



Edited by Stefano M. Torelli

KURDISTAN

AN INVISIBLE NATION

Introduction by Paolo Magri

ISPI

Kurdistan

An Invisible Nation

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ISPI

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I edition

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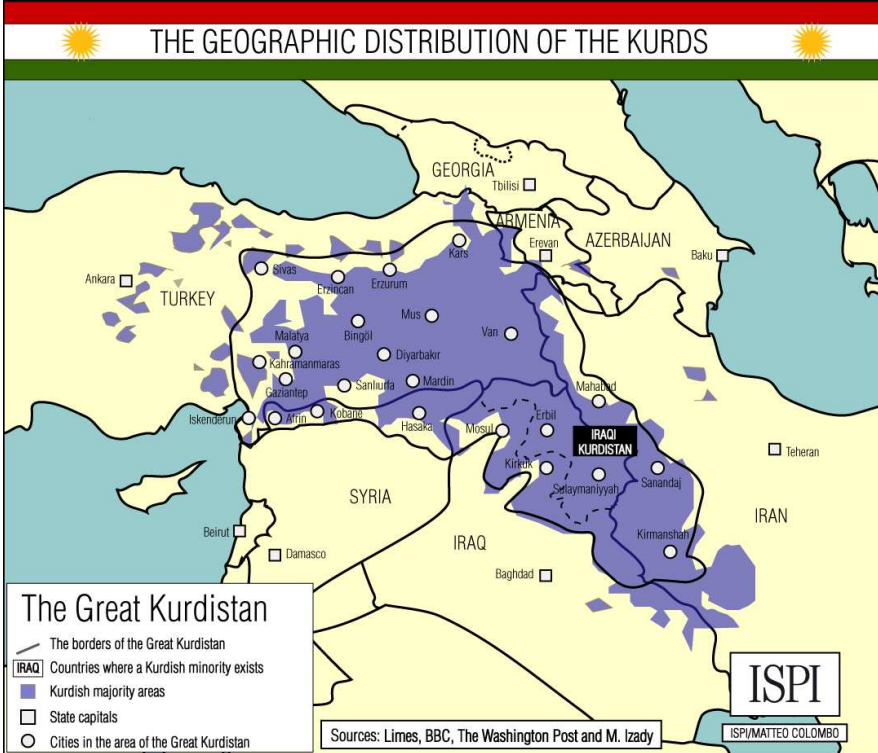
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List of the main political parties and movements involved in the Kurdish question

- AKP Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi (Justice and Development Party) (Turkey)
- Islamic-inspired party founded in 2001. Driven by the current Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, it has been ruling Turkey continuously since 2002. Its electoral strongholds are in Anatolia.
- CHP Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi (Republican People's Party) (Turkey)
- A liberal party, it is the oldest political party in Turkey. It retains the political legacy of the founder of the Turkish Republic, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. It is the second largest party in Turkey and its electoral base is concentrated in the western coastal regions.
- FSA Free Syrian Army (Free Syrian Army) (Syria)
- Armed group founded in 2011 by defectors from the official Syrian army. In the Syrian civil war, it fights against the loyalist forces of Bashar al-Assad and consists of militias from diverse backgrounds.
- Gorran Movement for Change (Iraq)

Iraqi Kurdish political party, born from a split within the PUK in 2009 instigated by Nawshirwan Mustafa. It stands as a renewal movement against the KDP-PUK duopoly. In the elections for the KRG in 2013, it exceeded the PUK, becoming the second political party in Iraqi Kurdistan.

HDP Halkların Demokratik Partisi (Democratic People's Party) (Turkey)

A Turkish progressive and pro-Kurdish political party founded in 2012. Led by Selahattin Demirtas, it is considered the heir to the different Kurdish political parties formed in Turkey in previous years. In the June 2015 elections it entered parliament for the first time, having crossed the 10% threshold. The result was repeated, albeit with lower rates, in the November 2015 elections. HDP is the leading political force in all the regions of southeastern Turkey, where the Turkish Kurds are concentrated.

IS Islamic State

Jihadist group led by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. Since 2014, IS controls a large portion of land between Syria and Iraq, including the capital of the self-proclaimed Caliphate, Raqqa (Syria), and the city of Mosul in Iraq. IS is the heir to ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria), born in the context of Iraq's civil war as Al-Qa'ida in Iraq (AQI), founded by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi in 2004.

JN Jabhat al-Nusra (Front of victory)

Jihadist group founded in 2012 in Syria. It is the movement affiliated with al-Qa'ida in Syria. Initially part of the ISIS network, in 2013 the two groups split

up, following ISIS' decision to leave the al-Qa'ida galaxy. In the Syrian civil war, JN fights against the Assad regime, but also against IS and the Kurdish militias.

- KCK** Koma Civakên Kurdistan (Group of Communities in Kurdistan)
- Political organization founded by the PKK in 2007, which includes some of the main Kurdish parties in Turkey, Iraq, Syria and Iran, with the aim of creating a democratic confederation of all Kurdish regions.
- KDP** Pārṯī Dīmūkrātī Kūrdistān (Kurdistan Democratic Party) (Iraq)
- Historical Iraqī Kurdish political movement, founded in 1946 by Mustafa Barzani. Until the seventies, it was the only party militating for the rights of Kurds in Iraq. It is currently led by Massoud Barzani (son of Mustafa), president of the KRG. Its bases are in the capital, Erbil. Since the nineties the KDP contends influence on Iraqī Kurdistan with the PUK and since 2003 it has forged good relations with Turkey.
- KRG** Kurdistan Regional Government (Iraq)
- Governmental body of the Autonomous Region of Iraqī Kurdistan, established in 1992. It is currently ruled by a coalition comprising the two historic Iraqī Kurdish political parties, the KDP and the PUK.
- MHP** Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi (Nationalist Movement Party) (Turkey)
- Turkish ultra-nationalist party founded in 1969. It represents nationalist discrimination against ethnic minorities, especially the Kurds. Historically it is the

third political force in Turkey, since 2015 in competition with the HDP.

Peshmerga Those who face death (Iraq)

Historically, it is the armed militia of Iraqi Kurdistan. Currently they represent the "regular" army of the KRG and since 2014 have had a leading role in the fight against IS in Iraq. Although the peshmerga form a united front, on the field the major Iraqi Kurdish parties, KDP, PUK and Gorran, are equipped with their own Kurdish fighters forces.

PJAK Partiya Jiyana Azad a Kurdistanê (Party for a Free Life in Kurdistan) (Iran)

Iranian Kurdish militant party, founded in 2004. Close to the PKK, it has been fighting for the self-determination of the Kurdish people in Iran. Considered a terrorist organization by Iran, Turkey and the United States, it has conducted several guerrilla operations against the Iranian state.

PKK Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê (Kurdistan Workers Party) (Turkey)

Marxist party founded by Abdullah Ocalan in 1978. Composed primarily of Kurds, it is identified with the Kurdish cause in Turkey. In 1984, the PKK launched a phase of armed struggle against the Turkish state, which led to a period of violence that caused between 35,000 and 40,000 victims. Ocalan was arrested in 1999 and in 2013 the PKK declared a unilateral ceasefire. Violence against Turkey re-emerged in 2015. The PKK, listed as a terrorist organization by Turkey, the NATO member countries and the

European Union, has its operational bases in Iraqi Kurdistan, in the mountainous areas of Qandil.

- PUK** Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (Iraq)
- Founded in 1975 by Jalal Talabani, former president of Iraq between 2005 and 2014, it is the second political party in Iraqi Kurdistan, along with Barzani's KDP. Characterized by a more progressive vision than the KDP, the PUK fought a civil war against the latter in the nineties. Currently the two parties govern together in Iraqi Kurdistan, but their aims and alliances still diverge. The PUK receives the support of Iran and is closer to the PKK. Its base is in Sulaymaniyah.
- PYD** Yekîtiya Partiya Demokrat (Democratic Union Party) (Syria)
- Syrian Kurdish political party founded in 2003, considered a direct offshoot of the PKK. In the context of the Syrian civil war, it has become the most important Kurdish actor in Syria and is currently the main force in Rojava (the self-proclaimed autonomous Kurdish federation in the Syrian Kurdish areas). Due to its proximity to the PKK Turkey considers it a terrorist organization.
- SDF** Syrian Democratic Forces (Syrian Democratic Forces) (Syria)
- Alliance of groups (largely majority Syrian Kurdish militias) created in 2015 and supported by the United States especially for its role in the fight against IS and other jihadist groups in Syria.
- TAK** Teyrêbazên Azadiya Kurdistan (Kurdistan Freedom Falcons) (Turkey)

Turkish Kurdish nationalist and separatist movement, born in 2004 from the split of some members of the PKK, against the latter's decision to deal with the Turkish state.

YDG-H Yurtsever Devrimci Hareket Gençlik (Revolutionary Patriotic Youth Movement) (Turkey) Youth wing of the PKK, formed in 2013.

YPG Yekîneyên Parastina Gel (Popular Protection Units) (Syria)

PYD's military branch. Since the self-proclamation of the Federal Government of Rojava (Syrian Kurdistan), the YPG in fact acts as the protecting militia of Rojava.

YPJ Yekîneyên Parastina Jin (Women's Protection Units) (Syria)

Established in 2012, it includes the brigades of wom

Introduction

Kurdistan is an unsolved puzzle in Middle Eastern politics. The debate about the status of the various Kurd-majority areas has been ongoing in the international community for decades but the issue has never really become front-page news. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that a clear-cut response to the problem has never been devised. While some propose to create an independent state, others would opt for greater autonomy for the Kurds within their respective countries or, conversely, suggest to totally assimilate Kurd minorities. Indeed, the Kurds have been almost constantly ignored by leaders in international and Middle Eastern politics and relegated to a condition of marginalization in the region. The main explanation for the scant attention paid to them can be found in the fact that the Kurdish question lies right in the center of an area, the Middle East, that is already endemically involved in crises and conflicts. In past decades, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was the focus of political and media attention worldwide. From the eighties to the nineties public opinion and governments were more interested in the rise of Khomeini's Iran or in its war against Saddam Hussein's Iraq. In the new millennium, the Middle East draws the attention due to the destabilization that followed the Arab revolts in 2011, with the emergence of new wars and forms of terrorism.

And yet in recent years Kurdistan – or better, the Kurdish nation, with all its different internal facets – has grabbed the headlines of international newspapers and now ranks high in the political agendas of the region’s governments and international actors. The traditional “lack of attention” to the Kurds has now become direct interest. A series of factors has contributed to creating the conditions for the international community to start a dialogue with the Kurds: the persistence of civil war in Syria and instability in Iraq; the emergence and territorial expansion of the so-called Islamic State (IS); the difficulty regional and international actors have in involving themselves directly on the ground to combat the jihadist threat of the self-proclaimed Caliphate of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi; and, finally, the fact that the “black stain” of IS is expanding right to the borders of Kurd-majority territories in Iraq and Syria. All this has inevitably turned the Kurds into trustworthy allies in the fight against the common enemy. In a quagmire of crossed alliances and interests making the Syrian civil war, the Kurds have been seen by the major Western powers – Italy included – as their fifth column in the area and bulwark of their defense. Support for the Kurds has more than once been framed within a sort of “clash of civilization”. The relatively democratic nature of the autonomous governmental structures put in place in some areas of Kurdistan, the mostly “secular” character of the Kurds and the women’s role within their society have helped create an image of the Kurds as close to Western values as opposed to jihadist archaism.

This is why the Kurd-Iraqi *peshmerga* and Kurd militias linked to the Democratic Union Party (PYD) in Syria have become privileged partners in Western strategy against IS, receiving financial, logistic and military support to fight it on the ground. In fact, thanks also to external support, the Kurds have led some of the biggest battles against IS – the Kurd militias’ resistance during the siege of Kobane between 2014 and 2015 has become

almost mythical – and they have regained portions of territory previously taken by al-Baghdadi’s troops, contributing to their partial retreat. At the same time, the Kurd-Iraqi militias also defended the important city of Kirkuk, temporarily taking control of it and compensating for the weakness of the Iraqi army. This city has great economic and geopolitical value for the entire country, as it owns a significant percentage of all Iraqi oil reserves.

The Kurds seem to be the ally that the international community – above all the West – needs to combat the Islamic State. And, in the middle term, they might also succeed in dealing mighty blows to the self-proclaimed Caliphate. However, right when their praises are being sung, a set of questions arises whose answers are complex and have to do with broader issues regarding the Kurdish question. What new balances would an eventual victory of Syrian and Iraqi Kurds over IS create? What are the long-term goals of the Kurd community in the Middle East? Could the legitimization they are gaining in the eyes of the international community lead to an official demand for independence? If so, within what borders? What are the relationships between the different Kurd communities? In the long term, how to reconcile the West’s policy of unconditional support for the Kurds with the position of Turkey, actually fighting the same Kurd militias at war against IS? How to reach a solution to the knotty Kurdish question able to satisfy all the actors involved? Will Kurdistan go back to being a problem in the heart of the Middle East? Finally, will it be possible to outline a common future for the Kurd communities or will they remain tied to the political destinies of the countries they live in?

These are just some of the questions that this report tries to answer through contributions from leading international experts

on the Kurdish question, gathered together by the Italian Institute for International Political Studies (ISPI).

The first chapter, by Stefano M. Torelli, grasps the surface and provides the basic elements for analyzing the Kurdistan question. To this aim, the editor traces the major turning points for the Kurds, from the end of World War I and the Treaty of Sèvres (with the winning powers' promise to create an independent state) to the rise of Ataturk and the start of a long history of neglecting their political and cultural rights. In that context, so-called Kurdish nationalism was heavily influenced by the Western powers, who had found in Kurd minorities a useful tool against the Ottoman Empire and, later, Ataturk himself. The analysis of how the Kurdish question arose in the early 20th century clearly shows how the Kurds themselves were always divided internally along family or clan lines. Over time, this weakened the demands of the Kurds, traditionally unable to form a unified front and often involved in internecine conflicts. The chapter concludes with examples of how these traits still survive, in Turkey, Iraq and Syria, and are an obstacle to solving the Kurdish question.

The second chapter, by Soner Cagaptay and Cem Yolbulan, is specifically focused on the actor that has most influenced the Kurdish question: Turkey. The importance of Turkish Kurds and the levels of intensity reached by the civil war fought for more than thirty years between the PKK and the Turkish state have made the issue more prominent in Turkey, also on the political and symbolic levels. Furthermore, in 2015 the hopes for peace seemed to have been dashed again, with a reprise of clashes between the Turkish army and PKK guerillas. What are the scenarios of the Kurdish question in Turkey? The authors' response is clear: everything will depend on the political decisions of Turkey's current president, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Should Ankara's strategy not change there will be little maneuver room for negotiations, but at the same time Turkey

will have lost its great occasion for pacifying the country once and for all.

The third chapter, written by Cengiz Gunes, retraces the stages of the conflict between the Kurds and IS, both in Syria and in Iraq. In the first case, after an initial retreat, the Kurd militias were able to overturn the situation after the “historic” siege of Kobane, expelling the troops of the self-proclaimed Caliphate from Kurd-majority territories. In Iraq, after IS came close to directly threatening Erbil, capital of Iraqi Kurdistan, the *pershmeqa* (thanks also to fundamental aid from the West) not only held their own positions but also extended the territory under their control.

Energy, together with security and fight against IS, is the other big factor that makes Kurdistan important, even in the eyes of external actors. In the fourth chapter, Carlo Frappi analyzes this factor by placing emphasis to the area of Iraqi Kurdistan. The immense hydrocarbon resources that the autonomous region of Kurdistan possesses seem to be both an asset and a liability since the Iraqi state-building process is centered precisely on oil revenues, as one would expect from a rentier states. The chapter examines the evolution of the clash between the Erbil and Baghdad central government on deposit exploitation and oil revenues in Iraqi Kurdistan, pointing out all the problems still unsolved and the ambiguities stemming from a constitution not entirely clear about the actual distribution of revenues and resource management.

Eventually, Robert Lowe draws picture of relations between the Western world (especially the United States) and the Kurd communities in the Middle East. In particular, this chapter analyzes how the West has constantly manipulated the Kurdish question at its own convenience. As described in the first chapter, this was true for Great Britain during and after WWI, but it is also a reading key today. The biggest difficulties in

finding a clear solution to the Kurdish question – or questions, since the chapter distinguishes between the Turkish, Iraqi and Syrian contexts, specifying the very marginal role that the West has had in the case of Iran – stem from the fact that any policies aimed at dealing with the issue have always run up against the need to maintain bilateral relations with the respective countries the Kurds live in. The United States and Europe still need to solve the dilemma of supporting the Kurds for anti-IS purposes in Syria and Iraq but at the same time maintaining current national borders. When it comes to Turkey, Ankara is tied to the United States by their common membership in NATO. As a result, should the US have to decide between politically supporting the Kurds or the Turkish government, it would have to opt for the latter.

This explains why the key to solving the thorny Kurdish question should be found first within the countries directly involved. However, as long as these countries are war-torn and unstable, it will be hard for Kurdistan to become a priority on the agendas of regional countries and the international community. With the risk that, once again, the Kurds will be exploited for short-term purposes while in the long term their fate remains uncertain.

Kurdistan is not only an evocative territory or an ideal cause with which to identify, but it also entails a series of key issues in the Middle East, such as the rights of minorities, the destinies of regional conflicts, Islamic terrorism and energy resources. This has a direct impact on us, more than we really perceive. Against this background, the volume puts the Kurdish question in a broader perspective and aims at contributing to public debate on an issue that has inevitably become a priority on the international agenda.

Paolo Magri

Executive Vice-President and Director of ISPI

1. Kurdistan and the Middle East. Historical Divisions and International Plots

Stefano M. Torelli

Framing the Kurdish question

In the intricate mosaic of the unresolved issues in the Middle East, the Kurdish question is undoubtedly one of the most difficult and, at the same time, constantly underestimated. Nowadays, the Kurdish people represent one of the largest “stateless nations”, whose grievances about un-achieved independence – or at least autonomy – have been systematically disregarded for decades. The Kurds continue to constitute a problem that touches different fields and different Middle Eastern countries. This contributes to making it an extremely complex issue.

Indeed, one of the main problems concerns its horizontal dimension, as well as the heterogeneity of the Kurdish population itself. Which lives mostly in four different countries: Turkey, Iraq, Syria and Iran. In each of the individual contexts in which they live, the Kurds have different priorities and agendas that often even conflict with each other. This means that it is impossible to speak about a single Kurdistan, but rather of several Kurdistan(s). It is undeniable that the redesigning of the former Ottoman area following the so-called Sykes-Picot

agreements¹ led to a situation where the newly created countries (often more the result of European calculations and choices than of the self-determination of indigenous peoples) were forced to accept the new arrangements. This contributed to creating new challenges to the Kurdish minorities living in those territories.

The area historically falling under the name of Kurdistan is, as already mentioned, on the border between Turkey, Iraq, Syria and Iran. Beyond that division, the Kurds are to all intents and purposes a population unto itself, connected by some specific features and provided with its own cultural traditions, language and common history. The latter has often been intertwined with the destiny of the Arab, Turk, Persian and Armenian peoples that over the years have inhabited the territories historically designated as Kurdistan. However, unlike all these other realities, Kurdistan has never achieved the international recognition leading to the creation of an independent state. This continues to represent the ultimate aspiration and the real dream of the Kurds, although a series of external and internal factors has led, over time, to the impracticability of such a solution. This in turn contributed to complicating the situation in the Middle East and to creating another potential destabilizing factor for the region.

On closer inspection, the Kurdish question can be likened to the Palestinian, although it has a much lower media and

¹ The agreements, negotiated between November 1915 and March 1916, were signed on May 16 1916 and took their name from the two diplomats – the French François Georges-Picot and the British Sir Mark Sykes – who were the architects of them. At the basis of the agreement was the consideration that in the case of the Ottoman Empire's defeat and with a possible power vacuum in the area of Syria and Mesopotamia (the current Iraq) a review of borders, of balances and of areas of influence in the Middle East were increasingly necessary. In this way the powers involved would have secured their strategic interests in that area. Most of the current state borders of the Middle East were decided by virtue of this agreement.

symbolic echo and is not perceived as one of the causes of the conflicts that, almost endemically, characterize the region. Yet many of the events that have marked the recent history of the Middle East have had the Kurds as their protagonists. This was true in the case of the wars in Iraq under the regime of Saddam Hussein and of the historical and political evolution of a country as crucial to the stability of the area as Turkey. At the same time, the Kurds are among the principal actors in the more recent civil conflict in Syria and in the rise of the so-called Islamic State (IS) between Iraq and Syria. Only Kurdish militias from different backgrounds in fact fight the latter on the field. The very ubiquity of the “Kurdish factor” in the various Middle East crises clearly shows the importance of this issue and how, over time, it continues to be a constant that is unlikely to be set aside, at least until a solution is provided to create a new and lasting balance. It is at this point, though, that we realize how varied the internal Kurdish reality itself is and that it is not possible to speak of a single solution for Kurdistan; instead the question should be resolved in different ways depending on the different contexts involved.

To better understand how we arrived at the current situation and what constants have driven the dynamics of so-called Kurdistan, we should give a brief analysis of what happened in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It was during this period that the Kurdish question became an issue not only regionally, but internationally too. At the same time, these years also saw the rise and development of Kurdish nationalist sentiment as a more structured political ideal than it had been in the past. Nevertheless, several external actors whose interests, in turn, overlapped with those of the indigenous Kurdish populations exploited this same “nationalism”. In this sense, it can be said that these same external actors partially contributed to instilling among the Kurdish people that sense of community

that was almost unknown, decisively influencing the evolution of the Kurdish political trajectory.

Brief history of a mistreated people

Estimates of the number of people making up the ethnic Kurds in the world vary depending on the source, but it is believed that in total the Kurds are about 30-35 million. Of these, currently between 15 and 20 million live in Turkey (about 20 per cent of the total population), about 5 million in Iraq (between 15 and 20 per cent), between 6 and 8 million in Iran (8 per cent) and about 2.5 million in Syria (10 per cent). In addition, there are other Kurdish minorities, for a total of about 2 million people, mostly in Germany, Israel, France, Sweden, Belgium, the Netherlands and other European countries². Over the years, the Kurds have experienced high levels of emigration from their areas of origin. The so-called “Kurdish diaspora” is a widespread phenomenon: at present, the city with the highest number of Kurds in the world is not located within the territories of Kurdistan, but in western Turkey: Istanbul.

Historically, the Kurds are an Indo-European ethnic group, like the Persians, and are bound together by different cultural and linguistic factors. In fact, they have their own language, which comes from the same family as the Iranian languages, also of Indo-European origin. Due to the cultural diversity of the Kurdish landscape, even the language is not only one, but consists of two main groups, Kurmanji and Sorani, and several dialects.

It is believed that the Kurds come from the Corduene region, straddling the territories of Armenia and Persia, near the Lake of Van in what is now southeastern Turkey. As a result of the

² Estimates differ depending on the sources. Generally, Kurdish sources tend to round off the demographics of the Kurdish population, whereas Turkish ones tend to underestimate it. The source referred to here is the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*.

several waves of conquest that followed the emergence of Islam, the Kurds were subjected to Islamization and, from the 21th century onwards, there have been several dynasties of Kurdish origin who, in a more or less autonomous way, have ruled the Kurd territories. The most important dynasty was certainly the Ayyubid, founded by Salah al-Din (our Saladin). The Ayyubids arose from the ashes of the Fatimid caliphate, which had its administrative center in today's Egypt. From there, between the 12th and 13th centuries the Ayyubids ruled over a territory that extended from the Libyan coasts to the heart of the Middle East, including the current territories of Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, southern Turkey, Yemen and the holy cities of Mecca and Medina. Saladin himself is famous in the West for having defeated the Crusader armies in the battle for the re-conquest of the holy city of Jerusalem, in 1187³. Even today, the Kurdish community remembers the heroic deeds of Saladin with pride. Thus, it is often to him that the Kurds refer as an example of a glorious past that since then has not returned.

With the birth and expansion of the Ottoman Empire⁴, the Kurds were gradually integrated into the new administrative and institutional system, continuing to inhabit the eastern provinces. To the east of the Ottoman borders, Kurds lived in the western provinces of the other most important empire in the region, the Persian (the Safavid empire). Since the 16th century, therefore, the Kurds have been divided between the two major Turkish

³ See also F. Cardini, *Il Saladino. Una storia di crociati e saraceni*, Piemme, Casale Monferrato, 1999.

⁴ Founded in 1299 by a dynasty of Turkish origin, the Ottoman Empire ruled over much of the Middle East until the end of World War I, when it was dissolved. In 1923, from its ashes was born the current Republic of Turkey. For a timely and thorough reading about the political, social and economic aspects of the Ottoman Empire, see R. Mantran (ed.), *Histoire de l'Empire Ottoman*, Fayard, Paris, 2003.

and Persian areas of influence. The management of their presence in these territories, respectively at the borders of the two major Near Eastern empires, was a substantially marginal issue relegated to the internal affairs of the Ottomans and the Persians, at least until the end of the 19th century. In this period, in fact, the Kurdish issue became international with the entrance of the political and military interests of the major foreign powers of the time.

At a time when the Ottoman Empire's borders were being redesigned and the major European powers – especially Great Britain on one side and Russia on the other – were paying more attention to its destiny, the predominantly Kurdish areas were one of the strategic grounds for competition, due to their cross-border nature. The Russo-Turkish War of 1877-1878, after which was held the historic Congress of Berlin (1878) defining the new international balances and the areas of influence within the Ottoman boundaries, had one of its most active fronts right in Kurdistan. Moreover, in those years had emerged the series of problems related to the difficult coexistence between Muslim Kurds and the Christian populations, especially the Armenians. It was also because of the clashes between Kurds and Armenians and the threats to Christian minorities in those areas, that the European powers began to be more assiduously interested in the Kurdish-majority territories⁵.

⁵ Between the late nineteenth and early 20th century, the Ottoman Empire used a cavalry regiment, known as *Hamidiyye* (whose core consisted of Kurds), to massacre the Armenian people, in what was the first phase of the so-called Armenian genocide. According to contemporary sources, the victims of the massacres committed against Armenians by the *Hamidiyye* were between 100,000 and 300,000. France, at the time, became particularly active as a defender of the Christian minorities in the Near East. Therefore, the so-called Armenian question soon entered the agenda of the major European powers. It is worth mentioning, however, that the eastern provinces of the Ottoman Empire were inhabited not only by Armenian communities but also by other Christian

Finally, it is to this time that can be traced the birth of Kurdish nationalist ideology and of a greater political awareness about its own role in the Middle East. In fact, this sentiment arose in the heyday of nationalisms (such as the independence movement in the Balkans region) and was definitely influenced by them. According to some interpretations, Kurdish nationalism itself would have been more the result of targeted European policies and propaganda than a spontaneous native process. Thus, in some way, it would have been a “driven from abroad” ideology.

In fact, especially during and immediately after the First World War, the Kurds were more than once instigated by the European powers who saw in these minorities an important tool of domestic opposition to the Ottoman Empire to be eventually exploited. In the last years of the Ottoman Empire, in fact, the conflict between the Kurdish minorities who lived in the eastern provinces of the empire and the central power of Constantinople (Istanbul) had become even stronger. Under the Sultanate of Abdulhamid II (1876-1909), the Ottoman Empire engaged in a process of internal reforms aimed at centralizing its administration, arousing reactions from the peripheral populations, historically accustomed to governing themselves in a relatively autonomous way.

Centralization and forced “Turkification” of the Kurdish minorities; influence of international and regional powers on the evolution of separatist Kurdish policies as a tool to be used against the Turks; fragmentation of the Kurdish landscape itself, divided into families and tribal connections often at odds with each other, which in the long term would make it impossible to create a unified Kurdish front. These are the basic factors that have characterized the recent history of Kurdistan and have represented the greatest obstacles to the creation of an

communities. In particular, significant were the *Nestorian minorities*, led by M. Shimoun.

independent Kurdish state, contributing to creating a situation of permanent instability, potentially upsetting the regional balances.

The chimera of the Kurdish State: birth and failure of independent Kurdistan

During the First World War, the British government was the actor that relied the most on the Kurds to defeat the Ottoman Empire against which it was fighting⁶. The British objective was to impose its influence in the area after the eventual defeat of the Ottomans. However, after helping to create the hope of an independent Kurdistan in exchange for support during the war, the European powers kept that hope from coming true, making it only an illusion. In fact, there was a moment, at the end of the war, when it really seemed that the dream of an independent Kurdistan could become a reality. The Treaty of Sèvres signed in 1920, which established the terms of peace between the defeated Ottoman Empire and the European powers, in fact expressly envisaged the creation of a Kurdish state. Article 62 of the Treaty stated that:

... A Commission sitting at Constantinople and composed of three members appointed by the British, French and Italian governments respectively shall draft within six months from the coming into force of the present Treaty a scheme of local autonomy for the predominantly Kurdish areas lying east of the Euphrates, south of the southern boundary of Armenia as it may be hereafter determined, and north of the frontier of Turkey with Syria and Mesopotamia...

⁶ The documents consulted by the author in the British Foreign Office archives regarding British policies toward the eastern Ottoman provinces (which already were referred to as Kurdistan) reveal constant references to London's political and strategic interest in this area.

Article 64 also specified that

... If within one year from the coming into force of the present Treaty the Kurdish peoples within the areas defined in Article 62 shall address themselves to the Council of the League of Nations in such a manner as to show that a majority of the population of these areas desires independence from Turkey, and if the Council then considers that these peoples are capable of such independence and recommends that it should be granted to them, Turkey hereby agrees to execute such a recommendation, and to renounce all rights and title over these areas...⁷

This promise, however, was already born with some structural defects, to the point that it is possible to speak of a “mutilated victory” for Kurdistan. Paradoxically, what would have been the highest point of Kurdish aspirations for independence contained in itself the factors for failure of the project to create a Kurdish state. Indeed, first of all the Treaty that the European powers were signing with the Ottoman Empire concerned only one government (that of Constantinople), delegitimized and existing only on paper. In the meantime, the “parallel” Turkish government led by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk had already risen in Ankara. Shortly thereafter Atatürk would be the sole interlocutor of Europe after winning the war of independence and founding contemporary Turkey⁸. On the other hand, the Kurdistan mentioned in the

⁷ The full text of the agreement is in the British parliamentary reports. Cfr. *Parliamentary Papers*, Treaty Series No. 11 (1920), «Treaty of peace with Turkey».

⁸ After World War I, the government formed in Ankara led by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk was opposed to the official government of Constantinople. Atatürk, not recognizing the peace terms of the Treaty of Sèvres, led the Turkish War of Independence. For a reconstruction of the history of Atatürk and of the period between the end of the First World War and the proclamation of the Republic of Turkey, see F.L. Grassi, *Atatürk. Il fondatore della Turchia moderna*, Salerno Editrice, Roma, 2008.

Treaty of Sèvres had been already deprived of a consistent part of its territory. In the British plans, southern Kurdistan would become part of the nascent state of Iraq, while areas under Persian control would remain under Iranian authority.

In this context, three years after promising the Kurds their own state, the European powers found it necessary to negotiate with Atatürk in order to concretize the new situation in the Middle East and contribute to its stabilization. It was at this time that they unhesitatingly sacrificed the Kurdish cause to the new Middle East peace. In the end, the part of Kurdistan that was supposed to be a new state entity under the Treaty of Sèvres would fall under the influence of Kemalist Turkey, which was officially created in October 1923, following the Lausanne Conference. The Kurds in Turkey would thus be residing within the new Turkish state borders. This was the start of what is still perceived as “the” Kurdish question *par excellence*, namely the one concerning Turkey. In the name of the new nationalist and secular principles on which the new republic was based, Atatürk imposed a kind of forced “Turkification” on the whole society, denying any kind of cultural autonomy to non-Turkish ethnic groups, most notably the Kurds, who were referred to as the “Turks of the mountain”. What was born as a negation of the cultural autonomy of a people, would soon also turn into social, political and economic marginalization, since the areas of southeastern Turkish (in fact, the Kurdish-majority ones) are still the country’s least developed.

The question of Kurdistan didn’t end here: while Turkey was trying hard to assimilate the Kurdish minorities within its renewed ethno-cultural framework, Iraqi Kurds were forcibly merged with the Arab Sunnis and Shiites, and the Kurds who were immediately south of Turkey were annexed to Syria, with consequences that in a few decades would become dire. Finally, a sizeable minority of Kurds continued to live in Iran. In 1946,

thanks to Soviet support, they created a kind of autonomous republic (the Republic of Mahabad). The experiment lasted only a few months, after which the territory of the self-declared republic came under the sovereignty of Tehran⁹.

Kurdish nationalism or survival of local interests?

Even before the fall of the Ottoman Empire there had been “nationalist” revolts led by Kurdish leaders. The particularity of such movements however, both in Turkish Kurdistan and in Iran and Iraq, was their local character, confined to limited areas rather than affecting Kurds as a whole. Between 1879 and 1881 in the eastern Ottoman provinces there were riots that, for many historians, were the first real manifestation of Kurdish nationalism, guided by Shaykh Ubayd Allah. Leveraging shared Kurdish ethnicity, Ubayd Allah formed a movement of rebellion against Constantinople, and even planned to extend its action to the Persian Kurdish areas¹⁰.

Although there were references to common Kurdish identity, the revolt of Ubayd Allah appeared to be more directed against the central empire than a genuine struggle for the independence of Kurdistan. Moreover, the Kurdish leader was respected and followed by virtue of his role as a religious leader, in a context where the locals were anchored to traditional values¹¹. The

⁹ To learn more, see F. Koohi-Kamali, *The Political Development of the Kurds in Iran*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2003, pp. 89-125.

¹⁰ For a detailed history of Ubayd Allah, among other sources, see W. Jwaideh, *The Kurdish National Movement. Its Origins and Developments*, Syracuse University Press, New York, 2006, pp. 75-101.

¹¹ That factor can even seem paradoxical if we compare that kind of attitude with the image generally given of the Kurds today, as a people essentially secular, albeit Muslim. Moreover, this perception should at least be revised, if we consider that the Kurdish-majority areas of Turkey are also the most conservative, to the point that the Islamic party AKP (Party for Justice and Development) has often been voted for by local Kurdish populations.

image that was given of the Kurdish populations in the final years of the Ottoman empire and even later, in the twenties and thirties of the 20th century, was that of a people difficult to control and unruly, rather than that of a people with a clear long-term political program, aimed at achieving national independence. This perception is partly confirmed by another factor that historically has characterized the Kurds: their internal divisions, which were manifested on different levels. On the one hand, the division between the intellectual Kurdish élite, who often lived in European capitals or in Constantinople, and local populations that inhabited the territories of historic Kurdistan, who perceived their distance – physical and cultural – from such élites. On the other hand, there were contrasts between the different families within Kurdistan itself, which effectively prevented the formation of a unified Kurdish front, favoring a climate of extreme fragmentation. It is emblematic, in this regard, that at the Paris Conference of 1919 the Kurdish delegation negotiating the international legitimation of an independent state was led by Sharif Pasha, a representative not recognized as such by all the Kurds and even unknown to most populations living in Kurdistan itself¹². On the contrary, in some areas with a Kurdish majority, especially in southern Kurdistan – which would later become Iraqi Kurdistan – local communities had already formed semi-autonomous structures

Nevertheless, this has been due not only to the common belief in Islam, but to much more pragmatic political interests.

¹² Consultation of the documents in the French archives clearly show that the president of the Kurdish delegation in Paris received letters from several Kurdish leaders. While Sharif Pasha was in Paris, they reiterated that a Kurdish government in their territories had already been formed and that the powers would only have to recognize it, rather than grant permission to form it to the Sharif Pasha. Cfr. *Archives du Ministère des Affaires Étrangères*, série «Levant 1918-1940», sous-série «Kurdistan», Vol. 11, Mardi Zade, Mehmed Alif Pacha à Cherif Pacha.

that, in turn, claimed their own legitimacy to represent Kurdistan.

From these examples it is clear that in most cases particular interests linked to specific local contexts were the real engine that moved some groups to rise up and self-organize, rather than a broader nationalist ideology. Some years after Ubayd Allah tried to lead his own personal battle in the Kurdish areas of the Ottoman Empire, in Persia it was a Kurdish leader named Simko Shikak who gathered around him a large group of fighters and, for a limited period, took control of the area around Lake Urmia¹³. His dynasty, the Shikak, was to become one of the most influential in Iranian Kurdistan, as well as the Ubayd Allah family in Turkish Kurdistan and the Barzani in Iraqi Kurdistan.

The Kurdish cause achieved international fame only with the entrance on the scene of the Turkish PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party), to the point that the Kurds are often confused and identified solely with it and with Turkey, in what is obviously a partial and distorted view of the issue. Which in fact involves many more actors and many more contexts. To date, if there is a real obstacle to the creation of an independent state of Kurdistan, it is precisely the diversity of the interests of individual Kurdish minorities in the different contexts they belong to, not to mention the fact that several state actors are involved. In light of this consideration, in order to outline an independent Kurdistan it is not enough that Turkey solves its internal Kurdish problem, or that Iraqi Kurdistan becomes even more independent, or that the Syrian Kurds constitute their own self-administrated areas (as, moreover, they began to do in the context of the Syrian civil war).

History decided that the Kurds would be permanently divided. Because of this division, the interests and strategies of

¹³ Cfr. F. Koohi-Kamali, *op. cit.*, pp. 66-88.

the different Kurdish communities were going to be entangled with the political evolution of many states, even to the point of creating paradoxical situations in which we witness a system of crossed alliances and enmities. After all, such a system well represents the two realistic aphorisms that any Middle East scholar learns with time: “The enemy of my enemy is my friend” and “In the Middle East there are no alliances, but only interests”. Kurdish minorities have often found their own ways of acting in the dense network of divergent interests of the different players involved. The Kurds were often entangled in this network, becoming the political objects of third actors rather than the architects of their own destiny. Because of this, the Kurdish minorities have been much more frequently in the position of having to pursue limited and short-term objectives mostly intended to ensure their survival, than of being the promoters of their own long-term plans.

The PKK: conflict in Turkey and support in Syria

The movement that in recent years has represented the Kurdish issue more than others is definitely the PKK¹⁴. Created in the early seventies in Turkey as a Kurdish Marxist-Leninist movement and formed as a political party in 1978 under the leadership of Abdullah Öcalan, the PKK was heavily hit by the military coup occurring in Turkey in 1980, following which it was outlawed. At the same, the Kurdish population in Turkey continued to be deprived of their basic cultural rights, such as the use of their language in public. The year 1984 marked the real turning point for the PKK: not recognizing the Turkish political system as legitimate, the Kurdish party decided to take the path of armed struggle. This would be the beginning of a

¹⁴ To examine the birth and historical evolution of the PKK, see A. Marcus, *Blood and Belief. The PKK and the Kurdish Fight for Independence*, New York University Press, New York - London, 2007.

conflict that, over the years, has claimed at least 40,000 victims, while the PKK would be defined a terrorist organization by the major Western countries.

Within the Kurdish political galaxy, the novelty of the PKK was its strong ideological characterization: far from being a pro-independence party, or even less a movement with religious connotations, it promulgated a kind of socialist revolution in Turkey, incorporating part of the anticolonial movements' ideology that arose in Asia and Africa in the fifties and sixties. Territorial characterization and identification with Turkish Kurdistan were added to this background. From the eighties onwards, the PKK became an anti-Turkish tool for many actors that, both within the region and internationally, were opposed to Turkey for geopolitical reasons. At various levels and at different times, the PKK was supported by the then-Soviet Union in the wider context of the Cold War (during which Turkey, a NATO member since 1952, was the bulwark of Western defense against the Soviet bloc), Greece and Iran, both historical rivals of Turkey¹⁵.

In the nineties, the PKK was used most as a tool of war-by-proxy against Turkey by the regime of Syrian president Hafez al-Assad. Indeed, Syria had very tense relations with Turkey because of the issue of control over water resources of the Tigris and Euphrates, as well as due to old disputes related to belonging to the two opposing blocs during the Cold War (Assad's Syria was called the "Cuba of the Middle East"¹⁶). The Syrian capital Damascus became a safe haven for Öcalan, who used Syria as a base to carry out attacks against Turkey. The situation became so unbearable for Turkey that in 1998 the two countries were on the brink of an armed conflict, avoided only

¹⁵ Cfr., for example, F.S. Larrabee, I.O. Lesser, *Turkish Foreign Policy in an Age of Uncertainty*, Rand Corporation, Washington (DC), 2003, pp. 71-97.

¹⁶ Cfr., For example, D. Pipes, "Syria: The Cuba of the Middle East?", in *Commentary*, 1 July 1986.

by the decision of the Syrian government to expel Öcalan from its territory. This episode also led to the arrest of the PKK leader after a daring escape first to Russia and then to Italy, where the D'Alema government extradited him without declaring his destination. In February 1999, the Turkish authorities arrested Öcalan in Kenya as he was being transferred from the Greek embassy in Nairobi to the airport of the Kenyan capital¹⁷.

The path of the PKK during the nineties is emblematic of how the Kurds were constantly at the center of regional interests that went beyond the Kurdish question itself. It is almost ironic that Syria, while supporting the Kurdish guerrilla for anti-Turkish reasons, was at the same time the state in which the Kurdish minorities lived in the worst conditions. Some 200,000 Syrian Kurds, in fact, were even deprived of citizenship and from 1962 until the outbreak of the civil war in 2011 lived as *de facto* stateless because they were accused of being illegal immigrants from Turkey, causing major repercussions in terms of social, economic and political exclusion¹⁸.

As already mentioned, the Middle East is often made up not of actors and alliances, but of friends, enemies and interests. Thus, just some years after the events related to the arrest of Öcalan, with the outbreak of the Syrian civil war the regime of Bashar al-Assad (Hafiz's son) decided in 2011 to make use of the Syrian Kurds. He promised to grant them citizenship, hoping in this way to get them on his side against the rebel groups that were beginning to form. The result of this policy of alliances *à la carte* would become even more paradoxical. In

¹⁷ For a detailed reconstruction of the events that led to the arrest of Öcalan, see R. Aliboni, D. Pioppi, "The Öcalan Affair Revisited", *The International Spectator*, Vol. 35, No. 3, 2000, pp. 37-47.

¹⁸ For an exhaustive framework of the Kurdish issue in Syria, see International Crisis Group, "Syria's Kurds: A Struggle Within a Struggle", *Middle East Report*, No. 136, 22 January 2013.

2016, in fact, the Syrian Kurds are now among the protagonists of the civil conflict that has devastated Syria and, by exploiting an atmosphere of partial connivance with the regime against the Islamic State, they have formed a regional Kurdish self-governing entity, which goes by the name of Rojava. This autonomous entity is part of a broader federal project also supported by the PKK, aimed at gathering together all Kurdish areas in Syria, Turkey and Iraq¹⁹.

To better understand all the unresolved problems of the Kurdish question it is necessary to reconstruct the network of cross-relationships that has developed over time. Syrian Kurds are represented mainly by the Democratic Union Party (PYD), considered a kind of Syrian offshoot of the PKK. The PYD has its armed wing, the People's Protection Units (YPG), which is one of the most active actors in the fight on the ground against the jihadists of IS. Because of this, many Western countries give their support more or less openly to YPG's armed struggle. Yet these same Western countries, primarily the United States, are allies of Turkey and have tried on several occasions to involve Ankara as a key partner in the fight against IS. However, the situation is complicated in the light of Turkey's attitude towards the Kurdish question: how can Ankara combine the fight against the Islamic State with its national interests, if the former means strengthening the Syrian Kurds – in turn an expression of the PKK? Indirectly, this would give the PKK itself greater international legitimacy and greater influence in the area. This dilemma has led Turkey to assume an ambiguous attitude: in accepting to be part of the international coalition against IS after the attacks suffered in the summer of 2015²⁰,

¹⁹ Cfr. C. Gunes, R. Lowe, *The Impact of the War on Syrian Kurdish Politics Across the Middle East*, Chatham House, The Royal Institute of International Affairs, London, 2015.

²⁰ On 20 July 2015, the town of Suruç, on the border with Syria, was hit by a terrorist attack that struck a demonstration in support of the rights of the Kurds

Ankara has exploited the Western mandate to its advantage. Turkey used airstrikes in Syria and Iraq more in order to hit Kurdish positions in Iraq and Syria rather than IS itself. The paradoxical result is that the Turkish bombardments, officially aimed at hitting IS, could indirectly favor it by weakening the PKK, which in turn plays an active role in the military actions of the Syrian Kurds against the Islamic State²¹. After all, for Turkey the priority on the security agenda continues to be Kurdistan and, to that effect, any acquisition of international legitimacy by Kurdish separatists groups – especially if linked directly to the PKK – is perceived as a threat to its own security and national integrity. It is for these reasons that Turkey can hardly accept in the near future the possibility of a break-up of its territory in favor of the creation of a Kurdish state. On the other hand, it should be emphasized that Turkish reluctance is not the only obstacle to creation of an independent Kurdistan in the historically predominantly Kurdish regions.

The Iraqi factor: divided we stand

An analysis of the different souls comprising the Kurdish galaxy would not be comprehensive if it did not take into account southern Kurdistan, namely so-called Iraqi Kurdistan. Since the birth of Iraq, here have emerged all the flaws of a system based on the political calculations of Great Britain. At the end of World War I London wanted to extend its area of influence to the future state of Iraq and did not hesitate to place within it the regions of southern Kurdistan, with their epicenter

in the Syrian town of Ayn al-Arab, causing 33 casualties. On 10 October 2015, another suicide bombing would later hit the capital Ankara, killing more than 100 people. In both cases, the IS was deemed responsible.

²¹ Cfr. K. Matin, “Why is Turkey bombing the Kurds?”, *Open Democracy*, 4 August 2015.

in Mosul, because of their energy wealth²². Even then, though, it was clear that Iraqi Kurds would be integrated with great difficulty into a state system composed primarily of Arabs. Moreover, in Iraqi Kurdistan, between 1918 and the first half of the twenties there had been one of the first real experiences of Kurdish self-government, under the leadership of Shaykh Mahmud, an influential tribal leader whose power center was in the town of Sulaymaniyyah. He, too, had been alternately supported and then fought by the British according to their contingent interests. Initially, the Kurdish uprisings that he conducted were a problem for the British plan to annex Iraqi Kurdistan to the rest of Iraq and had been directed against Great Britain itself. In a second phase characterized by the peace agreements of 1920, London would use the influence that Shaykh Mahmud had on that area in order to fight the Turkish nationalists led by Atatürk, who claimed sovereignty over the same territories. Once again, the Kurds were used by outside powers against a common enemy, yet later abandoned to their fate when the Kurdish cause did not further the interests of those who had used it up to that point. In this case, the main interest of Great Britain in reshaping the postwar balance was not to bring southern Kurdistan under the influence of Atatürk's Turkey, but to keep it anchored to Iraq. Once peace was signed with Turkey itself and the new boundaries defined, Iraqi Kurds were left to the harsh fate of living together with Iraqi Arabs, and northern Kurdistan was annexed by Turkey²³.

During the regime of Saddam Hussein, under whom Kurds suffered several waves of repression, they were again supported

²² Cfr. S. Eskander, "Southern Kurdistan under Britain's Mesopotamian Mandate: From Separation to Incorporation, 1920-23", *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 37, No. 2, April 2001, pp. 153-180.

²³ For a reconstruction of the revolts of Sh. Mahmud and of British policy towards Iraqi Kurdistan after the end of World War I, see D. McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, I.B. Tauris, London, 2007, pp. 155-178.

by Iran during the war between Iraq and Iran in the eighties. It was also because of their role as a fifth column of Iran between 1986 and 1988, that Saddam Hussein decided to “punish” them with killings, summary deportations and the destruction of villages: the so-called “al-Anfal campaign”, which caused the death of at least 150,000 people. Part of this operation was the episode in which the Iraqi army used chemical weapons in the town of Halabja, killing about 5,000 Kurds²⁴.

The turning point for Iraqi Kurdistan came after the U.S.-led intervention in 1990-1991 and the subsequent operations in northern Iraq to defend the local population from retaliation by Saddam Hussein’s regime. It was at this moment, in fact, that Iraqi Kurdistan became a quasi-independent entity led by a local government called the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), although officially dependent on the central government in Baghdad and structured in a federal context, along with the rest of Iraq. Despite this small victory for the Iraqi Kurds, internal disputes were soon to emerge, exemplified by the rivalry between the two most influential Iraqi Kurdish families, the Barzani and Talabani. The first, represented by the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), had its center of influence in the area of Erbil, while the second, close to the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) party, had its operational center in Sulaymaniyyah. The elections for the Iraqi Kurdish parliament of 1992 saw a substantial tie between the two political parties and the parliament that ensued was divided in two. The stalemate was made worse by the conditions of the international embargo against the Iraqi regime, which also contributed to impoverishing the Kurdish areas. In this climate, in 1994 a real intra-Kurdish civil conflict between the KDP and PUK broke

²⁴ A detailed report of the so-called Kurdish genocide perpetrated by Saddam Hussein in the late Eighties has been released by the international organization Human Rights Watch, *Genocide in Iraq. The Anfal Campaign Against the Kurds*, New York - Washington (DC) - Los Angeles - London, 1993.

out for the control of Iraqi Kurdistan. The Iraqi Kurdish civil war ended only in 1997 thanks to the intervention of the United States and Turkey and, in three years, had caused about 8,000 casualties. Again, a system of cross-alliances emerged, such as the unusual position of Masoud Barzani's KDP, which asked for the temporary support of Saddam Hussein to defeat the Kurdish rivals, whereas Jalal Talabani was turning to the historical regional enemy of Saddam Hussein, Iran. For his part, Saddam Hussein gladly accepted Barzani's invitation, hoping to regain control of all of northern Iraq. It was the intervention of Saddam's troops in the Kurdish civil war that led to the reaction of the United States, worried that the dictator could once again indiscriminately massacre the Kurds "guilty" of having fought him. Moreover, further complicating the situation there was also the presence of the Turkish PKK in the areas controlled by the PUK, used as a rearguard to launch operations against Turkey after being uprooted from Syria following the Öcalan *affaire*. In this context, an alliance between these two parties was formed to fight the KDP, perceived as an enemy by both. This circumstance led Turkey to intervene in the internal Iraqi Kurd conflict, in order to mount an offensive against the PKK²⁵. With difficulty the two Iraqi Kurdish parties came to a relative reconciliation, which would last despite problems in the following years. Nevertheless, Ankara was unable to eradicate the presence of the PKK in the mountainous region of Qandil, in northern Iraq, and the conflict between the PKK and Turkey has lasted to the present day with different levels of intensity and a new peak since the summer of 2015.

The alliances formed in the context of the Kurdish civil war of the 1990s have continued over time, to the point that Iraqi Kurdistan itself cannot be considered a genuinely autonomous

²⁵ In March 1995, some 40,000 Turkish soldiers were sent to the border with Iraq. Cfr. S. Sayari, "Turkey and the Middle East in the 1990s", in *Journal of Palestine Studies*, Vol. 26, No. 3, 1997.

territory. Both the KDP and the PUK, in fact, have two distinct agendas, making it very difficult to imagine any independent Kurdistan in that area. In addition, dynamics of external support to one or the other faction continue to persist, which means that still today different actors in turn use the Iraqi Kurdish parties as a political tool in order to pursue their own goals (often having little to deal with the Kurdish question as such). On the one hand, Turkey has forged increasingly close ties with the Kurdish Regional Government, especially with the KDP, in order to contrast the PKK and to create its own sphere of influence in northern Iraq. On the other, the PUK has continued to seek and obtain the support of Iran, in turn interested in extending its influence in Iraq through an alliance with local actors. Moreover, the PUK tolerates the presence of the PKK in the Qandil area, thus indirectly counterbalancing the hegemony of the KDP in Iraqi Kurdistan's internal balances. As a result of the emergence and the advance of the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq since 2014, Iraqi and Syrian Kurds have also assumed another role, that of the vanguard in the fight against the caliphate's jihadism. In the absence of direct external intervention by the major regional and international powers, in fact, the most important Western allies in the war against IS are the Iraqi peshmerga and the Syrian Kurds supported by the PKK. Also Iran, the only regional player to deploy its troops directly on the ground against IS, has found in the Kurds – especially the Syrian – an almost natural ally in the pursuit of its purposes. In the Syrian civil conflict Tehran supports the Assad regime and the Syrian Kurds fighting IS share with Assad the same contingent interest. At the regional level, since Turkey is a major supporter of Assad's fall, for Tehran to support the Syrian PYD – which, in turn, is disliked in Ankara due to its proximity to the PKK – means indirectly hindering Turkey itself. In addition, the fight against IS has an even wider strategic value for Iran

because, as a representative of the Shiite Muslim world, it is perceived by the caliphate as one of its main enemies²⁶.

The puzzle seems to have no solution, if we consider that in the medium-long term this kind of dynamic will contribute to further exacerbating internal divisions within the Kurdish field itself. In such a context returns the question of the objective improbability of the emergence of an independent Kurdistan. In addition to the strong opposition of Turkey and to the opposition expected from Iraq and Syria, there is indeed still the obstacle created by internal divisions. As an example, when in 2014 for the first time the president of the KRG, Barzani, announced his plan to hold a referendum for the independence of Iraqi Kurdistan, dissenting voices were raised from within the Iraqi Kurd territories themselves, with the PUK and Gorran (a splitter movement from the PUK) arguing that it was too early to talk about independence, considering the deep internal rifts that still persist²⁷. Moreover, the question that arises is about the very nature of an independent Kurdistan in Barzani's view. This ideal state, in fact, does not correspond at all to historical Kurdistan, but only to its southern part. What about the other Kurdish areas of Syria, Iran and especially Turkey? Therefore, the question of legitimacy within the Kurdish field, both at the intra-Iraqi level and within all territories with a Kurdish majority, remains a problem to solve. This is even more important than the willingness or not of the other state actors to accept such an outcome.

²⁶ On the network of alliances with the PUK and the KDP in the context of the war against IS and the Syrian civil war, see International Crisis Group, "Arming Iraq's Kurds: Fighting IS, Inviting Conflict", *Middle East Report*, No. 158, 12 May 2015.

²⁷ Cfr. K. Chomani, "Push for Kurdish independence divides Iraqi Kurds", *Al-Monitor*, 9 July 2014.

Conclusion

The Kurdish question cannot be dismissed as an exclusively Turkish internal issue or, at the same time, generalized and treated as monolithic. The actors, the different interests at stake and the territory on which they insist make up a rich tapestry from which it is difficult to extricate themselves, and whose pieces are not always automatically placed side by side. Some historical factors have contributed – and continue to contribute – to certify that Kurdistan was almost destined to remain an unsolved question. The fact that the Kurds, although united by specific characteristics, have not ever been in a position to live under a single authority, resulted in the long term in the emergence of divergent interests and agendas within their own community, accentuating their internal fragmentation. At the same time, the impossibility of acting as a single actor in the regional and international context has meant that Kurdish demands were always secondary to other strategic and political interests of external actors.

It is in this way that, in various historical periods, the Kurdish minorities became an instrument of struggle between vying powers, which have found in the autonomist Kurdish movements a weapon to counter their enemies. Even today, with the rise of the Islamic State, the Kurds are perceived as the only ones in a position to be able to combat the self-proclaimed Caliphate on the ground. By virtue of this perception, several Iraqi and Syrian Kurdish groups have received logistic and economic support from the Western powers. What is of concern, once again, are the consequences that this choice will have in the medium-long term, both at the intra-Kurd level and at the regional. Some effects have already been seen with the resumption of violence in Turkey, where the rekindling of the conflict against the PKK has cost hundreds of lives since the summer of 2015. Similarly, it is difficult to predict what will happen in Iraq, where the legitimacy which the Kurds could

benefit by should they defeat IS, could get them to renew their demands for independence on the one hand, while on the other could contribute to re-escalating the internal power clashes between the KDP and the PUK. The proclamation of an autonomous entity of Syrian Kurdistan, the Rojava, adds complications to the picture. It is likely that the dream of an independent Kurdistan will never come true, but the Kurds continue to be a people unto themselves, although organized in different groups and movements furthering particular interests, which will make them still a key player for regional balances. A possible solution to the issue, as indeed advocated by many Kurdish movements, could consist of creating a supranational organization bringing together in a federated system all the different local Kurdish entities, while at the same time respecting their belonging to different states' sovereignties. However, this condition seems rather utopian, as it needs a good dose of compromise between all the stakeholders and the different souls that make up the varied landscape of Kurdistan.

THE RELATIONS OF THE MAIN MIDDLE EASTERN POLITICAL ENTITIES AND THE KURDISH GROUPS (MAY 2016)

	Turkey	Syria	Iran	Iraq	KDP	PUK	PKK	PYD	IS
Turkey	/	☹️	😊	😊	😄	😞	☹️	☹️	☹️
Syria	☹️	/	😄	😊	😊	😊	😊	😊	☹️
Iran	😊	😄	/	😄	☹️	😄	😊	😊	☹️
Iraq	😊	😊	😄	/	☹️	😄	☹️	😊	☹️
KDP	😄	😊	☹️	☹️	/	😞	☹️	☹️	☹️
PUK	😞	😊	😄	😄	😞	/	😄	😄	☹️
PKK	☹️	😊	😊	☹️	☹️	😄	/	😄	☹️
PYD	☹️	😊	😊	😊	☹️	😄	😄	/	☹️
IS	☹️	☹️	☹️	☹️	☹️	☹️	☹️	☹️	/

Very positive relations: 😄 Rather positive relations: 😊 Neutral or no relations: 😐 Rather negative relations: 😞 Very negative relations: ☹️

2. The Kurds in Turkey: A Gloomy Future

Soner Cagaptay, Cem Yolbulan

Introduction

Today, Turkey faces its biggest challenge from the Kurds since before the government captured Abdullah Öcalan, the founder of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), with U.S. assistance, in February 1999¹. At that time, Ankara had just managed to defeat a full-blown Kurdish insurgency supported by two neighbors, Iran and Syria. The following decade promised a period of calm for Turkey regarding its Kurdish issue, since Öcalan was in jail and the PKK had declared a ceasefire. Even when the PKK broke its ceasefire in June 2004, the United States provided intelligence assistance in 2007, allowing Ankara to once again gain the upper hand against the militant organization. The PKK declared another ceasefire in March 2013 after entering into secret peace talks with the Turkish government in December 2012, led by the Justice and

¹ “The Capture of a Kurdish Rebel. Editorial”, *New York Times*, 17 February 1999, <http://www.nytimes.com/1999/02/17/opinion/the-capture-of-a-kurdish-rebel.html>

Development Party (AKP)². For a while it appeared that Turkey's Kurdish problem was headed towards a peaceful resolution.

But the Syrian conflict cut the path to peace short, and Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's ambitions to style himself as an omnipotent executive style president have led Ankara to harden its stance on the PKK. Concurrently, the PKK has mobilized against Ankara, emboldened by the ability of its Syrian franchise – the Party for Democratic Unity (PYD) – to capture large swathes of Syrian territory, notably the self-declared autonomous region of Rojava. The PKK apparently hopes to recreate the “Rojava model” inside Turkey, trying to take control of cities in which to declare autonomy.

All this puts Turkey at a dangerous trajectory, including inflamed fighting with the PKK, terror attacks by the PKK's franchise Kurdistan Freedom Falcons (TAK), including two recent attacks in Ankara which have killed at least 65 people, a new PKK-led insurgency in the country's majority Kurdish southeast, and last but not least growing tensions with the PYD, most recent of which Turkish shelling of the PYD position in Syria In February 2016. Fueled by developments in Syria, the Kurdish problem in Turkey could even lead to crisis with Washington which relies on the PYD to push back against the so called Islamic State (IS).

Analysts now wonder whether Turkey can take steps to prevent the current escalation from developing into another major conflict between Ankara and the PKK. The answer rests on a thorough understanding of the historic Turkish-Kurdish relationship and the newly emerging dynamics between Turkish Kurds and other Kurdish groups in the Middle East, especially those in Syria.

² “Turkey Kurds: PKK chief Öcalan calls for ceasefire”, *BBC News*, 21 March 2013, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-21874427>

Kurds in Turkey: a unique group in a multi-ethnic Muslim nation

Although this fact escapes most outsiders, Turkey is a multi-ethnic if almost homogenously Muslim nation. The Kurds are one part of this centuries-old diversity, yet in some ways they stand out from other Muslim ethnic groups in Turkey. It is hard to say exactly how many Kurds live within Turkish borders because domestic censuses do not collect data on ethnicity. However, most surveys suggest that as many as 15 per cent of the country's citizens could be ethnically Kurdish³.

The presence of this rather substantial minority is not so surprising. The country's population also includes a large number of other non-Turkish Muslim ethnicities. Approximately one million Circassians⁴ migrated to Anatolia in the middle of the 19th century after the Russian Empire expelled them from the northern Caucasus. At that time the Muslim population of Anatolia stood at nine million⁵. Hence, it is likely that the Circassians constitute around 10 per cent of the Turkish population. Yet, despite their relative size, the Circassians and millions of other non-Turkish Ottoman Muslims, from Bosnians to Greek Muslims, have integrated into the Turkish population. Some Kurdish groups, most notably the Alevi Kurds⁶ (who

³ "The World Factbook- Turkey", CIA, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/tu.html>.

⁴ Ethnic group originally from the northern Caucasus region (modern-day Southern Russia). The Circassians were persecuted and expelled by the Russians from the Caucasus in the 1860s. Survivors fled to the Ottoman Empire. Today, they live primarily in Turkey, but also in Jordan, Israel, Syria, and parts of the Balkans.

⁵ S. Cagaptay, *The Rise of Turkey: The Twenty-First Century's First Muslim Power*, University of Nebraska, Potomac Books, 2014, p. 98.

⁶ Distinct community from central-north as well as coastal Anatolia and the Balkans whose interpretation of Islam, while showing similarities to both Sunni

have for the most part adopted a secular Turkish identity) and the millions of Kurds living in western Turkey, have integrated into the country's overall population. Nevertheless, some have not, leaving the Kurds in a unique position among other non-Turkish Muslim groups in Turkey.

A number of historical factors help explain the Kurds' unique alignment *vis-à-vis* the Turkish nation, mostly relating to the Ottoman past. Turkish nationalism became a potent force in the late Ottoman Empire as the multi-ethnic and multi-religious Empire was collapsing. The new ideology of Turkish nationalism rose to prominence as Ottomanism proved a failed one. Turkish nationalism became the dominating force in the new Turkish Republic and throughout the 20th century.

The Ottoman Empire broke apart across ethno-religious *millet*⁷ lines in the Balkans. While Balkan Christian nationalisms wanted to expel all Turks and other Muslims from the peninsula, the nascent Turkish nationalists aimed to trans-

and Shiite Islam, is unorthodox enough to be considered neither. Different from the nearly eponymous and esoteric community of Arab Alawites, the Alevi, who practice an open and syncretic version of Islam constitute 10-15 per cent of the Turkey's population, as well as smaller communities in Greece and Bulgaria. The Alevi, whose liturgical language is Turkish and whose faith has been influenced by Shamanism and Christianity, have long been an important component of Turkey's secular block.

⁷ In its classical period in the 15th and 16th centuries, the Ottoman Empire organized its population into religious compartments called Millets, granting them religious freedoms as well as the ability to run social institutions, such as courts and schools in return for political loyalty. Originally, there were four millets: Muslim, Orthodox, Jewish and Armenian (including also other Eastern Churches). In the later centuries, however, many other religious communities, including Catholics and Protestants, were recognized as Millets. The Empire merged the ethnic identities of its peoples into religious ones to make their millet identity more dominant which resulted in religion becoming the key marker of national identity in post-Ottoman societies, such as Greece, Bosnia, Serbia, Bulgaria, and Turkey.

form the Ottoman Muslim community into a viable modern force by considering all Ottoman Muslims as members of the prospective Turkish national community, regardless of their ethnic origins. This effort strengthened following the Balkan Wars of 1912-13, in which the Ottomans lost 69 per cent of its population in Europe and 83 per cent of its territory on the European continent⁸. Ottoman Muslims in the Balkans had nowhere to go but to Turkey and the embrace of Turkish nationalism.

In order to achieve a homogenous national identity, Turkish nationalism substituted the patriotism of “Ottoman Muslimness” with that of “Turkishness”, thereby establishing a new standard of citizenship where Bosnians, Greeks and Bulgarians, Albanians, Kurds and other Ottoman Muslims, needed to identify themselves as Turkish to be seen as true participating citizens in the new country. This nationalism had little to do with the ethnic classification of “Turkish,” since a viable Turkish nation could only emerge from the chaos of the imploding Ottoman Empire through the support of the millions of Ottoman Muslims who did not have any ethnic Turkish heritage. This explains why after Mustafa Kemal Atatürk liberated Turkey in 1922, Kemalism, the apogee of Turkish nationalism and secularism, would also, and rather ironically, consider shared Muslim identity rather than ethnic commonality as the foundation of Turkishness in its policies⁹.

Surprisingly this late Ottoman-Kemalist stance presented few challenges for the Balkan Muslims, such as Bulgarian Pomak Muslims¹⁰, as well as other immigrant non-Turkish

⁸ S. Cagaptay, *Islam, Secularism, and Nationalism in Modern Turkey: Who is a Turk?*, Routledge Studies in Middle Eastern History, 2006, p. 6.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Bulgarian-speaking Slavic Muslim population who faced extermination or expulsion with the establishment of a Bulgarian state in the 19th century. While

Muslims, such as the Circassians. These groups had previously been members of the Ottoman Muslim *millet*. Whereas Kemalism viewed the former Muslim *millet* to be the same as the contemporary Turkish nation, this allowed the Circassians, Pomaks, and other Balkan and Caucasus Muslims to make a rather voluntary transition into the Turkish nation.

This was not the case for the Kurds who did not share with the Turks, or for that purpose with Bosnians and Circassians, a profound and ancient memory of having been part of the former Muslim *millet* of the Ottoman Empire.

While the vast Ottoman lands extended from Central Europe to the Red Sea, the territories that could be considered Ottoman par excellence are, in fact, more limited in nature. The sultans established their authority and installed classical 15th-16th century Ottoman institutions, such as the *millet* system, only in a core group of territories that they captured in the earlier centuries of the empire at a time when the Ottoman territories stretched from the Danube River in the west to the Black Sea in the north, the Mediterranean in the south, and the Euphrates in the east.

The empire's further expansions during the 16th century brought additional challenges to the gargantuan task of running a vast, mostly land-based state. The Ottomans often managed these newly acquired lands through pre-Ottoman rulers and institutions in a pseudo-vassal system, demanding loyalty and taxes from their inhabitants but leaving out the pervasive institutions that developed the strong Ottoman identity within the inner lands of the Empire. The relatively weak cultural influence is visible in the now profoundly separate areas once controlled by the Empire, including lands beyond the Euphrates and Danube, North Africa, and Arabia.

many Pomaks fled to Turkey where they live to this date, large Pomak communities remain in southern Bulgaria.

Enter the Kurds, whose traditional homeland lies east of the Euphrates and beyond the core Ottoman territories. This group was not exposed to Ottomanizing influences in the premodern era to the same extent of the Empire's non-Turkish Muslims of the Balkans. Kurdish areas were largely autonomous from Istanbul, and local leaders (*beys*) ruled over these lands that the Ottomans called Kurdistan¹¹. To put it succinctly, in the classical Ottoman era a Kurd in what is now southeastern Turkey most likely did not see himself as "Ottoman" in the way that a Slavic Bosnian Muslim in Sarajevo did.

As the Ottoman Empire centralized during the 19th century in an attempt to shift into a modern state, Istanbul attempted to bring its peripheral territories, including Kurdistan and Arabia, under direct rule. Yet these efforts to Ottomanize Kurdish and Arab communities quickly ended along with the collapse of the Empire. When the Turkish Republic formed in Anatolia, Kurds' Ottoman identity lacked the deep roots of Bosnians or other Balkan Muslims now incorporated into the new state. In Atatürk's republic, the Kurds stood in a unique position *vis-à-vis* Turkish nationalism: the distance of Ottoman rulers left them with enough of their own ethnic identity to prevent their assimilation into the new, proud Turkish ethnicity.

Other reasons also complicated the Kurds' voluntary embrace of Turkish nationalism. Various non-Muslim ethnicities lived in Turkey by the time Atatürk turned it into a nation-state in the interwar period. But again the Kurds were different than all other non-Turkish groups in this new Kemalist Turkey: they were the most sizable non-Turkish group in Turkey, comprising more than 10 per cent of the country's population in 1920s.

¹¹ S. Cagaptay, *op. cit.*, p. 19.

Not just historic identity-related issues but also the present reality hindered the Kurds' voluntary embrace of Turkishness, relative to other non-Turkish Muslims. Various non-Turkish Muslims had been scattered all over Turkey after chaotically arriving in the country as expellees from Russia and Europe. But by the time Atatürk turned the country into a nation-state, the Kurds, who are autochthonous in Anatolia like the Turks, lived clustered and isolated from other Muslims and also from Turks in a contiguous territory in eastern and southeastern Turkey. The Kurds formed the majority of the population in a number of provinces. Non-Turkish immigrant Muslims lived mixed with the Turks west of the Euphrates and married them, and this process also created a physical amalgam: the Turkish nation. The Kurds could not join this amalgam right away because they lived by themselves in rugged, eastern Turkey, which was isolated from the rest of the country: it was not until the late 1930s that railway lines penetrated this area, and then only a few, and not until the 1950s that highways came to the region, again only a few.

Atatürk's secularization and centralization efforts also alienated the deeply religious Kurds who also relished a memory of being semi-autonomous under the Ottomans. Notably, the single most important uprising against Atatürk's reforms – the Sheikh Said uprising of 1925 – took place in a Kurdish area led by a religious leader¹².

Relative poverty has also hindered Kurdish integration into the milieu of the Turkish republic. Much of Turkey was poor until the 1980s, when then prime minister and later president Turgut Özal opened the country to the global economy and paved the way for a more prosperous Turkey. While much of Turkey had faced financial difficulties, eastern Turkey has

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 109.

always been poorer than the rest of the country. The region never fully recovered from the collapse of its infrastructure multiple times during and following World War I. Armenian, Ottoman, and Russian armies all burned cities in the area and crippled the local economy in a matter of years.

The region's remoteness (it is distant from navigable seas and the rest of the country) and rugged nature (the average altitude in eastern Turkey is 6,500 feet) did not allow it to develop in the 1980s when the rest of the country took off. Accordingly, poverty has lasted in this region to this date. Turks too live in eastern Turkey, where they form the majority of the population in the country's equally rugged, remote and cold northeast, an area that saw even ore destruction during and after WWI than did southeastern Turkey. While these Turks in the Northeast are as poor as the Kurds in the southeast, their resentment has naturally not become an ethnic one. The Kurds' relative deprivation compared to the rest of the country, though, has led to ethnicity-based resentment among them, following the rise of Kurdish nationalism in the late 20th century. Such resentment, among other reasons, has in return boosted Kurdish nationalism with strong leftist antecedents.

Contemporary Kurdish nationalism and the PKK

Diyarbakir in southeastern Turkey is a laboratory for observation of the dominant leftist brand of Kurdish nationalism. This town is the home of the Kurdish political movement represented by the People's Democratic Party (HDP) – now the third largest party in the Turkish parliament. The town as a whole strongly supports this political movement: the HDP received more than 70 per cent of votes in Diyarbakir in the most recent Turkish elections in November 2015. Diyarbakir serves as an incubator of Kurdish nationalism in

Turkey, and can operate as a platform for observing how Turkish Kurds are increasingly imagining themselves as a separate nation from the Turkish Republic. The ancient city that forms Diyarbakir's core is a typical Fertile Crescent citadel, with three and a half miles of medieval walls surrounding mosques, synagogues, Assyrian, Chaldean, and Armenian churches, stone houses, and arched walkways. In the heart of the old town is the city's central Grand Mosque – Ulu Cami. This is a symbolic building that speaks volumes about southeastern Turkey's historically weak connections to Istanbul. The mosque lacks a central dome but is adorned by an *evantine*, demonstrating that its architectural influences stem more from the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus than the Byzantine-influenced Blue Mosque in Istanbul, the blueprint for Ottoman mosque architecture from the Euphrates to the Danube. The Ulu Cami reminds visitors that Diyarbakir is far removed from Ottoman influence, both geographically and ideologically.

Fittingly, Sur – the old town and city center of Diyarbakir – has been an epicenter of the most recent clashes between the PKK and the Turkish government forces. The PKK's newly-formed youth wing, the Patriotic Revolutionary Youth Movement (YDG-H), has led the charge in shifting this battle into urban areas by digging ditches and building barricades in the city streets. According to official records, more than 500 civilians have died in the Southeast since the violence erupted in July 2015¹³. Notably, this number includes the chairman of the Diyarbakir Bar Association and Kurdish rights activist Tahir Elçi, who was assassinated in Sur district of Diyarbakir.

¹³ G. Metin, "Turkey breaks new ground in southeast reconstruction", *Al-Monitor*, 21 January 2016, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/01/turkey-dilemma-how-to-end-clashes-pkk.html>

The centrifugal forces that have kept Diyarbakir's Kurds away from the heart of the Turkish nation have been compounded in the late 20th century by fighting between the Turkish government and the PKK. This Kurdish left-wing group has been waging a war against the Turkish state since 1984, when it was founded by their currently imprisoned leader Abdullah Öcalan. A nationalist organization fighting for greater rights and autonomy for the Kurds, the PKK is considered a terrorist group by Turkey, the United States and NATO¹⁴.

Although Turkey has been able to keep the PKK under check since the organization launched a campaign against Ankara through military force, the incessant fighting has left an indelible scar in the public consciousness along with an estimated 35 thousand lives lost in southeastern Turkey. Instability and the region's other challenges have prevented it from participating in Turkey's opening to the global economy in the 1980s and subsequent economic miracle. Today, in the overwhelmingly Kurdish provinces of southeast Anatolia have an average disposable income of 5,418 Turkish lira, in comparison to Istanbul's average of 14,873 Turkish lira¹⁵.

The violence between the PKK and the government further alienated Kurds from the rest of the country. In the 1980s, Turkey responded to the PKK's Kurdish nationalist message by reinforcing its bans of the Kurdish language in courts, municipal government, and even in the media. This move has proven counterproductive. Coupled with the PKK's strategy of violence to intimidate the rural Kurdish population in order to build a logistics and recruitment base, this ban on the Kurdish

¹⁴ "Foreign Terrorist Organizations", Bureau of Counterterrorism, U.S. Department of State, <http://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/other/des/123085.htm>

¹⁵ S. Cagaptay, *The Rise of Turkey: The Twenty-First Century's First Muslim Power*, Potomac Books, 2014, p. 105.

identity helped the PKK build a popular base among the Kurds in the 1980s and the 1990s¹⁶.

In recognition of its failure to stifle Kurdish nationalism, Turkey switched tactics and adopted progressive policies regarding the Kurdish issue in the first years after AKP came to power in 2002. The government removed restrictions on public Kurdish language use and began a publicly funded 24-hour Kurdish language television channel¹⁷. Moreover, Ankara now facilitates Kurdish language departments in universities, and allowed Kurdish to be taught as an elective course in middle and high schools in June 2012¹⁸. These reforms became a part of the “2009 Kurdish Opening” and so-called “Solution process”, where then Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan initiated negotiations with the jailed PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan in an apparently sincere attempt to foster peace.

The period between 2012 and 2014 can be regarded as the height of a peaceful era in Turkey’s Kurdish conflict. The PKK announced that it would withdraw all its forces from Turkey, and the government promised to move forward with legal and constitutional changes. But the spillover from the Syrian Civil War halted any further steps toward peace. The situation quickly deteriorated, and since July 2015, full-scale warfare between Turkey and the PKK has been as violent as the conflict has ever been. Moreover, the renewed violence nullified the progress of the past decade; any future negotiations will have to be rebuilt from the ground up.

¹⁶ A. Marcus, *Blood and Belief: The PKK and The Kurdish Fight for Independence*, New York University Press, 2007.

¹⁷ “Turkey’s Kurdish TV channel opens to mixed reviews”, *Reuters*, 2 January 2009, <http://www.reuters.com/article/idUSL2352569>

¹⁸ “Kurdish can be taught in Turkey’s schools, Erdoğan says”, *BBC News*, 12 June 2012, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-18410596>

Politics in southeastern Turkey: the HDP Factor

Turkey's politics are often characterized by a four-way race between the AKP, the HDP, the secular Republican Peoples Party (CHP) that operates as the main opposition party, and the right-wing Nationalist Action Party (MHP). In contrast, politics in southeastern Turkey are a two-way rivalry between the HDP and the AKP; the two receiving a combined 95 per cent of the vote in the seven southeastern provinces during the most recent November 2015 elections. While the ruling AKP appeals to more conservative, pious Kurds in the region, the HDP's liberal, left-wing platform manages to draw in both ethno-nationalist Kurds and some support from Turks in Western provinces.

Overall, the HDP made a historical move by deciding to enter the June 2015 and November 2015 elections as a party – previously they only fielded independent candidates – and managed to cross the 10 per cent electoral threshold for the first time to enter the parliament¹⁹. In the June elections, the party received more than 13 per cent of the vote, gaining 80 out of 550 seats in the Turkish legislature, and in the November 2015 elections, their popularity slipped somewhat and the party garnered 10.7 per cent of the vote, winning 59 seats in the country's legislature. The HDP's decrease in popularity after its historic victory can be attributed to the renewal of PKK violence after the June elections, which distanced middle-class Kurds and liberal Turks concerned over violence and conservative Kurds who disapproved of the PKK's leftist message from the HDP. In June, the HDP had increased their vote share in every Kurdish-majority province in the region

¹⁹ T. Arango, "Kurds Have Bigger Prize in Mind After Political Gains in Turkey", *New York Times*, 10 June 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/11/world/europe/kurds-have-bigger-prize-in-mind-after-political-gains-in-turkey.html>

compared to 2011. Nevertheless, the HDP's entry into the parliament in both elections, passing the country's rather high ten per cent electoral threshold, can be considered a success. Historically, pro-Kurdish parties have received about 5 to 6 per cent of total votes, meaning that the Kurdish political movement could only be represented by independent members of the parliament, giving them a much smaller block of deputies (20-30) compared to the HDP's current delegation in the parliament.

Interplay between Turkish Kurdish politics and regional Kurdish politics

HDP's overall success in the previous June 2015 and limited success in the November 2015 elections has been attributed to several internal and external factors. It can be argued that HDP rode the wave of rising Kurdish nationalism thanks to the recent regional developments. PKK's Syrian offshoot PYD made territorial gains in northern Syria to establish self-rule, and demonstrated a valiant 112-day resistance in Kobane to take the strategic border town back from ISIS. Ankara's refusal to provide necessary support to the Kurdish forces during the initial attack in September 2014 left Kurds disgruntled with AKP and Erdoğan. As the Kurdish regions in northern Iraq and northern Syria received international recognition and support in their successful fighting against IS and their nascent political autonomy, Turkey's Kurds began to develop broader expectations for their own areas. The HDP, led by their young and charismatic co-chairman Selahattin Demirtaş, capitalized on this regional Kurdish moment to consolidate the Kurdish vote²⁰.

²⁰ H. Barkey, "Turkey's Turmoil: Why Erdoğan and the Kurds are Both to Blame", *The National Interest*, 25 September 2015, <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/turkeys-turmoil-why-erdogan-the-kurds-are-both-blame-13932>

A pro-Kurdish party dominating southeastern Turkey caused further split between the AKP and the HDP, and nationalist Kurds in general. Viewing itself as the champions of civil rights for the Kurds, the AKP government felt betrayed by them, and chose to resort to old-school military tactics to defeat the new Kurdish insurgency²¹.

Another reason for Turkey's turn to hardline politics on the Kurds is that Erdoğan wants to change the country's constitution to make himself an omnipotent executive style president²². As of the most recent election, the Turkish leader's party hovers at barely at 50 per cent support among the electorate. Erdoğan needs to build further support, and to this end, he will pursue a platform, casting himself as a strong-man president, to peel off right-wing votes from the MHP. For this reason, the Turkish leader will maintain a tough line on the PKK, and continue fighting to boost his image as a strong man.

In this regard, Erdoğan's hard line policies are supported by the Turkish security forces, which include the military. Although technically folded under the AKP's civilian rule since the Ergenekon trials of 2008-2013 – a series of cases regarding an alleged clandestine organization consisting of high ranking military officials staging a coup against the AKP government –, the military's compliance is not guaranteed, seen for instance in its objections to the government's Syria policy²³. However, regarding the PKK, the military is aligned with Erdoğan, as is the rest of the country's security bureaucracy. Military and

²¹ E. Peker, "Turkish Fight Against Kurdish Insurgency Spreads", *Wall Street Journal*, 21 February 2016, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/turkish-fight-against-kurdish-insurgency-spreads-1456035892>

²² S. Cagaptay, "Erdoğan's Next Act", *Wall Street Journal*, 4 November 2015, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/erdogans-next-act-1446668849?alg=γ>

²³ "Timeline: Turkey's Ergenekon Trial", *Al Jazeera*, 5 August 2013, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/europe/2013/08/20138512358195978.html>

security forces are in particular concerned about the PKK's "underground state" infrastructure, which includes arms caches, "courts", and "tax offices" that developed in southeastern Turkey during the "Solution Process" between 2013 and 2015²⁴. Accordingly, when the PKK broke ceasefire with Ankara in July 2015, not only Erdoğan, but nearly the entire security establishment were happy to move militarily against the group²⁵.

The PKK for its own part, too, has eagerly embraced violence, undermining the rise of the HDP and Selahattin Demirtaş. The PKK, whose *raison d'être* is violence managed once again to make violence the language of the Kurdish movement, coming out as winners in the process, along with President Erdoğan.

However, the government and the military's actions against the Kurdish insurgency thus far have been mostly counterproductive. Weeks-long curfews, heavy bombardments and urban warfare in HDP strongholds appear to be pushing Turkey's Kurdish population away from the state.

Erdoğan and the Syria complicate the picture

Increasing polarization and violence in the southeast between the Kurds and the government is a challenge, especially at a moment when Turkey is debating writing its first civilian-made constitution and with rising concerns over President Erdoğan's authoritarian style of government. The question is what sort of

²⁴ D. Natali, "Turkey's Protracted PKK Problem", *Al-Monitor*, 1 September 2015, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/08/turkey-protracted-pkk-problem-kurds.html>

²⁵ "The truce between Turkey and Kurdish militants is over", *The Economist*, 26 July 2015, <http://www.economist.com/news/middle-east-and-africa/21659870-truce-between-turkey-and-kurdish-militants-over-turkey-and-kurds>

political rights to grant to the Kurds. The HDP pushes for an extensive set of group rights, including recognition of the Kurds as a national community and recognition of Kurdish as an official language in the country's constitution and most importantly, broad autonomy for the Kurdish provinces. The AKP has little to gain politically from writing such promises into Turkey's next charter, especially since the party is hoping to reconsolidate the Turkish nationalist vote further than it already did in the November elections thanks to their increasingly hawkish stance against the PKK. Moreover, the AKP and President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan seem more interested in changing Turkey's parliamentary system to an executive presidential system with Erdoğan at the helm, than to solve the Kurdish issue once and for all. President Erdoğan, known to be an astute politician, is well aware that a liberal and compromising stance on the Kurdish issue would not win him enough Kurdish nationalist votes to offset the many Turkish nationalist votes he would lose. Many Turkish nationalists oppose any political reconfiguration of Turkey, into a bi-national state of Turks and Kurds, a federal structure of self-autonomous regions, and this is the constituency that Erdoğan most hopes to court for upcoming referendum to change Turkey's constitution and make Erdoğan an omnipotent executive-style president.

Nevertheless, the Turkish government would do well to reexamine its role in the current escalation with the PKK, if not for political reasons then for the long-term stability of the country as a whole. Turkey's Kurdish problem will not simply disappear if left to smolder on its own. And due to shifting regional dynamics following the Arab Spring, Turkey is now more pressed than ever to develop a more permanent response to its Kurdish issue. The Syrian Civil War, instability in Iraq and the rise of the so-called Islamic State caused Turkey's

doorstep to spiral into chaos. While the Turkish government has at least in part contributed to this mess with its miscalculations in foreign policy, such a policy to go out alone against Assad and his sponsor, Russia, it now finds itself directly affected by the negative developments in its neighborhood. In fact, five of the six deadliest terror attacks in Turkish history have taken place in the last three years and they are all connected to the fallout from the Syrian Civil War. Together, these attacks have killed at least 240 people and injured at least 800 others. Furthermore, the October 2015 attack in Ankara, the July 2015 attack in Suruç, and the June 2015 attack in Diyarbakir all intentionally targeted pro-Kurdish groups, demonstrating the broader, regional aspect of Turkey's Kurdish problem, as well as showing how dangerously and easily the war between IS and PYD in Syria can be imported into Turkey²⁶.

Addressing Turkish Kurdish *Weltschmerz*

Until recently Ankara could have simply told the Turkish Kurds that “they have it really good”, given the country's economic boom and political liberalization. Not so long ago, Turkish leaders could have made a convincing case simply by saying, “given the levels of oppression and marginalization of the Kurds in the adjacent autocratic states, the Turkish Kurds should appreciate what they have”.

This can no longer be said. For one thing, the Iraqi Kurds now “have it really good” as well, and many Turkish Kurds

²⁶ On the Ankara attack, see T. Lister, “Ankara terrorist attack: What does it mean for Turkey?” CNN, 11 October 2015,

<http://www.cnn.com/2015/10/10/world/turkey-ankara-bomb-why-it-matters/>

On the attack in Suruç, see “Suruç Massacre: At Least 30 Killed in Turkey Border Blast,” *BBC News*, 20 July 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-33593615>

envy the autonomy enjoyed by their ethnic kin in Erbil and Sulaimaniyyah in northern Iraq. The Iraqi Kurds are all but independent, and Turkey's politically active Kurdish community suffers some status anxiety over this fact. There is also economic envy. Until the past decade Diyarbakir and other Kurdish-majority cities in Turkey appeared more prosperous than Sulaimaniyyah and Erbil. Today, the opposite could be true.

There is also the fact that Turkish Kurds are now exposed to the Iraqi Kurds and see what the latter have. Ankara's recent rapprochement with the Iraqi Kurds has made the Turkish-Iraqi border a line that exists only on paper, allowing many Turkish Kurds cross into northern Iraq daily to trade, receive education, and in some cases intermarry. These travelers witness firsthand the growth of a Kurdish state and pride in a region not so far from their own. The Iraqi Kurds' rise has created *Weltschmerz*, relative pain, among Turkish Kurds, who envy what the Iraqi Kurds have, and they want even more.

Events in Syria compound Ankara's problem by increasing the Turkish Kurds' relativity-based social pain. As the Assad regime weakened in light of the ongoing civil war, Kurdish parties and groups have started to take control over territories in northern Syria, creating an autonomous Kurdish region called Rojava consisting of three cantons; Jazira, Kobani and Afrin. Syrian Kurds have established institutions and a democratic system there and have received some international recognition as a viable political and military partner, especially in the fight against the IS. It seems that it will only be a matter of time until Kurds in Syria have enough leverage to demand constitutional recognition in a post-Assad Syria. In fact, on 17 March 2016,

the PYD declared a “federal democratic system” in Syria²⁷. If they cannot achieve full-fledged and internationally-recognized autonomy, the Syrian Kurds will at least have political power and recognition – hence, more *Weltschmerz* for the Turkish Kurds.

With the Iranian Kurds enjoying their own Kurdistan province, even though Iran is far from being a democracy, Turkish Kurds in the near future will go from being the “luckiest Kurds” in the Middle East to nearly the most politically underprivileged Kurds in the region. This is where Turkey’s new constitution comes in. If Ankara grasps this opportunity to create a truly liberal charter that broadens everyone’s rights, including those of the Kurds, perceptions of injustice relative to Turkey’s neighbors will carry less weight.

Can Turkey overcome its fear of an independent Kurdistan?

Another fear Turkey needs to overcome is that of an independent state of Kurdistan. This is especially important, just as Turkish Kurds are longing for greater autonomy in reaction to recent regional developments have presented Turkey with a rare opportunity, its own Kurdish moment.

Whereas Turkey’s ties with the Iraqi Kurds have improved in recent years, Ankara’s relations with the Syrian Kurds have remained rather bitter. This is because; unlike in the KRG where Iraqi Kurdish groups hold more sway than the PKK, the PKK is very popular among the Syrian Kurds. Bashar al-Assad’s father allowed the PKK to grow inside Syria to use the

²⁷ “Syria civil war: Kurds declare federal region in north”, *AlJazeera*, 17 March 2016, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/03/syria-civil-war-kurds-declare-federal-system-north-160317111902534.html>

group as a proxy against Turkey, and this bond between the two has remained.

Somewhere between 10 and 20 per cent of the Syrian population is Kurdish, creating a strong case for a greater Kurdish zone of control and eventual autonomy together with fraternal allies in Iraq, particularly given that the largest concentrations of Kurds in Syria live in the north along the Turkish border areas stretching eastward toward northwestern Iraq. There is also linguistic commonality among the Turkish, Syrian, and Iraqi Kurds in that Kurdish stretch. These Kurds speak the Kurmanji variety of Kurdish, as opposed to most Iranian and northeastern Iraqi Kurds, who speak the Sorani variety of Kurdish, which is as different from Kurmanji as perhaps Portuguese is from Spanish. The strong historic relationship between Syrian and Turkish Kurds meant that the PYD's increased control of Kurdish areas in northern Syria triggered a fear in Ankara that PYD victories could signal the birth of a PKK-led state on its doorstep²⁸.

However, cross-border dynamic of the Syrian Civil War and imminent security threats from multiple actors against Turkey present an important case for why Ankara needs to conquer its deeply-rooted fear of an independent Kurdistan. Turkey might actually be better served by supporting strong buffer states such as Syrian and Iraqi Kurdistan instead of attempts to maintain the far less defined ground realities today. If Ankara were to make peace with Syrian Kurds, it would benefit from having a friendly force that guards over 450 miles of Syria's 540-mile long Turkish border against IS and other threats.

Furthermore, as has been the case with Iraqi Kurdistan, Turkish infrastructure companies have been among the prime

²⁸ H. Barkey, "Erdoğan's Foreign Policy is in Ruins", *Foreign Policy*, 4 February 2016, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/02/04/erdogans-foreign-policy-is-in-ruins/>

beneficiaries of the region's investment boom, winning major contracts for road and airport construction. Turkey is the necessary outlet for Kurdistan's energy resources and a necessary trade partner for any landlocked entity emerging in the post-Syrian aftermath. Turkey's advantage of a strong and vibrant free-market economy would also prove mutually beneficial to an autonomous Syrian Kurdish region in post-Assad Syria, as it has with Iraqi Kurdistan.

In this regard, Syrian Kurds could learn from the remarkable shift in relations between Turkey and the Iraqi KRG. In recent years, Ankara's policy with the Iraqi Kurds has evolved from open hostility in 2003 at the beginning of the Iraq War to open friendship today. When Iraqi Kurds showed good will on the PKK issue; allowing Turkey to carry out cross-border military operations, Ankara reciprocated, building good ties with the Iraqi Kurdish Regional Government in Erbil. Today, Turkey has a diplomatic mission in Erbil. Turkish Airlines, the country's national flag carrier, flies directly from Erbil to both Istanbul and Antalya, facilitating Iraqi Kurdish tourism in the Turkish Riviera. And trade between Turkey and the Iraqi Kurds has boomed to such an extent that, were Iraqi Kurdistan an independent country, Turkey would be its largest trading partner²⁹.

Even if Turkey manages to put down a Kurdish insurgency at home, it would have a difficult time against Turkish Kurds backed by the Syrian Kurds. To be sure, Turkey is a powerful state and could eventually defeat a multi-country front, but only at an immense cost – suspension of democratic liberties, massive bloodshed, huge material damage, and Ankara's

²⁹ S. Cagaptay, Ch.B. Fidan and E.C. Sacikara, *Turkey and the KRG: An Undeclared Economic Commonwealth*. The Washington Institute, 16 March 2015, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/turkey-and-the-krg-an-undeclared-economic-commonwealth>

diversion away from the IS threat – with grave implications for Washington’s alliance with Ankara.

Solutions

To preempt a widespread Kurdish upheaval, Turkey would be better served to address the Kurds’ grievances, although following the regional examples in Syria, Iraq, and Iran is not necessarily the best way to go about it. In those countries, an overwhelming majority of Kurds live within the boundaries of their traditional homelands, or Kurdistan. In Turkey, half of the Kurds have migrated out of their homeland in the country’s southeast, and Istanbul is the most populous Kurdish city in the world.

There is no doubt that Turkey cannot grow closer to Iraqi and Syrian Kurds without making permanent peace with its own Kurdish community. Given Turkish political dynamics, territorial Kurdish autonomy looks unlikely. One reason is that a majority of the Turkish population would object to this step. More important, a potential autonomous Kurdish region inside the country would have to exclude nearly half the country’s Kurds, who live in western Turkey, having moved there over the years for jobs and other opportunities. Geographically, the distribution of Kurds in Turkey is very different from that in Iraq, Syria, and Iran, where population concentrations in Kurds’ territorial homeland make territorially based autonomy a realistic outcome.

The solution to the Kurdish problem in Turkey is, therefore, not narrow political autonomy but broader liberties for all citizens. Turkey needs to provide its citizens with the broadest individual freedoms imaginable if it is to satisfy its Kurdish citizens regarding their rights, including Kurds in western Turkey. A prescription for individual rights is also most

appropriate given Turkey's historical experience, whereby the forms of repression endured by Kurds resulted from distinct historical circumstances. Moreover, the Kurdish population is not only diffused geographically in Turkey but is also quickly integrating. One of every six Kurds is married to a Turk³⁰. Accordingly, addressing Kurdish demands in Turkey means granting comprehensive cultural rights to all of the country's citizens, Kurd or not, irrespective of location. Reforms would include access to education and public services not only in Kurdish but in other minority languages as well.

A framework based on strengthening individual rights would almost certainly be embraced by Kurds and Turks alike. In the short term, the government could take a number of specific and feasible steps. First, removing the legal uncertainties that surround the use of indigenous names for villages and landmarks would be a welcomed symbolic gesture to Kurdish and other linguistic minorities. Many buildings, towns, and streets with Armenian, Georgian, Syriac, Kurdish, or Greek names were reassigned "Turkish" names during the 20th century. A reversal of this forced renaming would serve as an acknowledgement of Turkey's linguistic and ethnic diversity.

A change in judicial culture, even if gradual, should be another goal. Turkish criminal law entails a good deal of vague wording, gaining much of its significance from how technical and legal terms are interpreted by the judges reviewing a case. Even if criminal statutes may seem perfectly reasonable if interpreted prudently, some Turkish judges have gained a unfortunate reputation for illiberal interpretations of the law. This factor has been behind many of the harsh rulings against pro-Kurdish political activists and journalists in Turkey. For example, the police arrested thousands of Kurdish nationalists

³⁰ "Milliyet. 55 milyon kişi 'etnik olarak' Türk", *KONDA*, 22 March 2007, <http://www.milliyet.com.tr/2007/03/22/guncel/angun.html>

in 2011 that were linked to the Union of Communities in Kurdistan (KCK), a pro-PKK political umbrella organization. Authorities alleged that the KCK members were working for the benefit of the PKK. But while some involved in the case could be connected to the outlawed and violent PKK. Many others, however, represent the legal, civilian Kurdish political movement, although they refuse to explicitly denounce the PKK³¹.

Turkey also needs to appease the Kurds by making peace with what happened in the past. The history of the Turkey-PKK conflict is full of extrajudicial killings or crimes committed by unknown perpetrators. This includes the December 2011 targeting of a convoy of Kurdish smugglers by the Turkish military in Uludere that resulted in the death of thirty-four people and the October 2015 bombing in Ankara, which targeted mostly pro-Kurdish groups³². Acknowledging the mistakes from the past and bringing perpetrators to justice would help alleviate Kurds' grievances.

These reforms should also come with administrative, but not political, autonomy. Turkey is a large country in need of decentralization. Many nationalist Kurds want self-government in the southeast. But an overwhelming majority of Turks oppose outright federalization. In this regard, Turkey might look Spain's administrative reforms beginning in 1980s as a model. In Spain's asymmetrical political system, areas such as the Basque region have stronger administrative autonomy than others, even though all areas remain under central government

³¹ Amnesty International, "Turkey: KCK Arrests Deepen Freedom of Expression Concerns", Amnesty International, 10 November 2011, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/eur44/015/2011/en/>

³² F. Tastekin, "Turkey's Kurds want explanation, apology for Roboski massacre", *Al-Monitor*, 30 December 2013, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/12/turkish-kurds-remain-estranged.html>

control. By providing the Basques with local political power, Spain ultimately negotiated a non-federalized government that deflated the violent wing of the Basque movement.

Turkey could follow a similar path of decentralization, allowing for stronger administrative autonomy in Kurdish provinces and other outlying areas while maintaining constitutional unity. By granting broad individual freedoms and greater administrative autonomy to Kurds, Ankara can win the Kurds while also satisfying the country's greater populace. Many Turks are uncomfortable with the country's current military-written constitution, which reads like a "don't do" list rather than an outline of Turkey's national principles. Not just the Kurds but Turks of all stripes would welcome a fresh constitution that lists their freedoms and those alone. This is the best way to help Turkey consolidate as a liberal democracy.

Can Turkey capture its "Kurdish moment"?

It will be hard for Turkey to maintain leverage over the Syrian and Iraqi Kurds when Turkish Kurds are locked in a violent struggle against Ankara. As it vies for influence in Syria and Iraq and stability across its borders with those countries, Ankara has to make peace with its Kurdish community. Kurdish nationalists and some others believe that this is the Kurds' moment in history. The Kurds may indeed turn the Middle East's post-World War I alignment on its head, but they cannot do this without Turkey. This is in fact Turkey's Kurdish and Middle East moment – if Ankara gets its hand right at home.

But all this depends on Erdoğan's political agenda. If the Turkish leader continues to fight the PKK to maintain his strong man image in the hopes of transitioning Turkey into a presidential system of government with himself at the helm, Ankara can miss the proverbial Kurdish train, not only in Syria,

but also inside the country. The risk for Turkey is that will reflexively respond to developments in Syria, where the PYD is supported by Russia and the United States alike and may prompt rash Turkish action. Respectively, the PKK can launch an all-out war, expanding the violence to cities in western Turkey. This would put Turkey at the risk of a long and sustained PKK-led insurgency in the southeast, a U.S. – and Russian backed and PKK – aligned Rojava entity in Syria across the border, and terror and mayhem in the country’s big cities. Turkey could survive these shocks, but only at a huge humanitarian and material cost as well as damage to its human rights record, and even alliance with the United States. It is Turkey’s Kurdish moment to capture: if Ankara plays it right, it can become long-term friends with the Kurds. And if Erdoğan decides on war with both the PKK and the PYD, then Turkey could, unfortunately, be in for a rough ride.

3. The IS Factor: The Kurds as a Vanguard in the War on the Caliphate

Cengiz Gunes

IS versus the Kurds

This chapter sets out the IS-Kurdish conflict in detail by providing an up-to-date account of the conflict, its main trends thus far and the motivations behind the attacks by the Islamic State (IS) against the Kurds in Syria, Iraq and Turkey. The success IS had in capturing large swathes of land in Syria and Iraq in 2014 and 2015, together with its ability to carry out terrorist attacks internationally, has made it one of the biggest international security threats of recent decades. The ongoing atrocities that IS has been committing against various communities in Iraq and Syria, particularly against the Yazidi Kurds, and its destruction of historic and heritage sites has been drawing widespread condemnation from the international community. Amidst the terror and chaos caused by the group, the resistance of the Kurdish forces against it in Syria and Iraq has also been drawing widespread admiration from the international community.

The growing influence of the jihadist groups in the rebel-controlled areas in Syria from 2012 onwards has coincided with a significant increase in attacks against the Kurdish majority

regions of the country. This has become the case especially since mid-July 2013, when fighting broke out between the al-Qaida-affiliated Jabhat al-Nusra (or al-Nusra Front) and the People's Protection Units (YPG) in Ras al-Ayn (Serêkaniye). However, since early 2014, the conflict has been mainly fought between IS and the Kurdish YPG and the Women's Protection Units (YPJ). IS captured Mosul in June 2014 and together with it large quantities of weapons from the Iraqi Army and sums of money. This has significantly increased IS' resources and propelled it to increase its attacks against the Kurds in Syria and Iraq.

In Syria, IS made significant territorial gains in its conflict with the Kurds in 2014 but from the beginning of 2015 onwards Kurdish forces managed to turn the tide against it by taking back a significant portion of the territory they had lost. The Kurdish town of Kobani (Ayn al-Arab) on the Turkey-Syria border became the centre stage in the struggle against IS during 2014 and 2015. At the end of January 2015, IS was expelled from Kobani and in June 2015 the Kurdish forces captured the strategic town of Tel Abyad, also on the Turkey-Syria border, which had often been described as an IS stronghold. Since then YPG expansion into IS-held territory has continued. The IS-Kurdish conflict spread to the neighboring Iraqi Kurdistan in August 2014 and there too it is still ongoing. The conflict is taking place mainly in the governorates of Kirkuk and Nineveh. One of the main highlights of the conflict was the humanitarian crisis following IS' capture of the Sinjar region, which is the historic home of the Yazidi Kurds. In August 2014, IS arrived as far as the town of Gwer, which is 40 kilometers southwest of Erbil, the capital city of the Iraqi Kurdistan. The U.S. air strikes halted IS' advance and subsequently the Iraqi Kurdistan's military forces, the *peshmerga*, managed to contain the IS onslaught.

The IS-Kurdish conflict in Iraq and Syria has spread to Turkey with the pro-Kurdish political and peace network becoming one of its main targets. These include the bombing attack in Diyarbakir on 3 June 2015 that targeted an election rally of the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), which killed three people and injured 100¹. On 20 July 2015, IS stepped up its campaign against the pro-Kurdish network by bombing a meeting of socialist activists as they gathered in the town of Suruç near the Turkey-Syria border, killing 32 and injuring another 100². Another attack targeting the pro-Kurdish peace network was carried out in Ankara by two suicide bombers on 10 October 2015 that killed more than 100 and injured more than 400 people³.

In Syria, IS and the Kurds are rivals for the same territory but the conflict has an ideological dimension and is also propelled by antagonisms based on ethnic differences. IS' goal of establishing a state run according to Islamist fundamentalist ideology is in stark contrast with the Kurds' vision of a democratic, secular, gender-egalitarian and plural Syria. IS' rhetoric targets the secularism of the main Kurdish political party, the Democratic Union Party (PYD), and its views on gender equality. Competition over resources and holding strategically important towns need also to be cited as the motives behind the IS attacks. In Iraq, the Kurds' long established alliance with the U.S. and other Western states has made them IS' enemy. In addition, as the attacks on the Yazidi

¹ "Blasts hit Kurdish party's election rally in Turkey", *Al Jazeera*, 5 June 2015, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/06/blasts-hit-kurdish-party-election-rally-turkey-150605171236899.html>

² C. Gunes, "Turkey bombing risks further unrest in a country already living on the edge", *The Conversation*, 21 July 2015, <https://theconversation.com/turkey-bombing-risks-further-unrest-in-a-country-already-living-on-the-edge-45020>

³ "Ankara blasts: Bombers linked to Islamic State", *BBC News*, 14 October 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-34533522>

Kurdish communities in Sinjar showed, the non-Muslim Kurdish religious communities have been identified as targets to be exterminated as they are considered heretical by ISIS⁴.

Another reason that IS targets Kurds is due to its desire to restart a Kurdish Islamist mobilisation in Turkey and Iraq. IS seems to have targeted the Kurds as part of its recruitment policy because in both Turkey and Iraq there is a history of Kurdish Islamist mobilisation. In fact, the 1990s witnessed widespread attacks by the Kurdish Islamist Hizbullah (or Hezbollah) movement against the pro-Kurdish activists in southeast Turkey⁵. So far IS attacks against the Kurds in Turkey have been predominantly carried out by the Kurdish Islamists recruited by IS in the city of Adiyaman⁶. Similarly, Ansar al-Islam – a Kurdish Islamist group close to al-Qaida – was active in Iraqi Kurdistan during the 2000s and carried out a number of attacks in the Iraqi Kurdistan⁷. The IS-Kurdish conflict in Syria has had a huge impact in Turkey and worsened security and the relations between the state and the Kurdish community, contributing to further polarisation of Kurds and Turks⁸.

⁴ “According to the United Nations, ISIS attacks against the Yazidis may constitute an act of genocide” (“IS Yazidi attacks may be genocide, says UN”), *BBC News*, 19 March 2015,

<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-31962755>

⁵ C. Gunes, *Kurdish National Movement in Turkey: From Protest to Resistance*, London and New York, Routledge, pp. 126-130.

⁶ M. Bozarslan, “Islamic State’s Secret recruitment ground in Turkey”, *Al Monitor*, July 23, 2015,

<http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/07/turkey-adiyaman-isis-connection-suruc-bombing.html#>

⁷ A. Speri, “Not All Kurds Are Fighting Against the Islamic State – Some Are Joining It”, *The Vice*, 7 November 2014, <https://news.vice.com/article/not-all-kurds-are-fighting-against-the-islamic-state-some-are-joining-it>

⁸ C. Gunes, R. Lowe, *The impact of the Syrian war on Kurdish Politics across the Middle East*, Research Paper, London, The Royal Institute of International Affairs, July 2015.

Additionally, the rise of IS and its attacks against the Kurds are dragging the Kurds into a much larger regional sectarian conflict. As a corollary of the IS attacks on the Kurds, Kurdish movements in Iraq, Turkey and Syria started to cooperate more closely. The Kurdish forces in Syria and Iraq are likely to have a key role in the operations to retake the IS strongholds of Raqqa and Mosul in the coming months.

The IS-Kurdish conflict in Syria

This section will provide an overview of the developments in the IS-Kurdish conflict in Syria. It is impossible to cover the conflict in a detailed way in a short space given the numerous turns and twists that it has taken so far. Instead the focus will be on charting the main events taking place and highlighting the dominant trends in the conflict. The Kurds took control of the Kurdish majority regions of Syria on 19 July 2012, mainly the towns along the Syria-Turkey border, including Afrin and Kobani in northern Syria, and Ras al-Ayn in the northeast, following the withdrawal of state forces in Kurdish majority areas. In subsequent months, the Kurds gradually expanded the territory they hold by gaining control of more towns and villages in northern Syria. However, the Kurdish majority areas do not constitute a continuous enclave, and areas populated by Arabs and other ethnic groups divide their population centres. Much like other rebel-held areas in Syria, Kurds began to administer their own affairs and subsequently build autonomous self-administrations in the territories they control. From 2012 onwards, the Kurdish forces were organised within the YPG and YPJ but since October 2015 they have been part of the newly formed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). From January 2014 onwards, the Kurds' political organisation took on a new dimension with the establishment of the cantons of Rojava as an administrative structure to manage *de facto* Kurdish autonomy. There are three cantons in Jazire, Kobani and Afrin but due to

the widespread destruction as a result of the IS attacks, the majority of the population of Kobani and the surrounding villages have left Syria for Turkey. Recently, the Rojava cantons were brought together to form a federal administration on 17 March 2016⁹.

2012-13: the growing tensions

There has been growing tension between the Kurdish forces and Islamist groups and some of the armed units within the Free Syrian Army (FSA) from the end of 2012 to date in particular in Aleppo and Ras al-Ayn. The initial reason for the conflict was competition for territorial control in mixed Arab-Kurdish areas but with the ascendancy of the Islamist groups within Syria's opposition and the failure of the Syrian opposition to accommodate Kurdish demands into its programme and incorporate Kurdish representatives into its structure, the conflict began to be fuelled by ethnic differences and ideology. One of the early sites of the Kurdish-Islamist conflict was Ras al-Ayn and the tensions began to flare up in November 2012. The initial fighting was between some military units of the FSA who entered the town on 8 November 2012 and the Kurdish YPG forces¹⁰. Not too long after the first outbreak of violence in the town, the Jabat al-Nusra (JN) fighters also joined the fight against the Kurdish forces¹¹. There were two ceasefires in December and February but attempts to find a settlement did not succeed. The conflict in Ras al-Ayn ended in July 2013 with

⁹ "Syrian Kurds declare new federation in bid for recognition", *Middle East Eye*, 17 March 2016, <http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/kurdish-pyd-declares-federalism-northern-syria-1311505605>

¹⁰ "Ra's al-Ayn: Heavy fighting between PYD and FSA", *Kurdwatch*, <http://www.kurdwatch.org/?aid=2697&z=en>

¹¹ "Jihadist rebels in standoff with Syria Kurds: NGO", *Al Arabiya News*, <http://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/11/22/251219.html>

the YPG expelling the JN and other groups from the town¹². After Ras al-Ayn, another of the mixed Kurdish and Arab towns, Tell Abyad (Gre Spi), became the site of conflict between the Kurdish forces and the jihadists. There, the initial conflict was between YPG and the JN but subsequently the town fell to IS hands on 30 June 2014¹³. Prior to the capture IS and the FSA were present in Tell Abyad and struggled for control. IS' capture of Tell Abyad was a significant setback for the Kurdish forces as it meant that they were not able to territorially connect the Kobani and Jazire cantons. Also, as the subsequent months showed, this made the Kobani canton particularly vulnerable to an IS attack as all the supply routes to Kobani were cut off. In fact, Kobani seems to have been one of the main targets for IS from the start as it attempted to lay siege to the town on 1 August 2013 by surrounding it on three fronts but was not able to forcefully capture it.

On 30 August 2013, further fighting took place between the Kurdish forces and IS, JN and the FSA units in the rural areas of Kobani¹⁴. On 28 August 2013, IS and Kurdish forces battled for control of the Yarubiya border on the northeast part of the Iraq-Syria border, which finally fell to YPG control on 26 October 2013¹⁵. On 26 September 2013, FSA and IS attacked Kurdish forces in the village of Atme and town of Jandairis near

¹² "Syria Kurds expel jihadists, seize weapons: NGO", Fox News, <http://www.foxnews.com/world/2013/07/20/syria-kurds-expel-jihadists-seize-weapons-ngo.html>

¹³ T. Daloglu, "ISIS raises flag at Turkish Border", *Al Monitor*, 30 June 2014, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/06/daloglu-isis-syria-iraq-mosul-caliphate-flag-border.html>

¹⁴ "Ayn al-'Arab: Fighting between YPG and FSA", *Kurdwatch*, <http://www.kurdwatch.org/?aid=2919&z=en>

¹⁵ "Kurdish Fighters Gain Control of Syria-Iraq Border Town", *Rudaw*, 26 October 2013, <http://rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/26102013>

the Turkey-Syria border in the northwest of the country¹⁶. Towards the end of 2013, the IS presence in areas between Hasakah and Qamishli was targeted by the YPG. In 2013 Kurdish action seems to have focussed on consolidating their control in Hasakah and other Kurdish majority areas. However, both IS and Kurdish forces were unable to hold on to the areas they captured for long periods, which has meant that the conflict was to become a long drawn out one and certain towns and villages changed hand a number of times between IS and the YPG. During 2014, as the territory held by both IS and the Kurdish forces controlled expanded, the conflict between the Kurdish forces and IS spread to a larger area. The capture of the towns on the Turkey-Syria border, such as Tell Abyad, has allowed IS to bring in via Turkey the jihadists that it recruited internationally¹⁷.

The spread of conflict

After IS captured large amounts of weapons from the Iraqi army in Mosul in June 2014, it began to carry out more attacks against the Kurdish-controlled areas in Syria. The conflict significantly escalated during the second half of 2014 with IS capturing large areas in the Kobani canton. The initial attacks on the town and its surrounding areas began in July 2014 but IS intensified its attacks on Kobane from 15 September 2014 onwards and the battle of Kobani is of critical importance in the conflict. To escape the onslaught, thousands of Kurds have taken refuge in Turkey. IS' advance into Kobani was rapid and

¹⁶ "Arabs battle Syrian Kurds as Assad's foes fragment", *Reuters*, 27 September 2013, <http://in.reuters.com/article/syria-crisis-kurds/id/INL5N0H3M220130926>

¹⁷ A. Albayrak, J. Parkinson, "Turkey Struggles to Halt Islamic State 'Jihadist Highway'", *The Wall Street Journal*, 4 September 2014, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/turkey-struggles-to-halt-islamic-state-jihadist-highway-1409777884>

it took the Kurdish forces by surprise that IS was investing such a considerable number of fighters in its siege of the town. The U.S. airstrikes targeting IS around Kobani started on 27 September 2015, in aid of the lightly armed Kurdish forces who were not able to stop IS advances.

In early October 2015, IS captured the strategically important Mishtenur Hill on the south side of Kobani as well as several buildings inside the town¹⁸. In the following weeks, as IS' expansion into Kobani continued, an urban fight ensued that resulted in widespread destruction of the town's buildings. The U.S. air-dropped weapons, ammunition and medical supplies to the Kurdish forces on 19 October 2014¹⁹. The *peshmerga* fighters from the Iraqi Kurdistan were allowed to travel to Kobani via Turkey on 31 October 2014 to offer support to the Kurdish forces battling IS²⁰. On 19 January 2015, Kurdish forces recaptured the Mishtenur Hill and then started to drive IS out of Kobani²¹.

Henceforth, from early 2015 onwards, the Kurdish forces gained the momentum in the fight against IS. On the evening of 27 January, Kurds celebrated the liberation of Kobani from the IS siege. The celebrations started after the YPG and YPJ declared that all parts of the town were free from IS control but it was still present in more than 300 villages surrounding Kobani. The intensification of U.S. air strikes against IS positions around Kobani helped to slow IS advances but the

¹⁸ "Battle for Kobane: Key Events", *BBC News*, 25 June 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-29688108>

¹⁹ "Kobani: US drops weapons to Kurds in Syria", *The Guardian*, 20 October 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/oct/20/us-drops-weapons-to-kurds-in-syria>

²⁰ H. Pamuk, R. Salman, "Kurdish peshmerga forces enter Syria's Kobani after further air strikes", *Reuters*, 31 October 2014, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-idUSKBN0IK15M20141031>

²¹ "Kobane battle: Kurdish fighters capture strategic hilltop", *BBC News*, 19 January 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-30883041>

biggest burden in ending Kobani's siege was shouldered by the YPG and YPJ fighters although their task was eased by the support received from the *peshmerga* forces of the Iraqi Kurdistan and some FSA military units. The widespread mobilisation of the Kurds of Turkey and Syria and the help and aid obtained from the donations provided by the Kurdish Diaspora community in Europe and North America were also important in pushing IS back. There have been significant civilian casualties in the conflict, with the massacre in Kobani of 164 Kurdish civilians on 25 June 2015 being one of the most deadly so far. They were attacked by IS fighters in disguise in Kobani, who also injured nearly 200 more²². IS also kidnapped Kurdish civilians and children who were held for long periods of time²³.

Kurds turn the tide against IS

The isolation of Kobani and the inability of the Kurdish forces to bring in fighters and materiel made it an easy target for IS but the success it had against the Kurdish forces there was not repeated elsewhere. In the Al-Hasakah governorate, IS made many attempts to capture Kurdish controlled-territory but even if clashes with IS took place in the rural areas, the YPG forces were able to protect the large population centres from IS attacks. The YPG seized control of Tell Brak, a town northeast

²² K. Shaheen, "Kurdish forces besiege Isis fighters in Kobani after massacre of civilians", *The Guardian*, 26 June 2015,

<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jun/26/kurdish-forces-have-besieged-isis-fighters-in-kobani-say-activists>

²³ J. Harkin, "Up to 186 Kurdish students kidnapped by Isis in northern Syria", *The Guardian*, 24 June 2014,

<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jun/26/186-kurdish-students-kidnapped-isis-syria>

of Al-Hasakah, from IS at the end of February 2014²⁴. The Kurdish forces were unable to hold the town and fighting between the Kurdish forces and IS in the area continued with the town coming under Kurdish control again in March 2015²⁵.

The Kurds' improving relations and cooperation with the U.S. military has enabled them to repel IS attacks and become a key fighting force on the ground against IS in Syria. On 15 June 2015, the border town of Tell Abyad was liberated from IS control by the Kurdish forces with support from some Arab militia units. This was described as a major blow to IS because of its proximity to its *de facto* capital city of Raqqa and because it was a major supply route. This has propelled the Kurdish forces to make further gains against IS and expand the territories they hold. During August 2015, the YPG made significant gains in Al-Hasakah governorate. On 23 June 2015, IS started a large military campaign to capture Hasakah city, which was controlled jointly by the Kurdish and regime forces²⁶. Clashes took place throughout July and on 1 August 2015 the Kurdish forces declared that Hasakah was cleared of IS' presence²⁷.

The advances of Kurdish forces against IS continued throughout the end of 2015 with the strategically important

²⁴ T. Perry, "Syrian Kurds take town from Islamists: watchdog", *Reuters*, 22 February 2014, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-crisis-town-idUSBREA110JJ20140222>

²⁵ "Under Kurdish Attacks ISIS loses main stronghold in Hasakah", ARA News, 1 March 2014, <http://aranews.net/2015/03/under-kurdish-attacks-isis-loses-main-stronghold-in-hasakah/>

²⁶ "Islamic State suicide bombers attack Hasaka, 10 killed", *Reuters*, 23 June 2015, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-bombings-idUSKBN0P32N420150623>

²⁷ T. Wyke, "Kurdish forces declare Syrian city of Hasakah liberated from ISIS", *Mail Online*, 2 August 2015, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3183235/Kurdish-forces-declare-Syrian-city-Hasakah-liberated-ISIS-jihadi-group-execute-three-men-promoting-engaging-homosexuality.html>

Tishrin Dam in the Al-Raqqa governorate falling into Kurdish-led SDF control in late December 2015²⁸. Further gains were made in the eastern part of the Al-Hasakah governorate in November 2016 with the town of al-Hawl being captured by the SDF on 14 November 2015²⁹. The SDF continued its advance further south in the Al-Hasakah governorate with capture of the town of El-Shaddadi on 20 February 2016³⁰. In February 2016, there were reports of clashes in northern Aleppo between Kurdish forces and the Islamist groups and FSA units. Kurdish gains against IS have not resulted in improving relations with other Arab opposition groups in Syria and we may yet witness acceleration in the conflict between Kurdish-led forces and a collection of Islamist and moderate Arab groups.

IS-Kurdish conflict in Iraq

This section will provide an account of the IS-Kurdish conflict in Iraq. At the beginning of 2014, IS started to increase its influence in Iraq but the initial attacks it carried out against Iraqi security forces took place in the Al-Anbar governorate. Having established a stronghold there by capturing the cities of Ramadi and Fallujah in the first half of 2014, it then started to move north and northeast into the Nineveh and Kirkuk governorates and increasingly targeted the Kurdish controlled or populated territories. As mentioned previously, IS' capture of Mosul – Iraq's second largest city – in early June 2014 with

²⁸ "U.S.-backed alliance captures key dam from Islamic State: alliance spokesman", *Reuters*, 26 December 2015, <http://news.yahoo.com/u-backed-alliance-captures-key-dam-islamic-state-153550929.html>

²⁹ "Syrian Democratic Forces recapture key town near Iraqi border amid ISIS decline", *ARA News*, 14 November 2015, <http://aranews.net/2015/11/syrian-democratic-forces-recapture-key-town-near-iraqi-border-amid-isis-decline/>

³⁰ "Syrian Democratic Forces announce liberation of last ISIS bastion in Hasakah", *ARA News*, 20 February 2016, <http://aranews.net/2016/02/syrian-democratic-forces-announce-liberation-of-main-isis-bastion-in-hasakah/>

relative ease greatly expanded the resources it had. In the subsequent weeks, it further expanded the territory it held and on 1 August 2014, it began its Kurdish campaign in which it captured territory, including the towns of Zumar and Sinjar.

The Iraqi Kurdistan has been relatively safe and secure in the post-2003 period, when compared with rest of Iraq, which has witnessed ongoing sectarian violence for much of the time. However, the bomb attack in Erbil on 29 September 2013 that IS carried out and that killed 6 people was a sign that it had the potential and intention to destabilise the Kurdish region³¹. Additionally, IS' expansion in Iraq and Syria has increased the pressure on the resources of the Iraqi Kurdistan significantly, with many of the internally displaced Iraqis and Kurdish refugees from Syria arriving there. Also, following the IS offensive in northern Iraq in June 2014, *peshmerga* forces moved into disputed areas such as the city of Kirkuk and the surrounding areas that were in danger of being captured by IS. Consequently, both the population and the territory of the Iraqi Kurdistan increased significantly, increasing the strain on the *peshmerga* forces as they had to provide security to a much larger area. Another area that IS had a strong presence in was the Kirkuk governorate. In fact, it was one of the cities that IS threatened during its June offensive and there too the Iraqi army abandoned its positions in expectation of an impending IS attack³². However, the Kurdish forces were able to swiftly move

³¹ T. Arango, "Once-Calm Area of Iraq Is Shaken by Bombings", *The New York Times*, 29 September 2013,

http://www.nytimes.com/2013/09/30/world/middleeast/relatively-calm-kurdish-region-of-iraq-is-shaken-by-rare-attack.html?_r=0

³² F. Hawrami, P. Beaumont, "Iraqi Kurdish forces take Kirkuk as Isis sets its sights on Baghdad", *The Guardian*, 12 June 2014,

<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jun/12/iraq-isis-kirkuk-baghdad-kurdish-government>

into the area and to defend it against IS in the subsequent months.

The increased threat levels and the worsening security situation have revealed the weaknesses and vulnerabilities of Kurdish *peshmerga* forces. It would not be an exaggeration to suggest that IS' August offensive against the Iraqi Kurdistan was a threat that it had never experienced in 25 years of its existence as an autonomous region. Described as a "near-death experience" by Gareth Stansfield, the biggest shock to the Iraqi Kurdistan was when IS came as far as the towns of Gwer and Makhmour in the Nineveh governorate and within 40 kilometres of its capital city Erbil, causing widespread panic amongst its population³³. The consequences could have been far worse for the Iraqi Kurdistan as well as the entire region had the U.S. not carried out prompt air strikes against advancing IS forces³⁴. In addition, the military aid the *peshmerga* has received from numerous countries has enabled them to stabilise their position and become more effective in combating ISIS³⁵.

IS advances in Sinjar and surrounding areas in early August 2014 resulted in a humanitarian crisis. Without a doubt the Yazidi Kurdish minority based in the northern part of the Nineveh governorate can be singled out as the group that suffered the most from the hands of ISIS. A quick glance at the available figures shows the scale of the devastation they suffered: 5,000 Yazidi men were executed, as many as 7,000

³³ G. Stansfield, "The Islamic State, the Kurdistan Region and the future of Iraq: assessing UK policy options", *International Affairs*, Vol. 90, No. 6, pp. 1329-1350.

³⁴ R. Spencer, "American air strikes help Kurdish forces reclaim towns from Islamic State", *The Daily Telegraph*, 10 August 2014, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/iraq/11024844/American-air-strikes-help-Kurdish-forces-reclaim-towns-from-Islamic-State.html>

³⁵ L. Berman, *The Status of Western Military Aid to Kurdish Peshmerga Forces*, Jerusalem Centre for Contemporary Affairs, 11 May 2015, <http://jcpa.org/article/the-status-of-western-military-aid-to-kurdish-peshmerga-forces/>

Yazidi women taken as slaves, almost 200,000 Yazidis were displaced, with many moving to Iraqi Kurdistan, and thousands were stranded on the Sinjar Mountain in an attempt to escape the IS assault³⁶. Had it not been for U.S. military action, UN aid and the swift action of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) guerrillas and YPG forces who provided safe passage to Yazidis, the scale of the devastation would have been far worse³⁷.

Kurdish fightback

Although the Kurdish forces were able to regain some of the lost territory in Nineveh soon after, progress in eradicating the threat IS poses to the Kurds and the Iraqi Kurdistan has been slow. After the initial shock and retreat, the *peshmerga* forces made progress against IS in and around the towns of Gwer and Makhmour one week after IS captured them in early August 2014³⁸. Since the end of August 2014, the *peshmerga* forces have recaptured the territory they lost. The capture of Mosul dam in August 2014 was one of the highlights of the *peshmerga* forces' advance against IS, which was achieved as a result of an intense U.S. air campaign against IS targets and with the

³⁶ R. Spencer, "Isil carried out massacres and mass sexual enslavement of Yazidis, UN confirms", *The Daily Telegraph*, 14 October 2014, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/islamic-state/11160906/Isil-carried-out-massacres-and-mass-sexual-enslavement-of-Yazidis-UN-confirms.html>

³⁷ I. Tharoor, "A U.S.-designated terrorist group is saving Yazidis and battling the Islamic State", *The Washington Post*, 11 August 2014, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2014/08/11/a-u-s-designated-terrorist-group-is-saving-yazidis-and-battling-the-islamic-state/>

³⁸ S. Khalel, M. Vickery, "Battle for Makhmour: a frontline in Iraq's latest war", *Middle East Eye*, 18 August 2014, <http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/battle-makhmour-frontline-iraq-s-latest-war-147748868>

support of the Iraqi Army³⁹. The *peshmerga* forces made further gains in the Nineveh governorate throughout 2015 but progress was more gradual and cautious⁴⁰. On 13 November 2015, the town of Sinjar was captured jointly by the *peshmerga* forces, PKK guerrillas and local Yazidi defence forces⁴¹. Subsequently the *peshmerga* forces began to push back IS further in other parts of Nineveh and in early February 2016, they captured 5 villages from IS in the Nineveh governorate⁴²

Another front on which Kurdish forces have been actively fighting IS is the city of Kirkuk. IS reached as far as the outskirts of the city and is present in the areas west of Kirkuk but the Kurdish *peshmerga* forces have by and large kept the city secure. IS carried out bombings in Kirkuk and sabotaged the oil infrastructure and on numerous occasions tried to capture the city by launching surprise attacks but the *peshmerga* forces have been able to repel IS attacks in each case⁴³. Being an oil

³⁹ H. Cooper, M. Landler and A. Ahmed, “Troops in Iraq Rout Sunni Militants From a Key Dam”, *New York Times*, 18 August 2014, http://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/19/world/middleeast/iraq-mosul-dam.html?_r=1

⁴⁰ A. Doran, “Holding Down the Fort in Kurdistan: Peshmerga Play Defense against ISIS”, *National Review*, 16 June 2015, <http://www.nationalreview.com/article/419811/holding-down-fort-kurdistan-peshmerga-play-defense-against-isis-andrew-doran>

⁴¹ M. Chulov, “‘Tyranny has gone’: Kurds and Yazidis celebrate recapture of Sinjar from Isis”, *The Guardian*, 13 November 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/nov/13/tyranny-has-gone-kurds-and-yazidis-celebrate-recapture-of-sinjar-from-isis>

⁴² “Kurdish Peshmerga, Iraqi allies recapture five villages in Nineveh amid ISIS retreat”, ARA News, 2 February 2016, <http://aranews.net/2016/02/kurdish-peshmerga-iraqi-allies-recapture/>

⁴³ N. Malas, “Islamic State Militants Launch Offensive Outside Kurdish-Controlled Kirkuk”, *The Wall Street Journal*, 30 January 2015, http://www.wsj.com/articles/senior-kurdish-military-commander-killed-in-iraq-fighting-islamic-militants-1422614353?mod=WSJ_hppMIDDLENexttoWhatsNewsSecond

rich city, it is likely to face threats until IS is completely defeated. The Kurdish forces are still engaged in a conflict with the IS around Kirkuk and there they have prevented IS from entering the city or laying siege to it. Since IS is positioned in nearby areas, the attacks on the city and on the positions of the *peshmerga* forces have continued regularly.

Being a highly mobile force has enabled IS to carry out attacks in a wide area. It has engaged in combat with the *peshmerga* forces but also used car bombs and suicide bombings in its attacks. These have mainly taken place on the combat fronts but the Iraqi Kurdistan's capital city Erbil has also been targeted on a number of occasions since the attack on 30 September 2013 that I discussed above. On 19 November 2014, IS carried out a car bomb attack targeting a checkpoint and killing 4 people⁴⁴. On 17 April 2015, IS again carried a car bomb attack in Erbil close to the U.S. consulate, killing 3⁴⁵. This has meant that the threat it poses to the Kurds in Iraq continues. Currently, the Iraqi Kurdistan has 1,000 kilometers of border with IS, which has meant that IS attacks on Kurdish positions continue to occur regularly. The human cost of the conflict with IS for the *peshmerga* forces has been quite high and rising steadily as the conflict drags on. In January 2016, according to official figures, the number of *peshmergas* who lost their lives reached 1,345 with over 8,000 injured in combat.⁴⁶ Many of the casualties lost their lives in combat and as a result of car bombs. For example, IS carried out a

⁴⁴ "ISIS claims suicide bombings in Iraq's Erbil", *Al Arabiya News*, 21 November 2014, <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2014/11/21/ISIS-claims-suicide-bombings-in-Iraq-s-Erbil.html>

⁴⁵ I. Coles, "Car bomb kills three outside U.S. consulate in Iraq's Kurdish capital", *Reuters*, 17 April 2015, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-us-consulate-idUSKBN0N81RF20150417>

⁴⁶ "New Figures Reveal Peshmerga Casualties in anti-IS War", *BasNews*, 12 January 2016, <http://www.basnews.com/index.php/en/news/kurdistan/253202>

“surprise attack” against the *peshmerga* forces in Gwer on 11 January 2015, resulting in 34 fatalities⁴⁷. Also, early on in the conflict, the *peshmerga* forces did not have suitable weapons and armour to fight an enemy such as IS. The task has been made more difficult by the fact that the Iraqi Kurdistan has not been paid its share of the combat budget by the Iraqi government. Historically low oil prices have meant that the export of oil via Turkey has not brought in the necessary income to finance the expenditures and as a result the Iraqi Kurdistan’s fight against IS has generated much social and economic pressure.

Conclusion

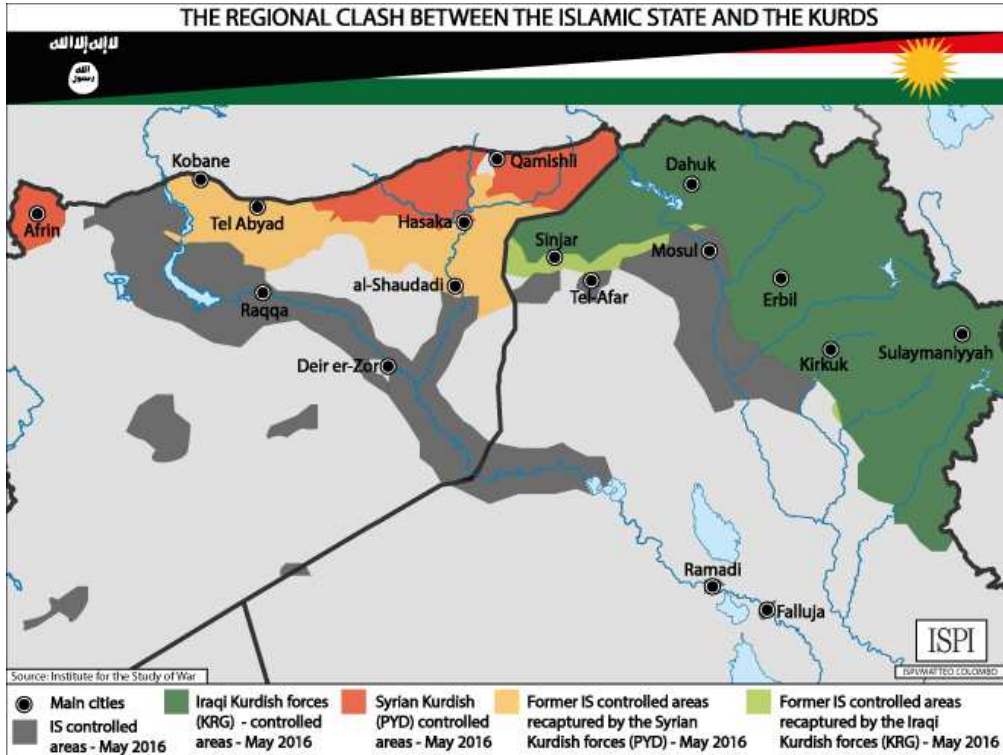
This chapter has presented an account of the IS-Kurdish conflict in Syria and Iraq. As Kurds in Syria expanded the territories under their control from July 2012 onwards, they have come under increasing attacks by the Islamist groups. The IS-Kurdish conflict in Syria has been ongoing since July 2013 but it has spread to a wider area and seen an increase in its intensity during 2014 and 2015. Fighting has taken place in the Al-Hasakah, Al-Raqqa and Aleppo governorates but much of it has focused on Kobani and Al-Hasakah. In fact, the Kurdish-IS conflict has been one of the main subplots of the Syrian civil war. As IS increased its operational capacity with the money and materiel from the Iraqi Army, it has intensified its attacks against the Kurds in Syria. The conflict has been active for much of the past two years with the Kurdish forces containing IS attacks from early 2015 onwards and they have subsequently pushed IS out of the territories it had captured from the Kurds. More recently in 2016, Kurdish forces around Aleppo came

⁴⁷ “Islamic State kills 24 Kurds in surprise attack in North Iraq”, *Reuters*, 11 January 2015, <http://uk.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-iraq-kurds-idUSKBN0KK0CX20150111>

under attack by various Islamist groups, particularly the JN and Ahrar al-Sham, which indicates that the Kurdish-Islamist conflict may yet accelerate in future.

The IS-Kurdish conflict has been ongoing in Iraq since August 2014 and it continues to pose a serious security risk for the Iraqi Kurdistan. The Kurdish forces were caught by surprise and lost territory against IS in August 2014 but subsequently they have consolidated their positions and made gradual progress against IS in the governorates of Nineveh and Kirkuk. The Iraqi Kurdistan has been supported by a number of states who have provided much needed military aid. In the past two years, IS has continued its attacks against the *peshmerga* forces but also carried out car bomb attacks in Erbil, increasing the risks to civilians. IS attacks in Sinjar resulted in a humanitarian crisis and widespread displacement of the Yazidi Kurdish community.

In both Iraq and Syria, we have witnessed a significant mobilisation and the Kurdish forces in both countries have become one of the central actors in the fight against ISIS. The Kurdish advance against IS in both Syria and Iraq has been welcomed by the international powers fighting against IS who have provided the Kurds with vital military support and air cover. The Kurds are likely to take a key role in forthcoming battles against IS in Mosul and Raqqa, which are considered the strongholds of IS in Iraq and Syria respectively. In addition to its attacks in Syria and Iraq, IS has also targeted the pro-Kurdish political and peace movement in Turkey, with bomb attacks causing the death of many activists and civilians in Diyarbakir, Suruç and in Ankara in 2015.



4. The Energy Factor: Oil and *State building* in Iraqi Kurdistan

Carlo Frappi

Iraq is one of the world's first areas where the exploitation of oil resources on an industrial scale was started. Still today, a century after the drilling of the first oil well, the country – fifth in the world for reserves and second among the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) for production – remains a key actor in the regional and global energy scenarios.

It was therefore quite natural that after dissolution of the Ottoman Empire, the history of Iraqi hydrocarbons often overlapped and even shaped the evolution of the country itself, as well as the relations between its different ethnic, religious and administrative components. Among these, a prominent place belongs to the Kurdish part of Iraq's population, which accounts for about one fifth of the total national population and is located in the north-eastern region of the country.

As a first consideration, it can be stated that the oil sector had a great influence on three connected aspects of contemporary Iraqi – and consequentially Kurdish – history. First of all, it contributed to the demarcation of the country's international and administrative borders. Indeed, the process leading to the birth of the Kingdom of Iraq (1921) was significantly shaped by Britain's desire to retain control over the oil and gas deposits in the southern and northern parts of the

country. This contributed to creation of a unitary petro-state in a nutshell consisting of the former Ottoman provinces (*vilayet*) of Basra, Baghdad and Mosul – respectively characterized by a Shi'ite Arab, a Sunni Arab and a Kurdish majority¹. At the same time this meant that the regional competition for oil was one of the contributing factors precluding Kurds from negotiations for statehood based on the right to the self-determination of peoples enshrined in Wilson's Fourteen Points – ostensibly because their homeland was largely divided between Iraq and the nascent (1923) Republic of Turkey. The will to exert control over the country's most significant energy deposits also contributed to demarcation of the administrative borders of the Kurdish autonomous region (Iraqi Kurdistan) itself. Granted for the first time in 1970 over the governorates of Erbil, Dahuk and Sulaymaniyya, the Iraqi Kurdistan was born severed from the province of Kirkuk – traditionally seen by Iraqi-Kurdish population as their symbol-city and would-be capital. In point of fact, the area's huge extractive potential prompted the Baathist regime to retain control over the province and to enforce a pervasive Arabization policy which lasted until the beginning of the 21th century². This wound never healed and still represents one of the most inextricable sources of tension between the federal authorities in Baghdad and the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) in Erbil – which since the 1991 Gulf War administers the Iraqi Kurdistan with a high degree of autonomy, at first *de facto* and later *de jure*.

¹ Mosul was officially granted to the Hashemite Kingdom in 1926, following a ruling of the League of Nations. On British regional policy see S. Eskander, "Southern Kurdistan under Britain's Mesopotamian Mandate: From Separation to Incorporation, 1920-23", *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 37, No. 2, 2001, pp. 153-180.

² For a striking contemporary reportage on the Arabization of the Kirkuk see M. Zanger, "Refugees in Their Own Country", *Middle East Report*, No. 222, 2002, pp. 40-43.

Secondly, the energy sector has had a decisive influence on the Iraqi *State-building* process, contributing to determining its economic, institutional and political posture. As a matter of fact, over the decades Iraq developed the typical features of a *rentier state*, i.e. of a state founding its economy on income rather than production, its budget deriving from hydrocarbon revenues rather than taxation. A state which, furthermore, uses the income as a key “consensus builder”, converting it into largely unproductive public spending³. Besides the economic fallout – i.e. the negative impact of the energy sector’s centrality over other national production sectors – the *rentier state* connotation has been no less significant in political and institutional terms. Oil revenues for decades gave the regime in Baghdad – in the various forms it took throughout the 20th century – a firm grip on the country, strengthening its ability to co-opt local elites and to militarily repress autonomist or secessionist movements, developed first of all among the Kurdish population. The role of oil revenues as a key tool for strengthening centralist power is nothing new. However it is all the more important in the case of Iraq because of the peculiar overlap between the ethno-sectarian divisions and the location of hydrocarbon reserves. Indeed the main oilfields are concentrated in the south and in the north of the country – i.e. in predominantly Arab Shiite and Kurdish areas respectively – deepening the need for control by the Sunni Arab minority, which retained power in Baghdad until the overthrow of the Baathist regime (2003).

Since the beginning of the 1980s Iraq has been characterized by a deep spiral of conflict, which keeps the country in chronic instability. Clearly, the country’s instability negatively affected exploitation of its extractive potential, which in fact still remains largely unexplored. The oil sector, however, was not

³ For a more detailed analysis of the *rentier state*’s features, see M. Nicolazzi, *Geopolitica degli idrocarburi non convenzionali*, in *Atlante Geopolitico Treccani*, Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana, Treccani, Roma, 2015, p. 77.

only a casualty of the cycle of violence, but in many respects the culprit behind the conflicts themselves. From this perspective, the key role played by the energy sector in the domestic and international conflicts that afflicted the country represents the third and last aspect explaining the interplay between Iraq's contemporary energy history and its wider political and institutional evolution.

As a matter of fact Iraq represents a privileged case study for analyzing old and new "oil wars", that is, traditional geopolitical wars fought between sovereign states and aimed at ensuring direct or indirect control of oil supplies; or contemporary asymmetric conflicts involving non-state actors, where oil revenues are used to finance violence as well as to foster a predatory political economy in the context of weak and sometimes ungovernable states⁴. While the 1990 Iraqi invasion of Kuwait is a typical example of the former, the current multifaceted war conducted by the Islamic State (IS) may well be seen as an example of the latter.

Furthermore, besides being a key *reason* for these conflicts, the energy sector has also proven frequently to be an essential *tool* for the war effort, i.e. helping to bear its cost or, rather, representing a privileged target for both military and diplomatic attacks. Although the interpretations of the 2003 war in Iraq vary greatly, the conflict may well fit into the first category, since the "oil narrative" – i.e. the idea that both the war and the reconstruction would pay for themselves thanks to the country's oil wealth – facilitated the U.S. decision to go to war⁵. On the other hand, a typical example of the second category of conflict is the Iran-Iraq war, during which the warring parties, aware of the importance of oil revenues for the opponent, hit each other's

⁴ On the "oil war" concept and on the differences between old and new ones, see M. Kaldor, T.L. Karle and Y. Said (edited by), *Oil Wars*, Pluto Press, London and Ann Arbor, 2007, pp. 1-4.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

production capabilities both physically and diplomatically. Last but not least, the same category also includes the asymmetric wars waged by the Kurds in Iraq throughout the 1960s and 1970s, with the oil infrastructures being a privileged target for Kurdish guerrilla attacks⁶.

Starting from the three nexuses highlighting the close relationship between the energy sector and Iraq's contemporary history, this essay intends to track the evolution of the KRG's energy strategy as well as to analyze the context in which the Iraqi Kurdistan's *State-building* process was launched and currently evolves. In this perspective, it will focus primarily on the phase following the overthrow of the Baathist regime. It was at this stage, indeed, that the *de facto* autonomy enjoyed by the KRG after the Gulf War and in the shadow of the no-fly zone implemented above the 36th parallel gained an institutional outcome. It was at this stage, therefore, that the decades-long Kurdish claim to autonomy and the right to self-determination was framed in the wider process of Iraq's political and institutional reconstruction, achieving domestic and international legitimacy. Highlighting the close relationship between development of the Iraqi Kurdistan's energy sector and *State-building* process, the article also intends to shed light on both the strengths and the vulnerabilities ingrained in a political-institutional path based upon energy revenues.

⁶ The first episode of Kurdish attack on Iraqi energy infrastructure was allegedly the August 1962 bombing of the pipeline running from Kirkuk to the Syrian port of Baniyas, demonstrating the capability to control the flow of oil from Iraq. See, L. Wenner, "Arab-Kurdish Rivalries in Iraq", *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 17, No. 1-2, 1963, p. 74.

Energy resources and Iraqi Kurdistan post-Baathist transition

The starting point of contemporary Iraqi-Kurdish energy history can be symbolically seen as June 2004, i.e. at the time of the formation in Baghdad of an interim government that formally recovered sovereignty from the Coalition Provisional Authority governing the country in the aftermath of the March 2003 invasion. This was indeed the first step in a national reconstruction process which, having transited through the January elections, would culminate with the approval of a new constitution in October 2005. The latter established a federal structure within which Kurdistan was granted the rank of “federated region” of Iraq – thus recognizing *de jure* an autonomy-gaining process *de facto* already underway since 1992⁷. Therefore, a *State-building* process took shape in the Iraqi Kurdistan, a process which the KRG authorities would find primarily on exploitation of the energy sector as the most natural stimulus for the economy and as a privileged tool to support the regional institutions-building effort.

The deep significance for the KRG of the relationship between the exploitation of extractive potential and the regional *State-building* process stems from the characteristics of the Kurdish path towards the full implementation and international recognition of its sovereignty. Reversing the prevailing approach to the issue of national sovereignty acquisition, the KRG has indeed given priority to its *de facto* implementation, rather than to *de jure* recognition. The creation of a stable and functioning institutional apparatus, supported by a sustainable economic development model, in this context becomes the

⁷ The Republic of Iraq, Ministry of Interior, *Iraqi Constitution*, Art.117, www.iraqnationality.gov.iq/attach/iraqi_constitution.pdf. It is worth noting that, legitimizing the *de facto* autonomy enjoyed by the region in the previous decade, the Constitution (art. 141) recognized the validity of laws passed by the KRG after 1992.

premise rather than the result of international recognition⁸. This, in turn, provided the coherent development of the energy sector with a strategic value which should not be underestimated. The tendency to place the *State-building* process before international recognition came mainly from the regional and international context in which the Iraqi Kurdistan took its first steps. Indeed, among the neighboring countries – and especially in Turkey – prevailed a traditional distrust of the Kurdish path toward independence, associated with the fear of a contagion effect on the Kurdish minorities living in their own lands. In addition, no less averse to the Kurdish independentist instance was the United States – the indivisibility of Iraq being a key pillar of successive administrations’ Middle East policy.

The Iraqi Kurdistan reached recognition of its institutional legitimacy with an energy potential as great as it was largely unexploited and unexplored. Indeed, over the decades that preceded the overthrow of the Baathist regime, Iraqi production had focused on the Kirkuk area and, above all, on southern Iraq’s maxi-fields – more profitable in economic terms and better connected to international markets through the Persian Gulf. Estimates on the size of hydrocarbon reserves available in the Iraqi-Kurdish region vary greatly. According to the figures released by the KRG, the area would possess 45 billion barrels of recoverable oil reserves. In a comparative perspective, this would mean that in the region’s subsoil lies a volume of oil reserves similar to those found in producing countries of the caliber of Libya or Nigeria. Moreover, according to government estimates, the Iraqi Kurdistan would also possess 5.6 trillion cubic meters of recoverable gas reserves, i.e. a volume slightly lower than the United Arab Emirates’ proven one, but higher than Algeria’s or Nigeria’s.

⁸ See R. Mansour, “Rethinking Recognition: the Case of Iraqi Kurdistan”, *Cambridge Journal of International and Comparative Law*, Vol. 3, No. 4, 2014, pp. 1182-1194.

The estimates do not include the rich oil fields of the Kirkuk area⁹, whose importance for national oil production was, as stated, the main reason for its separation from the Kurdish autonomous zone as well as for the resulting policy of Arabization. Confirming the Iraqi Kurdistan territorial demarcation already set in previous decades while at the same time addressing Kurdish territorial claims¹⁰, the constitution kept the area outside KRG control but laid down a road map for resolution of the resulting territorial dispute. Indeed, article 140 outlined a path that, by 2007, should have led to a referendum on the status of the province, as a result of a normalization phase – that is, the reversal of the Arabization of the area – and the holding of a census. However, while according to the KRG the normalization process can be considered achieved¹¹, neither

⁹ It is believed that the Kirkuk area holds up to 8.7 billion barrels of oil reserves, i.e. about one third of Iraq's total proven reserves.

¹⁰ The arguments about the KRG's right of sovereignty in the area of Kirkuk and is expressed in a report published in 2007. The document shows clearly the interplay between the economic dimension and the identity at the base of the territorial claims of the KRG which is well placed at the intersection of State building processes and Kurdish-Iraqi Nation building «Kirkuk is about more than petroleum» says the document «Like the other disputed regions, it represents deeply rooted Kurdish history and honor tied to lands that have been confiscated from families without compensation. It symbolizes decades of forced displacement of Kurds, the destruction of their homes, and the occupation of their lands by Arab settlers». Ministry of Extra Regional Affairs, *Report on the Administrative Changes in Kirkuk and the Disputed Regions*, Kurdish Regional Government, Erbil 2007, p. 9.

¹¹ According to the KRG, by 2009, 20,000 Arab families that arrived as a result of the Baathist regime policies had left the city, while 25,000 Kurdish families had returned. At the same time, 15,000 families had returned to Sinjar and 14,000 to Khanaqin, i.e. two other centers of primary importance in the disputed territories. N. Tomàs, A. Vilellas, *The Kurdistan Autonomous Region: risks and challenges for peace*, Escola de Cultura de Pau, Quaderns de Construcció de Pau, No. 8, 2009, p. 9.

the population census nor the referendum were held, keeping a deep wound open in relations between Erbil and Baghdad¹².

Over and above the accuracy of the cited government estimates concerning the availability of hydrocarbon reserves, what is relevant here is that the Iraqi Kurdistan's extractive potential is significant enough to be one of the strengths of the wider Iraqi energy sector – a circumstance on which international sector studies tend to converge¹³. However, the importance of the extractive potential has to be balanced with another major structural geopolitical factor of the Iraqi Kurdistan, consisting of the region's lack of an outlet to the sea and thus to international markets. The land-locked condition implies the need to involve third territories – whether federal or neighboring countries' – in order to translate the energy potential into economic benefit and, potentially, geopolitical strength. Such a necessity has significant repercussions from both a political and a strictly economic point of view. Indeed, from the first perspective it forces the Iraqi Kurdistan to seek solid transnational ententes while from the latter it contributes to elevating the total expenditure sector development requires.

Moreover, adding constrictions to energy development plans, physical geographical isolation was compounded by isolation in terms of infrastructure, which made the first even more disadvantageous. The Kurdish region's marginalization and peripherality to the Iraqi energy sector's center of gravity left the Iraqi Kurdistan outside the development of the national energy transport network, with no infrastructure suitable for direct export/marketing of hydrocarbons. Therefore, in 2004, the only energy transport infrastructure in northern Iraq was the

¹² A more detailed analysis of the Kirkuk issue, which goes beyond the purposes of this essay, is provided in H.D. Astarjian, *The Struggle for Kirkuk: The Rise of Hussein, Oil, and the Death of Tolerance in Iraq*, Westport, Praeger, 2007.

¹³ See for example, BMI Research, *Iraq Oil & Gas Report*, Q1 2016, Business Monitor International, London, 2015.

oil pipeline between Kirkuk and the Turkish port of Ceyhan on the Mediterranean coast, built in 1970 and operated by the State Organization for Marketing of Oil (SOMO).

Thus, KRG's energy strategy faced double-edged starting conditions. Strengthened by the attractiveness of the Iraqi Kurdistan's oilfields to international investors on the one hand, it was simultaneously affected by the not so favorable "on the ground" conditions – shaped by the higher profitability of southern Iraqi fields, larger and better connected to International Oil Companies (IOCs) as well as by the profound instability of the country following the removal of Saddam Hussein. Moreover, the uncertain national regulatory framework, resulting from the inability of Erbil and Baghdad to agree on the terms of law regulating the energy sector, added a significant obstacle to the development of Iraqi-Kurdish extractive potential. Therefore, ensuring the security of the Iraqi Kurdistan and setting up a favorable climate for international investment became a double and connected imperative for the KRG authorities.

Building on the compromise reached after 2003 by the Iraqi Kurdistan's two main political parties – i.e. the KDP and the PUK¹⁴ – the region's securitization was effectively guaranteed due to tight domestic security controls, the efficiency of *peshmerga* troops as well as the active collaboration of the civilian population. As a matter of fact, Iraqi Kurdistan emerged as an island of security in the sea of instability that was post-2003 Iraq. In parallel, the need to attract investments and foreign technology resulted in the rationalization and reorganization of the energy sector, starting with the

¹⁴ The Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), expressions of traditionally rival clans, reached the peak of their confrontation between 1994 and 1997, with a full-scale civil war. For an analysis of the genesis of the clash, M. Gunter, "The KDP-PUK Conflict in Northern Iraq", *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 50, No. 2, 1996, pp. 224-241.

establishment of a Ministry of Natural Resources (MNR, 2006) and approval of the Kurdistan Oil and Gas Law (2007) .

The MNR, in particular, would become the core of the KRG's energy policy, according to a logic of centralizing both decision-making and management of the regional energy sector. In fact, while on the one hand the input and oversight functions exercised by the regional legislative and judiciary powers remained limited, on the other hand the creation of energy companies – despite being envisaged by the Kurdistan Oil and Gas Law¹⁵ – has remained until now a dead letter. Moreover, the centralization of energy policy in the MNR went hand in hand with its personalization, fostered by ministry assignment to Ashti Hawrami, who has held the post since May 2006. Building on the experience he accumulated in the field as an engineer, consultant and managing director in several national and international energy companies, Hawrami greatly contributed to the personalization of the Iraqi-Kurdish energy policy and, at the same time, presided over the implementation of a *one-shot business* model centered on the key role played by the MNR, facilitating negotiations with IOCs.

Hawrami was in particular responsible for choosing the type of contract to be offered to international investors – the Production-Sharing Contract (PSC). Negotiated directly with the IOCs and avoiding the more common tenders, the PSCs have been one of the major strengths for the development of the Kurdish hydrocarbons sector. Without going into details of contractual typology, what is important here is that the choice

¹⁵ In order to guarantee efficient management of the regional oil sector, Articles 10-13 of the 2007 Kurdistan Oil and Gas Law foresaw establishment of the Kurdistan Exploration and Production Company (KEPCO), the Kurdistan National Oil Company (KNOC), the Kurdistan Oil Marketing Organization (KOMO) and the Kurdistan Organization for Downstream Operations (KODO). Of these, only the KOMO was created between the end of 2013 and the beginning of 2014 to meet the need for direct export of oil.

of the PSC was consistent with the KRG's desire to provide IOCs with better conditions than those envisaged by other types of contract. The principle characteristic of the PSC is in fact the assurance to IOCs of potentially large profit margins, associated with the sharing of profits with government authorities. Moreover, beyond the benefits guaranteed by PSCs in absolute terms, this type of contract was far more profitable than the one simultaneously offered by the federal authorities for the southern Iraqi fields – i.e. the *Long-Term Service Contract*, based upon payment to IOCs of a fixed fee for their activities¹⁶.

The evolution of the Iraqi Kurdistan's energy sector may be divided into three phases: initial opening (2004-06), regulation and expansion (2007-10) and consolidation (since 2011). The regulation of the energy sector and the simultaneous subdivision of the Iraqi Kurdistan into exploration blocks marked the beginning of the second phase of the contemporary history of Kurdish hydrocarbons, characterized by the attraction of IOCs greater in both number and size¹⁷. Throughout the first phase of sector development the KRG had signed PSCs with four companies – the Turkish Genel Enerji, the Swiss Addax, Norway's DNA and the Canadian Western Zagros – for the exploration and exploitation of seven blocks¹⁸. Instead, between 2007 and 2008 the Kurdish MNR negotiated the conclusion of 20 new PSCs, which marked the entrance into the regional energy sector of medium-sized companies such as Hungary's MOL, Austria's OMV and the South Korean KNOC.

¹⁶ For the technical details of the type of contracts signed by the KRG, see R. Mills, *Under the Mountains: Kurdish oil and Regional Politics*, Oxford Institute for Energy Studies, OIES Paper No. 63, 2016, pp. 19-20.

¹⁷ For a list of the PSC signed with international energy companies by KRG after 2004 see the documents made available by the MNR official website, <http://mnr.krg.org>.

¹⁸ Among the blocks negotiated between 2004 and 2006, standing out were Taq Taq and Tawke, today jointly responsible for 40 per cent of the Iraqi Kurdistan oil production.

The effectiveness of the KRG investment attraction policy derived primarily from its ability to guarantee IOCs favorable conditions in both security and contractual terms. The quick success of Kurdish energy strategy led to the inauguration of the third and current phase of sector opening, shaped by the attempt to consolidate and monetize the results achieved. Revolving first of all around the attraction of medium to large energy companies, the third phase symbolically began with the signing of a PSC on six exploration blocks with ExxonMobil in November 2011¹⁹. The agreement with the U.S. company was followed, in 2012, by the conclusion of similar exploration and exploitation contracts with international companies of the caliber of Gazprom, Total and Chevron – thus increasing the total number of signed PSCs to 60.

The steady growth of exploration and exploitation activities in the Kurdish region was reflected in the steady increase in annual oil production. Since the start of regional production in 2009, output grew at a fast pace (Table 1) and the oil sector revenues came to account for 75 per cent of the GDP and 95 per cent of total revenue of the KRG²⁰.

¹⁹ It is hard to underestimate the political significance of ExxonMobil's entrance into Iraq's energy sector. Though it seems that the company acted independently and without giving any notice to the U.S. government, in local players' view the PSC signaled a change in Obama administration attitudes. The latter, in fact, traditionally opposed any unilateral Kurdish action liable to break Iraq's fragile political and institutional equilibrium, especially on the eve of the troop withdrawal from the country. Apparently, a similar interpretation was also given by Turkish governmental and business circles.

²⁰ B. Wahab, *Iraq and KRG Energy Policies: Actors, Challenges and Opportunities*, Institute of Regional and International Studies, The American University of Iraq, Sulaimani, 2014, p. 24.

TABLE 1 - OIL PRODUCTION TREND IN THE IRAQI KURDISTAN
(2009-2015)*

2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
15,689	27,484	68,231	76,706	78,463	114,090	210,709

*Amounts in thousands barrels of oil

Source: Kurdish Regional Government, Ministry of Natural Resources

The steady increase in oil output is all the more significant by reason of the difficulties in accessing the national export network, as a result of the profound disputes between the KRG and the federal government. A crucially important element in assessing the conflict potential associated with the oil sector, the political-institutional clash represented – and still represents – a major constraint to regional production and to the monetization of Kurdish energy policy.

The conflict potential associated with the oil sector

Since 2004, the Iraqi Kurdistan's *State-building* process overlapped and interwove with the parallel process of national economic and institutional reconstruction carried out by the Baghdad federal authorities. As a natural consequence of elevated national extraction potential, a common feature of the two parallel dynamics was precisely the will to base public policies on the energy sector. Far from encouraging a cooperative management of the energy sector, this instead resulted in repeated moments of friction between federal and regional authorities, to the point of becoming the cornerstone of the contemporary phase of the older Arab-Kurd confrontation in

Iraq²¹. In addition, the Iraqi Kurdistan's landlocked condition and the consequent need for the KRG to pursue transit and marketing agreements with external actors in order to bypass the transit bottlenecks, resulted in the regionalization of the energy dispute between Erbil and Baghdad.

Besides the cited frictions over the status of the Kirkuk area, the oil dispute between the Kurdish regional authorities and the federal Iraqi revolved first and foremost around the need to implement the principles enshrined in the constitution for the management of the national energy sector, and were by and large fed by their ambiguity²². In fact the constitutional articles – 110 and 114²³ – delineating the division of powers between federal and regional governments do not mention the energy sector, while Art. 111 merely sets out the principle of collective ownership of resources, stating that oil and natural gas “are owned by all the people of Iraq in all the regions and governorates”.

The constitutional article dealing with the issue of resource management – and around which revolve the legal, institutional and political battles between Erbil and Baghdad – is the 112th. The second paragraph of this article entrusts the formulation of national energy policies jointly to federal, regional and provincial governments. However, such formulation has been hampered by the letter of the first paragraph of the same article, laying down two guiding principles for sector organization.

²¹ For a brief reconstruction of the genesis of Arab-Kurd opposition in Iraq, see L.M. Wenner, “Arab-Kurdish Rivalries in Iraq”, *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 17, No. 1-2, 1963, pp. 68-82.

²² Far from being casual, the ambiguity of the constitution reflected the Kurds' increasing negotiation power with both Bagdad and American mediators. On this point we refer to reconstruction of the process of drafting the constitution's text published by two members of the United States delegation. See, A. Deeks, M. Burton, “Iraq's Constitution: A Drafting History”, *Cornell International Law Journal*, Vol. 40, No. 1, 2007, pp. 1-87.

²³ *Ibid.*

Firstly, it entrusts the federal government, in conjunction with the regional and provincial, with the responsibility of managing the hydrocarbons extracted from “current deposits”. Secondly, it is the responsibility of the federal government to redistribute “its revenues in a fair manner in proportion to the population distribution in all parts of the country”. While the last principle was rather easily implemented with the allocation to the KRG of a 17 per cent share of national oil revenues²⁴, the interpretation of the first principle has instead generated conflicting interpretations, in Erbil and Baghdad, about the significance of the expression “current deposits”. According to Baghdad such a formulation should be interpreted broadly, including virtually all national deposits, with the result of centralizing national energy policy and providing the federal government with a measure of control, or at least of oversight, of Kurdish energy policy. Conversely, according to the KRG, “current deposits” should refer – and thus be subject to joint management – exclusively to oilfields already producing on the date of 15 August 2005, i.e. at the time of the conclusion of the work of the Constitutional Committee responsible for drafting the Iraqi constitution²⁵. By contrast, the “future fields”²⁶ would

²⁴ If calculation of the portion allotted to the KRG on the basis of regional population did not pose particular negotiation problems, deeper divergences between Erbil and Baghdad arose from the Kurds’ request for exemption from calculation of the funds needed to maintain the *peshmerga*, militias responsible for security in the Iraqi Kurdistan. At the same time the KRG traditionally asks that from the 17 per cent also be excluded the payments to the made to the energy companies for their respective exploitation work.

²⁵ The interpretation given by the KRG to the expression “current fields” has been officially sanctioned by Article 1, sub 16 of the 2007 law regulating the energy sector, in the section devoted to definitions. “Kurdistan Region – Iraq, The Presidency, Global Investment & Business Center, Oil & Gas Law of the Kurdistan Region – Iraq”, Law No. 22 – 2007, web edition, http://cabinet.gov.krd/uploads/documents/Kurdistan%20Oil%20and%20Gas%20Law%20English_2007_09_06_h14m0s42.pdf

be subject to the rescue clause contained in art.115 of the constitution, which reserves to the regions all powers not specifically granted to the federal government. The KRG's interpretation actually subtracts from federal responsibility the totality of Iraqi-Kurdish fields while simultaneously claiming the full legitimacy of the PSC signed in the first phase of regional energy sector development²⁷.

The inability to reach a compromise between the regionalist approach of Erbil and the federalist of Baghdad resulted, above all, in the continued failure to adopt a national law for energy sector regulation. Three draft laws prepared by the federal authorities were in fact rejected between 2007 and 2011 despite the incentive to compromise represented by conclusion of the first tenders (2009) for allocation of the giant southern Iraq fields – making the 17 per cent of national revenues more profitable for the KRG. This resulted, on the one hand, in making Kurdish energy policy autonomous – through approval of its hydrocarbons law (2007) and the signing of new PSCs – and, on the other hand, in the strong reaction of the federal authorities. Baghdad in fact declared the unconstitutionality of the Kurdish legislation and, in the absence of federal ratification, the illegitimacy of the PSCs signed between Erbil and the IOCs. Moreover the latter were sanctioned with exclusion from bidding for licenses to exploit Iraqi oil fields.

²⁶ That is, those fields “not in commercial production prior to 15 August 2005, and any other Petroleum Field that may have been, or may be, discovered as a result of subsequent exploration”. *Ibid.* Art.1, sub 17.

²⁷ The interpretive approach advanced by the KRG is mostly based on the advisory opinion offered in January 2008 by an independent international jurist from Cambridge University and published in: J. Crawford, *The Authority of the Kurdistan Regional Government over Oil and Gas Under the Constitution of Iraq*, Ministry of Natural Resources, Kurdistan Regional Government, online edition, http://mnr.krg.org/images/pdfs/James_R_Crawford_Kurdistan_Oil_Legal_Opinion_English_2008.pdf

The dispute between the KRG and the federal government, despite the alternation of friction and moments of rapprochement between the parties, for quite a long time did not prevent the bulk of Kurdish oil exports from flowing through federal channels – i.e. through the Kirkuk-Ceyhan oil pipeline – and from being managed by the SOMO. Moreover, the dispute did not prevent the federal authorities from allocating to the KRG, although discontinuously and apparently not entirely, the agreed share of oil revenues, which has been a crucial source of income for the Iraqi-Kurdish regional budget²⁸.

The main problem, rather, arose from Baghdad's unwillingness to bear the burden of the payments due to IOCs operating in the Iraqi Kurdistan for their exploration and production work, thus leaving the burden to Erbil. This resulted in considerable delays in payments and in the accumulation of substantial debt by the KRG *vis-à-vis* the IOCs, the smallest of which were actually greatly affected. The payment issue was also compounded by the accusation traditionally leveled at the KRG of directly exporting – by truck – increasing amounts of oil and oil products to Turkey and Iran, bypassing government channels and subtracting funds from the national budget. The political-institutional clash between the KRG and Iraqi Federal Government (IFG) fueled itself, triggering a vicious circle whereby the more muscular Baghdad's policy toward Erbil became, the more the latter was pushed towards the planning and implementation of independent policies. Thus, besides gradually widening the negotiating gap between the parties, this encouraged the KRG to seek independent export channels, with a view to supporting the growth in production and monetizing on it. In turn, the predisposition of an independent foreign commercialization policy presided over the

²⁸ R. Mills, *op. cit.*, p. 27.

regionalization of the KRG-IFG struggle which, until then, had had a predominantly internal dimension.

Arranged in 2012, in parallel with the first signs of rupture of the fragile balance in relations between Erbil and Baghdad, the Kurdish strategy of bypassing the Iraqi export infrastructure network benefited from the increasing openings of the Turkish government to cooperation with the KRG²⁹.

Accordingly, in the summer of 2012 – following the Turkish Minister of Energy’s announcement of Ankara’s intention to launch an energy partnership with Erbil – the laying of a pipeline connection began between the Taq Taq oil fields, in the heart of the Iraqi Kurdistan, and the northern border with Turkey. Here, near Fish Kabur, the pipeline would tap into the already existent Kirkuk-Ceyhan conduit, permitting the direct export of Kurdish oil to the Mediterranean. Completed by the end of 2013, the Kurdish-Turkish pipeline enabled oil to flow directly to Turkey as of December 2013, and more intensely over the course of 2014 (see Table 2).

²⁹ For the motivations, the evolution and the consequences of Turkish energy strategy regarding the KRG, see M.J. Bryza, “Turkey’s dramatic shift towards Iraqi Kurdistan: politics before peace pipelines”, *Turkish Policy Quarterly*, Vol. 11, No. 2, 2012, pp. 53-61; B. Park, *Turkey-Kurdish Regional Government relations after the U.S. withdrawal from Iraq: putting the Kurds on the map?*, Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College Press, Carlisle, 2014.

TABLE 2 - IRAQI KURDISTAN'S OIL EXPORTS BY EXPORT CHANNEL
(2009-2015) *

	Kirkuk-Ceyhan	By truck	Taq Taq - Ceyhan	Total
2009	6,870	---	---	6,870
2010	2,177	---	---	2,177
2011	37,242	---	---	37,242
2012	24,507	749	---	25,256
2013	9	11,283	491	11,783
2014	---	12,623	36,856	49,479
2015	---	4,539	138,661 ³⁰	143,200

*values in thousands barrels of oil

Source: Kurdish Regional Government, Ministry of Natural Resources

Besides resulting in the further cooling of the already difficult relations between Ankara and Baghdad, the start of exports to Turkey had significant consequences for both the Kurdish and the wider Iraqi energy sector. First, it caused the final rupture of the fragile balance in the relations between the KRG and IFG, prompting the latter to freeze budget transfers to the region. Moreover, the Taq Taq-Fish Kabur pipeline connection ended the KRG's infrastructural insulation, significantly expanding Erbil's freedom of action not only in the energy sector but also

³⁰ The figure refers only to oil exports from the Iraqi Kurdistan producing fields. Therefore, the oil exports originating from the Kirkuk oil fields operated by the National Oil Company should be added to the figure. In 2015 the Kirkuk oil exported by the KRG amounted to 40,961,626 barrels, thus bringing the annual total of exports via pipeline to 179,622,722.

in political maneuver terms. Indeed it is hard to underestimate the scope of the political entente with Ankara. In fact, apart from being a necessary corollary to policies aimed at increasing oil production, the cooperation with Turkey represents a key political tool to tie the KRG's security and autonomy to the interests of importer and investor countries – in accordance with a trend common to other medium-sized producers in the Eurasian region. Moreover, both the search for oil-sale agreements and the aggressive diplomatic-commercial campaign aimed at attracting foreign investors are useful tools to achieve an indirect form of political recognition and legitimacy at regional and international levels³¹. Therefore, in the KRG's promotion of functional interdependence with its state and non-state interlocutors lies an additional crucial component of the close linkage between energy policy and regional *State-building*.

The Syrian crisis and the “perfect storm” over Iraqi Kurdistan

The regional events occurring over the past two years significantly changed the framework within which the KRG's energy strategy took shape and developed. Accordingly, the Iraqi Kurdistan benefited from new and unexpected opportunities for international legitimacy and empowerment, in the face of renewed threats to domestic security and stability. The factor that contributed the most to such changes was the spill-over effect in the Iraqi theater of the ongoing conflict in neighboring Syria. The advance of the Islamic State in Iraq and the resulting destabilization of the northwestern area of the country, added to the steady decline in oil prices, led to what Hawrami recently labeled as the “perfect storm” in the Kurdish-

³¹ M. Ahmed, *Iraqi Kurds and Nation-Building*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2012, p. 48.

Iraqi economy³². A storm which seems capable of endangering the results achieved in a decade of growth.

In spring-summer of 2014 the advance of IS into Iraqi territory did not have a negative impact on the Iraqi Kurdistan energy sector. Quite the contrary, from a purely energy sector perspective as well as in territorial control terms, it provided the KRG with significant opportunities. First of all, the conflict did not involve Kurdish production facilities, whose extractive activities were not interrupted except for a short period between August and September – coinciding with the Kurdish counteroffensive that, with U.S. support, halted the IS advance in the nation’s territory³³. Marking a 45 per cent year-on-year increase (see Table 2) in production, the 2014 output figures offer the clearest confirmation of this trend. At the same time, the IS military threat, coupled with the inconsistency of the federal army’s response capability created the conditions for a significant extension of the territories under Kurdish control. In July the *peshmerga* forces took control of Kirkuk and the surrounding area – including its oil fields – exposed to IS threat following the withdrawal of government forces. Fully legitimated inside and outside Iraq by the need to resist IS penetration into the country, the takeover of Kirkuk and the consequent acceleration of the area’s political-economic integration into the Iraqi Kurdistan³⁴ represented a definite

³² “Erbil plans to establish national oil company”, *Middle East Economic Digest*, Vol. 59, No. 24/25, 17 June 2015.

³³ M. McQuaile, “IOCs head back to Kurdistan, cautions on oil output targets”, *Platts*, 8 September 2014.

³⁴ Significantly, already on the eve of taking control of the Kirkuk area, the highest KRG officers raised the issue of IFG recognition of its integration into the Iraqi Kurdistan. See “Baghdad must accept Kirkuk is now part of Kurdistan – KRG official”, *Asharq Al-Awsat*, 30 June 2014, <http://english.aawsat.com/2014/06/article55333791/baghdad-must-accept-kirkuk-is-now-part-of-kurdistan-krge-official>

watershed in the decade-long political-institutional struggle between Arabs and Kurds for administration of the territory.

Moreover IS' threat to Iraq's main source of national wealth also had a mitigating effect on the KRG-IFG struggle, helping the parties to reach a compromise with a view to safeguarding investments and oil flows – the latter being crucial in order to provide the income needed to tackle the multifaceted IS challenge. As a result, in December 2014 the parties reached an agreement for the resumption of federal budget transfers to the KRG, in exchange for the latter's consent to commercialize through SOMO 550,000 barrels of oil per day (mb/d), from the Iraqi Kurdistan fields (250 mb/d) and from the Kirkuk fields operated by the Iraqi National Oil Company (300 mb/d)³⁵. However, never fully implemented by both parties³⁶, the agreement lasted only until June 2015. In fact during the summer of 2015, in order to deal with the pressing financial needs of the Iraqi Kurdistan, the Kurdish authorities reverted to independent oil export, gradually decreasing the volume of oil delivered to SOMO at the Ceyhan terminal – until complete interruption in September.

³⁵ M. Abbas, "Oil deal a sign of hope between Baghdad", *Al-Monitor*, 5 December 2014, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/12/iraqi-kurdistan-oil-agreement-relations.html>

³⁶ According to KRG data, against a monthly installment of \$1 million expected from the federal treasury, between January and May 2015 only an average installment of about 370 million was granted to the Iraqi Kurdistan. According to the IFG, this was due to lower oil income prompted by the drop in oil prices and, at the same time, by the KRG's failure to comply with the terms of the December agreement. In fact oil exports from the Iraqi Kurdistan did not, over the same time-frame, reach the volume agreed with Baghdad – however, the KRG claimed the need to progressively raise the level of extraction and, therefore, to assess compliance with the agreed volumes on an annual basis, instead of a monthly one.

Despite the major economic benefits achieved by the KRG with circumvention of the federal export channels³⁷, the combined effect of the war on the Islamic State and the oil price decline generated a deep financial crisis in the Iraqi Kurdistan, with serious repercussions not only on the energy sector but also on the social and political levels. As a matter of fact, such repercussions clearly demonstrated the typical *rentier state* path taken by the Iraqi Kurdistan, as its social and political stability turns out to be, at least in part, dependent on oil price levels. Indeed, the increase in oil revenues in the second half of 2015 – confirmed in the first quarter of 2016 – was not enough to offset the heavy debt contracted by the KRG in 2014. Lacking remittances from the federal budget and against an oil export level politically significant but quantitatively limited and progressively less profitable, Erbil had to resort, on the one hand, to loans from both private and public donors – i.e. Turkey – and to the request for advance payments for the sale of oil, on the other. This resulted, in April 2015, in a debt estimated at 13.5 billion dollars plus about 1.6 billion in non-payments to energy companies operating in the Iraqi Kurdistan³⁸.

The economic impact of IS' military threat to Iraq went far beyond the mere increase in defense spending. The country's destabilization, while undermining the main sources of the Iraqi Kurdistan's non-oil revenues³⁹, exacerbated a humanitarian

³⁷ According to figures released by the MNR, in the second half of 2015 direct oil export revenues amounted to \$3.9 billion, compared with \$1.9 billion granted to the KRG by the IFG in the first semester of the year. Kurdish Regional Government, Ministry of Natural Resources, *Oil Production, and Consumption Report*, 2015, p. 7.

³⁸ R. Mills, op. cit., pp. 27-28.

³⁹ As examined in detail by a recent World Bank study, the IS military advance has mainly affected the influx of investments in the non-oil regional sectors – which fell by about two-thirds in 2014 – as well as the Iraqi Kurdistan's transit role in Iraqi international trade. World Bank, *The Kurdistan region of Iraq: assessing*

crisis with serious economic and social repercussions. Indeed, the internally displaced persons (IDPs) fleeing from the territories conquered by the Islamic State were added to the refugees already arriving in Iraqi-Kurdish territory from battle zones since 2012. According to a World Bank study, at the beginning of 2015 there was a total of one and a half million IDPs in the Iraqi Kurdistan, increasing the total population of the region by about one-third⁴⁰. The resulting demographic pressure caused, first of all, a sharp increase in government spending, which was incurred primarily by the MNR – once more demonstrating the key role played by the Ministry in the functioning of the state⁴¹. On the other hand, the demographic boom resulted in a significant deterioration of living standards as well as in a pronounced increase in poverty⁴². Adding fuel to the socio-economic fire, the KRG found it increasingly hard to meet its large public spending, accumulating delays and arrears in salary and public wage payments.

The socio-economic crisis turned into a political one, also triggered by the failed attempt by the Iraqi Kurdistan President – and KDP leader – Masoud Barzani to re-extend by two years a mandate already extended by two years in August 2013. The parliamentary confrontation between KDP and the PUK-Gorran block resulted in an institutional *impasse* as well as in a growing political polarization, passing quickly from the

the economic and social impact of the Syrian conflict and ISIS, Washington, World Bank, 2015.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

⁴² For a detailed analysis of the social cost of the 2014-15 crisis for the Iraqi Kurdistan, see N. Krishnan, S. Olivieri, *Losing the Gains of the Past. The Welfare and Distributional Impacts of the Twin Crises in Iraq 2014*, The World Bank, Policy Research Working Paper No. 7567, 2016.

parliament building into the streets⁴³. Therefore, the crisis gripping the Iraqi Kurdistan seemed to create the grounds for revival of the traditional intra-Kurdish rift which – defined essentially on a clan basis – several times in the past had already been responsible for preventing the Kurds from taking a coherent national path. Moreover, in a complex, internally and externally vicious circle, the divisions within the Iraqi Kurdistan correspond to Kurdish movement alignments in neighboring countries – namely Turkey, Syria and Iran – giving the intra-Kurdish rift a regional dimension.

As a matter of fact, the potential for regionalization of the latent intra-Kurdish conflict in the Iraqi Kurdistan – i.e. the possibility for it to be nourished and fomented by the multifaceted conflicts involving the Kurdish population beyond its borders – is very high. Besides the political consequences of the regional intra-Kurdish struggle, it is worth noting that it may very well assume an “energy war” connotation, as the pipelines turn into privileged targets for the asymmetrical military confrontation.

In particular, targeting energy transport infrastructures has been a traditional tool exploited by the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) in its long-standing struggle with the Turkish military. In the current situation, shaped by revival of the dormant Kurdish-Turkish civil war as well as by KDP-PKK quarrels, targeting the pipeline between Fish Kabur and Ceyhan serves the double aim of jointly hitting the interests of two PKK adversaries. Therefore, the July 2015 PKK attack on this pipeline – resulting in a three-week interruption to the oil flow

⁴³ The Gorran movement, in particular, was blamed by the KDP of fomenting and exploiting the harsh anti-government protests occurring in the region in October 2015 – which caused more than 20 deaths.

and in an economic loss quantified by MNR as 250 million dollars⁴⁴ – may well be seen in this perspective.

Conclusion: the energy industry and the trajectory of the Kurdish *State-building* process

The KRG's energy strategy is a central – and somehow connotative – component of institutional Iraqi-Kurdistan development, not only with regard to the Iraqi Kurdistan's economic outlook but also in relation to both its domestic and foreign policy. The development of the Iraqi-Kurdish energy sector has important implications and political fallouts over three concentric circles, respectively delimited by the Iraqi Kurdistan, by the Republic of Iraq and by the wider area of the Near and Middle East. Rising in Erbil's view to an indispensable vehicle for institutional empowerment and geopolitical relevance, for Iraq it seems conversely to represent the most threatening disintegrating force. Finally, in the Near and Middle East area the Iraqi Kurdistan's energy development contributes to strengthening political ententes as well as to stirring up dangerous hotbeds of friction and conflict, at both interstate or intrastate levels.

The KRG, ensuring international energy companies a favorable investment climate and relatively stable security conditions, after the 2004 starting point succeeded in a decade or so to establish itself as a significant middle-sized player in the competitive Near and Middle Eastern energy landscape. However, the regional upheavals begun in 2014 partially modified the analysis parameters that impinge upon the development of KRG energy strategy as well as its close link with the Iraqi Kurdistan *State-building* process. Indeed, Syria's

⁴⁴ “UPDATE1 – Iraqi Kurdistan says oil pipeline sabotage cost it \$501mln”, *Reuters*, 18 August 2015, <http://www.reuters.com/article/iraq-kurds-oil-idU5L5N10T3SF20150818>

progressive sliding into a state of permanent conflict and the expansion of military operations to Iraq have had a significant impact on the Iraqi Kurdistan.

On the one hand, regional upheavals ended up by accelerating regional autonomy processes, as they helped Erbil to foster its international legitimation as well as to extend its control to the Kirkuk area – thus allowing the KRG to negotiate the area’s final status from a renewed position of strength. At the same time, however, regional events exposed the structural weaknesses of the Iraqi-Kurdish economy- and institution-building, first of all by adversely affecting its main pillar – i.e. the energy sector itself. Although oil production continued in a decade-long upward trend, on the other hand the current political and economic situation casts a heavy shadow on the sector’s growth outlook as well as, from a wider perspective, on the sustainability of Kurdish development. While the Kurdish militia proved able to ensure the Iraqi Kurdistan’s safety, the threat IS poses to the wider Middle East region, combined with the KRG’s difficulty in securing payments to IOCs and the latter’s lower propensity to invest due to the fall in oil prices, concur in creating a scenario in which the coherent development of oil fields seems to be at risk. Moreover, the current political and economic situation puts development plans for the gas industry all the more at risk, despite no lack of potential markets, both inside and outside Iraq – first and foremost in Turkey⁴⁵. Indeed, the more stringent financial and security conditions needed for construction of a gas export network make export-oriented gas sector development highly

⁴⁵ Moreover, the two governments agreed in November 2013 to begin flows of Kurdish gas to Turkey for an initial volume of 10 million cubic meters (about a fifth of Turkey’s annual consumption) by 2017. H. Panuk, O. Coskun, “Exclusive: Turkey, Iraqi Kurdistan clinch major energy pipeline deals”, *Reuters*, November 2013, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-turkey-iraq-kurdistan-idUSBRE9A50HR20131106>

unlikely, at least in the short term – also hindering a substantial increase in the Kurdish-Iraqi production itself.

It is hard to underestimate the structural weakness associated with a development path over-dependent on the oil industry, as shown by the double crisis triggered by the 2014 events. All the more so since the dominant role of oil revenues for the state budget and the high level of unproductive public expenditures represent just one aspect, though important, of this structural weakness. In fact, the Iraqi Kurdistan's increasing tendency to assume the features typical of the *rentier state* – thus replicating the mistakes already made by the Baathist regime and several other oil-producing countries, including Iraq – is also evident in the growing self-referentiality of government authorities, manifest in the energy sector as well as outside of it. From the former perspective, the centralization and personalization of energy policy resulted in the almost exclusively KDP-block management of the oil & gas sector, both within and outside the Iraqi Kurdistan – a KDP block which is *de facto* free from both vertical and horizontal constraints, that is *vis-à-vis* both the Iraqi Kurdistan's institutional powers and federal authorities. More broadly, the self-referentiality of the Iraqi Kurdistan executive power – as well as of the KDP block supporting it – resulted in a scarcely inclusive, if not authoritative, governance. Recent political protests targeting government energy policies demonstrated the possibility for those two levels to overlap and merge, generating a social, political and institutional short-circuit. Therefore, for the KRG, dousing the conflict in dangerous intra-Kurdish hotbeds also entails ensuring greater transparency and inclusiveness in the formulation and implementation of regional energy strategy.

Finally, the traits of *rentier state* gradually assumed by the Iraqi Kurdistan are all the more dangerous when associated with the land-locked nature of the region. While geographic isolation by definition establishes dependence on the transit state(s), the

political vulnerability associated with this may only grow in proportion to the importance of energy revenues to the state budget and, in a wider perspective, to stability of the state. As far as the Iraqi Kurdistan is concerned, such a vulnerability is all the more significant because of its delicate geo-political position, with the region squeezed between its economic-institutional dispute with Baghdad and its almost obligatory relationship with Turkey – the latter a relationship that can hardly be considered straightforward and risk-free in political and security terms.

In conclusion, whatever path lies ahead for the Kurdish energy sector, the sustainability of Iraqi Kurdistan development seems to be necessarily linked to a twofold diversification: diversification of the productive structure of the regional economy, essential to avoiding the social, political and economic risks related to over-dependency on oil revenues, on the one hand, and diversification of energy export channels, unavoidable in order to limit the degree of political vulnerability to transit countries.

NATURAL RESOURCES AND ENERGETIC INFRASTRUCTURES IN IRAQI KURDISTAN (MAY 2016)



5. Kurdistan: The Eternal Dilemma of the West

Robert Lowe

The Kurds pose a conundrum for Western policymaking. It is difficult for governments to engage with non-state actors, especially those who at times function as a state or who aspire to greater autonomy. Western states have been sensitive in dealing with the state governments in Iran, Iraq, Syria and Turkey and Kurdish considerations have normally been secondary to those relationships and to broader geopolitical interests. Despite the legitimacy of the Kurdish struggle for equal rights across the Middle East this has been insufficient reason for Western policymakers to support them as a given. However, since the 1990s, there has been increased Western interest in Kurdish cultural, social and, at times political rights.

After decades of inactivity, Western interests have converged closer to Kurdish interests than ever before. Most recently, the threat of Islamic State has strengthened Western-Kurdish relations. But the stability of the existing state system and regional security is paramount for Western powers, especially given the massive scale of the violence in Syria and Iraq and its spill-over impact of the refugee crisis upon Turkey, Jordan, Lebanon and European countries. Therefore Western

policies are not always supportive of the Kurds but rather are Western multifaceted, complicated and at times contradictory.

There is not one homogeneous Kurdish community or political movement, but rather an interrelated yet diverse set of communities and relationships. Furthermore, as policymaking is largely conducted along the structures of sovereign states, Western policies towards the Kurds have to be considered within the context of the four states in which they live. This is not to downplay the significance of influences and relationships between the groups. This paper will provide some historical context to the West's approach to the Kurds. It will then examine current policies, mostly of the United States as the most powerful and influential Western actor towards the Kurds, especially in Iraq and Syria. It will conclude by considering future scenarios affecting the Kurds and the interplay of Western policies and interests with these.

Historical relations between Western states and the Kurds

The Kurds enter international politics as distinct actors with the breakup of the Ottoman Empire at the end of the First World War. U.S. President Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Point plan for world peace included the right of "autonomous development" for non-Turkish minorities in the Ottoman Empire. The victorious Allied powers, the UK, France and Italy then forced the Treaty of Sèvres on the collapsing Ottoman Empire in 1920. This provided for local autonomy for the Kurdish area of the Empire and held out the possibility that Kurds might be granted independence in the future. Turkey's subsequent victory in its War of Independence meant it was able to ensure more favourable terms in the Treaty of Lausanne in 1923 and dismiss any prospect of specific rights for Kurds, let alone autonomy. Turkey then enforced strictly repressive policies as part of its

nation-building ideology which refused to allow for Kurdish ethnic identity, cultural or political activities. Western states were not sufficiently interested to protest and this position continued through most of the 20th century.

Also in the inter-war period, the UK took responsibility for creating and controlling the modern state of Iraq. It put down uprisings by the Kurds in the north of the country in the 1920s, preferring to include Kurdish areas within Iraq rather than granting any form of local government. The UK's decision to include Kurdish areas within Iraq laid the ground for a long and bloody struggle between Kurds and the Iraqi state which has yet to be resolved. The failure of international powers to deliver statehood or even autonomy for any Kurdish community in the 1920s left Kurdish nationalists with sense of betrayal and victimhood which still lingers today.

Western states became preoccupied by the Second World War and then the Cold War and the claims of an ethnic minority in the Middle East which had little strategic or economic value were largely ignored. Furthermore, the UK and, then more significantly, the U.S., consistently prioritized the integrity of the Iraqi and Turkish states over Kurdish nationalist claims. Western powers generally declined to engage with Kurdish actors or political movements as their relationships with Ankara and Baghdad were of more value and they were reluctant to upset these governments.

Western interest in the Kurdish communities in Iran and Syria was even less. The Kurdish nationalist movement's roots lie in Iranian Kurdistan and there is a large and restive Kurdish population but the Western powers had little strategic interests in supporting its struggle against the Iranian state. The Partiya Jiyana Azad a Kurdistanê (PJAK) has favoured U.S. military intervention in Iran but its close links to the Kurdistan Workers'

Party (PKK) have meant the U.S. would not deal with it¹. In Syria there was also very little engagement with the least visible of the four Kurdish movements beyond raising the odd note of concern when human rights were abused.

When Western states did look at the Kurds, they were dealt with largely as a minority rights “issue” or “cause” with an emphasis on humanitarian assistance. The U.S. occasionally provided deeper support when deemed useful to its goals in Iraq, but it was also quick to abandon the Kurds when it suited its broader interests. In general, Western states remained largely disengaged from Kurds owing to reluctance to antagonize Iraq or Turkey. For their part the Kurds in Iraq tried to court international support, especially from the U.S., for years without much success. This lack of international support has been a factor in frustrating Kurdish efforts to secure greater cultural and political freedoms from their sovereign governments through the 20th century and into the early 21th century.

Contemporary Western relations

Kurds in Iraq

Western involvement in Kurdish affairs has increased significantly in the last 25 years mostly because of political developments in Iraq. Problematic Western relationships with Iraq and the tempestuous relationship between the Kurds and the Iraqi state have drawn the West, especially the U.S., towards closer engagement in Kurdish politics². Of the four main

¹ The Kurds in Iran are not adequately covered in this paper owing to space and the greater prominence of the other three Kurdish movements in Western policy.

² “If there is one factor that has forever changed the fate of the Kurds in Iraq, it is the United States”. O. Bengio, *The Kurds of Iraq: Building a State within a State*, Lynne Rienner, 2012, p. 260.

Kurdish communities, much the greatest Western interaction has occurred, and continues, with the Kurds in northern Iraq who have now become a significant strategic ally.

The policies of the U.S. and other Western states towards the Kurds in Iraq has developed steadily, if cautiously, towards a firmer recognition of the Kurds as an actor in their own right³. The change in policy began in the mid-1990s, following Saddam Hussein's genocidal attacks against Kurds in the late 1980s which triggered pressure in the U.S. and elsewhere to act on humanitarian grounds. But it was the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990 and subsequent failed Kurdish uprising and refugee crisis which did most to effect a gradual change in the U.S. approach to the Kurds. Saddam's decision to invade Kuwait was a critical turning point for the U.S. as it had previously supported Iraq in its war with Iran in the 1980s and in the question of the struggle between the Kurds and the Iraqi state, the U.S. backed the latter as the legitimate sovereign authority.

Following the Iraqi army's attacks against the Kurds in 1991, the U.S., UK and France imposed a no-fly zone over northern Iraq to stem the huge flow of Kurdish refugees into Turkey and create a humanitarian safe haven in northern Iraq. As the U.S. then ramped up its efforts to remove Saddam Hussein's regime in the 1990s, it began to see the Kurds as an ally in this campaign, realising that the Kurds were the strongest and potentially the most effective of the opposition groups in Iraq.

Following the 1991 war, the U.S. and its allies supported the establishment of the autonomous Kurdistan Region of Iraq,

³ For more detailed accounts see also M. Charountaki, *The Kurds and US Foreign Policy: International Relations in the Middle East since 1945*, London, Routledge, 2011 and B.R. Gibson, *Sold Out? US Foreign Policy, Iraq, the Kurds, and the Cold War*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2015.

effectively establishing the Kurdish de facto self-government which continues today. When the two main Kurdish parties in Iraq fought a civil war in the mid-1990s, it suited U.S. interests to broker the Washington Agreement peace deal in 1998 in which split Kurdistan-Iraq into two spheres of Kurdish control. Following this, the U.S. increased its assistance to the Kurds, alongside other opposition groups in Iraq.

The alliance between the U.S. and the Iraqi Kurds strengthened further in 2003 when the U.S. and its allies invaded Iraq to overthrow Saddam. The U.S. cited the Iraqi chemical attacks on the Kurds in 1988 as a justification for the war (having earlier largely ignored these). The Kurds gave strong backing to the invasion and played a significant role in the fighting in the north of the country with U.S. air support. The Kurdish ability to open a northern front while the U.S.-led coalition fought in the south was crucial, especially as Turkey had refused to let the U.S. use airbases on its territory. Kurdish forces were the only Iraqi opposition groups invited by the U.S. to join the campaign. The strong performance of the Kurds in the war and their display of loyalty to the U.S. earned greater U.S. commitment to them in its aftermath. The Kurds were rewarded through gaining a major role in the Iraqi affairs and a stronger autonomous government in the new settlement imposed by the U.S. on Iraq in 2005⁴.

Kurds had made impressive gains but the relationship of the Kurdistan Region to the Iraqi state remained tense and contentious with a number of issues unresolved. Furthermore, the ugly sectarian strife which gripped Iraq in 2006-2008 suggested the state was not stable and Kurdish popular support for greater autonomy pushed the question of Kurdish independence to the fore. Despite the strength of the U.S.-

⁴ See M. Shareef, *The United States, Iraq and the Kurds: Shock, Awe and Aftermath*, London, Routledge, 2014.

Kurdish alliance, the U.S. consistently opposed independence, fearing it would undermine its project of rebuilding Iraq within its existing borders. U.S.-Kurdish relations were not without bumps and both parties were dissatisfied at times.

The relationship grew closer still with another important turn in U.S. policy in the summer of 2014. Gains made by Islamic State (IS) in the summer of 2014 at the expense of the Iraqi Kurdish Peshmerga forces and the Iraqi army persuaded the U.S. and its allies to carry out airstrikes against IS in support of the Kurds and the Iraqi army. The weak performance of the *peshmerga* left the Kurdistan Region exposed to IS encroachment into its territory and Erbil, the capital city, was vulnerable. The U.S. military action, which has been joined by France, Australia, the UK and others, continues in the spring of 2016 and has been crucial to the defence of Kurdistan and the *peshmerga* subsequently recovering some of the territories taken by IS. The U.S. changed policy in part because the Kurdistan and Iraqi governments were cooperating in the fight against Islamic State and because Iraq itself was threatened by the advance of IS. The Kurds' participation in the fight would help save Iraq⁵.

The U.S. and its allies have to balance their support for Kurdish autonomy with their commitment to preserving the Iraqi state and awareness of Turkey's acute sensitivities. For this reason, the U.S. is reluctant to provide military aid directly to the Kurds⁶. While Turkey has established strong relations to the Kurdistan Region, it is opposed to independence as it fears the implications this could have for the large Kurdish

⁵ M. Kaplan, "Why the US backed the Kurds", *The Washington Post*, 9 September 2014, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2014/09/09/why-the-u-s-backed-the-kurds/>

⁶ T. Paasche, M. Gunter, "Revisiting Western Strategies against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria", *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 70, No. 1, Winter 2016.

community in Turkey. The position of the U.S. is ambiguous and at times inconsistent. While the U.S. has supported self-determination in South Sudan, Timor-Leste and Kosovo, it does not support independence for Kurdistan Iraq, despite its very close alliance to the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and its hope that it will be a strategic asset for the U.S. and a model of democracy for the Middle East. Rumbblings of moves towards independence in Kurdistan are viewed very dimly in Washington as in July 2014 when Kurdish President Massoud Barzani pledged to hold a referendum. In the U.S. government's list of five priorities for Iraq, number one is "Maintaining a unified and federal Iraq" with specific reference to narrowing areas of disagreement between the governments in Erbil and Baghdad⁷.

After decades of refusing to engage with the Kurds, the U.S. now has a formal strategic and political partnership with a firm non-state ally in the Kurdistan Regional Government. Despite strongly supporting the principle of Iraqi unity and territory integrity, the U.S. found itself allying more closely to the Kurds and becoming more dependent upon their support as they encountered difficulties in Iraq. The Kurdish project of secular ethnic nationalism, ostensibly democratic for all its failings, is much more attractive to Western states than Islamist alternatives. This is illustrated in the following statement by the Foreign Affairs Committee of the UK House of Commons, "The Kurdistan Region of Iraq is a genuine democracy, albeit an imperfect and still developing one, and a beacon of tolerance

⁷ "U.S. Foreign Policy Toward Iraq", Testimony of Brett McGurk, Deputy Assistant Secretary for Iraq and Iran, Near Eastern Affairs, House Foreign Affairs Committee, November 13, 2013, <http://www.state.gov/p/nea/rls/rm/217546.htm>

and moderation in a wider region where extremism and instability are on the rise. Its values are broadly our values”⁸.

Kurdish success in gaining international legitimacy is illustrated in the increasing presence of diplomatic missions in Erbil. As of early 2016, 32 UN member states had opened consulates, including the U.S., UK, France, Germany, Italy and the Netherlands. Canada has been supplying equipment and military training to the Kurds since 2014. The EU opened a delegation office in 2015. The shift in U.S. policy has had transformational implications for the Kurds. They gained effective autonomy for the first time and also a measure of international legitimacy as an actor, which, while not a sovereign state, has since been granted many of the privileges of states such as opening diplomatic missions around the world. The two wars launched by the U.S. against Iraq in 1991 and in 2003 have been of huge benefit to the Kurds in Iraq and have forced the U.S. to become ever more involved in Kurdish matters. U.S. engagement waned slightly after its military withdrawal from Iraq in 2011 but it remains a very important actor which sees its alliance to the Kurdistan Region as crucial in the fight against Islamic State and in somehow keeping the state of Iraq together.

Kurds in Turkey

Western policies towards the Kurdish population in Turkey, by far the largest of the Kurdish communities, have also been affected by the West’s need to remain on good terms with Turkey. Turkey’s size and regional strategic significance and its membership of NATO have meant that European and North

⁸ Government Response to the House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee Report: UK Government Policy on the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, March 2015. https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/415796/48533_Cm_9029_Accessible.pdf

American states have consistently valued their bilateral ties ahead of pushing for improved rights for the Kurdish population. As in Iraq, there was little official Western engagement on the issue until the late 20th century. The key factor which affected a slight shift in Western approaches was Turkey's candidacy for membership of the European Union.

Turkey applied for full membership of the European Community in 1987. In 1993, the EU established compulsory conditions for candidate countries; meeting stringent standards on democracy, human rights and the rule of law. EU candidacy obliged Turkey to consider EU standards of the rights of its minority populations, the most numerous of whom are the Kurds. It has often been remarked that Turkey's road to membership of the EU runs through Diyarbakir (a large Kurdish-majority city in south-east Turkey). The Kurdish movement has largely been a pro-EU actor, welcoming Turkey's bid for EU membership as a way to force the Turkish state to reform and allow space for Kurdish identity.

Through the 1990s the European Parliament increased its interest in Kurdish human rights issues in Turkey. When the Turkey decided to close the pro-Kurdish Democracy Party (DEP) in 1994, the EU froze the EU-Turkish Joint Parliamentary Committee, making an explicit connection between Kurdish rights and the possibility of EU membership. The EU declared Turkey a candidate country in 1999 and stated its official position towards the Kurdish issue as the improvement of "the situation in the south-east, with a view to enhancing economic, social and cultural opportunities for all citizens"⁹. Turkey's EU candidacy influenced its decision in 2002 to suspend the death sentence handed out to the PKK leader, Abdullah Öcalan, and impose life imprisonment instead

⁹ A. Balci, "The Kurdish movement's EU policy in Turkey: An analysis of a dissident ethnic bloc's foreign policy", *Ethnicities*, Vol. 15, No. 1, 2015, p. 76.

In the 1990s and 2000s, Turkey made some progress on the required EU reforms including relaxing the repression of Kurdish culture and language, and this accelerated following the election of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) in 2002. The EU then offered candidacy talks to Turkey. In 2002, in the atmosphere after the September 11 attacks in 2001, the EU named the PKK as a terrorist organisation and encouraged Kurdish politicians to distance themselves from the movement. The prospects of Turkish EU membership regressed from the mid-2000s as opposition to Turkish membership grew in many EU countries while the AKP failed to continue on a reformist path and abandoned its peace opening with the PKK.

The resumption of violence between the Turkish state and the PKK in 2015 and accompanying Turkish military activities in Kurdish towns, as well as worrying anti-democratic behaviour by President Erdoğan and the ruling AKP meant that Turkey's EU membership has become an ever more unlikely prospect. The war in Syria from 2011, the refugee crisis and Europe's financial difficulties mean that both Turkey and the EU have more pressing priorities. With this, the likelihood of EU engagement on the Kurdish issue diminishes. The EU and European states continue to criticize policies of the Turkish state towards the Kurds and emphasise the need to return to peace talks, but their influence has waned. They also condemn the PKK and insist it abandon its armed struggle, while making tentative but awkward overtures towards the legal Kurdish political representation in Turkey.

The U.S. has had little interaction with the Kurdish community in Turkey compared to that in Iraq. It views the pre-eminent Kurdish party, the PKK, as a terrorist organisation and it has enjoyed much smoother relations with the Turkey than with Iraq and so has been less inclined to deal with a troublesome minority group. It is crucial that Turkey is a member of NATO and hence the U.S. and other NATO

members are bound to support it within this alliance. The U.S. favours reforms and improved rights for Kurds and others in Turkey but it does not press these issues, preferring largely to back Turkey, including in the issue of domestic Kurdish unrest. The U.S. has provided support to Turkey in its fight against the PKK, including assisting in the capture of Abdullah Öcalan in 1998. The U.S. has consistently supported Turkey's right to take action against the PKK and blamed the latter for the breakdown of the ceasefire in 2015.

The Kurdish diaspora lobby and others press the U.S. and European states to remove the PKK from their lists of terrorist organisations but there is little prospect of them doing so. The Kurdish diaspora probably numbers more than one million in Western Europe and perhaps 25,000 in the U.S.¹⁰, with especially large and prominent communities in Germany, France and Sweden. The Kurdish diaspora in Europe has worked to highlight the abuse of human rights for Kurds in Turkey to EU and European government representatives and institutions. However, Western policymakers have traditionally been reluctant to address the political lobbying of the Kurdish diaspora communities¹¹. Kurdish political activities in Europe have recently intensified and become better coordinated, especially owing to the threats to Kurdish communities posed by IS and the opportunities emerging for Kurdish governance in Syria.

Kurds in Syria

Western policies towards the Kurds in Syria have undergone a remarkable shift since 2014 and remain in evolution. The Syrian

¹⁰ M. Gunter, *The Kurds Ascending: The Evolving Solution to the Kurdish Problem in Iraq and Turkey*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2011, p. 2.

¹¹ E. Østergaard-Nielsen, "Trans-State Loyalties and Politics of Turks and Kurds in Western Europe", *S.AIS Review*, Vol. 20, No. 1, 2000.

Kurdish national movement, fractious, weak and tightly controlled, struggled to have any effect and was the least prominent of the four Kurdish movements until recently. Western states engaged only lightly on Kurdish issues in Syria, in the main including the abuses of human rights specific to Kurds – such as the denial of citizenship and the right to speak Kurdish – within their long lists of complaints against the Syrian regime. If Western diplomats engaged directly with Kurdish politicians, the Syrian authorities would react vigorously against both parties.

The uprising against Bashar al-Assad's regime in 2011 and Syria's subsequent descent into a long and bloody war has provided an unprecedented opportunity for the Kurds. In 2012, taking advantage of the vacuum of authority and in defence of Kurdish communities against militant Islamist forces, Kurds took control of three areas in northern Syria which have majority Kurdish populations and established an autonomous administration called Western Kurdistan (known as Rojava in Kurdish). The emergence of the Kurds as a significant player in the Syrian war forced regional and Western actors to pay attention to them.

The Kurdish autonomous structure has subsequently developed a distinct and reasonably effective form of government which is secular, left-wing, proudly gender equal and far more in sympathy to Western ideals than any viable alternative operating in Syria. Further, in terms of pragmatic military value (which matters more to the West), the Kurdish militia, the YPG (People's Protection Units), has proved effective in resisting and then steadily pushing back Islamic State forces and taking more territory. In comparison to other options on the ground in Syria, the Kurdish militia appears to be the force most closely aligned to Western interests. Therefore the Kurds have become a highly attractive option to support in a

war in which Western powers are lacking effective and palatable allies and in which their policies have failed dismally.

Western, notably U.S. support for the Kurds has followed, to a limited extent, and has been extremely important in the survival and growth of the Kurdish project. The tipping point for the West was the Islamic State siege of the Kurdish town of Kobane in the autumn of 2014. It seemed likely the town would fall and heavy casualties would follow and this was at a time when Islamic State was expanding in Iraq as well as Syria and appeared unstoppable. The U.S. was left with little choice but to launch air strikes to help the Kurdish forces defending the town. The siege was lifted and over the following year, the Kurds have slowly taken more territory from Islamic State the U.S. and its Western allies have continued to carry out supportive air strikes and provide assistance. There is currently a small U.S. military presence in Kurdish areas coordinating the support and providing advice.

While the West has provided crucial military support to the Kurds, this support has been limited and somewhat reluctant. Western support has also not been as generous for the political project of Kurdish autonomy in Syria. Here lies a conflict between the imperative to stop Islamic State and acute Western sensitivities to the looming presence of Turkey on the northern border. Turkey, engaged in its war against the Kurdish PKK, is deeply hostile to Kurdish gains in Syria, especially as the dominant Syrian Kurdish party, the Democratic Union Party (PYD), is closely connected to the PKK. Turkey sees no distinction between the two parties and as such considers the PYD and the YPG to be terrorist organisations. While the PKK is on Western terrorist lists, the Syrian Kurdish movement is not. Turkey strongly demands that this changes.

Just as the West's strong alliance with Turkey has made it reluctant to intervene in Kurdish issues in Turkey, so it deeply affects Western approaches toward the Kurds in Syria. Turkey

rejects the legitimacy of the Rojava administration and is fiercely opposed to any form of Kurdish autonomy and to Kurdish territorial gains inside Syria. Turkey has repeatedly threatened to cross the border to prevent this and its forces sporadically engage in attacks on Kurdish positions from Turkish territory. This leaves Western policymakers treading a fine line between their interests in supporting the Kurds as a credible, acceptable and viable force within Syria, especially in opposition to Islamic State, and their strategic relationship with Turkey.

There are other reasons for Western hesitation to embrace the Syrian Kurds. The lines of Syria's existing borders are considered sacrosanct and hence should not be endangered by any autonomous movement; in particular the Kurds who have very strong ties to the Kurdish nationalist movements in Turkey and Iraq. The United States and United Kingdom formally oppose the Syrian Kurdish establishment of an autonomous self-ruled region because the long-term goal of the United Nations peace talks is a national unity government that keeps Syria united. They also oppose the unilateral actions of the Syrian Kurds without consulting the rest of Syria.

The dominant Syrian Kurdish party, the PYD, is considered problematic despite some attractive aspects of its ideology. This is partly because of its closeness to the PKK and so Western states prefer to sponsor another faction of Syrian Kurdish parties which are closer to the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) in Iraqi Kurdistan. The West also condemns the PYD for its behaviour; criticisms include running a one party state, harassing political opponents, forced conscription and expelling Arabs from Kurdish territories. Further, the PYD is accused of allying with the Syrian regime and the party has not joined the Syrian opposition nurtured and promoted by the West.

One outcome of Western reluctance to move closer to the Syrian Kurds is that Russia has been able to step in and forge an

alliance in 2015-2016 as part of its military intervention in Syria in support of the Assad regime. The Kurds are short of friends and welcome international support from most quarters and as Russia is not on good terms with Turkey it is able to go further than NATO members in its support for the Kurds.

The tangled interplay between Western policies and Kurdish scenarios

Kurdish geopolitics are highly intermeshed and complex. As a result, exploring future scenarios for Kurdish politics and communities in the Middle East requires consideration of a host of variables and actors, including the numerous and diverse Kurdish groups, the authorities of the states in which they live (Iran, Iraq, Syria and Turkey) and other non-state opposition actors (such as Islamic State, other hostile Islamist groups, Shi'a militias, and other ethnic groups such as Turkmen and Assyrian Christians).

A further variable which has proven to be highly influential on the Kurds, certainly in Iraq and recently in Syria, is the policies of international actors, most importantly the U.S., but also European states and Russia. As the Kurds have become increasingly important actors for Western interests in the Middle East, especially in Iraq and Syria, it is clear that Western policies will both affect, and be affected by, Kurdish trajectories. Among the ethnic and religious groups of the Middle East, Kurds are remarkably pro-American and pro-European as they see the values held in the West as supportive of their causes. However, the affection is not always returned by the West.

For Western states, led by the U.S., the current primary concern is to defeat Islamic State. This requires Kurdish help in both Syria and Iraq and so Western policy is likely to continue to engage and assist both. The need to assist Kurdish allies on

the ground against Islamic State soon clashes with the second Western policy aim; to achieve peace in both Iraq and Syria and maintain the existing borders. Therefore the extent of Western support will remain limited because of the concern that Kurds in both states might move towards greater autonomy, and indeed independence in the case of Kurdistan Iraq.

There is a clear desire for independence among the Kurdish population of Iraq although the practicality and implications of this are highly uncertain. Western policy is to oppose this strongly in favour of a federal sovereign Iraqi state and its borders. While compared to the rest of Iraq, and many neighbors in the region, the democratic transition in Kurdistan Iraq is strong; there are major problems of corruption, economic weakness and mismanagement which trouble Western policymakers. The West is also very concerned to improve the difficult relationship between the Kurdistan Region and the Iraqi government in Baghdad as part of its goal of strengthening the Iraqi state.

Western opposition is clearly a factor in the Kurdish leaders' reluctance to hold a referendum on independence. An independent Kurdistan would be highly vulnerable without support from the U.S. and indeed Turkey. However Iraq may start to disintegrate before the Kurds depart (it could be argued Iraq has already failed) and this would leave the Kurds little choice but to seek recognition as an independent sovereign state. In this scenario, at the point when the U.S. and Western states accept Iraq is finished, they would be likely to back Kurdistan to try to salvage a secure and stable ally from the wreckage of Iraq.

A more likely scenario in the next few years is a continuation of the current situation where Iraq is plagued by insecurity and lack of political reconciliation and the Kurds continue to develop their autonomous region while arguing with Baghdad. If Islamic State is defeated, or at least weakened, the

Kurds' role as influential power-brokers in Iraqi politics will be strengthened, not least because they are now holding some of the territories disputed between them and Baghdad. This would strengthen the Kurdish bargaining position with the West, although there is a possibility the Kurds could overplay their hand to the displeasure of the U.S.

Another possibility is that rather than collapse, IS (or a successor organisation) will become strengthened by Western military actions and Iraqi army incompetence and gain legitimacy and support, posing an increased threat to the stability of Iraq, Iraqi Kurdistan, Syria and Syrian Kurdistan. The lessons of the campaign against IS's weaker predecessor, al-Qaida in Iraq, in 2006-2008, suggest that a much larger, multifaceted strategy which also addresses social and economic needs will be required to defeat IS than is currently being employed¹². It remains uncertain that Islamic State can be defeated without Western actors engaging in ground operations, which is highly unlikely.

The scenarios facing the Kurds in Syria are not dissimilar. Islamic State might regroup and again threaten Syrian Kurdish communities with death or expulsion. In this scenario, the West would come under enormous pressure to intervene more forcefully to prevent a human catastrophe among a smaller population which is more vulnerable than that in Iraq. The failure to protect the Yezidi community in northern Iraq from Islamic State in 2014 leaves a bad stain. Another threat to Rojava is that Turkey increases its attacks or invades the territory. This would put the West in a dilemma, exposing the contradiction in its reluctant support of the Syrian Kurds as a key opponent of IS, but its refusal to acknowledge Kurdish claims of autonomy owing to its alliance with Turkey and

¹² G. Stansfield, "The Islamic State, the Kurdistan Region and the future of Iraq: assessing UK policy options", *International Affairs*, Vol. 90, No. 6, 2014.

commitment to Syrian unity. The Syrian regime might also gain in strength and retake control of Kurdish areas. This would cause a lot of head scratching for Western policymakers.

Alternatively, Rojava may continue to develop and become more firmly established. Western states would then need to consider deeper engagement with the political development of the autonomous region, in an effort to retain influence and help shape a structure which might be compatible one day with a peace deal agreed with all Syrians. The notion of a federal system in Syria has been raised by former U.S. officials, at least until a longer-term political solution is agreed. Syria would be divided into zones roughly corresponding to areas currently held by the Kurds, the government and by insurgents.

Western states have fewer interests and less influence on Kurdish politics in Turkey than in Iraq and Syria. There is a strong and uncomfortable connection between recent Western support for the Syrian Kurdish militia and Turkey's efforts to fight the PKK. Weakening the PKK and its close allies in Syria does not aid the battle against Islamic State. However, it is clear where most Western states primary interest lie – as a senior member of the UK military told this author, “If it came down to a choice between backing the Syrian or Turkish Kurds against Turkey, we would choose Turkey as our NATO ally every time”. As the influence of the EU membership carrot has weakened, the West has been largely powerless to prevent the resumption of violence between Turkey and the PKK and the accompanying suffering of the civilian population. In a more positive though unlikely scenario, the PKK and Turkey would succeed at the negotiation table, meaningful reforms and liberalisation would follow and the PKK would be taken off Western terrorist lists as it becomes a legitimate non-violent actor.

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