



KURDISTAN RISING?

CONSIDERATIONS FOR KURDS,
THEIR NEIGHBORS, AND THE REGION

Michael Rubin



A M E R I C A N E N T E R P R I S E I N S T I T U T E

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Contents

Executive Summary	1
1. Who Are the Kurds?	5
2. Is This Kurdistan's Moment?	19
3. What Do the Kurds Want?	27
4. What Form of Government Will Kurdistan Embrace?	56
5. Would Kurdistan Have a Viable Economy?	64
6. Would Kurdistan Be a State of Law?	91
7. What Services Would Kurdistan Provide Its Citizens?	101
8. Could Kurdistan Defend Itself Militarily and Diplomatically?	107
9. Does the United States Have a Coherent Kurdistan Policy?	119
Notes	125
Acknowledgments	137
About the Author	139

Executive Summary

Two decades ago, most US officials would have been hard-pressed to place Kurdistan on a map, let alone consider Kurds as allies. Today, Kurds have largely won over Washington. Kurdish politicians who would once struggle to get a meeting with a junior diplomat or congressman, now lunch with the Secretary of State and visit the Oval Office. There is a growing assumption across the political spectrum in Washington that not only will the Kurds soon win their independence, but that any resulting state will be a beacon of hope in a region where stability, democracy, and liberalism are in increasingly short supply.

Discussion about Kurdish independence both inside and outside Kurdistan too often remains limited to the moral argument: Do the Kurds deserve independence? Is it not their right? It may be, but that is not what this monograph is about. Whether or not the Kurds win independence is ultimately a question for the Kurds. What the current debate misses, however, is that, if the Kurds achieve their national aspiration, it will not be the end of the story but rather its beginning. Seldom, however, does this discussion occur in Kurdistan, let alone in the West.

Even basic questions remain unanswered: What do the Kurds want? Ask almost any Kurd in Iraq, Syria, Turkey, or Iran, and they will say they want their own state. But their leaders recognize that's easier said than done. Some use nationalism as a cover to distract from other issues. Others have proposed creative solutions, such as a confederation of autonomous regions across existing nation-states. Seldom, however, do Kurds address the question about whether freedom means just one Kurdistan or several. After all, there exist today two Romania's (Romania and Moldova), two Albania's (Albania and Kosovo), and two Palestine's (Gaza and the West Bank). Regardless

2 KURDISTAN RISING?

of how many Kurdistans there are, will ethnicity or geography determine citizenship?

If the Kurds win statehood in any form, it will be the culmination of a decades-long struggle. But time to celebrate may be short. Many territories that Kurds claim are disputed with neighbors. If Kurds (or their neighbors) refuse to accept new borders and boundaries, then independence might simply spark a new round of conflict.

There are other problems. Consider the recent victors of similar struggles: Eritrea, Timor-Leste, Kosovo, and South Sudan are either failed states, impoverished dictatorships, or on the brink of chaos. However many Kurdistans emerge and in whatever form, they will have to establish a functioning, unified government. What shape that government takes remains uncertain. Iraqi Kurdistan is far from unified. Should Kurdistan span established international borders, then Kurds will have to address different systems and perhaps even different political and economic philosophies.

Kurds will struggle with their economy. Oil is not a panacea. Not only is oil not present in appreciable quantities in each Kurdish region—and sharing mechanisms remain unclear—but even if Iraqi Kurdistan alone went independent, Kurds must recognize that none of the top 20 oil-producing countries is completely landlocked, as Kurdistan would be. Beyond oil, Kurdistan's financial infrastructure is still a work in progress. Modern banking and commercial law remain largely undeveloped. Kurdistan has no currency of its own. Choosing to establish one would raise questions about how Kurdistan would stabilize it.

Defense will pose another problem. The Iraqi Kurdish *peshmerga*, Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) fighters in Turkey, and the People's Protection Units in Syria each have long and storied histories. Each has won great battles over seemingly insurmountable odds. Yet if Kurdistan becomes independent, it will need not a guerrilla army, but a regularized one. Iraqi Kurdistan has had difficulty achieving a unitary military even after a quarter-century of autonomy. And if a greater Kurdistan emerges, it might need an air force, army, and perhaps other capabilities as well. There has been very little discussion, however, about the size and scope of a Kurdish military, the

however, about the size and scope of a Kurdish military, the infrastructure it would require, and how a Kurdish government would make the necessary investments. Moreover, the Iraq's conflicts have at times put Kurds at odds with each other. A new Kurdistan will also need to address transitional justice. How will an independent Kurdistan address those who sided with Baghdad against the *peshmerga* or those who sided with Erbil against the PKK?

An independent Kurdistan will affect not only the Kurds, but also the broader region. Here, too, discussion is too often stunted. If Kurdistan is established either as one or more states or as a confederation of regions, it will shake up more than a half-century of understandings about everything from water sharing to commerce to transportation to visa regimens. No matter what the Kurds decide, their neighbors, the broader region, the European Union, and the United States will need to address the second-, third-, and fourth-order effects of independence. Perhaps now, with *Kurdistan Rising*, it is time for policymakers in Kurdistan, the United States, and all points in between to tackle questions about what Kurdish independence would mean, whether the Kurds and the region are prepared, and, if not, how to avoid the rise of Kurdistan leading to a period of either internal Kurdish conflict or intrastate violence

1

Who Are the Kurds?

Almost any visitor to Kurdistan will hear Kurds quip that they are “the largest people without a state.” Indeed, they are. None of the countries in which the bulk of Kurds live—Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria—have had a real and apolitical census in decades, and most have had a habit of disempowering Kurds, if not outright denying the existence of Kurdish identity. Yet the existence of more than 40 million Kurds in the Middle East is increasingly a fact that no country can ignore. Indeed, if all of Kurdistan’s constituent parts were to become independent together, the resultant country would have a larger population than Poland, Canada, or Australia and larger in area than Bangladesh, Bulgaria, or Austria.

Whereas a quarter-century ago the Kurds’ stateless status seemed inescapable, increasingly it looks as if the Kurds might be on the verge of achieving their dream of independence. “I don’t know whether it happens next year or when, but independence is certainly coming,” Masoud Barzani, president of the Kurdistan Regional Government (of Iraq), declared during a visit to Washington, DC, in May 2015.¹ Syria’s Kurds for the first time largely control their own fate, and Turkey’s Kurds wield more power than ever before.

While the choice regarding independence is ultimately for the Kurds to make, their decision and its second-order effects will reverberate across the region and the wider world in a way that few observers imagine. Independence will force the Kurds not only to confront basic questions such as “Who is a Kurd?” against the backdrop of their own diversity but also to grapple with their own carefully constructed myths, internal divisions, and past.

If the Kurds choose independence—or even autonomy within the countries they now inhabit—it will also force them and their neighbors to reexamine international commitments. This could

6 KURDISTAN RISING?

include renegotiation of treaties regarding natural resources such as water and oil and reconsideration of basic assumptions about foreign relations, and it might also affect defensive alliances such as North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).

Diversity of Kurds

Among the Kurds, we see religious, linguistic, and tribal diversity. While most Kurds are Sunni Muslims, perhaps 15 percent are Shi'ites. Tens of thousands of Kurds also adhere to Islamic heterodox and pre-Islamic religions. For example, perhaps one million Alevi Kurds live in Turkey. Alevi theology combines a pivotal role for the Caliph 'Ali (Muhammad's cousin and son-in-law and the fourth caliph) with vestiges of pre-Islamic beliefs. Yezidi Kurds live in Turkey and Syria, but several hundred thousand are concentrated in Iraq's Nineveh and Dohuk governorates, divided among areas controlled by the Iraqi government, the Kurdistan Regional Government and those occupied by the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (known as ISIL, ISIS, or Daesh).² Yezidism is a pre-Islamic belief combining a veneration of angels with vestiges of pre-Islamic Zoroastrianism and Manichaeism.³ Communities of Kaka'is (Ahl-i Haqq) blend pre-Islamic beliefs with Shi'ite Islam in mountain villages along the Iran-Iraq border.⁴

Aside from politics, language is the factor that most divides Kurds today. Kurdish is an Indo-Iranian language very similar to the Persian spoken in neighboring Iran and the Baluch spoken in southwestern Pakistan, but it falls into a completely different language family than either Arabic or Turkish. Kurdish, however, spans numerous dialects, not all of which are mutually intelligible.

Generally speaking, the two most important Kurdish dialects are Kurmanji and Sorani, both of which are split into multiple dialects. Many Turkish Kurds speak Northern Kurmanji, while Kurds from the Duhok governorate in Iraq or northern Syria speak Southern Kurmanji (sometimes called Badinani, after a 19th-century emirate) and Sorani. Sorani is spoken in and around the cities of Erbil and Sulaimani in Iraqi Kurdistan, as well as in Iran. Many of Alevis

in Turkey speak Zaza, a language more closely related to the Caspian languages of Iran than to Sorani or Kurmanji.⁵ Within Iraqi Kurdistan, the Kurmanji-Sorani linguistic split runs roughly along the Greater Zab River. Nearly three million Fayli (Shi'ite) Kurds in Iran's Kermanshah province and the Khanaqin region of Iraq speak dialects of Luri.

Kurds speak a variety of other dialects, especially among communities in the Zagros Mountains along the Iran-Iraq border. One of these dialects, Gorani, has long been a favorite of Kurdish poets. Overlapping, though not necessarily coinciding with the dialectic boundaries, are different alphabets. Kurds of Turkey and Syria use the Latin-Turkish script, Kurds of Iran and Iraq use a modified Arabic alphabet, and Kurds in the Caucasus use both modified Cyrillic and Latin scripts.

Among more traditional segments of Kurdish society, tribal affiliation still matters. There are a number of Kurdish tribes, among the most famous of which are the Hakkari of Turkey, the Barzan and Hamawand of Iraq, the Jaff and Hawrami of Iraq and Iran, and the Mukri and Bani Ardalan of Iran.⁶ The Kalhur are one of the largest Kurdish tribes. While their origins are in Iranian Kurdistan, many of them live in and around Sulaimani in Iraqi Kurdistan and speak the Kalhuri dialect. More than a million Kurds consider themselves Hawrami. Nevertheless, many scholars and commentators over-emphasize Kurdish tribalism. Recent intra-Kurdish conflicts such as that between Jalal Talabani's Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) and Masoud Barzani's Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) have tribal overtones, but many other cultural and social factors contribute to the conflicts. To the growing number of young, urban Kurds, tribal affiliation is less relevant.

Demography

Kurds say they are the largest people without a nation. When Mustafa Kemal Atatürk founded the Republic of Turkey in 1923, he sought to both secularize and integrate Turkey by force. Almost a century later, however, the Turkish and Kurdish populations inside Turkey remain

8 KURDISTAN RISING?

largely distinct, and increasingly so as the Kurdish population grows relative to the ethnic Turkish population. The 1965 Turkish census found 90.1 percent of Turkey was ethnic Turk, while just 7.6 percent was ethnic Kurd. However, by 1998, the proportion of Turks had dropped to just 83.2 percent of the country, while the proportion of Kurds had nearly doubled, to 14.4 percent. This trajectory has continued. In 2008, Turks made up just 80 percent of the Turkish population, while the proportion of Kurds had increased to 17.2 percent.⁷

The discrepancy will continue to grow as the Kurdish birth-rate remains higher than the Turkish birthrate. After all, more than 95 percent of ethnic Turkish women marry ethnic Turkish men, and more than 90 percent of Kurdish women marry Kurdish men.⁸ Total population data present a starker portrait. In 1965, just over three million Kurds were in Turkey; by 2008, their number had quadrupled. And, of course, while Kurds have migrated to Istanbul and the towns and cities of western Turkey over the past quarter-century, southeastern Turkey remains disproportionately Kurdish. Many young Kurds may aspire to move to Istanbul, Izmir, or Ankara, but the opposite is not true: few ethnic Turks seek to live in Diyarbakir, Mardin, or Van.

Determining the Kurdish population in Iraq, Iran, and Syria is likewise difficult because of the absence of any professional census for decades. In Iraq, for example, the last real census was in 1958. Ask members of any constituent group in Iraq what their proportion of the population is, and Iraq becomes a country with 258 percent of its own population. Most experts believe, however, that Kurds comprise between 10 and 20 percent of Turkey's population of 80 million, perhaps 10 percent of Iran's population of 82 million, between 7 and 10 percent of Syria's population of 17 million, and between 15 and 23 percent of Iraq's population of 37 million.

Do the Kurds Have a Common History?

While nationalism is very much a 19th-century phenomenon, newly independent countries and peoples aspiring to nationhood often retroactively extend their historical narrative backward. After

Uzbekistan's 1991 independence, for example, authorities in Tashkent promoted 13th-century conqueror Amir Timur (Tamerlane) as the real father of their country.⁹ Likewise, successive Iraqi governments used archaeology to root Iraq's legitimacy in a Babylonian past, even though Iraq emerged as a state only in the aftermath of World War I.¹⁰

The Kurds are no different. Historian David McDowall comments, "It is extremely doubtful that the Kurds form an ethnically coherent whole in the sense that they have a common ancestry," but many Kurds today base their claims to nationhood on alleged common descent from the Medians, a nomadic people that established an empire in Iran in the eighth century BC.¹¹

While Kurdish emirates have appeared and disappeared throughout history, the Kurds could never escape the curse of geography: such entities were always subordinate to the great Turkish and Persian empires along whose borders the Kurds lived. Perhaps the Ottoman sultan or Persian shah would allow autonomy so long as the people paid the right taxes and demonstrated the proper fealty. And perhaps the Kurds could taste independence against the backdrop of a weak ruler in Istanbul or Tehran. But as soon as a strong ruler reigned in an empire's seat, the Kurdish entity could be snuffed out like a flame.

Other Kurdish entities appeared over time, even if they might not have trumpeted their Kurdishness in the way Kurds do in an age of ethnonationalism. Hasanawayh bin Husayn al Barzikani established the first real Kurdish principality in the middle of the 10th century along what now is the Iranian border with northern Iraq. This realm would last little more than 50 years before it were was conquered by Muhammad bin Annaz, heir to the leadership of the Shadhanjan, another Kurdish tribe. By the middle of the 11th century, however, the Seljuqs, a Turkic dynasty, had conquered the smaller entities that had sprung up in what now is Kurdistan.

Kurds across national boundaries also promote Salah al Din al Ayyubi (Saladin to many in the West) as part of the Kurdish historical legacy. In the 12th century, Salah al Din defeated the crusaders, reestablishing Muslim rule over Palestine and Syria. While Salah al

10 KURDISTAN RISING?

Din is history's most famous Kurd, his inclusion in a nationalist historical narrative is artificial since he fought in the name of religion, not ethnicity.¹² Recognizing this, some nationalistic Iraqi Kurds even castigate him as a traitor to their people.

In more recent centuries, great-power diplomacy has easily and completely denied Kurds their nationalist ambition. Many Kurdish intellectuals hoped that they might achieve statehood in the wake of World War I. The allied victory over the Ottoman Empire had led to the collapse of the old order and the construction of a new one. British and French diplomats and cartographers carved up the Middle East: new states—Jordan, Syria, Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, and Iraq, among others—sprung up in the years that followed. There was no reason, some Kurds argued, that Kurdistan should not also be among the states to emerge from the ashes of the Ottoman Empire. After all, the fifth of President Woodrow Wilson's "14 Points" embraced the concept of self-determination, encouraging "strict observance of the principle that in determining all such questions of sovereignty the interests of the populations concerned must have equal weight with the equitable claims of the government whose title is to be determined."¹³

Had it not been for the Sykes-Picot Agreement and the Treaty of Lausanne, the narrative goes, then the Kurds might have realized their dream for a united and independent homeland.¹⁴ While such sentiments are appealing, some Kurdish divisions predate the 20th century. The border between the Persian and Ottoman Empires, today represented by Iran and Iraq have, despite minor fluctuations, remained remarkably consistent since the Treaty of Zuhab (or Qasr-i Shirin) in 1639 and corresponds approximately to the frontiers of the great Byzantine and Persian Empires a millennium before. In recent centuries, Kurds straddled the frontier between the Ottoman and Safavid Empires, often fighting against fellow Kurds on behalf of their respective suzerains.

While Kurds in various areas of Kurdistan do have local histories of autonomy, most Kurdish entities were fleeting and geographically limited. In the early 19th century, a Soran emirate briefly arose in the area around what is now Rawanduz, Iraqi Kurdistan. The emirate

established itself at a time of Ottoman weakness, but quickly subordinated itself to Ottoman control and, within a decade or two, dissolved. The emirate of Badinan, centered at Amadia in Iraqi Kurdistan, and Baban, the founders of Sulaimani, likewise dissolved by the middle of the 19th century.

In the later 19th century, Kurdish tribal leaders maintained some degree of autonomy, although contemporary Iranians and Ottomans viewed the sheikhs who led such tribes as brigands. For example, in 1880, Sheikh 'Ubaydullah crossed from the Ottoman Empire and seized Iranian territory centered on Mahabad and Lake Urumiya.¹⁵ However, he underestimated the shah's power, and within two years his rebellion was over.

Kurdish nationalism is strong, but it has not always been so. In the early 20th century, many Kurdish populations were rural and cared more about preservation of their tribal and religious order than they did about ethnic solidarity. Still, the seeds of nationalism had been planted and would quickly grow. What was more frustrating for Kurdish nationalists was just how close they came in the wake of World War I, only to have the great powers snatch their dream away to appease Turkish nationalists and the nascent Iraqi kingdom.

The 1920 Treaty of Sévres promised Kurds an independent state. The European powers hoped to divide Anatolia, taking some territory themselves and perhaps creating both a greater Armenia and an independent Kurdistan. Turkey would have only a rump state. Entering the 1923 negotiations for the Treaty of Lausanne with Anatolia under control of his army, Atatürk refused to compromise on Turkish sovereignty over the whole of Anatolia, including those parts populated by Kurds.¹⁶

It was around this time that Kurdish hope for some degree of self-rule in the Mosul *vilayet*, the northernmost of Iraq's three constituent Ottoman-era provinces, also ended. Sheikh Mahmud Barzinji sought to create facts on the ground much as Atatürk had and soon presided over an autonomous Kurdish entity centered in Sulaimani. While he is celebrated as a hero in and around that Iraqi Kurdish city for revolting not once but twice against British suzerainty, his autonomy was short-lived. Any hope for Kurdish independence, at least

12 KURDISTAN RISING?

in the post–World War I order, ended in 1925 when the League of Nations awarded the newly created Kingdom of Iraq control over the province. The league extracted a promise that Kurds would administer the province and that Kurdish would be an official language alongside Arabic, but neither of these commitments meant much in practice to Baghdad.¹⁷ Occasional clashes between the Iraqi army and Iraqi Kurds occurred under the Iraqi monarchy (1921–58), but it was only in 1961, during the subsequent republic, that Kurdish resentment at Iraqi neglect erupted into open conflict. Insurgency and low-intensity conflict continued through the next decade.

In 1970, however, the KDP, led by Mulla Mustafa Barzani (father of its current leader, Masoud Barzani) believed it had found a pragmatic partner for peace in a young Baathist leader named Saddam Hussein. At the time, Saddam was deputy chairman of Iraq's Revolutionary Council, but increasingly he was the strongman behind President Ahmad Hassan al Bakr's rule. Together, Barzani and Saddam negotiated an autonomy accord. What Barzani had not initially recognized, however, but would soon come to understand, was how insincere Saddam was. Baghdad never fully implemented the agreement, and so fighting and stalemate continued.

Through its ally Iran, the United States supported the on-again, off-again Kurdish insurgency out of Cold War interest to undermine Iraq, which had placed itself in the Soviet sphere of influence. But the Kurds were just a means to an end, and there was little sincere support in the United States for any manifestation of Kurdish autonomy or self-rule. In 1975, what little official support the United States provided the Kurds ended as Secretary of State Henry Kissinger brokered the Algiers Accord, by which both Iran and Iraq pledged to cease supporting insurgencies in each other's territory. Suddenly cut off from Iranian military support, Barzani's forces evaporated or followed their leader into exile. Tens of thousands of Kurds fled into Iran as refugees, while others such as Talabani headed to Syria, where he formed a rival party, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). The next 15 years were among the most tragic in Iraqi Kurdish history: Saddam engaged in ethnic cleansing and mass murder.

Iraq was not the only place where the Kurds approached independence during the 20th century, only to have it denied. Iraqi Kurds sought to take advantage of the aftermath of World War I, and Iranian Kurds sought the same opportunity in the wake of World War II.¹⁸ British, American, and Soviet troops occupied Iran during World War II to ensure a supply route for oil and other material to the Red Army. When the war ended, British and American forces withdrew. The Red Army remained in Iranian Azerbaijan, sparking the first crisis of the Cold War.

With Moscow seeking to leverage ethnic identity to create pro-Soviet proxies against the West, several Iranian Kurdish intellectuals banded together and, on January 22, 1946, declared the Mahabad Republic. No state recognized it, but it managed to survive for almost a year before Reza Shah was able to rally his forces and reestablish central government control. The Mahabad Republic may not have won recognition, but it did capture the imagination of Kurdish nationalists across borders. Mulla Mustafa Barzani, father of Masoud Barzani, was one of four generals serving the short-lived republic.¹⁹ On the downfall of the shah in 1979, the Kurds again established fleeting autonomy in Iran but were unable to sustain their resistance against the Islamic Republic.²⁰

Terrorism and Insurgency in Turkey

In the first decades of the 20th century, the great powers dispossessed Kurds in what became Turkey and Iraq of their hope for an independent state. Turkey demanded that Kurds assimilate. There were some local uprisings in southeastern Turkey but, by midcentury, these had petered out. Those who did assimilate might advance to the highest echelons of government. Those who did not, however, experienced the full weight of Turkish repression.

This began to change in the 1960s and 1970s, against a backdrop of political polarization in Turkey. Abdullah Öcalan, a young student whose views had been shaped by the inequities he witnessed in his village upbringing, swapped his studies at Ankara's most prestigious political science academy for an activist education. "You must believe

before everything else that the revolution must come, that there is no other choice,” he later explained.²¹

Öcalan honed his education in prison. After Turkish police botched a raid to rescue three kidnapped NATO radar technicians, killing the hostages and all but one of their captors, Öcalan joined students protesting the deaths of the hostage takers. He ended up in Mamak Military Prison, where he shared a cell with dozens of other students and activists, many of whom were from the DEV-GENÇ (Federation of Revolutionary Youth) and perhaps other radical groups. The prisoners discussed and debated politics as they whiled the days away.²² When the police finally released Öcalan after seven months, he had internalized resistance and radicalism. “For me, prison was a school on advancing the political struggle,” he reflected.²³

The next few years were tumultuous. Inspired by the Baader-Meinhof Gang and Palestinian terrorist groups, both Turkish and Kurdish leftists increasingly embraced violence,²⁴ Kurdish leftists drifted away from their Turkish compatriots, whom they felt ignored Kurdish repression, and formed their own groups. Most Kurdish organizations, however, ostracized Öcalan. Some felt him an upstart, and others believed direct confrontation with Turkey would backfire. Still others believed he was simply the wrong man to lead any Kurdish nationalist movement.²⁵

Öcalan pushed hard for a Kurdish state and socialist revolution. He criticized both Barzani’s Kurdistan Democratic Party for its feudal overtones and rival Turkish Kurds for a variety of sins, real and imagined. In 1977, he and his inner circle met in a suburb of Ankara to flesh out plans for a much more formal organization to implement rather than simply talk about armed struggle.²⁶ Soon, the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan, PKK) was born. Over the five or six years, it sought to consolidate control over the Kurdish cause, targeting and assassinating members of competing leftist and Kurdish groups and political parties as much if not more than targets representing the Turkish state. On July 30, 1979, Öcalan turned his sights on the powerful Bucak tribe. The PKK wounded tribal leader Mehmet Celal Bucak, a Kurdish parliamentarian in Süleyman Demirel’s conservative Justice Party (Adalet Partisi) whom Öcalan deemed a collaborator.²⁷

Against the backdrop of growing political, economic, and social chaos in Turkey and predicting the situation could lead to a military crackdown, Öcalan and his supporters, along with other Kurdish revolutionaries, fled to Syria to avoid arrest or worse. It was a prescient move. The 1980 coup unleashed a bloody crackdown on radical movements on both the right and the left. The generals' intervention might have prevented the collapse of the Turkish state, but it was a Pyrrhic victory, for the military regime gave Öcalan and the Kurds a perfect foil against which to recruit and organize their fight. It also provided the PKK safe haven to organize and plan outside the reach of Turkish security forces.

Öcalan accepted exile in Syria much as Iraqi Kurdish leader Jalal Talabani had in 1975 when he broke from Barzani's KDP. But Öcalan's decision to continue the fight from Syria also placed the PKK on the front line of the Cold War. This was also true of Mulla Mustafa Barzani's KDP, of course. But while Barzani had accepted America's Cold War ally, prerevolutionary Iran, as its patron, the PKK's move into pro-Soviet Syria placed that group on the wrong side in the geopolitical scramble as far as most American policymakers were concerned.

What had begun as a local terror campaign or insurgency touched a geopolitical nerve. By the logic that the enemy of your enemy is your friend, Öcalan attracted Syrian President Hafez al Assad's support. Syria, which played host to a number of terrorist and revolutionary organizations, allowed the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP) in neighboring Lebanon, a country Syria dominated, to train PKK members in its camps. The DFLP also advocated on behalf of the PKK and its demands for a Kurdish state.²⁸ Greece, too, while a NATO member, soon came to support the PKK because of its historical and diplomatic animosity to Turkey.

But some Kurds began to second-guess the PKK against the backdrop of its failure both to take its fight to Turkey and its willingness to accept Syrian hospitality. The Syrian regime was, after all, a police state just as oppressive to its Kurdish community. Yet other Kurdish groups kept their distance, disapproving of the PKK's attacks on Kurdish rivals. The Revolutionary Path (Devrimci-Yol), a prominent Turkish leftist group and perhaps the PKK's closest institutional ally,

abandoned the group. Öcalan stood firm, laying the groundwork for the start of insurgency in Turkey. In the early 1980s, with the Iran-Iraq War unraveling Saddam Hussein's tight control in the mountainous and peripheral regions of northern Iraq, Öcalan struck a deal with Masoud Barzani to transit and base some PKK fighters in northern Iraq near the border with Turkey.

On August 15, 1984, the PKK launched coordinated attacks against the Turkish mountain towns of Eruh and Şemdinli, firing on military or police barracks, raiding storage depots, and distributing literature declaring the beginning of their liberation war. Over subsequent months, the PKK demonstrated its ability to sustain its fight and attack increasingly high-profile targets, killing several Turkish soldiers while President Kenan Evren toured the Kurdish region and also murdering a Turkish captain in a town near the Iraqi border.²⁹

With funds gathered from both the Kurdish community in Europe and foreign sponsors, the PKK continued its fight against Turks and Kurds whom they accused of collaboration. Öcalan launched a reign of terror against Kurds who worked for the state, such as village guards and school teachers, kidnapping and executing them.³⁰ Schools closed, and illiteracy rates increased. In one particularly brutal raid against Pınarcık, a village near Mardin, the PKK is alleged to have killed 8 men, 6 women, and 16 children.³¹ The PKK disputes this account, however, and blames the Gendarmerie Intelligence and Counterterrorism (Jandarma İstihbarat ve Terörle Mücadele) and argues that this is one of the reasons why it is essential to have a truth commission, a process by which people on both sides of the fight can come forward and be largely forgiven so long as they speak truthfully about their role in the past conflict.

Regardless, under the guise of their own military conscription law, the PKK kidnapped hundreds of young Kurdish men and forced them to fight for the guerilla group.³² Within a decade from the start of the insurgency, some 13,000 people—both Turks and Kurds—had lost their lives.³³

More than a decade of insurgency changed the face of Turkey. The Turkish military razed thousands of Kurdish villages both along Turkey's border with Syria and Iraq and in other areas where insurgency

raged. Whereas Turkey's Kurdish population was once concentrated in southeastern Anatolia, dislocations pushed displaced Kurds across the country. Today, the city with the largest Kurdish population in the world is no longer Diyarbakir but rather Istanbul. As Kurds fled villages for large cities outside of traditionally Kurdish areas, the face of the PKK also changed. A wave of well-educated recruits joined an organization that had hitherto been dominated by less-educated activists from villages.³⁴

Öcalan, too, evolved. During the height of the conflict, he lived in relative safety in Damascus, rather than as a guerrilla in the mountains. With the end of the Cold War, Marxism shifted from an equal component alongside Kurdish nationalism to a more minor concern. The Kurdish national dialectic became front and center. The PKK expanded its international network. Diaspora communities across Europe continued to be financial engines for the movement, as they raised funds both through donations and, according to detractors, through extortion and organized crime. The basis for such accusations, however, is often unclear, and independent courts in Europe have not found evidence to support organized crime allegations. Regardless, the US and European governments continue to designate senior PKK leaders as complicit in drug smuggling, although it is unclear whether the Turkish intelligence supporting such designations have merit.

Against the backdrop of Iraqi Kurdish elections within the safe haven, Öcalan called for elections to choose delegates to a new national assembly. The resulting body was more theoretical than real—after all, the PKK still focused on hit-and-run attacks but had not wrested control of any significant territory from Turkey and so it had little practical ability to govern. Nevertheless, it did signify the PKK's evolution. While Öcalan might once have demanded an independent Kurdistan, the new assembly was more a federal authority. Voting occurred in Kurdish cultural centers in Europe, and some Kurds in Turkey also joined the assembly. Öcalan opened the body to non-PKK members as well.³⁵

Many Kurds doubted Öcalan's sincerity, and the assembly was ultimately short-lived. Öcalan disbanded it under pressure from

18 KURDISTAN RISING?

the Syrian government, which both did not like the precedent and sought to ameliorate Ankara against the backdrop of Turkish military threats against Syria. Yet the very existence of the Kurdish assembly, however temporary, did signify cracks in the PKK's authoritarianism. The world was changing—the Soviet Union had collapsed—and the PKK began to change with it.

2

Is This Kurdistan's Moment?

While Kurds have long aspired to self-government and have achieved their aim for short periods of time in very limited areas, many factors beyond great-power politics and diplomacy have undercut their larger aspirations to realize a greater Kurdistan stretching from the Anatolian plains through northern Iraq and across the Zagros Mountains. Whatever cultural and linguistic ties the Kurds share, the multiplicity of experience among various Kurdish groups left an indelible mark on their current situation and contributes significantly to their inability to form a cohesive whole. If the Kurds are unable to overcome their divisions, they will remain a minority in others' lands.

Still, the winds may finally be blowing in their direction. While the Kurds' experience has been the deadliest in Iraq, Iraqi Kurds have also come the farthest in their drive to overcome their pariah status. In Turkey too, the Kurdish minority has made unprecedented strides in recent years. Syrian Kurds enjoy *de facto* autonomy in a manner unimaginable just three years ago, although the threat of the Islamic State and its self-described caliphate mean Syrian Kurds are always in its gun sights. Only in Iran are the Kurds still under the thumb of a government whose official ideology is based on ethnic and religious chauvinism.

Just 15 years ago, Kurdish independence seemed like a pipe dream. Kurds who lived in the autonomous zone in northern Iraq were the best off. But even while they thrived, Saddam Hussein's military loomed large. Even after the American military neutralized that threat, the Iraqi Kurds' landlocked homeland was isolated and at the mercy of its neighbors. Visiting Iraqi Kurdistan required flying into Diyarbakir, Turkey, and then taking a three-hour taxi drive over sometimes rough roads into Habur, on the border with Turkey.

Then the real crapshoot began, as any traveler had to traverse layers of Turkish checkpoints, each belonging to a different police, intelligence, or military agency. At best, personnel at any of them might demand bribes or refuse travelers the right to continue; at worst, they might arrest them. True, if Kurds were willing to put up with the hassle, they might go back and forth across the border. So, too, could the ubiquitous Turkish truck drivers importing Turkish goods and exporting Iraqi and Iraqi Kurdish oil and diesel fuel.³⁶ But journalists, Western businessmen, or aid workers? Forget it.

How ironic it was, then, that Turkey should be the easiest point of access into Iraqi Kurdistan. Any westerners who were lucky enough to get an Iranian visa could take their chances with the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps checkpoints. Many chose instead to fly into Damascus and board the old Soviet-built turboprop plane that made a daily run between Damascus and the eastern Syrian town of Qamishli. They could then take a taxi for an hour or two and hire a boat to cross the Tigris River. This was risky, of course, as the Iraqi Kurds controlled only three or four miles of riverbank. The crossing point was within sight of Saddam Hussein's nearest outpost: if the boat engine pattered out and the current swept it downstream, any Kurd or westerner onboard might very well be looking at weeks or months in an Iraqi prison, or worse.

Of course, Iraqi Kurdistan is just one part of the greater Kurdistan Kurds dream about: most Kurds actually live in Turkey, concentrated in southeastern Anatolia, but increasingly spanning the entire country. Being a Kurd in Turkey, however, means either subordinating your ethnic identity to Turkish nationalism or becoming a second-class citizen. While Kurds have risen to the highest positions in Turkish society—some say Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's successor İsmet İnönü, for example, was Kurdish—tolerance toward Kurdish culture, language, and education remain more the exception than the rule. Diyarbakir—the largest city in Turkey's southeast—might be overwhelmingly Kurdish, but it is also home to a Turkish air force base and host to a huge Turkish security force presence, lest Kurdish desire for greater rights if not an independent homeland spin out of control. Huge swaths of Turkish Kurdistan, especially near the

Iranian and Iraqi borders, remain largely off-limits to all but residents and the Turkish army; foreigners and Kurds from elsewhere in Turkey simply cannot enter.

Until the start of the Syrian civil war, Syrian Kurdistan was largely off-limits to both Syrians and foreigners. Even American diplomats could not enter Syrian Kurdistan without Syrian Foreign Ministry approval. There were only a few exceptions, for example, those who might be transiting from Iraqi Kurdistan through Qamishli to Damascus. The Syrian government allowed this only because of the payments in hard currency that these visitors would make for the requisite permits. Syrian President Bashar al Assad's regime, like his father's before him, sometimes arbitrarily stripped ethnic Kurds of citizenship, a prerequisite for landownership and state services, and generally denied Kurdish regions' basic infrastructure, all while seeking to entice Arabs into the region to dilute Kurdish demographic dominance.

Even at the worst of times, however, Syria's Kurds were hardly worse off than their Iranian relatives, who found themselves discriminated against on the basis of not only ethnicity but also religion. Iran's religious clerics showed little tolerance and even less patience for their country's Kurds, many of whom practiced Sunnism rather than the Shi'ism that formed the basis of Iran's post-revolutionary clerical order.

Sunrise over the Zagros

Few Kurds imagined as they watched satellite television images of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks that they were also witnessing the beginning of a new era in Kurdish history. While the al Qaeda terrorists who struck New York and Washington, DC, on that Tuesday hailed from Saudi Arabia, Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, and Lebanon and trained in Afghanistan, the United States government concluded that it could no longer tolerate the world's worst weaponry falling into the hands of the most anti-American regimes. "We must be prepared to stop rogue states before they are able to threaten or use weapons of mass destruction against the United States and

22 KURDISTAN RISING?

our allies and friends,” President George W. Bush’s introduction to the 2002 *National Security Strategy* read.³⁷

As a result, and because of the overwhelming belief of the US intelligence community and other major powers that Saddam possessed and was pursuing further acquisition of weapons of mass destruction, the United States, backed by a coalition of 40 nations, invaded Iraq. Their goal was to oust Saddam’s regime, destroy Iraq’s unconventional weapons programs, and establish a democratic regime.

History will judge if that effort was wise, doomed from the start, or condemned by decisions along the way. Regardless, the second-order effects have been clear: on one hand, sectarian struggle and civil war, and on the other, Kurdish empowerment. Territories the Kurds once only dreamed of having firmly under their control—the oil fields of Kirkuk, for example—are now ruled by Kurdish governors and patrolled by Kurdish *peshmerga*, literally “those who face death,” as the Kurdish militias are called.

The Arab Spring, too, brought undreamed-of opportunities to Kurdistan. Few Kurds would have imagined that the self-immolation of a fruit vendor in the rural town of Sidi Bouzid in Tunisia would not only overthrow dictators in Tunisia and Egypt but also shake the Syrian regime to its core. Assad may have resisted following his peers into retirement or worse, but just as Saddam had two decades before, when faced with a popular uprising, he both withdrew many of his forces from Kurdish zones along the periphery of his state and sought to co-opt the newly autonomous Kurds into a loose partnership. As in Iraq, the Syrian Kurds filled the vacuum and enjoyed, for the first time, true self-rule. Rojava, as the Syrian Kurds call their entity, might as well be a separate country: it has its own flag, language, judiciary, security forces, and political system.

Meanwhile, whether for cynical reasons or with a sincere desire to resolve Kurds’ long-standing grievances in Turkey, Prime Minister (now President) Recep Tayyip Erdoğan launched an unprecedented peace initiative, negotiating at first in secret with the PKK and then quite openly with the group’s imprisoned leader, Abdullah Öcalan. The two sides had not reached a final accord and, indeed, the peace talks collapsed. Yet even with the talks’ collapse, Erdoğan’s

implicit recognition of Öcalan as the leader of Turkey's Kurds and, by extension, of the PKK as the Kurds' chief representative cannot be revoked. Indeed, historians may mark the moment Erdoğan's team met with Öcalan's representatives in Norway as the beginning of the countdown to Turkey's partition.

Iranian Kurdish activists who seek greater autonomy, let alone freedom, in Iran, have had no corollary success, but the Kurdish movement inside the Islamic Republic remains resilient. Should significant unrest or revolution once again sweep across the Iranian plateau, it would be a matter of hours or days, not weeks or months, before Iranian Kurds moved to establish a similar autonomous zone centered around Mahabad or Sanandaj, the provincial capital of Iranian Kurdistan.

Mullah Mustafa Barzani once reportedly declared, "Independence is an aspiration in the heart of every Kurd."³⁸ Kurds have never been closer to this dream than they are now. Indeed, if their leaders truly desired it, they could declare their independence tomorrow and be recognized as an independent state by much of the world. However emotive the call to independence might be, though, Kurdish politicians restrain themselves, concerned about what might follow.

First, while Kurds dream of a single, independent Kurdistan, the realities of geopolitics might dictate that there be not one but two or more independent Kurdistans. There is precedent for this: Russian pressure prevented Moldova from uniting with Romania after the fall of the Soviet Union. Therefore, even though Moldovans are ethnically and culturally Romanian and a single state would have produced a stronger, more vital economy, Moldova became an independent state, and it has gained the dubious distinction of being the poorest in Europe and a human-trafficking hub.

Likewise, neighboring-state politics led Kosovo to become independent rather than to join with Albania, with which it shares ethnic and linguistic heritage. Today, it is the second-poorest state in Europe and has also become a hub for both human trafficking and organized crime. Moldova's and Kosovo's independence effectively brought two states for Romanians and two states for Albanians. There is no reason why Kurds or their neighbors should assume that

Kurdish independence would result in only a single state rather than two, three, or even four.

However many Kurdish regions gain independence, it is important to recognize that, despite the declarations of the great progress Kurdistan has made over the years, the track record for states that have seceded in recent years is not positive. Moldova may teeter on insolvency, but Kosovo quickly became a failed state after its independence.³⁹

Eritrea, East Timor, and South Sudan are today all failed states. Iraqi Kurdistan remains politically divided and, despite its oil wealth, it is unable independently to meet the payroll for its bloated public sector. The Kurdistan Regional Government is more than \$10 billion in debt, and a recent attempt to offer a \$1 billion bond fell flat when international debt markets priced it below bonds offered by the Iraqi government and Côte d'Ivoire.

Despite slick websites promising investment opportunities, Iraqi Kurdistan remains saddled with a poor reputation because of corruption, nepotism, the absence of commercial law, and the lack of an independent judiciary to handle disputes between foreign investors and their local partners. As a result, Iraqi Kurdistan may be oil rich, but in practice salaries in the bloated public sector go unpaid, occupancy rates in many of the new skyscrapers and apartment buildings are barely out of the teens, and both electricity and water shortages are frequent. As one Kurdish university professor quipped to me, "We have become a region of first-world restaurants and third-world hospitals."

And that situation does not even take into account serious security concerns. The rise of the Islamic State caught the Iraqi Kurdish government by surprise. While the Kurds have long lionized the peshmerga, the Islamic State initially routed the group. If not for US airpower, the Islamic State might even have entered the Iraqi Kurdish capital, Erbil. Even if the Islamic State disappears, Kurdistan's neighbors will not necessarily be friendly. An independent Kurdistan in Iraq could not count on continued Iraqi aid and assistance. And while Iraqi Kurdistan's relations with Turkey have never been warmer, it is far from certain that the honeymoon will continue. Syria might

be distracted by civil war, but Iran—fearful of the potential for separatism among its myriad ethnicities—has already made clear that it will not tolerate Iraqi Kurdish independence.⁴⁰ The Achilles' heel of Kurdish nationalism has always been internal Kurdish divisions that allow neighbors to interfere by proxy in Kurdish politics for aims that often run counter to the desires of ordinary Kurds.

While official US policy remains committed to Iraq's unity, support for Iraqi Kurdish independence remains widespread among American officials in their private capacity, as well as among American officers who served in Kurdistan or alongside the Kurdish peshmerga. While he was the ranking minority member on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Joseph Biden proposed tripartite division of Iraq, effectively endorsing Kurdistan's independence.⁴¹

Private commercial interests have increasingly placed their bets on the Kurds. ExxonMobil, for example, largely abandoned its work with the Iraqi central government to invest instead in Iraqi Kurdistan. American and European firms do far more business in Erbil today than they do in Baghdad or Basra.

It is easy to make the case for Kurdish independence on an emotional level. The Kurds have suffered tremendously at the hands of both Arabs and Turks. In the 1980s, Saddam ratcheted up the pressure on Iraqi Kurds, whom he accused of aiding Iran in its war with Iraq. Saddam's oppression culminated in the 1988 Anfal campaign, during which the central government destroyed more than 4,000 predominantly Kurdish villages and towns, concentrating the Kurdish population into "collective towns." He killed tens of thousands—Kurds say 182,000, although the exact figure remains unknown. There is also an element of Western guilt: the Reagan administration swept reports of Saddam's chemical weapons use under the rug so as not to impede diplomatic outreach to the secular Arab leader whom they saw as a potential Cold War ally and a bulwark against Iranian influence.

Through it all, the Kurds have been resilient. Given rotting lemons, they mass-produced lemonade. Kurdistan today is a land not simply of tents, bullet-pocked ruins, and goats but of shining skyscrapers, megamalls, and luxury cars. Iraqi Kurdistan might not be

the democracy it claims, but it has been a beacon of stability and ethnic and religious tolerance against the backdrop of extremism, terrorism, and civil war.

But, as Kurds mull independence and the United States and its allies consider supporting this dream, practical issues remain that both Kurds and their allies must address, lest the dream of an independent Kurdistan transform into a nightmare. Kurds must consider not only what happens in the aftermath of their independence but also the scope of it. Iraqi Kurdish statehood might be relatively straightforward, but add other Kurdish regions into the mix and the situation becomes far more complex. While state division is nothing new—the Czech Republic and Slovakia, the six republics that arose from the ashes of Yugoslavia, Singapore, and Bangladesh, to name just a few examples—never before has one country been carved from four separate countries, each of which will continue to exist post-division. There is no corollary, for example, in the 19th-century formation of Italy and Germany. There has simply been no precedent for what so many Kurds hope to achieve.

3

What Do the Kurds Want?

It would be both condescending and paternalistic to suggest that Kurds should simply forgo their dream because of the complexities surrounding it. Whether to seek independence or some other autonomous or federal arrangement ultimately should be the decision of the Kurdish people, their leaders, and to some degree the societies from which they seek to separate. Nor are Kurds uniform at present in their aspirations: while Iraqi Kurds overwhelmingly favor independence (even if their leaders are less enthusiastic in practice), the majority of their brethren in Syria and Iran seem to cap their ambitions at autonomy.

Kurds in Turkey run the gamut, although the resurgence of fighting between Turkey and the PKK and Turkish blockades and shelling of Kurdish towns and cities may lessen the willingness of Kurds to trust even symbolic Turkish suzerainty. Regardless of the decision within and across regions, it is essential that Kurds address beforehand the first- and second-order effects. Likewise, it behooves Western policymakers to prepare for the complexities of Kurdistan rising.

Freedom may be the goal, but the Kurds have major issues to settle. For example, they must answer these questions:

- Can they settle for less than independence?
- What would be the structure of any Kurdish government?
- Will a Kurdish entity lay claim to territory beyond its borders?

Too often, the Kurdish question is depicted in binary fashion: either Kurds remain repressed, or they win independence. Autonomy, meanwhile, has been largely ad hoc, with both Iraqi and Syrian Kurds winning it through conflict. In Iraqi Kurdistan, Kurds have

exercised nearly a quarter-century of self-rule, and their special status was confirmed in the Iraqi constitution for nearly half that period.

Federalism within Iraq—the interim solution—remains a possibility, allowing Kurds many benefits and the trappings of independence while allowing them and their neighbors to sidestep some of the thornier issues surrounding statehood. While the Kurds in Turkey have never enjoyed autonomy, it has now been more than 20 years since the PKK changed its demand from a separate Kurdish state to federalism or regionalism.⁴² At its core, it is a question of the attainable versus the dream and of whether practical self-governance should trump formal independence.

Iraq and the Case for Federalism

Independence may have been a Kurdish dream, but the strongest, most persistent entity in Kurdish history has been not a state but rather a federal entity: the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq. The roots of the KRG were laid in a war in which the Kurds had no involvement. On August 2, 1990, Saddam Hussein ordered the Iraqi army into Kuwait. In effect, he hoped to rob the piggy bank. By annexing Kuwait, he could take over its lucrative oil fields and its accumulated wealth, a tempting process considering Iraq's indebtedness after the eight-year Iran-Iraq War. He did not expect that President George H. W. Bush and British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher would assemble an international coalition to liberate Kuwait. In 100 hours, the coalition accomplished what the Iranians had failed to do in eight years: achieve a complete and utter rout of the Iraqi army, at the time, the fifth-largest army in the world.⁴³

On February 15, 1991, at a campaign stop in Ohio, Bush called on the Iraqi people to “take matters into their own hands and force Saddam Hussein the dictator to step aside.”⁴⁴ The Kurds and Shi'ites listened. The Kurdish uprising against Saddam began on March 4, 1991, in the town of Ranya. Within 15 days, the peshmerga controlled Iraqi Kurdistan's major towns and cities.

Using helicopters and armor, Saddam's forces counterattacked with brutal efficiency. On March 28, Kurdish forces withdrew from

Kirkuk, followed in quick succession by the other Kurdish cities. Mass panic ensued. After all, Iraqi forces had used chemical weapons against the Kurds just three years earlier. More than a million refugees fled over mountains into Turkey and Iran.⁴⁵ German Chancellor Helmut Kohl observed that Iraq seemed to be “on its way to a genocide.”⁴⁶

To avert humanitarian crisis, Turkey, Great Britain, the United States, and France created a safe haven and a no-fly zone so that refugees could return and remain in their country. Turkey’s motives were not entirely altruistic. Because they were already engaged in an armed struggle with the PKK, the last thing Turks wanted was an influx of Kurds who, in Turkish minds, were potential PKK supporters. The coalition countries justified their action with UN Security Council Resolution 688, which authorized Operation Provide Comfort.⁴⁷ While some United Nations officials were lukewarm about the idea of a safe haven, only the Iraqi government strongly opposed the move. Iraq’s UN ambassador, Abdul Amir al-Anbari, declared that there was no need for such a measure, since “the whole of Iraq is a safe haven to everyone.”⁴⁸

The initial safe haven was quite small, including just Zakho, a city astride the Turkish border, and its immediate environs. While civilians remained sheltered inside the safe haven, low-intensity conflict continued throughout the rest of Iraqi Kurdistan. As the winter of 1991–92 approached, Saddam ordered both his troops and his civil administration to withdraw from much of northern Iraq. He then imposed a blockade on the restive Kurdish regions, believing that, faced with starvation, Iraqi Kurds would reject their own leaders and demand the return of central government authority.⁴⁹

Even for Saddam, it was a historic miscalculation, one with consequences for Iraq as great as his decision to invade Iran or annex Kuwait. Rather than fold against the backdrop of one of the coldest, harshest winters in living memory, Kurdish political parties filled the vacuum left by the central government’s withdrawal. Kurds may complain about KDP and PUK cronyism and corruption, but the parties made order out of chaos and filled the administrative void. Iraqi Kurds have enjoyed *de facto* autonomy ever since.

In May 1992, Iraqi Kurds went to the polls to formalize governance. Masoud Barzani's KDP squeaked by with 45 percent of the vote, while Jalal Talabani's rival PUK took 44 percent, with minor parties taking the remainder.⁵⁰ The two parties agreed to split power evenly. In July 1992, the Kurdistan Regional Government formally inaugurated a 105-member Kurdistan National Assembly. The KDP and PUK each held 50 seats, while Assyrian Christian groups took five seats. Every KDP administrator would have a PUK deputy and vice versa. Not all went smoothly, however. Within just two years, disputes over revenue devolved into civil war.

When the guns fell silent in 1997, Iraqi Kurdistan was largely divided: Barzani controlled Duhok and Erbil, while Talabani controlled Sulaimani. The resulting cold peace gradually warmed as both parties recognized they faced a mutual threat from a resurgent Saddam Hussein. By August 2001, both rival parties were actively discussing the reunification of the regional parliament and new democratic elections.

Despite all the talk of reconciliation and unity over subsequent years, the division of Iraqi Kurdistan remains as real today as it was two decades ago. Such divisions are easier to paper over in an autonomous zone. Should they occur in an independent state, where the stakes grow higher and international recognition is at play, they become a catalyst for state failure (as has occurred in South Sudan).

It was a common misconception that the safe haven, no-fly zone, and area controlled by the KRG were synonymous. They were not. The safe haven remained relatively small, stretching from Zakho and Duhok to Erbil, and the no-fly zone covered only half of Iraqi Kurdistan. All the portions south of the 36th parallel—including the PUK stronghold of Sulaimani and Halabja, site of Saddam's infamous chemical weapons attack—technically were not protected by the international community. Indeed, there was constant fear both inside and outside Kurdistan that Iraqi forces would seek to recapture lost territory. It was not unfounded. At various times, the Iraqi army tried to do so.⁵¹

This shaky setup ossified into permanence when Saddam's fall confirmed the status quo as the new normal. As US-led forces

worked to reorder and reconstruct Iraqi society, the chief Kurdish demand was making Kurdistan's de facto federal autonomy the new law of the land. American and Western policymakers obliged. Even Arab rulers traditionally averse to seeing any fracturing of Arab lands acquiesced to the inevitability of Kurdistan's autonomy, having already lived with that reality for more than two decades.

Iraqi Kurds might have all the trappings of statehood, currency excepted, but they have not formally declared their independence. Reasons for this are multifold. Initially, both the safe haven and the no-fly zone depended on the goodwill of the Turkish government, as Turkey provided logistical support for the operation through trade and passage across the Habur border crossing or through Turkish air force bases that supported aerial operations. With Operation Iraqi Freedom ending Saddam's threat to the Kurds, Kurdish leaders feared antagonizing US officials on whose favor they depended to win claims in Baghdad and, more importantly, because they were loath to forfeit their share of revenue generated from southern Iraq's oil fields.

Masoud Barzani entered Iraqi Kurdistan relatively penniless in 1991 but has since accumulated billions of dollars. He and his children have grown accustomed to wealth, which, rhetoric aside, they appear to prioritize over nationalism. Despite the infusion of cash Kurdistan's continued membership in Iraq provided, the KRG has had difficulty making payroll and providing basic services. If Kurdish authorities blame their insolvency on Baghdad's failure to keep its commitments to transfer revenue to Erbil, then they are effectively acknowledging their inability to make ends meet after formal separation.

While US policy has grown more sympathetic to the Iraqi Kurds since the days of Kissinger, the White House, the State Department, nor either party in Congress formally supports Iraqi Kurdish secession. Should Kurds seek a green light from Washington before declaring independence, they will wait forever. The best they can hope for is a yellow caution light. If the Kurds want certain US support in the fight against the Islamic State and neighboring countries, then limiting their demands to federalism is the only sure cause of action.

After all, for the past two decades, the official position of the United States has been to embrace federalism as a practical compromise. For example, a 2012 meeting between President Barack Obama, Vice President Joseph Biden, and Masoud Barzani emphasized the importance of Iraqi unity. “The United States is committed to our close and historic relationship with Kurdistan and the Kurdish people, in the context of our strategic partnership with a federal, democratic and unified Iraq,” Obama and Biden told Barzani.⁵²

While it is no consolation to Kurdish nationalists, the US policy is consistent across other locations where minorities consider separation. President Bill Clinton, speaking in Mont-Tremblant, Quebec, on October 8, 1999, addressed the issue against the backdrop of Québécois separatism: “If every racial and ethnic and religious group that occupies a significant piece of land not occupied by others became a separate nation—we might have 800 countries in the world and have a very difficult time having a functioning economy or a functioning global polity. Maybe we would have 8,000. How low can you go?”⁵³

Then again, independent-minded Kurds can find precedent in Palestinian nationalism (though the international community has never recognized Palestinian territory as part of Israel). Eritrea and Timor-Leste may be independent today, but each had separate colonial identities before its incorporation into Ethiopia or Indonesia, respectively. Perhaps the closest precedent for Kurds seeking independence would be South Sudan, hardly a model that US policy-makers seek to emulate.

Could Turkey’s Kurds Settle for Federalism?

For entirely different reasons, perhaps, the PKK now suggests that independence might no longer be the answer. On March 21, 2013, the Persian and Kurdish New Year, Öcalan issued a statement declaring a ceasefire. “The struggle I initiated against our collective desperation, ignorance and slavery was aiming to form a consciousness, mentality and spirit,” he declared. “Our fight was never against a particular race, religion, sect or group, and it can never be.” He then

announced the beginning of a political process to end nearly three decades of insurgency and war directed mostly at Turkey: “We have a new era starting upon us. A door is opening from a process of armed resistance to a process of democratic politics.”⁵⁴

Over the decades of its fight, the PKK has offered and declared a number of unilateral ceasefires.⁵⁵ The 2013 ceasefire was significant in that the Turkish government also embraced it. Never before, however, had there been such promise of a permanent solution. Against the backdrop of Turkish President Turgut Özal’s reform initiatives, for example, the PKK declared a unilateral, 25-day ceasefire in March 1993 and then offered to extend it if Özal showed sincerity with regard to negotiations and reforms. Özal did respond seriously, but a heart attack felled him the following month before any of his reforms came to fruition. Indeed, conspiracies continue to swirl suggesting that nationalist politicians either murdered Özal or denied medical assistance to him after his heart attack.

Regardless, the ceasefire collapsed a month after Özal’s death, when the PKK stopped a bus carrying off-duty soldiers and massacred 33 of them. War resumed with a vengeance. The PKK executed dozens of schoolteachers and burned schools in the Kurdish region to the ground. Attendance plummeted and, alongside it, literacy among a generation of Kurds in Turkey. Much of southeastern Turkey became no-go areas, at least from dusk to dawn.

Turkey had had enough. It deployed thousands of troops to the Syrian border and placed them on a war footing. On September 16, 1998, General Atilla Ateş visited the border and declared, “Patience is running out.”⁵⁶ Öcalan had lived in Syria for almost two decades, but for the first time, his Syrian hosts truly feared that they might face real consequences for sheltering a terrorist, so they forced the PKK leader to leave.

In a February 2016 interview with the Kurdish website Pasewan, former Greek intelligence officer Savvas Kalenteridis detailed what came next: using a Turkish passport issued under the pseudonym Abdullah Kurd, Öcalan fled from Damascus to Athens onboard a Syrian Air passenger flight. Not wishing to suffer complications in the country’s relationship with Turkey, Greek authorities both

refused him safe haven and informed him that should he seek asylum, they would not allow him to continue to lead Kurdish resistance from Greece. He agreed to go to Moscow, but despite a semi-official welcome, Russian authorities were reluctant to anger Turkey and so Öcalan stayed for just over one month. He next tried Rome, but after his presence became public, it ignited a firestorm. Turkey boycotted Italian goods, and both the United States and other European countries lobbied Italy not to host him. The Italian government had not counted on this reaction and urged him to move on. Öcalan returned to Moscow, but seeking to maintain deniability about his presence on Russian soil, authorities transferred him to their military base in Tajikistan before eventually allowing him to go to St. Petersburg. Fearing that he might be kidnapped in Russia, he returned to Greece without the knowledge of Greek authorities. Once they found out he was there, they demanded he move on.

Privately, the Clinton administration suggested they send Öcalan to an African country to wait for asylum; in hindsight, many Kurds suspect this was to better enable a snatch-and-grab operation, as security in many African countries was significantly less than in Europe. Regardless, on Öcalan's arrival in Kenya, the Greek deputy chief of mission met him and took him to the Greek ambassador's house. On February 15, 1999, Öcalan departed for the airport, expecting to fly to Amsterdam. He never arrived. Turkish commandos kidnapped him en route and flew him to Turkey.⁵⁷

His capture was a blow to the PKK and to Kurdish nationalists more broadly. With their shackled leader photographed and humiliated posing before Turkish flags and his confessions published almost daily in Turkish newspapers, Kurds were in disarray. Öcalan's trial provided no rebound: Öcalan was unable to use the world's spotlight to enunciate Kurdish demands or justify PKK actions the way that Khalid Islambouli, Egyptian President Anwar Sadat's assassin, used his trial to justify his actions or ideology.⁵⁸ Öcalan not only apologized but also praised Atatürk. For his Kurdish followers, perhaps the only silver lining was that he did not order the PKK's dissolution. With tens of thousands dead, however, the special Turkish

security court cared little for Öcalan's contrition: it sentenced him to death, although under European pressure, it later commuted his sentence to life in prison.

The next few years were bizarre, as least in comparison to other national liberation movements. From prison, Öcalan ordered senior PKK leaders to turn themselves in, and they did. From outside the PKK, it appeared that Öcalan was doing anything necessary first to save his skin and then, after his death sentence was commuted to life in prison, to win greater comforts and privileges in his island prison. Öcalan, however, justified his actions by arguing that surrender demonstrated that not even prison could deter the Kurdish nationalist struggle. In a January 2000 conference, PKK members agreed to end their military struggle and instead rely on political means to further the Kurdish struggle.

Even if Öcalan was acting under duress, the PKK's autocratic culture continued to revolve around him. Perhaps with the support of some outside powers who wanted to divide and weaken the PKK, Öcalan's younger brother Osman challenged Murat Karayılan, the acting leader of the PKK during Abdullah Öcalan's imprisonment. But not even Öcalan's brother, himself a former high-ranking PKK commander, could convince most PKK rank and file to contravene Abdullah Öcalan's precepts.

The struggle, however, had changed direction. No longer would the PKK fight for an independent Kurdistan. Instead it would seek a "democratic Turkey," in which the Kurds would have full economic, cultural, language, political, and social rights. In 2002, the PKK renamed itself the Kurdistan Freedom and Democracy Congress (Kongreya Azadî û Demokrasiya Kurdistanê, KADEK) and the following year, to complete their political facelift, the PKK rebranded itself again as the Kurdistan's People's Conference (Kongra-Gel), although it restored its previous name in 2005.

Although their leader was behind bars, the only inmate in a special prison on an island in the Sea of Marmara at the fifth PKK conference convened in the mountains of Iraqi Kurdistan in 2005 and confirmed Öcalan's new political model and inaugurated the Group of Communities in Kurdistan (Koma Civakên Kurdistan, KCK), an

organization that seeks to implement Öcalan's vision of "democratic confederalism."

Meanwhile, within Turkey, the People's Democracy Party (Halkin Demokrasi Partisi, HADEP), the PKK's legal political front group, won a majority of votes in Diyarbakir. In effect, this meant that despite Öcalan's life imprisonment and statements at his trial that arguably betrayed many followers, Öcalan maintained popular support.

Not surprisingly, Kurdish secession remained a Turkish obsession. Most Turks—and many Kurds for that matter—did not consider Öcalan sincere when he forswore creation of a truly independent Kurdistan. The problem was the precedent that Iraq's federal system had created. Iraqi Kurds made little secret of neither their desire for independence nor their belief that self-rule in the guise of the Kurdistan Regional Government was about simply preparing institutions and the groundwork for the day when they would declare themselves free of Baghdad. In 2005, Kurdish activists conducted a referendum alongside already-scheduled Iraqi and Iraqi Kurdish elections. More than 99 percent of Kurds in predominantly Kurdish areas in northern Iraq chose independence.⁵⁹ In recent months, Iraqi Kurdistan's de facto president, Masoud Barzani, has called for a new referendum. If and when that is held, the results likely would be little different.⁶⁰

Despite their cooperation with the safe haven and the no-fly zone, the Turks understood that the Kurds left to their own devices would move toward independence. After all, the Kurds used their own flag, posted highway signs in Kurdish, designed their own passport stamp and customs process, and even marketed Coca-Cola in Kurdish. For officials in Ankara, the support provided to Iraqi Kurds was a question of short-term necessity trumping long-term risks. To allow Saddam to crush the Kurds would have meant an influx of more than a million Kurds into Turkey.

Accordingly, the Turks sought to create speed bumps, if not roadblocks, along the Kurdish path to independence. After the 1994–97 Iraqi Kurdish civil war, in which Barzani's forces, backed by Saddam, clashed with Talabani's forces, backed by Iran, Turkey inserted a Peace Monitoring Force that for years after refused to withdraw from

key positions in Iraqi Kurdish cities. Under the guise of fighting the PKK, the Turkish military continues to deploy tanks and troops to outposts miles inside Iraqi Kurdish territory.

Not all Turkish actions were about hard power, however: through the 1990s and early 2000s, even as Kurdish authorities cursed Turks and condemned Turkey, Barzani quietly used a Turkish passport provided him by authorities in Ankara and accepted sizable subsidies to pay his peshmerga so long as they continued to stand firm against their brethren in the PKK.

Leading up to Operation Iraqi Freedom—the 2003 war to oust Saddam Hussein and liberate Iraq—the Turks redoubled their efforts to create political and diplomatic obstacles to Kurdish empowerment. In the months preceding the initiation of hostilities, Turkish diplomats and generals fiercely opposed any action that might empower Iraqi Kurdistan further or allow Iraqi Kurds to expand the domains they governed to include oil-rich cities like Kirkuk. They demanded, for example, a second border crossing with Iraq and cultivated American general David Petraeus to make their case. In theory, the crossing would ease supply of goods into Iraq, but in practice it cut the Iraqi Kurdish self-rule area off from Syria and allowed Turks to bypass and effectively blockade Iraqi Kurdistan.

In addition, Turkish intelligence services promoted and bolstered Iraqi Turkmen front groups, trying to leverage a small ethnic Turkmen community descended from Ottoman administrators into a greater strategic force. In theory, these groups represented the interests of the Iraqi Turkmen, but in reality they were simply an effort to co-opt Turkmen as an effective veto on Kurdish aspirations. Turkish Premier Tansu Ciller told American diplomats that two million Turkmen in northern Iraq were in need of protection. If true, this would have placed the Turkmen on nearly an equal footing with the Kurds.⁶¹ Not only Iraqi Kurds but also many Iraqi Turkmen acknowledged these groups as puppets of the Turkish intelligence service. While Turkish diplomats held firm to the idea of a huge Turkmen population, the Turkish strategy to amplify Turkmen strength inside Iraq and on the world stage went from the sublime to the ridiculous when it emerged that many family members of Orhan Ketene, the

Washington, DC, representative of the Iraqi Turkmen Front, a proxy for Turkish state interests, considered themselves Kurdish rather than Turkmen.

None of the Turkish strategies could overcome the loss of leverage created when, on March 1, 2003, the Turkish parliament rejected a proposal to allow US forces to use Turkish territory and bases to conduct operations against Iraq. While the majority of Turkish parliamentarians present voted in favor of the motion, Grand National Assembly Speaker Bülent Arınç, an Erdoğan henchman, ruled that the motion failed because, based on 19 abstentions, the majority did not vote in favor of the US deployment. From the strategic standpoint of Turkey and its interest in quashing Kurdish aspirations, it was an own goal, but the Iraqi Kurds may also have played a role in its outcome. According to a number of Iraqi Kurdish businessmen and politicians, Kurdistan Democratic Party leader Masoud Barzani encouraged—sometimes financially—members of the Turkish parliament from the ruling Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, AKP) from southeastern Turkey to vote against the war so as to undercut the possibility of Turkish forces entering his territory to support or supply the United States.

Behind the scenes, the Turkish military and perhaps Turkish intelligence officials as well were uncertain whether the March 1, 2003, expression of independence and anti-Americanism was worth the diminished Turkish influence in Iraqi Kurdistan. Surreptitiously, Turkish Special Forces infiltrated Iraqi Kurdistan to assassinate Kurdish politicians in Kirkuk, ground zero for ethnic tension in Iraq. They were neither as good nor as covert as they thought they were.

Because of either lack of contact or just plain racism, Turkish authorities have a consistent record of underestimating the Kurds. On July 4, 2003, acting on intelligence provided by the PUK, members of the 173rd Airborne commanded by Col. William Mayville raided the compound in which the Turkish forces had gathered. The Turks were not in uniform and so were detained, cuffed, and hooded as per standard procedure for detainees until their identities could be confirmed. The whole episode might have been quietly resolved—the Turks were never mistreated—but the Erdoğan government,

sensing an opportunity to whip up anti-American sentiment, leaked the incident to the press, depicting it as an affront to the honor of the Turkish military and the Turkish nation. In private conversations, however, Turkish journalists pointed out none of those detained ever got another promotion, and most were quietly ousted from the military, indicating that the Turkish unit had, indeed, gone rogue.

That said, Turkish government concerns that the US invasion of Iraq might lead to greater Kurdish violence inside Turkey were not unfounded. On June 1, 2004, with his death sentence commuted, meaning he no longer needed to fear hanging, Öcalan called for an end to the PKK ceasefire.⁶² Almost immediately, the PKK launched an attack on government troops near the eastern town of Bingöl.⁶³ The PKK and Turkey reached a six-month ceasefire beginning in April 2005, which coincided with Turkey's European Union accession talks. There was still another ceasefire in October 2006, until Turkish forces attacked PKK bases in northern Iraq in September and October 2007.⁶⁴ Each ceasefire might have brought short-term relief for the families of Turkish conscripts and Kurds living in the areas of insurgency, but their limited durations also highlighted the intractability of the problem.

Öcalan's arrest might have been a blow to the PKK, but there were always powers who saw the group as a useful tool against Turkey. On June 29, 2007, two weeks after ruling out expulsion of the PKK from his territory, Barzani warned Ankara of a "catastrophe for the entire region" if Turkish forces crossed into his territory, effectively threatening to use the PKK to unleash even greater insurgency inside Turkey.⁶⁵ It was no idle threat. Turkish counterterrorism operations and the destruction of home villages had scattered Kurds across Istanbul and portions of Western Turkey where they had never before lived in such significant numbers. PKK attacks were no longer limited to southeastern Turkey: they had the infrastructure and organization to attack from Edirne to Erzurum. The resumption of open hostilities in 2004 had claimed the lives of hundreds if not thousands of Turkish soldiers, PKK fighters, and innocent bystanders within Turkey.

Despite its attacks on fellow Kurds and the hardships the insurgency caused the Kurdish community more broadly, the PKK

retained general sympathy among Turkey's Kurds. Erdoğan recognized this when, in 2010, when he had the Milli İstihbarat Teskilati (MİT), Turkey's intelligence service, begin secret talks with senior PKK lieutenants acting on behalf of Öcalan.⁶⁶ These initial talks led Öcalan to develop a "Road Map to Peace." When word of the talks leaked, Erdoğan doubled down to defend his outreach. He faced down Turkish nationalists and argued that PKK disarmament would justify talks. Left unsaid was the Turkish military's inability to defeat the PKK, let alone roll back areas of PKK control.

The PKK agreed to lay down its arms and send its fighters outside Turkey. Many of them made their way into northern Iraq, and some likely joined their Kurdish brethren in Syria and Iran as well. In exchange, Turkey offered a number of cultural and political reforms: Kurdish-language education in private schools, villages using their traditional Kurdish rather than Turkish names, and the use of Kurdish letters like Q, W, and X, which did not exist in the Turkish alphabet.⁶⁷

Both the Turkish government and the PKK had ample reason to distrust the other. PKK disarmament was readily reversible, especially as the Turkish government had only a superficial grasp of the size and membership of PKK units. While PKK fighters in theory should have left for exile among Turkey's neighbors, the difference between a PKK fighter and a farmer could be difficult to establish, and deliberately so.

The Turkish government, meanwhile, appeared to stall in its promised reforms as soon as quiet descended on the countryside. Reforms promised on paper did not necessarily translate into reality. The Turkish government theoretically approved Kurdish-language education, but 18 months after the Öcalan and Erdoğan truce, more than 1,700 Kurdish teachers still awaited appointments.⁶⁸ If Kurds were looking for a sign that Turkey had truly turned the page on decades of ethnic hatred and discrimination, they did not find it. Indeed, in 2013, Turkey's Interior Ministry acknowledged that it had used secret race codes to tag Turks of Armenian, Jewish, or Greek origins.⁶⁹ While these codes identified minorities on the basis of religion rather than simply ethnicity and so did not target Kurds specifically,

such behavior illustrates the depth of Turkish attitudes about who was a true Turk and who was, by default, a second-class citizen.

Erdoğan might have thought he could leverage peace and reform into Kurdish support for his presidential ambitions, but he misjudged the primacy many Kurds held for their ethnic identity over the religious solidarity the Turkish leader sought to cultivate. This was especially true given the rampant discrimination that Turkey's Alevis, many of whom are ethnic Kurds, experienced under AKP rule. The PKK also outplayed him. After all, simply by talking—and making clear Öcalan was calling the shots—the PKK won. After years of various Turkish governments' denying Öcalan's relevance and dismissing the notion many Kurds voiced that he was the paramount Kurdish figure who could represent and negotiate on behalf of Turkey's Kurds, Erdoğan had essentially anointed the PKK leader as his equal.

The March 2014 local elections confirmed the Kurds' attitude. The Peace and Democracy Party (Barış ve Demokrasi Partisi, BDP), a predominantly Kurdish party that is to the PKK what Sinn Féin is to the Irish Republican Army, won more than 6 percent of the vote, demonstrating widespread Kurdish support. The BDP dissolved and reformed in the guise of the Peoples' Democratic Party (Halkların Demokratik Partisi, HDP). In just over a year, it more than doubled its representation. Erdoğan had miscalculated badly. That Kurds would end their insurgency for the sake of some cosmetic cultural reforms was never realistic, however. One Kurd quipped to me, "We didn't do this [insurgency] so that Öcalan could be mayor of Diyarbakir."

The Kurds also demanded parity. And that equality could not be had with Erdoğan opining from an ostentatious new palace while Öcalan sat in prison. Release of the PKK leader, regardless of his past terrorism and role in the deaths of so many Turks and Kurds over previous decades, became a core Kurdish demand.

Kurds increasingly compare Öcalan to former African National Congress chief Nelson Mandela, who began his career as a terrorist and spent decades in prison, yet he ended his career as a peacemaker and father of his nation. There is no indication that Öcalan would

exit prison as committed to democracy as was Mandela, but ultimately his true intentions will become clear only on his amnesty. The Turkish government has refused to compromise on its insistence that Öcalan serve out his life sentence.

Kurds, however, argue that justice and international law are on their side. In 2014, the European Court of Human Rights ruled that Turkey had been guilty of inhuman and degrading treatment of Öcalan in the first decade of his imprisonment and also that Turkey had erred in ruling out any possibility of parole.⁷⁰ The court neither ordered Öcalan's release nor required serious amends, however, subsequently deciding that the Turkish government had corrected prison conditions sufficiently.⁷¹

The net result is impasse, sometimes violent and sometimes political. Ultimately, however, the question remains whether Turkey's Kurds will settle for autonomy or demand something more. In *The Road Map to Negotiations*, Öcalan argues that both Turks and Kurds must reconsider the concepts of Turkishness and Kurdishness to de-emphasize nationalism and instead emphasize democratization.⁷² "The nationhood within which unity is to be achieved must be constructed not forcefully by the rulers but on the basis of democratic willingness," he writes.⁷³ He suggests that a nation-state based on ethnicity becomes prone to fascism, as in Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy, or Imperial Japan, and only breeds alienation, polarization, and separatism. "The notion of uniform citizenry is clearly of fascist origin," he notes in a not-so-subtle swipe at Kemalism, the policy of strict secularism imposed by Turkey's founding father Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, and also declares, "A state cannot simultaneously be a nation-state and a democratic state—they are mutually contradictory."⁷⁴

Hence, at least superficially, Öcalan appears to be abandoning the idea of Kurdish separatism, let alone a Kurdish nation-state. "The republic would be more complete and united if concepts such as Turkishness and Kurdishness (which embody ethnicity and race) as well as attributes such as Islam, Christianity, and Sunnism (which are religious and ideological terms) are not included in the definition," he explains.⁷⁵

Turkey's Kurdish parties have embraced such a notion and seek a fundamental rethink of the notion of Turkey's identity. Many Turks may still embrace an ethnic-nationalist vision of the state, which sees Turkey as a republic for Turks even if other minorities are present. Kurds, however, argue that "the definition of citizenship should be non-ethnic in nature in the Constitution."⁷⁶ But, if Öcalan's goal and, by extension, that of the PKK, is no longer Kurdish statehood, then what does he envision? In effect, he proposes parallel and overlapping institutions under the guise of democratic expression: "The democratic solution principle seeks fundamentally to constitutionally safeguard the peaceful coexistence of democratic institutions and state institutions. The two institutional entities have a legal legitimacy. Neither bases its existence on the denial of the other. Democracy does not need to eliminate the state; nor should the state dissolve democracy for its benefit."⁷⁷

Here then is the core of Öcalan's postimprisonment vision. He assumes—probably correctly—that Turkey's Kurds and, for that matter, Kurds in Syria, Iran, and Iraq as well, want little or nothing to do with the existing state structures in those nations. Rather, they simply want to be left alone. Öcalan seeks to provide them with alternate, more local, more popular, more "democratic" structures they could instead rely on without formally revoking the sovereignty of the state. In effect, he seeks "democratic confederalism," the substance of self-rule across countries without the final cosmetic confirmation of separatism and a nation-state. In a sense, he envisions for the Kurds a state—or rather a network of institutions and structures with true local buy-in—that would overlap existing state boundaries without demanding their destruction.

Indeed, Öcalan is clear that the aim of the PKK has changed: "The real transformation in [the] PKK occurred when it abandoned its goal to establish a state, and its state-centered approach in general, and adopted the course toward democratic political formations."⁷⁸ He goes further, however, and proposes his outline of a post-nation-state order to be the basis of a new Middle East and international order more broadly.⁷⁹ "Forming geographies based on a single ethnicity and nation is an inhuman invention that

modernity created to alienate us from our true selves,” he declared in his 2013 ceasefire announcement.⁸⁰

The question for Turkey, of course, is whether the rhetoric is merely new window dressing for an old ambition. After all, if Turkey acquiesces to Kurds living within their own “democratic” structures, would Kurds simply formalize their break with Turkey and revert to their initial dream of a nation-state? Likewise, when Öcalan writes, “Each community must be not only an economic, ecological, and democratic unit but also a unit with its own self-defense,” would this mean a Kurdish entity with its own military?⁸¹ Any Kurdish military unit, after all, would likely have more legitimacy among ordinary Kurds than the Turkish army, which over the decades has come to be viewed as the enemy. The renewal of fighting in July 2015 has put all this on hold until one side or the other triumphs or both agree to return to the negotiating table.

Is Federalism the Answer for Syria?

In some ways, Syrian Kurds were the most oppressed of any Kurdish minority. Kurds might have suffered repression in Turkey, Iran, and Iraq, but at least those governments acknowledged Kurds were citizens. This is not to discount the victims of Saddam Hussein’s Anfal campaign, Turkish atrocities, or the Islamic Republic’s hanging judges. In Syria, however, the Assad regime simply chose to discount or strip many Kurds of citizenship. Damascus regularly voided the passports and identity papers of Kurds, denying them education, landownership, and even state-recognized marriage. When Kurds rose up in protest—as they did in Qamishli in March 2004—Syrian security forces and the military crushed them with brute force.

Even after Arab Spring protests swept away ossified regimes in Tunisia and Egypt, few predicted the uprising and civil war into which Syria descended. The Syrian conflict introduced a level of brutality not seen in the Middle East since Mongol hordes swept through the region in the 13th century. Perhaps the only segment of Syrian society to find a silver lining was the Kurds. Just as the KDP and PUK successfully filled the vacuum left behind in Iraqi Kurdistan

by the 1991 uprising and the withdrawal of central government administration, so too did the PKK-affiliated Democratic Union Party (Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat, PYD) fill the vacuum left behind by the withdrawal and at times collapse of Assad's administration.

People's Protection Units (Yekîneyên Parastina Gel, YPG) pushed back or quarantined regime forces and defeated al Qaeda-affiliated Nusra Front and Islamic State (ISIS, ISIL, Da'esh) fighters. The Syrian Kurds divided their holdings into three cantons: Cizire, Afrin, and Kobane, the latter of which in 2015 briefly became a household name as the YPG, outnumbered and out-equipped, fought a months-long pitched battle against the Islamic State to retain control of the city.

On January 29, 2014, a diverse array of not only Syrian Kurds, Arabs, and Christians but also Turkmen and Caucasians met in Amuda, a small town in northeastern Syria, to affirm a "Charter of Social Contract"—in effect, a proto-constitution implementing Öcalan's vision.⁸² Article II declared people the source of sovereignty exercised through elected assemblies and institutions. Article VI made all persons in the autonomous zone equal under the law. In a break from the ethnic chauvinism common in surrounding areas, Article IX made Kurdish, Arabic, and Syriac all national languages and enabled education in each language, and Article XXIII provided for the right to any ethnic, religious, ideological, cultural, or linguistic identity. Article XXIV provided for freedom of thought, opinion, conscience, and expression "as long as they do not exceed the ethical community structure and do not endanger civil peace and are not aimed at exclusion and hegemony." Subsequent articles abolished the death penalty, decreed equal rights for women, and affirmed the right to travel.

The charter further created three branches of government (executive, legislative, and judicial) and provided democratic oversight of the security forces. The economic system was more amorphous. While the charter promised the people the right to own private property, it allowed for legal exceptions that might raise concerns given Öcalan's consistent criticism of capitalism, even as he has abandoned doctrinaire Marxism. Other aspects of its economic philosophy were

likewise unclear. The charter blessed “competition in accordance with the principle of democratic autonomy, ‘to each according to his work,’” but also allowed the rights of workers and consumers, environmental considerations, and the strengthening of national sovereignty to infringe on free-market activity.

The charter called for direct elections of a legislative council that, among other responsibilities, would have power over the purse and the ability to ratify treaties, declare war or peace, and grant amnesty. An elected governor in each canton would approve laws and preside over an executive board that in turn would act effectively as a council of ministers to oversee various bureaucracies. Rojava, the self-declared Kurdish autonomous zone in Syria, established 20 ministries running the gamut from core portfolios common in any cabinet—foreign affairs, defense, interior, and justice, for example—to those rooted in the Kurds’ unique historical experience: ministries of martyrs’ families and of work and workers’ placement.

In effect, Rojava institutionalized what might arguably be one of the vulnerabilities of the neighboring Kurdistan Regional Government in Iraq: while the KRG is theoretically a single entity, KDP-PUK distrust and division has essentially left two parallel governments controlling different halves of the whole, with parallel ministries, intelligence agencies, and bureaucracies. By having each of the three cantons maintain its own ministries, Rojava risks something similar. On one hand, competition among cantons might augment effectiveness and services as the rivalry between KDP and PUK has in the realms of higher education and media. On the other hand, any discrepancies between portfolios and their functions could also create tension in Kurdistan’s future—for example, if veterans receive greater compensation or services in one region than in another. A strong leader might minimize such tensions but would also undercut the notion of bottom-up democracy.

Rojava’s charter envisions an independent judiciary that would embrace the notion of innocence until proven guilty. A Supreme Constitutional Court, also in theory independent of political influence, would mediate any disputes among the branches of government and have final say on constitutional interpretation. However,

in practice, throughout the Kurdish regions—whether under the KRG or in Rojava—top judges remain largely under the thumb of party leaders, and independent funding for courts is largely theoretical. A High Commission for Elections sets election dates, coordinates nominations, and runs elections under the supervision of United Nations monitors (should the UN choose to send such monitors). The Asayish, Rojava’s intelligence service, provides security. “Peace councils” resolve minor disputes regarding debts, land, and divorce, while basic courts function to resolve larger disputes, basing their decisions on a conglomeration of Syrian criminal law mixed with or moderated by Swiss, German, or other European legal codes.⁸³ In practice, however, the courts make it up as they go along, a situation that might become more problematic with time as mixed and contradictory precedents develop.

Most citizens interface with government through locally chosen neighborhood councils that resolve whatever problems they can. Rojava officials point to these councils as evidence of true democratic commitment. But local government penetration can just as easily provide a mechanism of authoritarian control if directed from above. Indeed, such neighborhood councils are eerily reminiscent of the structures put forth by Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi in his “Green Book.”

Can Federalism Work in Iran?

The 19th and 20th centuries gave birth to many new nation-states, some ethnically based and others drawn artificially by colonial powers. Iran, however, was not among them. Rather, Iran—or Persia, as it was called before 1935—has a near-continuous history dating back centuries, if not millennia. Iran has not always had strong government, and colonial powers carved out zones of influence within Persia in the early 20th century, but they never formally dismantled the country. Iranians broadly continue to see their country as multiethnic, if not multisectarian, and outside of Kurdish areas and perhaps Baluchistan, largely reject federalism, let alone separatism.

Indeed, any discussion of ethnic-based rule raises deep suspicions inside Iran. In the 20th century alone, Iran has faced Azeri, Kurdish, Arab, and Baluch separatism movements, all of which the Iranian government ultimately crushed, often at tremendous cost in blood and treasure. Efforts by larger powers over previous centuries to whittle away territory along Iran's periphery have also made Iranians extraordinarily sensitive to any sort of territorial adjustment. Iran has already lost control over Bahrain, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Georgia, much of Turkmenistan, western Afghanistan, and half of Baluchistan: from its perspective, to lose more would be to affirm a slippery slope to Iran's eradication.

For Kurdish nationalists, Iran's historical legacy is more a curse than a reason to remain in a country they despise. Still, of any constituent ethnic groups inside Iran, Kurds may have the best chance to carve out an autonomous federal zone if not once again to carve out their own republic from what is now Iranian territory. The reason is not simply ethnic organization, but religious as well.

Ahmad Muftizadeh, born in 1933, joined Mulla Mustafa Barzani's Kurdistan Democratic Party in his youth and rose to be the group's chief religious leader. Later, after serving time in the shah's prisons, he moved to greater Sunni activism and in 1978, inaugurated a Quran school to promote Sunni thought. Muftizadeh initially supported the Islamic Revolution as an opportunity for religious democracy, and Khomeini appointed him the prayer leader of Sanandaj.⁸⁴ But Khomeini was a sectarian warrior more than a coalition builder and turned quickly on the Kurds. He cracked down on Muftizadeh's Sunni *madrassa* (religious seminar), executing several of its leaders. In 1981, his security forces imprisoned and tortured Muftizadeh after he refused to teach Shi'ite doctrine, releasing him only after he had fallen fatally ill. Even though he had cooperated with the regime, his 1993 death became a rallying point for Kurds who were otherwise not swayed by the existing Kurdish groups.⁸⁵

Nor was Muftizadeh been alone in the goal of organizing Kurds along religious lines. The Organization of Iranian Kurdistan Struggle, while predominantly based outside Iran, is now in its fourth decade. More radical groups like Ansar al Sunna took refuge in

the mountains of Iran to escape American forces during Operation Iraqi Freedom.⁸⁶

Iranian Kurds, however, represent a far-smaller proportion of the Iranian population than their counterparts in Turkey do. They might desire the political autonomy their counterparts in Iraq and Syria have achieved or the recognition and cultural freedoms that their counterparts in Turkey have won, but they have a far greater battle ahead of them.

Iranian Kurds have faced more than ethnic discrimination. During the industrialization and modernization drives of Reza Shah (who ruled 1925–41) and his son Mohammad Reza Shah (1945–79), Iranian governments treated the Kurds as backward peasants or tribesmen. The Islamic Revolution only made matters worse: the Kurds rose in insurrection, not in support of the shah but rather in pursuit of their own ethnic and sectarian rights. Revolutionary authorities put down the Kurdish uprising with brutal force. They dispatched Ayatollah Sadegh Khalkhali to dispense revolutionary justice, with either a hangman's noose or a firing squad.

Ultimately, revolutionary authorities restored control, but they never won hearts and minds nor did they try. The problem was not simply ethnic discrimination but rather sectarian discrimination. Most Kurds are Sunni and so became the victims of double discrimination, targeted by authorities in Tehran first because of ethnicity and then because of religion.

Repression may have brought Tehran short-term quiet but only at the expense of Kurdish loyalty to the Iranian state. A number of Kurdish movements—Komala, the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran, and others—might be largely moribund, but at a grassroots level, sentiment has shifted decidedly in favor of Kurdish separatism. In June 2005, for example, Iranian security forces clashed with Kurds in Mahabad who first poured into the streets to celebrate the Iraqi Parliament's selection of Jalal Talabani as president of Iraq. A couple weeks later, there were renewed clashes as Iranian security forces clashed with Kurds celebrating publicly Barzani's election as president of the KRG in Iraq.⁸⁷ Iranian Kurds have continued to copy or seek inspiration from political developments in Iraqi Kurdistan.

For example, Iranian Kurds created the Republican Movement of Kurdistan in parallel to the establishment of the reformist Gorran movement in Iraqi Kurdistan.⁸⁸ When it comes to Kurdish national sentiment, what happens in Iraq does not stay in Iraq.

Rape, torture, and execution have not been able to stamp out Kurdish nationalism, nor has the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps been able to defeat the Party of Free Life of Kurdistan (Partiya Jiyana Azad a Kurdistanê, PJAK), the PKK's Iranian affiliate. This is largely because the PJAK retains local support. Sentiment in Iranian Kurdistan remains against the central Iranian government. In May 2015, the Iranian Kurdish city of Mahabad erupted into riots after a Kurdish woman died while seeking to flee an Iranian official attempting to rape her.⁸⁹

The Iranian central government recognizes that it is presiding over a tinderbox. Iranian Kurds increasingly look to their counterparts in Iraq and question why they cannot enjoy the same rights, freedoms, and autonomy. When the rise of the Islamic State led to the expansion of Iraqi Kurdish authority into territories formerly disputed between Baghdad and the KRG, Iranian authorities warned Iraqi Kurdistan not to declare independence. "This talk about breaking apart Iraq is a Zionist plot," Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian declared. "We should not forget that in recent days, the only place that joyfully supported the independence of Iraqi Kurdistan and urged the region to secede was Netanyahu. We will never allow the dreams of Netanyahu in Iraq and our region for the breaking apart of the critical region of West Asia to come true," he concluded.⁹⁰

While Amir-Abdollahian sought to ground his opposition in the Islamic Republic's enmity toward Israel, Iran's true concern was the danger of precedent. If Iraqi Kurds could win autonomy, then Iranian Kurds would demand similar. The reverberations went deeper. As Iraqi Kurdistan extracted oil, the revenue of which it kept for its exclusive use, southern Iraqis began to argue that they might do the same. Instead of sending the bulk of their oil revenue to Baghdad to underwrite the central government and, ironically, subsidize Iraqi Kurdistan, southern Iraqis might declare their own federal region

and transform Basra into a new Kuwait City or Abu Dhabi. Iran simply could not bear that precedent either, given that its oil lies almost exclusively in provinces dominated by ethnic minorities.

To undercut the Kurdish drive toward independence, Iranian authorities took a two-pronged approach. On one hand, they showered Barzani with aid and assistance to demonstrate the value of remaining on Tehran's good side. "The Islamic Republic of Iran was the first state to help us . . . and it provided us with weapons and equipment," Barzani said at an August 2014 press conference with Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif.⁹¹ On the other hand, they sent a subtle warning by including in their delegation to bilateral discussions in Iraqi Kurdistan an assassin known for gunning down Kurdish dissidents in the late 1980s.⁹² Kurdish officials are also concerned by the threat posed by Shi'ite militias such as *Asa'ib ahl al Haq* and the *Badr Corps*, which now operate in close proximity to Iraqi Kurdistan or in disputed areas it claims.⁹³

What About Independence?

Even if practicalities favor some form or forms of federalism and local autonomy, on an emotional level, Kurds increasingly appear to be forming a consensus around joining the community of nations as an equal member. They want independence and resent condescending diplomats, politicians, and others who argue that Kurds would be better off without it. Independence, however, involves more than a simple declaration and subsequent recognition. There are a number of issues that Kurds must decide alongside a declaration of independence.

First, would Kurds demand full independence among all four Kurdish regions, or would they accept sequenced independence—for example, in Iraq and Syria first, with the Kurdish regions of Turkey and Iran following years or even decades later? Given that the first portions of Kurdistan would set the precedent for everything from government structure to philosophy to language in an independent state, how might such sequenced independence undercut stability and even unity down the road? If Iraqi Kurdistan, with its

tribal, oligarchic, and crony capitalistic systems becomes the first independent Kurdistan, would the more populous, more economically left-of-center, and less tribal Kurdistan in Turkey choose simply to become a parallel Kurdistan rather than to subordinate itself to the existing Republic of Kurdistan? This would be anathema to most nationalist Kurds, of course, but the Kurdish leadership—be it with the KDP or PUK in Iraq or the PKK in Turkey—has not always put broader constituent interests above the pursuit or consolidation of political power.

The second consideration affecting a declaration of independence, whether or not independence was sequenced or full, is its territorial limits. Not only are Kurds divided among four countries, but also no consensus exists within each country as to the extent of Kurdish territory. Some Turkish and Syrian Kurds, for example, claim an outlet on the Mediterranean Sea. Some Iraqi and Iranian Kurds stretch their claims down to the Persian Gulf. Still others recognize that Kurdistan is likely destined to be a landlocked, less expansive republic.

Nor are all the lands potentially claimed by Kurds homogenous in terms of ethnic groups: in Iraq and Syria, large swaths of territory claimed by Kurds are populated by Arabs, Turkmen, and Assyrians; in Iran, by Lors, Azeris, and Persians; and in Turkey by Turks, Arabs, and Assyrians. Kurds would need to decide whether they would limit their claims to territory in which they are the majority or the plurality and whether, under certain circumstances, they would also claim territory in which they are a minority as part of a new independent state.

From a broader perspective, Kurds need to consider the degree to which they would host minorities that might harbor their own nationalist ambitions or seek instead to join a neighboring state that they feel more reflects their own national aspirations. Such issues have long plagued the ethnic basis of nation-states. Before World War II, for example, Germany claimed Sudetenland to unite ethnic Germans living in Czechoslovakia; many Germans living in the region were happy to join Germany. Many ethnic Hungarians continue to resist their incorporation in Romania, and ethnic Russian minorities in Estonia, Moldova, and the Ukraine continue to be a

source of tension if not outright war. Within Kurdish regions today, Kurds differentiate between the terms “Kurdish” as an ethnicity and “Kurdistani” as members of the territory. And Öcalan’s more recent writings on democratic confederalism have sought to address this issue. But simply granting someone theoretical equal rights as a member of a nation and having them accept such a compromise are two separate issues. Simply put, incorporating too large a minority into Kurdistan might sow the seeds of future conflict.

Kurds may choose to declare independence in whatever borders they wish, but Kurdish leaders must also recognize that such borders might be contested. Land-claim disputes are seldom cut-and-dried, especially when decades of conflict and deliberate sabotage have destroyed original documentation. While territorial disputes might be downplayed in federal arrangements, border disputes among independent states cannot be ignored: they quickly become flash-points for military conflict.

If Kurdistan and its neighbors wish to avoid such conflict, they must establish a credible bilateral or international border commission in advance of any declaration of independence. This is easier said than done, however, as Kurds distrust the United Nations and the Arab League, and US designation of the PKK as a terrorist group likely would disqualify any American involvement. Nor would a border commission necessarily be welcomed by neighboring countries. The Iraqi central government, for example, might argue that Article 140 of the 2005 Iraqi Constitution establishes a referendum procedure to determine the final status of Kirkuk. While that referendum has not occurred, Baghdad could dismiss any alternate procedure as unconstitutional. The alternative to establishing mutually agreed borders prior to independence could be disastrous and set the stage for a war such as the one that occurred seven years after Eritrea’s cessation from Ethiopia and claimed tens of thousands of lives.

There are, of course, other issues. Thanks in part to Turkey’s slash-and-burn counterinsurgency policy during the 1980s and 1990s, which culminated in the destruction of hundreds of Kurdish villages near Turkey’s border with Iraq and Syria, the Kurdish population in Istanbul and other major Turkish cities swelled. Today,

Istanbul is home to more Kurds than any other city. Ankara, Izmir, and Adana each have sizable Kurdish populations, as does Baghdad. Independence would raise a number of questions for both the new Republic of Kurdistan and countries hosting Kurdish minorities. For example, would Kurdistan allow dual citizenship? Would it enjoy a “right to return”—automatic citizenship for Kurds—as Israel as a Jewish state does for the Jewish diaspora?

The PKK has explicitly ruled out basing citizenship on ethnicity, but it is not clear that Iraqi Kurdish parties would. In 2003, Masoud Barzani told visiting US diplomats that even second- and third-generation Arabs in disputed areas had no standing to remain in what he considered Kurdish lands. Even before the rise of the Islamic State, both the KDP and PUK restricted freedom of movement on the basis of ethnicity. As a violation of the US Foreign Assistance Act of 1961, this should have resulted in a cutoff of aid, but the State Department choose to ignore the infractions.

The Kurdistan Regional Government has in recent years doubled down on ethnic discrimination. While predominantly Shi’ite provinces in southern Iraq—Karbala and Najaf, for example—have welcomed Sunni Arab refugees and provided shelter and work permits, the KRG has implemented an internal visa regime and has even proposed limiting land sales to non-Kurds. This seems to indicate that Iraqi Kurds seek to privilege ethnicity in citizenship, although this might not extend to Kurds from other regions whose political views local authorities fear might upset the established order.

Other questions loom. If Kurdistan choose sequenced independence, for example, with only Iraqi Kurdistan becoming independent while the other constituent parts of Kurdistan remain under Syrian, Turkish, and Iranian control, what would the relationship be among those other Kurdish regions?

Of course, it might not be only Kurds who decide questions of citizenship. As fighting flared between the Turkish army and the PKK in 2016, Erdoğan proposed stripping PKK members of Turkish citizenship.⁹⁴ But allowing dual citizenship poses other questions. While Iraq abolished conscription after Saddam Hussein’s ouster, Turkey, Syria, and Iran still require military service. This might mean that

Kurds holding dual citizenship could be forced to serve in neighboring armies, even if their primary residency is within an independent or autonomous Kurdistan. Indeed, this is a problem Americans holding dual citizenship with Iran, Israel, and Russia often face. But while it is easy for American dual citizens to avoid being impressed into military service by not traveling to those countries, an independent or even autonomous Kurdistan would likely be landlocked: therefore, unresolved problems of dual citizenship could likely prevent those in their late teens or 20s from most travel.

In all likelihood, any independent Kurdish state will both fall short of Kurds' maximal territorial demands and raise the suspicions of its new neighbors, most if not all of whom will continue to harbor significant Kurdish populations. If independence becomes inevitable, Kurdistan's neighbors will seek to bargain their recognition in exchange for limits. For example, Anwar Majid Eshki, a retired Saudi general and former adviser to Prince Bandar bin Sultan, has suggested that Saudi Arabia could tolerate a Kurdistan carved out of Iran, Turkey, and Iraq, but not out of Syria, whose unity Riyadh is not prepared to compromise.⁹⁵

Kurdistan's neighbors will likely demand that the new country forswear permanently any irredentist ambition. Whether Kurdish authorities do so or not will reverberate for decades, not only in the military posture of Kurdistan and her neighbors but also in the extent to which Kurdistan's neighbors interfere in Kurdish affairs. In short, Kurds must choose: Will Kurdistan become the equivalent of the Czech Republic or Slovakia? Or will Kurdistan go down the path of the Palestinians or Serbs, whose refusal to acknowledge, respectively, Israeli and Kosovar Albanian control over cities and towns they covet has contributed to economic stunting and decades of conflict?

4

What Form of Government Will Kurdistan Embrace?

Too often, Kurds discuss independence as if it is the end of a process, but it is really just the beginning. Upon independence, if not before, Kurds will need to inaugurate a new government. The greater the number of Kurdish regions that win independence, the more difficult post-independence governance will be.

The problem is twofold. First, each region of Kurdistan that exercises any degree of local control has drifted effectively into autocracy. For all the rhetoric of local democracy in Öcalan's more recent writings, PKK leadership clustered in the group's regional headquarters on Qandil Mountain in Iraqi Kurdistan, HDP officials in Turkey, and local PYD authorities in Rojava were hard-pressed to identify any difference they had with Öcalan. Indeed, the entire history of the PKK, as well as Öcalan's mercurialness, suggests the group would be wise to keep any policy differences with the leader to themselves.

Öcalan is not the only Kurdish autocrat, however. For all Iraqi Kurdistan's leaders have embraced the rhetoric of democracy, they have in action embraced autocracy. Political control runs deep. In the case of a victim learning from his tormentor, both the Kurdistan Democratic Party and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan have effectively replicated Baath Party mechanisms of control. Both the KDP and PUK deputize representatives from not only college classes, but also high schools. In some cases, these student representatives act as political commissars for 14- and 15-year-olds: they compile reports about both classroom and private discussions, which KDP and PUK intelligence then collate to assemble blacklists that follow those who have questioned party prerogatives for the rest of their lives.

De facto president Masoud Barzani runs the KRG autocratically, treating the parliament as a rubber-stamp institution when his party

dominates and disregarding it when opposition parties coalesce into a coalition majority. And while Iraqi Kurdistan has a draft constitution endorsed by parliament but as yet unratified, Barzani has ignored this also, refusing to step down from his presidency at the end of his second term, which itself had already been extended.⁹⁶

Barzani has also refused to abide by the Article 15 of the Law of the Presidency, which stipulates that the speaker take over when a president's term ends, until elections to choose a new president.⁹⁷ In effect, he has refused to evolve from the tribal leader of the Barzan into a broader leader for the more diverse array of Kurds living in northern Iraq, instead relying on his immediate family members to fill that role. He has placed his eldest son, Masrou, as head not only of the region's national security council, but also of its intelligence services, which he has occasionally used as death squads to target journalists and others criticizing Barzani politically. His second son, Mansour, is a commanding general, while nephew Nechirvan is prime minister. Other close family members run the local cell phone company (a private concern purchased with public money), serve on the KDP's leadership council, or represent its interests abroad.

Jalal Talabani began the PUK as an antidote to KDP tribalism, but in recent years he abandoned the meritocracy he initially promised to implement and instead began to favor his family. He promoted his elder son, Bafil, to a PUK military command and his youngest son, Qubad, still in his 20s, to represent Kurdish interests in Washington, DC. His wife, Hero Ibrahim Ahmed, took control of PUK media and, after Talabani suffered a debilitating stroke, redoubled her control over PUK finances. She purged nonfamily leaders like Barham Salih, an able reformer and former PUK prime minister, to promote Qubad further into the KRG hierarchy. Meanwhile, Jalal Talabani's nephew Lahur leads the PUK's antiterror force, which he and Hero use as much to intimidate political opponents as to fight terrorism. Ala, Jalal Talabani's niece, heads the PUK faction in parliament. Other Talabanis use their official positions, be they from perches in Sulaimani or diplomatic postings as far afield as Beijing, where Hero's brother-in-law sits, to direct and invest party and public money, often channeling it into family coffers. But even if poor

health undercuts Talabani, his wife rules with an iron fist in his name. There is no democracy within the PUK. It instead acts as a regional autocracy.

It was largely for this reason that longtime Talabani deputy Noshirwan Mustafa broke away from the PUK to lead Gorran, or the Change movement, in 2009. Gorran is based in Sulaimani, long the headquarters of the PUK but culturally a more open and, in the Kurdish context, a relatively liberal city. Gorran captured both the frustration and imagination of the Kurdish youth disillusion with PUK and KDP and upset the PUK in 2013 elections. While Gorran represented a change in political rhetoric, many of its grassroots supporters lament that it did not fulfill its promise to remake the region's traditional top-down party structures, which focused more on dispensing patronage than on promulgating ideas and implementing reform.

In short, Kurdistan hosts multiple political parties, but each embraces an autocratic culture. As Kurdistan becomes independent, it will face a competition between autocrats. Even in a single region, this can lead to instability. In Iraqi Kurdistan, for example, the PUK and KDP fought a civil war over revenue and territory in which thousands of Kurds died and both parties were willing to betray Kurdish nationalism for the sake of their own primacy. In the early years of the PKK, meanwhile, Öcalan attacked rival Kurdish factions with the same viciousness with which he targeted Turkish interests. In the 1990s, the PKK—with the tacit support of the PUK, waged a low-intensity conflict in KDP-controlled areas, but in 2000, fighting between the PUK and PKK claimed hundreds of lives after the PKK tried to establish a foothold around Ranya, a town the PUK held.⁹⁸

After independence, if Kurdish politics remains essentially a competition between would-be autocrats, the stakes will only be higher and the risk of conflict between parties greater. Indeed, if Kurdistan's current political dynamics hold after independence, then the new country risks following more in the path of South Sudan than in the peaceful breakup of Czechoslovakia. That conflict could come early, or it could come with the uncertainty that follows the death of the strongman, be it in the competition between Masoud Barzani's son and nephew following his death or in the scramble to fill the

leadership vacuum in the aftermath of the death of Talabani and his wife. The potential for conflict within the PKK remains especially high given the extent of the personality cult Öcalan has created.

Whether independent or a confederation of regions, the form of government that Kurdistan will adopt also remains unresolved. In theory, a confederation of regions can enjoy different systems, but the greater the discrepancy in the systems of each, the more difficult the interplay between Kurdish regions will be on other issues.

In Iraqi Kurdistan, disputes about Barzani's refusal to step down at the end of his term have sparked not only constitutional crisis but also broader debate about whether Kurdistan should have a parliamentary system or a strong presidency. Barzani and his followers argue that in times of crisis, with Kurdistan at an economic precipice and the threat of the Islamic State looming large, a strong, experienced president is necessary.

His opponents contend such attitudes are corrosive to democracy and accountability. To suggest that Barzani is the only man who can lead, they argue, is to suggest that after nearly a quarter-century of de facto Iraqi Kurdish autonomy, a region of several million has failed to train a competent technocratic or political class. Parliamentary rule, they maintain, brings greater accountability and ties the system more directly to the people.

Proponents of the presidential system question whether parliamentary paralysis would prevent effective action in crisis. They argue that direct election of the president rather than his selection by parliament could make that institution accountable to Kurdistan's citizens. That might be true, but such a discussion leaves unresolved separation of powers between the executive and legislative. If checks and balances do exist, then what might be the impact of split control on the ability of the presidency to allocate money in an emergency? Embracing emergency laws to bypass such crisis would be a slippery slope to autocracy, as successive Arab autocrats have supported such emergency regimes to consolidate power and eviscerate democracy.

Öcalan's theoretical decentralization provides another possible framework for Kurdistan. The BDP and its successor, the HDP, have embraced the principles of democratic autonomy, in effect proposing

to implement Öcalan's philosophy of governance. They have sought in Turkey a series of perhaps two dozen regional self-governments or autonomous areas only loosely connected to the center. The basis of government would be regional assemblies that would oversee education, health, culture, agriculture, industry, telecommunication, and social security and partner with the central government in security and judicial services. Tax money would flow primarily to the regional assembly, while the central government would also fund the regional governments according to proportion of the population and consideration of relative development. Hence, more developed regions might receive less money, while the central government would effectively subsidize underdeveloped areas. Because 14 of the 16 most impoverished or economically backward provinces are in eastern or southeastern Turkey, this effectively would be a Turkish subsidy for Kurdistan.

At its 2010 party conference, the BDP rejected the ideas that Turkey's existing political boundaries could form the basis for a solution. "In essence, the administrative conception that ignores cultural differences particularly that of the Kurdish people and yet that adopts the elimination of cultures through assimilation as official ideology, is devoid of providing solutions to any specific social problem," the BDP explained, arguing its goal to be "the comprehensive change of Turkish political-administrative through a fundamental reform."⁹⁹

In Turkey, such structural reform remains the realm more of theory rather than reality. Beyond the predominantly Kurdish HDP, mainstream Turkish parties, let alone President Erdoğan, appear to have little interest in the Kurdish proposals. Where Erdoğan pursues constitutional reform, he seeks to centralize his control, not loosen it. In Syria, however, the PYD has been able to implement Öcalan's vision by governing Rojava as not a single entity but rather a collection of three cantons, each of which theoretically rules based on the consensus and advice of a succession of more local councils.

Many Kurdish intellectuals recognize the problem of contrasting and conflicting government structures. In 1999, diaspora Kurds (mostly affiliated with the PKK) inaugurated the Kurdistan National Congress (Kongreya Neteweyî ya Kurdistanê), headquartered in

Brussels, to act as an umbrella group coordinating various Kurdish groups and to create a unified Kurdish voice across countries and systems. Rather than becoming a bridge to consensus, however, the Congress has become a platform for political games between systems. For example, ahead of the 2013 Kurdistan National Congress meeting—one of the first times when Kurds from all regions of Kurdistan were able to gather freely—the KRG largely excluded the PKK from meetings to set the agenda.¹⁰⁰ Such procedural maneuvers bring Pyrrhic political victories only. Any congress that fails to address the issues the large constituency supports ultimately loses its authority.

Should the Kurds embrace autonomy and confederalism, they will need to resolve questions regarding what laws will be supreme: those of the region or of the country to which they belong? Perhaps here, Iraqi Kurdistan should face the least legal resistance, as both the Iraqi constitution and the draft Kurdish constitution largely prioritize regional rights. Article 121 of the Iraqi constitution states, “In case of contradiction between regional and national legislation in respect to a matter outside the exclusive authorities of the federal government, the regional power shall have the right to amend the application of the national legislation within that region.”¹⁰¹ The draft 2009 Iraqi Kurdistan constitution defined regional law to trump national law. “The constitution and laws of the Kurdistan Region are more sovereign and supreme than those passed by the Iraqi government,” it declared and further provided legal basis for Iraqi Kurdistan’s direct dealing with foreign states and companies without regard to Baghdad.¹⁰² Presumably, Rojava and any future autonomous Kurdistan regions in Turkey and Iran would adopt similar laws. Still, disputes over ‘exclusive authorities of the federal government’ could provide seeds for conflict.

Should Kurdistan become a federation of regions, however, different legal structures and systems might complicate relations, especially if different regions adopt separate visa procedures and financial laws. A situation might also develop where Kurds from Turkey would be welcome in Iraqi Kurdistan or Syria’s Rojava, but Syrian and Iraqi Kurds would be unable to visit their northern brethren without a visa.

Statistics and Archives

Record keeping is an often unheralded but crucial element of governance. Presidents and parliaments can rule, but rule of law requires reference to precedent. At the same time, both the World Bank and International Monetary Fund rely on statistics to determine aid and assistance.

Every month in the United States, politicians, economists, and the media await release of the latest unemployment figures. Likewise, the government collects and releases data on everything from housing starts to imports and exports. The US Bureau of Labor Statistics maintains a consumer price index. The US Department of Agriculture releases monthly data on crop production. Each of the 50 states produces its own statistics, which become the basis for scores of experts and technocrats to calibrate policy.

The United States is not alone. Every European country collects statistics. The Turks do as well, although Turkish budget specialists admit politicians sometimes falsify the statistics when they are based less on hard data on interviews and survey data—for example, when estimating tourism revenue. Even the Iranian central bank collects and releases statistics showing food inflation from month to month and comparing prices over the year.

The Iraqi Kurdistan Regional Government's Ministry of Planning maintains a bare-bones statistical agency, the Kurdistan Regional Statistics Office, which is charged with the conduct of a basic census and statistical gathering.¹⁰³ Its reports cover issues such as consumer prices and inflation, agriculture, education, environment, and trade. However, the reports show no methodology and, in many cases, are years delayed. This allows political interference in the reporting—for example, chronic underreporting of inflation—which in turn creates a pattern in which statistics are crafted to affirm political decisions rather than inform them.

If the government of a Kurdish state is to craft policy to benefit the people they represent, then they will need to ensure they maintain independent and competent technical and statistical agencies rather than risk the comfort of a bubble of sycophancy. They should not

only be able to chart the unemployment (and underemployment) rate from month to month, but they should also have at their fingertips the price of basic foodstuffs. The real estate bubble in Iraqi Kurdistan has made both developers and those receiving gifts of public land instant millionaires, but it has also raised the price of rent beyond the grasp of pensioners, displaced Kirkukis, laborers, and the unemployed. Accurate statistics would be a good indicator of commitment to good governance. Charting income from oil exports to Iran and Turkey, as well as customs income, would also promote the transparency nearly every Kurdish politician has said he desires.

A related issue to the question of whether Kurdistan will have at its disposal impartial statistics is whether it will also establish and utilize archives. Writing for *Pasewan.com*, an independent online Kurdish news portal, columnist Sardar Aziz described the importance of archives as not only a record of administration in a region where portfolios and positions sometimes change but also a measure of the government's attitude toward state. "When an official holds a position and prefers that public are kept in the dark about what he has done, this is a clear sign that the state is not being administered as public property but rather as private property," he observed.¹⁰⁴ At present, however, the speaker of parliament often removes records at the end of his term, obliterating any resource to study precedent.

Rather than build on a growing corpus of work, parliament repeatedly reinvents the law, as newly elected lawmakers have no opportunity to study the actions and decisions of the past. In many instances, the legal canon simply starts anew and reinvents itself. That Iraqi Kurdistan, with its near-quarter-century administration, has been unable to implement professional record keeping bodes poorly for other Kurdish regions that are still disempowered or beset by war and insurgency. Political culture in Kurdish regions outside Iraq will further impede basic record keeping, given the opacity of decision-making by the PKK leadership.

5

Would Kurdistan Have a Viable Economy?

Kurdistan's independence would shake the Middle East. It would, in effect, be the first major adjustment in borders and the nation-state system since a new generation of states emerged from the ashes of World War I. But creating a state is one thing; having it function is another. While many Kurds focus on the trappings of the state—flags and coins, for example—these are often cosmetic. The real backbone of any state is its economy. America's Founding Fathers had Alexander Hamilton to establish a financial system which enabled the United States to grow and mature. In Kurdistan, however, the debate about the future shape of its economy is muted or, in the case of Abdullah Öcalan's writings, remains mired in failed assumptions about state control and suspicions about the private sector. Basic questions about the future of Kurdistan's economy remain unanswered.

How Will Kurdistan Organize Its Economy?

Kurds relish the trappings of an independent state: Kurdistanian passports, postage stamps, and coins and currency. Indeed, in the late 1990s, the PUK representation in Washington, DC, displayed model Kurdistanian coins that Kurdish nationalists minted for Iraqi Kurdistan. Kurds today still utilize the currencies of their home countries—the Syrian pound, new Turkish lira, Iraqi dinar, and Iranian rial as well as, of course, the euro and US dollar. Beyond simply how to design a new currency, if the Kurds choose to do so, Kurds will face much broader decisions with regard to their economy. For example, what economic philosophy will Kurds embrace? On this, there is no consensus nor have Kurds fully fleshed out the structure of law and regulation to govern it.

PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan has come closest to laying out a general vision for Kurdistan's economic future. While his followers may say he has shed the Marxism of his youth, his recent writings leave room for doubt. He may have blamed the PKK's earlier failure to achieve its aims on its ideological conformity to socialism, declaring in *The Road Map to Negotiations*, "The PKK, under the influence of real socialism, was for a long time unable to transcend the nation-statist paradigm."¹⁰⁵ But as he outlined his "democratic nation solution," he seemed simply to repackage his earlier teachings, leaving doubt about whether or not he has truly abandoned the Marxist dialectic. "European democracy is a class phenomenon with limited popular content, and it is under the oligarchic control of the bourgeoisie," he declared.¹⁰⁶

He has blamed both the military repression the Kurds have faced and the "federalist collaborationist solution" implemented in Iraqi Kurdistan on "the upper-class elements of capitalist modernity" and dismissed the sincerity of their efforts to find a resolution to the Kurdish question. "They will agree to the need for a solution, depending on how afraid they are of the lower social classes," Öcalan wrote.¹⁰⁷ In a sense, the problem has been not the failure of Marxist ideology but rather its impure application. "The Bolsheviks, with their Jacobin roots, were not able to undergo a communist transformation. They were power-focused and were nationalists with a class perspective," he explained.¹⁰⁸

As such, Öcalan seems to remain a staunch proponent of socialism. "Democracy cannot function in the absence of conscience. Monopolist power and systems of capital, on the other hand, are built upon the repudiation of conscience," he writes.¹⁰⁹

Öcalan's writings—and the statements of his supporters—suggest he foresees significant regulation of the economy. Indeed, this appears to be the philosophy Selahattin Demirtaş, coleader of the HDP, and Salih Muslim, coleader of the PYD, put forward in their various speeches. This does not mean any Kurdistan region will embrace Marxism, but PKK-affiliated groups would certainly embrace a degree of state control many proponents of economic freedom will be uncomfortable with. The PKK's promotion of its

notion of the common good, environmental justice, or other rationalizations to regulate commodities and large businesses is paradoxical given Öcalan's embrace of grassroots-level democratization.

The PKK and its affiliates are not the only Kurdish groups to lean left in economic theory. The PUK remains a member of the Socialist International, the international umbrella group of social democratic, socialist, and labor parties, and there is no indication its offshoot Gorran has significantly revised its own economic perspective. Mullah Mustafa Barzani, Masoud Barzani's father, accepted Soviet patronage less out of ideological fealty than out of political necessity. Still, early Soviet assistance to the KDP was predicated on the belief that the KDP would embrace socialism, and KDP leaders did little to dissuade the Soviets. Perhaps the KDP at first felt it had nothing to lose: after all, Kurds remained largely agrarian, and Kurdish enterprise in the cities was primarily limited to small-scale commerce. Until Iraqi Kurds achieved *de facto* autonomy in 1991, the region boasted only one university and little in the way of medical or industrial infrastructure. Syria was no better: most Syrians never took the long, bumpy eight-hour drive from the western towns and cities to towns such as Qamishli and Amuda in the far northeast. As for Iran, neglect of Kurdistan was a constant policy under both the shah and the Islamic Republic.

Sanctions, industrialization, and more recently the discovery of oil have altered the general economy of Kurdistan. The 1991 uprising enabled Kurds to either start larger businesses or inherit them from the infrastructure left behind from the end of Saddam's direct rule in the region. Either the political parties or the KRG, however, operated many of the larger plants, such as the cement factory at Tassulja, near Sulaimani, and an asphalt plant in Erbil. The KDP appropriated the local cigarette factory during the 1994–97 civil war to use its proceeds to fund its military. At the end of the war, it refused to return it to its former owners.

Kurdistan has long had oil, although its extraction and refinery capabilities were limited and its output was more appropriate for industrial products than for gasoline. Still, the KRG owned the fields, as it technically did all state resources. The same held true in Syria,

where the state oil company managed and extracted oil discovered in Syria's northeastern Hasakah Provinces, fields now falling under Rojava's control. But while oil might promise income to the state, traditional Kurdish wealth was based on agriculture.

In effect, big business in Kurdistan is public business. Marxist or not, such a large state role has skewed Kurdistan's economy and positioned it poorly to compete on the global stage. In Iraqi Kurdistan, arguably the most prosperous region of Kurdistan today, 30 percent of the workforce are on the public payroll.¹¹⁰ Should Turkish Kurds achieve autonomy or independence under the PKK's guidance, that figure might be even larger.

Another reason for this is the effective collapse of Kurdish agriculture, at least in Iraqi Kurdistan. Saddam-era United Nations sanctions devastated Iraqi Kurdish agriculture. The Oil-for-Food program meant that every Iraqi received a monthly basket of rations including 9 kilograms of wheat flour, 3 kilograms of rice, 2 kilograms of sugar, 0.2 kilograms of tea, 1.5 kilograms of vitamin A-fortified cooking oil, 3.6 kilograms of milk powder, 1 kilogram of dried whole milk and/or cheese, 0.8 kilograms of fortified weaning cereal, 1.5 kilograms of pulses (vegetable protein), and 0.15 kilograms of iodized salt. In addition, to ensure that every individual received the minimum stipulated rations, retail agents received an additional 4 percent flour, rice, and pulses; 2 percent sugar, oil, and salt; and 0.5 percent tea above their local needs.¹¹¹

The United Nations often bought supplies outside Kurdistan, if not Iraq entirely, drying up Kurdish farmers' ability to sell their goods. After all, if customers received flour for free, why should they purchase locally grown wheat? The continuance of the sanctions basket long after the end of Saddam's regime also reinforced the often-corrosive culture of entitlement in Iraqi Kurdistan. Even millionaires came to expect the bulk of their groceries for free.

Such a dynamic did not undercut the agricultural economy to the same extent in other regions of Kurdistan, although Iraqis, Kurdish or not, would often smuggle extra rations to sell in the markets of neighboring states. The greater industrialization in Turkey, Iran, and even Syria, however, meant that agricultural or not,

the Kurdish regions remained a backwater. Some of this was due to terrain, some of it to distance from major markets, and some of it was deliberate. Turkey neglected southeastern Anatolia for most of its history, and while Atatürk had speculated about the hydroelectric potential of the region, there was no serious plan to develop Turkey's Kurdish region until Turgut Özal initiated the Southeastern Anatolia Project (Güneydoğu Anadolu Projesi) in 1988. Most educated Turks and successful Turkish businessmen to this day acknowledge never having visited Kurdish regions of Turkey or even Kurdish neighborhoods on the outskirts of Istanbul. Successful Iraqi governments likewise neglected northern Iraq's development, at least as anything other than a summer resort. Iran, too, likewise ignored Kurdistan's development.

Iraqi Kurds supported the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq. Saddam's ouster lifted the dark clouds of uncertainty that had long loomed over Iraqi Kurdistan, even though Kurds there had already ruled themselves for more than two decades. With the threat that Baghdad might reverse their special status lifted and with the US government heavily invested in Kurdistan and interested in the region's stability and security, investors small and large flooded into the region. Kurds have long claimed that their region has vast natural resources, but until recently, there has been little to back up such claims. Certainly, Iraqi Kurdistan had a few small oil wells and refineries, but it was not until after Operation Iraqi Freedom that Western oil companies began to explore the region in earnest and initially believed that they had hit the jackpot. Iraqi Kurdistan's oil revenue topped \$14 billion in the first 11 years after the fall of Saddam. It was enough to subsidize a bloated bureaucracy, but declining oil revenues have since left Iraqi Kurdistan deep in the red.¹¹²

The Kurdistan Regional Government calculates its oil reserves at 45 billion barrels, about one-third of Iraq's total. It now appears that this estimate vastly overstates the true amount of exploitable resources. Indeed, some oil companies like Hungary's MOL Group and the United States' Heritage Oil have since left Kurdistan, having discovered either that complex geology undermined their ability to exploit their blocks or that areas that they believed contained oil

actually contained natural gas. Kurdistan has little infrastructure to exploit natural gas profitably, even if local authorities claim that they have between 1.5 and 3 percent of the world's gas reserves. Iraqi Kurdish authorities announced plans to export one million barrels per day in 2015 (although they achieved just over half of that).¹¹³ Their plan to double that figure by 2019, an output equivalent to Norway's, appears increasingly unrealistic. Indeed, in 2015, the American oil firm Hess has also announced disappointing exploration results.

There is a danger, however, when reality does not match expectations. When ordinary Kurds look at the Kurdish possession of the Kirkuk oil fields, they may imagine that such oil wealth will transform Kurdistan into the mountainous equivalent of Abu Dhabi, but they would be wrong. The Kirkuk oil fields, first developed by the Iraq Petroleum Company in 1934, are in decline. Today, they account for at most 20 percent of Iraq's oil exports, but often less, as terrorists often disrupt the flow. Nor does possession of reserves necessarily translate into ability to bring such resources to market. Expense of extraction, political stability, economic transparency, rule of law, and a willingness by the host government to give more favorable terms than other potential exporters can all impact the willingness of international energy firms to do business in any country.

While he was Iraq's oil minister, Hussain al Shahrstani could rightly brag that he negotiated terms tougher than the normal world standard for foreign oil companies wanting to explore and extract Iraq's oil. The problem was that Iraqi Kurdistan offered more favorable terms and, at least initially, a more secure environment. In 2009, ExxonMobil signed a \$25 billion agreement with Iraqi authorities in Baghdad to develop the West Qurna oil field in southern Iraq. Yet Exxon grew frustrated with Baghdad's tough terms and regulations and in 2011 signed a deal with Kurdistan, even though the Iraqi government had declared that any firm that signed a contract with the KRG independently of Baghdad would risk their contracts with Iraq.¹¹⁴

Baghdad and Erbil have long disputed Iraqi Kurdistan's right to develop autonomously and to export oil and gas. Iraqi Kurdish

officials argue that the 2005 Iraqi constitution grants the region the right to develop its own oil industry. On one hand, the constitution does make oil and gas the joint responsibility of both the federal and regional governments while on the other hand specifying that “all powers not stipulated in the exclusive powers of the federal government belong to the authorities of the regions and governorates.”¹¹⁵ The KRG therefore argues that oil and gas infrastructure predating the 2003 war should be shared jointly by Erbil and Baghdad—meaning that Kurdistan should get a proportion of all oil revenue generated from the oil fields of southern Iraq—while those fields developed after the fall of Saddam should be the exclusive domain of the KRG.

In 2007, the Iraqi Kurdish government enacted its own oil and gas law to guide further development in a manner that “provide[s] good and timely returns to the people of the Region.”¹¹⁶ The KRG subsequently attracted major international companies, including Total and Chevron, who, like Exxon, were willing to acquire interests in Kurdish oil over the objections of the Iraqi central government in Baghdad. However, when the Iraqi government challenged Kurdish oil sales in the United States, US judges sided with Baghdad.¹¹⁷

The Kurdish government, meanwhile, developed refinery infrastructure, expanding the Kalak refinery near Erbil to enable it to produce nearly 200,000 barrels per day and the Bazian refinery near Sulaimani, which can produce 34,000 barrels per day of kerosene and diesel, and that local authorities will upgrade to produce gasoline as well. The construction of a Kirkuk-Ceyhan pipeline enables Iraqi Kurdistan to export up to 300,000 barrels of oil per day to ports in Turkey. Such an export channel provides Turkey with significant leverage over Iraqi Kurdish politics and its economy.

While the Kurdistan Regional Government stands firmly behind development of regional resources, not all residents are as enthusiastic. Many Kurds complain of nepotism, corruption, and uneven development.¹¹⁸ As Kirkuk orients itself more closely to Erbil than to Baghdad, some Kurds complain that it is simply swapping Iraqi government corruption for equally corrosive Kurdish corruption, leaving local residents as the big losers.¹¹⁹ A nascent environmentalist

movement also increasingly questions the speed of development and lack of regulation. In October 2014, several hundred villagers from the outskirts of the eastern Iraqi Kurdish town of Darbandikhan protested behind the slogan, “We don’t give water for oil.”¹²⁰

Iraqi Kurdistan is not the only region of Kurdistan with significant oil. The *BP Statistical Review of World Energy* reported that Syria had proven reserves of 2.5 billion barrels of oil and 9.1 trillion cubic feet of natural gas, much of which is concentrated in Syrian Kurdistan. Before the outbreak of civil war, the state-owned Syrian Petroleum Company produced upward of 100,000 barrels per day in the region. London-based Gulsands Petroleum and China’s Sinochem also worked in the region until the civil war, producing approximately 24,000 barrels per day. Gulsands has estimated that Block 26, the 2,090-square-mile zone it operates along the Iraqi border, holds approximately 74 million barrels, both proven and probable.

Despite Syrian Kurdistan being perhaps the second-wealthiest section of greater Kurdistan in terms of energy resources, mismanagement and depletion have taken their toll. While Iraqi Kurdistan’s ability to derive wealth from beneath its soil has increased in recent years, Syrian Kurdistan oil production may very well have peaked. This was not the fault of the region’s new Kurdish administrators—the problem lay with the Assad regime’s management—but it remains a fact Rojava will have to deal with.

As Kurdistan evolves toward independence in one or all zones, officials will need to address several other energy policy issues. First, energy infrastructure across regions, originally built under different regimes and subsequently by different firms based in different countries, will not necessarily be compatible. Iraqi Kurdistan has built pipelines to transport its oil into Turkey and its Mediterranean ports. Syrian fields, meanwhile, are connected by pipeline either to an export terminal on the Mediterranean port of Tartous or a refinery at Homs that in turn distributes its product to Damascus, Aleppo, and Latakia. Intra-Kurdish political competition also comes into play.

Despite its huge need to fund its defense against the Islamic State, if not Turkey as well, Rojava cannot derive great benefit from the oil over which it sits. The YPG seized and protected many oil fields

previously run by the Syrian government, but they do not have excess storage capacity for extracted oil and Iraqi Kurdistan and Turkey are not willing to receive it in any large quantities; therefore, operations have largely ceased.

The likelihood that instability will continue to impact the central region of Syria for years, if not decades, to come mandates new pipelines or export routes be built before Rojava can tap the financial benefit of its energy resources. Rebwar Rashed, a Kurdish human rights activist and writer, recognized this when he wrote, "A future Kurdish oil and gas pipeline infrastructure can go through the Rojava/Kurdistan in Syria directly to the Mediterranean."¹²¹ Such a statement presumes abandoning Kurdish federalism or separatism in Turkey, as the Iraq-Turkey crude oil pipeline traverses Turkish Kurdistan just north of the Syrian border and the Batman-Dörtüyoöl Crude Oil Pipeline connects other Kurdish cities north of that. Should Turkey's Kurds join Kurdistan, connecting a spur to that existing infrastructure would be relatively simple and cheap.

However, if Turkish Kurdistan remains outside the boundaries of an independent state, Rashed is optimistic to assume first that Kurds can guarantee the security of such a pipeline if Kurdistan does not have an outlet on the sea; the Turkish military or Turkish irregulars would disrupt the pipeline to protect Turkey's position as a regional energy hub. Second, it is fanciful to assume that any Syrian Alawi or Sunni cantons through which a new pipeline would pass would not engage in the same sort of diplomatic hardball as the Turks.

Iranian Kurds possess comparatively limited energy resources. While Iran boasts a Kordestan province, this concession to Kurdish ethnicity occupies only a fraction of the territory in which Iranian Kurds live. That said, the most generous reading of Iranian Kurdistan's borders would place five oil or gas fields within a broader Iranian Kurdistan. Iran's West Oil and Gas Production Company, a subsidiary of the National Iran Oil Company, produced at most 1,000 barrels per day from Ilam Province's Tang Bijar field as recently as 2008, and pipelines connect the fields around Kermanshah and a small refinery in that western Iranian city to Iran's large refinery at Abadan.¹²² While the National Iran Oil Company announced

plans to develop seven projects in Lorestan Province's Kabir-Kuh field—which it claims sits on 590 billion cubic meters of gas—these would likely remain outside any future Kurdish entity as few Lorsi consider themselves Kurds, despite what some Kurdish nationalists may claim.¹²³

With countries all around them cashing in on the exploitation of new oil and gas discoveries, the Turkish government has undertaken a major effort to discover and develop any fossil fuel reserves it might have within its own territory. In 2011, the state-owned Turkish Petroleum Corporation (Türkiye Petrolleri Anonim Ortaklığı, TPAO) signed an agreement with Royal Dutch Shell to explore for oil and gas in southeastern Turkey and two years later, the government approved a \$500 million exploration budget for TPAO.¹²⁴ Such investments may pay some dividends: in January 2014, TPAO discovered oil in the Silopi district, alongside Turkey's border with Iraqi Kurdistan.¹²⁵ In addition, the US Energy Information Administration suggests southeastern Anatolia may have considerable shale oil and gas, although earthquake faults in the region and clay content in the shale may undercut the ability to develop the field.¹²⁶ Both TPAO and Royal Dutch Shell have also drilled gas-exploration wells in Diyarbakir, a city many Turkish Kurds consider their capital.

Exploration does not guarantee a find, though. If some future autonomous or independent Turkish Kurdistan seeks to rely on shale, it might find its ability to attract investment undercut by the relatively high cost of extraction, especially should international oil prices remain depressed. Öcalan's environmentalism might also become an issue: either the leadership of Turkey's Kurdistan would have to alter its position or Turkish Kurdistan would have to forfeit a potentially lucrative source of revenue.

The potential for discrepancies in oil and gas wealth between regions will force other decisions with potentially great social and political ramifications. Iraqi and Syrian Kurdistan are by population the smallest Kurdish regions but have at present the greatest oil and gas reserves.

The questions Kurds and Kurdish leaders must address, then, is if and how an independent Kurdistan would share oil revenue. Would

Kurdish oil be a national resource or a local resource? And, if Kurdish independence were sequenced—Iraqi and Syrian Kurdistan first, before Turkish and Iranian Kurdistan—would reluctance by authorities in Qamishli and Erbil to subsidize a much larger, resource-poor Kurdish population dampen enthusiasm for a much larger Kurdistan? There is precedent here with Arab nationalism. The smaller Persian Gulf states have small populations but the bulk of the oil and gas reserves. Egypt, meanwhile, has both been home to one in five Arabs and traditionally the epicenter for Arab nationalist discourse.

But while it has been easy for Egyptian Arabs to demand a proportional share of Saudi or Emirate oil or Qatari gas—in the name of Arab solidarity and unity—the fulfillment of that demand was always a nonstarter. Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Abu Dhabi, and Qatar created sovereign wealth funds to invest in their own futures rather than to support the broader Arab world. In all likelihood, Iraqi Kurdistan at least would embrace the same attitude—Barzani has long seemed to put wealth accumulation ahead of nationalism. For Barzani, the KDP must control oil if it is to have the revenue needed to dispense patronage, the basis of its power. To share oil would, essentially, be to forfeit power, and Barzani would likely resort to force before allowing that to happen. With the persistence of such attitudes in the higher reaches of the Iraqi Kurdish government, it is likely that not one unified Kurdistan would form, but rather two: a smaller, oil-rich emirate in Iraqi Kurdistan and a larger, poorer Kurdistan that encompasses whatever other Kurdistan regions can join.

Water Resources

Kurdistan is not only potentially an oil-rich nation but also would be among the fortunate few water-wealthy Middle Eastern states. The Tigris-Euphrates system is the only river system besides the Nile in the Middle East that offers an economically exploitable water surplus.¹²⁷ Ninety percent of Euphrates water and 50 percent of Tigris water originate in Kurdish areas of Turkey before flowing into Syria and Iraq.¹²⁸ The Tigris flows through Kurdish areas before bisecting Baghdad, while the Euphrates and its tributaries pass through a

portion of Syria claimed by Syrian Kurds before bypassing the rest of Kurdistan and continuing through Syria and into western and southern Iraq.

As additional Kurdish regions become autonomous, even if they fall short of outright independence, the changed status will reverberate through the broader Middle East as regional law and local claims to resources in recognized, self-governing Kurdish zones disrupt or exacerbate existing disputes about the division of water resources in the Tigris and Euphrates basin.

Take Turkey, for example: Turkey has long defended its management of water resources diplomatically but has not hesitated to play hardball in pursuit of its national interest. Turkey was, for example, one of only three countries—Burundi and China being the others—that voted against the UN General Assembly's 1997 Law of the Non-Navigational Uses of International Watercourses on what constitutes fair and reasonable distribution of water resources.¹²⁹ Prime Minister Süleyman Demirel was blunt when, in 1992, he declared, "We do not say we share their oil resources. They cannot say they share our water resources. This is a right of sovereignty. We have the right to do anything we like."¹³⁰

Should Kurds gain independence in Iraq and Syria but not in Turkey, then Turkey's water interests may not be seriously affected. But if Turkish Kurdistan gains autonomy or joins an independent Kurdistan, then Demirel's words may come back to haunt an already water-stressed Turkey. In such a case, Kurdistan would inherit a large proportion of Turkey's fresh water supply and its ability to generate hydroelectric power.

In the wider region, however, revisiting agreements to accommodate Kurdistan could open a Pandora's box. Disputes over water resources between Syria, Turkey, and Iraq date back more than eight decades. Both bilaterally and trilaterally, the three states have tried to regulate water resources and resolve disputes. In 1946, for example, Iraq and Turkey signed the Treaty of Friendship and Neighborly Relations, which addressed Euphrates and Tigris water sharing. Such agreements worked so long as both countries remained undeveloped, but tension increased alongside industrialization. Adding

Syria to the mix only complicated questions over downstream rights. In 1962, Syria and Iraq agreed to exchange information on water discharge and river levels, and Iraq demanded to receive a fixed share of Euphrates water. After multiple rounds of negotiations over the next four years, the two countries agreed Iraq should receive 59 percent of the Euphrates flow.

Should Kurdistan come into the mix, then that half-century of understanding will effectively become void. Existing states might argue that Kurdistan's proportion of the flow should come out of the share of whatever country from which it was carved, but unless Kurdistan accepts to inherit treaty commitments from all of the countries from which it was carved, an unlikely scenario, their complaints will fall on deaf ears.

The danger for both Kurdistan and its neighbors is that competing water claims are not always resolved diplomatically. In the 1970s and 1980s, Syria, Iraq, and Turkey began laying the groundwork for a series of dams and hydroelectric plants. Syria completed the Thawra Dam in 1974; Turkey followed suit with the Keban Dam the same year. The reduced water flow led to an escalating series of accusations among Iraq, Syria, and Turkey. As drought increased in Iraq, hostility almost erupted into open warfare between Iraq and Syria.¹³¹ Only a Saudi-brokered agreement between Damascus and Baghdad, in which Syria received 40 percent of the Euphrates water and Iraq took 60 percent, averted war. Such agreements were mere bandages, though, readily voided as Turkey, Syria, and Iraq continued to prioritize their own development.

Iraq briefly suspended oil supplies to Turkey in 1977, after Turkey decided to alter the flow of Euphrates in part to begin construction of the Karakaya Dam. At the time, the new Kirkuk-Ceyhan (Yumurtalık) pipeline was filling two-thirds of Turkey's petrol demands.¹³² Turkey refused to sign a binding agreement with Syria or Iraq, but it did subsequently promise the World Bank that it would allow 500 cubic meters per second of flow over the Karakaya dam in exchange for international funding. However, the precedent raises the possibility that a landlocked Kurdistan's neighbors will play hardball, closing the flow of Kurdistan's oil and gas through the pipelines needed for

its export until the Kurdish authorities come to terms on water sharing. Indeed, among the top 20 oil-producing nations, none is landlocked; Kazakhstan comes close, but has an outlet into the Caspian Sea giving it export options to Caspian's other littoral states. This might, in turn, harm economic diversification as Kurdistan's neighbors force it to compromise on its water claims and quotas in order for them to keep cross-border oil pipelines operating.

In 1982, Turkey and Iraq formed a Joint Technical Committee for Regional Waters, which Syria joined the following year. In 1989, Syria and Iraq agreed to provisional division of the Euphrates water passed by Turkey into Syria, but bickering between the two Arab states has nonetheless continued. Should Iraqi Kurdistan or Rojava become independent, then they effectively would void all previous agreements since both would likely refuse to be bound by existing treaties to which they were not parties. At the very least, a new Kurdish state would insist on renegotiating its own allotment.

It is easy to suggest that Kurdish entities or an independent Kurdistan renegotiate water-sharing agreements, but it might be too optimistic to assume that the resolution of these disputes will be entirely peaceful. Syrian MIG aircraft downed a Turkish reconnaissance plane inside Turkish airspace in 1987 after Turkey suspended its water-sharing agreements in retaliation for Syrian support to the PKK.¹³³ Against escalating tension between Ankara and Damascus, international diplomats rushed to avoid war.

In January 1990, Syria formally asked Turkey to reduce its diversion of the Euphrates, and that May, Iraq demanded that Turkey release a minimum of 700 cubic meters per second to Syria so that Iraq's downstream proportion would also rise. When Turkey refused, Iraq retaliated by refusing to renew its 1984 security protocol. As Turkey moved to fill the Atatürk Dam, effectively stopping the Euphrates' flow for one month, Iraq threatened to bomb the dam, and both Iraq and Syria joined in a boycott of Turkish companies involved with its development of southeastern Anatolia. Once again, water disputes threatened to morph into broader hostility.

In December 1995, at the behest of Syria, seven Arab states formally accused Turkey of releasing contaminated water into Syria.

The Arab League demanded Turkey stop building dams on both the Tigris and Euphrates and began to retaliate against European companies working on Turkish hydroelectric projects. Decreasing flow on the Euphrates led to a 50 percent cut in electricity to Nasiriya, Iraq's fourth-largest city, in August 2009. "Iraq has not faced a water shortage like this," Iraqi Water Resources Minister Latif Rashid, an ethnic Kurd and Talabani's brother-in-law, quipped in 2009, blaming the shortage on water diversion.¹³⁴ The Iraqi government claimed that Turkish dams had reduced flow into Iraq by nearly three-quarters.¹³⁵

Before the 1991 uprising, Iraq sought to harness Kurdistan's considerable hydroelectric potential. It began construction of the large Bekhme Dam on the Great Zab River. Looting in the aftermath of Saddam's withdrawal and subsequent international sanctions forced the suspension of that project, but Kurdistan—perennially short of electricity despite its oil wealth—might easily seek to revive it, setting the stage for renewed conflict with post secession Iraq.

As upstream countries like Turkey and Kurdistan dam the Euphrates and perhaps the Tigris as well, the rump Iraqi state could face agricultural disaster. Increased salinity as salt water from the Persian Gulf and Shatt al Arab river flows northward compounds the problem. Iraq has set its maximum saline limit at 1,500 parts per million, lethal to all crops but date palms. But during the 2009 drought, salinity levels peaked at 40,000 parts per million in southern Iraq, and they have since leveled out at 12,000 parts per million.¹³⁶ In March 2014, Iraqi Shi'ite politician Abbas al Bayati warned Iraqi Kurdistan not to dam water that he said rightfully belongs to the Iraqi government.¹³⁷ Uday al Khadran, governor of the largely Sunni al Khalis district, likewise condemned "attempts of Kurdistan Region President Masoud Barzani to wage a water war against several governorates by reducing their water share from the dams, which should be under the control of the central government."¹³⁸

Not many issues can unite Iraqi Arabs across the sectarian divide. Iraq reserved some of its vitriol for Syria as well. In a 2010 newscast, state-controlled al Iraqiya Television warned that "neighboring countries mean to wage a new war on Iraq, which Syria is spearheading through drying up the water of the Euphrates River."¹³⁹

Successive governments in Ankara and Baghdad neglected their Kurdish region and, depending on the extent of their borders, the Kurds may face an addition problem: aging infrastructure. The August 2014 capture of the Mosul Dam by Islamic State fighters revived fears that the vast reservoir it holds could be used as a weapon. A 2003 US military intelligence assessment warned that its failure could not only send a 65-foot wall of water into Mosul but also deluge parts of Baghdad with 15 feet of water.¹⁴⁰ Such a catastrophe could kill half a million people.¹⁴¹ Certainly, the Iraqi government would hold Kurdistan responsible for dam safety and security; that the dam was decrepit before it failed would be no excuse. Whether a newly independent Kurdistan would have the competence and make the necessary investment to upgrade and repair the Mosul Dam, however, is another question entirely.

Can the Kurds Attract Foreign Investment?

At first glance, that answer might seem a no-brainer. After all, billions of dollars of foreign investment have flooded into Iraqi Kurdistan since Saddam's downfall. The honeymoon, however, might be over, as a precipitous decline in oil prices and more than a decade of mismanagement take their toll.

In theory, oil and water should make Kurdistan rich. In reality, however, rentier states often find themselves at an economic dead end. The Kurds will need foreign investment to diversify and expand their economy, but this might be easier said than obtained. In the long term, Kurds will face five challenges to sustained foreign investment: their continued embrace of left-of-center, if not Marxist, economic philosophy; corruption; a lack of management experience; a lack of financial infrastructure; and the lack of procedural and substantive legal tradition which is necessary for titled property rights, banking infrastructure, capital formation, and more advanced business activities.

Many witnesses to the "gold rush" decade after Saddam's fall may forget that Talabani's Patriotic Union of Kurdistan was a member of the Socialist International or that Barzani's Kurdistan Democratic

Party acquiesced in its formative years to being a Soviet Cold War proxy. The socialism inherent in both facts may be a patina only. Both Öcalan and HDP leader Selahattin Demirtaş, however, continue to uphold a left-of-center economic vision that prioritizes the role of government and looks with suspicion—if not outright hostility—toward capitalism and profit motives. The leadership of Rojava, heavily influenced by Öcalan’s economic philosophy, likewise embraces a vision prioritizing the state over the private sector.

Should Iranian Kurds free themselves, they likewise would embrace a more socialist outlook. The Party of Free Life of Kurdistan (PJAK) is a PKK affiliate, no different in economic outlook from the PYD in Syria. In 1996, the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran became an observer member of the Socialist International, and the Organization of Revolutionary Toilers of Iranian Kurdistan (Komalay Shoreshgeri Zahmatkeshani Kurdistanî Iran, or Komala), aside from being home to many of the best-known Iranian Kurdish intellectuals, remains an unabashedly communist party. When asked in a 2014 interview about whether communism had failed, Ibrahim Alizade, Komala’s secretary general, responded, “No doubt it experienced failure and that is very obvious. But I think the time has come for its revival.” He added, “We want the labor sector to take over power. The labor sector should take over through its parties and organizations and it does not have to be through violence. . . . A labor strike, administered by a radical and truthful party, will put an end to capitalism.”¹⁴²

With such rhetoric, it will be hard to attract foreign investment. An independent Kurdistan will likewise be hard-pressed to attract investment if it restricts landownership. The fact that areas that the PKK or its affiliates dominate are also the least developed and therefore the most in need of foreign cash only exacerbates the problems Kurds can expect to face in the months and years after independence, arguably the period when the need will be greatest.

Even if international firms are willing to ignore Kurdistan’s knee-jerk belief in a state-centered economy and an inflated public sector, corruption and cronyism might offset their willingness to do business. In the wake of the 2003 war, Iraqi Kurds experienced a

veritable gold rush. They went from a region of broken apartments and old Brazilian or East Bloc vehicles to million-dollar villas, Mercedes, and souped-up Land Cruisers. Ordinary Kurds rebranded an upscale neighborhood in Erbil as “Dollarawa,” loosely “Dollarville,” because of the flood of money.

Increasingly, however, investors have learned that the allure of easy money, stability, friendliness, and democracy might be more an illusion than real. The vacancy rate in Kurdistan’s new apartment buildings and skyscrapers can hover around 80 percent and would be even higher if not for rentals by government enterprises. Kurdish leaders might liken Kurdistan to Dubai, but a better analogy would be to Turkmenistan. Kurdistan might be more democratic, but corruption has hampered economic development both there and in Turkmenistan. Two decades ago, investors believed that Turkmen gas could be the future. Kurdistan has even attracted some of the same officials who had once trumpeted Turkmenistan’s potential, former American Ambassador to Iraq Zalmay Khalilzad chief among them.¹⁴³

In the mid-1990s, the Gulf Cooperation Council consistently failed to attract top international companies like fast-food giant McDonalds and some large automobile franchises. The reason was corruption’s corrosive impact on profit. There was a widespread understanding that Bahraini or Emirati partners—and partnership was a prerequisite for entering the market—would take a 10 percent cut from any business dealings, with that expense rising to 20 percent if any members of the royal families were involved. This, in effect, negated any potential profit from the market. Only when Bahrain, Dubai, and other regional governments mitigated the scale of corruption did they achieve a sustained investment and economic boom.

Iraqi Kurdistan, however, shows no sign of tackling cronyism and corruption. Investment is difficult, if not impossible, without a senior KDP or PUK partner. Barzani’s sons demand extortionate amounts—sometimes up to 40 percent of profits—and use the security service to punish those who do not make their payments. Foreign investors will not receive necessary permits unless they pay

signing bonuses of up to \$50,000 and acquiesce to a KDP appointee as their accountant. The biggest difference between Kurdish officials is not whether they are corrupt but the degree to which they physically hurt people who get in their way. Many early investors now recognize that their Kurdish partners will not uphold contractual commitments and that the Kurdish judiciary provides no recourse. Oil companies have laid out billions of dollars in infrastructure investment only to discover that the KRG will not pay revenue owed, will pay pennies on the dollar, or will uphold their commitments only after tremendous delays.

While Kurdish authorities blame their refusal to uphold commitments on Baghdad's not providing oil revenue to Kurdistan in a timely manner and the expense of fighting the Islamic State, complaints about Baghdad's timeliness on payments has historically been more an excuse than real, and the KRG's deference of salaries because of the Islamic State does not explain why the central Iraqi government continues to fulfill its obligations despite suffering similar if not greater pressure. Rather, it seems the KRG is effectively challenging the oil companies to leave rather than complain, knowing that most are unwilling yet to abandon their investments. While in the short term, that might enrich party coffers and the bank accounts of Kurdish officials, it creates a corrosive investment environment with long-term reverberations far beyond the oil industry.

Indeed, Kurdish authorities might see Kurdistan as a new Dubai, but they should probably instead consider the case of Armenia: like Kurdistan, Armenia boasts a large diaspora that theoretically could provide a pool of money with which to jump-start development in their homeland. After all, commercial profit mixed with patriotic pride can be intoxicating. But endemic corruption within Armenia soon convinced Armenians abroad that, while they might rally for symbolic issues such as recognition of the Armenian Genocide in various countries across the West, they would be foolish to invest money in Yerevan because it would be lost. Various government officials and bureaucrats would either demand cuts or impose regulations with the same effect. Not only does Armenia remain poor, but it has lost one-third of its population to emigration since

independence as young Armenians seek employment and better opportunities elsewhere.

The Kurdish market may be formidable, but even more than 50 million potential customers and consumers—and that assumes all portions of Kurdistan coalesce into an independent state—will not attract sufficient investment so long as international companies feel the government will not provide them an even playing field. The risk outside investors will bear will increase rapidly if Kurdistan becomes independent only in limited regions, with smaller populations limiting profit potential.

Crony capitalism continues to impact Kurdistan in other ways. When the government sells state land, it reserves the most valuable properties—for example, in the center of cities or in resort areas—for family members of the leaders. Hence, Kurds complain that Jalal Talabani sold lucrative land to his brother-in-law, Latif Rashid, providing his family with an immediate multimillion-dollar windfall. Both Nechirwan Barzani, Masoud Barzani's son-in-law, and Masrour, Masoud's son, have invested heavily in real estate development, building subdivisions into which businessmen and party officials effectively must buy.

The ruling families monopolize almost all the opportunity through their ability to win sole licensee status when foreign companies do invest. In the United States and many Western countries, buying a McDonald's, Starbucks, or International House of Pancakes franchise, for example, might be a ticket to the middle class, and buying several over time might actually make a businessman rich. Hence, when fast-food companies, international coffee chains, or automobile manufacturers enter the local market, they license their brand to single individuals connected with the leadership, who then monopolize the brand: no one else can buy a McDonald's franchise if a Barzani has purchased the rights to control all McDonald's restaurants in Kurdistan. This means that Kurdistan not only lacks an even playing field, but also that there are no real opportunities for any new investment that might provide more stable foundations for the middle class or disrupt monopolies.

Kurds may be resilient, but their patience is not infinite. In the years prior to Saddam's ouster, Kurds dreamed of emigrating to Europe. Many paid human traffickers to smuggle them, an expensive and dangerous prospect that nonetheless reflected the hopelessness many felt living under international sanctions and with Saddam's army often just over the horizon. That many Kurds once again take their chances as illegal emigrants on the perilous path to Europe reflects just how disillusioned they have become with the lack of opportunity for those not connected to elite families.

After years of denial, threats, and even the murder of critical journalists, Barzani has acknowledged corruption is a problem. He, his nephew and current Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani, and former Prime Minister Barham Salih have all promised to tackle corruption. All, however, have also used their political connections to win contracts and enrich themselves. Rhetoric alone does not defeat graft. Promises can be empty. No Iraqi Kurdish politicians have used their positions to legislate codes of conduct that will dampen the tendency of politicians to use their offices to pursue extracurricular business activities or define more broadly conflicts of interest. Absent such legislation and protections, the political class might quickly transform any independent Kurdish entity into a banana republic. Indeed, some Kurds argue that the willingness of Kurdish leaders to depend on a single resource and market have already done so in Iraqi Kurdistan.¹⁴⁴

Kurdistan must also overcome cultural problems if Kurds hope to develop a growing economy that is attractive to outside investment. Decades in which political patronage trumped merit in advancement have undermined the notion of personal accountability. The tendency for young people to aspire to safe civil service positions over entrepreneurship has led generations of the best and brightest to shy away from the business world. The issue is not only the youth but also their parents: young Kurds might have caught the entrepreneurial spirit, but Kurdistan remains a conservative society relative to the West. If students graduate at the top of their class, the insistence of their parents to pursue medicine or engineering will be hard to resist, regardless of what is in their heart.

There have been some changes to the employment landscape. Against the backdrop of the building boom in Kurdistan, some young Iraqi Kurds have launched businesses in decorating or computing services, although most of these are relatively small-scale. Still, the lack of a diversified, entrepreneurial economy has translated into a shortage of experienced managers in Kurdistan. Hotels, for example, must often import Turkish managers and staff from other countries.

Another impediment to the modernization and advancement of Kurdistan's economy is a lack of financial infrastructure. ATMs are a relatively recent phenomenon and still remain few and far between. Few locations accept credit cards. Essentially, Kurdistan remains a cash economy.

Banking is essentially a trust-based activity grounded in law. The problem with local banks is that most Kurds simply do not trust that they could get their money back should they deposit it into them. This is not an unfounded fear. Iraqi Kurdistan's North Bank no longer provides depositors access to their money on demand and has recently sought to provide plots of land, often in the middle of nowhere, in lieu of repayment. Such lack of confidence in banks hampers capital formation and intermediation. Increasingly, individuals are hesitant to patronize Kurdish banks or invest in its limited banking sector. In 2015, approximately \$300 billion disappeared from the Central Bank of Iraq's vault in Erbil. Most of these funds had been deposited by private Iraqi and foreign banks operating in the region. As a result, many Kuwaiti, Emirati, and Lebanese banks are already reconsidering operations in Iraqi Kurdistan.

At present, outside Turkey, no modern banking sector exists in the lands where Kurds form the majority. Banks in Syria and Iran are state-run, at best inactive and at worst corrupt, acting as slush funds for regime elites. Few if any ordinary Syrians or Iranians, regardless of ethnicity, trust their deposits to a state bank. Instead, they keep cash at home either in local currency or in US dollars or euros or convert it into gold. Iraqi Kurdistan, which after a quarter-century of financial autonomy, could have the most advanced banking sector. It does not for the simple reason that banks operating according to international norms and with transparency would undercut some

of the most lucrative corruption schemes in which politically connected Kurds engage. Indeed, during the 2016 Sulaimani Forum, Qubad Talabani quipped that Iraqi Kurdistan was still operating under 1940s accounting rules, regulations, and practices. This is intentional.

Simply put, government ledgers are rife with ghost employees whose salaries officials pocket. There are many variations on this scheme. The rarest are outright fictional employees simply because it is easiest for such a scheme to be exposed. More often, ministers, commanders, and directors general inflate employee rolls with friends and family. The government disburses the full salary, but the director might give only half to the fake employee—incentive enough to keep quiet—while keeping a healthy cut for himself.

In other cases, employers simply take an illicit cut from the salaries of real employees. After all, to collect salaries, Iraqi Kurds must queue in their offices, peshmerga must go to force headquarters, and police must visit their directorate to pick up the cash due to them. In such an environment, supervisors can easily embezzle a set proportion of the cash theoretically due to their employees. No employees will complain, as their supervisors would likely have won their positions through political connections and would triumph in any dispute. To make an accusation, even a truthful one, would likely lead to an employee's firing and blacklisting. In one example, the police spokesman in Erbil criticized Nechirvan Barzani privately among friends. He was kidnapped and beaten and had his life saved only by the appeal of Kosrat Rasul, a popular former PUK prime minister and peshmerga leader, to Nechirvan. Still, the officer was hospitalized for several days and unceremoniously fired.

It is only because Kurdistan remains a cash society that either scheme remains viable. If employers were to pay salaries directly to employees' accounts, ministers, supervisors, or party leaders would have no opportunity to siphon off cash or deduct kickbacks for themselves. If, on paper, a clerk earned \$1,000 per month, he would receive \$1,000 per month into his account, not \$700 per month with the extra \$300 diverted to party officials or ruling family members. In addition, ghost employees could be more easily traced. Electronic

banking also hampers large-scale bribery: banking watchdogs would question how a midlevel government employee suddenly deposits \$100,000 into his account.

Because enabling such corruption became more important for Kurdistan Regional Government leaders than modernizing financial infrastructure, Iraqi Kurdistan will not in the near future have the banking infrastructure to support a modern economy. Should Iraqi Kurdistan become independent in the next year, its economic structure would be on par with sub-Saharan Africa, not with Europe, the Persian Gulf or North Africa, and Asia.

Electronic banking would not only ease the payment of salaries but could also allow their accessibility on demand. Workers would not have to waste afternoons in long queues to collect cash. The electronic banking network would also ease real estate transactions. Purchasing a property in Kurdistan can involve gathering several hundred thousand, if not more than a million, dollars in cash. Property crime might be rare, but security is not foolproof, and handling such amounts of cash can be dangerous. With electronic banking, the cash transfer can occur with the press of a button. Nor is electronic banking revolutionary: every advanced economy uses it. Given a clear choice between regional development and ease of life for ordinary Kurds and protecting a system that enables corruption and embezzlement, the Iraqi Kurdish leadership has chosen the latter.

While Turkey has numerous modern banks, Erdoğan's recent willingness to interfere with them in the course of his political crusades or to seek revenge against their owners increasingly erodes confidence in their stability and independence. Only Turkey has a regulatory oversight board, the Savings Deposit Insurance Fund (Tasarruf Mevduatı Sigorta Fonu, TMSF), an institution somewhat akin to the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation in the United States. In Turkey, however, Erdoğan has transformed the TMSF into a political ax to wield against his adversaries. An independent Kurdistan, whether born of one or of many regions, will be confronted with the need to create an oversight board that bolsters confidence in banks. Should it become yet another tool to dispense

political patronage or to conduct party politics, public confidence will sharply erode.

Financial law and transparency would also allow Kurdistan to establish a stock exchange, an institution necessary to allow the economy to move beyond reliance on government subsidies and the volatility of commodities. Only a handful of countries exist without one—mostly small island nations and authoritarian dictatorships. The shah inaugurated the Tehran Stock Exchange in 1968, which today trades in 420 companies. The Istanbul Stock Exchange, which celebrates its 30th anniversary this year, lists 371 companies. And even Syria inaugurated a bourse in 2009, although the civil war there has suspended its development. In theory, the Kurdistan Regional Government did launch the Erbil Stock Exchange in 2014, but the institution exists as little more than a web page. Private companies have no incentive to list, and a lack of legal infrastructure and trust any Kurdish regulatory authority will continue to condemn the local stock exchange to irrelevance.

If an independent Kurdistan is to create a functioning bourse, then Kurdish businessmen must confront several issues almost immediately. The first is whether they will continue to list their companies on the stock exchanges of Turkey, Iraq, Iran, or elsewhere or whether they will shift their companies to a new and inexperienced exchange. Sometimes, financial wisdom trumps nationalism.

A broader issue if Kurdistan is going to promote a private-sector jump-start of its economy with both domestic and foreign investment is how it will address the issues of insider trading, especially given the lack of legal framework regarding conflict of interest. Certainly, that is an issue shared with other developing countries, but it is nevertheless a problem that, in combination with other weaknesses, could severely undermine investor confidence.

Currency

Also crucial in any new Kurdish state will be decisions regarding choice of currency. At present, Kurds use the dollar or euro for large transactions, but for everyday small transactions, each Kurdistani

region currently uses the currency of the country which is its suzerain. Hence, Kurds in Turkey, Syria, Iran, and Iraq, respectively, use the Turkish lira, Syrian pound, Iranian rial, and Iraqi dinar. Of all these currencies, the Turkish lira and Iraqi dinar have been most stable, yet both now show signs of weakness. Against the backdrop of corruption, instability, and questions about political interference in and the solvency of Turkey's banks, the Turkish lira has lost almost one-third of its value against the dollar in the past year. While the Iraqi dinar has been remarkably stable for more than a decade, that era may soon end: the decline in the price of oil and the Iraqi government's continued dipping into its reserves may soon devalue if not destabilize the dinar.

After a flag—a symbol of nationalism with no current Kurdish consensus—there is no greater symbol of statehood than currency. Not every newly independent state adopts its own currency. Upon Kosovo's 2008 independence, it adopted the euro as its currency even though, as a non-eurozone member, it has no say over European monetary policy. Micronesia, the Northern Mariana Islands, and Palau use the US dollar, and many Caribbean and West African states share the East Caribbean dollar or CFA franc, respectively.

But these are exceptions rather than the rule. Countries that have faced decades-long and often violent fights for independence often insist on their own national currency. South Sudan, for example, uses the South Sudanese pound; Eritrea uses the Eritrean nakfa; and every former Soviet state has issued its own currency, from the Latvian lat to the Tajik somoni. The problem is that, absent sophisticated monetary policy, fiscal discipline, and sufficient reserves, a Kurdish currency will weaken or collapse. Indeed, with the Kurdistan Regional Government at least \$25 billion in debt—debt denominated in dollars or euros—any new Kurdish currency would immediately come under immense pressure and likely collapse.

Even if Iraqi Kurdistan did issue a currency and achieve some economic stability, the Kurdish regions in Turkey and Iran have no experience with economic autonomy, and Rojava has only limited experience. If any of these regions were to become independent

alone or in conjunction with another region, it would bring little to no hard currency reserve on which to peg its currency.

A possible compromise for Kurdistan, however, would be to issue a symbolic currency equivalent in value to the US dollar or European euro. In this, there is precedent in Panama and Timor-Leste, which utilize the US dollar as their currency for all practical purposes but both also mint symbolic coinage (and, in Panama's case, currency as well) pegged one to one to the US dollar.

6

Would Kurdistan Be a State of Law?

While choice of a government system remains contentious for Kurds and Kurdistan, that might only be the tip of the iceberg. After all, any government or governments would need a well-established legal code upon which to function on a daily basis. Regularizing law will be a Herculean task. Each of the four main regions of Kurdistan brings with it a different body of law, on top of which, the long history of struggle, insurgency, and civil war brings with it immediate legal obstacles which must be addressed before Kurds address the minutiae of their legal needs and necessary reforms.

Transitional Justice

Kurds may see independence as closing the door on an often-traumatic past and beginning a fresh chapter, but the past may not be so easy to forget. In every Kurdistan region, Kurds lionize those who have fought for their freedom, but that fight has often been brutal and seldom a binary conflict between Kurds and non-Kurds.

Take the PKK-led insurgency in Turkey: the PKK may depict theirs as a fight between Kurds and the Turkish state to recognize the legitimate cultural and political rights of Kurds, but it was far more complex. In its early years, the PKK fought rival Kurdish groups as fiercely as it fought the Turks. The PKK embraced not only ethnic nationalism, but also Marxism. It targeted not only external enemies, but also those within its own ranks. In the early 1980s, for example, several PKK members disappeared, arrested and perhaps executed by Öcalan's inner circle.¹⁴⁵

Nor was the fight against Turkey so cut-and-dried. Many Kurds integrated into the Turkish state and the Turkish army. As insurgency

grew, the Turkish government in 1985 resurrected a network of village guards originally formed in 1924 to create what was effectively a Kurdish paramilitary loyal to the state and meant to defend against PKK attacks.¹⁴⁶ With rural unemployment high, village guard employment could be attractive, providing both a salary and health insurance.¹⁴⁷ As of 2013, 59,000 village guards remained on the Turkish government's payroll, with an additional 23,000 armed volunteers recognized by the Interior Ministry.¹⁴⁸ In April 2013, the predominantly Kurdish Peace and Democracy Party (BDP) sought the dissolution of the system.

If Kurdish regions of Turkey achieve autonomy or independence, then not only will 50,000 village guards need new employment, but they and their families will have to choose between fleeing their homes and villages and living among those whom they once fought as terrorists. From a purely economic standpoint, the flight of thousands of village guards, schoolteachers, and other Kurds who worked with those the PKK leadership fought would be disastrous. New states or entities should try to attract human and monetary capital, not purge it.

Anger at village guards runs deep, however. A 2006 Turkish Interior Ministry report found almost 10 percent of village guards to be criminals, involved in terrorism, smuggling, or property crime.¹⁴⁹ The Human Rights Association of Turkey found 1,591 violations by village guards between January 1990 and March 2009.¹⁵⁰ "Village guards first wounded and then burned my son alive, dragged his dead body behind a car and left it to the dogs," one woman told a British reporter in 2013, adding, "I hate the village guards more than I hate Turkish soldiers."¹⁵¹ Village guards also have grievances: mainly, that more than 2,000 have died at PKK hands.¹⁵² On June 11, 1990, for example, the PKK attacked Cevrimli village in Sirnak, killing 27, including 12 children.¹⁵³

Whether Turkey's Kurds become independent, as some desire, or simply govern themselves autonomously, questions remain about how to reconcile abuses of the past. To the PKK's credit, they have embraced the idea of a truth commission so long as it includes both sides involved in the struggle.

Many village guards fear that they might become surrogates for blood feuds. As longtime Turkish columnist İlnur Çevik observed, many Kurdish families in southeastern Anatolia have lost children fighting against Turkish soldiers. The Turkish soldiers might rotate out of the area as the army deploys them to other areas or their service ends. Past and present village guards, however, remain targets for those seeking to avenge the loss of loved ones.¹⁵⁴

Kurdish political leaders in Turkey certainly recognize that they must address the issue of the village guards, but forgiveness might not be at the top of their agenda. The BDP proposed not truth and reconciliation, but rather truth and justice. “The conscious of society would not rest and there will be no social peace unless these human rights violations are investigated without impunity and criminals are brought to justice,” a 2010 resolution stated. “The carnage and massacres left in the dark should be illuminated, criminals should be persecuted, [and] justice should be served, opening the way for compensatory damages and apology.”¹⁵⁵

Nor is the need to address human rights violations limited to Turkey’s Kurds. Collaboration has been a consistent problem through Iraqi Kurdish history. Tribal divisions and animosities led some Kurds to oppose Mulla Mustafa Barzani’s initial 1943 revolt. Over subsequent decades, including during Saddam’s genocidal Anfal campaign, numerous Kurds collaborated with the Iraqi government, sometimes more out of animosity toward Barzani than out of sympathy with the Iraqi government. “Jash,” literally the foal of a donkey, became a derogatory term for such Kurds.

At various times, Mulla Mustafa Barzani sought to cooperate with Saddam. His eldest son Ubeydullah, actively collaborated with the Baathist regime. Documents seized after the fall of Saddam Hussein show unequivocally that senior members of both Masoud Barzani’s Kurdistan Democratic Party and Jalal Talabani’s Patriotic Union of Kurdistan cooperated with and reported to Saddam’s intelligence service: none have lost their jobs for their betrayal, let alone faced justice, fueling the resentment of those less politically connected who lost loved ones in the struggle against Saddam. In 1996, Barzani invited Saddam’s Republican Guards into the Iraqi Kurdish capital,

Erbil, to protect Barzani against Talabani's forces. That Barzani was willing to collaborate with Saddam only eight years after the Iraqi regime used chemical weapons against Kurds and had murdered 8,000 members of his own tribe has become a symbol of the cynicism of the Kurdish leadership.

Not every mass grave in Iraq was filled by Saddam or, more recently, the Islamic State. In the wake of independence, Iraqi Kurds might also need to address the status of human rights abuses carried out by Kurdish political parties directly against their Kurdish rivals. During the 1994–97 intra-Kurdish civil war, not every peshmerga or political activist died on the battlefield. The two sides took approximately 400 prisoners. Some were captured in combat, but many others were arrested at home by security forces loyal to either Barzani or Talabani.

To this day, neither political leader nor their parties will acknowledge fully what happened to the prisoners and where they are buried. The closest any Iraqi Kurdish official has come was in early 2015 when, according to Iraqi Kurdish journalists, Karim Sinjari, the Kurdistan Regional Government interior minister, informed the Iraqi Kurdish parliament's human rights committee that none of the disappeared were alive. According to these journalists, he provided no further details. Family members protested in front of the Iraqi Kurdish parliament on May 11, 2015. According to them, some PUK members had turned themselves in when the KDP captured Erbil and promised them safety. They expected to be sent to PUK-held territory as party of a prisoner transfer but instead faced impromptu firing squads. The KDP reportedly ordered the execution of its prisoners at Akre Prison, while the PUK supposedly also put its prisoners to death, although perhaps not as systematically.

A Kurdistan entity combining regions may bring additional complications in terms of transitional justice. Every major Kurdish political party has at one point fought every other existing party. According to independent Kurdish journalists, human rights activists, and lawyers, the Kurdistan Democratic Party executed at least 67 PKK guerrillas captured during fighting between the two parties. Likewise, the PUK apparently executed 11 members of Islamic parties after they

had surrendered in the wake of a skirmish. The issue goes beyond simply militia fighters: at least 50 civilians disappeared after their arrest by KDP or PUK security forces in the civil war period. That the PUK antiterrorism force is run by Jalal Talabani's nephew Lahur and its KDP corollary is run by Barzani's son makes the political sensitivity of truth and reconciliation even greater. Even if neither family member was directly involved in extrajudicial execution, both certainly have access to the records of their respective organizations.

Nor did human rights abuses end with the civil war. Security forces or vigilantes have assassinated at least 30 journalists and civil-society activists since the establishment of the Kurdistan Regional Government in Iraq; the government has not brought a single individual to justice for any of these murders.¹⁵⁶

Property Disputes

Compounding the issue of transitional justice will also be questions about property. Across the various regions of Kurdistan, wars and political upheaval have compounded decades of disputes about landownership.

In Turkey, decades of war and insurgency led to the destruction and forced displacement of millions of Kurds from thousands of villages the Turkish army subsequently razed. Among the chief problems facing any new Kurdish state or entity will be the resolution of conflicting property claims. The BDP, for example, has declared, "Return to inhabited lands is a right. All aggrieved victims of migration are entitled to benefit from this right."¹⁵⁷ The BDP went further, however, and demanded that the state compensate "with fairness and without delay . . . all material and moral losses caused by the forced migration that has detached millions of people from their living areas." If Kurds redouble such a demand, it will strain relations with the new Turkish rump state and can distract from the development of the new Kurdish entity.

The problem is twofold: while Kurds certainly can demand compensation for razed villages and destroyed property, Turks likewise might make claims against Kurds—decades of fighting were not

one-sided, even if both Turks and Kurds tend to absolve themselves and blame their adversaries. Should a new Kurdish entity arise in southeastern Anatolia, poor relations with neighbors will undercut the state's vitality, especially if it remains landlocked.

In Iraq, the problem will be especially severe. Almost every Iraqi regime after the fall of the monarchy in 1958 has sought to confiscate its opponents' land and property and transfer them to supporters. In some cases, multiple families have legitimate claims over the same parcel of land. In Kirkuk, for example, Saddam's Baathist regime expelled Kurds and transferred their property to Arabs, many of whom legally—according to Iraqi law—bought and sold land to which Kurdish returnees can rightly claim title. To deny those Kurds property owned outright by their grandparents or great-grandparents but stripped from them because of the Baathist regime's ethnic chauvinism would compound that injustice. But to deny sometimes second- or third-generation owners whose family bought such property legally might also create ethnic tension should Arab or other ethnic minorities seek to remain in territory that becomes incorporated into a new Kurdish state. Destruction of archives and cadastral surveys overtime makes relying on them impossible.

Nor are all property disputes between ethnic groups. Land disputes can carry on within families, especially when grandchildren seek to claim property lost by a grandfather, a problem compounded by multiple wives among older, more traditional generations. Likewise, the Kurdistan Democratic Party confiscated tobacco factories and other lucrative businesses against the backdrop of the Kurdish civil war to finance its militias. At the conclusion of the fighting, however, it refused to return the properties to their rightful owners. Should Kurds seek to recover property from others but ignore claims within their own system, it might undercut investment and could lead to internal violence.

To simply favor the Kurdish claims in all cases in which disputes stretch across ethnic fault lines would be tantamount to ethnic cleansing and would sit poorly with the same international community from which a nascent Kurdish state would likely seek aid. Ideology and ethnic nationalism might trump pragmatism, however,

regardless of the financial and reputational cost to the new state. In both Iraqi Kurdistan and Syrian Kurdistan, human rights groups have accused Kurdish militias of conducting ethnic cleansing against Arab villages and the villages of other ethnic minorities. These were not villages or property to which Kurds had claim; they were simply for the purpose of consolidating or expanding territorial gains.

Civil Rights and Freedoms

Beyond questions of reconciliation and righting historical wrongs, Kurds will have to address how an independent or confederated Kurdistan will address basic rights and protections. Whatever the final extents of the territory within any independent Kurdistan, it will not be homogenous. It will incorporate Arabs, Turkmen, and Assyrians, as well as Sunnis, Shi'ites, and Christians. As many Arabs have fled to Kurdistan to escape the Islamic State, Kurds have imposed restrictive residency law and, in some cases, have banned landownership. Should an independent Kurdistan restrict landownership to ethnic Kurds, in effect declaring that not all citizens will be equal under the law, it risks sowing the seeds not only of significant internal strife but also of external conflict as neighboring states advocate for specific minorities.

Issues relating to civil rights and freedom, however, will not be limited to cross-ethnic or sectarian tension. While the popular Kurdish narrative is one of triumph against genocidal enemies and the cynicism of world powers, Kurds have as often been victimized by their own leaders. The PKK began as a Marxist, authoritarian group and retains pronounced elements of a personality cult. While debate occurs at the margins, it is unclear the degree to which the group's leader, Abdullah Öcalan, would tolerate dissent within his ranks.

Nor is the PKK unique. Iraqi Kurdish authorities often depict their region as democratic but, while Iraqi Kurdistan is more secure than the rest of Iraq, it takes an authoritarian approach to civil society. Here, the Iraqi Kurdish constitution is troubling. Article 60 allows freedoms of speech and assembly but only "as regulated by law."¹⁵⁸

Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) are likewise regulated in a manner that essentially subordinates them to government and political control.¹⁵⁹ Most Kurdish NGOs operate under the patronage of the Kurdish political leadership. Kurdistan Save the Children, for example, has no affiliation from the international NGO whose name it borrows. Instead, it relies on the patronage of Talabani's wife, Hero Ibrahim Ahmad, and largely operates to further party aims; foreign aid workers say that both the KDP and PUK demand they hire party members if they wish to operate in coordination with the local government. When independent Kurdish employees operating with the US Agency for International Development (USAID) refused to obey PUK instructions, PUK security officials alleged security concerns. This led to their firing by USAID, which promptly hired PUK apparatchiks. The Kurdistan Democratic Party security apparatus, for its part, has demanded that NGOs cease operating when the Barzani Charity Foundations, an organization closely tied to the ruling family and theoretically involved in humanitarian relief, chooses to take over their projects. With very few exceptions, local human rights organizations—and a government-controlled Ministry of Human Rights—focus on atrocities Saddam's regime committed against Kurds rather than abuses by the current political leadership.

The Kurdish judiciary, still under *de facto* party control, remains far from independent. Here, the case of Austrian-Kurdish journalist Kamal Said Qadir is instructive. In October 2006, the KDP's secret service abducted Qadir after he accused senior Barzani family members of corruption and published documents alleging links between the late Mulla Mustafa Barzani and the Soviet KGB.¹⁶⁰ After a 15-minute trial, a judge appointed by and loyal to the Kurdistan Democratic Party sentenced Kamal to a 30-year jail term, which was commuted only after a campaign by international NGOs and condemnation from the US State Department.¹⁶¹ Nor is this an isolated case. Independent human rights monitors have discovered businessmen imprisoned without charge who report that they were jailed on the order of one of Barzani's sons after spurring silent partnerships with members of the Barzani family.

An independent Kurdish state will also have to determine its commitment to a free press. At present, no region of Kurdistan has a truly free press. Through no fault of their own, Kurdish regions in Iran and Turkey remain under the control of autocratic governments. Ruling parties in both Syrian and Iraqi Kurdistan, however, have sought to strictly limit press freedom.

At first glance, the 2007 Iraqi Kurdish press law might look progressive: it replaced a Saddam-era law that effectively considered any criticism of a public institution to be libel. The new law prohibited harassment, imprisonment, or physical abuse of journalists and removed any government right to close down newspapers and magazines. However, the same law prohibited “sowing malice and fostering hatred,” “insulting religious beliefs,” or exposing “the private lives of individuals.”¹⁶²

The Iraqi Kurdish government has in practice interpreted the notion of “sowing malice” to prohibit criticism or critical reporting, especially with regard to corruption. Newspapers and magazines affiliated with specific political parties avoid this third rail with rigorous self-censorship, but outlets like *Awene*, *Hawlati*, and the news magazine *Lvin* that value their independence are often harassed with frivolous lawsuits by politicians claiming that legitimate stories libel or insult them. Indeed, *Hawlati* has since ceased publication for lack of financial support. Because the Iraqi Kurdish judiciary remains firmly under political control, journalists effectively have no recourse.

Nor do they have resources when security forces or vigilantes answering to political bosses respond violently to criticism. On July 22, 2008, an assassin in Kirkuk gunned down *Lvin* magazine journalist Soran Mama Hama as he was working on a story regarding police and government corruption. On May 3, 2010, journalist Sardasht Osman was kidnapped at a university campus in the middle of the Kurdish capital of Erbil, allegedly by the security service Masoud Barzani's son commanded, after he had published a poem critical of nepotism. When, separately, Sheikh Jaffar, the minister of peshmerga, was recorded threatening to kill the editor of *Lvin*, the Kurdistan Regional Government took no action.

Such impunity had consequences. On December 5, 2013, gunmen assassinated Kawa Garmyane, editor of the news website Rayel and a correspondent for *Awene*, after he reported on PUK corruption. Mahmud Sangawi, a PUK official who had earlier threatened to kill Garmyane, was briefly detained but released without charges. That same year, the Metro Center for Defending Journalists, an advocacy group for Kurdish journalists, documented 21 cases of physical assaults on journalists, 34 cases of security forces confiscating journalists' equipment, 5 death threats, and 50 arrests of journalists.¹⁶³ In the past year, more than a dozen journalists and activists have sought asylum in Europe because of KDP threats.

The lack of a free press is not going to prevent Kurdistan from achieving or maintaining independence, but a free press and, more broadly, free speech are crucial if Kurdish leaders are to escape a bubble of sycophancy to identify problems and seek effective solutions.

What Services Would Kurdistan Provide Its Citizens?

Many Kurds may be conservative socially, but there is broad consensus that any Kurdish state's primary function should be to provide social services to its citizenry. Part of this is the result of Kurdish experience: in each state where Kurds found themselves, the state often favored non-Kurds in provision of services, be it through uneven development or outright discrimination. As Iraqi Kurdistan develops its oil infrastructure, domestic pressure will increase to provide basic social services to the citizens of any Kurdish entity, be it a state or a confederation of regions.

Health Care Reform

Most Kurds expect their government to provide free or very low-cost health care. In Iraqi Kurdistan, hospitals theoretically provide free services but are poorly equipped and poorly serviced. Iraqi Kurdistan, one Kurdish academic quipped, is "a land of first-world restaurants and third-world hospitals." The skill and quality of doctors and specialists are uneven. Kurdish universities continue to emphasize memorization in all fields. In medicine, this can produce excellent diagnosticians but not top-quality specialists or lab technicians. Innovation is a casualty in other professions.

Corruption compounds the problem. Most hospital doctors also own or work in private clinics to which they refer any patient who wants real treatment. Fees are seldom preset; doctors assess payment based on their estimate not only of the patient's wealth, but also that of his or her extended family. Political leaders regularly travel abroad for even basic medical treatment.

The medical supply business is largely unregulated, with no

quality control. Many Kurdish businessmen import fake or expired medicines from Turkey or Iran. In Iraqi Kurdistan, the problem has grown so severe that almost one-fifth of Kurdistan's entire drug supply is counterfeit.¹⁶⁴ The Iraqi Kurdish government inspects only 10 percent of drugs Iran exports to Sulaimani. In 2013, the Hoz Group, a group connected politically to the ruling party, smuggled into Iraqi Kurdistan a contaminated batch of the cancer-treatment drug Avastin. When a public hospital in Erbil subsequently used the drug, it blinded 30 patients. Those businessmen who knowingly imported and sold the bad drug faced no accountability, perhaps because the Hoz Group had flown Ministry of Health officials—including the head of the malpractice unit—on a junket to Dubai.¹⁶⁵

Regrettably, these practices have become more the rule than an exception. In March 2012, Kurdish authorities uncovered a counterfeit medicine plant in Erbil packaging substandard drugs with false claims of manufacture in Syria and India, but issued only a reprimand because of its owners' political connections. Corrupt traders and manufacturers distributed more than 2,500 boxes of defective insulin to Kurdish hospitals. Numerous cancer patients received defective chemotherapy drugs, and patients receiving injections for minor medical issues subsequently suffered life-threatening reactions. A relative of a former KRG prime minister working at a border crossing with Turkey allowed in 20 trucks carrying 400 tons of counterfeit medicine, but the contents of only one truck were ever recovered. Kurdish authorities ignored an Iraqi Ministry of Health circular to all Iraqi and Iraqi Kurdish hospitals that banned injections of the antibiotics ceftriaxone, resulting in the deaths of several patients.¹⁶⁶

Unlicensed pharmacies compound the problem. In 2012, out of a total of more than 4,000 pharmacies, clinics, and dispensaries, Iraqi Kurdistan boasted only 320 licensed pharmacies and 57 licensed dispensaries, meaning that less than 10 percent of those dispensing medications receive government circulars warning about specific counterfeit cases.¹⁶⁷

All these cases highlight the question of how Kurdish government will regulate food, drugs, and other industries. If Kurdistan becomes

a collection of autonomous zones rather than a single independent entity, that will only complicate regulation and standardization.

As regards the broader question of health care, Shakawan Ismaeel, a consultant physician in acute medicine with 12 years' experience working in the United Kingdom's National Health Service, published an extensive proposal in November 2012 outlining how to reform Kurdistan's health care system.¹⁶⁸ He argued that basic funding must increase. In theory, the Kurdish medical system receives about 5 percent of the Kurdistan Regional Government's budget; in contrast, the United States spends 19.9 percent, Iran spends 15.4 percent, and Turkey spends 12.8 percent. Kurdistan's level is closer to those of Yemen, Iraq, and Pakistan, hardly countries to emulate.¹⁶⁹ Initially, outlays may need to be even higher given decades of Saddam-era discrimination against Iraqi Kurdistan; the situation may be worse in Syrian and Iranian Kurdistan.

In addition, Iraqi Kurds—and Kurds more broadly—might need to battle cultural and historical reticence and welcome insurance companies. This will require a cultural shift on the part of both doctors and patients, many of whom rely on their families and broader tribal structures. Because many of Kurdistan's most prevalent chronic conditions—heart disease, diabetes, and lung cancer, for example—are linked to lifestyle, such as a diet rich in fatty red meat and salt, or smoking, then the Kurdish government might also begin to consider taxing nicotine or other unhealthy products to help defray the cost of health care.¹⁷⁰

When someone does get sick in Iraqi Kurdistan, they visit the hospital or perhaps a specialist. There is no culture of primary care physicians or family medicine. Ismaeel explains, "The UK health system was facing the same problem a decade ago, which was solved by giving huge financial incentives and promoting the specialty [primary family care] among doctors and nurses."¹⁷¹

It will also not be enough to renovate old hospitals and build new ones. If the medical system is to function, it will need to revise hospital management. At present, hospitals are run by administrators who receive appointments based more on political connection than on skill. The Kurdish leadership has traditionally favored such

a system because of its autocratic culture: the hospital administrator remained loyal to only the political leadership, which in turn could call any shots necessary, as the hospital administrator had little to no financial or managerial independence. To fix such a system, Ismaeel proposes elected management boards that in turn would choose a chief executive officer. Together, it would be their job to structure the hospital according to the needs of its specialty and community and to recruit staff for positions.

Education

Education is hardly a marquee issue within the debate about Kurdistan's final status, but it nevertheless promises to become a contentious issue Kurds will need to tackle as they become either a confederation of regions or an independent state. The issue is not just the poor quality of education in all regions of Kurdistan, itself the result of poor resourcing and an academic culture that prioritizes memorization over critical thinking.

Rather, the problem is a lack of consensus about the purpose of school and curriculum and the role of the state in both. Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria all traditionally used schools as a center for indoctrination. Saddam Hussein's regime sought to imbue students with his intolerant brand of Arab nationalism, and he also encouraged teachers to inform on students. When US forces ousted his government in 2003, they found detailed dossiers on every school child and assessments of their political loyalty and that of their families. The Syrian regime behaved similarly. Turkey used schools as a mechanism to promote Turkishness and secularism at the expense of any Kurdish ethnic or religious identities. The Iranian education system likewise seeks to indoctrinate religiously if not in terms of ethnic nationalism.

After the Kurdish uprising ended Saddam's direct rule, schools took down his photo from classrooms, but rather than separate politics from education, they simply replaced it with Barzani's. Political indoctrination continued, albeit with a different tone. While such political interference in schools might be corrosive, should a single region of Kurdistan gain independence or should Kurdistan

remain a confederation for regions, it may not be divisive. A problem will occur, however, should more than one region of Kurdistan coalesce into a single state. To have regional governments each seek to utilize schools as a platform for local political parties might encourage intraregional conflict. It would not do, for example, to have schools in Duhok preach Barzani-style tribalism while those in Qamishli, a three-hour drive away, indoctrinate students in the writings of Öcalan.

There has been little move in Iraqi Kurdistan, however, to separate education from politics at either the secondary or university level, nor does it seem likely that the PKK and its various affiliates would take a hands-off approach to the content of curriculum. Even the American University of Iraq–Sulaimani maintains far stricter political control over discussion, debate, and discourse than do American universities outside of Kurdistan.

If every region uses its own entrance exams for universities, the Kurdish public will become more provincial, ultimately setting the stage for long-term instability as Kurdistan devolves into insular and separate regions. Ultimately, Kurds should address basic issues regarding curriculum before independence or confederation, if they hope to prevent discord and if Kurdish students aim to attend universities outside of their hometowns upon graduation.

Should Kurdistan embrace a more unified education system, however, the cohesion will benefit the country or confederation in other ways. Over the past two decades, Iraqi Kurdistan has witnessed a boom in new universities. The first university in Kurdistan was Salahuddin University, founded in Sulaimani in 1968. In 1981, Saddam's government ordered the campus moved to Erbil because that city is located in a flat plain and easier to control from a security perspective in the event of student unrest. In 1992, after the Kurdish uprising, the new Kurdish administration in Sulaimani founded a separate university there. Shortly after, Duhok founded a university, giving each Iraqi Kurdish province one university.

In subsequent years, however, various politicians also sponsored universities, so now Iraqi Kurdistan is oversaturated. Kuysanjaq—a town halfway between Erbil and Sulaimani—now hosts a university,

and Soran and Halabja also have universities. Former Prime Minister Barham Salih founded the American University of Iraq–Sulaimani, in theory to create a new baseline for high-quality, Western-style education. Rival politicians soon founded universities as vanity projects. Erbil now hosts a University of Kurdistan Hewlêr, funded by Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani, while Duhok hosts its own “American University.”

Quantity is often inverse to quality, however. Rather than concentrating on a few key departments, each university (with the exception of the American universities in Sulaimani and Duhok) seeks to replicate subjects already taught elsewhere. Because Iraqi Kurdistan is relatively small, this means there are not enough good faculty to go around. If Kurdistan had a more professional, less political education system, however, then separate universities might be combined administratively—much like a state university system in the United States—and departments consolidated into one campus. This would also lead to the mixing of populations, breaking down barriers in other ways. Such a system would be even more important if any Kurdish entity spanned today’s national boundaries.

8

Could Kurdistan Defend Itself Militarily and Diplomatically?

Perhaps the greatest responsibility of any government is defense. This will be especially true in the case of Kurdistan, which at best will find itself in an unstable region and at worst will be surrounded by hostile powers resentful of its independence and disputing its resources.

Each Kurdish region rightly lionizes its fighters for having prevailed against vast odds, to the point where Kurdish independence seems possible, if not likely. The transition from guerrilla units to a more professional defense force remains, however, one of the greatest challenges facing a new Kurdish entity. Should the process fail, it could undermine any new Kurdistan, if not condemn it to state failure.

Political culture has been hard for Kurds to overcome. Every Kurdish movement has been divisive: Jalal Talabani formed the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan from disaffected members of the Kurdistan Democratic Party. His deputy, Noshirwan Mustafa, eventually organized members upset with Talabani's corruption into the new Gorran (Change) movement. The PKK has also weathered occasional factionalism, although never to the degree of Iraq Kurdish parties. As a result of fractious politics, peshmerga have been organized around political leaders or parties.

This is problematic for two reasons. First, it is corrosive to democracy, as political leaders seek to impose their will through sheer force rather than simply through a democratic process. For example, after Barzani's presidential term expired in August 2015, KDP peshmerga physically forced parliamentary speaker Yousif Mohammed out of the capital, Erbil, in order to prevent him from assuming the presidency, as he would have according to Kurdish law. Such actions had

nothing to do with defense and in effect exposed the peshmerga as a private, personal militia. In addition, whether on policy or ideology, political clashes undermine the unity of the armed forces. In the mid-1990s, perhaps a worst-case scenario, this led to a civil war between Talabani and Barzani's respective peshmerga, but even in absence of open violence, distrust and political considerations undercut military utility.

Nor are such divisions limited to the peshmerga. In 2015, Lahur Talabani and Masrour Barzani, respectively heads of the PUK anti-terrorism and KDP security forces, got into a public spat regarding politics, Masoud Barzani's legal claims to the presidency, and even whether a joint operation between KDP peshmerga and US Special Forces was a success or failure.¹⁷²

The danger of disunity and the peshmerga's prioritization of politics above security was on full display against the backdrop of the rise of the Islamic State in both Iraq and Syria. Both Iraqi and Syrian Kurds joined the fight, but even within their respective national borders, they had no unity of command. "Militarily, one can say the different groups are together against [the Islamic State], but there is no merging of the various forces at all," Masoud Akko, a Kurdish activist, told Agence France Presse. "Each force has its separate leadership with its own agenda."¹⁷³ While the Iraqi Kurdish peshmerga subsequently entered Kobane with Turkey's acquiescence, their deployment was more symbolic than real, a mechanism to allow the Kurdistan Democratic Party to claim a share of the Syrian Kurds' victory.

Even within Iraqi Kurdistan, which theoretically saw the unification of government more than a decade ago, the peshmerga effectively act as two separate forces loyal to two different leaders. That peshmerga loyal to Kurdistan Democratic Party leader Masoud Barzani convoyed through central Erbil on August 18, 2015, the day before his presidential term expired, reinforced the notion that Barzani sees the peshmerga not as a Kurdish defense force but rather as a personal militia. That equipment donated to peshmerga by the international community to fight the Islamic State had instead been warehoused and was being used for political rather than military purposes underscores the point.

The prioritization of politics over military necessity also impedes the fight against the Islamic State in other ways. When the Kurdistan Regional Government does release weaponry to the front, it factors politics into calculations of military necessity. As the Islamic State targeted Kirkuk in 2015 in the wake of its conquest of Mosul and Tikrit, the Kurdistan Regional Government failed to provide much of the weaponry to peshmerga seeking to defend Kirkuk because Najmaldin Karim, the Kurdish governor of the province, did not belong to Masoud Barzani's political party.

If Kurdish political parties cannot unify the peshmerga before independence, doing so will become exponentially harder afterward, when the stakes are higher.

Should Iraqi Kurdistan win independence, it will face questions with regard to its defensive infrastructure. The Kurdistan Regional Government already owns a military airfield at Harir and civilian airports in Sulaimani and Erbil, and it is constructing an additional airfield in Duhok. In June 2014, against the onslaught of ISIS and the disintegration of forward-deployed Iraqi army units, Patriotic Union of Kurdistan peshmerga seized Kirkuk and its airfield, a facility capable of accommodating almost every military airplane.

In September 2014, Bas News, an outlet associated with Masoud Barzani's son Masrouf, reported rumors that the Pentagon would build three military bases in Iraqi Kurdistan: one in Erbil, another at Harir, and a third for Apache helicopters at Atrush, near Duhok.¹⁷⁴ The location of such bases reflects the influence of politics on defense decisions: each of the supposed military bases lies within territory controlled by the Kurdistan Democratic Party and leaves portions of Iraqi Kurdistan governed by the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan or the Gorran movement without significant military architecture. That itself might be problematic postindependence, given Iranian hostility to Kurdish independence and the likelihood that Iran would try to interfere in, if not dominate, any Kurdish state. To limit military basing—especially those that might host American forces—to portions away from the frontier of Iran is to invite the Islamic Republic to fill the vacuum with proxy forces.

Beyond the question of unity, Kurdish officials must outline what sort of military Kurdistan would have. The peshmerga model may have traditional resonance and may have been useful in situations involving guerrilla fighters in the mountains. But should Kurdistan win independence, the Kurdish government must answer basic questions about whether or not Kurdistan would have conscription—as Iran, Turkey, and Syria do—or whether it would remain a volunteer army. As Iraq discusses the creation of a national guard, Kurdistan might want to do likewise.

There would be further complexity should an independent Kurdistan consist of regions drawn from multiple countries, as each of the countries from which Kurdistan could be drawn have different military traditions and rank structures and do not have interoperability. If Kurds have been unable to achieve true unification of peshmerga within Iraqi Kurdistan, then combining militaries across broader regions may be a bridge too far.

An independent Kurdistan's defense ministry would need to consider other questions as well. While the need for a navy is unlikely—despite some maps showing a greater Kurdistan having outlets on both the Mediterranean Sea and Persian Gulf—Kurdistan would likely need to establish an air force, a capability it does not currently have. That would require both a significant expenditure—money the Iraqi Kurds, blanketed in billions of dollars of debt, do not have. Even if the United States were willing to provide some older aircraft as military aid, training may be hampered by Leahy Law vetting, which outlaws such cooperation with officers accused of human rights abuses or those serving under them, something that would come into play given accusations leveled against senior Kurdish officials.¹⁷⁵

Implications for NATO

Even if the Kurds do manage to organize a unified defense force around a territory or state rather than a political party, the defense implications of an independent Kurdistan are significant, especially if the independent state—or autonomous regime—includes part of Turkey.

Turkey, after all, is a NATO member. It was part of NATO's first expansion in 1952 and, after the United States, it has the most troops under arms, more than the next three nations—France, the United Kingdom, and Italy—combined. Whether Turkey embraces federalism or eventually partitions, Kurdistan's rise would affect NATO directly.

No NATO country has ever seceded outright. (The 1993 partition of Czechoslovakia predated both the Czech Republic and Slovakia's entrance into NATO by several years). However, NATO members Canada and the United Kingdom have both faced peaceful secession challenges that, had they been successful, would have set a precedent, as would Catalanian secession from Spain.

The first real challenge to the unity of a NATO state was in Canada. The French-speaking Québécois people have long maintained a cultural identity distinct from the majority of English-speaking Canadians. In 1968, Québécois nationalists seeking to redefine Quebec's association with Canada formed the Parti Québécois. Voters overwhelmingly rejected sovereignty in a 1980 referendum, but the separatists did not give up. On October 30, 1995, the Québécois held another referendum to determine whether Quebec should become sovereign, and voters defeated the resolution by less than 55,000 votes out of more than four million cast.¹⁷⁶ Had 0.7 percent of the voters gone the other way, then Quebec might very well be independent today.

Quebec's independence might not have severely affected NATO. The Québécois nationalists assumed that an independent Quebec would join the treaty organization, and Quebec's cultural background, geographic location, and support of close cultural cousin France made it likely to join the defense alliance sooner rather than later.¹⁷⁷ That said, while the Clinton administration did not directly address the potential accession of an independent Quebec to NATO, the White House was unprepared to extend North America Free Trade Association membership to Quebec, making US support for Quebec NATO membership far from certain.

Even if Quebec had joined NATO, its independence would have hurt NATO defense considerably. More than half of Canada's defense

electronics and aerospace industry is in Quebec, and the province also manufactures most of the ammunition the Canadian military uses.¹⁷⁸ When it came to Canadian military readiness, the whole has always been greater than the parts. Independence would have crippled both Canada's and Quebec's military capabilities. A partition of Turkey would likewise undermine Turkey's military utility, especially given the presence of so many military facilities in areas likely to be incorporated in any future Kurdish entity.

Diyarbakir, the largest city in southeastern Anatolia, is home to an F-16 base, and nearby Malatya hosts Turkey's 2nd Army. Other airfields at Mus and Batman fall firmly inside territory that would certainly be incorporated into any Kurdish autonomous zone or a state carved from Turkey. Should the partition extend north, it might incorporate another air base at Sivas and the 3rd Army at Erzurum. In addition, there are communications facilities in Diyarbakir and Malatya and an intelligence facility at Diyarbakir.

Scottish separatism efforts, even though unsuccessful, provide other insight into how NATO might react to Turkey's partition. Scots flocked to the polls on September 18, 2015, to decide whether to leave the United Kingdom after more than 300 years of union. While unionists ultimately held out, for months it was touch and go.

The Scottish National Party argued that independence would not change Scotland's NATO membership.¹⁷⁹ But many diplomats and military officials pointed out that Scotland would not receive automatic entry into NATO, any more than Quebec or any other potential secessionist state. Some officials added that Scotland could apply but added that its application would be considered only after the process was complete for countries like Ukraine and Georgia that were already discussing possible membership. Proponents of Scottish accession to NATO, however, including most prominently Dame Mariot Leslie, Britain's ambassador to NATO between 2010 and 2014, dismissed such arguments, saying that NATO did not have any defined "queueing order."¹⁸⁰ That might or might not be true: since no potential state had gotten as far as Scotland in terms of potential secession, NATO was effectively making up a new potential procedure as it went along.

More likely, NATO might not want Kurdistan under any circumstance because it might not bring much to the table. Out of concern for Turkey's own security and out of spite, the Turkish army would likely dismantle or destroy military facilities on its withdrawal. Corruption, Kurdistan's politicized militias, its history of infighting, and the likelihood of conflict with neighbors like Iran, Syria, and the rump Iraqi state would also give even the most ardent proponents of NATO expansion pause.

To be fair, however, Kurdistan might not want NATO membership. A key issue for consideration of an independent Scotland's entry into NATO would have been its attitude toward nuclear weapons. Scottish nationalist politicians had vowed to remove the United Kingdom's Trident program, a submarine-based nuclear missile delivery system. While the United Kingdom could relocate the four submarines housed in Scottish bases to Devonport, near Plymouth in England's southwest, the implications of a Scottish nuclear weapons ban would be farther reaching. After all, while only a few NATO members—the United States, the United Kingdom, and France possess nuclear weapons—no NATO member explicitly prohibits its nuclear weapons on its territory.¹⁸¹ “NATO is a nuclear-armed alliance, and all NATO states must accept the principle of nuclear deterrence and being part of the NATO nuclear command and control system,” General Sir Richard Shirreff, a former deputy supreme allied commander in Europe, explained.¹⁸²

The PKK and its various political wings, including the HDP, have long embraced a left-of-center understanding of environmentalism. It is doubtful that either would accept a position that would implicitly endorse nuclear power, let alone the possession of nuclear weaponry in Kurdish territory.

The British government in London considered other scenarios in response to Scottish secession, each of which could have implications for any eventual Kurdish secession from Turkey. Rather than relocate the Trident program submarine bases, the British government considered extending British sovereignty over the Faslane and Bute bases in Scotland, the precedent for which would be British sovereignty over military bases it retained in Cyprus after that

island's independence.¹⁸³ Kurdistan therefore might face an immediate challenge to its sovereignty if Turkey acquiesced to partition but insisted on maintaining military bases inside of an autonomous Kurdish region or even an independent Kurdish state. Indeed, this is a likely scenario given how Turkey has established small military bases in Iraqi Kurdistan—for example, in Amadiya and near Kani Masi—much to the resentment of local authorities.

Foreign Affairs

An independent Kurdistan will also have to establish a diplomatic corps to represent its interests abroad. Here, Kurdistan is well ahead of the curve. In the 1990s, Iraqi Kurdish political parties appointed representatives to United States, Russia, Iran, Turkey, and major European capitals. Eventually, they unified to enable single officials to represent the whole of the Kurdistan Regional Government. The fall of Saddam and the presence of Kurds in the Iraqi Foreign Ministry has augmented the numbers of Kurds with professional diplomatic experience.

Nevertheless, independence will present challenges. Career advancement among Kurds representing either the Kurdistan Regional Government or the Iraqi state has consistently relied more on family and political connections than merit. Hoshiyar Zebari, Iraqi foreign minister, from 2003 to 2014, example, was uncle to Kurdistan Regional President Masoud Barzani. Mohammed Sabir, Iraq's ambassador to China, won his position by virtue of being Iraqi President Jalal Talabani's brother-in-law. Both Mohamed Sabir and Qubad Talabani served as representatives to the United States. Bayan Sami Abdul Rahman, the daughter of Nechirvan Barzani's former deputy, succeeded Qubad in Washington. Both she and Zebari had previously served as the KRG representative in London. Meanwhile, Lahur Talabani's brother Aso represents the KRG in Russia, and Masoud Barzani's brother Dilshad handles Kurdish affairs in Germany.

There are exceptions, but they are infrequent. Barham Salih was perhaps the most effective Kurdish representative to serve in the United States, but despite this, his lack of family connection led to

his marginalization. Even when he subsequently held the premiership, Barzani and Talabani effectively stripped him of power, transferring normal responsibilities to their own families. Likewise, KRG Foreign Minister Falah Mustafa may not be a Barzani, but despite his lofty title, Barzani and Talabani family members serving in diplomatic capacities regularly bypass him and, within Kurdistan, Barzani often treats him more as a manservant than an equal.

There is a logic to reliance on close friends or associates. The United States president offers ambassadorships to friends, associates, and funders, but this does not extend to family nor does it exclude a professional diplomatic corps. Nevertheless, even if Kurds see diplomatic appointments as unfair and based more on nepotism than merit, this may not always be a bad thing. When Talabani's son Qubad was the Kurdish representative in Washington, DC, those doing business with him said they believed that his family connections meant he could make commitments that carried the weight not of a junior diplomat but rather of the leader of a major political bloc and Iraq's president.¹⁸⁴

Kurdistan's nepotism will become a greater problem should regions beyond Iraqi Kurdistan become independent. Both the PKK and HDP maintain a network of representatives in foreign capitals. A Kurdistan incorporating multiple regions might require folding these representatives into the broader Kurdish diplomatic system. Whereas the Iraqi Kurds maintain the most-developed system, the dominant political leadership in each region and ordinary citizens will not be willing to subordinate their foreign representation to those whose positions lie with tribal or family connections to one or two political leaders.

Almost immediately upon independence, Kurds will need professional diplomats to solicit and coordinate aid, assistance, investment, and defense with foreign governments, with greater frequency and more professionalism than before independence. Should they not have diplomatic missions, Kurds may find that interest in the new state will wane as the next crisis looms and headlines move on.

While it might be easy to appoint ambassadors to various countries and partners, housing them and creating permanent missions

will be more difficult. Iraq—and other countries from which Kurdistan might be carved—will resist transferring any diplomatic property to the new Kurdish state. Iraqi Kurds might demand 17 percent of Iraqi diplomatic property abroad based on the formulation by which they already claim Iraq's oil revenue, but they must be prepared to move ahead even if Baghdad balks. Kurdish representation in Washington, DC, has moved from rented office space to its own townhouse, but this is more the exception among its various international locations than the rule. It will be difficult to perform all the functions of an embassy from a few rented apartments or offices, as the Kurds now do in many locations where they operate.

More broadly, Kurdish foreign policy may become a bone of contention, whether Kurdistan remains a confederation of three or four regions or it attains independence. If Kurdistan becomes a confederation of regions, each region might pursue a different foreign policy. This in turn could exacerbate proxy conflicts, which would undercut Kurdish unity and cooperation across regions. In recent years, for example, Iraq's Kurdistan Democratic Party has allied itself increasingly with Turkey while, in Syria, the Democratic Union Party has moved itself closer to Russia. Hence, as tension increases between Moscow and Ankara, the rivalry between Rojava and Iraqi Kurdistan also grows.

Should a Kurdistan arise that includes Kurdish regions in Turkey, Syria, or Iran, the United States' designation of the PKK and its various affiliates as terrorist groups will complicate foreign relations, if not for Kurdistan then for the American approach to the new state. Even though the PKK has never targeted Americans and is arguably more of an insurgency than a terror group, the US State Department has been reticent to delist the PKK from its terrorism list out of deference to Turkey. Should Turkey partition, it will remain bitter at the loss of territory, and even if it acquiesces to a new Republic of Kurdistan, it will likely demand that the United States keep its designation of the PKK in place, using its membership in NATO as leverage: because NATO is a consensus-driven organization, Turkey can paralyze the organization by objecting to every decision.

Kurdistan will also face other problems in its foreign relations. At present, the United States formally opposes Kurdish independence because it supports the integrity of all the states from which a greater Kurdistan would be carved. Ultimately, however, American policy-makers can be swayed. President Harry S. Truman overruled the State Department's objections and, in 1947, agreed to support the creation of the new State of Israel. In his famous 1991 "Chicken Kiev" speech, President George H. W. Bush opposed Ukrainian independence, but as Ukrainian nationalists pushed forward he eventually supported their freedom. And the United States initially opposed the breakup of Yugoslavia, until Germany's recognition of Croatia and Slovenia forced the State Department's hand.

Kurdistan may find much more difficulty in getting Iran to acquiesce to Kurdish independence given the Iranian fear of any precedent that could have reverberations given Iran's own ethnic diversity. But, even if Iran is faced with a *fait accompli*, that will mark only the beginning of a new diplomatic battle. Iran maintains two broad diplomatic categories for countries it considers part of its near abroad: the Iranian foreign ministry manages relations with countries it considers less important to its strategic interests, and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps takes the lead in relations with countries like Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, and Lebanon that Iranian authorities consider of greater importance ideologically or strategically. Hence, during the initial years of Operation Iraqi Freedom, Iran had appointed Hassan Kazemi Qomi, a Quds Force operative, as its ambassador to Iraq. Tehran likely will consider Kurdistan to be a key country and so the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps will dominate Iran's diplomatic representation for the purpose of coercing Kurdish foreign policy to conform to Iran's interests.

This will force a difficult choice for Kurdistan. The Islamic Republic is an ideological state and seeks to impose its ideological agenda onto its neighbors. Kurds and Israel, however, have long had mutual affinity. Not only do Kurds see in Israel a model for their own statehood, but both also have weathered the hostility of Arab neighbors. In the wake of Saddam's downfall, relations blossomed between Israel and Iraqi Kurdistan. Israeli Kurds returned to visit the land

from which their grandparents or great-grandparents had fled, and the Iraqi Kurdish prime minister visited Israel secretly. The Israeli government certainly would welcome Kurdish independence. Israel is perhaps, alongside Turkey, the only country willing to buy Kurdish oil the Iraqi government claims is rightly Baghdad's. And, on June 29, 2014, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu endorsed Kurdish independence.¹⁸⁵

If Kurdistan's neighbors do not give it the luxury of neutrality, it risks continuing to fall into destabilizing proxy conflicts between regional rivals like Israel and Iran, Iran and Turkey, or Turkey and Syria. Many newly independent countries have the luxury of time to establish themselves diplomatically. Kurdistan, however, will have to hit the ground running. The stakes of not doing so could be disastrous.

Does the United States Have a Coherent Kurdistan Policy?

There have been three distinct chapters in US government posture toward the Kurds and Kurdistan. Between 1945 and 1975, American policymakers saw the Kurds through a Cold War lens. They were alternately an asset and a liability, but they were always expendable. Between 1975 and 1991, the White House and State Department largely ignored the Kurds, treating them as an impediment and inconvenience to broader US interests, if not with outright hostility. The Reagan administration largely looked the other way as Saddam Hussein's regime used chemical weapons against the Kurds, and it fully backed Turkey's brutal crackdown on the PKK insurgency.

There were individual exceptions, of course, but the Kurdish quip that they had "no friends but the mountains" held true during this period. The Kurdish uprising that followed Operation Desert Storm and the liberation of Kuwait was a turning point that began a third chapter. What began as a humanitarian mission grew into a much deeper relationship that culminated in partnership in the run-up to and aftermath of the 2003 Operation Iraqi Freedom.

Historians may consider 2011 to mark the beginning of a fourth chapter, one characterized not only by deep US ties to Iraqi Kurdistan but also, with the Arab Spring uprising in Syria and soon after a peace process in Turkey, a much broader appreciation of Kurds and Kurdistan beyond simply the three Iraqi provinces that comprise the Kurdistan Regional Government. One thing is certain: Kurds in Iraq, Syria, and Turkey have advanced so much de facto autonomy or, in Turkey's case, have sacrificed so much that it will be hard for their neighbors, let alone the United States, to deny their aspirations. Only the Kurds of Iran, suffering under the yoke of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard

Corps, have been left behind, but should instability afflict Iran after a change in leadership, Iranian Kurds will likely seek to replicate the autonomy models and achievements of their peers.

Do Not Choose Sides

The final aspirations of the Kurds are a different matter. Many American officials see the Kurds through the lens of their experience. Because they interact most with the KDP or PUK in Iraq, they assume both parties espouse the models that Kurds most favor. A more holistic approach, however, would recognize that Iraqi Kurds do not represent broader Kurdish political culture. Whether the United States government likes it and regardless of the historical reasons, the simple fact is that Abdullah Öcalan and the PKK have far greater influence on Kurds as a whole than do the Barzani or Talabani families combined.

This presents a difficulty for the evolution of US Kurdish strategy. Working exclusively through Barzani and Talabani will at best fail to achieve US aims and at worst antagonize Kurds. Not only does a lopsided embrace of Barzani and Talabani associate the United States with Iraqi Kurdistan's endemic corruption, but it also ignores the vast majority of the Kurdish public, who want nothing to do with politicians they consider too tribal or focused on narrow rather than national interests.

This does not make the PKK a panacea. It has a deeply problematic past and a continuing democracy deficit, and it embraces an economic philosophy that undercuts individual freedom and the ability of Kurds to prosper.

The difference in US attitudes today toward the KDP and PUK on one hand and the PKK on the other, however, highlights how arbitrary American policy is and hampers diplomats' ability to shape events to achieve the most stable, secure, and just outcomes. Each group is guilty of promoting a personality cult. To embrace the KDP and PUK as friendly, even democratic, forces and to designate the PKK as a terror group ignores that all three have waged similar insurgencies against regimes which that oppressed them on ethnic

grounds and with indiscriminate violence. Each Kurdish party has behaved badly in the past, but US officials must take care to recognize the political motives of governments and political groups passing intelligence about their rivals. At the very least, the United States must trust less and verify more.

It is time to reconsider the US designation of the PKK as a terrorist group. Unlike the Mujahedin al Khalq, which the State Department delisted in 2012, the PKK never attacked Americans. The PKK has also renounced and condemned attacks on civilians. The conflict in Turkey may continue for months or years, but it will end with a ceasefire and renewal of peace talks. If Turkey can talk to the PKK, as it did between 2012 and 2015, there is no reason why the United States should not as well. By refusing to recognize and talk with the PKK, Washington not only hampers its own strategy in Syria as PKK affiliates battle the Islamic State and al Qaeda-linked Nusra Front, but it also undercuts the US ability to nudge the PKK toward greater democratization and economic liberalism. Simply put, it is time for the United States to treat Kurdish political parties equally.

Federalism Is Not Just for Iraq

Many Kurds may dream of independence. The extent to which they pursue that dream is not America's choice; it will be a Kurdish decision. At present, discussion of Kurdish independence emphasizes emotion and a sense of historical justice more than practicalities and plans. While Washington should not stand in the way of any Kurdish decision, the United States should inform it. If Kurds push for independence in one or many Kurdish regions, US officials must work to ensure Kurdish officials understand that statehood would be not the fruition of a process but rather its beginning. Too many secessionist states—Eritrea, East Timor, Kosovo, and South Sudan—today suffer under autocracy or chaos because of their leaders' failure to resolve issues and address political, economic, and cultural fault lines before independence raised the stakes.

Herein, Iraqi Kurdistan's experience with federalism provides a model. Iraqi Kurdistan established its federal government under the

protection of the US military and confirmed it in Iraq's 2005 constitution. Successive US administrations have endorsed and protected Kurdish autonomy in Iraq. It is both arbitrary and counterproductive for American officials to insist that Kurds in Syria and Turkey do not deserve the same federal rights and local autonomy. Overcentralization—in politics, the economy, and culture—has long been the bane of the Middle East. The federal model both rectifies those wrongs and undercuts the ability of would-be or actual autocrats like Turkey's Recep Tayyip Erdoğan or Syria's Bashar al Assad to consolidate dictatorial control.

While American policymakers should accept the idea that Kurdish rights in Iraq, Syria, Turkey, and perhaps even Iran can be protected through federal systems, they should not confuse respect for Kurdish autonomy and neutrality among political parties with disinterest in the quality of government. Should Kurds aspire to independence, an interim federal period provides an opportunity to resolve problems that could condemn an independent Kurdistan to state failure and civil war.

Here, US policy toward Iraqi Kurdistan has failed. Democracy matters, and yet successive US administrations have turned a blind eye toward a Kurdish retreat into autocracy or oligarchy. And while terrorism in Iraq grabs headlines, corruption touches exponentially more people in the region and, left unaddressed, becomes increasingly corrosive to civil society and the ability of the region to succeed. No US administration should be shy about promoting economic transparency, defending the free press, and prioritizing the rule of law over any party or individual's desire for emergency powers.

Perhaps the most underappreciated lesson from the Iraqi Kurdish experience is the realization, at least among Kurdish intellectuals, that the internal challenges pose as much of a threat to Kurdish aspirations as do the external ones from Kurdistan's neighbors.

Is an Independent Kurdistan on the Horizon?

Achieving Kurdish independence is easier said than done, but Kurds now have their best chance in almost a century to win statehood.

Independence may be achievable, but it will not be a panacea. If Kurds choose to make that leap, they should do so with eyes wide open, for they will have no honeymoon period. They will face disputed borders, disunity, major gaps in defense and infrastructure, and major economic challenges. The heart often trumps the brain, however, so it behooves the United States to start contingency planning should Kurds declare independence.

Within Washington, uncertainty exists about such basic issues about whether the United States would extend diplomatic recognition to Kurdistan and, if so, whether it would limit its recognition to certain regions or territory. Nor is it clear whether the United States, Europe, or any other power would protect Kurdistan should neighboring states contest its independence wholly or in disputed territories. In an age when the American public is increasingly inward looking, it is unclear whether and if the United States would be prepared to support a nascent Kurdistan as it seeks to jump-start and sustain its economy.

Only one thing is certain: developments in Iraq, Turkey, Syria, and perhaps even Iran mean that the status quo is no longer sustainable. Kurds may decide they prefer federalism or confederalism, or they may seek independence for one or multiple Kurdish states to be equal to their neighbors on the world stage. Regardless, American policy is too often reactive rather than proactive. A little contingency planning now, even if it rubs Turkey or Iraq the wrong way, might go a long way to guaranteeing the best, most secure, and most prosperous outcome for not only the Kurds but also the whole region.

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Acknowledgments

When a dear Kurdish friend read an earlier draft of this report, he responded with a joke:

“Two friends are talking. One asks the other, ‘What would you do if you found yourself stranded on a small island with a lion?’ ‘I’d climb a tree,’ his friend answers. ‘But there are no trees on the island,’ the first replies. ‘Then I’d hide in a cave in the mountains,’ the second retorts. ‘But there are no mountains or caves on the island,’ his friend explains. ‘Then I will jump into the ocean and swim,’ comes the response. ‘But lions can also swim,’ says his friend. His exasperated companion then demands angrily, ‘Whose side are you on? Mine or the lion’s?’”

My goal in producing this report was to neither endorse nor rebut efforts to achieve Kurdish independence or greater autonomy. Rather, it was to highlight many aspects of the debate about Kurdish aspirations that Kurds, their neighbors, and the United States government too often ignore. The purpose is not to hamper Kurdish aspiration, but both to guarantee whatever path Kurds choose will contribute to peace and prosperity for Kurds and their neighbors and also to ensure that US officials are prepared for the many second-, third-, and fourth-order effects that any change to the Kurds’ status in any of their constituent regions will bring.

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About the Author

Michael Rubin is a resident scholar at the American Enterprise Institute, senior lecturer at the Naval Postgraduate School, and senior editor of the *Middle East Quarterly*. Between 2002 and 2004, Rubin worked as a staff adviser for Iran and Iraq in the Office of the Secretary of Defense at the Pentagon, in which capacity he was seconded to Iraq. Between 2004 and 2009, he was chief editor of the *Middle East Quarterly*. A native of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, Rubin received a B.S. degree in biology from Yale University in 1994, and a Ph.D. in history from the same institution in 1999. He writes frequently for the independent Kurdish press and currently teaches classes about Kurds and Kurdistan, among other topics, for the FBI, and US Army, Navy, and Marine Corps.

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*Director of Research, Domestic Policy;
State Farm James Q. Wilson Chair in
American Politics and Culture*

ROBERT B. HELMS
Resident Scholar

FREDERICK M. HESS
*Director, Education Policy Studies;
Resident Scholar*

R. GLENN HUBBARD
Visiting Scholar

WILLIAM INGLEE
Visiting Fellow

BENEDIC IPPOLITO
Research Fellow

MATT JENSEN
*Managing Director,
Open-Source Policy Center*

FREDERICK W. KAGAN
*Director, AEI Critical Threats Project;
Christopher DeMuth Chair;
Resident Scholar*

LEON R. KASS, MD
*Madden-Jewett Chair;
Resident Scholar*

ANDREW P. KELLY
*Director, Center on Higher Education
Reform; Resident Scholar*

PAUL H. KUPIEC
Resident Scholar

JON KYL
Visiting Fellow

DESMOND LACHMAN
Resident Fellow

ADAM LERRICK
Visiting Scholar

PHILLIP LOHAUS
Research Fellow

KIRSTEN MADISON
*Deputy Director, Foreign and Defense
Policy Studies; Resident Fellow*

NAT MALKUS
Research Fellow

APARNA MATHUR
Resident Scholar

MATT MAYER
Visiting Fellow

MICHAEL MAZZA
Research Fellow

J. MATTHEW MCINNIS
Resident Fellow

LARRY MEAD
Visiting Scholar

BRUCE D. MEYER
Visiting Scholar

THOMAS P. MILLER
Resident Fellow

CHARLES MURRAY
W. H. Brady Scholar

ROGER F. NORIEGA
Visiting Fellow

STEPHEN D. OLINER
*Codirector, AEI's International
Center on Housing Finance;
Resident Scholar*

NORMAN J. ORNSTEIN
Resident Scholar

MARK J. PERRY
Scholar

JAMES PETHOKOUKIS
*Editor, AEIdeas Blog;
DeWitt Wallace Fellow*

TOMAS PHILIPSON
Visiting Scholar

EDWARD J. PINTO
*Codirector, AEI's International
Center on Housing Finance;
Resident Fellow*

RAMESH PONNURU
Visiting Fellow

ANGELA RACHIDI
Research Fellow

VINCENT R. REINHART
Visiting Scholar

GERARD ROBINSON
Resident Fellow

DALIBOR ROHAC
Research Fellow

MICHAEL RUBIN
Resident Scholar

SALLY SATEL, MD
Resident Scholar

GARY J. SCHMITT
*Codirector, Marilyn Ware Center
for Security Studies; Director,
Program on American Citizenship;
Resident Scholar*

MARK SCHNEIDER
Visiting Scholar

DAVID SCHOENBROD
Visiting Scholar

DEREK M. SCISSORS
Resident Scholar

SITA SLAVOV
Visiting Scholar

VINCENT H. SMITH
*Director, Agriculture Studies;
Visiting Scholar*

CHRISTINA HOFF SOMMERS
Resident Scholar

KATHARINE B. STEVENS
Research Fellow

THOMAS P. STOSSEL, MD
Visiting Scholar

MICHAEL R. STRAIN
*Director, Economic Policy Studies;
Resident Scholar*

PHILLIP SWAGEL
Visiting Scholar

JIM TALENT
*Director, Marilyn Ware Center's
National Security 2020 Project;
Senior Fellow*

SHANE TEWS
Visiting Fellow

MARC A. THIESSEN
Resident Fellow

STAN A. VEUGER
Resident Scholar

ALAN D. VIARD
Resident Scholar

PETER J. WALLISON
*Arthur F. Burns Fellow in Financial
Policy Studies; Resident Fellow*

W. BRADFORD WILCOX
Visiting Scholar

WENDELL L. WILLKIE II
Visiting Fellow

PAUL WOLFOWITZ
Visiting Scholar

JOHN YOO
Visiting Scholar

ROGER I. ZAKHEIM
Visiting Fellow

WEIFENG ZHONG
Research Fellow

KATHERINE ZIMMERMAN
Research Fellow

JOEL M. ZINBERG, MD
Visiting Scholar

BENJAMIN ZYCHER
John G. Searle Chair; Resident Scholar