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The Political Impasse of the Syrian Kurdish Movement

→ Antoine Maltais



A Kurd carries the PKK flag in the funeral for female fighters killed in clashes against IS in Qobane, 2014 © Sedat Suna / EPA



Arab Reform Initiative

The Kurdish movement's policy of territorial advances in Syria puts it at odds with its desire to build international political alliances and renders military cooperation with it politically costly for Western nations, said Antoine Maltais in a new paper published today by the Arab Reform Initiative.

The paper, entitled *The Political Impasse of the Syrian Kurdish Movement*, argues that the movement's current deadlock is the outcome of policies and strategies the group adopted since 2011 uprising in Syria.

Lacking a broad social base, the group, which is directed by the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), has built its choices on security considerations, pushing it to nurture contradictory relations with different allies. It has fought in collaboration with the Assad regime in Syria and been a primary ally in the US-led coalition against the so-called Islamic State (IS). Its ultimate goal has been to gain international recognition.

Although the PKK has succeeded in bolstering its military capabilities, it remains politically weak in Syria, and relies on a rigid, authoritarian model of governance that depends, for its maintenance, on security institutions and party cronyism.

The PKK's institutional model, which has been used for years in Turkey and Iraq, co-opts elected local committees and representatives, and puts local armed forces under the direct control of party activists. Kurdish associations and institutions created in Syria and officially presented as "representatives of the people" are in reality controlled and managed by the PKK.

While the PKK is putting its model of governance as the only choice and seeks to implement it in non-Kurdish areas in Syria, the party remains extremely precarious. It lacks lasting allies and the opportunity to strengthen its social base, which makes its model of governance unstable and in constant need of change in response to the evolving conflict.

Despite its territorial expansion, the PKK finds itself at an impasse in Syria: its military rush has been the only means of garnering support but it does not guarantee stability in the long term.

Uncertainty about the future of the Syrian conflict forces the PKK to maintain its



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security policy of crushing any opposition in areas under its control because it fears local populations will turn against it as soon as IS has been defeated. At the same time, it seeks to ensure that its three Syrian “cantons” are geographically connected to each other as well as to Iraq.



Arab Reform Initiative

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About Arab Reform Initiative

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- We mobilize stakeholders to build coalitions for positive change

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