



KURDISTAN: A STATE OR A STATE OF MIND?

Can the Kurds, the largest ethnicity in the Middle East without their own nation, overcome their internal disunity and find ways to exist as an independent state or as autonomous regions?

By Guney Yildiz

The traditional view of the Kurds in the Middle East—living as they do in the mountains and valleys of southeastern Turkey, northwestern Iran, northern Iraq, and northern Syria—used to feature only as a subcategory in the strategic political calculations of the United States, Russia, or the European Union toward the larger central governments in Ankara, Damascus, Baghdad, and Tehran. But this was a mistake. Yet, it was easy to understand why this mistake was made. Up until the 1970s and 1980s, Kurdish politics in one state had limited influence over politics in other countries where Kurds resided.

The Syrian civil war has forever changed all of these foreign policy calculations. One reason why the international community and the central governments of the regional countries were caught off-guard by the rise of the Syrian Kurds was their failure to consider the evolving transnational crosspollination between Turkey and Syria's Kurds. The world witnessed this political cooperation between the Kurdish communities of Turkey, Syria, Iraq, and Iran when Kurdish volunteers mobilized behind Syrian Kurdish fighters against the better-equipped and numerically superior force of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in the northern Syrian town of Kobane in 2014. According to some estimates, over a thousand Kurds from Turkey, Iran, and Iraq died fighting against ISIS in Syria.

Syrian Kurds benefited from the fighting experience of the Syrian Kurdish commanders who had fought with the Kurdistan Workers' Party or PKK in its longstanding conflict against the Turkish state. In fact, two main Kurdish groups initially vying for power in Syria were either followers of Abdullah Öcalan, the imprisoned PKK leader, or Mullah Mustafa Barzani, former leader of the Kurds in Iraq. Also, many rank-and-file members of the leading Syrian political group, the Democratic Union Party (PYD) and their affiliated armed forces, the People's Protection Units (YPG) developed their organizational and fighting skills during the years they fought against the Turkish military with the PKK.

◀ Kurds celebrate ahead of independence referendum in Erbil, Iraq, Sept. 8, 2017. *Azad Lashkari/Reuters*

Today, Kurds across all four nations receive public and moral support from each other and from the Kurdish diaspora abroad, outside of what is known as “Greater Kurdistan.” As such, the foreign-policy belief in Washington, Brussels, and Moscow that Kurdish politics must be a subcategory of the politics in their states has lost its validity. This interstate political connection among Kurds also means that Turkey, Iraq, and Iran have to approach the rise of Syrian Kurds through the lens of their own domestic Kurdish policies.

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Syrian politics. Likewise, the collapse of the Turkish–Kurdish peace process in Turkey and Iranian–Turkish–Iraqi cooperation against the 2017 independence referendum of the Iraqi Kurds cannot only be accounted for by how domestic politics play out within each country or within the Kurdish political milieus in each of those countries.

The real question moving forward is how Kurds will unify in the future. Will Kurds

continue to be citizens active as part of their present nation-states—that is as confederated autonomous areas—or will Kurds seek actual political independence? The beginning of the answer to this fundamental question likely lies in how crosspollination, political recognition, and geography will connect Kurds in Turkey (known to political Kurds as “Northern Kurdistan”), with Kurds in Iraq (known as “Southern Kurdistan”), with Kurds in Iran (“Eastern Kurdistan”), to Kurds in Syria (“Western Kurdistan”).

Two Challenges to Kurdish Self-Determination

The political ascendancy of the Kurds, however, faces two significant challenges. The first challenge concerns itself with the international political system: Kurds are trying to exist as non-state actors in a world that is dominated by nation-states. This renders them invisible in most official political platforms that discuss their future. Despite the Kurds’ prominence in public discourse due to their role in fighting against ISIS, their secularism, and the media coverage of female fighters, in official political platforms that discuss matters on Syria, Turkey or Iran, Kurdish affairs are rarely discussed.

Such statelessness therefore makes the Kurds invisible in policymaking circles and official meetings. In one such meeting on Syria between European and Russian officials, the word “Kurdish” was mentioned only a couple of times throughout the six-hour-long session. Foreign ministries from the United States

to Europe are designed to deal with the representatives of other countries, not non-state actors. Even limited efforts to recognize ethnic non-state or sub-state actors come under strong criticism in official circles. During his speech in Cairo in January, U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo criticized former President Barack Obama's eagerness to address only Muslims and not nations, saying that such an approach had "undermined the concept of the nation-state, the building block of international stability."

The second major challenge concerns political geography. The Kurds live in a landlocked area dominated by the central governments of Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and (at least nominally) Syria. Consequently, the Kurds of greater Kurdistan are in a worse situation than many other ethnic minorities without states, which exist within the borders of a single nation. This interstate separation reduces the Kurdish population—which according to some estimates numbers in total 35 to 40 million—to smaller minorities in each of the countries in which they live. Having lived under the control of different countries, Kurds and their politics in the twentieth century have been shaped by the politics of host countries. It is possible to say that up until the late 1980s, Kurds in Erbil were more connected to the political situation in Baghdad than developments in Diyarbakir, in southeastern Turkey.

Also, the central governments of Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria have worked in tandem to cooperate in stifling resistance by Kurds in any one state. These dominant states also have hindered reform efforts on Kurdish rights in the other countries. In the 1970s, for example, the Turkish government objected to the Iraqi government's decision to grant autonomy to the Kurds in Iraq.

Besides regional alliances formed by the four states against Kurdish rights and autonomy, the international alliances that each of the four states are a part of have come down against Kurdish political groups. For example, due to Turkish policies regarding Kurdish political organizations, the Kurds faced hostility and criminalization by the states of NATO, of which Turkey is a member. Members of the EU have mostly shied away from extending support to the Kurds due to fears of angering Turkey or the United States which has, until recently, been one of Turkey's closest allies. Another example of international apathy for Kurdish political groups and rights is the response of the Arab World. As Kurdish rights groups were active in Iraq and Syria, other Arab powers who had pan-Arab relations with Damascus and Baghdad were at best lukewarm in their sympathy toward the Kurdish cause. Iran could even galvanize the support of non-Iranian Shias against Kurdish political organizations, if need be.

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To overcome these problems, the Kurds need either to establish an independent state or find ways to exist and realize their roles as non-state actors. In other words, they can either work against the dominant states to set up their own country or work with the states in a bid to reform those states' apparatuses in regards to minority rights. Iraqi and Syrian Kurds exemplify these two ongoing attempts at Kurdish self-determination; Iraqi Kurds aim to set up an independent state while the Kurds in Turkey and Syria are seeking to establish a decentralized government, based on autonomous regions that are not organized along ethnicity but instead recognize the rights of minorities.

Two Solutions for the “Kurdish Question”

Two political forces dominate the Kurdish political landscape: the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the PKK. The PKK, the largest Kurdish political organization, is the dominant party for the Kurds in Turkey and Syria. The PKK also has limited support in Iraqi Kurdistan and Kurdish regions of Iran. The KDP on the other hand has support in Syria and Iran and even has, albeit limited, support in Turkey. The KDP dominates critical positions in the Kurdistan Regional Government in Iraq, which provides the party with important financial resources and diplomatic recognition in Europe and in the United States. The PKK, on the other hand, is considered a terrorist organization by Turkey, the United States, and the EU. There are, of course, several other notable but smaller Kurdish political groups, but the main fault line that divides the Kurdish politics is formed through the rivalry between the KDP and the PKK.

The PKK Solution

The PKK, founded in 1978, was and is an armed political group, but it has also organized as a movement with numerous civilian, social, economic, and political affiliates. The political groups that today are linked to the PKK are the dominant political parties in Turkey and Syria. The PKK is also present in Iran, where members fought against the Iranian regime for several years before agreeing to stop military hostilities in 2011. The PKK's main military bases are located mainly in the Zap–Qandil region of Iraq. The PKK asserts itself as the leader of all people in historically Kurdish regions.

The PKK has, from its inception, been a firmly left-wing organization. The initial political objective of the PKK was to establish a socialist Greater Kurdistan uniting the Kurdish regions of Turkey, Iraq, Syria, and Iran. The group's leadership has always held that “a revolution in Kurdistan” will either kick off a revolution in Turkey or will be a part of a broader rebellion.

Since the mid-2000s, however, a change has occurred in the tactics and direction of the PKK. This shift has been called by party leadership “democratic

confederalism” which seeks autonomous Kurdish areas in Iran, Turkey, Syria, and Iraq without necessarily establishing an independent Kurdish state or changing borders of the countries in question.

The confederal system Öcalan envisions is not a confederal arrangement between states but a model where sub-state “democratically autonomous” administrations are linked in a loose political arrangement. The “democratic autonomy” as Öcalan formulates it, foresees decentralization of the nation-states that the Kurds live in. Autonomous administrations are further divided into autonomous organizations of women, workers, economic units, communes, and religious and ethnic groups.

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The model that is implemented in northeastern Syria is composed of this Öcalan/PKK model. The federalism, proposed by the pro-Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD), will not be based on ethnicity but region. Another step Öcalan and the PKK leadership has taken is to propose an alternative to ethnic or civic nationalism in the nations where Kurds reside. By what he calls “democratic nation,” Öcalan proposes a flexible approach to the concept of nation. His concept is not necessarily based solely on ethnicity or citizenship of a nation-state. Rather, the concept foresees autonomous organizations of different ethnicities, religious groups, and economic units which can organize themselves as a political entity within Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria.

The KDP Solution

The Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), however, is organized as a political party rather than a movement. Under the leadership of Masoud Barzani, the party also trades on the legendary name of Mullah Mustafa Barzani, father of Masoud Barzani, and counts on support by the Barzani tribe and some other powerful tribal elites in Iraqi Kurdistan. Masoud Barzani’s background, which contradicts that of Öcalan, is the primary source of Barzani’s political power.

The KDP, founded in 1946 in Mahabad, then the short-lived Soviet-backed independent Kurdish Republic of Mahabad, is today the controlling faction of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq. Under the leadership of Mullah Mustafa Barzani, the KDP engaged in a protracted conflict with the Iraqi government since at least the 1960s. A de facto Kurdistan region came to existence after 1991 when the U.S.-led coalition imposed a no-fly zone in the north and south of Iraq. Kurds in Iraq were among the primary beneficiaries of the demise of Saddam Hussein’s Baath Party.

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autonomous Kurdish region and today champions setting up an independent Kurdish state. One of the main pillars of the strategy of the KDP leadership in its efforts to establish a Kurdish state is to obtain international support for the cause. The party's founding leader initially secured some limited support from the Soviet Union and then switched to seeking assistance from the United States and Israel. The KDP did not succeed in receiving open diplomatic and military support until 1991 when the northern Iraqi no-fly zone coupled with funds and limited recognition from the United States and Europe, allowed the KDP to solidify its power.

Political and Military Competition between the PKK and KDP

The PKK and the KDP are not only political but also ideological rivals. Their actions on the ground are implemented in the Syrian Kurdish and the Barzani-led northern Iraqi Kurdish quest for independence. And each movement challenges the other politically in its own strongholds as well as inside the territory controlled by its rival. You can see pictures of Öcalan in the Barzani stronghold Erbil, and hear people chanting “Biji Serok Masoud” (Long live President Masoud) on the streets of Qamishli and Amude in northern Syria, strongholds of the pro-Öcalan movement.

In Syria, it was the pro-Öcalan movements that won the rivalry. Pro-Barzani factions inside Syria hesitated to take up arms at the beginning of the Syrian conflict in 2011 and 2012 to resist the Bashar Al-Assad government and the Islamist anti-Kurdish opposition. They then chose to join forces with the Syrian opposition without securing any guarantees from them for Kurdish rights. The Syrian Kurdish factions, who were against the pro-Öcalan PYD, later received military training in Iraq and Turkey from Turkish and Western forces. By that time, though, the PYD had already established a military force of ten thousand fighters.

Iraqi Kurds are divided between the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) founded by former Iraqi President Jalal Talabani with Sulaymaniyah as its stronghold, and the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) which is more powerful and based in Erbil. Iraqi Kurdistan's Peshmerga force—the northern Iraqi Kurdish military—operates as a united force, but there are separate divisions under control of the KDP and the PUK. In northern Syria, by contrast, the armed Syrian Democratic Forces, which includes a high number of Arab troops, is strongly dominated by the People's Protection Units (YPG) which follows Öcalan's ideology.

Moment of Victory, Moment of Defeat

Two recent moments or events illustrated the strengths and weaknesses of these two Kurdish attempts at self-determination. The “Kobane moment” was the successful resistance of Kurdish fighters in the northern Syrian town of Kobane against a numerically and technologically superior army of ISIS, which gave the terror group their first significant defeat. Under siege from September 2014 to January 2015, the city was liberated when not only Syrian Kurds but Kurds from Turkey, Iran, and Iraq arrived en masse at Kobane to defend the town. Many other Kurds from Europe and elsewhere gave their support.

Observing the resistance through the lens of world media, the Kurds around the region and the world became aware of Kurdish military strength. This support testified to the strength and the unity of the Kurdish people. The result was a significant victory and the start of a successful military partnership between the United States and the Syrian Kurds despite objections from Turkey. Kobane was also a place where some Free Syrian Army factions extended support to the Kurdish fighters of the YPG. The cooperation between the YPG and other Syrian Arab groups formed the basis of the Syrian Democratic Forces, which went on to defeat ISIS in Kurdish as well as Arab regions. Today, a few months after the destruction of ISIS’s territorial caliphate, the Kurdish–Arab alliance controls more than one-third of Syria and around half of Syria’s resources.

The weaknesses of the Greater Kurdistan independence/autonomy movement, on the other hand, were laid bare during the “Kirkuk–Afrin moment.” Within a few years following the victory in Kobane, in 2017 and early 2018, the Kurds experienced two bitter defeats. First in the Iraqi town of Kirkuk and then in Afrin, the Kurdish-majority town of northeastern Syria. Iraqi Kurds, in Kirkuk and in the aftermath of the independence referendum, realized that they were not politically ready to confront the Iraqi central government backed by Iran and supported by Turkey. There has not been any genuine soul-searching since the loss of Kirkuk almost without any resistance to the Iraqi central army and the paramilitary Hashd Al-Shabi forces. This also came with a realization that the Turkish government, with which the Iraqi Kurds engaged in relatively stable and peaceful relations and trade, can, in the blink of an eye, make common cause with the Iranian government in stifling the prospects of Kurdish independence. The Iraqi Kurdish public also realized that the Kurds could not base their moves on the calculation that the United States and Israel will back them in crucial moments.

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Several months later and over a thousand kilometers away, the Kurds in Afrin in northwestern Syria realized that they could not confront on their own the

air power and ground forces of the Turkish military and their Syrian Russian-backed proxies. They also realized that they could not rely on the international community to put pressure on the Turkish military to stop using air power against

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Kurdish fighters. In the wake of the Turkish attack on Afrin, then-UK Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson extended public political support to Turkey “to secure its border.” There also was not much mobilization among the international public. In Turkey, the pro-Kurdish People’s Democratic Party, which is allied with the PKK and Turkish left-wing parties, was not able to mobilize the Kurdish

population against the Turkish offensive. The Kurdish military units fighting against Turkey in Afrin realized that in the face of Turkish air supremacy they would not have a chance to stop Turkey without extensive casualties on their side. The YPG leadership then decided to pull out their troops from Afrin, leaving the city to Turkey. The conflict left over 200,000 people from Afrin, mostly Kurdish, internally displaced.

The Kurds Together and Closer

Despite these challenges and defeats, the Kurds are gradually breaking the barriers imposed on them by the dominant regional states they live in. As a result, they are emerging as powerful independent actors in the Middle East. Gains and losses made by Kurds in one country can have substantial effects on the benefits and losses of those in another. The Kurds no longer exist solely as secondary actors to the political realities of the states in which they reside.

Kurdish resilience managed to outlive all attempts at repression, assimilation, and divide-and-rule tactics by the regional countries. The rise of the Kurds was mainly due to the weakening of the centralized states in Baghdad, Ankara, Tehran, and Damascus. In the future, much will depend on whether the Kurds can manage their political divisions and institutionalize a new Kurdish administration in areas of Kurdish majority.

To this end, the KRG enjoys legitimacy in the eyes of U.S. and European policymakers through KRG foreign relations offices in leading global capitals. Also, the Iraqi KRG and the Syrian Kurds are openly receiving aid from the United States. While the pro-Öcalan administration in northern Syria is not recognized diplomatically in European or American circles, the region’s military forces (the SDF and the YPG) receive a significant amount of U.S. military support that goes beyond the need to fight ISIS. However, both the Peshmerga and the YPG lack aerial defense weapons, and it is difficult for them to defend against an enemy with air power.

These two Kurdish regions in Iraq and Syria, which share a border, are, unfortunately, not the best of friends. With intermittently blockaded borders and mutually hostile rhetoric, there is plenty of room for improved relations. Both of these regions are firmly allied with the United States and the EU. However, U.S. efforts to broker a rapprochement between the movements have hitherto not produced concrete results.

To stifle Kurdish political groups, the governments of Ankara, Tehran, Damascus, and Baghdad have, on many occasions, collaborated throughout the last century. To realize their seemingly rival projects, Iraqi and Syrian Kurds must now cooperate. In both regions, there is a strong desire in the Kurdish public to see their political movements more united. In the face of anti-Kurdish sentiment from the Iranian, Syrian, Turkish, and Iraqi central governments, all Kurds across the Middle East—whether through the autonomous regional model or the independence model—must come closer together. ©