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# **The Kurds in a Volatile Middle East**

Ofra Bengio



**Mideast Security and Policy Studies No. 130**

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**THE BEGIN-SADAT CENTER FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES  
BAR-ILAN UNIVERSITY**

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# The Kurds in a Volatile Middle East

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This study examines the role of the Kurds in a rapidly changing Middle East. While in the twentieth century, they were generally portrayed as a troublesome and victimized minority, by the turn of the twenty-first they had assumed the role of a national movement with a political agenda and narrative of their own. They thus challenge the self-perceptions of the nation-states in which they reside: Turkey, Iran, Syria and Iraq. Moreover, they have come to play a crucial role in combatting the radical Islamic State (IS), which threatens the whole Middle East region and the world beyond.

Although the Kurdish movements in all four parts of Greater Kurdistan have been demanding the right of self-determination, they differ vastly in their interpretation of the political embodiment of that right as well as its achievement on the ground. Thus, Kurdistan in Iraq is inching towards independence, Kurdistan in Syria is in the midst of multiple revolutions, Kurdistan in Turkey is in a dark period of unprecedented repression, and Kurdistan in Iran is searching for a political outlet.

This study analyzes the rivalry and interdependence among the four parts of Kurdistan as well as the dynamics of their relations with regional countries and the international community. Now, with the entire region in a state of flux, the big question is whether or not the Kurds will manage to reshape the map of the Middle East to fulfill their dream for a state or autonomous existence of their own.





# The Kurds in a Volatile Middle East

*Ofra Bengio*

## INTRODUCTION

For the greater part of the twentieth century, the political system in the Middle East was governed by the notion of the nation-state. In that system, there was little room for ethnic groups that sought to preserve their identity and remain distinct from the hegemonic state. This was especially true for the Kurds, whose territories span four countries: Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria.

The Kurds were generally considered a troublesome minority likely to jeopardize the stability of the Middle East. However, if one defines "minority" as a weakened and disenfranchised group, the term no longer applies. The twenty-first century is now referred to by some as the century of the Kurds.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, neither the Kurds themselves nor the countries containing their populations use the term "minority" to refer to them. The states reject the term because they seek to assimilate the Kurds into hegemonic, unified nation-states.

Epitomizing such discourse was that of Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khomeini, who said in November 1979: "Sometimes the word 'minorities' is used to refer to people such as Kurds, Lurs, Turks, Persians, Baluchis, and such. These people should not be called minorities, because this term assumes there is a difference between these brothers. In Islam such difference has no place at all ... It is very probable that such problems have been created by those who do not wish the Muslim countries to be united."<sup>2</sup>

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For their part, the Kurds argue that 35 million people cannot be considered a minority.<sup>3</sup> As early as 1923, when the fate of the Kurds was discussed at the Lausanne Conference, the Kurds argued against minority status: "The demand we make of the Lausanne Conference is not the protection of a minority; it is the vindication of the right to live of a great independent people with a country of its own."<sup>4</sup> By the turn of the twenty-first century, the Kurds in different parts of Kurdistan had revolutionized their status by casting themselves as an ethno-national group with a legitimate right to self-determination while at the same time assuming a leading role in reshaping the geostrategic map of the region.

## **GREATER KURDISTAN: A PANORAMIC VIEW**

Academic study of the Kurds has tended to focus on each Kurdish community as an individual unit. But it is also essential to examine the dynamics that are common to all Kurdish communities, as well as to the four states that govern them. The panoramic view enables the observer to appreciate similarities as well as differences between the political systems that have developed in each of the states.

The Kurds are an ancient nation that has existed in the Middle East from time immemorial. They consider themselves the descendants of the ancient Medes, and accordingly use a calendar that starts from the conquest of Nineveh by the Medes in 612 BC. Thus, their calendar is six hundred years older than the Gregorian and more than one thousand years older than the Islamic.<sup>5</sup> Unlike the Islamic calendar, the Kurdish calendar begins in the month of March, during which their holiest festival, Newroz, takes place.<sup>6</sup>

For all their long history, the Kurds have never managed to establish an independent state. They did, however, establish autonomous principalities under the Ottoman Empire. These principalities survived for some three to four hundred years, until the Ottomans dismantled them in the mid-nineteenth century. The Kurds who lived concurrently in the Persian Empire did not have the privilege of developing an autonomous principality, which may explain their inferior political status in modern times relative to the other communities.

Following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire at the end of War World I and the molding of the modern Middle East, the Kurds found themselves divided among four states: Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria. While geographically speaking, the Kurdish territories remained contiguous, they were cut off from each other politically. Over time, each community developed its own unique characteristics, which mirrored those of the states in which they lived.

Seeking to establish a nation-state model, the central governments in all these states employed similar methods vis-à-vis the Kurds: denial of Kurdish identity, de-Kurdification, oppression, the creation of security belts, transfer of population, and, in some cases, even ethnic cleansing. The central governments also managed to establish mechanisms of cooperation among themselves that helped contain the Kurds for the greater part of the twentieth century. The most famous of these was the Baghdad Pact of 1955, which included Turkey, Iraq and Iran. Its aim, among other things, was to contain the Kurds.

As for the Kurds, notwithstanding the fact that they were fragmented and their national identity suppressed, they had certain common features that distinguished them from their neighbors and helped them overcome the consequences of the regimes' policies. Aziz Mahir described these features as "historical memory, language and territory," as well as the common myth of descent from the ancient Kurds that could be traced to "the memory of Kurdish common history, its golden age, heroes and symbols."<sup>7</sup> Similarly, the Kurdish language with all its dialects, including Kurmanji, Sorani, and Zaza, has been a very potent feature of Kurdish identity – so much so that all the central governments sought to eliminate it through policies of Arabization, Turkification and Persianization, or what was termed linguicide.

Political Islam did not cut deep roots in Kurdish society (unlike the societies of its neighbors), nor did it play an important role in the Kurds' identity formation, national movement, or political performance. The weak hold of Islam on the Kurds is illustrated in the saying: "Compared to the unbeliever, the Kurd is a Muslim."<sup>8</sup> As Mahir suggests, Islam was not their primary identity marker: "Modern Kurdistan political culture is deeply rooted in national rather than religious identity."<sup>9</sup>

In addition, the Kurdish conception of Islam has strong mystical overtones, and many Kurdish *ulama* were affiliated with a *tariqat*, or mystical order. The eminent scholar Martin Van Bruinessen described the relationship between religion and nationalism in Kurdistan as often strained and ambivalent. "Many leading nationalists," he maintained, "were irreligious or at least dissatisfied with the strong hold of mullahs and sheikhs on the people. It has, on the other hand, usually been the orthodox Muslims who formed the backbone of the Kurdish movement. In order to gain support for their nationalist objectives, secularist intellectuals have time and again had to reach an accommodation with religion."<sup>10</sup>

In the twenty-first century, the Kurdish world has been undergoing paradigmatic shifts, the most important of which is national revival and reclamation of identity. Various factors have played a role in this renaissance: the weakening of the states and governments that oppressed the Kurds; the crucial role of new media, which enabled the revival of the Kurdish language and facilitated cross-border ties among Kurds of the four regions; the role of the diaspora as an energizer of Kurdish identity formation thanks to the freedom of expression it enjoys in the West; and the spread of education systems which, notwithstanding their severe restrictions, did enable access to Kurdish culture, history, and heritage.

One aspect of this new identity formation is in the realm of terminology. The Kurds have built their "imagined community" around Greater Kurdistan (*Kurdistan Mezin*), which has four centers, each representing a different region. The centers are Bakur, in northern Turkey (the largest and most politicized community, with approximately 15 million people); Rojhelat, in eastern Iran (the second-largest in population, but the least strong politically, with about 7.5 million people); Bashur, in southern Iraq (the closest to independence, with about 6.5 million people); and Rojava, in eastern Syria (the newest to emerge as a political entity, with around 2.5 million people). That the idea of Greater Kurdistan is widespread can be attested to by the fact that textbooks of Kurdish children in Syria present a map not of Rojava but of Greater Kurdistan, which was drawn in 1945.<sup>11</sup>

Politically speaking, the upheavals in the Middle East that started at the end of 2010 triggered what may be termed the Kurdish Spring. This movement was the result of two simultaneous processes that reinforced

one another: the collapse of the nation-states in the Fertile Crescent (Iraq and Syria), and the emergence of non-state actors, one of which is Kurdish communities seeking to fill the vacuum left by the central governments. At the same time, these non-state actors have been struggling with each other with a view towards gaining the upper hand.

For the Kurds, these sudden events provided the background to the crystallization of strong national movements; the strengthening of trans-border nationalism; the blurring of geographical borders between the Kurds of the four countries; state-building in Iraq and Syria; and an undeclared war of independence against both the central government and IS.

However, the pace of nation-building and state-building has varied from one region to another depending on the following factors: the economic and strategic importance of the Kurdish region in question; the balance of power between the non-state actor and its surrounding nation-state; the relations of the state and non-state actor with the West or lack thereof; and most importantly, the strength and cohesion of Kurdish nationalism in comparison to state nationalism. In that sense, Kurdistan in Iraq is at one end of the spectrum and Iranian Kurdistan is on the other.

## **KURDISTAN IN IRAQ: INCHING TOWARDS INDEPENDENCE?**

Kurdistan in Iraq, which developed into a quasi-state by the turn of the twenty-first century, is the most advanced and politically organized of all the parts of Greater Kurdistan. Called Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), itself a euphemism for the state of Kurdistan, this entity has all the trappings of an independent state. It has a government independent of Baghdad (the Kurdistan Regional Government, or KRG) as well as a parliament of its own, the elections for which are held separately from the Iraqi general elections. Another crucial component of autonomous power is the Peshmerga, which has metamorphosed from a guerrilla organization into an effective and well-organized military force.

The KRI has an undeclared capital, Erbil, as well as a national anthem and a national day, Newroz, that differ from those of Iraq. Likewise, the Iraqi Kurds have their own flag, which is hoisted everywhere in Kurdistan and can be seen on the badges of Peshmerga soldiers. The Iraqi flag is

almost nonexistent in the KRI – it is visible in only a few places, such as Erbil Airport. Another symbol of independence is the Kurdish language, which was declared the official language of the region and is used by the administration, the media, and schools and universities.

The two airports in Erbil and Sulaymaniyya, built in the last few years, grant the region a degree of freedom to communicate independently with the outside world. For a region with no access to the sea, such an asset is crucial for survival. Most important of all, the huge quantities of oil and gas that were found in the KRI are a key factor in its economic and political independence. The international oil companies that flocked to Kurdistan in post-Saddam Iraq not only helped develop the oil sector but also became the Kurds' advocates vis-à-vis their governments. All in all, there were 47 companies from 17 countries operating in the KRG.<sup>12</sup> Thus, American oil companies with vested interests in Kurdistan, such as Exxon Mobil, pushed the American administration to support the Kurds.<sup>13</sup> Oil was also a main vehicle for facilitating a rapprochement between Ankara and Erbil. The Kurdish-Turkish pipeline that was inaugurated in May 2014, and which functions independently from Baghdad, is a case in point.

On another level, Kurdish national consciousness was strongly reinforced by the educational system, which flourished during the years of the economic boom (2003-14). This system is entirely separate from the Iraqi system and curricula.<sup>14</sup> All the textbooks are in Kurdish, so unlike the older generation, Kurdish youth no longer know or use Arabic. Similarly, the narrative in these textbooks puts the emphasis on Kurdistan and Kurdish society, history and culture rather than on Iraq and the Arabs.<sup>15</sup> Sherko Kirmanj maintains that the "KRG history textbooks present a core political message that the Kurds, as a national group in the world of nation-states, have the right to self-determination and statehood."<sup>16</sup> Another revolution took place in the higher education system whereby, according to the Ministry of Higher Education and Research, there are now no fewer than 28 universities in the KRI, 14 of which are private.<sup>17</sup>

These achievements have turned the KRI into a source of pride and inspiration for all Kurds and a model to be followed, at least on the popular level.<sup>18</sup> They are all the more impressive when we recall

the abyss into which the Kurds of Iraq had been thrown by Saddam Hussein's Baath regime less than three decades before. How was this accomplished? What advantages did this region have in comparison to the others, and what are the challenges ahead?

The road to the emergence of a Kurdish quasi-state has been tortuous and long, lasting for some eighty years. Even now it is not yet completed. The KRI's success lies in various geopolitical and socioeconomic factors.

First, one should mention Britain's vacillating policies towards the Kurds in the early years of the Iraqi state, when it promised autonomy to the Kurds and then reneged on that promise. Then there was the Local Languages Law, a kind of cultural autonomy the Kurds managed to gain at the end of the British Mandate in 1932. Though not fully implemented, it set a precedent no Iraqi government could disregard.

Another unique factor that did not exist in the other Kurdish regions was political autonomy, which the Baath government in Iraq granted to the Kurds in 1970. The Baath made this tactical move less than two years after they took power in order to gain the Kurds' goodwill until control could be stabilized in the government's hands. This pseudo-autonomy was dismantled five years later, but did prepare the ground for the establishment of a genuine Kurdish autonomy years later.

The concentration of the Kurds in mostly impregnable mountains, and their high percentage among the total population in Iraq (20-25%), goes a long way towards explaining their perseverance against the central government's attempts to defeat Kurdistan once and for all.

No less important is the continuity in the leadership symbolized by the Barzanis and the Talabanis. The former, who began their struggle against the central government in the late days of the Ottoman Empire, carried on with it throughout the twentieth century and beyond. The Talabanis have followed suit since the 1960s. Though these elites suffer from nepotism and corruption, they provide a sense of stability and continuity, especially in comparison to the new elites emerging in the Arab part of post-Saddam Iraq. Their military prowess has made them a formidable challenge to every regime since the establishment of the modern Iraqi state in 1920.



Wars have played a paradoxical role in Kurdish history. On the one hand, they have brought about catastrophes verging on genocide. On the other, they have provided windows of opportunity to improve the Kurds' political standing. This is true especially for the Kurds of Iraq.

The Iraq-Iran War (1980-88) had a severe impact on the Kurds. Accusing the Kurds of supporting Iran in the war, Saddam's regime unleashed a campaign of repression against them. This included the chemical attack on Halabja and the Anfal campaigns at the end of the war, which cost the lives of 5,000 and 180,000 Kurds, respectively; as well as the demolishing of over 4,500 villages. The combined effect of this onslaught was to turn Kurdistan into a desert.<sup>19</sup>

The 1991 Gulf War might have ended with similar results, but instead turned out to be the beginning of genuine Kurdish autonomy. In March 1991, in the aftermath of the war, the Kurds revolted against the Baath regime. Saddam attempted to put down the revolt by force, but his effort boomeranged. The flight of more than one million Kurds towards the Turkish and Iranian borders convinced the international community of the need to establish a safe haven in the Kurdistan region, to be protected by the US and its allies.

Saddam responded by pulling his military forces out of Kurdistan and stopping payment on salaries to Kurdish officials in the hope that this would precipitate the collapse of the region. In fact, it brought about the opposite result, with the KRI gradually establishing itself as an autonomous entity.

The 2003 Iraq War had even more dramatic effects. The Kurdish Peshmerga played a crucial role in ousting the Baath regime by supporting the American army's effort to occupy the northern part of the country – at a time when Turkey, a member of NATO, declined the Americans permission to use the Incirlik air base for that purpose. This success affected the Kurds deeply. In the KRI itself, the dismantling of the Baath regime eased the trauma experienced by the Kurdish population under Saddam and significantly bolstered the nation-building and state-building processes. The Kurds also played a key role in the Iraqi central government in Baghdad, which granted

them a say in the political affairs of the country as a whole. A further significant factor was the new constitution, endorsed in 2005, which adopted – for the first time in Iraqi history – a unique formula for the establishment of a federation system for Iraq. In a way, this legalized the push towards self-rule in the KRI.

The establishment of independent foreign relations was also accelerated significantly in the aftermath of the 2003 Iraqi War. Kurdish missions opened in countries around the world, and country missions were opened in Erbil (Hewler). The KRG also has a foreign minister, Falah Mustafa Bakir, who has been serving in that post since 2006 under the euphemistic title "head of the department of foreign relations."

The KRI's most important relations are with the US, which changed its traditional policy of ignoring the Kurds to one of engagement and support.<sup>20</sup> The turning point was of course the 2003 war, which showed the Kurds to be a reliable and pro-Western ally. (The American stance remained ambiguous, however, as will be discussed below).

Another strong point for the KRI in post-Saddam Iraq was its vibrant economy, of which oil was the main driver. But, as was the case elsewhere in the world, oil was problematic for many reasons. It enhanced foreign relations, especially with Turkey – but it also brought corruption, nepotism, and severe rivalry between the two leading parties in the KRI, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). It put the KRI in the position of being vulnerable to fluctuations in the oil price and to instability in the Middle East.

In sum, there is no doubt that the KRI has reached a critical mass that may eventually lead to independence. However, its participation in the war against IS, in which it has been engaged since 2014, has brought with it severe economic, political, and military challenges. This war could decide the fate of the KRI: it might become an independent state, or it might revert to its former status as a weak autonomy. That question will be addressed in the conclusion of this paper.

## THE METEORIC RISE OF KURDISTAN IN SYRIA – ROJAVA

The real revolution took place among the Kurds of Syria, who, until not too long ago, were a silent minority insulated from the rest of the world. Many analysts doubted that such a community, which is politically and geographically fragmented and which lacks the gift of impregnable mountains enjoyed by the other parts of Kurdistan, could play any important role in the Kurdish scene. For a long time, studies on the Kurds ignored those of Syria altogether.<sup>21</sup> Yet within a short period, they have emerged as a player to be reckoned with.

How did this come about? The historical relations between the Kurds of Syria and their “big brothers,” the Kurds of Turkey, go a long way toward explaining their swift military and political achievements. Of special importance have been their ideological, political, and military ties with the Kurdistan Workers Party (*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê*, or PKK), which was established in Turkey in 1978 and which has had relations with its co-nationals in Syria from its earliest days.

It should be remembered that Syrian President Hafez al-Assad provided a political and military base to PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan and his supporters as far back as 1980.<sup>22</sup> His aim was that the PKK would fight Turkey, his nemesis. While in Syria, Öcalan deepened the PKK’s relations with the Kurds of that country. Eager as he was to divert the energies of the Syrian Kurds toward an outside enemy, Assad essentially pushed them into the arms of the PKK, which trained them on Qandil Mountain in Iraq.

Öcalan and the PKK were forced to leave Syria following the Adana Agreement, struck by Assad with Turkey in 1998. However, its two decades in Syria left the PKK with lasting influence among the Kurds of that country. That influence was strengthened with the formation in 2004 of a special Kurdish Syrian branch, the Democratic Union Party (PYD), which would emerge as the most influential Kurdish party in 2011. What gave it its advantage over the fifteen other Kurdish parties that came under the umbrella of the KDP in the KRI was its effective military force, which consisted of the People’s Protection Units (YPG) and the all-female organization, the Women’s Protection Units (YPJ), established in 2012.

When the upheavals erupted in Syria in 2011, President Bashar al-Assad made a move similar to the one made by President Saddam Hussein of Iraq twenty years earlier when he withdrew his military forces from the Kurdish region in Iraq. As in the Iraqi case, the move was made in a moment of extreme weakness; and just as it had in Iraq, it proved crucial for the establishment of Kurdish autonomy. Supported by its military branches, the PYD acted quickly to fill the vacuum and at the same time marginalize the other fifteen Kurdish political forces, which were allied with the KDP but much weaker than the PYD.

The fact that the Kurds of Syria reside on the geographical and political periphery only helped them take the initiative far away from the watchful eyes of the government as well as those of the Syrian opposition. Assad's struggle for survival forced him to turn a blind eye to developments in the Kurdish region, and even to turn the Kurds into an ally of sorts against other opposition groups – particularly the rebel forces and various jihadist groups that were vying to fill the vacuum left by the government. The close ties between the Turkish Kurdish PKK and the Syrian Kurdish PYD were further cemented by the souring relations between Damascus and Ankara, which pushed Damascus to employ both the PKK and the PYD against its short-lived erstwhile ally.

The fuel for the Kurdish movement in Syria was the central government's policy of assimilation, Arabization, and effacement of Kurdish identity. The disenfranchisement of the Kurds of Syria was precipitated by the rise of the Baath regime to power in the early 1960s, which based its Kurdish policy on the infamous "doctrine," likened by some to Nazi ideology, of Syrian Arab official Muhammad Talab Hilal.

In his book *Dirasa `an Muhafazat Al-Jazira*, Hilal raised the specter of the establishment of a Kurdish state in Iraqi Kurdistan that could engulf the Kurds of Syria as well. Accordingly, he proposed the creation of an Arab belt (*hizam `Arabi*) along the Syrian-Turkish-Iraqi borders to block such trans-border influences.<sup>23</sup> Among his doctrine's tenets was the denial of the special Kurdish identity through Arabization and even the deliberate instilling of ignorance (*tajhil*) through the closure of Kurdish schools, even though they taught in Arabic.<sup>24</sup> These policies continued intermittently until the upheavals in Syria, which put an end to the government's sway over the Kurdish region.

The developments that took place so abruptly for the Kurds in Syria are unprecedented in their history. With a force of some 10,000 YPG fighters,<sup>25</sup> the Kurds managed within a short time to take control of 10 Kurdish cities as well as a part of Aleppo populated by Kurds. Another important achievement was reached in January 2013, when the Syrian Kurds took control of the oil-rich region of Rimelan. If they can manage to hold onto it, Rimelan might give them additional political and economic leverage.<sup>26</sup>

However, as was the case with the KRI, the Kurdish achievements in Syria might have been jeopardized by the rise of IS (discussed below). Because IS believed the YPG was the only force capable of stopping its swift advance in the Syrian north, it concentrated its attacks against the Kurdish region. The most important battle, which became a symbol and a turning point for the Kurds, was in Kobane (September 2014-January 2015). In that battle, the forces of YPG and YPJ managed to achieve victory against all odds.

The battle for Kobane has had far-reaching strategic implications. First, it galvanized the tacit cooperation between the Kurds and the US, which granted them air cover against IS forces and thus tipped the balance in the Kurds' favor. Second, it highlighted the growing tension between Turkey and the Kurds of Syria.

While the battle raged, Turkish forces stood idly by on the border, doing nothing to support the YPG. This is not surprising, as Ankara perceived a Kurdish victory in Kobane as a threat to Turkey's national security. Ankara, which regarded the PYD and its military branches as an extension of the PKK, identified the PYD as a terrorist organization that should be fought by any and all means. Turkey fears that an emerging Kurdish entity in Syria could become a model for the Kurds in Turkey, and is thus trying its best to stop the Kurdish advance in Syria.

Another strategic implication of the battle of Kobane was a new strain in relations between Ankara and Washington. The US insisted on continuing its support for the YPG, which it regarded as the force most capable of stopping IS. It maintained that position despite pressure from Turkey, its main NATO ally, to desist. Nor was the US willing to put the PYD on its terrorist list despite the group's ideological and concrete ties to the PKK.

The victory in Kobane foreshadowed new military successes in Syria. Over the next 18 months, Kurdish forces, propped up by Arab fighters in the newly organized Arab-Kurdish Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and supported by American air cover, managed to uproot IS from several areas and extend their own government. Having established three cantons – Afrin, Kobane, and al-Jazira – the leadership was bent on achieving geographical contiguity between them by taking lands separating Kobane from Afrin. Thus, during a quick expansion, it seized territory not only from IS but also from other Syrian rebels in the Azaz corridor, as well as from the Syrian army in Hasaka.<sup>27</sup>

This series of Kurdish successes was crowned by the seizure, on August 12, 2016, of the mostly Arab town of Manbij from IS. This set in motion some unexpected developments that may yet jeopardize the entire Kurdish project.

Alarmed by the seizure of Manbij, which it perceived as a first step towards YPG's extension of its power to Jarablus and the establishment of a corridor between Kobane and Afrin, Turkey took action. Just 12 days after the seizure of Manbij, on August 24, Ankara-backed Syrian rebels the Free Syrian Army (FSA, *al-jaysh al-hurr*) and Turkish land forces launched an operation to take Jarablus from IS.

The Turkish intervention, dubbed Euphrates' Shield (*Firat Kalkanma*), was the first of its kind outside Turkish territory since the invasion of Cyprus in July 1974.<sup>28</sup> Up to August 2016, though IS had been active in Syria for a long time, Ankara had done very little to stop it. Some reports even claim that Ankara had gone so far as to support it. So what made Ankara change its policy?

The AKP government felt extremely vulnerable following the July 15, 2016 failed coup d'état in Turkey, the sweeping success of the YPG in Syria, and the series of terrorist attacks by IS and PKK affiliates The Kurdistan Freedom Falcons (*Teyrêbazên Azadiya Kurdistan*, TAK) inside Turkey. The government accordingly decided to act in the hope of killing a few birds with one stone. Domestically, it sought to mobilize national support; raise the morale of the army, which had suffered a severe setback following the coup; and cut the Gordian knot between the PKK and the YPG. Externally, it sought to take areas previously controlled by IS and establish a security belt on its southern border, and most importantly to stop the advance of the Kurds towards autonomy.

Fikret Bila, writing in *Hurriyet*, noted the grand strategic objective behind Ankara's operation: "The aim of the Euphrates' Shield operation is to restore this area to its demographic situation prior to 2011, namely, to revive the area's character before the Syrian civil war. This entails ensuring that the Turkmen and Arab population that was driven away from this area by the PYD-YPG ... and ISIS, can return to their villages, towns and cities. We can say that the Euphrates' Shield operations will continue until this objective is secured."<sup>29</sup>

For all this confidence, the dismantling of the Rojava entity might not be as easy as Turkey expects. Even as it was fighting on the battleground, the PYD was making quick moves towards Kurdish state-building. The pace of institution-building was incremental, and ran in parallel with the enlargement of the areas falling under Kurdish control. These institutions included administrative apparatuses, a Kurdish school system, and various social and political structures.

The first step was to declare the establishment of the three cantons, Jazira, Afrin, and Kobane, as autonomous entities. Then, on January 21, 2014, the PYD established what it termed "democratic autonomy" (*xweseriya demokratik*), which involved the setting up of city councils, a police force, and a military force.

This system, which is referred to sometimes as the Third Way, was developed by Öcalan in a book he wrote in prison in 2004 under the title *Bir halkı savunmak* (Defending the People). The book illustrates the transformation in Öcalan's thinking from the concept of an independent Kurdish state to the negation of the very idea of the nation-state, which he describes as "probably the most dangerous instrument in history." In its stead, he suggests a kind of utopian political system in which the peoples of the Middle East coexist, with an emphasis on democracy and socialism.<sup>30</sup>

In March 2016, the Kurdish leadership in Syria dismantled the cantons system, declaring (together with several allied groups) a new model of federation aimed at power-sharing among all the communities in the region, including Kurds, Arabs, Turkmen, Muslims, Christians, and Yezidis. They refer to this federation as a "federal democratic system." According to a Kurdish spokesman, the move was made after many



attempts by the Kurds to be heard. "The Kurdish people have been rejected and silenced in the latest peace talks in Geneva," he said. "We feel that the world powers are using us as a tool to push forward their agendas. It is now our right to protect ourselves. We do not support dividing Syria, but we expect an equal and fair outcome from the peace talks, and we have not seen any."<sup>31</sup>

On July 5, 2016, the Syrian Kurds and their allies declared Qamishlo City the capital of the federal system in northern Syria and Rojava, explaining the choice by its heterogeneity and the need to represent "all the nations in northern Syria."<sup>32</sup> That same month, a draft for a new constitution based on the one adopted in 2014 was presented to the public.<sup>33</sup> Its guiding principle was the establishment of a polyethnic federation as part of Syria rather than a separate nation-state. This principle went hand in hand with the concept of democratic autonomy, and was aimed at reconciling the other local minorities while allaying fears of Damascus and other states in the region. But it deepened the conflict with the KRI's umbrella organization in Syria, which advocated the establishment of a Kurdish state *per se*.

Another important novelty in this part of Kurdistan – also inspired by the ideas of Öcalan – is the enhanced role of women in society, including in the administration, the political system, and the security forces.<sup>34</sup> In what can be termed a gender revolution, new laws were enacted forbidding polygamy, marriage at an early age, and unilateral divorce. The PYD adopted the appointment of co-chairwomen to different echelons of power, with women taking part in the decision-making process. Kurdish women, who constitute an estimated 35% of the entire Kurdish forces, have been taking active part in the fighting against the radical Islamist groupings –especially IS, which gained Kurdish women worldwide fame and admiration.<sup>35</sup>

The developments in Syrian Kurdistan caused a shift in roles between the three parts of Kurdistan. While historically, the Kurds of Syria came under the influence of their "big brothers" in Turkey and Iraq, they went their own way following their revolution. Even more than that, they became a kind of model for the Kurds of Turkey while at the same time realizing the political theories of Öcalan and distancing themselves from the KRG's political model. Still, the five-year achievements might be jeopardized by new geostrategic developments.



## TURKEY'S KURDISH DILEMMAS

In an ideal world, Turkey would be the most adept of the four states at integrating and conciliating its Kurdish minority. For one thing, unlike the artificiality of states like Iraq and Syria, Turkey is endowed with deep roots of statehood going back to the Ottoman Empire that should presumably give it the self-confidence to make room for other nationalities. For another, unlike the Persian Empire, the Ottoman Empire allowed the flourishing of Kurdish principalities, which enjoyed autonomous rule for hundreds of years.

In the very early years of the modern state, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk promised autonomy to the Kurds as a reward for their contribution to the Turkish military effort during WWI, as well as the Turkish War of Independence. Moreover, Turkey is considered the most democratic Muslim state in the Middle East, and as such could have been expected to grant the Kurds their cultural and political rights.

The paradox is that the Kurds of Turkey have been more oppressed, both culturally and politically, than their brethren in other parts of Greater Kurdistan.

The Turkish government's policies of assimilation, cultural homogenization, and denial suffocated the Kurdish language and destroyed other unique cultural attributes. Kurdish speakers were long perceived as disloyal to the state, and their use of their own idiom was portrayed by the government as a sign of separatism. Archival material shows the Kurds referred to as "Turks who somehow forgot their mother tongue," while the Kurdish language was depicted as a "mixture of Asian Turkish and Persian."<sup>36</sup>

So threatened was the Turkish political elite by the Kurdish language that over the years they employed a whole gamut of linguicidal policies, including bans on Kurdish names, on both written and spoken Kurdish, and on the Kurdish alphabet.<sup>37</sup> The letters Q, W, and X were explicitly banned, as they do not exist in the Turkish alphabet. The most direct affront to freedom of speech was the notorious Law 2932, which came into effect as late as 1983 and which banned the use of the Kurdish language in either public or private spheres. The very word "Kurd" was not to be used in the media.

The government's attempts to smother Kurdish identity and culture also included bans on Kurdish music, traditional Kurdish dress, Kurdish holidays (especially Nowruz), and Kurdish emblems, none of which were allowed to be used in the public sphere.

If Kurdish cultural attributes were perceived as a threat to the homogenous Turkish state, Kurdish political activities were considered high treason. No Kurdish party was allowed to participate in the political system, not even when the state shifted to a multi-party system in 1950. As Turkey was purported to be a democratic state, the Turkish elite had to devise a technique that would enable it to preserve the façade of democracy while at the same time preventing the rise of Kurdish political parties. The tool they hit upon was the institution of a high threshold of 10% that parties had to secure to enter the parliament – a threshold that prevented Kurdish parties from winning any seats at all.

The Kurdish political groupings had to devise a counter-technique to overcome this hurdle. Their solution was to run as independent candidates, then join hands as a group once they were in the parliament. The government tried to ban such pro-Kurdish parties, but after each closure, the same party appeared under a different name.

This "cat and mouse policy" lasted for 25 years, from 1990 till 2015. In total, there were eight Kurdish parties under different names, including the People's Labor Party (*Halkın Emek Partisi*, or HEP) in 1990 and the Peace and Democratic Party (*Barış ve Demokrasi Partisi*, or BDP) in 2008.<sup>38</sup>

The vicious circle was broken in the June 2015 elections, which represented a milestone in the Turkish political scene. For the first time in Turkey's history, the pro-Kurdish party, People's Democratic Party (*Halkların Demokratik Partisi*, or HDP), managed to enter the parliament as a party and not as individuals. Established in 2012, HDP was the new incarnation of the BDP, differing from its predecessor in that it appealed not only to Kurdish voters but to liberal Turks and members of other minorities as well. Its appeal lay in its secular leftist worldview and its inclusion of Turks and other minorities on its list. Gender equality was also part and parcel of its ideology and practice, with women serving as co-chairs at various echelons of power.

These policies went a long way towards explaining HDP's success in overcoming the 10% threshold and winning 13.1% of the vote. However, this victory signaled the beginning of a renewed deterioration in relations between the AKP government and the Kurdish political elite.

The Turkish government's systematic suppression of Kurdish identity, and its attempts to implant a homogenous Turkish one in its place, produced the opposite result. As Senem Aslan argues, "The gradual nationalization and expansion of the Kurdish movement was a consequence of a highly comprehensive and intrusive nation-building process in Turkey."<sup>39</sup> This suppression was also at the root of the intermittent violent conflicts that took place between the Turkish army and the Kurdish movement in the early years of the modern Turkish state (the Sa'id Rebellion in 1925; the Dersim Rebellion in 1937-38), and from the 1980s until now.

The repression of the Dersim Rebellion was followed by 40 years of relative quiet in the Kurdish region, leading the Turkish government to believe that its de-Kurdification and assimilation policies had succeeded in solving "the Kurdish problem" once and for all. It therefore accorded little importance (at first) to a small group of students in a remote village who, in 1978, founded an organization called the Kurdistan's Workers Party (PKK), headed by Abdullah Öcalan. Within a few years, this organization would prove to be the biggest challenge to the Turkish state.

In the aftermath of the 1980 military coup d'état, the repression of Kurdish culture and identity increased significantly, triggering bloody fighting between PKK militants and the Turkish armed forces. This war, which started in 1984, reached a peak in the 1990s, with tens of thousands killed,<sup>40</sup> huge economic costs, and vast numbers of Kurds evacuated from their villages.<sup>41</sup> The government's violent moves against the Kurds as a whole went a long way towards explaining the PKK's own violent actions, including against the civilian population.

It was at this point that the Turkish government appealed to its partners in the West to put the PKK on their terrorist lists. Accordingly, in 1997, the US designated PKK as a terrorist organization "based on its history of violence both against the Turkish military and against Kurds which the group perceived as collaborating with official security structures."<sup>42</sup>

The EU followed suit in 2002. The listing of the PKK as a terrorist organization had a negative effect not only on the PKK, but on the entire Kurdish movement in Turkey.

From the Turkish point of view, the complexity of this war lay in the diffusion of the PKK across three countries, not to mention its important base in the diaspora. In addition to its strongholds in Turkish Kurdistan, the PKK held bases in the Qandil Mountains in Iraq, from which it carried out attacks on Turkey. And until 1999, Öcalan was out of reach: he led the campaign from Syria, where he had been based with a group of PKK militants since 1979.

The solution Turkey devised was to cut the PKK's trans-border connections by reaching a deal with the Syrian government, which had employed the PKK as a proxy in its conflict with Ankara. Thus, under Turkish pressure, President Hafez al-Assad expelled Öcalan from Syria on October 9, 1998, even going so far as to declare the PKK a terrorist organization. Shortly afterwards, Syria and Turkey signed the Adana Agreement "against the PKK terrorist organization."<sup>43</sup>

Five months later, Öcalan was caught in Nairobi and put in prison on Turkey's Imrali Island, where he is serving a life sentence. Ironically, another Turkish citizen who served time in Turkish prison for four months that same year was none other than future Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who was convicted of "inciting hatred based on religious differences."<sup>44</sup>

The capture of Öcalan dealt a severe blow to the PKK, as evidenced by its declaring of a unilateral ceasefire that lasted five years. As stated above, Öcalan himself underwent an ideological transformation while in prison, abandoning the goal of independence in favor of democratic autonomy.

The PKK resumed fighting in 2004, however, possibly driven by the desire to imitate the KRG's achievements in Iraq following the 2003 Iraqi War. Once again, the Kurdish problem resurfaced as the most acute challenge to the Turkish state. During the 1990s, Turkey's domestic security threat perception contained two major elements: Islamism and Kurdish ethno-nationalism. But since 2002, with the rise to power of the Islamist AKP, the government's threat perception has revolved mainly around the PKK and its military activities, termed as terrorism by the government and as a

war of liberation by the Kurds. Regardless how it is defined, the Turkish-Kurdish war illustrates a striking paradox. The Turkish army is the second-biggest army in NATO after the US, but it has not been able to overcome the infinitely smaller PKK paramilitary force.<sup>45</sup>

Concurrently with the fighting, the AKP government began trying to come up with a peaceful solution to the Kurdish question. The first attempt, in 2009, was termed "the Kurdish opening" or "the democratic opening" (*Kürt açılımı*). The moving spirit behind the move was Prime Minister Erdoğan, who sought to weaken the Turkish military by divesting it of its most important role, namely its battle with the PKK. Erdoğan's move resembled that of Iraqi strongman Saddam Hussein, who, four decades earlier, initiated a peace process with the Kurds of Iraq with a view towards neutralizing the military.

Because it viewed the PKK as the main force on the ground, Ankara engaged with it rather than with the Kurdish political party, the BDP. In early 2009, a Turkish state delegation led by Hakan Fidan, later to be appointed director of the National Intelligence Service (MIT), approached Öcalan and requested that he produce a statement of views. The result was the "Road Map" document, written by Öcalan from his prison cell on Imrali Island.

As Öcalan explained it, the document was intended to present solutions to the Kurdish question and bring democratization to Turkey.<sup>46</sup> It was the centerpiece of a secret dialogue between the AKP and the PKK that took place in Oslo intermittently starting in 2009 until it was broken off in mid-2011. Erdoğan subsequently acknowledged the talks, saying, "They did meet; I myself had given the instructions."<sup>47</sup>

Initially, the "opening" appeared promising, and the Kurds celebrated it as a great achievement. However, the euphoria evaporated quickly, the peace process reached a dead end, and a new round of fighting began. The BDP's co-chair, Selahattin Demirtas, claimed the "opening" had been merely a tactical move aimed at winning the support of the Kurdish electorate in the June 2011 elections.<sup>48</sup> In fact, concurrently with the peace talks, the government arrested 10,000 Kurds for "belonging to a terrorist organization" – Kurds who were in fact members of a legal party.<sup>49</sup>

In 2013, a second round of peace talks took place, repeating the same pattern. It too was at the behest of Erdoğan, and was conducted between MIT and the PKK while Turkey officially continued to depict its partner as a terrorist organization. It appears to have had the same tactical motive; namely, to gain the support of the Kurdish electorate for a projected referendum on changing the Turkish political system into a presidential one, which would have granted wide powers to Erdoğan. However, the HDP's success in the July 2015 elections thwarted Erdoğan's ambition to achieve the necessary two-thirds majority needed to turn Turkey into a presidential system. Neither was the HDP willing to support Erdoğan by endorsing the change in the parliament.

This was one of the main causes of the all-out war that flared up in July 2015 between the Turkish armed forces and the PKK. The other major cause was of course the establishment of the Kurdish entity in Syria, which Turkey views as an inherent danger due to the intimate ideological, political, and organizational ties between Syrian Kurds and Turkish Kurds. For a year and a half since the summer of 2015, Turkey has been embroiled in combatting Kurdish forces on three separate but interconnected fronts: internally, in southeastern Turkey; in Iraqi Kurdistan, in the Qandil Mountains (the base of the PKK); and in Syrian Kurdistan.

After the collapse of peace talks with the PKK in the summer of 2015, Kurdish activists declared local administrative autonomy in various cities and districts in Turkish Kurdistan. This, together with a new wave of PKK attacks on Turkish security forces as well as several terrorist acts against civilians, alarmed the Turkish authorities to the point that they unleashed all-out war in the heart of Turkish Kurdistan's cities. In early 2016, Erdoğan claimed that the number of PKK members killed had reached 3,100,<sup>50</sup> while Turkish official sources claimed the toll on Turkish security forces was more than 420.<sup>51</sup>

The harsh crackdown on Kurdish cities and towns exacted a high price on their populations. The government imposed 85 curfews across Kurdish cities and towns, about half a million civilians were displaced, and there was massive urban destruction in Kurdish areas.<sup>52</sup> According to an international crisis group, "whole swathes of Turkey's majority southeast have been devastated."<sup>53</sup>

Turkey's objective is to eliminate its Kurdish problem once and for all and sever the ties between the Kurds in Turkey and those in Syria. Erdoğan recently declared that the PKK faces two choices: to surrender to the state or be neutralized.<sup>54</sup> But this war, to which the world has turned a blind eye, is likely to generate the opposite outcome: cementing the resistance of the Kurdish opposition movement in Turkey.

As for the Kurdish front in Syria, in June 2015, Erdoğan warned that he would never allow a Kurdish state to be established there. But much to his chagrin, the Kurds on Turkey's southern border had great success in fighting IS (as discussed above), which gained them military support from the West and from Russia. What's more, Erdoğan was forced to swallow the bitter fruit of his actions when IS began carrying out terrorist attacks in Turkey. One of the deadliest was in October 2016 in Ankara, an attack that cost the lives of 100 people.<sup>55</sup> Beyond the harm done to the lives of the innocent, these attacks have dealt a heavy blow to Turkish tourism.

The third front involves the ongoing Turkish air force attacks on the PKK in the Qandil Mountains, and, more recently, Turkey's declared intention of participating in the operation for the liberation of Mosul from IS that began in mid-October 2016. One of Turkey's reasons for participating in that operation is believed to be to stop the PKK – which already has forces in Sinjar and is allied with PUK forces in Kirkuk and elsewhere – from playing a role. Turkey's other major objective is to stop the hegemonic advances of Iran in Iraq and the Middle East as a whole.

For its part, the Kurdish leadership has its own dilemmas. This leadership has three major components: the leader and ideologue Abdullah Öcalan; the illegal organization PKK; and the legal party HDP, each of which is pulling in a different direction. Öcalan came out publicly in support of the peace process with Ankara (or solution process, *çözüm süresi*) in March 2013. But since the collapse of that process in the summer of 2015, he has been out of touch with the reality on the ground. He remains a symbol and a hero for Kurds in all parts of Kurdistan, but his ability to affect decision-making is close

to nil. On a personal level, Öcalan escaped the death penalty after his capture in 1999 due to pressure brought to bear on the Turkish government by the EU to get rid of capital punishment entirely. However, if the death penalty is reinstated in the aftermath of the coup attempt, Öcalan's file might be reopened.

The PKK and its military branches also suffered a severe blow in the last round of fighting. The PKK's strategy of shifting the war into cities and towns in the heart of Kurdistan has caused severe destruction and resulted in great fatigue and dismay on the part of the population.<sup>56</sup> Accordingly, the PKK is seeking a new strategy to reduce the hardships inflicted on the Kurdish people. One major change it has implemented is taking the fight back to the countryside.

The civilian party, the HDP, became the third party in the parliament following its success in the July 2015 elections. However, the November 2015 elections represented a setback, since they resulted in the HDP's portion of the electorate going down to 10.7% as a reflection of the growing tension between Turkish and Kurdish nationalists against the background of the renewed conflict. Since then, the HDP has been in a tight spot. Many Turks who had voted for it left its ranks because of its supposed association with the PKK, and hence with the war. Of course, even though the HDP continues to stress its Turkey-centric view and its support for a peaceful solution to the Kurdish problem, it cannot disassociate itself altogether from the PKK, because it regards itself as part of the Kurdish national movement and might lose the support of the Kurdish electorate. Thus it has to balance its need to appeal to liberal leftist Turks with its appeal to Kurdish nationalists. Even more difficult, it has to reconcile trends in the Kurdish national movement both inside and outside Turkey.

In the aftermath of the failed coup of July 15, 2016, the conflict between the Turkish government and the Kurdish movement deepened significantly. The government lumped together all its supposed enemies, including Gülenists, liberals, the PKK, and any Kurd who had alleged ties with it. The result has been a purge campaign among the worst in Kurdish history in Turkey.



No fewer than 10,000 Kurdish teachers were suspended by the government over suspected links with the PKK.<sup>57</sup> Shortly after the attempted coup, 185 media outlets were shut down, many of which were in the Kurdish language (including 15 at the end of October 2016).<sup>58</sup> The wave of repression included the arrest of Kurdish leaders following their having been stripped of constitutional immunity; the arrest of mayors and municipal leaders, most importantly the co-mayors of Diyarbakir Gültan Kısanak and Fırat Anlı; the appointment of administrators (*kayyum*) in dozens of Kurdish municipalities to replace elected mayors who were accused of supporting the PKK; a ban on Kurdish leaders traveling abroad; and the cutting off of internet access to Kurdish regions.<sup>59</sup> The culmination of these moves was the arrest, on November 4, 2016, of the two co-chairs of the HDP, Selahattin Demirtaş and Figen Yüksekdağ, alongside eight other HDP MPs on the accusation of spreading propaganda for the PKK.

In an attempt to balance these drastic moves and appease the Kurdish population, Prime Minister Binali Yıldırım announced in September 2016 that the government would invest £2.6 billion in reconstructing the conflict-hit Kurdish southeast, including the planned construction of 67,000 flats, hospitals, factories, sports stadiums, and police stations.<sup>60</sup> Kurds are skeptical that these promises will be fulfilled, but if nothing else, they amount to an indirect official admission of the magnitude of the destruction inflicted upon the Kurdish region.

One Kurdish citizen summarized the situation as follows: "Many Turkish governments have tried violence. They destroyed our villages, burned down our forests. Now our cities are in ruins as well. Dialogue is the only way. [President Erdoğan] could end this war with a single sentence."<sup>61</sup> However, Erdoğan remains bent on solving the problem by force, because he needs the support of the ultra-nationalist Turks represented by MHP for his ambitious program of transforming the Turkish system into a presidential one.

All these moves have had boomerang effects. Terrorist acts by PKK affiliates took place in various parts of Turkey while rank-and-file Kurds were further alienated from the state, thus increasing support for Kurdish nationalism and the Kurdish identity rather than weakening it.

## IRAN'S FORGOTTEN KURDS

The Kurds of Iran present a paradox: they were the pioneers of Kurdish nation-building and state-building, but remained far behind the rest of Kurdistan at the turn of the twenty-first century. It was in Iran that the Kurdistan Republic, better known as the Republic of Mahabad, was established in 1946. Though it survived less than a year, this tiny republic bequeathed to all Kurds an important model that included Kurdish administration, the free use of the Kurdish language, the opening up of society to women, and the free use of national symbols like a flag and an anthem. Despite all this, while the other three parts of Kurdistan were in the process of developing some degree of self-government, the Kurds of Iran were largely dormant and had little visibility in the international arena.

The explanation for this weakness lies in the combination of inherent problems within the Kurdish community and the policies of different Iranian regimes. In Iran, Kurdish identity appears fragmented, blurred, or fused with Iranian identity. Historically speaking, Kurdish identity was less developed under the Persian Empire than it was under the Ottoman Empire because from the start, the Safavid Empire destroyed Kurdish principalities and was bent on centralization and Shiization.<sup>62</sup>

Iranian Kurds nevertheless have an identity conflict with respect to the central government in Tehran. Ethnically speaking, despite certain cultural affinities with the Persians, the Kurds are a distinct nation. As to their religious affiliation, the majority of Iran's Kurds are Sunni, which has certainly deepened their alienation from the central government. This has been especially true under the Islamic Republic, which designated Shiite Islam the official religion and where radical Shiism has been the ideology of the state for four decades.<sup>63</sup>

There is, however, a substantial group of Kurds in Iran who are Shiite, unlike in the other states, where the Kurds are mostly Sunni.<sup>64</sup> This religious divide has made it difficult for the Kurdish national movement to unite all Kurds along modern secular grounds.<sup>65</sup>

Politically speaking, the Kurdish movement does not seem to have recovered completely from the Mahabad experience. Following the collapse of the republic, the main political organization, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDPI), almost ceased to exist, and the remnant of its members had to go underground.<sup>66</sup> Since then, it has experienced ups and downs in its political fate. New parties had emerged by 2016, including Komala, PJAK and PAK, but none of them managed to mobilize the Kurds of Iran around them.

The KDPI and Komala suffer from chronic fragmentation. All the parties are clandestine, so their contacts with potential supporters are loose and often dangerous. In addition, they all have bases in the KRG, which limits their freedom of action in Iran because of the longstanding ties between Iran and the Kurds of Iraq.

Unlike their brethren in the rest of Greater Kurdistan, who have managed of late to put themselves on the "international map," the Kurds of Iran have gone largely unnoticed. Nor have they succeeded in gaining significant support from regional or international players.

This is puzzling. Until the lifting of sanctions in January 2016, the Islamic Republic was regarded as an international pariah, which could have formed an incentive for supporting Kurdish opposition groups. However, such a policy failed to materialize – either because the groups in question were considered too weak to be able to dislodge the Islamic government, or because of fear of Iranian retaliation. Furthermore, according to a Kurdish observer, "the West, over the last decade, has prioritized Iran's nuclear deal, effectively giving Tehran carte blanche to undertake strict oppressive measures against Kurdish activists, to an extent that even independent social campaigners are not tolerated."<sup>67</sup>

The Iranian governments' policies go a long way towards explaining the position of Kurds in that country. Throughout modern history, Iranian governments have sought to suppress the Kurdish national movement in ways that very much resemble the policies of the other states with Kurdish communities, including forced assimilation, denial of Kurdish identity, and terrorizing of the population.<sup>68</sup> However, the

Iranians were unique in their systematic killing of strong Kurdish leaders, a policy undertaken on the assumption that a leaderless movement would take a long time to reorganize.

This brutal logic bore fruit. The assassinated leaders included Isma`il Simko; Qazi Muhammad, the leader of the Mahabad Republic; and Abdul Rahman Ghassemlou, leader of KDPI. These killings of Kurdish leaders from different generations had a debilitating effect on the movement as a whole. Comparatively speaking, the governments of the other three host countries were either less consistent or less successful at carrying out such Machiavellian plans.<sup>69</sup>

The Islamic Republic sought to weaken the Kurdish movement by appealing to Shiite Kurds whose main concentration was in Iran. By harping on their religious affinity towards Shiism and employing the well-known strategy of divide and rule, successive Iranian governments managed to distance Shiite Kurds from the rest of the Kurdish national movement.<sup>70</sup> The Iranian government also sought to play the demographic card by moving Shiites into the Kurdish region or converting young Kurds to Shiism.<sup>71</sup> The inferior status of Sunni Kurds had a negative effect on their access to educational opportunities and positions in state institutions, and hindered their participation in local and national politics.<sup>72</sup>

Militarily speaking, the Islamic Republic was even more aggressive towards the Kurdish movement than its predecessor had been. Khomeini went so far as to declare a jihad against the Kurds in August 1979, giving a religious twist to their relations. The worst fighting took place during the first two years of the Islamic Republic (1979-80), when some 10,000 Kurds died either in battle or in mass executions carried out by the regime to terrorize the population into submission.<sup>73</sup> By 1983, the regime managed to crush the movement despite the fact that it was mired in the war against Iraq. Over the next three decades, the Kurds made repeated attempts to challenge the regime but were always unsuccessful.

The Iranian regime's success in suppressing the Kurdish movement reflects not only its internal ruthlessness but also its ability to play the external Kurdish card. Iran was the first of the four countries hosting Kurds to do this. The Iranian governments offered assistance to the Kurds of Iraq for these reasons: to render them dependent on Tehran; to

encourage them to fight Iran's nemesis, the Iraqi regime; and to cause them to refrain from supporting the Iranian Kurds – or even to fight them if need be. This support, which started in the early 1960s and has continued intermittently ever since, is one of the causes of the weakness of the Kurdish movement in Iran itself.<sup>74</sup>

Two opposing dynamics make the future of the Kurdish national movement in Iran extremely ambiguous. On the one hand, there are signs of growing Kurdish alienation from the government. But on the other hand, the lifting of sanctions against Iran in January 2016 weakened the Kurdish movement's already feeble ability to fight.

By the late 1990s, the Shiite Kurds had become increasingly politicized, as shown by their opposition to the Islamic government and their emphasis on Kurdish identity. In June 2009, Shiite Kurds played a role in the "Green Revolution," which protested the disputed victory of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in the presidential elections.<sup>75</sup> This change can be attributed to several elements: the economic crisis in Iran, which hampered the government's ability to buy Kurdish goodwill with economic benefits; new media, which brought the mounting wave of Kurdish nationalism to Iranian Kurdish youth; and inspiring developments in other parts of Kurdistan, especially in Syria.

On an organizational level, a new party – the Free Life Party of Kurdistan, better known by its initials, PJAK – was established in 2004. PJAK is an offshoot of the PKK. Based in the Qandil Mountains in the KRG, it managed to capture the world's attention with its guerrilla actions against the Iranian regime. Like the PKK, it has a leftist, nationalist, and egalitarian ideology (in terms of gender), with a woman, Evindar Renas, co-leading the party with Abdul Rahman Haji Ahmadi. Some sources claim that PJAK has benefitted from American assistance thanks to its activities against the Islamic Republic.

In August 2012, KDPI and Komala, which had long been at each other's throats, signed an agreement calling for the toppling of the Islamic Republic, the establishment of a federal system in Iran, and the separation of religion from the state.<sup>76</sup> Two years later, the two rival branches of the KDPI and KDP initiated talks on reunification and on forging a common policy vis-à-vis the regime. So far nothing has materialized.

It is important to remember that in terms of sheer numbers, the Kurds of Iran outnumber those of Iraq and far outnumber those of Syria. They also have great potential on the intellectual-scientific front, as attested by the large number of Iranian Kurdish intellectuals in the diaspora. Many are active in the Kurdish national movement, providing it with indispensable organizational links to the outside world.

These developments have been eclipsed, however, by the concurrent strengthening of the Islamic Republic. If the Iranian Kurdish parties had hoped the international community would support them, as it has been doing with the Kurds of Iraq and to a certain extent the Kurds of Syria, the lifting of sanctions on Iran nipped those hopes in the bud. It turned Iran into an important trading partner for countries that are unlikely to be inclined to forfeit that burgeoning relationship for the sake of the Kurds.

Iran has become a hegemon in the region, with growing influence not only among Shiites but among the Kurds of Iraq as well. Tehran will certainly do its best to use the Kurds of Iraq to further repress their brethren in Iran. Moreover, except for PAK, with its six hundred fighters engaging IS in the Iraqi Kurdistan region, the Iranian Kurdish parties are not playing a significant role in that endeavor. Rightly or wrongly, the Iranian government is perceived to be a barrier against IS.

The Iranian regime has significantly bolstered its position both internally and externally, making the task of fulfilling Kurdish national aspirations even more difficult. The fact that all the Kurdish parties are acting clandestinely in Iran, with little basis of support among the Kurdish population at home, renders the emergence of a second Mahabad Republic a remote hope. Still, should the shifting sands of the Middle East reach Iran, the Kurds in that country may become pioneers for change because of their repression under the Islamic Republic, their synergy with other parts of Kurdistan, and the nationalist fervor among Kurdish organizations in the diaspora. If there is any lesson to be drawn from the Mahabad experience, it is that when favorable political circumstances present themselves, the Kurdish national movement is capable of seizing them quickly and flourishing.

## ISLAMIC STATE: A BLESSING IN DISGUISE?

The vacuum left by the central governments in Iraq and Syria gave rise to the emergence of multiple non-state actors, the most important of which are the Kurdish movements and the jihadist IS. They soon became major antagonists engaged in a war of life and death. Together, the Kurds and IS have shaken the very foundations of the nation-states of Iraq and Syria, blurred the internationally recognized borders between those two states, and called into question the century-honored Sykes-Picot vision of the map of the Middle East.

A comparison between the performance of the Kurds and IS since 2014 shows similarities, but also huge differences. In many ways, developments in the Kurdish arena in Iraq and Syria were a mirror image, albeit benign, of those occurring in the vast swath of territory dominated by IS. Both the Kurdish entities and IS swiftly occupied new territory, blurred state boundaries, built new administrations, attracted volunteer fighters from abroad, and mobilized members of the international community to fight their adversaries. The war between the Kurds and IS has been ferocious for several reasons: because they have been vying for influence and for rich oil resources on the same tracts of land; because they have opposing ideologies and orientations; and because they both want to build a strong entity on the debris of old states.

If wars are catalysts for nation-building, then the war between IS and the Kurds is playing such a role for the Kurdish nation. Indeed, IS has had a paradoxical effect on the Kurds. On the one hand, it has wreaked havoc upon them – but on the other, it has stimulated unprecedented patriotism and solidarity among the leadership and populations of all four Kurdish regions. It has accelerated nation-building in Rojava as well as in the KRG, especially with regard to the creation of a unified army and the acquisition of new arms. At the same time, hegemonic discourse in the four states has been weakened significantly, making room for the rise of Kurdish discourse and a self-centered Kurdish narrative.

Overall, IS has had contradictory effects on the Kurds. Its occupation of parts of Iraq in the summer of 2014 pushed the Peshmerga to expand their own hold on strategic areas rich with oil – especially Kirkuk, which

the Kurds call their Jerusalem. In Syria, too, the encounter between the YPG and IS helped the Kurdish entity achieve military and political accomplishments that enabled it to present a much more positive image than that of its enemy. The war enhanced trans-border nationalism, cooperation, and interdependence among all Kurds; forced the Iraqi and Syrian governments to join forces with them for tactical reasons; and help internationalize their cause.

The other side of the coin is that the war has been very costly and may jeopardize the very achievements of the two Kurdish entities in the long run. In terms of human life, as of summer 2016, the KRI had suffered 1,466 fatalities and 8,610 wounded.<sup>77</sup> The toll among the YPG and YPJ was much higher. According to Rojava TV, by the end of 2015, 1,722 had been killed in Hasaka province alone.<sup>78</sup>

On the socioeconomic level, the war has been disastrous for the KRI. After a decade of unprecedented prosperity, the region has undergone a severe economic crisis due to a combination of factors: the need to cope with about 2 million refugees and internally dispersed persons (IDPs); huge military expenses; a slump in oil prices; tensions with Baghdad, which declined to transfer the Kurdish part of the budget; and corruption and mismanagement problems. The economic crisis hit so hard that many Kurds were either unemployed or did not receive salaries for months. This has resulted in ongoing demonstrations and a rift between the KDP and its two rivals, the PUK and Goran.

The blurring of borders between the different parts of Kurdistan has also exacerbated competition and rivalry. The struggle for power between the KDP and the PKK/PYD reached new heights, as did their ideological conflict over the future political framework: a Kurdish state as envisioned by the KDP, or autonomy as advocated by the PKK/PYD. At the same time, the war against IS has sown the seeds of future clashes between the Kurds and central governments: in Iraq, with regard to Kirkuk and other disputed territories; and in Syria, on the idea of Kurdish autonomy. Nor is there any guarantee that the vital Kurdish contribution to the war effort against the jihadists will bring them the international support they need to promote their political cause.



## THE AMBIGUOUS ROLE OF INTERNATIONAL PLAYERS

Throughout modern history, international players have used the Kurds as proxies in their wars in the Middle East. However, none has ever agreed to support the Kurds in their struggle for cultural and political rights, let alone independence. As a rule, when push came to shove, these powers opted for the integrity of the state and for standing by central governments rather than supporting the Kurdish national project.

After promising a state or autonomy to the Kurds in the aftermath of WWI, for example, Great Britain reneged on that promise. The Soviet Union abandoned the Mahabad Republic in 1946 when it no longer served its interests. So did the US in 1975, when it left the Kurds of Iraq to the mercy of the Baath and the Shah. Does this pattern still apply?

The alarm caused by IS's swift gains and terrible atrocities caused an important change in the international community's posture towards the KRI and Rojava and helped boost the Kurds' stature worldwide. Kurdish fighters in the two arenas are perceived as the main bulwark against the onslaught of the emerging IS power, not only in the Middle East but in the entire world. The American coalition, unwilling to put their own boots on the ground, found in the Kurds a reliable and strong partner who could do the job for them.

In addition, in the post-Saddam era, the KRI has proved to be the most secure, moderate, and tolerant place in the region – certainly when compared to the Arab part of Iraq. This is illustrated by the fact that while 4,486 Americans have lost their lives in Iraq since the 2003 Iraq War, not a single American soldier has been killed in the Kurdish region by Kurds.<sup>79</sup> This posture, together with the ongoing deterioration of the situation in Baghdad, explains why many countries have opened diplomatic missions in Erbil that function as embassies in all but name.

After the Iraqi army's dramatic collapse, the Kurdish forces, the Peshmerga, were the only reliable force on the ground. Many western countries thus began to actively, if halfheartedly, support the Kurdish entity in Iraq. The same was true for the Kurds in Rojava, who proved their mettle in thwarting the advance of IS in Syria. Both entities thereby emerged as the natural, albeit undeclared, allies of the West.

Due to this convergence of interests, the coalition accorded crucial support to the Kurds in the form of airstrikes against bases and forces of IS, without which Erbil could have collapsed. The coalition air strikes on IS in Kobane, too, far exceeded the combined strikes in Iraq by the end of 2014 and helped the Kurdish fighters liberate the city.<sup>80</sup>

The military training and equipment the West gave the Kurdish fighting forces were also very important. For example, in early 2015, the US decided to establish a military base in Erbil and to dispatch military officials and warplanes to provide logistical support against IS.<sup>81</sup> In July 2016, a memorandum of understanding on military coordination between the KRG and the US was signed in Erbil. Some analysts viewed this MOU as a landmark agreement because it formed a partnership with the US separate from Baghdad.<sup>82</sup> The US also agreed to contribute US\$22.2 million as salaries to the Peshmerga as the KRG was in such a dire economic position.<sup>83</sup>

Rudaw summarized the relations this way: "Since the beginning of the war with ISIS, there has been a steady traffic of US high level military and civilian delegations to the Kurdistan Region and US-KRG relations entered a new phase in their strategic and special relationship."<sup>84</sup> Arms and military hardware have begun trickling to the KRG from other European states as well – a factor that may prove crucial not only in the fight against IS, but in the bolstering of a Kurdish national army, a vital component if a future independent state is to be viable.<sup>85</sup>

Some European leaders have been bold enough to visit Erbil, show their moral support, and coordinate activities against IS. French president Francois Hollande, for example, traveled to Erbil in September 2014, where he announced that the arms France provided to the Kurds were going to be "decisive in reversing the balance of power" in the fight against IS militants.<sup>86</sup> In February 2015, Swedish foreign minister Margot Wallström declared that the time had come for a Kurdish state: "We as the Social Democratic Party have had a clear policy toward the case of Palestine, and I want Sweden to change its foreign policy toward the Middle East as it is the right time to discuss Kurdish independence."<sup>87</sup> Shortly afterwards, Hungarian prime minister Victor Orban declared his support for the idea of an independent Kurdish state.<sup>88</sup>

All this might have deluded the Kurdish political elites into believing they have become allies of the big powers and not mere proxies. This misconception is not entirely unfounded. For one thing, there appears to be a genuine convergence of interests between the Kurds and their employers. Also, in a significant change, the support given to the Kurds has become overt. As for the Kurds themselves, they now appear to have a higher degree of national consciousness and cohesion, which spurs their fight for independence or a large autonomy.

However, there is a less positive side to the situation. First, the military equipment granted to the Kurds does not fulfill all their needs: it does not include heavy equipment such as tanks, and certainly not aircraft. This compares negatively with the huge quantities of equipment given to Baghdad, which failed dismally to stop IS in 2014. Second, for a long time, military support to the Peshmerga was transferred via Baghdad, which was reluctant to deliver it to Erbil. This severely hindered the buildup of the Peshmerga. In Syria, too, the support given is far from sufficient to cover all the needs of the Kurdish fighting force.

Cynicism came to the fore time and again when the US and the EU systematically vetoed the Kurds' participation in any international fora that dealt with strategies for fighting IS or solutions to the Syrian and Iraqi crises. Ironically, it was Russia that kept pressing for the inclusion of the Kurds. On one occasion, a Russian official blamed the West, saying: "It is evident that this has been done to please some of the regional players, for which ambitions are more important than the real stabilization of the situation in Syria."<sup>89</sup> Russia was clearly alluding to Turkey's adamant opposition to any Kurdish participation in such fora.

The situation became much more complicated due to the direct involvement of regional and international players in the conflicts in Syria and Iraq. The full-bore return of Russia to the Middle East, and the direct military support it has granted since September 2015 to an extremely weakened Assad regime, changed the balance of power in Syria in particular and the region as a whole. Concurrently, Russia has also supported the YPG or at least turned a blind eye to its advances on the battlefield.

This paradoxical position can be explained by the Kremlin's historical ties to the PKK, as well as by the awkward but functional relationship that has developed between Assad and the Kurdish PYD opposition. Another factor is Russia's desire to stop the Kurds from becoming entirely the West's proxies, which would allow Russia's adversaries to have a monopoly over the Kurds. Another twist in Russia's stance towards Rojava took place following its rapprochement with Turkey in autumn 2016, which led it to forsake its demand to include the Kurds in peace talks. As for the US, it is on the horns of a dilemma. It has to choose between its NATO ally Turkey and the effective Kurdish fighting forces on the ground while simultaneously juggling the Turks, the Arabs, and the Kurds.

The net result of these factors is that the dormant cold war between the US and Russia has been awakened in the form of a struggle over Syria and Iraq, and the Kurdish enclaves have become part of the battleground.

Turkey's intervention in Syria in August 2016, and its determination to take part in the liberation of Mosul in Iraq and Raqqa in Syria, adds another layer to a complex situation by reigniting competition for regional hegemony with historical rival Iran. Both are using proxies to combat Kurdish forces: Iran is employing the Shiite militia *al-hashd al-sha`bi* to contain the Peshmerga's quick advancement in the battlefield of Mosul, while Turkey is using the less effective Free Syrian Army to do the same against the YPG in Syria.

All these complications present a severe challenge to the Kurdish national project. Both Turkey and Iran have been doing their best to frustrate it, while the West's alliance with the Kurds – geared as it is towards defeating IS – might prove merely tactical. The US and its allies might prove willing to support the Kurds as long as they fight IS, provided the central governments are not antagonized by the relationship. Indeed, up until now, leading members of the international community have consistently repeated the mantra of the integrity and unity of the Iraqi and Syrian states, even though the reality on the ground is far removed from that elusive ideal.

## **CONCLUSION: WHAT FUTURE FOR THE KURDS?**

Since the dawn of the twenty-first century, a dialectical process has been taking place in the Middle East: the weakening of nation-states and the concomitant empowerment of non-state actors. There is no better example of this development than the case of the failing Iraqi and Syrian nation-states and the parallel rise of the Kurds and their nemesis IS. One of the most conspicuous results has been the blurring of geographical borders between Iraq and Syria, which signified for the Kurds the strengthening of trans-border ties and trans-border nationalism. Another important result was the mobilization of Kurdish societies in Greater Kurdistan as an instinctive reflex to stem the advance of the new enemy. The most significant result was the large-scale war that broke out between the Kurds and IS on two fronts: the KRI in Iraq and Rojava in Syria.

The sweeping developments in Greater Kurdistan suggest that a tectonic geopolitical shift is already underway, one whose consequences will shape the Middle East and international arenas for years to come. This paradigmatic shift was the product of five important developments that took place in the early years of this century: the 2003 war against Iraq; the so-called "Arab Spring;" the rise of IS in the summer of 2014; the deepening rift between the Sunni and Shiite worlds, which complicated the geostrategic map even further; and finally, the return of Russia to the region and with it the cold war between the US and Russia over regional influence.

The four states hosting the Kurds are all undergoing crises of one sort or another over the Kurdish issue, which has posed the severest challenge to their integrity since their establishment after WWI. In the twentieth century, the Kurdish challenge weakened the central governments but did not benefit the Kurds themselves. By the turn of the century, however, it was targeting the very framework of the states, with much more auspicious results for the Kurdish communities – at least in Iraq and Syria.

The internal dynamics among the four parts of Greater Kurdistan have also changed as a result of the general transformations of the states and the region. The KRI has emerged as the center of Kurdish nationalism, and all the other groups have established bases on its soil. This phenomenon

has enhanced cross-border nationalism but at the same time increased rivalries, as each group has different interpretations of the national goal and different ways in mind to realize it. It has also generated peculiar cross-border Kurdish alliances – for example, between the Iraq-based PUK and the Turkey based PKK. The most striking example of such an alliance is that between the Kurds of Syria and those of Turkey. That relationship so dramatically changed Turkey's threat perceptions that Ankara came to regard Rojava as a mortal enemy, justifying a three-pronged war on the PKK and all its branches.

Another deep change was the internationalizing of the Kurdish issue due to the rise of IS, which catapulted the Kurds onto center stage following decades of marginalization. This change can be also seen on the academic level, where the study of Kurdish history, culture, and politics has become popular among scholars of the Middle East. For the greater part of the twentieth century, the Kurds' voice was largely subsumed by the academic literature into hegemonic, state-centered narratives.

At the time of this writing (winter 2017), the situation in the Middle East remains extremely volatile, a state of affairs that could affect all four parts of Kurdistan. The KRI, which has made the biggest strides towards self-rule, is grappling with the idea of declaring independence. There are two schools of thought in this regard: that this is mere talk aimed at mobilizing public support for the Barzanis; and that this is a serious and determined plan geared towards achieving independence in the near future.

The political elite led by the Barzanis, and the KDP associated with it, argue that this is in fact the most opportune time for such a move. They are preparing the ground by instilling the idea of independence on the home front and lobbying in various capitals to get support for their government in due time. However, the opposition, led by the PUK and Goran, are against such a move right now. This could be for any of a number of reasons: a possibly genuine belief that the time is not ripe, or pressure by Iran to oppose the move, or a struggle for power with the KDP. Certainly the war against IS is still raging, the economy is still in dire straits, and Baghdad, Tehran, and other capitals are still absolutely opposed to Kurdish independence. Still, it seems the Barzani/KDP camp is determined to go the extra mile.

The close ideological, political, and military relationship between Kurdistan of Turkey and Kurdistan of Syria has complicated the situation for both. There is no doubt that the war the Turkish army unleashed against the PKK in Turkey in mid-2015 was partly an act of revenge against Kurdish achievements in Syria and partly an attempt to prevent spillover effects in Turkish Kurdistan. Turkey has also tried to tarnish the image of the PYD/YPG by portraying it as a terrorist group that belongs on terrorist lists alongside the PKK. Those attempts have failed so far because both Russia and the West need the YPG for combating IS and other jihadist elements. On the whole, the Kurds' greatest challenge at this juncture is determining how best to use the war for the liberation of Mosul and Raqqa to promote their own cause.

As for the Kurds of Iran, after a period of relative quiet, several Iranian Kurdish groupings were emboldened once again to initiate guerrilla warfare against the Iranian government in the spring-autumn of 2016. The logic of the timing of the attacks is not altogether clear, but it might be related to the larger geostrategic struggle between Saudi Arabia and Iran and the former's attempts to use the Kurds in a war by proxy against Tehran. Another possibility might be that the KDP and the Barzanis turned a blind eye to those activities as part of their own struggle for power with the PUK and Goran, which belong to the Iranian camp.

What results have the Kurds achieved from one hundred years of the struggle for independence? The question cannot be answered categorically, as the Kurdish regions are not cut from one cloth and are in different stages of nation-building and state-building. One region, Kurdistan in Iraq, has been the pioneer, and appears to be the most prepared to achieve its stated goal of independence. Will it cross the Rubicon and declare statehood? It remains to be seen.

## NOTES

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- 4 McDowall, pp. 174-175.
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- 13 Interview with a Kurdish journalist who wishes to remain anonymous.
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- 17 <http://www.mhe-krq.org/node/23>.
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- 19 These facts are taught in school textbooks of the fourth level. *Babetin Komalayeti 4* (Ofset Turkey, 2013, Kurdish year 2713), pp. 38-40.
- 20 For example, the Kurdish leader Mulla Mustafa Barzani died incognito in Washington in 1979.
- 21 A pioneering study of the Syrian Kurds is by Jordi Tejel: *Syria's Kurds: History, Politics and Society* (Routledge, London, 2008). More recent studies are by Harriett Allsopp, *The Kurds of Syria: Political Parties and Identity in the Middle East* (I. B. Tauris: London, 2014) and Michael Gunter, *Out of Nowhere: The Kurds of Syria in Peace and War* (London: Hurst and Co., 2014).
- 22 Ismet G. Imset, *The PKK* (Ankara: Turkish Daily News Publication: 1992), pp. 30-32.
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- 35 For further details, see Ofra Bengio, "Game changers: Kurdish women in peace and war", *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 70, No. 1, Winter 2016, pp. 30-46.

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