
The Kurdish Awakening

Unity, Betrayal, and the Future of the Middle East

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“We’ve been fighting for a long time in Syria,” said U.S. President Donald Trump in the last days of 2018. “Now it’s time for our troops to come back home.” The president’s surprise call for a rapid withdrawal of the nearly 2,000 U.S. troops stationed in Syria drew widespread criticism from members of the U.S. foreign policy establishment. But it came as an even greater shock to the United States’ main partner in the fight against the Islamic State (or ISIS), the Syrian Kurds. For weeks prior to the announcement, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan had been threatening to invade areas of northern Syria controlled by Kurdish militants. The only thing stopping him was the presence of U.S. troops. Removing them would leave the Kurds deeply exposed. “If [the Americans] will leave,” warned one Syrian Kurd, “we will curse them as traitors.”

Details about the U.S. withdrawal from Syria remain sketchy. But whatever Washington ultimately decides to do, Trump’s announcement marked a cruel turn for Kurds across the Middle East. Back in mid-2017, the Kurds had been enjoying a renaissance. Syrian Kurds, allied with the world’s only superpower, had played the central role in largely defeating ISIS on the battlefield and had seized the group’s capital, Raqqa. The People’s Protection Units (YPG), a Syrian Kurdish militia, controlled large swaths of Syrian territory and looked set to become a significant actor in negotiations to end the country’s civil war. Turkish Kurds, although besieged at home, were basking in the glow of the accomplishments of their Syrian counterparts, with whom

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they are closely aligned. And in Iraq, the body that rules the country's Kurdish region—the Kurdistan Regional Government, or KRG—was at the height of its powers, preparing for a September 2017 referendum on independence.

By the end of 2018, many of the Kurds' dreams appeared to be in tatters. After the overwhelming majority of Iraqi Kurds voted for independence in the KRG's referendum, the Iraqi government, backed by Iran and Turkey, invaded Iraqi Kurdistan and conquered some 40 percent of its territory. Overnight, the KRG lost not only nearly half of its land but much of its international influence, too. The Turkish Kurds, despite gaining seats in parliament in the June 2018 elections, had endured relentless assaults from Erdogan and his government throughout the year, including a renewed military campaign against the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), a left-wing separatist group. In Syria, Turkey invaded the Kurdish-controlled town of Afrin in March 2018, displacing the YPG and some 200,000 local Kurds. Then, in December, the Syrian Kurds learned that their American protectors might soon abandon them altogether.

These setbacks, however, belie a larger trend—one that will shape the Middle East in the years ahead. Across the region, Kurds are gaining self-confidence, pushing for long-denied rights, and, most important, collaborating with one another across national boundaries and throughout the diaspora. To a greater extent than at any previous point in history, Kurds in the four traditionally distinct parts of Kurdistan—in Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Turkey—are starting down the road of becoming a single Kurdish nation. Significant barriers to unity remain, including linguistic divisions and the presence of at least two strong states, Iran and Turkey, with an overriding interest in thwarting any form of pan-Kurdism. Yet recent events have initiated a process of Kurdish nation building that will, in the long run, prove difficult to contain. Even if there is never a single, unified, independent Kurdistan, the Kurdish national awakening has begun. The Middle East's states may fear the Kurdish awakening, but it is beyond their power to stop it.

THE LOST CAUSE

Around 30 million Kurds currently live in Greater Kurdistan, a contiguous region stretching across southeastern Turkey, northwestern Iran, northern Iraq, and northeastern Syria. Kurdish tribes interacted with



This land is our land: Kurdish peshmerga forces in Makhmur, Iraq, August 2014

the Arab, Persian, and Turkic empires over the centuries, sometimes cooperating with them and sometimes rebelling against them. Modern Kurdish nationalism has its roots in the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire after World War I. The 1920 Treaty of Sèvres, signed between the Allies and the defeated Ottomans, called for an independence referendum in the Kurdish-majority areas of modern-day Turkey. Yet following Turkey's war of independence, the new Turkish government renegotiated with the Allies. This resulted in the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne, which guaranteed Turkish sovereignty over what could have potentially been an independent Kurdistan.

Kurdish demands for independence, however, did not go away. Throughout the twentieth century, Kurdish revolts, often backed by rival states, erupted in nearly every country that had a significant Kurdish population. Turkey put down Kurdish rebellions in 1925, 1930, and 1937. Then, in the mid-1980s, the PKK launched an armed insurgency in Turkey that has continued off and on until the present day. In Iran in 1946, Kurds backed by the Soviet Union established the first genuine Kurdish government, the independent Republic of Mahabad, which lasted for one year before collapsing after Moscow withdrew its support. Iraqi Kurds have also frequently revolted against their central government. Supported by the shah of Iran, they fought two wars against Baghdad during the 1960s and 1970s, only to be

defeated in 1975 after the shah struck a deal with the Iraqi strongman Saddam Hussein, abandoning the Kurds to their fate.

This agitation has meant that for each of the four states with a large Kurdish minority, suppressing Kurdish nationalism has been a paramount policy objective. The new Turkish state under President Kemal Ataturk banned the use of the Kurdish language in 1924 and over time introduced draconian rule in Kurdish areas, burning villages, displacing people, and confiscating their property. (Although U.S. intelligence was always confident that Turkey could handle any challenge posed by the Kurds, a 1971 CIA report conceded that Turkish policies, especially those preventing the use of the Kurdish language, were at the root of Kurdish unrest.) Iran similarly banned Kurdish dialects in the 1930s. In Syria, the central government not only prohibited the teaching and learning of Kurdish but also placed restrictions on Kurdish landownership. And beginning in the 1960s, Damascus revoked the citizenship of tens of thousands of Syrian Kurds, rendering them stateless. All across the Middle East, Kurdish areas were economically neglected and marginalized.

In the face of this repression, the Kurds have succeeded in preserving and even strengthening their identity across generations. As the Kurdish scholar Hamit Bozarslan has observed, Kurds have been treated as a minority by the governments of Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Turkey, but they do not see themselves as one. They are a majority in their homeland, Kurdistan, which only through an accident of geopolitical history has been rendered an appendage of other states. And it is the Middle East's modern state system that has, historically, been the main obstacle to Kurdish national aspirations. A prescient 1960 intelligence report by the CIA argued that the Kurds of Iran and Iraq had all the necessary elements for autonomy—military strength, leadership, and the possibility of material support from an outside power, the Soviet Union. “Only the relative stability of parent governments,” the report noted, “stands in the way of active Kurdish separatism.”

TWO STEPS FORWARD, ONE STEP BACK

For most of the twentieth century, the only possible path to Kurdish autonomy (or independence, for that matter) ran through state failure. And in effect, this is exactly what has transpired over the past two decades. If the Kurds today have a glimmer of hope in Iraq and Syria, it is because of the collapse of authority in Baghdad and Damascus. In

particular, the actions of the United States—its support of the Kurds following the Persian Gulf War, its 2003 overthrow of Saddam and subsequent occupation of Iraq, and its more recent efforts to combat ISIS in Syria—have created the conditions for the revival of Kurdish political aspirations. Washington, unintentionally and in service of its own strategic needs, has midwifed Kurdish nationalism.

American military and political engagement with the Kurds began in earnest with the 1990–91 Gulf War. After the Iraqi army was evicted from Kuwait, it turned its guns on the Kurds and Shiites who had responded to U.S. President George H. W. Bush's call to rise up against Baghdad.

Faced with the possibility of a humanitarian crisis, the United States, with support from France and the United Kingdom, declared a no-fly zone over the Kurdish regions of northern Iraq. Protected by the no-fly zone, the Iraqi Kurds were able to carve out regional autonomy, founding the KRG in 1992. Iraqi Kurdistan became a bastion of pro-American sentiment in the country, especially after the United States' invasion in 2003, promoting further U.S.-Kurdish cooperation. Kurdish forces allied with U.S. troops in the initial war against Saddam, and in the ensuing years, Iraqi Kurdistan provided an anchor of stability as the rest of the country descended into civil war.

The founding of the KRG provided an important psychological boost to the Kurds, not just in Iraq but across the rest of the Middle East, too. It demonstrated that Kurds could govern themselves and secure international recognition. It also began to reshape Kurdish relations with other states. Although Turkey has traditionally disapproved of Kurdish demands for autonomy, the Turkish government under Erdogan chose not to confront the KRG but to build political and economic links with it instead. The landlocked Iraqi Kurds needed a channel for diplomacy and commerce—especially oil exports—and Ankara was happy to provide one. In 2010, Turkey opened a consulate in the KRG's capital, Erbil. Then, in 2012, the KRG and Turkey signed a deal to construct an oil pipeline from Iraqi Kurdistan to the Mediterranean. By 2018, some 400,000 barrels of KRG oil were reaching the Turkish port of Ceyhan every day. Ankara has provided an economic lifeline to the KRG, granting it the breathing room to consolidate itself in Iraq. For a time, Erdogan also profited domestically, as Turkish Kurds close to the KRG's president, Masoud Barzani, began voting for Erdogan's party in Turkish elections.

Confident of his Kurdish bona fides, in 2009, Erdogan launched a domestic peace process with the PKK.

Yet soon, another U.S. action was to unintentionally change the Kurds' position in the Middle East. In 2014, the Obama administration began a bombing campaign to prevent Kobani, a Syrian Kurdish town on the Turkish border, from falling to ISIS. At the time, ISIS had just swept through northern Iraq and Syria, capturing large stretches of territory, including Iraq's second-largest city, Mosul. Washington's decision to protect Kobani elicited frenzied objections from Erdogan, since the United States would be directly supporting the YPG, which had close ties with the PKK in Turkey. The U.S. partnership with the YPG was a battlefield success, and the Kurds' eventual victory at Kobani became a turning point in the fight against ISIS. But this very success began to ring alarm bells in Ankara.

For Erdogan, a U.S.-YPG alliance represented a game changer for the region. What the Turkish president feared most was the emergence of a second KRG, this one in Syria. After all, the KRG itself was the product of a U.S. intervention that led to a civil war and the breakdown of central authority in Baghdad, culminating in the creation of a federal system in Iraq, with the KRG as a constituent element. With Syria already consumed by civil war, Ankara believed that Washington was on the verge of repeating what it had done in Iraq—that is, transforming

Syria into a federal state in which the Kurds would gain the right to govern themselves. Erdogan could not assent to federal arrangements in two neighboring countries, much less to a Syrian-Kurdish one closely linked to the PKK. In 2014, Erdogan abandoned his negotiations with the PKK and began a policy of outright conflict with both the Turkish and the Syrian Kurds. He sought to delegitimize all Kurdish political activity by associating it with the PKK, arresting large numbers of Kurdish activists and politicians.

But if the United States inadvertently disrupted Kurdish-Turkish relations, U.S. policy in Iraq and Syria, taken as a whole, has earned the Kurds an unprecedented degree of international legitimacy. France, the United Kingdom, and the United States have all extended diplomatic recognition to the KRG, as well as providing it

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with economic and other forms of support. And the Syrian Kurds, previously ignored by the outside world, have been able to raise their global profile thanks to their role in the fight against ISIS. This recognition has come not only from Western powers. In a draft proposal for a new Syrian constitution, put forward in 2017 through the Astana peace process, Russia suggested two important concessions to the Kurds: dropping the word “Arab” from the name Syrian Arab Republic and creating a “culturally autonomous” region in the country’s northeast, where children would be educated in both Arabic and Kurdish. These concessions were rejected by Damascus, and there is no guarantee that they will ever be granted. But their inclusion in the Russian proposal demonstrated that despite the Syrian Kurds’ precarious position, outside powers are beginning to recognize them as an autonomous force to be reckoned with.

THE KURDISH RENAISSANCE

Kurds mobilized throughout the twentieth century to win cultural autonomy and some degree of self-rule from central governments. For nearly 100 years, rebellions and resistance constituted the backdrop of ordinary Kurdish life. Now, this is changing, as Kurds have acquired governing experience—not just in the KRG but also in numerous municipalities in Syria and Turkey. This, in turn, has caused Kurdish identity to begin to coalesce across national boundaries.

So far, the Kurds’ experience in power has been fraught with problems. The KRG, for instance, is on the path to becoming a petrostate, dependent on oil sales and beset by corruption, patronage, and the outsize power of its two leading political families, the Barzanis and the Talabanis. The political wing of the YPG, the Democratic Union Party, has succeeded in efficiently providing services in the areas of Syria that it controls, but it has also constructed a one-party proto-state. And in Turkey, although representatives of the left-wing, Kurdish-dominated Peoples’ Democratic Party (HDP) won 102 municipalities in the July 2016 elections, Erdogan has since removed 94 of them from office. He has vowed to act similarly after the next round of municipal elections this March. Future HDP success may even motivate Erdogan to have the party shut down by the Constitutional Court, as Turkey’s generals did to the HDP’s predecessors.

But even if Kurdish self-government has not been an unalloyed success, it has been a boon for Kurdish culture and language across the

region. This is especially true in Iraqi Kurdistan, which boasts its own Kurdish-language institutions, including schools and media organizations. Despite challenges such as the existence of two distinct Kurdish dialects, which roughly correspond to the KRG's political divisions—Kurmanji is spoken in areas dominated by the Kurdistan Democratic Party, whereas Sorani is spoken in those run by the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan—the KRG has established a rich Kurdish cultural environment in the territory it controls. There are now hundreds of Kurdish television channels, websites, news agencies, and other cultural products, such as novels and movies. And in Syria, where for decades Damascus banned even private education in Kurdish, the Democratic Union Party has formally introduced Kurdish-language education in the areas under its control. After nearly a century of attempting to prevent the dissemination of Kurdish language and culture, central governments have now decisively lost that battle.

Iraq's Kurdish-language renaissance has in turn stimulated a renewal of Kurdish self-awareness in transnational social media and diaspora communities. The Kurdish diaspora is especially strong in Europe, to which over one million Kurds have immigrated over the past six decades—initially as guest workers and then as refugees fleeing repression. Free to organize and collaborate with other civil society groups, Europe's Kurds have raised public awareness of Kurdish issues and put pressure on national governments in Germany, France, and the Netherlands—as well as on the EU as a whole—to change their policies toward Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Turkey. In this, they have been aided by the rise of Kurdish-language social media.

The flourishing of Kurdish has extended even to Iran and Turkey, where the Kurds have relatively little power. During Erdogan's brief opening to the Kurds between 2009 and 2014, there was a proliferation of Kurdish-language institutes, publications, and private schools. The resulting euphoria did not last long; by the end of 2017, almost all of these had been eliminated by Ankara, which went as far as systematically taking down all signs in Kurdish, traffic signals as well as signs for schools and municipal buildings. But not everything has been lost. Some Turkish universities still allow students to study Kurdish, and the Turkish state has created a TV channel dedicated to official broadcasts in Kurdish. In Iran, meanwhile, the government has, since 2015, allowed optional high school and university Kurdish-language classes in the country's Kurdish-majority regions.

MAKING A NATION

The increasing fluidity of physical boundaries between Kurds, the creation of Kurdish-run governments such as the KRG, the emergence of strong diaspora communities (especially in Europe), and the rise of Kurdish-language social media and cultural products—all have combined to strengthen pan-Kurdish identity. Today, Kurds from Iran, Iraq, Syria, Turkey, and the diaspora are all engaged in a common conversation. They do not speak in unison, but the days of Kurd-on-Kurd political violence, which flared up in Iraq during the 1990s, are gone, in large part because the Kurdish public will not tolerate it. The Kurds have acquired all the attributes of a nation, except sovereignty.

This newfound unity is reflected in the emergence of pan-Kurdish military units. Turkish Kurds have fought with the YPG in Syria, just as Syrian and Turkish Kurds have been integrated into the armed forces of the KRG. Diaspora Kurds have also volunteered to fight, particularly with the YPG. The PKK commands armed forces in Iraq, Turkey, and Syria and in 2004 created an affiliate in Iran. The erosion of intra-Kurdish boundaries was greatly accelerated by ISIS' advance through Iraq and Syria in the summer of 2014, which imperiled Kurds in both countries and fostered pan-ethnic solidarity. Faced with a genuine existential peril, the Kurds put their own fractious politics aside and appeared as one. And the more that they do so, the more they will begin to reshape the politics of the Middle East.

In both Iraq and Syria, the fragility of central governments provides Kurds with an opportunity for self-rule that is still unthinkable in Iran and Turkey. This process is much further along in Iraq, where the KRG's autonomy is protected by the constitution. Yet the KRG is still vulnerable, as Baghdad's reaction to the disastrous 2017 independence referendum demonstrated. In Syria, the Kurds may have an opportunity to reach a deal with the Assad regime that would grant them a degree of regional autonomy. Such a result is far from guaranteed, however, and a U.S. withdrawal from the country could leave the Syrian Kurds at the mercy of Damascus and Ankara. Even so, any Syrian or Turkish campaign to eliminate the YPG, however bloody, would engender a backlash among Kurds across the Middle East. Nothing builds national consciousness like a David taking on a Goliath.

In Turkey, the Kurds have made a great deal of progress over the past decade, despite the recent deterioration in their relations with the central government. Erdogan's efforts to sabotage the HDP's electoral

chances—imprisoning candidates, imposing media blackouts, and harassing Kurdish voters—have not prevented the party from entering the Turkish parliament in three successive elections. (Many HDP politicians, including the party's leader, Selahattin Demirtas, are even now languishing in jail.) The new Turkish constitution, passed by referendum in April 2017, has transformed Turkey into a presidential system and neutered its parliament, so the HDP's influence, despite its significant number of deputies, is greatly limited.

Nonetheless, the fact that the party came in third in the June 2018 elections, behind only the ruling party and the main opposition party, is an indication that the Kurdish issue has been institutionalized in Turkish politics. The HDP's success will encourage the mobilization of Kurdish civil society and, eventually, the development of Kurdish ties with others in the Turkish opposition. And the proliferation of Kurdish organizations in Europe may help to move European attitudes toward Turkey in a more pro-Kurdish direction. It is the Turkish Kurds who, although divided between a military wing (the PKK) and a political wing (the HDP), are in the best position to assume a leadership role for Kurds across the region. This is because they, unlike the other Kurdish communities, are part of a country embedded in Western institutions. Even if Turkey's practices diverge from Western norms, Turkish Kurds have benefited from exposure to the values and principles associated with the West.

The case of the Iranian Kurds is the most opaque, given Tehran's strained relations with the outside world and the secretive nature of the regime itself. Yet events in other parts of Kurdistan are influencing developments in Iran's Kurdish regions. Iran has always pursued a multipronged policy toward the Kurds. Domestically, it has repressed them, including through the liberal use of capital punishment against activists. At the same time, it has forged ties with the KRG in a successful effort to control Iranian Kurdish groups residing in Iraqi Kurdistan. Yet as Iran finds itself overstretched in the region, its leaders worried about regime stability and the country's worsening economy, the central government may come to see the Kurds as an even greater threat. Iranian Kurds have had little experience with self-rule, having lived for decades under a government that interferes in all aspects of daily life. But Iran, like Syria, is a brittle state. Change will start at the center. The more pan-Kurdish identity and confidence grow, the more likely it is that Iranian Kurds will be prepared for instability in Tehran.

Finally, the United States remains the single most important actor when it comes to determining the future of the Kurds, particularly in Iraq and Syria. Trump may be ending the U.S. partnership with the YPG, but the Syrian Kurds have nonetheless benefited from the relationship, as they were previously considered by outside powers to be the least important Kurdish population in the region. Now they are on the map: hours after Trump announced the United States' withdrawal from Syria, a spokesperson for the French foreign ministry claimed that France would "ensure the security" of the Syrian Kurds. Yet Washington's move will force the Syrian Kurds to negotiate with Damascus earlier than they had planned to, and from a position of relative weakness. A full U.S. withdrawal, moreover, could cause a destabilizing scramble among regional powers in Syria, with disastrous results for the Kurds.

Concerned about these repercussions, U.S. officials, including Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and National Security Adviser John Bolton, have warned Turkey not to intervene against the Kurds in northern Syria. Having stumbled into the Middle East's perpetual Kurdish conundrum, the United States is finding it hard to extricate itself. Washington will have to employ all its persuasive powers to ensure that the Kurds are not crushed by Ankara, Damascus, and other regional powers. That, in turn, will require a degree of interest and policy coherence not previously evident in the Trump administration. But to the extent that the United States values democracy, human rights, and minority rights, it should support Kurds across the Middle East within the existing nation-state system. Even if Trump is unwilling to expend much political capital to support the Kurds, there are other centers of power and influence in the United States, such as media and civil society organizations, that can do so.

Whatever happens in the near future, however, there can be no going back to the status quo that obtained only a few decades ago, before the United States' interventions in the region set the Kurds on a fundamentally new path. Despite frequent setbacks, continued repression, and over a century without a homeland, the Kurds are finally emerging as a unified people. A Kurdish state may be a long way off, but if one ever does emerge, there will be a nation there to populate it. ●

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