

Global Talk MIGA

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Kobani, or Ayn al-Arab? That is the Question

In Syria, the Kurdish opposition's struggle to hold on to the city of Kobani, just a few kilometers from the Turkish border, against the Islam State (ISIL) has gripped the US media's attention.

No surprise there. If the Kurds prevail, at a minimum, it will be a huge boost to morale of the forces mustered in the war against ISIL, not only in Syria but also in Iraq. If the ISIL march stalls going forward, the Battle of Kobani will be remembered as the turning of the tide. A Kurdish victory will also complicate the geopolitics of the region, where everyone seems to be somebody's enemy. The Syrian Kurds, under (mostly) US air cover, will retain and strengthen their grip on the areas under their control, further entrenching Syria's de facto partition. By no coincidence, the Iraqi Kurds, who on their part have a good chance of securing de facto independence if they can hold out against ISIL, acquired experience in self-government as a no-fly zone courtesy of the United States and its allies during the post-Gulf War sanction years. But all this will make the Assad regime in Syria as well as the Shia-dominated Iraqi government—and by extension their main ally Shia-dominated Iran—deeply unhappy unless ISIL is defeated decisively and some mysterious, benevolent power imposes sectarian and ethnic reconciliation on a truly federated states of Syria and likewise federated states of Iraq. Whatever the outcome,

though, the Obama administration's "no boots on the ground" policy will be vindicated, at least for the near future—thus the political significance for the domestic politics of the United States, but more on that later.

The aftermath of a Kurdish failure is less clear: expert opinion on the strategic value of Kobani is divided. No doubt the Kurdish nation will be furious, most importantly in Turkey, where the reconciliation process was already suffering a serious setback because of what had been a deep reluctance on the part of Turkey to commit itself to the war against ISIL. Turkey appears to have relented under US pressure, allowing US

forces to use bases in Turkey for the bombing sorties and allow Iraqi Kurds to pass through Turkish territory to fight in the battle for Kobani. But unless it allows the Turkish Kurds, so agonizingly close to the frontline, from crossing over—as of this writing, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan had yet to relent—the backlash is likely to be severe, with significant regional impact as Turkey’s role as a major player is accordingly constrained. The broader consequences, though, are more difficult to guess at, largely because it is difficult to foresee how the United States will respond. Will it cajole Turkey into allowing Turkish Kurds—battle-hardened guerillas (terrorists according to the Turkish and US governments) more numerous than the Syrian Kurds—to join the fight in Syria? Will it step up its bombing raids on ISIL targets? Will it allow its military “advisors” in Iraq to take on a more active role? Whatever the answer, though, the Obama administration will take a significant hit on the domestic political scene, particularly if it decides to put its military advisors in the line of fire, however it decides to describe the upgraded role. If Kobani falls before the November 4 US midterm elections, this will surely turn out to be the blow that decisively takes control of the US Senate out of the hands of the Democrats and deliver it to the Republicans: bad news for the Obama administration, but a bit of good news for the Democrats, who will have a fully Republican Congress to blame for the legislative gridlock that will continue regardless of the outcome of the midterm elections. The Democrats will have that to console themselves with as they look towards the 2016 elections, when they can field a new presidential candidate.

But if you were following the events through the Japanese media, you would have missed much of this story, partly because Japanese involvement in the war on ISIL and more broadly in the Middle East is much less than that of the US, but also because the Japanese media have been covering the battle over Ayn al-Arab. Now if you, unlike me, are an expert on the region or, like me, follow both media, you will know that Kobani and Ayn al-Arab are the Kurdish and Arabic names, respectively, for the same city that is currently under attack by ISIL forces. But the US and Japanese media will only very infrequently remind you of this point. Where does this difference come from? My guess is that this partly a reflection on the US side of a general sympathy for Kurds, who prospered in Iraq under US protection during the post-Gulf War years, the only US success story that truly survived the fateful war in 2003. It also helps that the Kurds have a strongly secular outlook, particularly with women depicted regularly on the frontlines wielding weapons, in contrast to the often sectarian and what is perceived as a sexist outlook in much of the rest of the Middle East. More generally, the US view of sovereignty, at least those of others, is somewhat limited for better or worse, as witnessed by its serial involvement in regime change around the world. Japan, by contrast, is more likely to be more respectful of sovereignty, perhaps chastened by its experience in copying the imperial powers after the Meiji Restoration, an experience that ended very badly—in 1945. And the sovereign’s choice in Syria is Ayn al-Arab, Arabic being the sole official language of Syria.

This is not the first time, and will surely not be the last, that we will be seeing this dichotomy. A more obvious and politically more significant example was Myanmar, which the US media (and government) consistently referred to as Burma until the military dictatorship released its grip on power and embarked on its still-ongoing emergence as an open economy and society. Japan, by contrast, while joining the international sanctions regime, quickly began referring to Myanmar, the name adopted by the military dictatorship. One wonders what name—or names—we will be using, twenty years from now, for that border town in Syria.