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The Kurdish Policy Imperative

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A brass band at Erbil International Airport, Iraqi Kurdistan
Source: KRG

Summary

- Kurds have struggled for decades to mobilize and gain international attention. Now, for the first time, some Kurdish interests are converging with the regional designs of prominent members of the international community.
- The consolidation of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq is of huge importance. Kurds in Iraq now have an unprecedented opportunity to define their own future and influence other Kurds in the region.
- Another Turkish incursion into Iraq is likely to be futile but the threat has been raised because of the poor state of Turkish–US relations, the tension between the AK Party and the Turkish military, and Turkish opposition to a successful KRG.
- Kurdish political demands remain limited, but there has been a notable strengthening of Kurdish self-perception and aspirations at a mass level.
- The intricate web of relationships between Kurds and regional states means that the future of the Middle East is closely tied to Kurdish futures.
- Regional and Western policy-makers need to reappraise the role of the Kurds in Iraq and Turkey and how Kurds in Syria and Iran interact with their governments and are influenced by Kurdish developments in neighbouring states.

Introduction

Non-state actors present thorny problems for the international community. They do not fit neatly into the jigsaw of sovereign states that provides the primary framework of political order. Yet some situations in which non-state actors are involved cannot be ignored and present the international community with difficult choices. Rights of self-determination, for example, rarely trump the necessity of maintaining stability in regions of geopolitical importance. External intervention to protect the rights of non-state peoples is perhaps determined more by the anticipated benefits to the intervening state than by the basic impulse to protect people.

In the Middle East, problems associated with the claims made by different groups of peoples over tracts of territory commonly believed to constitute some form of historical homeland had a profound influence on the political development of the region in the twentieth century. The most prominent of these problems is the conflict between Palestinians and Israelis.

In comparison with the Palestinians, the Kurds have received considerably less attention. Conservative estimates of the size of the Kurdish population suggest a figure of around 30 million people – substantially more than the populations of Israel and Palestine combined. While they do not live in a space as sacredly coveted as the Palestinians, the land referred to by Kurds as Kurdistan is fertile, endowed with important natural resources and located in an area of great geopolitical significance. Furthermore, Kurds have a major influence on the four prominent states in which they mostly live: Turkey, Syria, Iraq and Iran.

Specifically 'Kurdish' aspirations and nationalism appear to be strengthening and are likely to affect the future development of these four states in significant ways. In addressing the intractable problems of the Middle East, international policy-makers need to pay more attention to the importance of the Kurds and consider how best to approach these non-state actors and the four state governments.

The transformation of the Kurdish position

In the aftermath of the First World War and the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, international support for a Kurdish state evaporated as promises were made and broken, states created and peoples divided largely because of imperial imperatives and ignorance of local conditions. Kurds paid a price for being relatively unknown in Western diplomatic circles and, unlike first the Zionists and then the Palestinians, were never championed by Western policy-makers. Compounding this was the perennial Kurdish problem of disunity. In the 1920s, when the

modern boundaries of the four states were created, Kurds failed to create or force national unity as Mustafa Kemal Atatürk did in Turkey or Reza Shah did in Persia/Iran. The Kurds did not possess the nationalist vision, military strength or leaders to challenge those promoting their own nationalist agenda (chiefly the Turks) or the designs of imperial powers (chiefly the British).

The sense of imagined community and nation has been a particular problem for the Kurds. While semi-independent Kurdish emirates existed in the Ottoman and Qajar Empires, the mountainous topography of Kurdistan was responsible for the development of a society whose political fissures mirrored its landscape. Kurds were late starters in the modern game of nationalism and the Great Powers found it easy to renege upon earlier promises of an independent Kurdish state. The Kurdish negotiators at the San Remo Conference in 1920 attempted to present their vision of Kurdistan – a huge arc of land stretching from the Mediterranean Sea to the Persian Gulf.¹ This immense 'greater Kurdistan' may have been seriously suggested, but it was ultimately a pipe-dream – albeit one that survives in the hearts and minds of pan-Kurdish nationalists. Instead, Kurdistan was divided. In a region already split between the Ottoman Empire and Persia, new boundaries were drawn in the post-1918 carve-up of the Middle East which created the modern-day territorial outlines of Syria, Iraq, and Turkey. In both geographic and political terms, the Kurds were consigned to the peripheries of states dominated by the narratives of Arabs, Turks and Iranians.

Early twentieth-century history provides a useful context for events taking place nearly a century later. In the 1920s, the interests of the Kurds did not coincide with the interests of the Great Powers and the Kurds could not match the organized and driven nationalist projects of their neighbours. The late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries have seen developments which question the durability of the post-1918 boundaries. Recent events have exposed the existence of Kurdish nationalist sentiments, which have developed irrespective, or in spite, of those same boundaries: Kurdish autonomous aspirations in Iraq; the resurgence of Kurdish opposition to the policies of the Turkish state; the crackdown of the Syrian government on its Kurdish population; the under-reported suppression of Kurdish national expression in Iran.

But there is now a stark difference to factor into the analysis of the Kurds' place in international affairs. For the first time in their history, Kurdish interests are coinciding with the designs of the prominent members of the international community – the European Union and, more importantly, the US. In Turkey, demands made by the EU as part of Turkey's accession negotiations often place the Kurds centre-stage, focusing on fundamental rights, justice, political representation, security, education and culture. If Turkey is to join the EU, then its treatment of the Kurds must improve dramatically, and it has implemented some reforms along this road.

The convergence of Kurdish interests with those of the US in Iraq has even wider ramifications. The Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) governs the most stable and prosperous area of Iraq and affords previously unheard-of levels of legitimacy to Iraqi Kurdish leaders who are now able to influence, if not determine, the overall future of Iraq. The Iraqi President is Jalal Talabani, the veteran leader of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). Strong alliances with key Shi'i parties, including the Supreme Islamic Iraqi Council (SIIC), and an ability to engage with figures associated with the former regime and Sunni tribal leaders, further heighten the importance of the Kurds. Moreover, some of the most effective sections of the Iraqi military and security services are drawn from the Kurdish *peshmerga*, recognizing the fact that – apart from the US military – the most potent military force operating in Iraq today is not pan-Iraqi, nor Shi'i, nor tribal. It is Kurdish, and the Kurds in Iraq have an unprecedented opportunity to determine their own future. For these reasons alone, Western policy-makers need to consider the role Kurds play in Turkey and in Iraq, and how Kurds in Syria and Iran interact with their governments and view their brethren across the borders.

This confluence of Kurdish and US/European interests is not straightforward, and not necessarily welcome outside Kurdistan. Indeed, it may well be viewed with a degree of nervousness in the halls of the world's foreign services. Recognizing that there exists common cause with one or more Kurdish agendas reveals a startling array of pitfalls, unpalatable choices and the alarming possibility of involvement in a process of self-determination which could lead to the attenuation of established states, and therefore to the troubled question of intervention in the affairs of sovereign states.

But, for now, no Kurdish politicians (apart from some rather noisy if powerless leaders of diaspora groups) are calling for an independent Kurdish state at the expense of Iraq, Turkey, Iran or Syria, least of all for a pan-Kurdish state at the expense of all of them. Rather, Kurdish politicians from the different partitions of Kurdistan are doing what they have done for the last century – pursuing political aims within the frameworks of the states in which they reside.

The great change has not been in Kurdish political demands, but rather in the way Kurds view themselves at a mass level. This now has very real policy implications. This transformation has not been caused by any secret strategies of secessionist-minded leaders, but through the establishment and survival of an autonomous political Kurdish entity in Iraq, by globalization and its local impacts on Kurdish nationalism, and – of equal importance – by the inability of the established states to accommodate this rise in national feeling.

The innate mistrust of some right-wing Turkish political elites of any form of 'Kurdish' entity existing in or near Turkey has only served to strengthen Kurdish nationalism in Turkey as well as in Iraq, Syria and Iran. For the 'deep state'² of Turkey, which

includes the military command, the establishment of an autonomous Kurdish government in Erbil is a warning as well as a catalyst for the rise of Kurdish nationalism at the expense of a highly exclusivist vision of the Turkish nation-state. It is with this background in mind that the stand-off on the Iraq–Turkey border over the PKK (*Partiya Karkaren Kurdistan* – Kurdistan Workers' Party) has to be viewed.

The stand-off in the mountains

In the autumn of 2007, a spate of attacks in Turkey killed around 40 people. The Turkish government blamed these attacks on the PKK, the Turkish Kurdish party which has waged an armed campaign against the Turkish state since 1984. A sizeable Turkish military force was then deployed along the border with Iraq. The official justification was that the attacks had been carried out by PKK units operating from inside Iraq. In October, the Turkish parliament reserved the right to take action against the PKK inside Iraq if neither the Iraqi government nor the KRG chose or was able to do so.

However, although PKK attacks had occurred in Sirnak and Hakkari provinces, which border KRG territory, it is misleading to suggest that these were worse than previous attacks or could threaten the integrity of Turkey. They seemed to have little effect on wider Kurdish sentiments in the population centres of southeast Anatolia. Indeed, it can be argued that while some Kurds view the PKK in a romanticized way, many have become increasingly disillusioned with the organization and see the prospect of being Turkish citizens in the EU as more attractive than being independent Kurdish citizens. This may, to a certain extent, explain the popularity of the AK party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* – Justice and Development Party) among Kurds in the elections of July 2007. It is not certain that the autumn attacks were carried out by Iraq-based PKK units. Movement across the mountainous border is difficult and if the PKK claim of having more guerrillas based in Turkey than in Iraq is true, it is likely that the Turkish state's problem is closer to home. The PKK has claimed that none of its units carried out the attacks, but that they were undertaken by a covert group of the Turkish military in order to provide a *casus belli* against the Iraqi Kurds.

It is technically incorrect to refer to a Turkish 'incursion' into Iraq in late 2007 as significant numbers of Turkish military personnel have been based inside the Kurdistan Region of Iraq since the mid-1990s. Detachments of Turkish soldiers are dotted around in small bases in district centres, and there is a deployment of tanks (in excess of 30) in the town of Bamernê, where there is also a military airstrip. No organization has a better understanding of how difficult it is to eradicate the PKK than the Turkish military. Ideological and nationalist commitment, a determined and largely popular reaction against oppression, and the benefits

afforded by fighting on very inaccessible terrain have all proved the PKK to be at least as durable a group as its counterparts in Iraq and Iran.

In late 2007 Turkey aimed to pit Kurd against Kurd, in the hope that the Iraqi Kurdish *peshmerga* would confront the PKK guerrillas. However, both Jalal Talabani and Massoud Barzani, the leader of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), understand the military risk of tackling the PKK, having suffering bruising encounters with them in the 1990s. They have also been restrained from taking action because they now enjoy a position of at least symbolic leadership over the Kurdistan national movement across the region – even if this is a position they have stumbled into rather than proactively sought. As such, it is now hard (though not impossible) for them to countenance military action against fellow Kurds.

Furthermore, despite their differences and messy history, the Iraqi Kurdish leaders do not fear the PKK. Indeed, they have shared common platforms in the past. They currently harbour a much greater fear of radical Islamists. Some of the formative groupings of *Ansar al-Islam* and the now infamous *Ansar al-Sunnah* – aggressive Sunni insurgent groups operating in Iraq – were established in the mountains of Kurdistan. These organizations are no longer present in Kurdistan in any meaningful way (although informal reports abound of guerrillas operating from across the Iranian border), and they would find it impossible to share mountain lairs with the avowedly secular and leftist PKK. Were the PKK to be flushed from the mountains, Barzani and Talabani have just cause to fear radical Islamists gaining a foothold in Kurdistan's mountains and creating a dangerous Kurdish Tora Bora which would be even more inaccessible than its Afghan namesake.

If Turkey knows that it cannot realistically defeat the PKK, that it does not need to defeat the PKK as it is merely a nuisance which no longer poses any meaningful security threat to the state, that Iraqi Kurdish 'allies' cannot or will not defeat the PKK, and that an invasion is merely the continuation of a policy that has already proved futile, why has it been pursuing this line? It is necessary to contextualize the immediate situation.

There are three clues. The first is the continuing poor state of the US–Turkish relationship. Indeed, what was already a tense relationship following Turkey's refusal to support the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 became even more strained when the US House of Representatives' Foreign Affairs Committee passed a resolution on 10 October 2007 condemning the Ottoman Empire for genocide against Armenians. The second clue is the rise of the Islamic-rooted AK Party and the election of Abdullah Gül as President. The AK Party's victories have been greeted with suspicion by the armed forces. However, the military hardliners cannot openly challenge a party with a strong popular base. Rather, they have chosen to raise the spectre of the Islamicization of Turkey as a means of rallying support behind their Kemalist position, and by arguing that only the military can maintain Turkish interests in Cyprus and combat the threat posed by the autonomous Kurdish region in

Iraq. The success of the KRG that provides the third clue to why the Turkish military seeks to invade Iraq.

Consolidating the Kurdistan Region of Iraq

The KRG has come a long way since it was founded in the chaotic period of the early 1990s. From being set up in a vacuum following the withdrawal of Iraqi forces and bureaucrats from the three northern governorates of Iraq in 1991, the KRG has endured elections, civil wars, fighting-by-proxy, regional involvement and invasion, and terrorist attacks. Yet it has done what many in 1991 thought impossible: it has survived in an environment where it was in the interests of no regional power to allow it to exist.

Indeed, it has arguably done more than survive. In the early 1990s, the Kurdistan Region existed under a double embargo, one from the UN against Iraq, another from the Iraqi government against the Kurdistan Region. Political life was dominated by rounds of fighting rather than discussion, the result being the division of the region into two spheres of influence, with two governments: KDP in Erbil and PUK in Sulaymaniyah. The UN oil-for-food programme provided a much-needed injection of resources into the region from 1996 onwards and was largely responsible for bringing some semblance of normality to the population. Following the last round of KDP–PUK fighting in 1997, a process of political normalization was adopted by the two parties that gained US support in 1998 under the terms of the Washington Agreement.³ While remaining highly wary of each other, the KDP and PUK managed to work in an increasingly cooperative manner from 2000 onwards, coordinating their two governments' activities and undertaking a range of normalization and confidence-building measures. These activities were accelerated as it became clear that the US intended to remove the Ba'ath regime. From 2001 onwards, the KDP and PUK gained prominence within the Iraqi opposition given their popular support and, even more important from the perspective of the US, they controlled a swathe of Iraqi territory that could prove crucial to any invasion strategy.

The removal of the Ba'ath regime in 2003 heralded a new period of consolidation and prosperity for the Kurds, albeit coloured with heightened political uncertainty. As the rest of Iraq fell into conflict, with Sunni insurgents and Shi'i rebels first fighting the Multi-National Forces, then turning their guns on each other, the Kurdistan Region became an area of at least relative stability where the braver sort of investor could venture. Particularly from 2005 onwards, foreign investment began to appear within Kurdistan. Turkish, Iranian and Arab businesses transformed the economic profile of the major Kurdish cities – especially Dohuk and Erbil – from being lethargic backwaters into boom towns. The final piece of the consolidation puzzle was put into place on 7 May 2006 when, after several months of negotiation, the KDP and PUK finally agreed to

reunify the Kurdish Regional Government under the premiership of KDP-heir apparent Nechervan Barzani (Massoud's nephew).

Since then, the investment law of Kurdistan has been altered to allow for 100% foreign ownership of companies operating inside the region – thereby encouraging an inward flood of investment – and the KRG has embarked on a public relations initiative to show Iraq, the Middle East and especially the US that it not only exists but is a consolidated, economically vibrant reality that can no longer be ignored. This political and economic advancement has been more than matched by socio-cultural developments within the Iraqi Kurdish population. Autonomy from Baghdad has invigorated the Kurdish sense of nationhood. With a national narrative previously built around catastrophic events such as the *Anfal*,⁴ the Kurds could now point to a more 'positive' development in the form of their autonomy and governmental institutions. The popular discourse in Kurdistan, among Kurds, rapidly became dominated by notions of *Kurdayeti* (Kurdishness), Kurdish nationalism, and even the moral right to statehood possessed by all Kurds.

Problems still exist. The durability of the KDP–PUK union is not certain and the KRG is wracked by accusations of corruption occurring at the highest levels. Furthermore, the KRG is increasingly accused of adopting negotiating positions *vis-à-vis* Baghdad over issues such as the future of the city and province of Kirkuk and the position of the Kurdistan Region within the Iraqi structure, which threaten the political stability of the entire country. These are serious problems that could easily draw the KDP and PUK into conflict with other Iraqi actors and, potentially, with regional neighbours. Commonly referred to as the Kurds' 'Heart' or 'Jerusalem' (because of Kurdish commitment to the territory rather than any sacred connotations), Kirkuk remains a particular focus of concern. The fate of the city now affects the KDP and PUK relationship with their Arab counterparts in Baghdad.

For outside observers, the issue of Kirkuk is an indicator as to whether or when the Kurds in Iraq will seek independence. The thinking is that the oil reserves of Kirkuk would grant the Kurds the financial resources to secede. However, this view reflects a simplistic understanding of Kurdish views of Kirkuk, and the geopolitics of oil transportation. The Kurdish view of Kirkuk as a part of Kurdistan is separate from the fate of Kirkuk's oil. The Iraqi constitutional requirement that the Kirkuk oilfields (as 'established fields') come under the authority of the Iraqi government has not been disputed by the KRG. Indeed, considering the situation logically, Kirkuk's oil is not worth as much to the Kurds as a population-related proportional share of Iraq's overall oil revenue. Furthermore, Kirkuk's oil only has value if it can be exported. It is unlikely that Turkey or Arab Iraq (the transit routes from Kirkuk) would do business with a secessionist Kurdish government. So a deal would seem to be the most likely outcome – one in which the province of Kirkuk would join the Kurdistan Region but the oil reserves of Kirkuk

would be the property of the Iraqi government. This deal would, to a very considerable degree, further strengthen the Kurdistan Region. If a deal on Kirkuk cannot be reached, then Kurdistan would also be consolidated as a political entity, but in a very different manner. In this case there would probably be a more nationalist and aggressive consolidation in which Kirkuk might be taken by force. While running the risk of offending powerful neighbours, and especially Turkey, such a move would raise pan-Kurdish national feeling to a new level.

From the perspective of the neighbours, therefore, it would seem that short of a full-scale military assault from a combination of two or more regional countries (which is unlikely), the Kurdistan Region in Iraq will become more entrenched in the coming months. The question is whether it will be consolidated within the constitutional parameters of the Iraqi state or extra-constitutionally because of differences that cannot be resolved, or even because of the collapse of the Iraqi state owing to developments in Arab Iraq. This successful survival greatly affects how Kurds in Iran, Syria and Turkey view themselves and their relationships with the states in which they reside.

Kurdish troubles in Syria

Developments in Iraq and Turkey have had a major influence on the less-well known Kurdish population in Syria. The Syrian Kurds have traditionally been the least restive of the Kurdish populations but this does not diminish the scale of their grievances. As these continue to be ignored while Kurdish gains are made elsewhere, discontent is growing.

The Syrian Arab Republic is not reconciled to the fact that a large number of Kurdish non-Arabs live within its borders. The Arab nationalist ideology of the Ba'thist state and the insecurity of 'Syrian Arab' identity mean that there is official discrimination against Kurds on the basis of their ethnicity. The overt hostility of the state towards Kurds is confirmed by its more tolerant approach to smaller ethnic minorities, including Armenians and Assyrians, who are not seen to pose the same level of threat.

The modern history of Kurdish political development in Syria is under-researched.⁵ Syrian Kurds have had an almost negligible international profile compared to their neighbours as there has been much less violence in their relationship with the Syrian state. This is largely due to their smaller number and scattered geographical distribution, as well as the effectiveness of official coercion and repression. There are probably around 1.75–2 million Kurds in Syria – roughly 10% of the population. They are mainly concentrated along the borders with Iraq and Turkey, with significant numbers also in Damascus and Aleppo.

Official discrimination against Kurds has been practised since the 1930s; its peak coincided with the height of Arab nationalism in the 1950s and 1960s. The Asad family has continued the repression of Kurdish political and cultural activity and Kurds still

must become assimilated Arabs to gain access to the rights and services enjoyed by other Syrians. As a result, Kurds are among the poorest Syrian citizens, and the level of poverty deepens dramatically among a large number of Kurds who are denied Syrian citizenship. Despite these grievances, Kurdish political development has been stunted and fractious as both the government and ubiquitous internal divisions have sapped its growth. Kurdish political parties are illegal and their number and names change with bewildering regularity.

Periodic rumblings of discontent amidst state repression failed to catch international attention until violence and rioting broke out in March 2004 and left around 40 Kurds dead and 2,000 in jail. Kurdish nationalists call these events the *Serhildan* (Uprising), while external commentators refer to a Kurdish awakening. Whatever the extent of the trouble, there is no doubt that the riots stirred the sentiments of Syria's Kurds and the complacent apathy of Syria's government. Official promises of reform were made but have come to nothing. In 2004, Syria was under intense international pressure, chiefly because of the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri, but this has now eased and intolerant policies remain in force.

Syrian Kurds have always been greatly affected by their entanglement in the intricate web of inter-Kurdish and Kurdish-state relationships in the Middle East. Historical, tribal and family ties with Kurds over the borders in Turkey and Iraq remain very strong and Syria's Kurds, as a less numerous and prominent group, have been recruited, abandoned and deeply influenced by more famous Kurdish movements. The troubles of March 2004 occurred shortly after Kurdish control over the Kurdistan Region of Iraq was confirmed in the Transitional Administrative Law, thus providing encouragement and inspiration for Kurds in Syria. Syrian Kurds have fought in Iraqi Kurdish struggles and have contributed notably to the PKK in Turkey.⁶ In November 2007, Syrian Kurds took to the streets to protest against Turkey's threatened invasion of Iraqi Kurdistan.

Trans-state Kurdish influences have also hindered the Kurdish position in Syria, partly because of Syria's self-serving and inconsistent attitude towards the region's Kurds. Syria has supported Kurdish movements in Iraq and Turkey during long periods of hostility towards Baghdad and Ankara. The PKK, KDP and PUK have all exploited this useful relationship and have consistently valued it more highly than the plight of Syria's Kurds. Self-interest rather than pan-Kurdish nationalism has always been the dominant driver of the major Kurdish parties. The PKK has even held the odd position of discouraging Syrian Kurdish activism and casting doubt on the legitimacy of Kurdish rights in Syria.

Recent shifts in Syrian foreign policy may have implications for the structure of the Kurdish web. Syria's rapprochement with Turkey has meant abandoning support for the PKK while the Syrian-Iraqi Kurdish relationship has cooled because of Syrian opposition to recent KRG gains. It is not certain that the Iraqi and Turkish Kurds will begin

supporting Kurds in Syria, but this political shift does remove one of the impediments.

While Syria continues to run a political system which is closed to Kurds, the serious resultant problems will fester. Kurds are increasingly frustrated at the absence of reform and opportunity and they are less willing to quietly accept abuses of their rights. Part of this new-found confidence comes from the sense across the region that Kurdish futures need not remain bleak.

The Kurds in Iran

Kurds make up around 10–15% of Iran's population and have made repeated challenges to the Iranian state. The establishment of a briefly independent Kurdish republic at Mahabad in 1946 has since served as an inspiration to nationalist Kurds. The republic was defeated by Iran but its main driver the KDP (Kurdistan Democratic Party – though separate from the Iraqi KDP) re-established itself. The KDP struggled to operate through the 1950s and 1960s, but in the late 1970s the unpopularity of the Shah enabled it to become the main political actor in Iranian Kurdistan.

Transnational influences on Kurdish nationalism were apparent in the 1960s. The Iraqi Kurds began their close cooperation with the Iranian government which sought border concessions from Iraq. The Iranian KDP carried out armed incursions into Iran from Iraqi Kurdistan but the alliance with the Iraqi Kurds helped Iran and in 1967–8 key Iranian KDP leaders were eliminated.

Hopes that the overthrow of the Shah would help the Kurdish position were dashed only a few months after the Islamic Revolution when armed conflict broke out between the KDP, the newly-formed Kurdish Komala organization and the Iranian state. Iranian military invasions of Kurdish areas forced Kurdish militants to retire to Iraq. By the late 1980s, the two major Iranian Kurdish parties were based in Iraq and fighting each other, thus losing their position in Iranian Kurdistan. The KDPI leadership split in 1988 and the breakaway KDPI (Revolutionary Leadership) was formed. Komala, which had been acting as the Iranian Communist Party's Kurdistan Branch since 1982,⁷ also suffered a major split in the late 1980s. A large number of Iranian Kurdish activists migrated to Europe. The assassination of two KDPI leaders, Dr Abd al-Rahman Qasemlu in Vienna in 1989 and Dr Sadeq Sharafkandi in Berlin in 1992, hit the party hard.

The establishment of the KRG in Iraqi Kurdistan in 1991 changed the position of the Iranian Kurds who stayed in Iraqi Kurdistan. The relationship between the KRG and Iran would not permit an armed struggle by Iranian Kurds against Iran, and the KDPI and Komala were prevented from military action against Iran by the Iraqi Kurdish authorities. The Iranian government continued to make use of its good relations with the Iraqi Kurds and during the early years of the 1990s assassinated a number of Iranian Kurds based in Iraqi Kurdistan.⁸

During Mohammad Khatami's reformist presidency from 1996 to 2005, there was some opening of the cultural and political space in Iran. The Iranian Kurds, inspired by the achievements of the Iraqi Kurds and the escalation of PKK activities, used this space to embark on cultural activities on an unprecedented scale. The election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as Iranian president signified the start of another tough period for nationalist Iranian Kurds. On 9 July 2005 Iranian forces killed a young Kurdish activist, Shwane Seyyed Qadir, in Mahabad. The news of his murder and the publication of photographs of his mutilated body gave rise to protests in Mahabad. There were demonstrations also in other Kurdish cities; around twenty were killed by the security forces and hundreds were arrested.

During the 1990s, when the traditional established Kurdish political parties were mainly absent from Iran, the PKK had received support from Iranian Kurds and many joined, especially the young. The PKK later decided to organize its Iranian members in a separate party and PJAK (Party of Free Life of Kurdistan) was founded in 2004. The established Iranian Kurdish political parties were suspicious of PJAK and refused to deal with it. However, the party quickly demonstrated its ability to operate militarily inside Iran and towards the end of 2006 most Kurdish political parties altered their rhetoric. There has since been frequent contact. The leader of PJAK, Rahman Haji Ahmadi, has denied any relationship with the US and Israel, as claimed by the Iranian government, but there have been numerous reports of contact between the US and PJAK. It is notable that the US designates the PKK a terrorist organization but does not apply this label to the sister organization, PJAK.

The inclusion of Iran in the United States' 'Axis of Evil' and the invasion of Iraq in 2003 gave the Iranian Kurdish parties hope that the Iranian government might also fall. However, the massive difficulties soon faced by the US in Iraq dampened this hope. Mustafa Hijri, the leader of KDPI, and Abdulla Mohtadi, the leader of Komala, met US officials in Washington in May 2006 but were not officially encouraged to expect US support for the Iranian Kurds.

The prolonged exile of the Iranian Kurdish parties and the KRG-Iranian friendship have caused strains among the parties. Iranian Kurdish parties have also consistently fractured and there have been major splits in both the KDPI and Komala since early 2007. In December 2006 a significant number of members in the KDPI broke away, renaming themselves KDP (removing 'Iran' from the name of the Party and returning to the original name as established in 1945⁹). The change of name not only distinguishes the new party from the old but also relates to its more broadly nationalist approach. In October 2007 a number of Komala's leading figures broke away to form 'Komala – the faction of reform and development'. In both cases there were physical clashes among the followers of the various factions. If it had not been for the intervention of the KRG, these conflicts could have become deadly.

The Iranian Kurdish parties are heavily divided

and Iranian government policy remains unyielding. There is continuous discussion of the need to build a united Kurdish front among the Kurdish political parties, but disunity prevails. Satellite TV has become very influential among Iranian Kurds and the variety of channels illustrates the complex schisms.¹⁰ PJAK retains a military presence in the Qandil Mountains and other border areas of Iraq, prompting the Iranian military to periodically bombard Iraqi Kurdistan.¹¹

The strength of Kurdish nationalism throughout the region has forced the Iranian government to permit Kurdish organizations in Iran; the two major political groups are the 'Kurdish United Front' and the 'Kurdish Reformists'. However, Iranian policies make it very difficult for these groups to operate freely and their positions, which must by necessity be moderate and mostly passive, cannot compete with firmer Kurdish nationalist rhetoric from outside Iran.

Despite all the difficulties facing the Iranian Kurdish political parties, no policy of change in Iran, whether internal or external, can ignore them. Furthermore, the high degree of political and national consciousness among Kurds in Iran has been heightened by the establishment of the KRG in Iraq. The first Kurdish government since Mahabad offers an inspirational political model but, perhaps more importantly, provides a central operational base for Kurdish activities. Iranian Kurdish cultural delegations have made frequent visits to Iraqi Kurdistan, and Kurdish journals and books published in Iraqi Kurdistan include the work of Iranian Kurds and are easily available in Iranian Kurdistan.

Conclusion

For the first time in their history, some Kurds have the ability to shape their political future in a significant way. In the period immediately after the First World War, a weak Kurdish sense of nationhood combined with poorly organized elites meant that the dream of an independent Kurdish state emerging from the ruins of the Ottoman Empire remained only a dream. Although Kurdistan is divided by the boundaries imposed on it by the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne, a perceived sense of injustice has served to sharpen Kurdish nationalist views in the different countries, albeit in different ways. While often a potent presence within individual states, those seeking to promote Kurdish rights, or even independence, have not been able to muster enough internal cohesion nor external support from other Kurds (who had their own fights to fight), or the international community (which largely baulked at the idea of Kurdish self-determination in one of the most geopolitically critical regions of the world).

The situation has recently changed. Forces of globalization and their effects on local politics have served to harden a more unified sense of Kurdishness and brought to the attention of Kurds in one country the activities of Kurds in another. Since 1991, the leading source of inspiration for politically-minded

Kurds has been the continued existence of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. The legalization of this region in post-2003 Iraq has strengthened the commitment of many Kurds to what they see as their innate national rights. For many, these equate to independence.

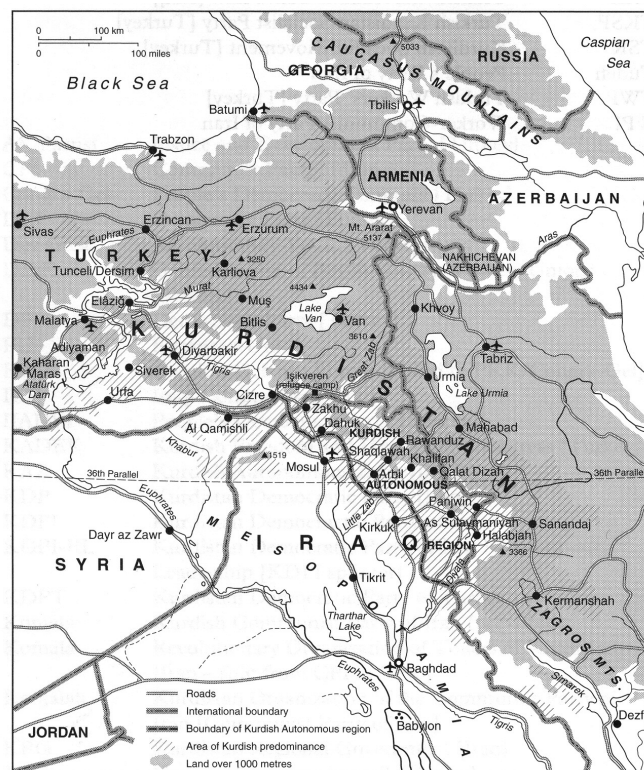
Whatever happens in the short to medium term, some Kurds are now able to influence outcomes in a manner that the Kurdish negotiators of the 1920s failed to achieve. There is no imminent prospect of an independent Kurdish state but it is possible that one may in time emerge as a late addition to the post-1918 political map of the Middle East.

These trends mean that the Kurdish situation has

to be reappraised and reconsidered with reference to new political dynamics in Turkey, Syria, Iran, and of course Iraq, and more importantly, the new political and economic outlook of the Kurds themselves. International policy-makers find it difficult to deal with non-state actors and minorities, but this should not prevent them engaging seriously on Kurdish issues. The recent stand-off between Turkey, the PKK, and the Iraqi Kurds has opened a window onto the intricate web of relations that link different actors together, and has exposed the new interactions caused by domestic political complexities in Turkey and Iraq and the increasing effectiveness of political actors among the Kurds.

Notes

- ¹ The San Remo Conference was convened by the victorious Allied powers to decide the future of the former territories of the Ottoman Empire.
- ² For a fuller explanation see Philip Robins, *Suits and Uniforms: Turkish Foreign Policy since the Cold War*, Hurst & Co., 2003.
- ³ The Washington Agreement was brokered by the US government to assist the peace process between the KDP and PUK. See Gareth Stansfield, *Iraqi Kurdistan: Political Development and Emerging Democracy*, Routledge, 2003.
- ⁴ *Anfal* was the code name given by the Iraqi government to its policy of ethnic cleansing in the three northern governorates of Iraq in 1987–8. See 'Iraq's Crime of Genocide', Human Rights Watch, 1992.
- ⁵ The most comprehensive study available in English is Harriet Montgomery's *The Kurds of Syria – An Existence Denied*, Europäisches Zentrum für Kurdische Studien, 2005. For a shorter introduction, see Robert Lowe, 'Kurdish Nationalism in Syria', in Mohammed Ahmed and Michael Gunter (eds), *The Evolution of Kurdish Nationalism*, Mazda, 2007.
- ⁶ There may still be a significant number of Syrian Kurdish members of the PKK although this is usually downplayed by Syrian Kurdish leaders. See 'The PKK and Syria's Kurds', *Terrorism Monitor*, The Jamestown Foundation, Vol. 5, Issue 3 (February 2007).
- ⁷ The Iranian Communist Party was established in 1983 through the merger of Komala and the Iranian party, 'The Union of the Communist Fighters'.
- ⁸ Iranian Kurdish sources estimate the number killed to be more than 200.
- ⁹ From its formation in 1945 until 1971 the party was officially called KDP. In 1971 'Iran' was added to the name, within parentheses. From 1973 'Iran' became an integral part of the name of the party.
- ¹⁰ The KDPI runs Tishk TV (the sun ray) from Paris, the KDP runs Kurd TV from London, Rojhelat TV (East) from Sweden belongs to Komala, Komala TV based in Sweden belongs to Komala (the Kurdistan branch of the Iranian Communist Party), and Newroz TV based in Denmark is the mouthpiece of PJAK.
- ¹¹ In the early 1990s Iran, hunting the Iranian political Kurdish parties, regularly sought the border areas of Iraqi Kurdistan. Since the late summer of 2007 Iran has again started shelling the border areas around the Qandil Mountains, this time hunting PJAK fighters. Abdulla Hasdanzadeh's book, *Niw Sada Tekoshan* ('Half a Century of Struggle', 2003) provides a detailed account of the shelling in the early 1990s.



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