

“Prolonged instability and violence or state collapse in Syria and Iraq, as well as major changes in Turkish attitudes, may produce the right conditions for the establishment of a Kurdish state or new autonomous regions.”

Kurdish Nationalism’s Moment of Truth?

MICHAEL EPPEL

The moment long awaited by Kurdish nationalists may have arrived. The conditions that arose in Iraq following the fall of Saddam Hussein’s regime in 2003, the deterioration of the state in Syria as a result of the civil war raging there since 2011, and changes in traditional Turkish positions regarding the Kurds in Turkey and the autonomous Kurdish region in Iraq have created a historic opportunity. The Kurds are now closer than ever to establishing an independent state or new autonomous regions within the framework of the states that control the territories they inhabit.

Resurgent Nationalism

Third in a series

The creation of a large independent state is the ultimate vision of the Kurdish national movement. Nonetheless, the leaders of the main Kurdish political forces in Iraq, Syria, Turkey, and Iran have repeatedly declared that their objective is the establishment of autonomous Kurdish regions, disavowing any intention of seceding from the existing states. In Iraq, where the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) rules the autonomous region that has existed since 1991, Kurdish leaders profess their loyalty to Baghdad while at the same time making that loyalty contingent on the preservation of broad autonomy. Since 2003, their strategy has aimed to fortify a *de facto* “state within a state.”

In Syria, Salih Muslim Muhammad, the leader of the Democratic Union Party (PYD)—the strongest and most active Kurdish political force in that country—stated several times in 2013 and 2014 that the Kurds’ objective is the establishment of an autonomous area within the Syrian state. The principal Kurdish nationalist political forces in

Turkey, including the radical leftist organization known as the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK), also speak of autonomy and equality for the Kurds within the Turkish state. Mustafa Karasu, one of the PKK’s senior leaders, declared in May 2014 that the party had abandoned the aim of creating an independent state and is instead seeking the democratization of Turkey, meaning recognition of the Kurds’ right to self-rule. In the same month, leaders of the Free Life Party of Kurdistan (PJAK), the main Kurdish nationalist group in Iran, declared that their new policy aimed to achieve “democratic autonomy for Iranian Kurds.”

Since the summer of 2014, an offensive by the jihadist Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) has threatened the Kurdish areas in both countries, and complicated their relations with Turkey. But the Kurds’ central role in the international military response to ISIS has also strengthened the nationalists’ position.

A STATELESS PEOPLE

The Kurds, numbering 25 to 35 million, are the world’s largest population group with a developed modern national movement but without a state. Although Kurdish distinctiveness and the signifiers *kurd* and *akrad* have existed in the discourse of the Kurds and among their neighbors since ancient times and certainly since the beginnings of Islam and the Arab conquest, there has never been an independent Kurdish state in Kurdistan at any time in recorded history.

The development of social strata with a modern education and the emergence of a national movement among the Kurds were slow and limited during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This sluggish pace resulted from historical as well as geopolitical conditions. Kurdistan was a landlocked area divided among strong states, the centers of which were in Anatolia, Iran, and

MICHAEL EPPEL is a professor of Middle Eastern history at the University of Haifa.

Mesopotamia. Others inhibiting factors included the tribal-feudal fragmentation of Kurdish society, which prevented the formation of a state; the absence of a hegemonic Kurdish dialect and the slow development of the written language due to the historical dominance of Arabic, Turkish, and Persian; and a relative detachment from direct modern Western influences, which primarily reached Kurdistan in the context of the Ottoman state's modernization in the nineteenth century.

At the end of World War I, when the map of the Middle East was redrawn, the Kurdish national movement, then in its infancy, did not succeed in obtaining an independent state. British interests (despite the support of then-Colonial Secretary Winston Churchill for a Kurdish state), as well as the weakness and fragmentation of the Kurdish political forces, led to the division of Kurdistan within the boundaries of Turkey, Iran, and the new Arab states of Iraq and Syria created by Britain and France.

Throughout the twentieth century the chances of establishing a Kurdish state remained slim, given strong objections by the states that controlled Kurdish lands, and the preference shown by world powers for cultivating relations with those states rather than supporting the national movement. Ever since World War I, the possibility of an independent Kurdish state, or even of Kurdish autonomy, had been the nightmare of the states among which Kurdistan was divided. Admittedly, in cases where conflicts developed between those states, their regimes did not hesitate to support Kurdish tribal revolts and political forces that acted against their rivals.

Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Syria shared a common interest in the prevention of a Kurdish state. Their fears of Kurdish nationalism on the one hand, and of Russia and communism on the other, were the undeclared motives for two regional agreements: the Saadabad Pact of 1937 and the Baghdad Pact of 1955. They objected even to Kurdish autonomy within the confines of any of their territories, fearing that this would be the first step toward an independent state, strengthening separatist and irredentist trends throughout the region. The creation of a Kurdish state would have torn extensive territories away from those countries, weakening their status and regimes, and it likely

would have incited other minorities to demand autonomy or independence. Turkey and Turkish nationalism since Mustafa Kemal Atatürk went so far as to deny the very existence of a Kurdish people and identity, and made violent efforts to suppress or even eradicate the Kurdish culture and language.

Various countries around the world pursued their own interests in maintaining relations with the states that were hostile toward the Kurds. Many of those countries, with minorities that had separatist or autonomist movements of their own, feared the precedent that might be set by the establishment of a Kurdish state.

ENCOURAGING SIGNS

Since the end of the global Cold War in 1990–91, significant changes have taken place in the conditions that, throughout the twentieth century, prevented the creation of a Kurdish state or of autonomous Kurdish areas. Some

of the world's multinational states have crumbled, and minorities have established independent states or autonomous regions within existing states. Developments such as the disintegration of the Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia,

and Yugoslavia encouraged the Kurds. They followed with great interest the establishment of South Sudan, which broke away from Sudan and achieved independence in 2011, facing no real opposition from the Arab states or any other country.

The strengthening of movements for autonomy or independence in Catalonia and the Basque region in Spain, in Scotland and Belgium, in Quebec in Canada, and in the Philippines, and the legitimacy that these trends have achieved, reflect a change in the ideological climate, in the characteristics of the international arena, and in the relationship between society and the state in the age of globalization. These trends strengthen the Kurdish claims to autonomy. The Kurds have closely watched the separatist movements in Scotland and Catalonia.

The opposition of Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and the Arab world to the establishment of a Kurdish state continues to constitute a severe obstacle. However, the chances for a state or for more autonomous regions have increased following the consolida-

*The weakening of nation-states
throughout the Arab world since
2011 is creating auspicious
conditions for Kurdish nationalism.*

tion of strong, stable Kurdish autonomy in northern Iraq, as well as growing nationalist sentiment among the Kurds in Turkey, the beginnings of a dialogue between the Turkish government and the Kurds, and the rise of Kurdish self-rule amid civil war in Syria. The weakening of nation-states throughout the Arab world since 2011, together with the strengthening of worldwide autonomist and federalist trends since the end of the Cold War, is creating auspicious conditions for Kurdish nationalism.

AUTONOMY IN IRAQ

The KRG in Iraq has nurtured connections with autonomous regions and federalist movements around the world. At the same time, the Kurds are encouraging those Sunni and Shia forces that seek their own autonomous regions and a federal system in Iraq. An autonomous Shia region in southern Iraq and a Sunni area to the north and west of Baghdad, as well as the transformation of Iraq into a federal or confederal state, would reinforce the autonomy of the Kurdish region relative to the central government in Baghdad.

When Hussein's regime was overthrown in 2003, it appeared that the Kurds' historic opportunity to declare an independent state, at least in Iraqi Kurdistan, had come. However, the Kurdish national leadership in Iraq—Massoud Barzani, head of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), and Jalal Talabani, leader of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK)—felt that such a move would provoke a harsh and uncompromising reaction by Turkey and Iran. Kurdistan, lacking an outlet to the sea, would not be able to export oil or receive foreign aid without the consent and cooperation of at least one of the surrounding countries that opposed an independent Kurdish state: Turkey, Syria, and Iran.

Thus, despite broad-based popular support for independence, the Kurdish leadership in Iraq took the realistic course of building autonomy within the framework of the Iraqi state. But it has also kept open the option of seceding from Iraq and establishing an independent state. So as not to arouse a Turkish and Iranian response, KRG spokespersons have made sure to declare their support for the continued unity of Iraq. In April 2014, Barzani affirmed that the Kurdish aim is

broad autonomy within Iraq. However, he warned that if the Iraqi government tried to limit this autonomy, the Kurds would consider an independent state or confederation.

TIES WITH TURKEY

The KRG is forging closer economic and political ties with Turkey in order to reinforce its status vis-à-vis the central government in Baghdad, but also to assuage Turkish fears of the Kurdish national movement and to strengthen Ankara's interest in the preservation of the autonomous region in Iraq. Turkey's opposition to Kurdish autonomy in Iraq and its threats to invade the region had posed a major obstacle to its transformation into an independent state, but since 2005 they have worked on improving their relationship. In light of the growing Iranian influence on Baghdad and the tightening of economic bonds between Iraq and Iran, Turkey's interest in improving its position in Iraq and its economic and political ties with the KRG has increased.

More than 1,000 Turkish companies are operating in Iraqi Kurdistan and benefiting from rapid development and construction. The region is likely to become Turkey's principal

source of gas and oil, and Turkey will be the main route for KRG energy exports to markets worldwide. At the end of 2013, the KRG and Ankara reached an agreement on Kurdish exports of oil and gas. In 2014, they inaugurated a new oil pipeline to the Turkish port of Ceyhan. Both the KRG and Turkey are exerting pressure on the Iraqi government to accept the agreement and recognize it as commensurate with Iraq's constitution and sovereignty.

Turkey continues to oppose Kurdish secession from Iraq and to regard the establishment of a Kurdish state as contradictory to its strategic interests. In practice, though, the Kurds see progress toward independent oil and gas exports as a significant move toward building a thriving economy and reducing their dependence on the Iraqi government, a trend that reinforces their autonomy and preserves the option of independence. The strengthening of the economic relationship and interdependence between the Iraqi Kurdish region and Turkey constrains Baghdad's ability to exert pressure on the KRG.

ISIS has enabled the Kurds to achieve international recognition and cemented their status as an independent political and military force.

The Kurdish leadership in Iraq has an interest in successful negotiations between the Turkish government and the Kurds in Turkey. A renewed struggle would confront the KRG with the dilemma of maneuvering between popular desire to support the Kurdish national struggle in Turkey and the KRG's interests in preserving the relationship with Ankara.

Following the establishment of the Atatürk regime after World War I, Turkey negated the very existence of Kurdish nationality and suppressed the Kurds' culture and language. The PKK launched an armed separatist campaign that has left more than 40,000 dead since the 1980s. But over the past decade, the Turkish government has shifted under Prime Minister (now President) Recep Tayyip Erdoğan toward dialogue with the Kurds. The government initiated informal talks with Abdullah Öcalan, the imprisoned PKK leader. Erdoğan's attempt to increase the flexibility of Turkey's position has inspired the Kurds to hope they are within reach of their objectives of equal rights in Turkey and a regional autonomy that will reflect their national culture and identity.

An arrangement acceptable to the Kurds will require Turkey to make far-reaching compromises, including profound changes in the discourse of Turkish nationalism and the Kemalist ideology on which the Turkish state has been based since World War I. To reach its goal of achieving the status of a regional power, Turkey must find a way to resolve its conflict with the Kurds. This process depends on Turkey's ability not only to accept Kurdish autonomy within its borders, but also to cultivate its relations with the Kurdish regions in Iraq and Syria, or with a Kurdish state, if and when such a state is established in northern Iraq.

SYRIAN RIVALRIES

Amid the civil war in Syria that began in 2011, the Kurds have achieved control of northern areas along the border with Turkey, which they call Rojava. The armed wing of the PYD, the People's Protection Units (YPG), is the strongest Kurdish force in Syria. The PYD's main rival is the Kurdistan Democratic Party in Syria (KDP-S), affiliated with Barzani's KDP in Iraq. The KDP-S leads the Kurdish National Council, a coalition of Kurdish parties in Syria that oppose the PYD.

In July 2012, Barzani made efforts to foster reconciliation and coordination among the rival Kurdish forces in Syria. He convened a confer-

ence in Erbil, the capital of Iraqi Kurdistan, at which the Syrian parties agreed to establish a Supreme Council. This move would have given Barzani and the KDP the prestige of pan-Kurdish leadership. However, the rivalry among the Syrian groupings has flared up again, becoming violent at times.

The PYD has strong connections with the PKK in Turkey. PYD activists in Syria fly the PKK's flag and openly express their support for the group. They have a close ideological relationship, sharing radical leftist tendencies. Whereas the vital interest of the KRG and especially the KDP lies in cultivating close relations with Turkey and allaying its anxiety over the Kurdish national movement, the relationship between Turkey and the PYD is tense and fraught with suspicion, due to the latter's close ties with the PKK.

In November 2013, the PYD declared self-rule in Syria's Kurdish regions, and in the beginning of 2014 it announced the establishment of three autonomous cantons. The Kurds in Syria control three separate regions, in which they constitute the majority, along the Turkish and Iraqi borders. The fact that the Syrian Kurds as of October 2014 had not achieved territorial contiguity creates a strategic and geopolitical problem for them. The PYD declaration of autonomy met with resistance and criticism from other parties in Syria that belong to the Kurdish National Council. The KRG also rejected the declaration. But the other main forces in Iraqi Kurdistan—the Change Movement (Gorran) and the PUK—voiced their support for the autonomous government declared by the PYD.

DIFFERENT PATHS

Since World War I, the Kurdish nationalist political movements have developed in different ways in each of the states that divide Kurdistan. The Kurdish region in Iraq is the most advanced in terms of political autonomy, and its leadership has aspirations for power or at least seniority in the wider Kurdish nation. It has the advantage of oil profits, whereas the Turkish, Syrian, and Iranian parts of Kurdistan suffer from poverty, underdevelopment, and discrimination. However, the Iraqi Kurds have a population of only 5 million to 5.5 million, compared with the 12 to 18 million Kurds in Turkey, 6 to 8 million in Iran, and 1.8 to 2.5 million in Syria. The Iraqi Kurdish leadership, which acquired a central status within the Kurdish national movement over the course of the twentieth century, will have to become

accustomed to a situation in which other power centers—each with its own viewpoint and perception of interests—arise and flourish in Turkey, Syria, and Iran.

These differences contribute to the complexity and unpredictability of political relations among the Kurdish regions. In the development of the national movement in Iraq, tribal or clannish solidarities and affiliations have been interwoven with modern political patterns. The political leadership of the Kurds in Turkey is less influenced by these tribal affinities, given the Turkish suppression of any expression of Kurdishness, of the Kurdish language and culture, and of Kurdish nationalism.

The Turkish state's co-optation of the tribal landowners, or *aghas*, in the post-World War I economic system caused social alienation between them and the peasants, deepening the landowners' investment in the state and turning them against modern Kurdish nationalism. This socioeconomic situation was the background to the revival of Kurdish nationalism in Turkey in the 1980s by a new, nontribal element—educated, modernized, radical leftist activists, many of them from poor rural families. They grew up amid social ferment aroused by discrimination and repression of Kurdish identity and national aspirations.

Such divergent political perspectives, interests, sociopolitical backgrounds, and social visions shape the relations among the KDP in Iraq, the PKK

in Turkey, and the PYD in Syria. Rojava, the Syrian Kurdistan, became a prize for which the KDP and its Kurdish Syrian allies contended against the PKK and its Syrian ally, the PYD. It is up to the leadership of the various factions to reserve their domestic rivalries for the political field and avoid sliding into intra-Kurdish violence. Whatever the outcome of the civil war that is now raging in Syria, the Kurds will have to struggle for the establishment of their autonomy and its recognition by the state. A shift toward a federal regime in Syria could prove extremely beneficial for the Kurds.

If Ankara pursues further reform on the Kurdish issue, that could create conditions favoring the establishment of autonomy for the Kurds in Turkey. But any transformation in deeply rooted anti-Kurdish attitudes will require significant changes in the conception of Turkish nationalism that has prevailed since Atatürk's time.

IDENTITY POLITICS

If they can make such progress, the Kurds will build a system of “states within states” and establish relations among themselves on the basis of the Kurdish national identity. The creation of Kurdish autonomous regions with confederative status in the framework of existing states could serve as a catalyst for the decentralization and democratization of the regimes in Syria, Iraq, Turkey, and Iran, and for the possible development of federalist systems in these states.

A Kurdish state would be the fulfillment of the nationalist movement's vision. The overwhelming majority of participants in a referendum conducted in Iraqi Kurdistan in 2005 supported the creation of an independent Kurdish state. Nonetheless, in light of the political, social, and linguistic splits and rivalries among the Kurds, and given the separate development of the Kurdish political forces in the various parts of Kurdistan, the establishment of a large state encompassing the Kurdish areas in Turkey, Syria, Iraq, and Iran will require a complex process, fraught with tension, which could easily escalate into violence among the various Kurdish forces.

In 2012 and 2013, relations deteriorated between the KRG and the government of Iraq, headed by Prime Minister Nuri Kamal al-Maliki, primarily with regard to the powers granted to the Kurds for oil production and export. Maliki ordered an end to monthly fiscal transfers to the KRG after it announced that it would continue independent oil exports. During this crisis, Kurdish statements

From the archives of *Current History*...

“Khomeini returned to Iran to one of the most tumultuously adoring welcomes any human being has ever received. His strength was so profound that he could have acted with benevolent generosity toward any opponent—from the Shah's sycophancy to the secular left. But this was not to be. The entire world witnessed Khomeini's Islamic ideology take form. What they witnessed was a moral absolutism narrowly and often brutally expressed.”

Richard W. Cottam
“Revolutionary Iran”
January 1980

HISTORY IN THE MAKING
100
years
1914 - 2014

in favor of establishing an independent state grew more forceful. Barzani declared in early July 2014 that the Kurds wanted independence and asked the Kurdistan parliament to prepare a referendum. The Kurds see the increased flexibility of Turkish policy with regard to oil exports, starting in 2013 and especially since May 2014, as a means of reducing their economic dependence on the Iraqi government. However, the KRG's efforts to sell its oil independently in world markets have met obstacles. The Iraqi government used legal claims to block transactions. Most nations and oil companies, including American ones, have refrained from buying Kurdish oil.

Meanwhile, Turkey, Iran, and the United States have made it clear to the Kurdish leaders that they still oppose secession from Iraq. Notwithstanding Turkey's increased receptiveness to Kurdish autonomy in Iraq, and despite some Turkish analysts who advocate reconsidering the objection in principle to the establishment of an independent Kurdish state, Ankara remained steadfast in its opposition.

THE JIHADIST ONSLAUGHT

In June 2014, an offensive by ISIS captured Mosul, the biggest Sunni city in Iraq, demonstrating the weakness of the Iraqi Army and bringing the country to the verge of collapse. It also created an opportunity for the Kurds to annex the northern city of Kirkuk, along with its oil fields, and other disputed areas. In its early stages, the ISIS offensive was interpreted by the KRG leadership, and particularly by the KDP, as just one more chapter in Iraq's long-running Shia-Sunni sectarian struggle.

At the beginning of August, however, ISIS attacked the Kurds. On August 2, ISIS opened a murderous offensive against the Yazidis, a Kurdish minority sect (whereas most Kurds are Sunni, the Yazidis practice a syncretic religion based on a blend of Zoroastrianism and mystical elements of Islam, Christianity, and Assyrian traditions), who fled to Mount Sinjar. The Kurdish military force, the *peshmerga*, suffered heavy losses and retreated from the isolated mountain. On August 6, ISIS captured the towns of Makhmour and Gwer, the entry points to Erbil, and advanced toward the city's airport. ISIS fighters used American arms that they had seized from the Iraqi Army in Mosul. As it became clear that ISIS posed a severe danger

to the Kurds, the United States began airstrikes against the group's forces outside Erbil.

With the collapse of the Iraqi Army, the *peshmerga* were the only force holding back the advancing Islamists. Until August, the United States had declined to supply the Kurds with arms, insisting that such military assistance would have to come through the Iraqi government in Baghdad—which vetoed any supply of arms and matériel to the *peshmerga* forces by third parties, while refusing to provide them itself. But the weakness of Iraq's army and the threat posed by ISIS led the United States to change its position and begin to supply arms to the Kurds, over the protests of the Baghdad government. In August, France became the first European state to send military aid and weapons to the *peshmerga*.

The regional and global threat represented by ISIS enabled the Kurds to achieve international recognition and cemented their status as an independent political and military force. French President François Hollande, Italian Prime Minister Matteo

Renzi, and foreign ministers and emissaries of many nations visited Erbil and held meetings with KRG leaders. Britain, Germany, Denmark, the Czech Republic, Canada, Australia, and other countries have also expressed their support for the

Kurds and sent them arms and military equipment.

Nonetheless, despite the improvement in the status of the Kurds, who have proved themselves the strongest and most efficient force capable of taking on ISIS despite setbacks in the August battles, there has been no change in the positions of Turkey, the United States, and Iran with regard to preserving the integrity of Iraq—that is, preventing the establishment of an independent Kurdish state. In view of the need for cooperation with the Shia and Sunni forces in Iraq, the Kurds have tempered overly enthusiastic statements about independence.

Given this state of affairs, the realistic alternative open to the Kurds is to continue to promote their *de facto* independence, without seceding from Iraq, and to pursue efforts toward the establishment of a confederal regime. KRG Prime Minister Nachirwan Barzani declared in September 2014 that the Kurds prefer coexistence in a federal Iraq. The declaration of an independent Kurdish state will have to wait until international conditions are more favorable.

There has never been an independent Kurdish state at any time in recorded history.

ON THE BRINK

In the beginning of July, the ISIS forces in Syria attacked the small city of Kobani and the surrounding Kurdish villages, near the Turkish border. Although YPG fighters repelled the first offensive against the city, ISIS occupied the villages. The Kurdish population of the area, some 150,000 to 200,000, fled to Turkey and to the Kurdish region in Iraq. ISIS besieged the city in September and October, but Turkey was reluctant to come to Kobani's aid because of its fear that supporting the PYD would strengthen the PKK. Ankara's inaction aroused anger among the Kurds in Turkey, leading to protests demanding that volunteers be allowed to cross the border to reinforce the Kurdish fighters in Kobani. Turkish police opened fire on the Kurdish demonstrators, and the Turkish Air Force attacked PKK bases in the mountains of the southeast.

In October, Ankara allowed peshmerga fighters from the Kurdish region in Iraq to cross through Turkey in order to join the battle in Kobani. The Turkish decision resulted from mounting international pressure on Ankara to take a more active role against ISIS. Continuing to refuse to assist Kobani in any way would also damage the peace process between Erdoğan and the Kurds in Turkey.

Massoud Barzani sponsored negotiations between the rival Kurdish forces in Syria, achieving an agreement calling for the PYD and the KDP-S to establish a common council to run the Kurdish cantons in Syria, to cooperate in the fighting against ISIS, and to allow the peshmerga

to join the defense of Kobani. The role of the Kurds in fighting ISIS, along with the ongoing Syrian civil war, is setting the stage for Kurdish autonomy in Syria.

These developments are creating an opportunity for historic change in the political and diplomatic situation of the Kurds. Prolonged instability and violence or state collapse in Syria and Iraq, as well as major changes in Turkish attitudes, may produce the right conditions for the establishment of a Kurdish state or new autonomous regions. The new threat of ISIS and the central role of the Kurds in the international struggle against the group are facilitating the growth of confederal relations between the Kurdish region in Iraq and the government in Baghdad. The Iraqi Kurds are using the opportunity to strengthen their state within a state, to gain wide international recognition of their quasi-independent status in Iraq, and to retain the option of declaring a fully independent state when favorable conditions prevail in the international arena.

The spread of federalizing, decentralizing political change across the Middle East would allow for the existence of Kurdish regions enjoying broad autonomy or de facto independence within the framework of federal or confederal states. In any case, a political solution for Kurdish national aspirations, whether an independent state or autonomous federal regions, is indispensable for the stabilization and peaceful development of the Middle East. ■