fate in jeopardy for an indefinitely long period.

Being an ethnic minority, the Kurds have long faced atrocities at the hands of Arabs in Iraq, Turkey, Syria and Iran. In the renewed conflict in Syria, they now face prospects of facing the Islamic State extremists whose terror tactics including mass slaughter, public beheadings, capturing non-Muslim women as slaves and horrific atrocities, have earned it the brutal reputation of being more extreme than the Al-Qaeda. Before the attack on Kobane, some 400,000 people used to live in

...Kobane Resistance

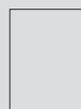
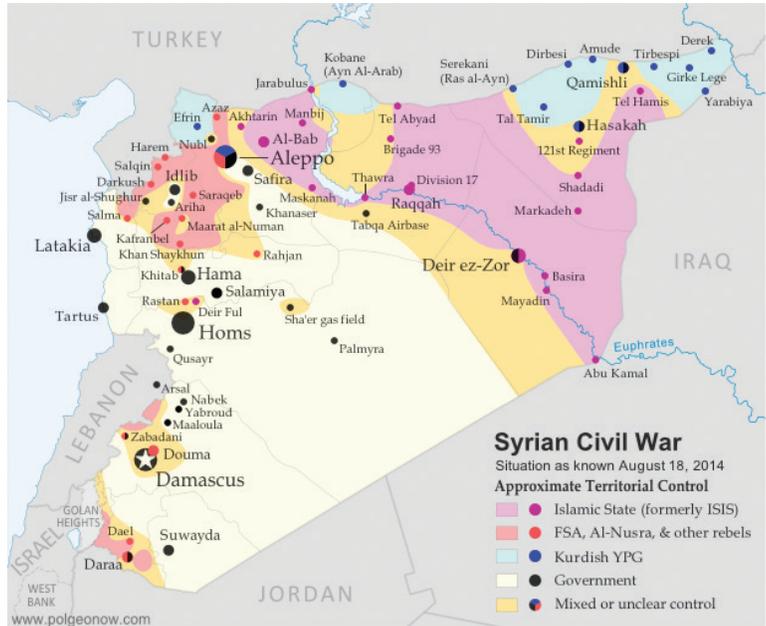
and around its 360 surrounding villages. Now, roughly 10,000 odd civilians survive, while the town is reduced to rubble.

As the strength of the moderate opposition rebels continue to fade, the YPG has emerged as one of the strongest irregular forces in the ongoing Syrian war to fight against ISIS. It proved its credibility in the rescue operation for thousands of Yezidis fleeing ISIS's terror from the mountains of Sinjar in Iraq. By joining hands with other rebel forces and Kurdish fighters the YPG has strengthened the fight against ISIS not just in Kobane but also in the countryside of Aleppo, Efrin and Jazia. The US coalition could take advantage of this to forge a new opposition in Syria in its fight against ISIS. However, for that to

happen, the YPG will need more than a few airdrops of ammunition and coordinated air-strikes. The Syrian Kurds have paid a heavy price fighting ISIS and have lost around 400 fighters and volunteers and are running low on medical, food and arms supply. According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights the fighting in Kobane has claimed the lives of 1,013 people from September to November 10 including about 609 ISIS militants. The death toll in the Syrian civil war itself has surpassed 200,000.

Winning Kobane would not just deal a crushing blow to ISIS but provide an edge to the PYD and reinstate Kurdish identity in

the region. The resistance in Kobane has given an edge to PYD and it has established itself as an anti-ISIS group who are fighting to defend their people. The PYD's political ideology, based on democratic autonomy, principle of decentralisation and local self-management reaffirm its role as an important player in the future of Syria. The Kobane resistance has not only upped the role of Syrian Kurds militarily and politically but has firmly established them as an invaluable partner in what looks like a prolonged conflict.



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