

Syria/Kurdistan: Fresh off victory over Islamic State, Kurds seek more success

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Kurdish fighters in Syria are building on their victory in Kobani to ally with moderate rebels and push out Islamic State extremists. They tout the alliance as a game-changer.

For Kurdish fighters, last month's victory over Islamic State militants in the town of Kobani in northern Syria was only the beginning.

Their ambition is to build on an alliance with moderate rebels in Syria and become the chief force fighting the extremists in the country.

Its commanders say such an alliance could be just the partner that the West has been seeking all along in the battle against the Islamic State group, also known as ISIS or ISIL, which began its rise in 2013 and now holds a third of both Syria and neighbouring Iraq.

The Kurds quickly emerged as a potent foe for the Islamic extremists. In August 2014, fighters of the YPG, the main Kurdish force, battled Islamic State militants to carve out an escape route for tens of thousands of members of Iraq's Yazidi minority who were trapped on a mountaintop.

The fight for Kobani, which is on the border between Syria and Turkey, began after rapid Islamic State advances in mid-September. It further thrust Syria's Kurds to the forefront of the anti-Islamic State groups.

"The Kurds have proved to be a very reliable partner on the ground where none other exists in Syria," said Mutlu Civiroglu, a Kurdish affairs analyst who focuses on Syria and Turkey.

"In my view, if the West is looking for a partner, Kobani provides a successful example where Kurds and Arabs could work together to get rid of ISIS. ... It's a good model," he said.

Like their Iraqi brethren, Syria's Kurds have used the region's conflicts to further their nationalistic goals, carving out effective self-rule in the northeastern corner of Syria called Rojava, where they make up the majority.

For a long while after the uprising against Syrian President Bashar Assad began in March 2011, the Kurds tried to pursue their own path - distinct from both the Syrian government and members of the opposition to the Damascus government. That led to accusations among Syria's overwhelmingly Sunni rebels that the Kurds were siding with Assad's forces. There were repeated clashes, particularly between the Kurds and the more extremist rebel groups in northern Syria.

In the battle for Kobani, the Kurds say it was their determination and discipline that made the difference and showed they are worthy of Western support. A U.S.-led air assault began Sept. 23, with Kobani the target of about a half-dozen daily airstrikes.

At one point in October, the U.S. dropped bundles of weapons and medical supplies for the Kurdish fighters - a first in the Syrian conflict. Dozens of Iraqi Kurdish peshmerga forces joined their brethren in Kobani, bringing in heavy weapons that neutralized the Islamic State group's artillery advantage.

But Kurds say it was also a group of fighters from the Free Syrian Army who helped them turn the tide against the militants in Kobani.

In September, the YPG created a joint operations room with several moderate FSA brigades that formed an umbrella group called "Burkan al-Furat" - Arabic for the "Volcano of the Euphrates."

Col. Abdul Jabbar al-Oqaidi, a senior FSA commander, said fighting alongside each other has built confidence between the Kurds and the FSA, and it has also dispelled suspicions among many FSA members that the Kurds were Assad supporters.

"It will shape the future of a free Syria," he said.

In recent days, Kurdish and FSA fighters have swept outward from Kobani to clear the surrounding countryside, seizing about 100 villages from the militants.

Kurdish commanders say their aim is to liberate all Kurdish-majority areas in northern Syria and then to go farther, to help liberate Arab majority areas that have become Islamic State strongholds.

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