A CENTURY OF KURDISH POLITICS

CITIZENSHIP, STATEHOOD AND DIPLOMACY

Edited by
Güneş Murat Tezcür

A Century of Kurdish Politics

The Kurdish question remains one of the most important and complicated issues in ethnic politics in contemporary times, with the Kurds being one of the largest ethnic groups in the world without a state of their own. This comprehensive volume brings together a group of distinguished scholars to address the Kurdish question in its centennial year with a fresh analytical lens, to demonstrate that the study of Kurdish politics has developed beyond a narrow focus on the state-minority antagonism. It addresses a series of interrelated questions focusing on Kurdish politics, as well as broader themes related to nationalism, ethnic mobilization, democratic struggles, and international security.

The authors examine the agency of Kurdish political actors and their relations with foreign actors, the relations between Kurdish political leaders and organizations and regional and great powers, the dynamics and competing forms of Kurdish political rule, and the involvement of Kurdish parties in broader democratic struggles. Using original empirical work, they place the scholarship on Kurdish politics in dialogue with the broader scholarship on ethnic nationalism, self-determination movements, diaspora studies, and rebel diplomacy.

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Güneş Murat Tezcür is the Jalal Talabani Chair and a Professor of Political Science at the University of Central Florida, Orlando, USA. He also directs the Kurdish Political Studies Program, the first and only academic entity dedicated to the study of Kurdish issues in the United States. He is a social scientist studying democratization, political violence, and politics of identity with a focus on Iran, Turkey, and Kurdish lands.

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A Century of the Kurdish Question: Organizational Rivalries, Diplomacy, and Cross-Ethnic Coalitions

GÜNEŞ MURAT TEZCÜR iD

ABSTRACT The Kurdish question remains one of the most important and complicated issues in ethnic politics in contemporary times. Taking the Ottoman Defeat in the World War I in 1918 as a historical critical juncture, the article sets the agenda for the special issue and develops a conceptual approach to think about the *strategies* of Kurdish nationalism. It goes beyond the state-ethnic minority antagonism that has been the most predominant theme in the study of Kurdish politics, and discusses how inter-organizational rivalries, diplomatic efforts in pursuit of external support, and domestic cross-ethnic coalitions have shaped the dynamics and outcomes of Kurdish nationalist struggles.

> History needs mobility and the ability to survey and explore a large territory…Our ideal cannot be the oak or redwood, however majestic, but the migrant bird, at home in arctic and tropic, overflying half the globe. (Hobsbawm, 2002, p. 415)

Introduction

The origins of the Kurdish question go back to the defeat of the Ottoman Empire in 1918. As the nascent Kurdish nationalism failed to develop sufficient strength, ethnic Kurds ended up being marginalized minorities in

the newly emerging nation-state system in the Middle East. A conventional perspective conceptualizes the Kurdish political history as an ongoing struggle between the ruling states dominated by Arab, Persian, and Turkish ethnic groups and the repressed Kurdish minorities. From the uprising of the Sheik Mahmoud Barzanji in Sulaimaniyah against British rule in 1919 to the 2017 independence referendum in Iraqi Kurdistan, this struggle has typically been characterized by failure. In fact, the concept of defeat was central to Kurdish political and literary imagination throughout the twentieth century (e.g. Berekat, 2015). From tribal and religious revolts at the start of the century to the nationalist rebellions until the last decade of the century, Kurdish history emerges as a series of unsuccessful military attempts to throw off the yoke of the ruling regimes. Most recently, the most ambitious bid for Kurdish statehood in history, the September 2017 independence referendum organized by the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), was nipped in the bud. Yet, these defeats have not had a lasting pacifying effect on nationalist mobilization. Like Simurgh, the mythical bird symbolizing recreation in ancient Iranian culture (Dabashi, 2014, p. 214), episodes of Kurdish defeat have been ultimately followed by periods of revival and rejuvenation (cf., Schivelbusch, 2003). Given these cyclical dynamics, there is a strong scholarly consensus that the centralizing, exclusive and repressive state policies have had primary influence over the formation, rise and resilience of Kurdish nationalist demands (e.g. Aydın, 2014; Romano, 2006, pp. 114–5; Vali, 2011). From this perspective, an inevitable violent hostility characterizes relations between the dominating states and dominated ethnic minority, a pattern that is widespread elsewhere (Gurr, 2000).

This special issue, titled 'The Kurdish Question in its Centennial: Citizenship, Statehood and Diplomacy', demonstrates that the study of Kurdish politics has developed beyond a narrow focus on the state-minority antagonism. Taking 1918 as a historical critical juncture symbolizing the birth of the Kurdish question, it puts the analytical focus on the agency of Kurdish political actors and their relations with foreign actors. The six articles in the issue discuss the relations between Kurdish political leaders and organizations and regional and great powers, the dynamics and competing forms of Kurdish political rule, and the involvement of Kurdish parties in broader democratic struggles. Several interrelated questions shape the agenda of the articles. Which factors frustrated Kurdish self-

determination in historical and contemporary times? More specifically, how did international dynamics hamper the independence referendum organized in Iraqi Kurdistan in September 2017? What are the ideological and administrative characteristics of competing models of Kurdish governance in Syria and Iraq? How do Kurdish aspirations for greater rights and power align with broader democratic struggles in Turkey? Finally, how do Kurdish diaspora and political rulers engage with each other? The articles address these questions on the basis of original empirical work and put the scholarship on Kurdish politics in dialogue with the broader scholarship on ethnic nationalism, self-determination movements, diaspora studies, and rebel diplomacy.

Several articles in the issue emphatically argue the opportunities for and limits of Kurdish alliances with regional and international powers have been decisive in their gains and losses. Bajalan (2018) compellingly argues that the prevailing geopolitics was highly unfavorable to Kurdish independence during the last years of the Ottoman Empire. A century later, the international powers have remained unsupportive of Kurdish self-determination. Kaplan (2018) innovatively suggests how the KRG leadership miscalculated that foreign powers would limit any significant costs the Iraqi central government can impose on the KRG in the aftermath of the independence referendum in September 2017. Likewise, the KRG's dependence on Turkey as an economic partner turned out to be a liability when the latter allied itself with Iraq to punish the KRG for holding the referendum. Park's (2018) engaging study suggests that the deinstitutionalization of Turkish foreign policy and the Turkish fears of Kurdish gains in Syria led to the strong Turkish opposition to the KRG's bid for independence.

While the pursuit of a sovereign Kurdish state has been elusive, different levels of Kurdish governance have been achieved in Iraq and Syria. Jongerden (2018) offers an analytical discussion of the competing models of political self-rule in the KRG and *Rojava*, the Kurdish enclave in northern Syria. He argues how the emergence of a 'non-statist' model of self-determination in the latter represents a rupture from the state-centric political tradition that has been dominant in the former. In turn, Başer (2018) examines the evolving relations between the KRG, an autonomous entity with statist aspirations, and the growing Kurdish diaspora in the Western countries. Despite strong emotional connections, the dearth of

effective and institutionalized forms of diaspora engagement strategy and corruption, nepotism, and factionalism besetting the KRG limit the avenues of cooperation between the Kurdish homeland and diaspora.

Finally, the Kurdish struggle takes very different forms in Turkey and Iran. As the central authority in these countries remain robust, the availability of political opportunities for Kurdish groups to form viable and effective coalitions with other opposition forces remains crucial. Kaya and Whiting's (2018) study of the short-lived rise of a Kurdish political party, the HDP (Peoples Democratic Party/*Halkların Demokratik Partisi*), as an electoral force in Turkish politics in 2015 demonstrates the potential and limits for democratic struggles based on cross-ethnic alliances for a peaceful resolution of the Kurdish question. The authors argue how the ambivalent relationship between HDP and the Kurdish insurgency hampered the efforts of the former to present itself as an agent of democracy in Turkey.

This introductory article to the issue presents a novel conceptual to think about the *strategies* of Kurdish nationalism, which are armed struggle, diplomacy in pursuit of external supporters, and domestic cross-ethnic coalitions. While there has been strong focus on violent aspects of the Kurdish question, in terms of both state repression and nationalist mobilization, a more systematic attention to diplomacy and cross-ethnic coalition building is essential for a more comprehensive understanding of contemporary Kurdish politics. The article draws examples from modern Kurdish political history and engages with the broader literature on ethnic movements to offer an overview of the dynamics shaping Kurdish pursuit of greater rights and power.

Inter-Kurdish Rivalries

Fragmentation is a common occurrence among ethnic movements seeking self-determination (Cunningham, 2011). Focusing on the behavior of Kurdish political organizations rather than treating Kurds as an 'internally homogenous and externally bounded' group is a necessary conceptual step (Brubaker, 2002, p. 164). In fact, it has been a source of common lament among Kurdish nationalists that their own political divisions greatly

undermine their collective struggle.[1] Nonetheless, there are some important examples of inter-Kurdish cooperation against external enemies. The three notable albeit short-lived instances of trans-border Kurdish collaboration took place during the Mt. Ararat Rebellion of 1927–30, the Mahabad Republic in 1946, and the liberation of Sinjar in 2014–5. The Mt. Ararat Rebellion was organized by the Khoybun League led by exiles form Turkey and based in French controlled Syria (Tejel, 2009, pp. 17–21). The rebellion received support also from the Sheikh Ahmad of Barzan based in Britain controlled Iraq (Arfa, 1966, p. 42). Moreover, members of the Jalili tribe on both sides of the Turkish-Iranian border actively participated in Mt. Ararat rebellion (McDowall, 2004, pp. 202–7). The Mahabad Republic has a central role in Kurdish nationalist discourse and historiography, as it is often portrayed as the only instance of Kurdish self-rule throughout the twentieth century (Vali, 2011). The short history of the Republic exhibited one of the most memorable instances of trans-border Kurdish collaboration immediately after the World War II. Mustafa Barzani, whose revolt was suppressed by the Iraqi authorities, his tribal fighters, and Kurdish officers defected from the Iraqi army pledged their alliance to Qazi Muhammad, a local notable who would be the President of the Republic (Eagleton, Jr., 1963, pp. 53–6). After the Iranian forces reoccupied the territories controlled by the Republic, Barzani and his close followers trekked to the Soviet Union (Schmidt, 1964, pp. 101–10; Barzani, 2003, pp. 207–26).

In August 2014, the Islamic State (IS), emboldened by its swift capture of Mosul, staged a coordinated attack against the heartland of the Yazidi community, the Sinjar area, close to Iraq's northwestern border with Syria.[2] As the KDP (Democratic Party of Kurdistan/*Partiya Demokrat a Kurdistanê*) Peshmerga that effectively controlled the area since 2007 withdrew without resistance, many Yazidis desperately tried to take refuge on Mount Sinjar. Eventually PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party/*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan*)-affiliated militants secured a corridor that enabled large numbers of Yazidis to take refuge in Kurdish controlled territory in Syria (Dinç, 2017, pp. 170–81). Yet the IS militants executed thousands of men and older women and enslaved women and small children (Cetorelli, Sasson, Shabila, & Burnham, 2017). In the wake of tragedy, KDP and PKK forces exhibited some degree of coordination in their military actions against IS. Their military alliance supported by US airstrikes resulted in the liberation of the city of Sinjar from IS control in December 2014 and

November 2015.[3] Immediately after this victory, however, tensions between the PKK and KDP military units resurfaced. KDP forces finally withdrew from Sinjar in the face of the Iraqi and Shiite militia offensive of October 2017 (Yılmaz, 2018).

These occurrences of limited cooperation among Kurdish nationalists are exceptions that prove the rule. Modern Kurdish history is replete with examples of power struggles taking place among Kurdish organizations. In particular, the power struggle between the KDP and PUK (Patriotic Union of Kurdistan/*Yekêtiya Niştîmaniya Kurdistan*) has been one of the defining characteristics of the Kurdish politics in Iraq since the 1960s. The KDP-PUK division has strong sociological and political features symbolized by the opposition between Moustafa Barzani, on the one hand, and Ibrahim Ahmed, and his son-in-law Jalal Talabani, on the other (Schmidt, 1964, pp. 124–30, 269–71). Antagonism between these two parties has occasionally resulted in armed clashes.[4] In the autumn of 1986, the Islamic regime in Iran brought them together in its fight against the Saddam's Iraq (Hilterman, 2007, pp. 88–92). Yet this Kurdish military alliance proved to be disastrous as the Iraqi forces pursued a campaign of genocide against the Kurdish population culminating in the chemical attacks in Halabja in March 1988.

The KDP and PUK established a degree of coexistence with the imposition of the no-fly zone in northern Iraq with the United Nations Security Council Resolution 688 (Karadaghi, 1993). However, disputes over the allocation of governmental power and finances fueled a civil war in May 1994 (Gunter, 1996; Laizer, 1996, pp. 133–6). In August 1996, Saddam's forces entered Erbil in response to calls for assistance by Masoud Barzani who had lost ground to the PUK (Randal, 1997, pp. 292–315). The conflict formally ended only in September 1998 following US mediation. The establishment of a *modus vivendi* between these two major Kurdish parties in Iraq provided the KRG with significant leverage vis-à-vis the governments in Baghdad after the US invasion in 2003. The key factor that made this inter-Kurdish cooperation possible after the civil war in the mid-1990s was the emergence of international support that generated significant rents for both parties (Jüde, 2017).

Yet, the independence referendum of September 2017 dramatically exposed how internal rifts continued to undo Kurdish nationalist struggle. As the Iraqi army evaporated in the face of the IS blitzkrieg, Kurdish forces

established control over Kirkuk and other disputed areas in the summer of 2014. During this time, KRG President Masoud Barzani announced his decision to organize a referendum that would establish a popular mandate for the KRG's secession from Iraq. However, significant disagreements among Kurdish politicians regarding the feasibility and desirability of a unilateral push for independence persisted (Chomani, 2014). Members of the PUK remained uneasy about Barzani's ambitions that would jeopardize their own economic and political power. The PUK was much more exposed to Iranian influence that vehemently opposed an independent Kurdistan. When Barzani finally organized the referendum three years later, in September 2017, these divisions came to the surface. While Najmaldin Karim, Governor of Kirkuk and a member of the PUK politburo, became an ardent supporter of the referendum, other leading members of his party opposed it.[5] Several PUK leaders came to an agreement with the Iraqi forces in a deal brokered by the Iranian General Qasem Soleimani and withdrew their forces from the city of Kirkuk on the night of 15 October. As Kurdish defences crumbled, the city with its vast oilfields that has been central to Kurdish self-determination was lost in less than six hours (Morris, 2017).

The decades-old power struggle between the PKK and KDP also demonstrates how strategic organizational interests typically prevail over common ethnic identity. While the KDP allowed the PKK to establish bases in Behdinan (the mountainous area in Iraqi Kurdistan bordering Turkey) in 1983, KDP-PKK relations deteriorated throughout the 1980s and early 1990s (Dağlı, 1994, pp. 32–49). The rise of the PKK as a mass movement was a significant ideological and territorial challenge to the KDP. The establishment of Kurdish self-rule in 1992 made the KDP increasingly dependent on Turkish goodwill for their economic sustainability. Turkey's attempts to dislodge the PKK from its bases in Behdinan with the help of the Iraqi Kurdish forces ultimately resulted in the outbreak of widespread clashes in the fall of 1992. While the PUK generally enjoyed more cordial relations with the PKK given their common rivalry with the KDP, the two sides engaged in a bloody fight in 2000 (al-Khafaji, 2001).

The relations among Kurdish parties with different bases of operation have also been characterized by mutual suspicion and rivalry. While of the Barzanis' KDP was a major source of inspiration for Kurdish movements elsewhere, it was hardly supportive of their activities. It collaborated with

the Shah against armed action by the Iranian Kurdish groups in 1967–8 and during the 1980s (Prunhuber, 2009, pp. 180, 186; Qasimlo, 2002). The execution of the Turkish-born Kurdish political activist Sait Kırmızıtoprak (Dr. Şivan) by the KDP in 1971 is a well-known story of how strategic interests of the KDP prevailed over its willingness to support Kurdish nationalism beyond Iraq. Overall, inter-organizational rivalries have been much more pronounced in Kurdish political history than has collaboration on the basis of shared ethnic identity and nationalist agendas. The persistence of these rivalries reflecting deep-seated sociological and historical differences, and personalist and ideological animosities remains one of the greatest challenges faced by Kurdish nationalism in the twenty-first century.

Kurdish Diplomacy in Pursuit of External Support

According to a widespread view, the four regional states cooperated with each other to smash any indicators of Kurdish nationalism throughout the twentieth century (Bozarslan, 2018; McDowall, 2004, p. 226). In fact, during the latest phase of the Mt. Ararat rebellion, Pahlavi-ruled Iran agreed to a border ratification that allowed the Turkish army to encircle the rebels (Arfa, pp. 40–1). A central goal of the Treaty of Saadabad of 1937 between Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, and Turkey was co-operation against Kurdish rebellions (Edmonds, 1971, p. 91). From the Kurdish perspective, the Baghdad Pact of 1955 involving Iran, Iraq, Turkey, Britain, and Pakistan also had the appearance of an anti-Kurdish alliance (Bedir-Khan, 1960; Naamani, 1966, p. 288). After the outbreak of the Barzani rebellion in Iraq, in 1963 Syria sent two brigades in support of its fellow Ba'ath regime to suppress 'secessionism'. Most recently, Turkey, Iran, and Iraq pushed aside their own disputes and took a common stand against the Kurdish referendum in 2017.

Nonetheless, this image of a wholly anti-Kurdish inter-state alliance is not completely consistent with the historical record. In many different instances, Kurdish nationalists sought and acquired help from neighboring

states in their fight against the host state. The Ba'ath regime in Syria provided crucial support to Jalal Talabani in the 1970s and early 1980s, and Abdullah Öcalan's PKK from the late 1970s to 1998 (Çandar, 2012, pp. 84–5). Without its sanctuary in Syria, the PKK could have not become a potent insurgency mobilizing tens of thousands of fighters and challenging the Turkish state (Tezcür, 2016). Likewise, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi's support for the Barzani rebellion from the 1960s to 1975 was crucial for its viability. From late 2007 to late 2017, the KRG developed dense commercial, political, and military linkages with Turkey and used the Turkish connection as leverage over the Baghdad government. Meanwhile, the Turkish government treated the KRG as a quasi-state and perceived it as an instrument to restrain the PKK (Paasche & Mansurbeg, 2014).

Rival states tend to support insurgencies in each other's territory (Salehyan, Gledistch, & Cunningham, 2011). In parallel with this general pattern, the Kurdish nationalist organizations capitalized on interstate disputes. Their main challenge was not the presence of a solid alliance among four host states, but rather the feeble nature of their alliances with their own external supporters. In fact, the Kurdish overreliance on external sponsors in Iran in 1946 (Soviet Union), Iraq in 1975 (Iran), and Turkey in 1998 (Syria) made them highly vulnerable and contributed to their temporary failure. With the partial exception of the KRG, the Kurdish diplomacy had very limited success in mobilizing tangible international assistance vis-à-vis the ruling regimes they are fighting against. International powers typically perceived the Kurdish question as an 'internal matter' of the sovereign states.[6] This pattern also influenced the Soviet Union's Kurdish policy as Moscow aimed to avoid the image of an expansionist power threating the territorial integrity of the states with Kurdish minorities (Hensel, 1979). For the Soviet Union, the priority of relations with Iraq prevailed over using the Kurdish card against Baghdad.[7] Nor did it support Kurdish radicals in Turkey in the 1970s (McDowall, 2004, p. 412).

A similar pattern also characterized the United States' Kurdish policy. After Turkey joined the NATO, the US prioritized political stability in Turkey and had little sympathy for Kurdish nationalism with its leftist tendencies. The US Department of State included the PKK in its first list of 'foreign terrorist organizations' in 1997. Overall, the US did not make human considerations a significant issue in its relationships with Turkey

(Callaway & Matthews, 2008). More recently, the emergence of a military alliance between the US and the PKK-affiliated with the YPD (Democratic Union Party/*Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat*) in northern Syria during the battle of Kobanî in fall 2014 led to unprecedented strains between two NATO members (Taştekin, 2016, pp. 259–68). At the same time, by the end of 2017, this alliance did not translate into US political support for Kurdish goals for autonomy in Syria. The US continued to portray its relationship with PYD as 'temporary, transactional, and tactical'.[8]

In the 1960s and early 1970s, the United States' support to the Barzani rebellion in Iraq was highly circumcised by its existing alliances with Turkey and the Pahlavi Iran (Schmidt, 1964, p. 273). From 1975 to 1990, the US relations with the Iraqi Kurds remained limited. After the 1979 revolution, the US perceived the Saddam regime a bulwark against the radical Khomeini regime and tried to diffuse responsibility in the Saddam's chemical attacks against Kurdish civilians (Hilterman, 2007, pp. 125–9). Nonetheless, Saddam's failed invasion of Kuwait enabled the Kurds to benefit from foreign intervention and establish self-rule for the first time since 1946. While the spontaneous uprising that first erupted in the city of Ranya in March 1991 failed, the US-led Operation Provide Comfort paved the way for the formation of a Kurdish safe-zone in northern Iraq.

The US invasion of Iraq in 2003 was the first time when geopolitical interests of a superpower was completely aligned with the interest of a Kurdish minority. The KRG with abundant oil and gas reserves became the main beneficiary of the US presence in Iraq. It also established good relations with Turkey and Sunni Arab countries increasingly worrisome of Shiite Iran's influence in Baghdad (Stansfield, 2013). By time of the US withdrawal from Iraq in December 2011, the KRG achieved a degree of partial independence from Iraq. The rise of IS in the summer 2014 made the Iraqi Kurds a strategic partner in the international fight against the jihadists. It received significant military aid from the United States that included payments for the Peshmerga salaries and European states (McLeary, 2017). Nonetheless, the Trump administration remained opposed to the Kurdish independence referendum and made efforts to prevent it from happening (Lake, 2017a). The US was concerned that Iraqi Prime Minister Haidar al-Abadi, perceived as an Iraqi nationalist, would be very vulnerable to more pro-Iranian political forces in the spring 2018 parliamentary elections unless he took action against the Kurdish drive for independence. Ironically,

the KRG diplomacy also aimed to capitalize on anti-Iranian sentiment in the US capital.[9] While this diplomatic initiative enabled the KRG to gain significant support in the US Congress (McCain, 2017), it ultimately failed to influence the US policy. When the Iraqi army made its move toward Kirkuk, the US did not take action to stop the Iraqi takeover of the city (Lake, 2017b). In summary, despite its increasing visibility and prowess, Kurdish diplomacy remained short of Kurdish aspirations, as eloquently argued by Kaplan (2018) in this issue.

Cross-Ethnic Alliances & Democratic Struggles

Compared to religious minorities, linguistic minorities in the Middle East, including Kurdish people in Turkey, tend to be less supportive of authoritarian regimes as their demands for greater rights and autonomy are suppressed by such regimes (Belge & Karakoç, 2015). Hence, it has been suggested that Kurdish political actors could play an important role in democratic struggles in four host countries (Romano & Gurses, 2014). While there is a merit in this perspective, it is important to develop a more nuanced approach. First, under the prevailing circumstances, democratic struggles involving cross-ethnic alliances remain central to the peaceful resolution of the Kurdish question in both Iran and Turkey, but not necessarily in Iraq and Syria. Neither armed struggle nor external intervention would contribute to Kurdish goals in Iran or Turkey. Both Iranian and Turkish states remain much stronger than the Iraqi and Syrian states. Additionally, national identity has deeper and stronger historical roots in the former than in the latter. Next, the recognition of Kurdish cultural and political rights depends on an interactive political process based on mass mobilization rather than unilateral concessions from the ruling regimes.

The Kurdish participation in oppositional politics has a long history. Leftist political movements continue to have strong mass mobilization capacity among the ethnic Kurds. In both Iraq and Syria, Kurds embraced communism as a countervailing force against pan-Arabism. After his return to Iraq from the Soviet Union in 1958, Moustafa Barzani was one of the most important allies of the Iraqi Prime Minister Abd al-Karim Qasim for

three years. During the same period, ethnic Kurds with urban backgrounds started to achieve leadership position in the Iraqi Communist Party (ICP) (Batatu, 1978, pp. 659–65, 699–700, 996–8, 1046). For instance, Aziz Mohammad (d. 2017), a tin worker, became the ICP Secretary General in 1964 (ibid., p. 1040). The Kurdish presence in the ICP continued well until the 1980s. Similarly, the Syrian Communist Party (SCP) had substantial appeal among the ethnic Kurds (Allsopp, 2014, pp. 65–9; Tejel, 2009, p. 43). Two leading Kurdish intellectuals and poets, Cigerxwîn and Osman Sabri, were members of the SCP before establishing the Kurdish Democratic Party of Syria (KDPS) in 1957 (Cegerxwîn, 2003, pp. 294–304).

In Iran, from 1948 to 1953, remnants of the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran was allied with the Tudeh, the popular communist party of the time (Naderi, 2016). During and after the Iranian revolution, the Kurdish parties established military and political alliances with the leftist opposition (Entessar, 1984). Besides, Ahmad Moftizadeh, a scion of an illustrious Sunni clerical family from Sanandaj, tried to offer a third-way combining Islamism with Kurdish nationalism (Ezzatyar, 2016, pp. 138–51, 185–92). In both historical episodes, the defeat of the oppositional forces by the autocratic regimes also undermined the Kurdish struggle for autonomy and greater rights in Iran. More recently, the Kurdish regions exhibited strong support for reformist candidates in the parliamentary and presidential elections in the Islamic Republic. Nonetheless, the reformist forces could not establish viable alliances with the fragmented Kurdish opposition that typically boycotted electoral contests. The Green movement that organized massive street protests after the controversial presidential elections in June 2009 failed to mobilize strong support in the Kurdish regions.

In Turkey, the strongest strand of autonomous Kurdish political activism was born out of leftist movements in Turkey in the 1960s (Bora, 2017, pp. 836–40). An electoral alliance with a social democratic party in 1989 enabled Kurdish nationalists to gain parliamentary presentation in significant numbers for the first time. The electoral gains and control of municipal authorities by Kurdish nationalists especially since 1999 enabled them to present a non-violent and viable mobilization strategy (Watts, 2010). Meanwhile, Kurdish sociopolitical actors emerged as one of the leading force in street protests in Turkey (Uysal, 2016, pp. 152–4, 175–8).

While secular nationalism represented by both the HDP and PKK is the largest political force among the Kurds in Turkey, religious/sectarian, linguistic, and class-based cleavages remain salient (Çiçek, 2015). The HDP under the dynamic and capable leadership of Selahattin Demirtaş, a lawyer with a long history of human rights activism, epitomized the most promising episode in Kurdish participation in broader democratic struggles in Turkey. The HDP with its commitment to environmental protection, gender equality, and minority rights, appeared as an important ally for the Turkish intelligentsia and public increasingly concerned with the growing personification of political power in the hands of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. The HDP's solid performance in the June 2015 elections presented a major upset and denied the AKP its parliamentary majority. It also made a pro-Kurdish party a potential partner in a coalition government, a development unprecedented in the history of Turkish politics.

The HDP ultimately became a causality of forces beyond its control. Kaya and Whiting (2018) in this issue argues that the inability of the HDP to establish itself as an autonomous force from the PKK undermined its declared mission of being an agent of democratization in Turkey. The rekindling of intense armed clashes between the Turkish security forces and the PKK put the HDP in an impossible position. As violence returned to Kurdish politics in Turkey, the HDP's promise of progressive politics and cross-ethnic alliances appeared increasingly irrelevant. The failed coup attempt in July 2016 provided Ankara with carte blanche to intensify its crackdown on all oppositional forces. The HDP borne the brunt of this crackdown. Most of the elected HDP mayors were dismissed and replaced by government appointees; more than a dozen HDP lawmakers including Demirtaş and several thousands of party members were arrested. With the approval of the new system in a controversial referendum by a razor-thin majority in April 2017, it became very difficult for a Kurdish party to have access to executive power. Unlike the old parliamentary system, which was inherently open to coalition governments, the new system is deliberately designed to prevent such power-sharing and effectively lock out Kurdish nationalists. Nonetheless, cross-ethnic coalition building and democratic struggles remain the most viable and realistic mean for a partial resolution of the Kurdish question in Turkey. The institutionalization of a new presidential system may unintentionally lead to a robust political alliance

transcending ethnic divisions and contributing to the revival of a process of democratization in the country.

Conclusion

The articles in this special issue of *Ethnopolitics* offer fresh perspectives informed by original research about the unexpected and novel developments concerning Kurdish politics. As discussed in this article, the rivalries among Kurdish organizations, the Kurdish pursuit of external supporters, and the involvement of Kurdish political actors in democratic struggles deserve systematic attention for a comprehensive understanding of the strategies and outcomes of Kurdish nationalist mobilization. Such a tripartite perspective offers a strong analytical advancement given the complexities of Kurdish political history. While the four dominant states all oppose Kurdish empowerment, their own rivalries have often prevented these states forming active anti-Kurdish alliances. At the same time, rivalries among Kurdish nationalist organizations have typically undermined the feasibility of sustainable trans-border coalitions. Hence, not only international anti-Kurdish alliances but also pan-Kurdish struggles have strong limitations. These dual dynamics alongside with the highly contingent nature of external support for Kurdish causes have contributed to the fragmentation of the Kurdish question that follows unique trajectories in each part of historical Kurdistan. While external dynamics have become more decisive in Iraq and Syria, domestic political struggles remain decisive for Kurdish communities in both Iran and Turkey. Consequently, the contemporary evolution of Kurdish question now has interrelated but highly distinct trajectories.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1. One of the well-known stories in this regard considers the betrayal of Emir Bedir Khan of Botan by one of his commanders, Yezdansher, in 1847 (Eppel, 2016, pp. 56–64; Zeki Beg, 2010, pp. 220–4).

2. Most Yazidis speak Kirmanji dialect of Kurdish and has a long history of persecution at the hands of Sunni rulers including Kurdish chieftains.

3. In another episode of cooperation, the KDP send a small military contingent to the defense of Kobanî via Turkey in October 2014. However, the involvement of this force in the battles remained mostly symbolic.

4. In a particularly bloody episode, the KDP forces ambushed and destroyed a large PUK military group led by Ali Askari in Hakkari in June 1978.

5. The author spent the referendum day and night in Kirkuk. In the evening before the referendum day, the anti-referendum PUK faction made a failed attempt to remove Karim from his position.

6. This approach characterized United Kingdom's approach to the Kurdish issue in Iraq in the 1960s. Foreign and Commonwealth Research Department Memorandum, "The Kurdish Problem in Iraq, 1963–1971," December 6, 1971 (Burdett, 2015, pp. 354–6).

7. As early as August 1945, Moustafa Barzani sent a letter addressed to Stalin asking diplomatic and material support for his struggle against the British controlled Iraqi state (Hewramî, 2003, pp. 30–1).

8. Remarks by Jonathan Cohen, the US Deputy Assistant Secretary for European and Eurasian Affairs, at the 8th Annual Turkey Conference of the Middle East Institute, Washington, DC, December 4, 2017.

9. Personal communication with a senior KRG official in Washington, DC, December 4, 2017.

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The First World War, the End of the Ottoman Empire, and Question of Kurdish Statehood: A 'Missed' Opportunity?

DJENE RHYS BAJALAN

ABSTRACT Historians who have examined the 'failure' of the Kurds to obtain statehood in the immediate aftermath of the First World War have, understandable, closely examined the lobbying efforts engaged in by the Kurdish elites in Istanbul, specifically those activists associated with the Society for the Betterment of Kurdistan (est. 1918). These efforts culminated in the summer of 1920 with the inclusion of clauses within Treaty of Sèvres which provided Kurdish-inhabited regions of the dying Ottoman Empire with a pathway to independence. Yet, only a few years later, Sèvres was replaced by the Treaty of Lausanne (1923), a treaty which made no provisions for Kurdish self-rule. This reversal of fortunes is accounted for in a number of ways, divisions amongst the Kurdish nationalists, the military success of Mustafa Kemal Pasha's 'nationalist' forces in the Greco-Turkish War (1920–1922), and the 'betrayal' of the Kurds by perfidious European powers. However, often overlooked in this story is the geopolitical legacy of the First World War. It will be argued here that the failure of Kurdish nationalists in the immediate aftermath of the war can in large part be explained by developments that occurred over the four years of conflict.

Introduction

On 25 September 2017, amidst much jubilation and fanfare, the Kurdistan Regional Government of Iraq (KRG) held a referendum on the question of Kurdish independence or, more accurately, *Iraqi* Kurdish independence. For almost a century, the Middle East's Kurdish population has found itself divided amongst the nation-states of Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Syria, regimes that have often been hostile to even peaceful forms of Kurdish political activism. Hence, for Kurds, in both Iraq and across the Middle East, the vote was of historic importance. As the KRG's representative in the United States, Bayan Abdul Rahman, succinctly put June 2017: 'Changes happened also about 100 years ago, and the Kurds were bystanders. We are not going to be bystanders again.'[1] Nevertheless, there was little international support for the vote. Even the Iraqi Kurds' long-time allies, the United States made clear its strong opposition to the vote, noting that it 'may jeopardize Iraqi Kurdistan's regional trade relations and international assistance of all kinds…'[2] Consequently, despite the fact that some 93.25% of Iraqi Kurdistan's electorate voted in favour of independence, the referendum did not bring the KRG closer to the dream of Kurdish independence. Immediately following the vote, Turkey, Iran, and the Iraqi central government placed the region under an international blockade. This was followed by a brief military campaign in which the Iraqi army and Shiite militias forced the desperately divided Kurdish forces to withdraw from the oil rich city of Kirkuk and most of the (other) disputed territories. The events of the autumn of 2017 are a stark reminder of the formidable international impediments to the formation of even a limited Kurdish state.

Ms Rahman's references the changes of 'about 100 years ago' are, of course, a reference to the reordering of Middle Eastern affairs that accompanied the defeat and partition of the Ottoman Empire—home to the majority of the Middle East's Kurdish population—following the end of the First World War.[3] Certainly, the interests of the victorious imperial powers, Britain and France, played a critical role in the reshaping of the map that occurred in the years immediately following the end of the war. However, the principle of national self-determination, both in its Leninist and Wilsonian formulations, also played a significant role in shaping the post-Ottoman settlement. US president Woodrow Wilson's 'Fourteen Points', in

particular, loomed large over the peace-makers in Paris (Manela, 2007). Indeed, Wilson explicitly recognized the applicability of the principle of national self-determination to the Middle Eastern context.[4] Thus, the new Middle East was ostensibly reorganized into a series of discrete *nation-states*—a transformation that formed part of a broader global process of 'nation state creation' dating from the late eighteenth/early nineteenth century (Gellner, 1997, pp. 38–46; Roeder, 2007, pp. 3–41).

The specific circumstances through which the Middle East's new nation-states took shape varied greatly. In Anatolia, the 'nationalist' movement, which coalesced under the leadership of Mustafa Kemal Pasha (Atatürk), successfully resisted efforts to enforce a partition scheme, formalized in the Treaty of Sèvres (April 1920). This success ensured that Turkish statehood was achieved in the form of a unified territorial nation-state and that the newly formed Republic of Turkey was able to maintain a large measure of sovereignty and independence vis-à-vis the European Great Powers (Kayalı, 2008). In contrast, Britain and France played a decisive role in shaping the political destiny of the Arabic-speaking portions of the Ottoman Empire. As a result, Arab-inhabited lands were divided—in line with Anglo-French interests—into a series of territorial nation-states over which European tutelage was imposed. In short, statehood for the Ottoman Arabs was realized in a truncated and limited form (Dodge, 2003; Gelvin, 1998; Pedersen, 2015).

However, for Kurdish nationalists, the fallout from the break-up of the Ottoman Empire was even worse. The Treaty of Sèvres, concluded between the allied powers and the Ottoman administration in Istanbul, contained two articles pertaining to the future of the Kurds. Article 63 tasked a tripartite commission—made up of British, French, and Italian representatives—with drafting 'a scheme of local autonomy for the predominantly Kurdish areas lying east of the Euphrates…' Article 64 outlined a political process, stipulating that:

> If within one year from the coming into force of the present Treaty the Kurdish peoples…shall address themselves to the Council of the League of Nations in such a manner as to show that a majority of the populations desires independence from Turkey, and if the Council then considers that these peoples are capable of such independence and recommends that it should be granted to the them…(Hurewitz, 1979, p. 82)

Yet, despite this recognition, the pathway to Kurdish statehood outlined at Sèvres amounted to nothing. Three years later, on 24 July 1923, Sèvres was superseded by the Treaty of Lausanne, an agreement that recognized Turkey's new Ankara-based 'nationalist' government. Unlike Sèvres, this new treaty contained no direct reference to the Kurds, let alone recognition of the Kurds' national rights. Kurdish-inhabited districts in south-eastern Anatolia ('Northern Kurdistan') remained under Turkish rule, while the final status of the British-occupied *vilayet* of Mosul and its Kurdish-inhabited sub-districts ('Southern Kurdistan'), a source of contention between Great Britain and Turkey, was referred to the League of Nations. Three years later the League awarded the former Ottoman *vilayet* to the British-backed Hashemite-ruled Kingdom of Iraq. The 'partition' of Ottoman Kurdistan was complete (Hurewitz, 1979, pp. 143–146).

Despite the failure of Kurdish nationalists to secure a nation-state, even in a limited and truncated form, for many scholars of Kurdish politics and history, the immediate post-war era constitutes the historical moment in which the Kurds came closest to achieving statehood. Michael Eppel (2016) describes the period between 1918 and the conclusion of the Treaty of Lausanne in 1923 as an era of 'lost opportunities' (p. 122). In a similar vein, David Romano (2006) observed that: 'If there ever existed an auspicious political opportunity for Kurdish nationalists, it was embodied in the Treaty of Sèvres, forced upon the Sultan and his coterie of government elites and endorsed by the Allied powers' (p. 28).

Several scholars have sought to locate the answer to the question of the Kurdish failure to secure statehood through and examination of the Kurdish movement as well as the disposition of the broader Kurdish population towards the question of statehood. This has included a focus on the divisions amongst Kurdish political activists and notables (Kirişci & Winrow, 1997, pp. 67–88; Özoğlu, 2004, pp. 87–120) as well as the failings of Kurdish political organizations (Strohmeier, 2003, pp. 57–74). As one Kurdish commentator noted:

> History shows that the lack of a coherent Kurdish national discourse combined with disunited, fragmented Kurdish leadership and personal rivalries among Kurdish leaders have been key factors in halting a Kurdish state from developing. These aspects were ultimately more responsible for this failure than the unwillingness of Paris and London to accommodate the Kurdish demand for a state in Kurdish majority areas.[5]

However, as multiple scholars have observed, the *most decisive factor* in determining the success or failure of separatist-nationalist political projects has been their ability to attract international recognition and support (Bélanger, Duchesne, & Paquin, 2005; Horowitz, 1985; Young, 1994). Consequently, it will be argued here that, whatever their failings, Kurdish activists and advocates in the post-war period were in reality operating under highly *unfavourable* international conditions. In short, despite the recognition the Kurdish community received in the Treaty of Sèvres, the end of the First World War and the break-up of the Ottoman Empire were far from the 'opportunity' for Kurdish nationalists as it has often been portrayed.

The Kurdish Movement Revisited, 1918 to 1923

As alluded to, scholars have often cited the weakness the Kurdish movement, as well as divisions amongst the Kurdish elite more generally, as laying behind the 'failure' of Kurdish nationalism following the end of the First World War. Therefore, before examining the geopolitical circumstances surrounding this 'failure', it is first necessary briefly to outline some of the efforts directed at establishing a Kurdish state in the immediate post-war period.

Undoubtedly the most significant Kurdish political organization to be established following the end of the First World War was the 'Society for the Betterment of Kurdistan' (*Kürdistan Teali Cemiyeti*—hereafter KTC). The organization was established in Istanbul in November 1918. Initially, its stance on the question of Kurdish self-government was ambiguous. For example, the KTC's charter initially described its objectives as being to protect the 'general interests of the Kurds…' although later this was changed to 'the Kurdish nation's political, economic, and social interests and historical and racial rights' (Tunaya, 1999, pp. 215 & 222). Similarly, the first issue of the organization's journal, *Jîn* ('Life') carried an article written praising Kurdish service in the Ottoman military, claiming that the 'the casualties sustained by the Kurds during the Great War alone [reached] approximately eight hundred thousand.'[6] In this regard, this pro-Ottoman tone echoed the discourse of pre-war Istanbul-based Kurdish associations

such as the 'Society Kurdish for Mutual Aid and Progress' (*Kürt Teavün ve Terakki Cemiyeti*—hereafter KTTC), established shortly after the July 1908 'Young Turk' Revolution. Indeed, the KTC's president, Sheikh Abdülkadir Efendi, an influential Kurdish religious notable, had served as the KTTC's president a decade earlier.[7]

However, it soon became apparent that the KTC possessed a more radical political agenda, namely the formation of an autonomous Kurdish homeland. In January 1919, the KTC dispatched a letter to the British High Commissioner in Constantinople, Admiral Sir Henry Gough-Calthorpe, setting out its objectives. This included four points:

1. A specified and geographically defined territorial area to be assigned to the Kurds.
2. The Kurds would be grateful to enjoy the same privileges and to receive the same treatment at the hands of the Allied Powers of the Entente, as those granted to the Arabs, the Armenians, and the Chaldeans, Assyrians and other small nationalities without distinction of race and religion.
3. the Kurds should be granted Self-government
4. The Kurds, particularly beg the British Government to kindly undertake the protection of their rights and interests, and to help them in their path to civilization and Progress.[8]

The organization's president, Sheikh Abdülkadir, as well as other Kurdish notables and public figures signed the letter. This included members of aristocratic families such as the Bedirhans and Babanzades.

In June, *Jîn* reported on a KTC conference in Istanbul, stating that the Wilson Principles had been placed 'at the centre of the KTC's program …' The author continued by warning that, were the Kurds to fail in securing their national rights, they would 'remain oppressed and deprived of rights, and possibly remain imprisoned for centuries…'. The piece went on by emphasizing that the Kurds had the right to choose their own form of administration in their homeland and that it was appropriate for them to work towards attaining their national rights as did 'other nations and neighbouring communities'.[9]

Ultimately, tensions emerged amongst the members of the KTC over whether the Kurds should pursue autonomy within (a much reduced)

Ottoman Empire or seek full national independence. The KTC's president, Sheikh Abdülkadir, who had been a member of the Ottoman upper house of parliament since 1908, served as president of the Ottoman Council of State (*Şura-yı Devlet*) between March and May 1919. Hence, he continued to proclaim, at least in public, his fidelity to the Ottoman polity, stating to the Ottoman and international press that the Kurds only sought a limited form of provincial autonomy.[10] This resulted in a formal rupture in the KTC with a group led by Emin Ali Bedirhan establishing a rival association in early 1920. This new organization, the Society for Kurdish Social Organization (*Kürt Teşkilat-i İçtimaiye Cemiyeti*—hereafter KTİC), advocated for a complete separation from the Ottoman Empire.

Nevertheless, Kurdish groups maintained a sustained lobbying effort. Indeed, they were keen to represent themselves as being amenable to Great Britain; the preeminent military power in the Middle East. In July 1919, a British intelligence officer sympathetic to the Kurdish cause, reported that, after interviews with the Bedirhans faction as well as Sheikh Abdülkadir, he had come to the conclusion that their 'pro-British sympathizes' were 'genuine.'[11] Moreover, the KTC was able to advance lobbying efforts beyond the boundaries of the Ottoman Empire. It appointed Mehmed Şerif Pasha, son of the former Ottoman Foreign Minister *Kürd* (Kurdish) Said Pasha and a former high-ranking Ottoman diplomat himself, to represent Kurdish interests at the Paris Peace Conference in 1919. There he put forward Kurdish territorial claims, publishing them under the title *Memorandum sur les revendications du peuple kurde* as well as expressing the desire of the Kurds to maintain close relations with Great Britain.[12] He was also able to negotiate with the Armenian delegation to the Paris Peace Conference; eventually coming to an understanding over the delineation of a potential Armenian-Kurdish frontier in November 1919.[13]

Consequently, we might conclude that the fact that the Treaty of Sèvres laid out a pathway to Kurdish self-rule was, at least indirectly, a result of Kurdish lobbying efforts. After all, it is hard to imagine the inclusion of the articles pertaining to Kurdistan in the treaty had it not been for such lobbying. Certainly, the 'Kurdistan' recognized in the summer of 1920 was far more limited in scope than Kurdish activists of the time might have hoped. Its territory was restricted in the west by the Euphrates River. In the north, major centres of Kurdish settlement near Lake Van were assigned to Armenia. Meanwhile, in the south, the fate of the Kurdish-inhabited

districts of the old Ottoman *vilayet* of Mosul was left to the discretion of the Great Powers. And most importantly, the final say on Kurdish self-rule was granted to the League of Nations Council, which would consider whether the Kurds were 'capable of such independence'. Still, despite these limitations, this was an explicit international recognition that the Kurds constituted—at the very least—a *potential* nation.

Yet, the KTC was unable to capitalize on this recognition. Despite efforts to organize KTC affiliates in Ottoman Kurdistan, Kurdish political activities were curbed by the rise of the Turkish nationalist movement following Mustafa Kemal Pasha's landing in Anatolia in May 1919. Mustafa Kemal and his confederates were extremely successful in winning the support of Kurdish tribal leaders across Eastern Anatolia. They aimed to exploit the fears of Kurdish tribal leaders of potentially falling under Christian Armenian rule.[14] The nationalist press vigorously rejected Armenian territorial claims in Anatolia and accused Kurdish activists of opening the way for the creation of an Armenian state on Muslim-Kurdish lands.[15] Indeed, Kazim Karabekir (1990), a close ally of Mustafa Kemal and the commander of forces in the east, recalled that, faced with growing agitation for Kurdish independence, he had 'immunized' the Kurds by propagating the idea that those advocating Kurdish statehood wanted to 'turn Kurdistan into Armenia…' (p. 113).[16]

The notion that talk of Kurdish independence was a stalking horse for the creation of a 'Greater Armenia' was seemingly confirmed following the Ottoman press's publication of details of Şerif Pasha's negotiations with the Armenian delegation in Paris. The territorial concessions made to the Armenians in the districts around Lake Van elicited a hostile response from the local Kurdish population. Moreover, in the autumn of 1920, the nationalist movement was successful at winning the support of Kurdish tribal leaders in their struggle against the Republic of Armenia. In the spring of 1921, individuals associated with Emin Ali's KTİC attempted to take advantage of an anti-nationalist tribal revolt in the Koçgiri region to advance the Kurdish cause. However, the nationalists crushed the rebellion with relative ease (Dersimi, 1996, pp. 131–176; Strohmeier, 2003, pp. 71–72). Thus, by the time the Treaty of Lausanne was signed in April 1923, the Kurdish nationalists that had been so active in lobbying for Kurdish statehood were largely irrelevant.

Consequently, perspectives that have emphasized the weaknesses of the Kurdish movement in terms of its inability to mobilize the broader Kurdish population most certainly capture an important element of the story of Kurdish nationalism following the end of the First World War. However, it is necessary to look to the international balance of power prevailing in the Middle East following the end of the war to fully understand why Kurdish nationalists were unable to prevent the partition of their homeland.

Imperial Interests, Geopolitical Circumstances, and Kurdish Nationalism

The history of the Ottoman Empire over the course of the nineteenth century provides an excellent case study of the pivotal role foreign intervention plays in secessionist movements. For instance, Greece's separation from the Ottoman Empire (a process culminating in the formation of the Kingdom of Greece in 1832) was only assured following the Anglo-French victory over the Egyptian-Ottoman navy at the battle of Navarino in 1827. Similarly, the independence of Serbia, Montenegro, and Romania, as well as the autonomy of Bulgaria were secured in the aftermath of Tsar's victory in the Russo-Ottoman War of 1877–1878 (McCarthy, 1997, pp. 207–9). Therefore, the disposition of the Great Powers, in particular Great Britain and Russia/Soviet Union, towards the question of Kurdish statehood should be seen as being of primary importance.

Great Britain and the Kurdish Question

Kurdish nationalists have long since regarded the 'partition' of Kurdistan as being a product of the machinations of Great Powers. References to the 1916 Sykes-Picot agreement as lying at the root of the Kurds' failure to achieve statehood in the post-Ottoman era are a common trope drawn upon by Kurdish political leaders and their allies.[17] The 'Sykes-Picot' agreement, penned in May 1916 by Mark Sykes, a British operative with extensive

experience in the Middle East, and François Georges-Picot, a French career-diplomat, sought to establish the broad parameters of any partition of Ottoman territories in a post-war settlement. Ultimately, the specific territorial divisions outlined in the agreement did not reflect the final shape of the political settlement achieved in the aftermath of the war.[18] However, the role of Great Britain (and to a lesser extent France) in determining the post-Ottoman order remained critical.

An emphasis on the role of European imperialism in frustrating the ambitions of Kurdish nationalists is also a theme present in the scholarship on the post-war era. This is particularly apparent in works that have examined the actions of Great Britain the three years between Sèvres to Lausanne. On the most basic of levels, British policy towards the Kurds in the aftermath of the war was not consistent. Communications between the imperial centre and actors on the ground were slow. Arnold Wilson, who served as the British Civil Commissioner in Baghdad between 1918 and 1920, noted that replies from London often took more than a month to arrive. At the same time, rivalries amongst the different governmental institutions—the War Office, the General Headquarters in Cairo, the Cabinet, the Indian Office, and the Government of India—served to confuse the picture even more (O'Shea, 2004, p. 110).

Certainly, there were individual British political officers that sought to advance a pro-Kurdish agenda, such as Major Edward Noel, an intelligence officer in the British Indian Army. In late October 1918, Arnold Wilson appointed Noel the political officer with responsibility for Kurdish affairs in the *vilayet* of Mosul's predominately Kurdish sub-districts. He was also empowered to appoint Sheikh Mahmud Berzenci, an influential religious notable, governor of Suleimani.[19] In the spring of 1919, Major Noel left British-controlled 'Southern Kurdistan', and set out for Constantinople where he met with members of the KTC leadership. He subsequently embarked on a tour, accompanied by members of the KTC, of Kurdish-inhabited districts still under Ottoman control.[20]

The presence of such a partisan of the Kurdish cause in districts that remained within the Ottoman zone of control aroused a significant degree of suspicion within Mustafa Kemal Pasha. Speaking to journalists in 1923, Turkey's leader accused the British of attempting to 'infect the Kurds within our borders' with nationalist ideas (İnan, 1996, p. 43). Moreover, in his famous 1927 'Speech' (*Nutuk*), Mustafa Kemal accused Noel and his

travelling companions of having conspired with Ali Galip, the governor of Mamuretülaziz (Elazığ), to incite the Kurds to assassinate him (1995, p. 80). Subsequently, the notion that efforts to establish a Kurdish homeland after the First World War were a British plot has become a common trope in Turkish nationalist historiography (Çay, 2010; Şimşir, 2007).

Yet, closer research utilizing British sources call this narrative into question. British support for a Kurdish homeland after Sèrves was near non-existent. Othman Ali (1997) observed that from November 1922 onward 'Britain withdrew her support for an independent Kurdistan which she had espoused in the August 1920 Treaty of Sèvres…'. He accounted for this shift by highlighting the role of broader international conditions in bringing about this state of affairs. 'Britain's new official stand on Kurdish independence was dictated primarily by her desire to appease Turkey, whose co-operation was needed in Britain's grand strategy to isolate Bolshevik Russia…' (p. 531). Robert Olson's examination of the activities of British diplomatic correspondence covering the period between Sèvres and Lausanne yielded similar conclusions. Olson (1987) notes that proposals in March 1922 from Lieutenant-Colonel A. Rawlinson regarding the possibility of instigating a Kurdish rebellion in Anatolia attracted little support from policy-makers in London. He was out of step with the growing desire of the British administration to come to terms with Mustafa Kemal's 'nationalist' government in Ankara.

Thus, despite Mustafa Kemal's accusations, British policymakers were quick to recognize that Sèvres, which had been signed by the Constantinople-based 'collaborationist' government of Damad Ferid Pasha, was a dead-letter.[21] Instead, the British looked to reach some form of accommodation with the Ankara-based nationalists, who had emerged as the *de facto* rulers of Ottoman Anatolia and defeated both Armenian (1920) and Greek (1920–1922) attempts to annex parts of the region. The nationalists were already able to secure a significant degree of international recognition, including from Afghanistan (1 March 1921), the Soviet Union (6 March 1921), and France (20 October 1921).[22] In the end, Great Britain would only come to a lasting *modus vivendi* with the nationalist forces led by Mustafa Kemal in October 1922, following the Mudanya Armistice, which were followed negotiations that laid the groundwork for the Treaty of Lausanne. However, British policymakers had long recognized the necessity of reaching such an accommodation.

On one level, Britain's ambivalence towards the pathway to Kurdish self-rule outlined in Sèvres reflected the prevailing military balance of power that existed in Ottoman Kurdistan following the end of the war. Unlike in Mesopotamia and the Levant, which had been occupied by British forces during the war, British military influence over Kurdistan was limited. Britain only occupied the southernmost extremities of Ottoman Kurdistan, namely the predominately Kurdish sub-districts in the *vilayet* of Mosul. Kurdish populated districts and provinces further north remained under Ottoman control following the termination of hostilities in October 1918. Moreover, Britain's relationship with Sheikh Mahmud was soon in tatters, following the latter's attempt to establish an independent Kurdish kingdom. In May 1919, British forces were dispatched to Suleimani and the sheikh was deposed (Eskander, 2000).

Given these troubles, Britain had little incentive to intervene on behalf of the Kurds beyond the northern frontier of the *vilayet* of Mosul. Moreover, British interests in the Ottoman Empire were located further south in the Ottoman *vilayets* of Baghdad and Basra, which British forces had occupied during the war. Following the capture of Baghdad in 1917, British forces advanced into the *vilayet* of Mosul, continuing operations against Ottoman forces until mid-November 1918, in violation of the Modros Armistice agreement which had gone into effect on 30 October. Although Mosul had been assigned to France in the Sykes-Picot agreement, France quickly conceded British pre-eminence in Mosul. However, the Turkish nationalists continued to contest British control of the region until 1926. Within the context of this struggle, the British experimented with Kurdish self-rule. Sheikh Mahmud was even allowed to return from exile to Kurdistan in 1922. However, he was again soon in revolt against the British (McDowall, 2004, pp. 159–163; Olson, 1989, pp. 60–63). More generally, 'Southern Kurdistan' was largely of secondary importance to British policy-makers whose primary concern was maintaining dominance in Mesopotamia. Hence, Britain's actions in the region served to inhibit the formation of a Kurdish state, while at the same time favouring the inclusion of the region within the newly formed Kingdom of Iraq (Eskander, 2001, pp. 153–180).

It is certainly evident that, at times, elements within the British administration expressed support for Kurdish aspirations. However, overall Britain did not possess any overriding interest in the creation of a Kurdish state and as time went on what interest that did exist evaporated. This is

particularly evident in British attitudes towards the Sheikh Said Piran Revolt in 1925. The revolt, which engulfed much of the region surrounding Diyarbakir, has often been portrayed in Turkey historiography as a product of British intrigue. Indeed, the fact that it occurred during the negotiation process between Britain and Turkey over the fate of the Mosul *vilayet* and its Kurdish inhabitants, has tended to reinforce this view. However, as research into British accounts of the revolt has shown, far from being a British conspiracy, some elements of the British administration believed the rebellion as having being orchestrated by Ankara in order to provide a pretext for a Turkish occupation of Mosul (Özoğlu, 2011, pp. 91–93).

In summation, Britain possessed neither the diplomatic nor, more importantly, the military power to intervene into Kurdish Anatolia in order to enforce the terms of Sèvres. Perhaps more broadly, the trajectory of British policy in Kurdistan following the end of the war reflected the fact that Kurdistan lay beyond Great Britain's traditional areas of influence and interest. In fact, the Sykes-Picot agreement foresaw little British involvement in Kurdish affairs. Not only had Mosul and its Kurdish sub-districts been assigned to France, the agreement had also envisaged the majority of Ottoman Kurdistan falling within the Russian sphere of influence.[23] These concessions were far from arbitrary. They were recognition of Russian preeminence in a region over which it had long since sought to establish its influence.

Russian Expansion and Kurdish Nationalism

Over the final century and a half of its existence, the Ottoman Empire's primary international rival was Tsarist Russia. In the late eighteenth century, Russia successfully wrestled the Crimea from Ottoman control. And, over the course of the nineteenth, Russia continued to advance southwards against the Ottomans, including into Eastern Anatolia from their base in Caucasia. As a result, Russian soldiers, diplomats, and officials increasingly came into direct contact with elements of the Kurdish population.

As early as 1787, the Russian government commissioned the publication of a Kurdish dictionary. Russian awareness of and interest in the Kurds intensified following the Crimean War (1853–1856), during which time Russian armies clashed with those of the Ottoman Empire and her allies

Britain and France. In fact, one scholar collected an anthology of Kurmancî and Zaza dialect texts from Kurdish prisoners of war held in Smolensk. More generally, in the second half of the nineteenth century, Russia emerged as the birthplace of 'Kurdology', a distinct sub-branch of Iranian Studies. Individuals in service to the Russian government played a critical role in the development of this field. For instance, Auguste Alexandre Jaba (1801–1894), who served as the Russian consul at Erzurum, collaborated extensively with a local Kurdish scholar to secure a number of Kurdish-language manuscripts; which formed the basis of a Kurdish collection at the Imperial Academy in St. Petersburg. Other important texts were also published in Tsarist Russia's capital, including both a Persian (1860) and French (1868–1875) edition of the *Sharafnama*, a Persian language chronicle of the Kurdish dynasties completed in 1597. Indeed, perhaps the most influential figures in the early development of Kurdish studies in the Anglophone world, Vladimir Minorsky (1877–1966), who became a professor at the School of Oriental Studies (London) in 1933, was a former Tsarist diplomat.[24] In many ways, the Russian orientalists' 'emphasis on the distinctness of Kurds and Armenians from their neighbours fit in well with Russian expansionist ambitions towards the Ottoman Empire and Qajar Persia, and with the divide and rule tactics pursued towards that end…' (Leezenberg, 2011, p. 87).

Certainly, Russian political interest in the Kurds only deepened over the course of the nineteenth century. In fact, with the Russian annexation of Kars, Arhadan, and Batumi in 1878, following the Russo-Turkish War of 1877–1878, Kurdish Anatolia became a frontier zone between the two empires. As a result, Russian expansion towards Kurdistan played an important role in shaping the development of Kurdish nationalism. At times, this role was largely indirect. For instance, Sheikh Ubeydullah, who sought to establish himself as the ruler of a unified Kurdistan in the early 1880s, partly rose to prominence due to the weakness of Ottoman authority across Eastern Anatolia following the empire's defeat at the hands of Russia in 1878 (Ateş, 2014, pp. 735–798; Soleimani, 2016, pp. 157–215). However, in the early twentieth century, Russia came to play a far more active role in the promotion of Kurdish nationalism. In the aftermath of the 1908 'Young Turk' Revolution, Tsarist Russia was increasingly able to exploit unrest amongst the Ottoman Kurdish population.

The revolution witnessed the restoration of constitutional rule after more than thirty years during which time Sultan Abdülhamid II (r. 1876–1909) ruled as an absolute monarch. This political transformation was greeted with a great deal of apprehension by many Kurdish tribal leaders.[25] Over the course of the previous three decades, the sultan had developed a network of patronage across Ottoman Kurdistan. Through schemes such as the *Hamidiye* light cavalry, a tribal militia drawn from amongst the Kurdish tribes as well as through developing relations with important religious personalities, the sultan sought to align the interests of influential tribal leaders with those of his autocracy (Çetinsaya, 1999; Duguid, 1973; Klein, 2011). Kurdish fears proved to be well founded. The Committee of Union and Progress (*İttihad ve Terakki Cemiyeti*—hereafter İTC), the organization behind the 1908 revolution, increasingly sought to assert government authority across Ottoman Kurdistan.[26] In the years leading up to the outbreak of the First World War, unrest in Ottoman Kurdistan only increased as İTC policies towards Kurdish tribal leaders in the region became increasingly heavy-handed.[27] This provided a fertile ground for nationalist agitation.

Perhaps the most significant figure in this regard was Abdürrezzak Bedirhan. As a member of the illustrious Bedirhan clan, Abdürrezzak Bey, like other members of his family, enjoyed the patronage of Sultan Abdülhamid II. Although barred from returning to their native Cizre-Bohtan—where the clan's ancestors had ruled until 1846—members of the Bedirhan family were integrated into the Ottoman governing class. Many received a 'modern' education in the empire's elite schools and colleges, after which most enjoyed careers within the expanding Ottoman bureaucracy (Malmîsanij, 2000). Abdürrezzak Bey began his career in the Ottoman bureaucracy, serving in the Ottoman embassy in St. Petersburg and later as the Master of Ceremonies at the imperial palace. However, in 1906, his alleged involvement in the murder of Istanbul's governor, Rıdvan Pasha, resulted in his deportation, along with the rest of his family, to (Libyan) Tripoli (Alakom, 1998, pp. 48–54). While following the 1908 revolution, the new government allowed most members of the Bedirhan family to return to Constantinople, Abdürrezzak Bey was only allowed to leave North Africa in 1910. Embittered against the Ottoman government, he subsequently emerged as one of the leading supporters of Kurdish self-rule.[28]

In September 1910, Abdürrezzak Bey set out for Tiflis, the centre of Russian administration in the Caucasus. There he sought to secure Russian support for his political activities (Bedirhan, 2000, pp. 18–25). In the spring of 1911, he returned to Ottoman territory, where he approached the Russian vice-consul in Van with a plan to provoke a general Kurdish revolt, stating that once the rebellion had begun, the Kurds would 'ask the Russian Emperor to take them under his wing and give them independence' (Lazarev, 1972, pp. 161–162). This initial attempt to foster a rebellion failed.[29] However, in May 1912, he established 'Correct Guidance' (*İrşad*), a secret revolutionary organization with branches across Kurdistan and dedicated to the creation of a 'Kurdistan Beylik' under Russian protection. Ultimately, efforts to provoke a Kurdish rebellion came to nothing and, in September 1913, *İrşad* suffered a blow when Hayreddin Berazi, the organization's vice-president was killed by the Ottoman authorities (Akgül, 1995, pp. 28–29). Another plan to raise a general Kurdish uprising was foiled, when the Kurds of Bitlis rose prematurely in the spring of 1914 (Reynolds, 2010, pp. 58–66 & 78–81).

Significantly, Abdürrezzak Bey's endeavours to secure Russian support coincided with a growing realization amongst Russian officials that Kurdish nationalism presented the Tsarist regime with an opportunity to undermine Ottoman control over Eastern Anatolia. As a result, Abdürrezzak Bey received Russian support and protection. For instance, in 1911, following a failed Ottoman attempt to abduct him in the Iranian town of Urimya, he was escorted to safety by Russian Cossacks.[30] At the same time, Russian officials also provided arms and logistical support to Abdürrezzak Bey and his allies.[31] Co-operation even extended to cultural affairs. In October 1913, with the support of the Russian vice-consul, Abdürrezzak Bey established a Kurdish school in Khoy, a predominately-Kurdish town in Russian-occupied Iranian Azerbaijan. Significantly, although the medium of instruction was Kurdish, the school's curriculum also included Russian language tuition as well as classes on Russian culture, literature, and law (Ahmad, 1994, p. 61; Celîl, 2000, pp. 127–132). In doing so, this new institution served to harmonize Kurdish and Russian interests, helping to propagate Kurdish national consciousness as well as pro-Russian sentiments.

Abdürrezzak Bey's collaboration with Russia continued following the outbreak of war between the Ottoman Empire and the Entente Powers

(including Russia) in the autumn of 1914. The Kurdish leader, who had proclaimed himself 'Sultan of the tribes', moved to support his Russian allies as they advanced into Anatolia. He distributed proclamations calling on the Kurds to expel the Ottomans and sought to win Kurdish tribesmen to the Russian cause. The violence and confusion that accompanied the Russian advance into Eastern Anatolia served to strain relations between the Russians and their Kurdish allies. Indeed, Russian authorities accused Abdürrezzak Bey of conspiring against Russian forces, and briefly forced to return to Tiflis. Nevertheless, when the Russians captured the fortress town of Erzurum in February 1916, they elevated Abdürrezzak Bey to the position of governor, while his relative and ally, Yusuf Kamil Bedirhan, was appointed in Bitlis (Hakan, 2013).

In retrospect, these appointments marked a highpoint in relations between Kurdish nationalists and Tsarist Russia. However, whatever the longer-term objective of the Russians vis-à-vis the Kurds may have been, the collapse of the Tsarist regime in March 1917 radically altered the balance of power in Eastern Anatolia. Over the subsequent year, the Ottomans were subsequently able to reoccupy all territories lost to Russia over the previous three years. Indeed, in 1918 Ottoman forces pushed into the Caucasus, advancing as far as Baku. This rapid reversal of fortune proved disastrous for the nationalists. Yusuf Kamil was forced to flee to the Caucasus, where he remained until his death in 1934. Abdürrezzak Bey was less fortunate. Ottoman forces caught and executed him in 1918.[32]

Thus, despite their eventual defeat, the Ottomans, in effect, 'won' the battle for Kurdistan. The Russian defeat, formalized in the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk in March 1918, ensured Ottoman ascendancy in Kurdish Anatolia. By the end of the war, only 'Southern Kurdistan' lay beyond Ottoman control. Moreover, the post war era witnessed an 'inversion' of the geopolitics of alliances (Reynolds, 2010, pp. 255–259). Russia's new Bolshevik government reversed the Tsarist regime's traditional anti-Turkish policy, moving to support and bolster the nascent nationalist movement. This co-operation was brought about by a mutual interest in restricting the influence of Great Britain, whose 'sponsorship of anti-Bolshevik Russian armies…drove the Turkish nationalists and the Bolsheviks into each other's arms' (Gökay, 1997, p. 2). As a result, during the critical period between 1918 and 1923, the Bolsheviks possessed none of the interest in patronizing Kurdish nationalism its Tsarist predecessor once had.

Conclusion

The argument that has been presented here has been that the inability of Kurdish nationalists to secure statehood following the end of the First World War was primarily a result of factors that lay beyond their ability to influence. Unlike in Southern Mesopotamia and the Levant, the Ottoman military remained in control of much of Ottoman Kurdistan. In fact, to a large extent the partition of Ottoman Kurdistan had largely been *completed* by 1918, with the British detaching 'Southern Kurdistan' from Ottoman controlled districts further to the north. Consequently, in the immediate post war period, Kurdish nationalists were struggling within a context in which a partition of the homeland they laid claim to had already occurred. In this sense, the events of 1917 were decisive in defining the fate of Ottoman Kurdistan. Most immediately, the revolutions that witnessed the destruction of Tsarist Russia and birthed the Soviet Union had set the stage for a restoration of Ottoman control over much of the Kurdish homeland in 1918. Indeed, it also provided the Ottoman authorities with an opportunity finally to catch up with Abdürrezzak Bedirhan.

However, while the loss of such a prominent Kurdish nationalist was a major blow to the Kurdish movement, the loss of Russian patronage and protection was even greater. Britain, which was already heavily engage in consolidating its control over Mesopotamia, had little desire to fill the vacuum in Kurdistan left by Russia's withdrawal. Indeed, after 1919, both Britain and Soviets worked to win the Turkish nationalists to their side and perceived Kurdish nationalism—despite the efforts of Kurdish nationalists to gain international backing—to be too weak to play into their geopolitical interests. Consequently, despite the recognition of Kurdish national rights in the Treaty of Sèvres, the Kurds lack an international patron willing to ensure that Kurdish national rights were respected. In short, far from presenting Kurdish nationalists with a 'golden opportunity' to secure statehood, the First World War turnout to be a geopolitical disaster.

In this regard, one might draw a parallel with the geopolitical situation today. The US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the outbreak of the Syrian Civil War have created new opportunities for Kurdish groups to mobilize and, more importantly, make significant political gains. Indeed, the United States currently works closely with Kurds in both Iraq and Syria. However,

Washington continues to prioritize its relationship with Baghdad and Ankara—both of which remain implacably opposed to Kurdish statehood. Thus, despite the political changings sweeping the Middle East at the present time, it continues to look unlikely that Kurdish nationalists will be able to attract the necessary international support to obtain statehood.

Notes

1. Tharoor (*2*017).

2. United States. Dept. of State (2017). For the US position on the referendum, see Morgan Kaplan's article in this issue.

3. It should be noted here that this paper primarily deals with the Ottoman Kurdish population, namely the future Kurdish populations of Turkey, Iraq, and Syria. 'Iranian Kurdistan', which was subject to a separate administrative regime from the rest of Kurdistan even before the end of the First World War, lies beyond the scope of this current study.

4. His twelfth point says,
   [t]he Turkish portion of the present Ottoman Empire should be assured a secure sovereignty, but the other nationalities which are now under Turkish rule should be assured an undoubted security of life and an absolutely unmolested opportunity of autonomous development… (Torr, 2002, p. 78)

5. Saeed (*2*017).

6. Haydarzade İbrahim, "Bir Hasbihal" *Jîn*, 7 November 1918.

7. Following the 1925 Sheikh Said Rebellion, Turkish authorities executed Sheikh Abdülkadir Efendi.

8. FO 608/95, Constantinople, 2 January 1919.

9. See Memduh Selim, "Kürd Kulübünde Bir Musahabe" *Jîn*, 18 June 1919. Also see İhsan Nuri, "Wilson Prensipleri ve Kürdler" *Jîn*, 30 March 1919.

10. See Seyyid Abdülkadir, "Kürdler ve Osmanlılık", *İkdam*, 27 February 1920 (Göldaş, 1991, pp. 282–283); Also see "Leaders in the Turkish Senate Greatly Worried over Kurdish Independence", *Leavenworth Times*, 6 March 1920.

11. FO371 4192, Constantinople, (12 July 1919).

12. See FO 608/95, Paris, 14 February 1919; FO371 4192 29 June 1919; FO 371/5067, Constantinople, 3 February 1920; FO 371/5067, Turkey, 1 March 1920; also see *Jîn*, 2 October 1919.

13. For a copy of the joint declaration see FO371 4193, Paris, 20 November 1919.

14. Major Noel noted in December 1919 that they were making
    frantic efforts to win over the Kurds to the nationalist cause by pan islamic and anti-Christian propaganda…No organization for counter propaganda exists. The Kurdish intelligentsia, the

majority of whom have been banished from their county, are debarred from all communications with the compatriots. FO 371 4193, London, 18 December 1919.

15. See "Şarki Anadolu Türki ile Kürdi tefrik edilemez", *Albayrak,* 20 October 1919.

16. Also see FO 371 4193, Constantinople, 29 November 1919.

17. Speaking to *The Nation*, Iraqi Kurdistan's then president and leader of the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iraq (KDP), Masud Barzani declared the Sykes-Picot agreement "the mistake of the century…" noting that: "The borders were drawn by hand in the name of the great powers." Gutman (*2*016).

18. On the legacy of Sykes-Picot in the reconstruction of the Middle East see Nick Danforth, (10 August 2015). Forget Sykes-Picot. It's the Treaty of Sèvres That Explains the Modern Middle East. *Foreign Policy*. Retrieved from www.foreignpolicy.com.

19. AIR2/512, Baghdad, 31 October 1918; Major Noel noted that prior the war "no part of the Ottoman dominions in such a state of turmoil and anarchy as the district of Sulaimaniyah…" and that the "prime mover" in this unrest was Sheikh Mahmud and his supporters. However, he argued that "[t]here is a natural tendency to characterize the influence he waged as a malign one, but if we bear in mind what the policy of the Turks was, there is a good deal of justification for viewing the Shaikh's activities as the natural expression of revolt on part of an oppressed people." See FO 608/95, Suleimani, 8 December 1918.

20. For Noel's account of his journey, see *On Special Duty in Kurdistan* (1920).

21. Damad Ferid Pasha served as Grand Vizier between March and October 1919 and again between April and October 1920.

22. On the diplomatic activities of Mustafa Kemal's Ankara-based government in 1921 see Soysal (1983, pp. 24–60).

23. "That Russia shall annex the regions of Erzeroum, Trebizond, Van, and Bitlis, up to the point, Trebizond, Van, and Bitlis, up to a point subsequently to be determined on the littoral of the Black Sea to the west of Trebizond. 2) That the region of Kurdistan to the south of Van and of Bitlis between Mush, Sert, the course of the Tigris, Jezireh-ben-Omer, the crest-line of the mountains which dominate Amadia, and the region of Merga Var, shall be ceded to Russia; and that starting from the region of Merga Var, the frontier of the Arab State shall follow the crest-line of the mountains which at present divide the Ottoman and Persian Dominions." (Hurewitz, 1979, p. 64)

24. On the development of Russian 'Kurdology' see Leezenberg (2011, 2015); also see Alakom (1987).

25. See FO 195/2284, Bitlis, 10 August 1908; FO 195/2284, Harput, 26 August 1908.

26. Indeed, within a year of the revolution two of the *ancien régime* most high-profile supporters, Sheikh Said Berzenci of Suleimani (Sheikh Mahmud's father) and the infamous *Hamidiye* commander İbrahim Milli Pasha, were dead. FO 195/2308, Mosul, 14 January 1909. Kürt Teavün ve Terakki Cemiyeti Mosul Şubesi, "Musul Hadise-i Feciası", *Kürt Teavün ve Terakki Gazetesi,* 16 January 1909; FO 195/2284, Diyarbakır, 13 October 1908.

27. As one British official observed in 1914:
   nothing has been done to improve the material conditions of this part of Turkey, and on the other hand taxes are more rigorously collected than under the old regime, whilst the tribal cavalry has been deprived of the privileges it used to possess. FO 195/2458, Van, 14 February 1914.

28. For an overview of Abdürrazzak Bedirhan's career see Reynolds (2011); also see Bedirhan (2000).

29. FO 195/2375, Van, 22 May 1911; FO 195/2375, Van, 26 June 1911.

30. FO 195/2375, Van, 26 June 1911; also see Bedirhan (2000, pp. 27–29).

31. FO 195/2405, Erzurum, 5 November 1912; FO 195/2449, Diyarbakır, 22 April 1913.

32. On Abdürrezzak Bey's activities during the war see Reynolds (2010, 2011); also see Hakan (2013).

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Foreign Support, Miscalculation, and Conflict Escalation: Iraqi Kurdish Self-Determination in Perspective

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ABSTRACT How does foreign support for separatists influence conflict escalation with the central government? What types of miscalculations over foreign support encourage separatists to take risky gambles and lead to surprising losses? Existing research indicates that armed non-state actors may initiate or escalate conflict with the central government when existing or anticipated gains in foreign support favorably alters their likelihood for success. This article sheds light on an additional but equally important catalyst for conflict escalation: rebel, or separatist, beliefs about net losses of foreign support in their gamble for more autonomy. Even if groups have perfect information on potential gains in foreign support, miscalculations over potential losses can also lead to risky gambles. To illustrate the distinction between separatist miscalculations over gains and losses in foreign support, this paper compares two episodes of Iraqi Kurdish escalation: the 1991 uprising against Saddam Hussein in the aftermath of the Gulf War, and the 2017 independence referendum after three years of war against the Islamic State. While the former case is a classic example of escalation based on miscalculating gains in foreign support, the latter case represents a miscalculation over potential losses of foreign support in response to the vote.

Introduction

On September 25, 2017, Iraqi Kurds went to the polls to vote in a referendum on independence. The vote represented a culmination of nationalist ambitions and a first-step in what the Kurds hoped would be a negotiation on the region's eventual independence. However, while the referendum passed overwhelmingly, the vote was strongly condemned by Baghdad, regional powers, the international community, and even Erbil's own allies in Washington and Europe. Threats and counter-threats escalated between Baghdad and Erbil, which eventually culminated in the military recapture of Kurdish-controlled Kirkuk by Iraqi government forces and Shia militias on October 16. Over the next several days, significant amounts of Kurdish-controlled territory were lost, most of which was prized, disputed territory between the central government and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI).

Prior to the referendum, Iraqi Kurds were at a territorial, military, and political apex. Kurdish military strength increased drastically through foreign arming, financing, and training during the war against the Islamic State (ISIS); the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) administered its own borders with direct access to the international community; Iraqi Kurds were engaged in unprecedented military cooperation with the Iraqi military; Kurdish *peshmerga* possessed strong international goodwill as the face of the anti-ISIS campaign; and the Kurdish issue received public attention worldwide. After the referendum, however, Kurds found themselves in an objectively weaker position on nearly all fronts. The Kurds suffered a loss of international sympathy and political backing; Kurdish *peshmerga* were in a defensive and weaker position; issues with Baghdad have soured and remain unresolved; and the KRI's direct access to the international community has only recently been reinstated ("Iraqi PM Abadi Orders Reopening of Kurdish Airports," 2018).

Journalists and analysts immediately labeled the Kurdistan referendum a 'colossal miscalculation' (Illing, 2017). KRI President Masoud Barzani and his Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) miscalculated over how Baghdad, other Kurdish parties, and in particular, the international community would respond to the vote. From Baghdad to Ankara, Tehran to Geneva, London

to Washington, the collective voice was definitively and conspicuously against the vote (Hiltermann, 2017; Mansour, 2017).

Why did Erbil make a risky play for greater sovereignty despite overwhelming international resistance to the maneuver? Why, despite already possessing sizable international support and local power, did the campaign lead to a net loss in Iraqi Kurdish sovereignty and foreign support? Was there an actual 'miscalculation,' and if so, what exactly was miscalculated? Examining the Iraqi Kurdish case also allows us to address broader theoretical questions. What role does foreign support for and alliances with separatists play in conflict escalation with the central government? What types of miscalculations over foreign support encourage separatists to take risky gambles and lead to surprising losses?

This paper addresses these questions and highlights the central importance of foreign support as a source of miscalculation and risky conflict escalation.[1] Existing research indicates that armed non-state actors may initiate or escalate conflict with the central government when existing or anticipated gains in foreign support favorably alters their cost–benefit calculations. Rebel beliefs that foreign support is *forthcoming* incentivizes groups to make risky gambles against the central government because they believe the likelihood of success has improved.[2] This paper, however, sheds light on an additional but equally important catalyst of conflict escalation: rebel, or separatist,[3] beliefs about potential *losses* of foreign support in their gamble for more autonomy. Even if groups have perfect information on potential gains in foreign support, miscalculations over potential losses can also lead to risky gambles. I argue that the latter mechanism best explains the type of miscalculation made by the Iraqi Kurdish leadership and why Kurds felt particularly stunned by the referendum's outcome.

To illustrate the distinction between separatist miscalculations over gains and losses in foreign support, this paper compares two episodes of escalation initiated by the Kurds: first, the 1991 uprising against Saddam Hussein in the aftermath of the Gulf War; and second, the 2017 independence referendum campaign after three years of war against the Islamic State. In the former case, the decision by Kurds to rebel, the uprising's failure, and shock over the outcome can be attributed to a miscalculation over forthcoming foreign support. Kurds believed the U.S. was sincere in its promise to back Kurdish and Shia uprisings. In 2017, however, there was not a miscalculation over what support would be

forthcoming. Kurds likely understood that the U.S. and other backers would not support the pursuit of independence. However, there was a miscalculation over the withdrawal of foreign support in response to the vote and the willingness of foreign actors to let Baghdad impose heavy costs on the Kurds.

The remainder of the article proceeds as follows. First, I provide an overview of the relationship between foreign alliances, rebel miscalculations over third-party support, and conflict escalation. This includes a distinction between miscalculating gains and losses in foreign support. Second, I demonstrate the importance of this distinction through a comparison of Iraqi Kurdish escalations in 1991 and 2017. I conclude with a brief discussion of policy implications.

Foreign Support, Miscalculation, and Separatist Escalation

The relationship between foreign support and conflict escalation in civil wars is grounded in theories of inter-state alliance politics and conflict bargaining. A strong body of research has addressed how international alliances can influence conflict escalation when local allies feel emboldened by outside support. Such encouragement may also produce ill-fated offensives when third-parties fail to support their ally's actions. Third-parties may abandon their local partners due to fears of becoming entrapped in unwanted wars, misunderstandings over the terms of the alliance, and uncertainty over intentions of all parties involved.[4]

Such dynamics are applicable to the formal and informal alliances that states sometimes make with armed non-state actors. Like states, rebels look to outside actors to boost their relative power against their enemies at home and expend considerable effort toward the solicitation, acquisition, and maintenance of foreign assistance (Coggins, 2015; Heraclides, 1991; Huang, 2016; Kaplan, 2016). The provision or promise of outside support can strengthen rebel power (Gent, 2008; Seymour, 2008), as well as influence their decisions to initiate or escalate disputes with the central government. Outside pledges of military, political, or financial assistance

alter the bargaining power of beneficiary groups, making them more confident in their chances of success should they provoke a more powerful central government.[5]

Yet rebel escalation can put incredible strains on relations with their foreign backers. Although some third-parties pursue alliances to support offensive purposes, others do so to promote the durability of the status quo. As espoused in classic theories of alliances, third-parties often form alliances to deter a common enemy from escalation and to make their own allies feel secure in a defensive posture.[6] As such, third-parties may offer assistance without intending to deliver in the event of a true crisis. This dynamic may be particularly acute for rebel-state alliances as foreign supporters tend to avoid direct inter-state confrontation with the central government (Salehyan, 2010). Thus while some pledges of foreign support for rebels are well-defined and sincere, many agreements can be insincere, informal, and ambiguous.[7]

The result can be doubly dangerous. Foreign support can create a 'moral hazard' in which the provision of aid encourages rebels to pursue the precise behavior their backers sought to discourage.[8] And when rebels escalate against the preferences of their foreign supporters, there is a notable risk third-parties will not come to their aid. (Grigoryan, 2010). While the potential for dangerous escalation and unanticipated abandonment is present among inter-state alliances, it may be exacerbated in the context of rebel-state because of greater information asymmetries and uncertainty of intentions.[9] As a result, rebel decisions concerning conflict escalation in the shadow of foreign support are susceptible to tragic *miscalculation*: groups may escalate under the false perception that their supporters will come to their aid.

Such miscalculations, however, need not be irrational. Central to bargaining models of war that underpin this discussion, rebels can make a rational decision to escalate – despite being mistaken over their prospect of success – due to incomplete information about the likelihood that foreign supporters will come to their aid (Fearon, 1995). As Wagner (2005) argues, 'inconsistent expectations about the outcome of violent conflict, or about how relevant actors will respond to them,' is a key component of how rebels may initiate conflict at home.[10] The conflict itself serves as a

learning moment where the real balance of power and resolve is revealed to all actors (Seymour, 2008, p. 105).

Miscalculating Gain vs. Loss in Foreign Support

Both real and perceived increases in foreign support can thus catalyze rebel-initiated conflict escalation. And when groups overestimate the fidelity of such support, costly miscalculations are made. Yet although the literature provides a clear account for miscalculated escalations based on rebel beliefs about forthcoming *gains* in foreign support, miscalculations based on beliefs over potential *losses* in support has been under-examined. Both can generate similar outcomes of failed escalation, albeit for different reasons.

To better understand these related types of miscalculation, we must distinguish between what rebels perceive to be the *upper* and *lower bounds* of foreign support. Whereas the former is the maximum degree of support a foreign backer can provide, the latter is the minimum degree of guaranteed support. There is a wide range in both the type and degree of aid foreigners can provide rebels (Regan, 2002). However, when rebels and third-parties form alliances, an understanding of these bounds can take shape, although unlikely by formal means.

Where rebels believe the upper or lower bounds of foreign support are and how confident they feel about their durability can influence rebel decisions to escalate against the state, as well as their expectations about the costs and benefits of such actions. When the upper bounds of foreign support appear high and durable, separatists may be encouraged to engage in conflict escalation because of increasing confidence in success with potential outside help. When the lower bounds of foreign support appear durable, separatists may also be encouraged to escalate, albeit for a different reason. Feeling assured that a minimum level of support will continue, rebels feel confident that gambling for success will not affect their chances of suffering major losses. Whereas the former encourages escalation by increasing its potential benefits, the latter encourages escalation by decreasing its potential costs.

Varieties of Miscalculation. Rebels can thus make two types of miscalculations when escalating in the shadow of foreign support.

Miscalculations about the upper bounds of support skew groups' beliefs about the prospects of forthcoming support and gains, while miscalculations about the lower bounds of support skew groups' beliefs about prospects for decreasing support and loss. In the former case, escalation is driven by false perceptions that the probability of success has risen. Rebels are shocked when their allies do not promote their new goals and are likely to fail in their attempted escalation. In the latter scenario, escalation is driven by the belief that while there may not be an increase in the probability of success, there is a decrease in the probably of suffering net losses. Rebels are not shocked when they do not gain support for their escalatory goals, but they are when foreign supporters do not maintain existing levels of support and act to maintain the status quo or mitigate their losses.

Why do local beneficiaries miscalculate whether support for their cause will be withdrawn in the event of risky escalation? There are at least two potential explanations. First, when local beneficiaries are existing recipients of foreign support, cognitive biases may make it difficult to update potential changes in support, demonstrating consistency-seeking behavior (Jervis, 1976; Rathbun, 2007, p. 548). Second, third-party actors may purposefully make the terms of their support ambiguous. While creating clear terms of an alliance may be essential to ensure that local beneficiaries do not engage in risky behavior,[11] foreign actors may be incentivized to create an ambiguous state of support with local allies (Blankenship, 2017). For example, if a foreign backer has less than hostile relations with the local ally's adversary, it may strive to maintain a favorable balance of relations between the two through ambiguity.

Gambling for Kurdish Sovereignty

In recent decades, Iraqi Kurds have made numerous attempts to elevate their sovereignty through the help of outside actors. In 1991, Kurds revolted against Baghdad after the Gulf War, and most recently in 2017, Iraqi Kurds staged a referendum on independence after over a decade of close cooperation with the West. Yet when Kurds revolted in 1991, they found themselves fighting Hussein's forces alone. And when Iraqi forces

responded to the 2017 referendum with coercion, the Kurds' allies were unwilling to restrain Baghdad.

How did foreign support for Kurdish aspirations influence the decision to escalate vis-à-vis Baghdad, and what types of miscalculations about third-party assistance were made? Below, I demonstrate that Iraqi Kurdish decisions to challenge Baghdad in 1991 and 2017 were partly influenced by the leadership's perception of existing and future foreign support in response to conflict escalation. In both cases, Kurdish gambles for greater sovereignty fell short for reasons often attributed to a misreading of foreign intentions to intervene. However, I argue that the type of miscalculation made by Iraqi Kurds in each scenario, while similar in outcome, were not alike.[12] While Kurds miscalculated the height and durability of the upper bounds (i.e. gains) of foreign support in 1991, they miscalculated the base and durability of the lower bounds (i.e. losses) of support in 2017.

Below, I examine how Kurdish perceptions of foreign support influenced decisions to escalate against Baghdad, unpacking the disparate miscalculation types that led those escalations to fail.[13] Each episode of escalation can be explained by a multitude of factors at different levels of analysis, domestic and international. The goal of these cases is not to provide an exhaustive explanation of why the Kurds chose to escalate, but to demonstrate how expectations of foreign support made Kurdish decision-makers confident they could act on existing motivations for conflict escalation.

1991: Miscalculating Gains in Support

Since the mid-1980s, Iraqi Kurdish leaders had been pushing for increasing Western assistance. During the Iran-Iraq War, the main backers of the KDP and PUK were regional powers such as Iran, Syria, and Libya. However, towards the end of the war, Kurdish parties recognized that to undermine Baghdad, they would need the support of Washington, London, Paris, and even Moscow (Kaplan, 2016). Thus began a long international campaign to secure Western assistance to help overthrow the Hussein regime.

For nearly half a decade and through the worst of an Iraqi campaign against Kurds in the north, Kurdish efforts at securing foreign support were spurned. Yet when Iraq invaded Kuwait in 1990 and foreign powers turned

against Hussein, the Kurds made quick gains in international access (Charountaki, 2011, pp. 167–168). The Kurds hoped the U.S.-led coalition to remove Iraqi forces from Kuwait would signal the beginning of the end for the Hussein regime and Kurdish leaders strived to coordinate cooperation and rebellion with U.S. officials. But Turkish objections to U.S. cooperation with Kurds made an alliance politically untenable and the Americans settled to leave Hussein in place (Shareef, 2014, pp. 146–147).

Yet the Kurds felt they were receiving mixed messages from the U.S. Although unsuccessful in securing formal promises, the U.S. began hinting at support for regime change through the Iraqi opposition.[14] Two weeks before the war's end and just after its conclusion, President Bush made two widely broadcast speeches perceived as having encouraged the Kurds in the north and Shia in the south to rebel (Romano, 2006, p. 205). On 15 February 1991, Bush announced: 'There is another way for the bloodshed to stop, and that is for the Iraqi military and the Iraqi people to take matters into their own hands and force Saddam Hussein, the dictator to step aside' (Grossman, 2003). Just two weeks later, on March 1, Bush made another call: 'In my own view…the Iraqi people should put Saddam aside, and that would facilitate the resolution of all these problems that exist and certainly would facilitate the acceptance of Iraq back into the family of peace-loving nations' ("Remembering the Kurdish," 2016). These two speeches, although vague to outside audiences, were viewed by many as encouraging calls on the people of Iraq to rise against Hussein, with the belief that the U.S. would support such endeavors (Shareef, 2014, p. 147). Finally, a historic meeting on March 8 between Kurdish leaders and Turkish officials, in which the Turks '"[lifted] its objection to the establishment of direct relations between the Kurdish front in Iraq and the United States",' may have also led the Kurds to believe that an impediment to U.S. support was lifted (Shareef, 2014, p. 148).

Most accounts note that the Kurdish rebellion began as a popular uprising, followed by formal participation by Kurdish parties, *peshmerga*, and defectors of the Iraqi army (See Gunter, 1992, p. 50; Stansfield, 2003, p. 95). Beginning in Sulaymaniyah province, the rebellion quickly spread across the Kurdish region and soon the Kurds would control a large swath of liberated territory, including the oil-rich city of Kirkuk.[15] Yet, the U.S. and the allied coalition that had just fought against the Hussein regime remained on the sidelines as Iraqi forces began repressing Kurdish and Shia

protesters with ferocity. As Kurdish historian Gareth Stansfield notes, 'The expected support from the US-led coalition did not appear for the Kurds' (Stansfield, 2003, p. 95). In an interview that March, Kurdish leaders Masoud Barzani and Jalal Talabani blamed the U.S. for misleading the Kurds: 'You personally called upon the Iraqi people to rise up against Saddam Hussein's brutal dictatorship.'[16]

The international community only intervened once a major humanitarian crisis had formed along the Iraqi-Turkish border as nearly 468,000 refugees sought shelter from Hussein's advancing forces (Gunter, 1992, pp. 54–55). Looking back, Barzani conceded that the U.S. did not pledge support for the rebellion, which was 'a Kurdish initiative,' but insisted that U.S. did pledge to 'respond immediately' if the Iraqis initiated war against the Kurds (Quoted in Charountaki, 2011, p. 169). As Romano has noted, 'Perhaps Kurds should be forgiven for thinking that this time, unlike 1975, the Americans would actually back them up for such an action. They were certainly encouraged to believe this, if not given any explicit promises' (Romano, 2006, p. 205). While the end result would be the establishment of a U.S.-led no-fly zone to protect Iraq's Kurds and *de facto* Kurdish self-rule in the north, the more immediate result of the rebellion can be viewed as a strategic error. While there was clearly a miscalculation on the part of Kurdish protesters and parties during the 1991 uprising, an important question is what type of miscalculation?

This episode can be viewed as a miscalculation over potential gains in international support and the upper bounds of what would be supported. At the time, there was minimal direct Western support for Kurdish *peshmerga*, meaning there was little foreign support Kurds could lose from escalating. Instead, the miscalculation was over the aid that would be gained by Kurds should they escalate against the Hussein regime. From the Kurdish perspective, escalation was sensible since foreign support was presumably forthcoming. In addition to the supportive rhetoric from the U.S., coalition forces were already forward deployed, making such an intervention operationally feasible.

A question remains whether Iraqi Kurds would have revolted if not for the belief that support would be forthcoming? This question, of course, is hard to answer given long-standing incentives for rebellion. While many Kurds are quick to point out that they felt encouraged by the perception of forthcoming support from the West,[17] it is difficult to indicate how much of

an effect this had on decisions to escalate. Still, even if the impetus for rebellion was already present, it is apparent that encouragement from the U.S. and the realistic assumption that support would be forthcoming served as a catalyst for the uprising.

Overall, the case of the Kurdish rebellion of 1991 follows more classical models of how perceptions of outside support can trigger conflict escalation. Believing that support would be forthcoming, Kurds took the risk to escalate conflict with Baghdad. Since the Iraqi opposition was not receiving substantial support from the international community, there was little need to consider potential losses in foreign support. The miscalculation, therefore, was over potential gains in support as a response to the uprising.

2017: Miscalculating Losses in Support

From 1991 to 2003, Operation Provide Comfort and Operation Northern Watch enforced a no-fly zone over northern Iraq, allowing Iraqi Kurds to establish *de facto* autonomy and self-governing institutions like the Kurdistan Regional Government. The subsequent U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 led to *de jure* regional autonomy for northern Iraq and more formally brought Kurdish leaders and parties into a federalized Iraqi state. Although armed Kurdish parties were no longer 'rebels' to the Iraqi state, the continuation of separatist desires and adversarial relations maintained. Over a decade later on 7 June 2017, KRI President Masoud Barzani announced that a referendum on independence would take place that September. The immediate goal of the referendum was to begin a negotiation process with Baghdad toward independence, but not to trigger independence itself. As such, the 2017 push for greater autonomy was fashioned as a political escalation, even if it generated a violent response from Baghdad.

The decision to escalate Kurdish aspirations in 2017 was based on multiple, reinforcing factors at the national, party, and individual level. On the national level, one could view the referendum as the natural progression of a decades-old self-determination movement, catalyzed by the weakened Iraqi state and the fight against ISIS. There were previous calls for an independence vote ("Iraq Kurdistan Independence Referendum Planned," 2014), and as Barzani declared before the referendum, 'A long time ago I

reached this conclusion that it was necessary to hold a referendum' (MacDiarmid, 2017). Viewing independence as an old and deeply held goal, fueled by nationalism and collective emotion, the referendum itself may appear inevitable. A more strategic explanation at the national level would be that Iraqi Kurds viewed late-2017 as a particularly opportune moment to trade in international goodwill for greater sovereignty and to solidify Kurdish territorial gains from fighting the Islamic State. From the party perspective, many viewed Barzani and the KDP's push for the referendum as a way to consolidate domestic power at the expense of their political rivals.[18] After all, although an independent Kurdistan had been a dream for nearly all Kurds, the referendum was shepherded by President Barzani and the KDP, along with parts of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) leadership, but without the support of opposition parties like the Gorran Movement and Kurdistan Islamic Group.[19] At the individual level – if one were to view Barzani as the critical decision-maker behind the referendum – personal aspirations to shepherd the birth of a Kurdish state would be strong for the long-time leader. Collectively, each of these factors help explain the motivations for why Iraqi Kurds escalated their pursuit of greater sovereignty in 2017. But how did Kurdish perceptions of foreign support interact with these existing motivations to produce conflict escalation? [20]

The conventional wisdom is that Barzani and others took the risky escalation because they believed support for independence would ultimately be forthcoming, and thus a good time to act on long-held ambitions. Existing foreign support could be translated into greater gains vis-à-vis Baghdad in pursuit of independence. And even if initially hesitant, Erbil's international backers would ultimately provide at least some support for Kurdish independence aspirations.[21] Therefore, what the Kurds had presumably miscalculated was additional support for the escalation itself. I argue, however, that the most likely explanation is that Kurdish decision-makers believed that holding the referendum would simply not lead to a loss of foreign support for the status quo. By assuming Erbil's international allies would defend the pre-referendum status quo – i.e. existing territorial holdings, high levels of military and fiscal aid, and assurances against military aggression or sovereignty encroachments from Baghdad – so long as the fight against ISIS continued, Kurds felt that the risks of gambling for greater autonomy were mitigated.

As such, one can view Kurdish perceptions of a stable, lower bound of foreign support as a necessary but not sufficient condition that encouraged Kurdish leaders to act on their national, partisan, and personal motives without fear of losing external support.[22] Regardless of the diverse set of motivations behind the referendum itself, the belief that the KRI's foreign sponsors would actively defend the status quo may have convinced the referendum's architects it was worthwhile. Counterfactuals are difficult to assess, but one could argue that without the belief in a strong lower bound of foreign support, the impetus for the referendum may have existed but the odds of it being carried out would be lower due to fears of punishment and abandonment by its international allies.

Although it may be too soon after the referendum to discern the precise perceptions of the Kurdish leadership, we can make reasonable assumptions about whether the upper or lower bounds of foreign support were most likely to be misread.[23] To do so, we can first examine the likelihood that Kurdish leaders miscalculated the prospects of forthcoming support for the referendum and the eventual goal of independence.

There is some likelihood that supporters of the referendum believed the KRG's international supporters would eventually back the push for greater autonomy. As some analysts have mentioned, this false perception may have been the result of over estimating the effects of KRG lobbying campaigns in Washington and other capitals, and trusting those who provided a skewed image of foreign support for Kurdish independence aspirations (Hiltermann, 2017). Furthermore, Kurds may have overestimated their gains in support from foreign allies as a result of their fight against ISIS since the summer of 2014, when the Islamic State captured nearly a third of Iraqi territory in June and by August attacked deep into KRG-controlled territory. Certainly, the Kurds would have reason to believe that the conditions were favorable for outside support for independence to increase in 2017. Notably, the war against the Islamic State and the central role that Kurds in Iraq and Syria played in the counter-offensives may have convinced Iraq's Kurds that they would be rewarded politically for their sacrifice (Hiltermann & Frantappie, 2018; Mansour, 2017).

Yet there are few reasons to assume that the referendum's decision-makers believed their international backers would suddenly endorse the outcome of the vote and the ultimate pursuit of independence. For example,

it had long been U.S. policy to maintain a centralized Iraq, even at the height of American-Kurdish campaigns of cooperation – this includes U.S. support for Kurdish rebellion in the mid-1970s, U.S. support for Kurdish self-rule in the 1990s, and even after the defeat of Saddam Hussein in 2003.[24] Additionally, at nearly every mention of escalating its sovereignty demands against Baghdad, the Kurds received resistance from its foreign backers. As soon as the referendum was announced, Western capitals publicly called on the Kurds to postpone the vote (Hussein, 2017). As the referendum drew closer and intra-Kurdish and Iraqi rhetoric heated, Kurdistan's supporters grew even more public and aggressive in their non-support for the referendum. American officials openly supported Iraqi Prime Minister Abadi's calls that the referendum be postponed ("US Urges Kurds to Call Off Independence Vote," 2017), meaning that the U.S. – usually careful to appear impartial between Erbil and Baghdad in public – became openly hostile to Erbil's ambitions (Kaplan & Mardini, 2017a). Foreign supporters of the KRG went to great lengths to try to postpone the vote, including an alternative UN-backed proposal to begin formal discussions on the future of Kurdish independence ("Kurdistan Refuses Current US-Backed Alternative to Referendum," 2017). Aside from public support from Israel, the international arena was resoundingly and clearly signaling that no support would be forthcoming should the Kurds escalate.

However, if supporters of the Kurdistan referendum did not overestimate international support for Kurdish independence, what did they miscalculate? Why were Iraqi Kurds caught off-guard when the referendum led to net losses? The most likely answer is that Kurdish officials miscalculated potential losses of support (i.e. the lower bounds of support) as a result of pushing for greater autonomy. While it was clear that foreign support would not increase to meet Kurdish escalation demands, it was less clear that foreign support for the KRG's existing sovereignty would diminish, allowing Baghdad and others to impose unexpected costs on the KRG. As such, the greatest shock to Kurdish officials after the September 25 vote was not that the KRG's foreign backers refused to uphold the referendum, but that the U.S. and others failed to protect the KRG from losing influence, territory, and power in its aftermath.

Iraqi Kurds may have interpreted significant increases in foreign support as solidifying support for the lower bounds of foreign support, or the status quo of strong regional autonomy. In addition to direct military intervention

to bolster Kurdish and Iraqi defenses, foreign support was provided to the Kurds in the form of military training, arms, and financing. But such support came with clear limits and foreign allies were careful to clarify the upper bounds of their support even as their support for the status quo increased and solidified. Assistance was intended to help Kurds fight ISIS as partners with the Iraqi federal government, not to encourage Kurdish independence aspirations by bolstering their autonomous power. For this reason, the United States agreed to funnel military support to the Kurdish region through Baghdad, upsetting Kurdish counterparts (Knights, 2016; Wong, 2015). Kurdish officials were painfully aware of international desires to keep Iraq united, despite the return of large-scale insurgency in 2014 and the collapse of Iraqi forces in the face of the Islamic State. As such, the pursuit of greater autonomy in 2017 was seen as a push against, not with the wishes of Kurdish allies.

Given substantial increases in foreign support, but open hints that such aid had limits, Iraqi Kurds likely perceived that the lower bounds of foreign support were beginning to solidify over the status quo of Kurdish autonomy. This includes the ability to autonomously conduct international affairs and business, self-government, and security. In short, heavy Western investment in the Kurdistan region's defense and international goodwill from the fight against the Islamic State encouraged the Kurds to believe that existing gains from foreign backers were solidified and that Kurdish sovereignty would be defended by its allies, even if they would not support further gains such as independence (Mansour, 2017).

When the referendum was announced, Kurdish leaders seemed acutely aware that Iraq's neighbors – notably Turkey and Iran – and the international community would not back the pursuit of independence. After all, interventions in Iraq in 2003 and 2014 were openly premised on the policy of a unified Iraq. As Hiltermann notes, the U.S. 'made clear its intent to rebuild the Iraqi state, including its military, and preserve its external borders. All they ever promised the Kurds was business and protection' (Hiltermann, 2017). Negotiations over the 2005 Iraqi constitution made it clear to Kurds that while the U.S. could tolerate a federal Iraq, it would uphold its longstanding policy of a single Iraq (Diamond, 2005). It is perhaps for this reason that referendum was designed to be a vote on independence and not for independence – the critical distinction being that a positive result would not automatically change KRI sovereignty, but

establish a first-step in a likely prolonged negotiation process (Barzani, 2017). While this nuance was eventually lost in Kurdistan, Iraq, and abroad, the immediate goals of the referendum indicated an understanding on the part of Kurds that Iraqis and outsiders would not support a change in Kurdish sovereignty.

After the referendum had passed, U.S. officials joined Iraqi PM Abadi in pressuring the Kurds to nullify its results (Qiblawi, Sirgany, & Said-Moorehouse, 2017). Emboldened by U.S. pressure, Baghdad began joint-military operations with Ankara and Tehran along the KRG's borders and imposed an international flight ban on the KRG. When Iraqi forces, along with Shia militias, clashed with Kurdish *peshmerga* in Kirkuk, retook the city, and continued on to recapture disputed territory from Kurdish forces, Kurdish officials expressed a feeling of betrayal by their allies and experienced a loss in pre-referendum levels of support (Arraf, 2017).

Reflecting on America's behavior in a November 2017 interview, 'Barzani said that he at least expected neutrality from the United States in the Kurdish quest for independence as a tribute to Kurdish Peshmerga sacrifices in the fight against ISIS' ("Barzani: No US 'Support' For Kurdish Referendum if Postponed," 2017). As such, what appears to have shocked Barzani most was the feeling that the U.S. was complicit in Kurdish losses through its vocal opposition to the referendum and failure to deter a clash between Erbil and Baghdad. In Barzani's words,

> We thought the people who were verbally telling us they were our friends, and would support us, that they would have supported us or *if not stay silent* [*neutral*]…Not only did they not support the Peshmerga, but the Peshmerga is getting martyred with their weapons, and they were looking without doing anything.[25]

By not deterring clashes between Baghdad and Erbil and defending the status quo, the U.S. was perceived to have decreased its support for the Kurds.

Why did the Kurds not see the prospect of losing foreign support, leaving the door open for Baghdad to make gains against the Kurds? There are at least three reasons why the Kurds may have believed that its foreign supporters would uphold the status quo and maintain the lower bounds of support, despite escalating against their backer's interests. First, although the U.S. had continuously shunned Kurdish aspirations to gain more autonomy from Iraq since the 2003 invasion, direct Western support for the

KRG had been increasing since the beginning of the 2014 counter-offensive against the Islamic State (Mansour, 2017). Relatedly, the war against the Islamic State had led to a dramatic influx of foreign military personnel and infrastructure in the Kurdistan Region, which Kurds could have viewed as a tripwire for any advancing forces from ISIS, but also Baghdad, Ankara, or Tehran (Mylroie, 2017). With American and Western troops and infrastructure intermingled with *peshmerga*, it would be extremely risky for outsiders to attack those areas. More proactively, Kurdish officials may have also felt that the U.S. would not allow Baghdad or others to *physically* recapture Kurdish-controlled areas in response to the referendum. This perception could be coupled with an understanding of what a U.S.-backed, post-2003 Iraq was built upon: a country in which disputes between Erbil and Baghdad would be dealt with without violence. This was part of the grand bargain in the 2005 Iraqi Constitution process (McGarry & O'Leary, 2007). The Kurds would cede ultimate sovereignty to Baghdad but would be guaranteed regional autonomy and physical security from Baghdad (See Diamond, 2005). As part of this tacit bargain, for example, the U.S. served as mediator during a standoff between Kurdish and Iraqi forces in Khanaqin in 2008 (Peterson, 2008).

Second, Kurdish officials may have believed that some degree of audience costs were constraining their foreign backers, making it harder for them to withdraw support (Fearon, 1994). Should the KRG's allies allow it to suffer losses as a result of the push for greater autonomy, there could be public backlash from their own citizens who now viewed the Kurds in a positive light after their fight against the Islamic State. Additionally, there was belief that Western allies would risk appearing hypocritical if they opposed the vote. Barzani himself seems to have believed this. In an interview with *Foreign Policy*, Barzani remarked: 'If these international players are against this referendum, that means that they are against their own values and principles' (MacDiarmid, 2017).

Third, there may have been ambiguity as to how far the U.S. and others would be willing to back the Kurds in the event of violent conflict with Baghdad because third-parties had to manage the conflicting expectations of Erbil and Baghdad simultaneously (Iddon, 2017). In other words, the U.S. may have been intentionally ambiguous with regards to the extent to which it could or could not guarantee Kurdish security in order to maintain Kurdish compliance without upsetting Baghdad.[26] As such, Kurdish

officials may have relied too heavily on positive perceptions of existing Western support for the KRG and audience cost narratives to assume that the foreign supporters would not sit back and allow Baghdad and others to punish the KRG.

The result was that on October 16 and the proceeding weeks, when control of Kirkuk was transferred to Baghdad and Kurdish *peshmerga* were compelled to cede additional territory, Kurdish officials were caught off guard. And when Baghdad restricted direct air travel to the Kurdistan Region's two airports – without interference from international actors – Kurdish officials were equally perplexed. While they may have expected the Kurdistan referendum to generate minimal, if any gains in foreign support, they had not anticipated net losses from the pre-referendum status quo. In sum, whereas it was the promise of forthcoming support that encouraged Kurds to escalate in 1991, it was faith in the continuity of existing foreign support in 2017 which made the risky referendum gamble more palatable.[27]

Conclusion

Numerous assessments have declared that Iraqi Kurds 'miscalculated' international audiences in the run-up to the independence referendum, but few have unpacked the type of miscalculation made and the mechanisms by which disparate types of miscalculations lead to failed escalations. Previous research has shown that rebels may escalate against the central government when they believe there will be an influx of foreign support to help achieve their goals. This article has demonstrated, however, that even if rebels are certain that additional support for escalatory goals are not forthcoming, they may still escalate if they feel confident that initiating conflict will not generate losses of foreign support. Overall, this article advances our understanding of rebel-state alliances politics, the effects of third-party intervention on civil war dynamics, and self-determination behavior, while also addressing important, policy-relevant debates.

From a policy perspective, correctly signaling the upper and lower bounds of support to local allies may be particularly difficult when the foreign supporter is allied with both the central government and its

opposition. Additionally, escalation due to rebel perceptions about the continuity in foreign support is most likely when rebels already receive high and sustained amounts of foreign aid – a condition which remains true for many armed, non-state actors around the globe.

To avoid future miscalculations, which can be detrimental to local separatists and their backers, foreign supporters should carefully define both the upper and lower bounds of support they are willing to provide local proxies.[28] While the U.S. and others were clear to Iraqi Kurds about their unwillingness to support independence, a lack of clarity on how far they would support the KRG against outside aggression contributed to the Kurdish miscalculation. The episode may have further damaged American interests in Iraq by damaging U.S. credibility vis-à-vis its allies. Although it may be strategic to maintain ambiguity over the upper or lower bounds of support one is willing to offer under some conditions, policymakers should think more carefully about what those conditions are.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1. For a classic discussion on perceptions and miscalculation as a source of conflict, see Jervis (1976).

2. For a broad overview on the influence of third-party intervention and support on rebel decision-making, see Garment and James (2000), Centinyan (2002), Crawford (2005), Wagner (2005), Jenne (2006), Thyne (2006), Kuperman (2006, 2008), Chan (2012), Poast (2015).

3. Since armed separatist movements can be seen as a subset of rebel groups broadly speaking, we can apply theories of rebel conflict escalation to broader discussions of separatist politics.

4. For classic discussions on these inter-state alliance dynamics, see Snyder (1984), Smith (1995), Gartner and Siverson (1996), Leeds (2003). Foreign alliances with local rebels may also

encourage the central government to initiate conflict escalation as the prospect of foreign intervention may encourage the state to strike rebels preemptively to disrupt or test the strength of such their foreign alliance (See Grigoryan, 2010, 2015; Poast, 2015).

5. For extensive debates on the relationship between third-party support and civil war conflict escalation, see Crawford (2005), Wagner (2005), Kuperman (2006), Jenne (2006), Thyne (2006), Grigoryan (2010, 2015), Schultz (2010), Chan (2012), Poast (2015). Centinyan (2002), however, argues foreign support will have no effect on the likelihood of war, but only the degree of belligerent demands.

6. For more on these dynamics in the inter-state context, see Benson, Meirowitz, and Ramsay (2014) and Morrow (2016). On how alliances constrain allies, see Wolfers (1959), Pressman (2008), Fang, Johnson, and Leeds (2014).

7. On how states create alliance ambiguity to avoid entrapment, see Beckley (2015).

8. Kuperman (2006, 2008), Chan (2012). For more on the moral hazard in intra-state conflict, see the special issue of *Ethnopolitics* 4(2). For an argument on how moral hazards may constrain aid recipients, see Benson et al. (2014).

9. On information asymmetries within proxy relationships, see Byman and Kreps (2010), Salehyan (2010), and Salehyan, Gleditsch, and Cunningham (2011). On information asymmetries between parties in civil wars more broadly, see Amegashie (2014). On communication difficulties and uuncertainty among allies, see Smith (2016).

10. Wagner (2005), p. 241. Also, see Crawford (2005).

11. Fears of becoming "entangled" or "entrapped" in an ally's conflict encourages more powerful actors to design agreements that discourage local allies from engaging in risky behavior. This is done by clarifying the conditions in which allies assist and in what ways. See Kim (2011), Benson and Clinton (2016), Lanoszka (2017), Blankenship (2017).

12. While it may be true that "the Kurds have a long history of misreading America's [and others] intentions (Hiltermann, 2017)," I argue that these misreadings have fundamental differences.

13. Other types of miscalculation – e.g. domestic responses to escalation – can be analyzed as well, but our focus is on miscalculations over foreign support.

14. These mixed messages may have been the result of internal disagreement within the U.S. administration over regime change (Charountaki, 2011, p. 168).

15. For an overview of the rebellion, see Goldstein (1992), Jabar (1992).

16. Quoted in Gunter (1992), p. 53.

17. Conversations between the author and Kurdish officials.

18. For an overview of the above points, see Kaplan and Mardini (2017b), Hiltermann (2017).

19. The disagreement was over the process of the referendum, not the goal of independence itself.

20. For a related study on how foreign support for the KRG can affect conflict bargaining with Baghdad, see Morelli and Pischedda (2014). The authors argue that increasing Kurdish bargaining power due to foreign backing would have a dampening effect on the likelihood of an escalation of Kurdish sovereignty demands and associated risk of war.

21. For example, see Young (2017), Yoshioka (2018), among others.

22. On the difficulty and importance of balancing internal and external support for separatist movements, see Caspersen (2015).

23. Given the temporal proximity of the referendum, there is limited data on the personal perceptions of decision-makers. The analysis below employs existing data to provide strong suggestive evidence as to what those perceptions may be.

24. For an overview on this U.S.-Kurdish dynamic throughout the years, see Charountaki (2011), Shareef (2014), and Gibson (2015).

25. Quoted in 'Barzani: No US "support" for Kurdish referendum if postponed' (2017), emphasis added.

26. Hiltermann (2017) argues that ambiguity is consciously built into U.S.-Erbil relations.

27. One could also view the sudden withdrawal of American and Iranian aid from Iraqi Kurds in 1975 as a similar miscalculation over the lower bounds of foreign support.

28. Benson et al. (2014), for example, highlights the importance of negotiating alliance obligation terms to avoid unwanted behavior.

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[Explaining Turkey's Reaction to the September 2017 Independence Referendum in the KRG: Final Divorce or Relationship Reset?](#)

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ABSTRACT In the years preceding the independence referendum held in the KRG in September 2017, the relationship between Ankara and Erbil had blossomed, based on commerce, energy exports, a shared antipathy towards Baghdad and towards the PKK, and interlocking interests between the families and business circles surrounding Turkish president Erdogan and KRG president Barzani. Ankara had even appeared relaxed in the face of Barzani's repeated insistence that an independence referendum would be held. Ankara's fierce reaction to the holding of the referendum, and in particular to its extension to the disputed territory of Kirkuk, took Erbil by surprise. This article will seek to explain Ankara's reaction, and Erbil's failure to anticipate it. It will explore Ankara's aspirations in northern Iraq, its unease both with developments in Rojava and with the PKK/YPG presence in northern Iraq, its commitment to the Turkmen of Kirkuk, its growing dissatisfaction with Erbil, and shifts in power and perspective in Ankara. It will also seek to unpick Barzani's decision to go ahead with a referendum. It will then speculate on possible outcomes for the KRG in Iraq, on whether Baghdad can emerge as a viable longer-term partner for Turkey, and on the extent to which Turkey might be prepared to sustain the economic and political losses that could result from a more permanent and substantive loosening of its ties with Erbil.

Introduction

The referendum question that was put to voters in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) on 25 September 2017, in Kurdish, Arabic, Turkish and Syriac, was, 'Do you want the Kurdistan Region and the Kurdistani areas outside the administration of the Region to become an independent state?' Of a 72% turnout, almost 93% voted yes and around 7% voted no. Overseas observers—including this author—who were present at the referendum noted that although turnout in Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP) areas and in the Kurdish neighbourhoods of Kirkuk was very high and enthusiastic, campaigning in Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) and *Gorran* (Change) strongholds such as Sulaimani was more muted and voter turnout lower, at around 55%. This author was able to observe that in Turkmen, Arab and mixed area of the disputed city of Kirkuk the vote barely exceeded 30%. The referendum left little doubt that a clear majority of Iraqi Kurds aspire to independence from Iraq (Park, Jongerden, Owtram, & Yoshioko, 2017).

Unsurprisingly, the decision to hold the referendum was opposed by Baghdad, which was supported in this stance by its Iranian ally. Iraqi Kurdistan's western friends were also unhappy with Erbil's initiative, and advised strongly against it, seeing it as a distraction from the battle to defeat Islamic State (IS), and wary that Iraqi prime minister Haidar al-Abadi might be compromised by this apparent challenge to Iraq's territorial integrity. However, Ankara was at least as fierce as Iraqi Kurdistan's other friends and neighbours in its condemnation of the decision to hold a referendum, a ferocity that intensified in the days immediately preceding the referendum and in the weeks that followed it. This demands explanation in light of the fact that Turkey's relationship with the government of Iraqi Kurdistan had been developing strongly for almost a decade, in the economic, political and security dimensions. Leading figures on both sides had even began to refer to the relationship as 'strategic', as did some seasoned observers, who expected the relationship to endure over time (Romano, 2015). Turkey apparently had a lot to lose if its ties to Erbil were weakened. So why and how did Ankara and Erbil find themselves in so marked a disagreement?

Road to the Referendum

KDP head Massoud Barzani, who at that time also served as Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) president—in the wake of the referendum he stepped down as president and assumed the chairmanship of a new body, the High Political Council–had repeatedly insisted on the right of Iraqi Kurds to hold a referendum on independence, and did so again in June 2014. The collapse of the Iraqi army in the face of the IS attack on Mosul enabled Kurdish Peshmerga forces to expand the area under their control by 40% (Coles & Kalin, 2016), thereby incorporating areas beyond the recognised territory of the KRG but over which the Kurds staked a claim, such as the Kirkuk governorate, and parts of Diyala, Nineveh and Sala ad-Din governorates, mainly located along the KRG's southern border (Kane, 2011). Barzani now declared his intention to hold a referendum on Kurdish independence within 'a matter of months', asserting that Iraq was already 'effectively partitioned'.[1] In a reference to Article 140 of the 2005 Iraqi federal constitution, which had obliged Iraq's government to 'perform a census and conclude through referenda in Kirkuk and other disputed territories the will of their citizens' before 31 December 2007, Barzani now declared that 'Article 140 has been completed for us, and we will not talk about it anymore'.[2] The 'disputed' territories were now non-negotiable. Many Kurdish leaders not only consider Iraq's failure to implement Article 140 a constitutional violation, but also as indicating Baghdad's unwillingness to adjust to the notion of a federal Iraq (Bartu, 2010; Kane, 2011).

Calling a referendum so soon after the fall of Mosul proved premature and, ultimately, provocative. By August 2014 Peshmerga forces were being expelled from some of their newly acquired positions by IS fighters, and Erbil itself seemed at risk. It took a US-led bombing campaign against IS to stabilise the situation. The focus now was on the battle to defeat IS in northern Iraq, in which Peshmerga forces cooperated with Iraqi security forces and the US-led coalition, western members of which provided arms and training to the peshmerga. Barzani was persuaded to delay his referendum plan. As the battle to liberate Mosul drew to a close in 2017, he resurrected it. On 7 June, he announced that a non-binding independence referendum would be held on 25 September. It was initially unclear whether

the disputed areas would be included in the referendum. However, in August 2017 the Kurdish contingent on Kirkuk's 41-member provincial council voted to approve incorporating Kirkuk into the referendum plan. Arab and Turkmen council members boycotted the vote. The referendum was also to be extended to other areas now under Peshmerga control.

Barzani seemed convinced that the KRG had proved itself indispensable in the battle against IS and that this would shape international responses to a referendum. IS had challenged the borders that had been left behind by the departing British and French, the viability of both Iraq and Syria looked questionable, and sectarian differences threatened to tear apart much of the middle east (Gunter, 2015). Such chaos appeared to offer a historical opportunity for Kurds to correct past wrongs. Furthermore, there had been little progress on Erbil's differences with Baghdad over energy or territorial issues, and Arab Iraq had descended into chaos and sectarian tension. Barzani also noted the extent to which Iraq's security forces had become entwined with some of the often Iranian-backed Popular Mobilisation Units (PMUs, also known as Hashd al-Shaabi). On 24 September, Barzani again referred to Iraq as a sectarian state and said that 'the partnership with Iraq has failed'.[3] He hoped that his western partners, and maybe Turkey too, had arrived at similar conclusions. He gambled that a referendum would trigger international engagement in the settlement of Iraqi Kurdistan's future status (Zaman, 2018). On a personal front, Barzani might also have felt that this was his last and best opportunity to lead Iraqi Kurdistan towards independence (Amanpour, 2014). Furthermore, his unconstitutional extension of his presidency (the parliament extended his presidency only for two more years in June 2013) and his suspension of Kurdistan's parliament, which had not met for almost two years, had undermined his own legitimacy, as had the perception of widespread KRG corruption, nepotism and repression. He may have surmised that an independence referendum would distract attention from this brewing storm. In other words, if not now, when?

The Ankara–Erbil Axis

International sympathy was not forthcoming, however, and Barzani's determination to go ahead with the referendum in the face of external opposition, particularly from Ankara, is striking, and constitutes a misjudgement of monumental proportions. It had long been a mantra of senior Kurdish figures, above all in the KDP, that the KRG could not attain independence without the support or at least acquiescence of one or more of its neighbours. For example, in a December 2012 interview with Time Magazine, KRG prime minister Nechirvan Barzani, nephew of President Barzani, possible heir apparent, and architect of Erbil's relationship with Turkey, said 'First of all, we have to convince at least one country around us. Without convincing them we cannot do this. Being land locked we have to have a partner, a regional power to be convinced'. 'The door of hope', he continued, 'is Turkey'. (Newton-Small, 2012; Park, 2014, p. 45). However, that had not always been the case.

Ankara had initially struggled to reconcile itself to the KRG's emergence, fearing the impact it might have on its own domestic Kurdish problems (Lundgren, 2007; Park, 2005). However, over time a number of factors produced a shift in Ankara's approach to the KRG—or, more accurately, to the KDP and its leader. Barzani shared Ankara's mistrust of the Kurdistan Workers Party (*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan*, or PKK), was irritated that its presence in the border zone and the Qandil mountains on KRG territory drew Turkish military attention, and was prepared to offer limited assistance to Turkish security forces in their fight against it. In any case, Erbil had Washington's blessing and was recognised in Iraq's 2005 constitution. Ankara's cold-shouldering of the KRG seemed increasingly unrealistic. The political influence of Turkey's General Staff (TGS), associated with Turkey's hard-line stance on Kurdish issues, was waning as a consequence of its losing domestic political battle with the *Adalet ve Kalkınma* (AKP) government of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, and anyway, its securitised approach had met with scant success. Ahmet Davutoglu's appointment as foreign minister in 2009, with his commitment to a 'zero problems' approach to neighbourhood relationships[4] (Aras, 2009), was an additional factor behind the transformation of Ankara–Erbil relationships. Davutoglu's visit to Erbil in October of that year led to the opening of a Turkish consulate there in 2010.

In parallel, the sectarianism of Iraqi prime minister Nouri al-Maliki (r. 2006–2014) clashed with Ankara's cultivation of Iraq's Sunni Arabs and

contributed to a deterioration in Turkey–Iraq relations. Baghdad accused Ankara of meddling in Iraq's internal affairs, suggested Turkish aerial attacks against the PKK in northern Iraq constituted a violation of Iraq's airspace, and criticised the presence of Turkish troops on Iraqi soil (Raphael, 2012; Yegin & Ozertem, 2013). It was proving far easier for Ankara to conduct a constructive political relationship with Barzani than it was with Baghdad. In 2012, Barzani was an honoured guest at the AKP's annual convention, whereas Maliki had refused to attend. In November 2013, Barzani and Erdogan even shared a platform in Turkey's Kurdish city of Diyarbakir, where Barzani expressed his support for Turkey's Kurdish peace process and acclaimed the brotherhood between Turks and Kurds (Tezcur, 2013). Barzani insisted that the aspirations of Turkey's Kurds were a matter between them and Ankara.

On the economic front, Ankara's trade and energy relationship with Erbil had also stormed ahead of that with Baghdad. By 2014, 110,000 Turkish citizens were officially resident in the KRG and around 1500 Turkish companies were operating there—well over half the total number of foreign firms in Iraqi Kurdistan—and it was reckoned that 80% of the goods on sale in the KRI were Turkish. Seventy per cent of Turkey's trade with Iraq was with the Kurdish quasi-state (Fidan, 2016; Park, 2014, pp. 8–14). Energy considerations were also becoming central to the Ankara–Erbil relationship (Mills, 2018; Paasche & Mansurbeg, 2014). The KRG's dynamic approach to the development of its energy resources synergised with Ankara's aspiration to develop as an energy 'hub' and to minimise its dependency on Iran for most of its oil and on Russia for 50% of its gas imports.

Encouraged by the arrival of major companies such as ExxonMobil in 2011, Turkey began accepting oil trucked directly from Iraqi Kurdistan in 2012, as did Iran. In early 2014 Kurdish oil began flowing through a new pipeline that connected the Kurdish oilfields with the existing Kirkuk-Ceyhan pipeline, for export from the Turkish port of Ceyhan—illegally, as far as Baghdad was concerned, a position supported by Washington. Turkish energy minister Taner Yildiz reassured Erbil that, notwithstanding Iraq's crisis, 'if there is oil (to be exported) we will transit it',[5] and they did. Such was their confidence in the relationship that in June 2014 Nechirvan Barzani announced the signing of a 50-year oil export agreement with Ankara. There were also ambitious plans to export Iraqi Kurdish gas to

Turkey via a pipeline, although that remained a downstream project for the time being.

By early 2017, two-thirds of the oil that arrived in Ceyhan via the Kurdish pipeline originated in the Kirkuk supergiant fields that had been captured by the Kurdish forces in 2014. Given the lack of any agreement with Baghdad over who 'owned' Kirkuk, it is not surprising that Baghdad regarded these shipments as theft, in which Turkey was deemed complicit. There was precious little transparency concerning the details of this trade (Osgood, 2018), and it is widely suspected that both KDP and PUK leaders, and members of Erdogan's entourage, have benefited handsomely. Washington was uneasy about the implications of the KRG's energy independence for Iraq's unity, but its attempts to pressure Turkey to limit its energy engagement with Erbil irritated Ankara (van Wilgenburg, 2013).

Energy and trade were not the only issues that brought Erbil and Ankara together. Security understandings also played a part. As we have seen, Barzani had been supportive of Turkey's domestic 'peace process' with the PKK. He had his own reasons to dislike the PKK, seeing them as ideological opposites, as rivals for the leadership of Kurdish nationalism and as a threat to his relationship with Ankara.[6] The PKK-affiliated Syrian Kurdish Democratic Union Party (*Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat*, or PYD) had resisted Barzani's attempts to subordinate it to the Kurdish National Council (KNC, otherwise known as *Encûmena Nistimanî ya Kurdî li Sûriyê*, or ENKS), a coalition of Syrian Kurdish groups that was formed in 2011 under Barzani's sponsorship and which the PYD had largely marginalised. Indeed, the KRG—or, rather, the KDP—had, like Turkey, closed its border with the PYD-governed Qamishli even as the People's Protection Units (*Yekîneyên Parastine Gel* or YPG)—the armed wing of the PYD—was battling jihadi elements. It also refused to recognise the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria (DFNS), the name given in 2016 to the three Kurdish self-governing entities in northern Syria that had hitherto been known as Rojava, in an attempt to dilute its predominantly Kurdish character. The role played by PKK and YPG fighters in defending Sinjar and Makhmur in Iraqi Kurdistan against the IS attack of June 2014, and which gained them a foothold in the region, was of equal concern to both Barzani and Ankara. For the PKK/YPG Sinjar offered an alternative to Turkey as a route into northern Syria, but its presence—and its formation of armed units among Yezidis, a Kurdish speaking religious minority viciously

attacked by the IS,—threatened Barzani with a loss of control over part of his fiefdom, and—as Erdogan saw it—offered yet another base from which the PKK could launch operations into Turkey[7] and link with its sister YPG in Syria. Both Ankara and Erbil repeatedly called on the PKK/YPG to leave Sinjar, and both had threatened to use force to expel it if necessary (Hawez, 2017; Sadullah, 2015; Tastekin, 2015).

The Erosion of the Relationship?

However, when the KRG was threatened by IS in the summer of 2014, it was Iran rather than Turkey that first rushed to Erbil's aid. Indeed, military and other assistance began to arrive from a number of countries, but not from Turkey. According to Fuad Hussein, president Barzani's chief of staff, Ankara had refused to assist 'even after we asked for help'. Thus Ankara 'did not meet our expectation', he said, and that given 'every single Kurd is upset with Turkey's position, how would president Barzani not be upset?' (Hevidar, 2014; Zaman, 2015a; Zaman, 2015b). Turkey's wider regional foot-dragging in the battle against IS put pressure on the Erbil–Ankara relationship, as well as on Turkey's increasingly tense relationships with its western partners. For example, no help was forthcoming from Turkey during the IS siege of the Syrian Kurdish town of Kobane that had commenced in September 2014. The US was not allowed to use Turkey's Incirlik base from which to mount bombing raids against the besieging IS forces, and it took intense international pressure before Turkey would allow Kurdish forces to transit Turkish territory in order to help in Kobane's defence (Sherlock & Spencer, 2014). The battle for Kobane became, and remains, an important symbol for pan-Kurdish sentiment, and Turkey's indifference is remembered by Kurds with considerable bitterness.

Baghdad's withholding of the KRG's share of the federal budget, and the chaos and burdens of the war against IS, slowed Iraqi Kurdistan's economy considerably and reduced the opportunities there for Turkish business interests. Even so, Turkey made loans available to the KRG during this difficult time, and the economic and energy ties with Ankara remained intact. However, Ankara's preoccupation both with the emergence of Rojava in Syria and the end of the 'peace process' with the PKK by mid-

2015 added to doubts in Erbil concerning Turkish priorities. Nor were Turkish forces integrated into the US-led effort to free Mosul from IS control, despite the presence of Turkish forces in the area—whose primary function was to monitor PKK activities.

On the ground, YPG, PKK, and the KRG's Peshmerga forces became de facto if uneasy allies in the battle against IS. The KRG even allowed the PKK to move its forces and weapons out of its bases in the Qandil mountains to join the battle against IS in Syria and indeed in Sinjar, whereas Turkey offered little. In Syria, Turkey was widely suspected of aiding a range of other jihadi and typically al Qaeda-affiliated groups bent on fighting YPG forces there. PYD leader Salih Muslim was far from alone in accusing Turkey of providing arms and sanctuary to IS (Bekdil, 2015; Ozkan, 2015; Pipes, 2017; Tahiroglu & Schanzer, 2017). With the breakdown of the 'peace process' in Turkey, for which many Kurds and non-Kurds alike blamed Ankara, from the summer of 2015 onwards Turkey resumed air strikes on PKK bases in northern Iraq. Although Barzani called upon the PKK to vacate its bases in the Qandil mountains, he also criticised Turkey and blamed Turkish air strikes for the deaths of several Iraqi Kurdish civilians.[8] PUK and Gorran leaders were more outspokenly critical.

From Ankara's perspective, Erbil had failed to act decisively against the PKK/PYD presence in Sinjar, notwithstanding Barzani's demands that they leave the area. Barzani had even thanked YPG units for their efforts around Sinjar. In April 2017, and simultaneous with its bombing raid against YPG targets in north-eastern Syria, Ankara also bombed a base in Sinjar, northern Iraq, used by Yazidi units affiliated to the PKK. It is possible that the raid was in part an expression of frustration with Erbil's inaction. The KDP leadership expressed its disappointment in relatively mild terms, whereas the other major Iraqi Kurdish factions more roundly condemned Turkey's action. Baghdad also condemned the Turkish raids.[9] Barzani was perhaps proving to be a less valuable strategic asset than Ankara had hoped, and Ankara a less accommodating neighbour than Erbil thought it had become.

Explaining Turkey's Reaction to the Referendum: Erdoğan

As the referendum approached, Turkey's displeasure—and that of Iran, Baghdad and the KRG's western partners—was made increasingly clear (Uyanik, 2017). It cut little ice that the KRG leadership repeatedly insisted that the referendum would be non-binding, that it was not about to declare independence unilaterally, and that it stood ready to negotiate the terms of its future relationship with Baghdad. From the outset, Ankara's position broadly mirrored that of the west and indeed of Iran. The Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) issued a statement declaring this to be a 'grave mistake', and poorly timed in light of the regional security situation, and reiterated Ankara's commitment to a unified Iraq.

In extending the referendum to Kirkuk, KRG leaders appear to have discounted Turkey's harsh reaction to the decision in March 2017 to fly the Kurdish flag on Iraqi government buildings in Kirkuk. On that occasion, Erdogan reasserted what had long been Ankara's position—that Kirkuk was 'historically a Turkmen city regardless of whether some accept it or not', and accused the KRG of 'an act of occupation'. He denounced Barzani for 'engaging in an effort to conduct certain operations there despite knowing our sensitivity', and insisted there would be a price to pay.[10] Warnings such as this one came thick and fast from Ankara in the months that followed but to no avail. KRG leaders might also have noted that Turkey had reportedly trained and was ready to arm a 400-strong Turkmen militia force in Kirkuk province.[11] There had been Kurdish-Turkmen clashes just a week before the referendum took place. Local Turkmen echoed Ankara's view that the referendum would lead to Iraq's partitioning, and they boycotted it largely for that reason, as did Kirkuk's Arabs. In short, there was ample warning that Turkey was unlikely to back down in its insistence that Iraq remains unified and that Kirkuk was not and could not be exclusively Kurdish controlled.

It is possible, even likely, that Barzani concluded that Ankara's threats were largely bluster and aimed at a domestic audience—a point subsequently made by Masrour Barzani, the president's son, possible heir apparent, and head of the KRG's Security Council (Zaman, 2018). It was

certainly the case that, at least until the days just before and after the referendum was held, some Turkish comment was critical rather than threatening. For example, in late August—just a few weeks before the referendum was due - Turkish foreign minister Mevlut Cavusoglu insisted that Turkey's trade with the KRG and the holding of the referendum were not connected and that Turkey had no plans to close the border.[12] Yet as the referendum approached and it became clear that Barzani was not prepared to call it off, and in the days and weeks that followed the vote too, the rhetoric became more menacing. Erdoğan warned that the KRG's 'adventure' was an act of 'treachery' and 'will be over when we close the oil taps, all [their] revenues will vanish, and they will not be able to find food when our trucks stop going to northern Iraq'.[13] In early October he threatened that Turkey was 'soon' to close its border with the KRG and that it could bring Iraqi Kurdistan to its knees economically.[14] In fact, Turkey did not carry out this threat, nor many of the others that it issued in the days immediately preceding and following the referendum—to shut down the oil pipeline that carries Kurdish oil to world markets via the Turkish port of Ceyhan, to terminate Ankara's energy partnership with Erbil and to henceforth conduct all energy business with Iraq via Baghdad, or even to use military force against the KRG. Ankara consulted closely with Tehran —both countries conducted military exercises on their borders with the KRG—and Baghdad, and fully supported the Iraqi government's tough stance, but in practical terms it did little.

Turkey's relative inaction, and its contrast with Erdogan's rhetorical bluster, does lend support to the proposition that the Turkish president's main concern was with nationalist sentiment at home. At that time the AKP was yet to enter into coalition with Turkey's nationalist MHP (*Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi*, or Nationalist Action Party), whose voter base overlapped with Erdogan's and with which his party was in competition. A formal AKP-MHP alliance did not come until the June 2018 presidential and parliamentary elections in Turkey. On the other hand, it is arguably a rather lazy presumption that the Turkish electorate closely follows events in Iraq and assesses its voting options so carefully. Erdogan is himself nationalistic, as indeed are many Turks, and his verbal reaction to the Iraqi Kurdish referendum may have more broadly reflected his own value set as well as those of many of his voters, and the enduring Turkish opposition to Kurdish demands for self-determination, rather than any precise electoral

calculation. It may also have indicated an emotional response to Barzani's 'betrayal'. He reacted in similar fashion to the failure of his hitherto close associate, Syrian president Bashir al-Assad, to follow Ankara's advice in 2011 to enter into negotiations with Syria's Sunni rebels. He has also see-sawed in his relationships with Israel, Russia, and the Gulf states. Erdogan is prone to emotional and hostile rhetoric, which has also been directed at Turkey's western allies, Israel, Egypt, most Gulf states, Baghdad and Iran, and his own domestic opponents.

An approach that seeks purely strategic motives in foreign policy-making might not apply to Erdogan with any great accuracy. His policies have alienated Turkey's western partners, brought its economy to the brink of crisis, weakened the structures of the Turkish state, led to highly risky military interventions in Syria and an escalation of the fight against the PKK in Iraqi Kurdistan, and brought about an intensification of repression of Turkey's own domestic Kurdish movement as well as a wider crackdown on all domestic opposition. As the Iraqi Kurdish referendum was approaching, Erdogan was simultaneously well on the way to laying the political groundwork both for the establishment of a personalised and autocratic presidency, and a fusion of the AKP's social and Islam-inflected conservatism with an intense nationalism, each of which he has subsequently achieved.

Erdogan's foreign policy stances may reflect his confrontational, narcissistic and domineering personality and his nationalistic and aggressive political ideology just as much as does his domestic political behaviour (Hammargren, 2018). Turkish policy-making has become de-institutionalised, and it is far from self-evident that government figures outside his more closely knit personal circle share his temperament or anticipate the stances he might adopt. Nor need his behaviour necessarily further Turkey's interests in the way in which they might normally be understood by outside observers in particular. Consideration such as these might help explain Turkey's—or, rather, Erdogan's—stance towards the Iraqi Kurdish referendum (Cagaptay, 2017; George, 2018; White, 2017).

Explaining Turkey's Reaction to the Referendum: Syria and the PKK

Furthermore, Turkey's behaviour towards the KRG in the months preceding and following the September 2017 referendum needs to be understood in its wider geopolitical context. Above all, Ankara was spooked by developments in Syria, and inside Turkey too, and here there is scope for a more 'rational actor' explanation for Turkey's sensitivities towards Erbil's referendum. Unlike Barzani, Erdogan did not see the challenges to the region's political map as an opportunity, but as a threat. This had become especially so in the case of Syria. In its encouragement of opposition to Damascus Ankara failed to anticipate the emergence of a Kurdish dimension of the Syrian crisis, no doubt because—as with most other observers—it did not anticipate the emergence of the PYD as the best organised and militarily most effective of Syria's otherwise disparate Kurdish groups (International Crisis Group, 2014). Turkey rightly regards the PYD/YPG as umbilically tied to the PKK. The PYD's establishment of the self-governing cantons of Rojava in early 2013 seriously rattled Ankara. Erdogan expressed his concern about the possible 'creation of a structure that threatens our borders'.[15] The Kurdish referendum could be seen as adding further fuel to a potential regional fire that could in due course threaten Turkey's unitary nature too.

Worse still, Washington elected to ramp up its support for the Kurdish-Arab Syrian Democratic Force (SDF), formed in October 2015[16] and regarded by the Pentagon as the most effective force in the Syrian counter-IS campaign. Washington's support for this Kurdish-led force impacted badly on US–Turkish relations, and may also have tapped into widespread Turkish suspicions that the emergence of the KRG too had been a US project. Unsettled by the SDF's military advances, in August 2016 Turkey sent forces—its own and a variety of aligned and largely jihadi groups it dubbed the Free Syrian Army (FSA)—into northern Syria, to prevent Syria's Kurds from connecting their three autonomous cantons, which they now threatened to do with their capture of the hitherto IS-held town of Manbij. Named Operation Euphrates Shield, the operation blocked the SDF path westwards, and formally came to an end in March 2017. However,

intense lobbying from Ankara did not prevent a May 2017 White House decision to directly arm the SDF, including its Kurdish elements, in their bid to wrest control of Raqqa from IS.[17] In September 2017, during the run-up to the KRI's referendum, Turkey participated in the Astana talks between itself, Russia and Iran. The ostensible rationale was to neutralise jihadi groups in the region, but Ankara's thinly veiled purpose was, in fact, to put pressure on Kurdish-controlled Afrin—which Turkey invaded in January 2018 (Kasapoglu & Ulgen, 2018), and shows no sign of leaving. Turkey's concerns in Syria were no longer focused on Assad's overthrow, but on primarily combating Kurdish gains there.

In Turkey too, the Kurdish 'peace process'—such as it was—had collapsed into violent conflict. Against a backdrop of a ceasefire that was barely holding, Turkey's June 2015 elections saw socially conservative Kurdish voters in Turkey's south-east, possibly buoyed by the battle for Kobane, desert the AKP in droves, lifting the pro-Kurdish People's Democratic Party (*Halkların Demokratik Partisi*, or HDP) share of the national vote to 13.1% and causing the AKP to lose its parliamentary majority. In the run-up to the follow-up November election, which restored the AKP majority and reduced the HDP vote, Turkey's security forces engaged in a resumption of fighting against the PKK which involved enforced curfews, bombing of PKK targets in both Turkey and KRG territory, and the flattening of Kurdish towns and cities. Casualties on all sides rocketed, and up to half a million Kurds were displaced from their homes (International Crisis Group, 2016).

Erdogan had learned that a 'peace process' might benefit the Kurdish party, but that he might gain politically from a return to violence. Turkish state violence in the southeast intensified further in the wake of the July 2016 failed coup attempt and the subsequent state of emergency, and then again in the wake of the April 2017 referendum on constitutional amendments which further secured Erdogan's power grip on power. The national and regional leaderships of the HDP and its affiliated parties were arrested, hitherto Kurdish-run councils were taken over by the state, academics and journalists deemed sympathetic to the Kurdish struggle were detained and media outlets closed down (Human Rights Watch, 2017). It indicated the extent to which Erdogan's approach to Kurdish issues now echoed those that had preceded the AKP government. The Turkey that reengineered its approach to the KRG under Davutoglu had adopted a

desecuritised, conciliatory approach to foreign policy and accompanied it with a search for a resolution of its own Kurdish problem. Turkish policy is now resecuritised, assertive and no longer accompanied by a search for domestic peace.

Such was Ankara's position on the eve of the KRI's referendum. In any case, Erbil at the time seemed more disappointed by the position adopted by its western allies, and particularly by Washington and London (Arraf, 2017; Hiltermann, 2017). Just days before the referendum was due to be held, the US and the UK, with the UN, put forward a proposal to facilitate negotiations between Erbil and Baghdad in return for the referendum being deferred for two years.[18] However, Erbil's feeling was that Baghdad could not be trusted to negotiate in good faith, and there were no guarantees after the negotiation period had expired (Zaman, 2018). However, it is possible that Erbil's dismissal of the west's proposals contributed to the late ratcheting up of Ankara's condemnation.

The KRG Exposed

Washington and its western allies did encourage Erbil–Baghdad dialogue in the aftermath of the referendum, but Baghdad's stance towards Erbil following the referendum was unforgiving. Although the federal government did not follow through on all of its numerous threats, Iraqi Kurdistan's airports remained closed for six months, banking and other economic sanctions were imposed, the KRG's share of the federal budget was reduced, and a probe was launched into its energy dealings and the alleged corruption that accompanied them. Indeed, Baghdad argued that proceeds of Erbil's energy exports were owed to the federal government.

More dramatically, however, with barely a fight, Iraqi security forces and their Iranian and PMU allies took back Kirkuk in the early hours of October 16. They met with little resistance. It appears that the US and the UK had prior warning of the attack, whereas Ankara might not have been informed (Zaman, 2018). In any case, the US did nothing to prevent the takeover of Kurdish-held territories,[19] Iran had been prepared to 'bite' after all, and Ankara could do little more than express its approval for a Kurdish loss of territory that Turkey did not regard as rightfully Kurdish in any case. Within

a few days, most of the other areas that the Peshmerga had taken over in June 2014 also fell. Kurdish control had been reduced back down almost to the recognised 'green line'—that delineated the Kurdish self-governing entity. Post-referendum Iraqi Kurdistan is a changed place, economically weaker, politically isolated, and internally divided and in turmoil. Its leadership is discredited abroad and in the eyes of much of its own population (van den Toorn, 2017). This is the KRG with which Ankara will conduct its future relationship.

What Future for Turkey–KRG Relations?

In seeking to compartmentalise its close relationship with Erbil from the oft-repeated independence aspirations of Barzani, Turkey's position had been shot through with contradiction and risk. That the referendum had isolated the Kurds and had led to the loss of their hold over Kirkuk perhaps represented a desired outcome for Ankara, but Turkey now found itself more directly facing a still-sectarian Iraqi government that seemed determined to force Kurdish dependency on Baghdad, was strongly in debt to Tehran, that had long been unhappy with Turkey's military presence in and attacks on Iraqi territory, that was unhappy with Ankara's role in facilitating Erbil's energy exports, and that is yet to eradicate IS. Barzani, Turkey's leading Iraqi Kurdish ally, was chastened and the KRG weakened. Discord within the KRG mounted in the referendum's aftermath, and in the immediate wake of Iraq's highly controversial May 2018 federal elections, during which the KDP and PUK were widely suspected of tampering with the votes. Erbil's future relationship with Baghdad had yet to take shape. It is hard at the time of writing to foretell how this will pan out, but what follows are some considerations that might be taken into account. Although the KDP's patronage networks and the divisions amongst the Kurdish opposition will combine to ensure that the KDP will remain the major Iraqi Kurdish political actor for the foreseeable future, any erosion of Massoud Barzani's or the KDP's dominance of the political scene in the KRG could pose serious challenges to Ankara's influence in Iraqi Kurdistan. A possible foretaste was offered by the expulsion of the PUK's Ankara representative in August 2017 following the detention of Turkish intelligence officers by

the PKK in the PUK-controlled Sulaimani area.[20] Then, in March 2018 the PUK owned *Kurdsat* media station withdrew Turkish programmes from its schedule in protest at Ankara's incursion into Afrin. There were informal boycotts of Turkish goods. For its part, Ankara refused to resume flights to Suleymaniya in March 2018, alleging PUK collusion with the PKK. The PUK, Gorran, the KIG and other Iraqi Kurdish political parties are more sympathetic to the PKK and the PYD than is the KDP, and between them have mounted a number of demonstrations in the KRG against the Turkish attacks on the YPG in Syria, notably Afrin. In the wake of a special session in the KRG's parliament on the Turkish attack on the Kurdish canton of Afrin in northwest Syria, a KRG parliamentary delegation visited Afrin in February 2018 to express solidarity with the YPG's resistance. Tellingly, it included a KDP MP and seemed to have been supported by Masrour Barzani (Zaman, 2018). Indeed, should he emerge victorious in any future struggle for power against the president's nephew Nechirvan, the KDP's ties to Ankara could loosen further (Rasheed, 2018). For the time being though, Nechirvan remains committed to the resurrection of the Erbil–Ankara axis.

In economic terms, it is unlikely that the Iraqi Kurdistan will be as lucrative for Turkish business as has been the case in the past. In terms of trade and investment, Turkey will be the main loser from the KRG's fall from grace. Even prior to the referendum, Iraqi Kurdistan's economy had deteriorated considerably. Baghdad's withholding of the KRG's share of the budget from early 2014 onwards, a drop in the global price of oil, the uncertainty caused by, and costs incurred as a result of the struggle against IS, and the cost to the KRG of hosting well in excess of a million displaced people —Kurds, Arabs and Yezidis —from elsewhere in Iraq and from Syria, all brought Iraqi Kurdistan's hitherto booming economy to a standstill. Opportunities for Turkish traders, construction companies and the like all but dried up. In the aftermath of the referendum, Baghdad's unilateral reduction of the KRG's share of the federal budget and the economic pressure that it subjected Kurdistan to, all meant that the region's economy deteriorated further.

With the October 2017 re-taking of Kirkuk, it was not clear at the time of writing how Kirkuk oil will be exported, if at all. The Kurds still control the pipeline that came into operation in 2014 and continue to export oil via Ceyhan from KRG fields, but that amounted only to around one-third of the

pre-October 2017 levels. Indeed, Baghdad had also raised the issue of Turkey's role in and revenue from this export trade and sought repayment to Iraq's central coffers of both Erbil's and Turkey's earnings from it. Baghdad's task in recovering these revenues will not be easy given the lack of transparency that has characterised Erbil–Ankara energy dealings (Osgood, 2018). Nevertheless, the issue is likely to cause difficulties between Baghdad and Ankara. In any case, unless the pipeline is forcibly wrested from Kurdish control, or Erbil enters into an agreement with Baghdad, Kirkuk's oil cannot be exported via Ceyhan. Thus, for the foreseeable future, Turkey can expect reduced transit and storage fees for Kurdish oil exports. It is also possible that Baghdad will seek to build a pipeline to or otherwise market Kirkuk oil in Iran, or send the oil southwards towards Basra, or neglect the Kirkuk field altogether. Should any of these options come to pass, Turkey will lose revenue, influence, and one prop in its attempts to ensure diversity of energy supplies.

An additional complication is the acquisition by the Russian energy giant Rosneft of a 60% stake in the Kurdish section of the pipeline to Ceyhan, and its purchase of five exploration blocs from Erbil. If the Kirkuk field is to be developed further and its oil exported via Ceyhan, there will need to be an understanding between Rosneft and BP, who have been Baghdad's partner of choice in the modernisation and exploitation of the Kirkuk fields, and Baghdad. In effect, this might mean that Moscow will find itself negotiating on behalf of the KRG, given Rosneft's proprietorship of the pipeline and some of the oil that will go through it. On the eve of the referendum, Rosneft also signed a deal with the KRG to construct gas pipelines, which in due course will be the main export route for gas to Turkey. Rosneft's developing energy relationship with the KRG should be seen in the context of Moscow's relatively understanding reaction to Kurdistan's referendum. The exclusive energy relationship that Ankara built up with Erbil now looks set to erode in the years to come, while Russia's role has augmented.

With the liberation of Sinjar, the profile of PKK/PYD forces there was lowered. Turkey might be happy with this erosion of the PKK/PYD presence in Sinjar but it not self-evident that it will be comfortable with the PMU and enhanced Iranian presence that had largely replaced it. In the meantime, Iran's footprint in Iraq, including Iraqi Kurdistan, has enlarged. Tehran is similarly entrenched in Syria. An enhanced Iranian profile

throughout Iraq could be a problem if the broader sectarian tensions and rivalries between Tehran and Ankara persist. It is possible nevertheless that Ankara will regard PMU, Iranian or Iraqi control of Sinjar a preferable outcome than having to tolerate a YPG presence there, just as it preferred and was happier to live with an IS presence on its southern border than with the YPG control that replaced it, and just as it seems happier to have enabled an assortment of jihadi factions that constitute the bulk of its FSA allies to share control of Afrin with Turkish forces—whose presence is resented by Damascus—than to have the canton dominated by YPG forces. Turkey's fear of Kurdish gains is real enough, but this does not make such gains worse than all possible alternatives, even if Ankara proves incapable of appreciating that. When we consider the future prospects of the Turkey–KRG relationship, it should be borne in mind that it constitutes just one of a number of troubled Turkish diplomatic relationships in recent years. It is not only the KRG that might find Turkey a difficult partner in the years to come, and it is not only in its relationship with the KRG that Turkey might act in ways that encourage outcomes that serve to undermine its own best interests. In short, the circumstances of both Turkey and the KRI are not what they were in 2014, or even 2017. Recent events in Iraqi Kurdistan have not been Turkey's fault. However, the negative potentialities that now lie ahead have much to do with Ankara's risk-taking and overly assertive behaviour. That will be one of the biggest determining factors of Turkey's future relationship with the KRG. So too will Turkey's continuing sensitivities—some might regard it as paranoia—towards Kurdish demands for self-determination, wherever they might be expressed. Turkey now finds itself engaged in what could evolve into an open-ended and contested occupation of parts of northern Syria, in the face of not only Kurdish but also Syrian government and even US opposition, and in yet another round of violent conflict with the PKK, both at home and in northern Iraq. Erdogan has also destroyed and appears to have abandoned altogether any immediate hopes for a political settlement to Turkey's domestic Kurdish difficulties. These will not prove ideal circumstances in which to restore the damaged Ankara–Erbil relationship.

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[Governing Kurdistan: Self-Administration in the Kurdistan Regional Government in Iraq and the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria](#)

JOOST JONGERDEN

ABSTRACT On 25 September 2017, voters in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq and disputed areas controlled by Kurdish forces were given the opportunity to respond 'Yes' or 'No' to the question 'Do you want the Kurdistan Region and the Kurdistani areas outside the administration of the Region to become an independent state?' Functioning as an expression of the desire to construct an independent state, the referendum signalled a break with the formal Kurdistan Regional Government position of constructive engagement for greater power and autonomy within a unified Iraq. Meanwhile, on 22 September 2017, the neighbouring population in the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria elected co-chairs for the approximately 3,700 'communes', which form the basis of what is claimed to be a non-state governmental system. In this region of the northern Middle East, therefore, divided by the Iraqi-Syria border and under the influence of two distinct Kurdish movements, two quite different and competing government systems have emerged. One is based on the idea of the nation-state, the other on societal self-organization. The main questions addressed in this contribution is how these two systems of governance differ and what the societal implications are of these differences? Data on the political-

administrative practices has been collected on basis of field work in both regions in the period 2015–2017. A main conclusion is that the systems differ strongly in terms of political outlook, with profound implications for the nature of citizenship and inter-ethnic and inter-religious relations.

Introduction

In 1991, a de facto independent region of Kurdistan in Iraq came into existence after a forced retreat of Iraqi forces; two decades later, in 2012, a fracturing of the central state in Syria gave rise to a system of local self-government in this Kurdistan region. Thus, in both southern (Iraqi) Kurdistan (*Başur*) and western (Syrian) Kurdistan (*Rojava*) the weakness of the central power enabled new entities to emerge. The aims of the Kurdish actors and the nature of the entities that emerged, however, differed greatly. The Kurdistan region in Iraq today can be considered a proto-state or statelet, while the Kurdistan region in Syria is quite different, with a self-identity, political system and further aspirations toward a non-statist, confederated form of locally based self-administration.

This article discusses these two forms of governance, looking at their development and comparing them in relation to the idea of the state. I will argue that the problematic and changing relation to the state-idea shaped the main Kurdish movements in the northern Middle East in several ways. Pursuing a doctrine that civilized societies have a state and that the establishment of a state would bring the ultimate recognition of Kurds in modern society, Kurdish political movements historically shaped their political programmes around the objective of state formation, with self-determination as the right on the basis of which recognition as a people and state-formation was considered legitimate. This could take the form of autonomy, a form of self-government within the larger political unit named the state, but could also take the form of the establishment of a state. While a main ideological difference between Kurdish political parties used to be in terms of the state-form it pursued, the distinguishing character since the 2000s has become between those who maintained the state-idea as ultimate objective and those who rejected it, attempting to articulate a form of non-state government.

The two forms of governance discussed in this article are linked to two currents within the Kurdish movement, currents that have dominated the Kurdish political spectrum over the last decades. The first involves the political parties, which are the backbone of the (Iraqi) Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) proto-state, emerging from the tradition of the KDP (*Partîya Demokrat a Kurdistanê*). In addition to the KDP itself, this tradition includes the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK, Y*ekêtiya Niştîmaniya Kurdistan*), a break-away party from the KDP established in 1976, and *Gorran* (Change), a break-away party from the PUK founded in 2009.[1] While these parties are struggling for power within the autonomous territory (proto-state), they are also constituents of it.

The other current is composed of the political parties that are part of or associated with the movement inspired by Abdullah Öcalan, once the political leader of the PKK (*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan*),[2] today the symbolic leader of a swarm[3] of parties and organisations. We may refer to this as the Apo-ist movement.[4] Within this movement the relationship between nation(al) recognition and state formation is questioned. The recognition of the right to self-government should not take the form of a state, it is argued, but of self-organisation as an empowering mechanism against the state. This is referred to as a 'non-state' and sometimes 'non-statist' democracy.

It must be noted, that one of the most difficult challenges to discussing non-statist forms of societal organisation is the naturalisation of the state in social and political thought. In the case of the Apoist movement, this sometimes leads to incomprehension and lack of understanding of its political outlook (Jongerden, 2016b). Although itself the outcome of socio-historical processes, the common sense view is that social life is somehow 'naturally' a life within states (Clastres, 1989), that these are inevitable, the pre-ordained products of societal development (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2009; Clastres, 1989). This hegemonic consensus operates like an intellectual constraint and a powerful barrier against understanding ideas and practices from which a new 'political architecture' may arise, and may lead to easy dismissal of new practices instead of serious consideration (Nimni, 2013, 6).

Data for this article was collected by fieldwork undertaken by the author in the Syrian (October 2015) and Iraqi (October 2014, October 2015, September 2017) regions of Kurdistan. The stay in the Kurdistan region in

Syria (Rojava) was organised by the New World Summit,[5] during which a conference was also held. In the context of this event, visits were undertaken to towns and villages of Derik, Rimelan, Amude and Qamislo, and interviews were made with activists, representatives of political parties and also, informally, people encountered along the way while traveling and staying in the region. Interviews took place with people in the Apoist movement were conducted in October 2014 and 2015. The 2017 research in the KRG-administered territory was conducted in the context of participation in a mission to observe the referendum on independence that was held there on September 25 (Park, Jongerden, Owtram, & Yoshioka, 2017).

The structure of this article is as follows. First, general backgrounds are presented, reviewing the situations of the two regions through which the opportunities to develop new governance systems emerged due to the collapse of the existing states. This is followed by discussion about the way the two Kurdish movements acted upon this collapse of the state, one searching for recognition through a process of state building, the other trying to work beyond the state. In order to give meaning to this discussion, I will provide backgrounds of the ideas of federalism and of democratic-confederalism and the ways in which these have been enacted in the two regions.

Uprisings and the State

The modern history of the Kurdistan region is marked by unrest and uprising in the context of the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire and processes of state formation. While states were being carved out from the remnants of collapsing empires in Europe and the Middle East, military organisation among the Kurds and the political aspiration to establish an independent state were relatively weak. Thus, when the Ottoman Empire made way for states through the Treaties of Sevres (1920) and Lausanne (1923), Kurds found themselves divided between Turkey, Syria and Iraq.[6] Thereafter, in the context of this new division and the subsequent subjugation of Kurds within the new states, a series of uprisings occurred (Jwaideh, 2006; McDowall, 2000; Olson, 1989).

In what had become Iraq, a decades long, political struggle resulted in the recognition of Kurdish territorial autonomy in 1970. However, the agreement collapsed in 1974 and the end of the territorial autonomy of the Kurdistan region was followed by war, Arabisation, insurgency and then the horrors of the chemical attacks and mass deportations in 1987 and 1988, which resulted in an effective defeat of the Kurdish armed movement in Iraq (Bruinessen, 1994, 16, 21; HRW, 1993). Opportunities for the Kurds in Iraq developed again after the 1991, US-led Operation Desert Storm, launched against Iraq's occupation of Kuwait, when the international coalition implemented Operation Provide Comfort to give refugees humanitarian assistance and installed a no-fly zone (NFZ) north of the 36th parallel to protect them (Chorev, 2007; Romano, 2006). It was this NFZ that effectively brought the Kurdistan autonomous region into being (Gunter, 2008; McDowall, 2000; Romano, 2006; Yoshioka, 2015), and a new territorial entity was born, comprising the governorates of Sulaymaniyah, Erbil and Dohuk.[7] This region came to be referred to as the 'Kurdistan region in Iraq' or the 'Kurdistan autonomous region'.

When the US invaded and occupied Iraq in 2003, the boundaries of the Kurdistan region were pushed southwards (Yoshioka, 2015, 22–23), and, in 2014, when the Iraqi army collapsed in Mosul under attack from the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL)—now just Islamic State (IS)—the Peshmerga moved further south in agreement with the central government in Baghdad, establishing control over the long-disputed city and oil-rich area of Kirkuk, among other places. Finally, therefore, the Kurdish political parties in Iraq had gained control over the Kurdistan region there. Though the Kurdistan region is formally governed by the state institutions making up the Kurdistan Regional Government in Iraq, the region has since become divided into a north-western part led by the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP) under Massoud Barzani and a south-eastern part led by the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) under Jalal Talabani.

Some 20 years after the Kurdish political parties in Iraq had gained control over the main part of the Kurdistan region in Iraq, the violent disarray into which the state of Syria fell created opportunities for the Kurdish movement there. In January 2011, following a sequence of protests that swept through North Africa and the Middle East from Tunisia and Egypt eastwards generally referred to as the 'Arab Spring', mass protests erupted along with violent actions and reactions in Syria, too. Within three

months, by March, 2011, the Syrian protests had developed into an uprising. The regime in Damascus thought it could mitigate and supress the protests by a combination of gesture politics and brutal force, as it had done before, but the international context had changed considerably.

The civil uprising in Syria in 2011 quickly transformed into an active insurgency, with the state as the main trophy. This insurgency was dominated by the Muslim Brotherhood in 2012 and then by the emergence of Al-Qaida and Islamic State (IS), with various states in the region fuelling an attempted armed overthrow of the regime in Damascus. The result was an increasingly violent cluster of interlinked conflicts in different locations with alignments of armies and militias made up of variously independent and proxy forces in which no single power could prevail (Dam, 2017, 183).[8]

Though the Kurdistan region in Syria had its own history of resistance against oppressive Syrian state policies, under Hafez el-Assad and then his son Bashar, including Arabisation and denial of citizenship (Allsopp, 2014; Knapp, Flach, & Ayboga, 2014; Lowe, 2014; Schmidinger, 2014), protests in Syrian Kurdistan broke out relatively late in 2012. With the central state facing an existential threat in the capital, its local authority in this peripheral, though agriculturally important, area was given up. People's Protection Units (*Yekîneyên Parastina Gel*, YPG), allied to the PYD, took the city of Kobanê on July 19, followed by Amude and Afrin on July 20, and Derik and Qamislo in the days after. Within two weeks, regime forces had pulled back to the south of Rojava, though maintaining strongholds in Hasakeh and Qamislo (Knapp et al., 2014; Knapp & Jongerden, 2016). In the years that followed, the YPG forces—and later, too, the 2013-established Women's Protection Units (*Yekîneyên Parastina Jin*, YPJ) and the Syrian Defence Forces (SDF), a coalition of forces established around the YPG and developed into a broader, progressive, multi-ethnic and multi-religious alliance—were able to establish a monopoly of violence in the regions under their control and build relatively stable and working administrations.

Not only the relation to the regime, but also the question of the state became an important and dividing issue between the Apoist movement and other parties, both the pro-KRG parties and the Arab opposition. Importantly, the PYD and the political umbrella organisation of the Syrian Democratic Council (*Konseya Demokratîk a Sûriyê*, SDC) did not aim at

conquering the state to take over from the Assad regime nor at constructing a new state. Differently from other opposition groupings, it did not focus on (Syrian) regime change. For the PYD, the principle issue was not a replacement of (Bashar) Assad, but a change of the very political system through which dictatorships and dynasties emerge. The PYD advocated a radical change to the political formation underlying the repression in Syria and the Middle East as a whole, one that involved the construction of more genuinely democratic institutions for a societal empowerment.[9] Contrary to the statist political outlook of the Kurdish parties in Başur the political outlook of the PYD was centred on a strengthening of society vis-á-vis the state through a form of active citizenship and self-government—a non-state, or better, non-statist democracy—which stood square to Assad's and the opposition's objective of centralised state rule (Allsopp, 2014; Knapp et al., 2014; Lowe, 2014; Maur & Staal, 2015; Schmidinger, 2014).

The PYD/SDC orientation towards systemic change rather than to regime change through a conquering of the state informed its distrust of the Syrian National Council (SNC), a Muslim Brotherhood-dominated entity sponsored by Turkey that called for regime change but was considerably less vocal on systemic change. The PYD/SNC also rejected the Kurdish National Council (KNC), an umbrella organisation established in 2011 under the political guidance KRG President Massoud Barzani, which was collaborating with the Syrian opposition. The tensions between the KNC/SNC, on the one hand, and the PYD/SDC, on the other, expressed a fundamental division between the two different approaches to the state. While the PYD/SDC aimed to develop a ordering based on the idea of autonomous assemblies, the KNC aimed at autonomy for the Kurds within a Syria in which the Ba'ath regime would be replaced, something we may refer to as the KRG model.

This conflict between the PYD and the pro-KRG Kurdish parties coincided with a crisis within the Kurdish party political system that had developed over the previous decade or more. The popularity of the main Kurdish political parties in Syria had been falling since the 1990s, due, among other things, to factionalism and the domination of personality issues, along with the inability of the parties to gain concessions from the state (Allsopp, 2014, 176–177). While support for these parties diminished, however, the levels of Kurdish national consciousness and youth activism increased. It was from out of this contradiction—a crisis in traditional party

politics set against a raised political awareness—that the PYD was able to make its political alternative of autonomous assemblies, horizontally connected and bottom-up constructed, attractive for youth activists, who had become suspicious of bureaucratic and centralised structures. The PYD/SDC political outlook, often not understood by classical party organisations, resonated strongly with the emerging activism.

Thus, two very different political imaginaries for governance came to the fore in the Kurdistan regions in Iraq and Syria, each with a different approach towards the idea of the state. With the Iraqi Kurdistan achievement of de-facto independence in 1991 and an overthrow of the centralist and nationalist Ba'ath regime in 2003, the future for a federally based state construction of Başur looked bright. In Syrian Kurdistan, meanwhile, the PYD initiated a process of self-administration, developing a network of interconnected and self-administrated villages, neighbourhoods, cities and regions in and even reaching out beyond Rojava. The two models, of Başur and Rojava, are referred to here as federalist (autonomy) and democratic confederalist (democratic autonomy).

The Question of the State: Political Outlooks

Though fostering a dream of independent statehood, the Kurdish leadership's struggle for autonomy in Iraq has a long history, going back to the failed autonomy agreement between the KDP and the Iraqi regime in 1970 (Stansfield, 2017, 358–360). Since 1991, when the Kurdistan region gained a de facto near independence from the central government, the dominant political parties, the KDP and PUK, have continued to favour a federal approach to the question of self-administration.

The driving force of a federal system is a politics of recognition. When 'difference and diversity are able to breathe and to express themselves as a legitimate driving force in the federation' writes Burgess (2017), a federal state 'works'. Thus, a federal system is 'meant to provide institutional solutions that allow the different segments of diverse societies to realise their aspirations for self-determination while simultaneously preserving the overall social and territorial integrity of existing states' (Wolff, 2009, 28). Although the driving force in the Iraqi federal arrangement is a politics of

recognition, institutionalised in the form of at least two levels of government that have constitutionally defined powers (Anderson & Stansfield, 2005, 3) and in which each authority has at least one domain in which it is autonomous (Danilovich & Owtram, 2017, 14), there is considerable disagreement about the institutional setting. Two competing approaches of federal engineering have emerged (Gold, 2011). The first is referred to as mono-national (or territorial, administrative or majoritarian), and the second is referred to as multi-national (or ethnic or pluralist) (Gunter, 2008, 21).

The mono-national approach advocates the drawing of boundary lines of the federal entities in such a way that no ethnic, religious or cultural group forms a majority (Anderson & Stansfield, 2005, 4). If federal regions are made under such an arrangement, this is thought to dilute the strength of any ethnic, religious or cultural group and thus to encourage inter-group cooperation. Initially, the US was said to have favoured a mono-national federal state, drawing boundaries in such a way that the Kurds, Sunnis and Shi'as would be divided across different federal regions in order to stimulate inter-communal collaboration. A major critique of this approach, however, was that it would necessitate the construction of absurdly shaped units running north to south (Gunter, 2008, 22–23).

The multi-national model does not favour the separation of state and nation, but seeks the development of federal entities at the level of groups, accommodating desires to self-government (Gunter, 2008, 22–23). Arguments have been made (Anderson & Stansfield, 2005) in favour of a five-region multi-national model for Iraq, comprising Basra, Kufa (the Shi'a holy region), Greater Baghdad, Mosul and Kurdistan, regions that have more or less equal populations and would, supposedly, accommodate Kurds, Sunni Arabs and Shi'a Arabs in the formation of federal entities within Iraq. However, the principle of congruency is based on the widespread assumption that a nation is to be considered a '[human] collectivity existing within a clearly demarcated territory', even though the idea that human collectivities are spatially organised in separate entities is extremely questionable (Giddens, 1985). People do not live as packaged bundles of people waiting for a state to be drawn around them (Taylor, 1985). In fact, as Öcalan (2010, 195) notes, every state aspiring to become a nation-state faces the problem of becoming a centre of assimilation and homogenisation, putting peoples and borders under surveillance.

While state formation and federal autonomy were top of the agenda in Iraqi Kurdistan, the political thought of the PYD, inspired by the post-1999 work of Abdullah Öcalan, problematised the concept of the state. Öcalan (Öcalan, 2013, 2015) had argued that social inequalities and cultural injustices are directly related to the process of state formation, which has its historical background in the idea of the 'strong man' and the emergence of gender hierarchy. In *Liberating Life,* Öcalan (2013, 55) argued that the struggle for justice 'entails creating political formations aiming to achieve a society that is democratic, gender equal, eco-friendly and where *state is not the pivotal element*' (emphasis added). Referred to by Nietzsche as 'the coldest of cold monsters' (Merrifield, 2006, 157), the state is critiqued by Öcalan (Öcalan, 2010, 193) as an institution that stands not for democracy, freedom and human rights but rather their denial.

Briefly, Öcalan's critique of the modern state combines two analytical threads. The first is a state-critique that problematises the administrative state, the creation of a bureaucracy as a dominant class, in which the main contradiction becomes that between the people and this dominant class. The alternative of a system of local self-administration is suggested to address this contradiction. The second is a state critique, which problematises the nation-state form as having ultimate objective of homogenising the population through assimilation into a dominant identity and thus erasing diversity and difference. The idea of autonomy as the right of cultural, ethnic, gender and religious groups to organise themselves and give expression to their interests and identity aims to address this.

Thus, rejecting the administrative state and the nation-state, Öcalan (2014, 32) proposed a new model:

> The people are to be directly involved in the decision finding process of the society. This projects relies on the self-government of local communities and is organized in the form of open councils, town councils, local parliaments and larger congresses. Citizens are the agents of this kind of self-government instead of state-based institutions. The principle of federative self-government has no limitations. It can even be continued across borders in order to create multinational democratic structures. Democratic confederalism prefers flat hierarchies where decision finding and decision-making processes take place within local communities…It provides a framework within which minorities, religious communities, cultural groups, gender-specific groups and other societal groups can organize themselves autonomously.

Following the libertarian socialist thinker Murray Bookchin (1991), Öcalan uses the term 'democratic autonomy' to refer to the decision-

making capacities and responsibilities of people themselves, a politics fundamentally based on an engaged involvement, a primarily participatory rather than representative democracy (Akkaya & Jongerden, 2013; Jongerden & Akkaya, 2013). The principle of 'democratic confederalism' refers to the inter-connective context in which self-government should take place, comprising a multi-layered network of local assemblies as a principle of social organisation aimed at 'democratizing the interdependence without surrendering the principle of local control' (Bookchin, 1991). Thus, a bottom-up process of extension starting with the establishment of 'direct-democratic popular assemblies at the municipal, town, and neighbourhood levels' becomes, through the emergent confederated form, an alternative to the state; this is 'a politics that seeks to recreate a vital local political or civic sphere'.[10] Over larger regions, these assemblies would confederate and, as they gain strength, challenge the centralised nation-state. Bookchin argued for a municipalisation (rather than a Marxian nationalisation) of the economy, as a way of opposing the present corporate capitalist system of ownership and management (Simkin, 2014).

It was through his imbibition of these ideas that Öcalan came to question whether independence really ought to be conceptualised and practiced in the form of state construction. Thus, following a critique and self-critique on the character of national liberation struggles and 'real existing socialism' during the 1990s, Öcalan developed a new political philosophy for the Middle East (Jongerden, 2016a). Thereafter, the Kurdish movement organisations inspired by his thought—including not only the PKK (in Turkey) and PYD (in Syria), but also others, like TECAK (in Iraq) and KODAR (in Iran)—started to develop an ideological architecture on the basis of the idea of self-government as a non-statist society and thence to address issues of socioeconomic and sociocultural injustice, meaning inequality and exclusion (Jongerden, 2017).

Politics Toward a State

On 25 September 2017, voters in the federal entity of Iraqi Kurdistan were given the opportunity to vote Yes or No to the question 'Do you want the Kurdistan Region and the Kurdistani areas outside the administration of the

Region to become an independent state?' In line with the idea of state construction and maintenance as the primary objective of political action, the referendum signalled a symbolic break by the Kurdish political establishment from the formal position of constructive engagement for a Kurdistan region within a federal Iraq. Indeed, on the day before the referendum, regional president Masoud Barzani disqualified the current federal state of affairs, referring to it as a failed partnership and to Iraq as a sectarian state. No longer was any meaningful negotiation with Baghdad considered possible regarding the position of Kurdistan within a federal Iraq (Park et al., 2017, 199, 201). This represented a firm step toward the presumed ultimate goal, the establishment of an independent and internationally recognised state. The KDP enthusiastically pushed for referendum while the PUK and Gorran concerned with the KDP's hegemony expressed lukewarm support/rejection of it.

The referendum was followed by arrest warrants for the referendum organisers and authorisation of the use of force. The Iraqi Armed Forces (IAF) and the Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF, *Hashed al-Shaabi*), an umbrella organisation of mainly Shi'a militias, moved into Kirkuk on October 16, and quickly took control of the disputed territories and most of the oil fields there. The KDP and PUK were shown to be hopelessly divided, retreating from territory they had controlled since 2014. Importantly, the central government aimed at regaining control over border-posts, and to enforce this announced an international flight ban on the region's airports starting September 29, which was only lifted on 13 March 2018 after federal authority of the Erbil and Sulaymaniyah airports was officially restored. What the Kurds lacked was a unified leadership and military command to execute a well-thought out political and military strategy (Anczewski, 2017). The failure to act like a state had caused defeat.

Reviewing the period 1991–2017, therefore, we witness a double process of failed state construction, of a failure in the Kurdistan autonomous region, that is, as well as in Iraq as a whole. The failure of the latter became manifest with the lack of political progress or even any consensus about how to move forward, particularly given the centralising tendencies in Baghdad. Indeed, Iraq came to resemble a federacy in which the central state was linked to one grouping—broadly, the interests of Shi'a political leaders. In the Kurdistan autonomous region, meanwhile, the referendum served to highlight the weakness of Kurdish government institutions. The

KRG proved to be defunct, and what remained were clientelistic party-person militia networks unable to act in concert. Their mutual antagonism, never resolved, created the conditions in which Baghdad could act. This resulted in its easy (re)taking of control of the disputed territories and a forcing of its authority upon the region, further antagonising relations between the two. This double process of failed state construction will be discussed as a failure to act in concert, both at the level of the federal state and the level of the self-governing state entity within the federation.

The future of Iraq and federalism had appeared promising for Kurds in 2005. Although many were suspicious of the reincorporation and had voted already for independence in an informal referendum organised in parallel to parliamentary elections in 2005 (Ahmed, 2013, 112, 131), the main Kurdish leaders and their parties, the KDP and PUK, had decided to remain in a federal Iraq. They were pressured by the US to remain in Iraq and act as a stabilizing force between the Shi'a majority and Sunni minority, yet the Kurdish leaders had anyway already expressed a commitment to a post-Saddam federal Iraq. It was as early as 1992 that the KDP, PUK and the Iraqi National Congress, an umbrella organisation of Iraqi groups opposed to Saddam's regime, agreed on the principle of a federal state (Yildiz, 2004, 116).

In 2005, the KDP, PUK and the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI),[11] which had considerable support among the Shi'a in the south, co-drafted the new constitution. Articles 117, 141 of the new constitution formally instituted the Kurdistan region and effectively recognised the Kurdistan parliament and the legislation enacted there (Ahmed, 2013; Danilovich, 2014; Kane, Hiltermann, & Alkadiri, 2012; Katzman, 2010; Stansfield, 2005, 2017; Stansfield & Anderson, 2009; Yoshioka, 2015). Other regions, with the exception of the Baghdad region, were given the right to form a federal region in the future (Wolff, 2009, 30). The constitution was approved in a referendum on 15 October 2005. While the population in the majority Shi'a and Kurdish welcomed it, the new constitution was met with fierce opposition from Sunnis, whose leaders had not actively participated in the drafting.

Two main processes undermined the states under construction, both the federal state and the Kurdistan Region, leading to their failures. First, the Iraqi state became sectarian and centralist. Even as the 2005 constitution was drafted, it became clear that an undercurrent in the Shi'a political

leadership favoured simple majoritarian rule in a centralised unitary state (Gunter, 2008, 20), and in the years that followed, anti-federalism among the Shi'a leadership increased. A matter of grave concern for the Kurds was the refusal of the Iraqi central government to implement Article 140, which required it to 'perform a census and conclude through referenda in Kirkuk and other disputed territories the will of their citizens'. The referendum in areas considered by the Kurds as part of Kurdistan should have been concluded before 31 December 2007. While the Kurds saw the failure to implement the referendum as a violation of the constitution, Iraqi leaders considered it expired (Park et al., 2017, 201). This signalled a major break between the parties drafting the constitution.

Second, although the KDP and PUK had acted in concert at the time of the drafting of the 2005 constitution, they were hopelessly divided by the time of the referendum in 2017. The PUK was prone to divisions and splits, aggravated by the absence and illness of its leader, Jalal Talabani, who died in October 2017. This had already resulted in the establishment of the PUK breakaway party Gorran (Change) in 2009, disrupting a 15-year-old power-sharing agreement between the KDP and PUK that had dominated Kurdish politics. Gorran campaigned for a strengthening of the governmental institutions, the integration of party and personal militia into a Peshmerga army, accountable to the Ministry of Defence, and against corruption. It was precisely this failure to create political coherence through government institutions that was exposed in the preparation for the referendum and its aftermath. Ironically, while the KDP and PUK had been acting in concert on the construction of a federal Iraq since 2005, therefore, they had failed to build a strong autonomous entity within that Iraq. Indeed, unable to formulate a consistent and cohesive political and military strategy, they had developed the federal region through competitive clientelistic networks (Aziz, 2017).[12]

Politics Beyond the State

On 22 September 2017, three days before the independence referendum in Iraqi Kurdistan, elections were organised for the commune co-chairs in the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria. A total of some 728,450 votes

were cast, representing around 70% of all eligible voters. In the Cezîre region (Qamişlo and Hesekê cantons), people elected co-chairs for 2,669 communes from over 12,000 candidates, while in the Fırat region (Kobane and Grê Spî cantons) people elected co-chairs for 843 communes from over 3,100 candidates, and for the Afrin region (Afrin and Şehba cantons), people elected co-chairs for 435 communes from over 1550 candidates.[13] The elections were boycotted by the pro-Barzani parties in the KNC, claiming they had been deliberately arranged to draw attention away from the independence referendum in Iraqi-Kurdistan.[14] Irrespective of intentions, however, what is important was that in the same month, an attempt to establish an independent state was made in one part of Kurdistan, while in the other part, an attempt was made to strengthen self-administration through the local elections of co-chairs, the core of what claimed to be a non-statist form of government.

Once large parts of Rojava had come under the control of the YPG in 2012, local (neighbourhood) assemblies were developed to provide some form of government and the provisioning of services, such as the distribution of food and fuel to the organisation of education and self-defence. The establishment of councils, it should be noted, was not solely a 'Rojava-affair'. In fact, hundreds of councils sprang up all around Syria during 2011 and 2012 in the context of the uprising, councils referred to as 'the essence of the Syrian revolution'.[15] Interlinked in a variety of ways— e.g. through WhatsApp groups with like-minded councils and organisations —these councils were the creative product of local needs, an immediate response to the collapse of central government structures in the wartime context, and the governance vacuum resulting from the sudden absence of state administrators through forced departure and/or local rejection of their office.[16] In other words, the councils took over state functions. The local councils in the ethnically diverse city of Manbij, for example, were described as a 'compelling example of successful grassroots governance during the two-year period between the Syrian regime's withdrawal from the city in 2012 and the Islamic State's takeover in 2014' (Munif, 2017).[17] Importantly, the councils emerging were not a function of the central state but rather the way in which opposition was articulated and people administrated themselves.

The councils that had emerged throughout Syria in the springtime of the protests were different from those that emerged in Rojava, however, primarily in terms of political organisation. The councils in Rojava were not just a local working practice, but also interrelated in a larger network that provided cohesion and direction. Together with the establishment of the first councils in the Kurdistan region, the PYD initiated the establishment of the Movement for a Democratic Society (*Tevgera Civaka Demokratîk*, TEV-DEM), a platform of political parties, professional and societal organisations, and council representatives for deliberation and coordination (Knapp et al., 2014). TEV-DEM firmly framed itself as promoting pluralism, based on the 'rights of all ethnic and religious groups to manage themselves according to their own free will'.[18] It argued that such pluralism was not possible within Syria as a unilateral and centralized state.

Promoted by TEV-DEM, councils for decision-making and administration have been established at the level of streets and villages, neighbourhoods and district, cities, regional and the level of the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria (DFNS), all with a 40% gender quota. The smallest unit in this confederation is the commune, which may consist up to a few to 400 households, equal to a residential street or streets or a village. The commune meets monthly or bi-monthly and all residents are entitled to participate. Often, a women's council, in which the women of the residential area are entitled to participate, function in parallel to the commune council, discussing issues the women consider important and which they can bring to the agenda of the commune meeting.

It was also determined that each commune has an executive, composed of the co-chairs (a man and a woman) and additional members. The communes meet weekly and ideally have committees for peace, self-defence, economics, politics, civil society, free society and ideology. Not all committees have been established, but the peace and self-defence committees are common. A neighbourhood council is composed of several villages or a city-quarter, and its members are the executives of the communes. These neighbourhood councils have an executive and further committees (Knapp et al., 2014, 87). This is repeated at the level of the city council, cantons and regions (Cezîre, Euphrates and Afrin) and the DFNS. The development of an alternative system of local self-administration was to address the contradiction between (the) people and state, while the idea of autonomy as the right of diverse (cultural, ethnic, gender, religious, etc.)

groups to organise themselves and give expression to their interests and identity responded to the problem of the state.

Discussion and Conclusion

Historically, the national liberation movements that emerged in the 1960s and 70s framed their struggle in terms of an anti-colonialism that had the establishment of an independent state as its goal. This was also the case for the various liberation movements that emerged during the twentieth century in Kurdistan. Over time, however, a profound development and political shift occurred within the broader Kurdish context. While the political parties that developed from the KDP tradition continued to understand the realisation of self-determination in terms of state construction, a movement born from the PKK tradition and inspired by the ideas of its jailed leader, Abdullah Öcalan, started to perceive the state not as a goal but as a hindrance on the road to freedom. 'Drawing and dying for borders', argued Salih Muslum, Chair of the PYD in Rojava, 'is a European illness from the 19th and 20th centuries'.[19] Thus it was that a (proto-)state-structured KRG emerged in Iraqi Kurdistan, while in Syrian Kurdistan, the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria (DFNS), including Rojava but extending into non-Kurdish majority territory, was founded on the basis of a non-statist form of societal organisation referred to by the twin terms 'democratic autonomy' and 'democratic-confederalism'.

In this article, I have discussed the two systems of government developed and still developing in Iraqi and Syrian Kurdistan. The government system developing in Iraqi Kurdistan has been discussed in the context of federalism, defined as an institutional solution that allows different entities to realise their aspirations for self-determination through the establishment of a state. In a federal state power is divided between the central government and (one or more) regional government(s). With both levels having constitutionally separate competences, the state-entity within a federation is not subordinated to the federal government. The system developed in Syrian Kurdistan, meanwhile, has been discussed in the context of democratic-confederalism, a political idea that problematises state-society relations, and mainly aims at the development of self-

governing capacities. This is referred to as non-statist as is tries to move beyond the concept of the central administrative state and the nation-state, two key features of the modern state system. While the driving force of both federalism and democratic-confederalism is the reconciliation of a politics of difference with a politics of recognition in such a way that different social groups are able to express themselves in some form of self-administration, this takes rather different forms.

The government system developed in Iraqi Kurdistan, mainly under the tutelage of the KDP and PUK, has been oriented towards (proto-)state construction. These two parties initiated a process of state-building starting with the 1992 elections and the establishment of the KRG. Following the US-led occupation of Iraq in 2003 and later the collapse of the Iraqi army facing the Islamic State in 2014, the greater part of the areas considered to be part of Iraqi Kurdistan came under the control of the two parties, which effectively extended their territorial control. Though the Kurdish population voted overwhelmingly for independence in a so-called informal referendum in 2005, the KDP and PUK became active participants in the drafting of the 2005 Iraqi constitution, which recognised the Kurdistan region as a federal entity, granting it strong powers.

However, a politics of difference had not met a politics of recognition. The central authority in Baghdad, now dominated by the majoritarian strength of the Shi'a political parties, did not live up to the Kurdish expectations, failing to implement many of the provisions in the constitution, including the agreement to hold a referendum in the disputed territories. The central government in Baghdad also practised an anti-federal policy to other regions aspiring a federal status, which turned a federal Iraq into asymmetric federalism and meant that only the Kurdistan autonomous region had a constitutionally guaranteed governmental system, other regions being ruled under the central government. Thus, the central government violated the constitution. With souring relations between Baghdad and Erbil, the Kurdistan autonomous region became an aberration from Baghdad's perspective, while the collaboration between the federal entity and the central state became considered a failed partnership from the perspective of Erbil.

This notion of a failed partnership gave cause to the push for an independence referendum, held in September 2017. This referendum symbolised the failure of the development of a federal Iraq. Yet the

referendum highlighted not only the failure of the 2005 constitution and the construction of a federal Iraq, but also that of the Kurdish leadership to develop a state within the federation. In practice, clientelistic networks around families and individuals exercise strict control, not the parliament and government, and they do so without a common political agenda and coordination. Instead of bringing the parties together in their quest for statehood, the referendum exposed these clientelistic networks that determined KRG politics along with the fiefdoms associated with these networks. We may conclude, therefore, that the attempt to institutionalise a state administration in the Kurdistan autonomous region failed, along with the construction of a federal Iraq on the basis of a politics of recognition.

This is not to say that the federal development in Iraq and the Kurdistan autonomous region is doomed to fail in the future, of course, but rather to highlight the problematic nature of this course of state-building as compared to the very different government system developed in Syrian Kurdistan, under the tutelage of the PYD and the SDC, oriented towards societal empowerment. Interestingly, this comes with a relative marginalisation of traditional political parties, whose role in the organisation of government becomes quite limited. The objective of the new governmental system is to strengthen local self-governing capacities though the development of a council system. This council system is not only territorially organised, through the network of councils at the level of communes, neighbourhoods, cities, regions and the DFNS, but also at the level of cultural, ethnic, gender and religious groups. We could, therefore, make a tripartite distinction between territorial autonomy (referring to the decision-making powers on a geographical level, namely street and village/neighbourhood up to regional and confederal levels), cultural autonomy (referring to the right of people with different religious, ethnic or cultural backgrounds to organize themselves and determine their own affairs) and categorical autonomy (referring to the right of women and youngsters or other societal groups to organize themselves, deliberate and decide about their agendas and priorities for political actions). This results in a multi-layered network of councils, with TEV-DEM as an important institutional nexus. The government system aims to counter homogenising or assimilative tendencies along the axis of democratic-autonomy and the emergence of a bureaucratic class along the axis of democratic-confederalism.

The models developed around the two different political ideas pursued by different political currents in Kurdistan, one with roots in the KDP and the other born from the PKK, have to be considered as two process of becoming in the problematic and quite different contexts in which they have each emerged. They should not be looked upon in terms of a determined, linear unfolding, and it is hard to predict the future of either, particularly since this is dependent in part at least on external factors. Though the KRG (Başur) model follows a relatively well-trod route and the DNFS (Rojava) is attempting something very different, both are forging a path into the unknown.

Notes

1. These parties have their sister-parties in other parts of Kurdistan.

2. A decentralisation of the PKK resulted in the establishment in 2002 of the Kurdistan Democratic Solution Party (*Partî Çareserî Dîmukratî Kurdistan*, PÇDK) focussing on the struggle in the Kurdistan autonomous region in Iraq, in 2003 of the Democratic Union Party (*Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat*, PYD), focusing on the struggle in Syria, and, in 2004, of the Kurdistan Free Life Party (*Partiya Jiyana Azad a Kurdistanê*, PJAK), oriented to the struggle in Iran.

3. Swarm as in a swarm of singularities, which flow together towards a shared or common objective; see Negri (2011: 121).

4. Apo (Kurdish for uncle) is the nick-name for Abdullah Öcalan.

5. The New World Summit is an artistic and political organization founded in 2012. It is dedicated to providing 'alternative parliaments' and 'imaginative spaces' for debates on democracy and emancipatory politics. See newworldsummit.org/about/

6. Kurds in Iran, of course, remained outside of this (new) division.

7. Parts of Nineva above the NFZ were administratively absorbed by Dohuk, and the northern part of Diyala was absorbed by Sulaymaniyah.

8. Russia and Iran intervened decisively for the regime, with the US and West focusing on removing IS, including through collaboration with the Kurdish forces.

9. E.g. Salih Muslum: 'We want a fundamental change to the oppressive system. There are some who hold up the slogan: the fall of the regime. Our problems are not of powers. The ruling powers in Damascus come and go' (Allsopp, 2014: 209).

10. dwardmac.pitzer.edu/Anarchist_Archives/bookchin/bio1.html

11. Renamed the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI) in 2007.

12. The construction and maintenance of these clientelistic networks was highly dependent on the availability of resources (Wilgenburg & Fumerton, 2015: 5), and the asymmetric access to resources needed to sustain these networks heightened the competition between the two main parties. The KDP controlled Ibrahim Khalil border post with Turkey, which produced much higher revenues than those gained by the PUK controlling the border with Iran (Chorev, 2007: 4), and there has been an ongoing competition between KDP and PUK over who controls the oil-rich territories in the region. The international community allegedly strengthened this reality of competing party networks, by dealing with politicians from the region as party leaders and not with them as KRG government officials (Yoshioka, 2015: 33). Then, with the rise of IS in 2014, investments and revenues slumped, while oil prices dropped, causing serious money-flow problems for the maintenance of the power structures that had evolved.

13. At tr.hawarnews.com

14. 'The insistence of the Democratic Union (PYD) to hold its one-sided elections at this particular time is a blatant challenge to the will of our Kurdish people in Syria's Kurdistan and a clear attempt to deflect attention from the referendum' asserted the KNC. http://theregion.org/m/news/11613-barzani-affiliated-kurdish-national-council-have-called-for-boycott-on-elections-in-northern-syria

15. At heaworldview.com

16. The regime policy was generally to continue paying the salaries of local officials, signalling the regime's non-acceptance of the new arrangements and intention to reassert (control of) the state at some point in the future.

17. IS was expelled by the SDF in 2016.

18. http://en.hawarnews.com/tev-dem-announces-project-for-a-democratic-syria/

19. Salih Muslum, speaking at the Flemish Parliament in Brussels, 18 September, 2014.

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[Engaging Diasporas in Development and State-Building: The Role of the Kurdish Diaspora and Returnees in Rebuilding the Kurdistan Region of Iraq](#)

BAHAR BAŞER

ABSTRACT Diasporas can play an important part in contemporary social processes, either via remittances, investment, skills transfer, diaspora philanthropy or political influence. Currently, many states establish diaspora ministries or sub-committees under existing institutions to connect with their diaspora and tap their resources for development in the homeland. This paper contributes to this literature on the diaspora-homeland nexus by focusing on the Iraqi Kurdish diaspora and returnees. The paper analyzes the intricacies of diaspora and returnee involvement in state-building in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq by discussing their capabilities and expectations as well as the tensions between the diaspora and the homeland.

Introduction

The Second World Kurdish Congress (WKC) was held in the capital of the Kurdish Region of Iraq (KRI), Erbil, between the 12th and 14th of October 2012.[1] The conference was an invitation to Kurdish diaspora scholars from various disciplines, which could be interpreted as a calling for the 'scientific diaspora' (Kuschminder, 2011, p. 7) to refresh their ties with the homeland. The first WKC was organized in 2011 in the Netherlands and focused on Kurdistan's economy and society in transition. There was something special about this second gathering; it gave the opportunity to Kurdish diasporans around the world to have a homecoming and see the 'miracle'[2] with their own eyes. The participants of the conference were not solely Iraqi Kurds, there was a sizeable community of diasporans who are Kurds from Turkey, Iran and Syria. The diasporic attachment, which Williams (2018, p. 6) called 'the altruistic tie' was very much present.

Research suggests that in some cases, diasporas are ascribed parts in a national project (Shindo, 2012, p. 1699). 'Diasporic patriotism varies in time and space, with patriotic flame being doused and ignited by a variety of origin and destination specific triggers' (Ancien, Boyle, & Kitchin, 2009, p. 17). In cases where out-migration was once perceived as unpatriotic, especially in countries experiencing crises, the discourse has now shifted towards a more positive outlook characterizing the diasporas as part of the solution to underdevelopment (Mohan, 2008, p. 464; Van Hear & Cohen, 2017, p. 172), or as 'agents of change' (Budabin, 2014; Rock, 2017; Sinatti & Horst, 2015; Van Houte, 2014). In post-conflict settings, diaspora contributions become all the more important as they can contribute to knowledge capital, capacity-building and investment, as well as peace-building and the strengthening of civil society (Hamdouch & Wahba, 2015; Kuschminder, 2011). These state-led initiatives not only tie the diaspora to the homeland development, but also construct a pan-ethnic discourse that aims at solidifying nationhood transnationally (Chan & Tran, 2011, p. 1103). What is special about the Kurdistan Region of Iraq is that it has started a homeland calling for the diaspora, acting as states do, despite its ambiguous autonomous position within the Iraqi state.

By focusing on this special case, this paper analyzes the intricacies of diasporas' and returnees' involvement in state-building in the KRI with a focus on their expectations and the tensions between the diaspora and the homeland. What role do the diaspora and returnees play in post-conflict reconstruction in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI)? How do their

expectations evolve given the complexities and challenges of state-building in the homeland? What does the homeland expect from them and what capacities does it offer to facilitate their engagement?

Methodology and Data Gathering

The empirical data collection for this article is based on two strands of fieldwork. The first strand was conducted in France, Germany, the Netherlands and Sweden between 2012 and 2014, where I interviewed more than a hundred diaspora members, entrepreneurs and returning migrants from the first and second generations of the diaspora. I have also been to Iraqi Kurdistan twice; the first time was for the WKC in October 2012 and the other visit was a three-week fieldwork trip in April 2013 where I interviewed KRG diplomats, members of parliament as well as returnees who came back to Kurdistan permanently or temporarily. In these visits, I concentrated mostly on interviewees in Erbil but I have also visited Suleimaniyah and other small towns surrounding Erbil such as Shaqlawa.

The second strand of research in 2016 focused on returnees in the KRI and included follow-up interviews with the KRG Representation in London and prominent diaspora entrepreneurs. I prepared a semi-structured interview template in consultancy with my research assistant[3] based in Duhok. The interviews were conducted by the research assistant in three provinces, Suleimaniyah, Duhok and Erbil. In total 26 interviews[4] were conducted with diaspora returnees who lived outside Kurdistan for at least ten years and who returned after 2003. Only Kurds who voluntarily returned to the homeland were included in the study. As a common practice in investigating return migration (Rock, 2017, p. 206), I have used purposive and snowball sampling. I supplemented the interview data with official declarations by KRG policy-makers, diaspora organizations' press releases and website blogs as well as information from diasporic and homeland's media outlets. Overall, this multi-sited research gave me the opportunity to observe the sustainability of diaspora return as well as the opportunity structures developing in Kurdistan for diaspora and returnee engagement during a five-year period characterized by ebbs and flows in Kurdish politics and socioeconomic structure. Finally, I have conducted

follow-up interviews[5] with academics from the KRI in 2018 in order to validate certain aspects that emerged from this research.

The Kurdistan Region of Iraq

The Iraqi Kurds have suffered under various Iraqi regimes, especially during the Saddam Hussein era. However, third party interventions in the Middle East's internal and international conflicts made it possible for the Iraqi Kurds to flourish since 1991.[6] Particularly after the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq, Iraqi Kurds have been successful in formulating self-rule in Northern Iraq and moved towards establishing a *de facto* state.

Since 2003, the KRG has managed to exploit the 'shifting opportunity grounds in Iraq to attract and vest a number of international interests', establish diplomatic representations around the world and gain recognition as a crucial actor in the region (Jude, 2017; Soguk, 2015, pp. 964–965). It has its own judicial system and makes its own laws, runs its own security services, has its own parliament and runs its own elections. Until 2014, it had a rapidly growing economy and revenues from the oil sector brought about the possibility to expand its infrastructure. Since then, however, the KRG found itself in a dire security and financial situation including tensions among the Kurdish parties, conflict with the central government, a drop in oil prices, and fighting with ISIS (the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant). The KRG held a referendum in September 2017 when more than 90% voters supported independence from Iraq, though the KRG failed to receive significant support from the international community.

Since 2013, at least 700 foreign companies went bankrupt, leaving around 200,000 people unemployed.[7] KRG officials have been struggling to pay the salaries of teachers, Peshmerga fighters, oil industry workers and other civil servants. Moreover, after the independence referendum, international flights were temporarily banned by the central government and the KRG has lost the control of economically significant territories including Kirkuk to the Iraqi Army. The referendum also brought internal disputes to the fore, as the Kurdish political parties other than the KDP demonstrated a lukewarm approach towards the referendum. These

developments will surely create strains in the KRG and have significant implications on diaspora investments and return migration in the long run.

Spheres of Iraqi Kurdish Diaspora Engagement Before the Fall of Saddam

Since 1960s, large numbers of Kurdish refugees have been forced to flee Kurdistan (Wahlbeck, 2013, p. 44). There have been two significant waves of conflict-induced Kurdish migration from Iraq. The first one happened in 1988 when thousands of Kurds fled from the genocidal Anfal offensives[8] by the Saddam regime. The second wave occurred in 1991, when Kurdish rebellions were brutally suppressed by the Iraqi regime after the Iraqi Army's defeat in Kuwait (Van Bruinessen, 1998, p. 43). Kurdish leaders went into exile and started establishing transnational networks which connected Kurdish voices to the rest of the world. These migration flows have also grown in size due to family reunification, and gradually Kurds abroad have come to constitute one of the largest diasporas in the world.

While struggling with statelessness and feeling of victimhood, these Kurds managed to create a transnational network and used their exile experience to influence the situation back in their homeland. Van Hear and Cohen (2017, pp. 172–173) suggest that 'the variety of characterizations of the role of diasporas in conflict might be explained by differentiating forms of diaspora engagement and the public and private spaces in which they occur'. Although they admit that these suggested categories might overlap, they theorize diaspora interventions by distinguishing three spheres of engagement: (a) the household/the extended family, (b) the 'known community' and (c) the imagined community. In this section, I will analyse Iraqi Kurdish diaspora interventions in the KRI following this categorization.

The Household/Extended Family Sphere

Van Hear and Cohen (2017, p. 173) investigate the manners in which diasporans engage in private and personal transnational relations. Diasporans send money to nuclear families so that they can survive under pressing conditions. My interviews with Iraqi Kurdish diasporans also revealed that, especially in the beginning of the exile experience, the household/family sphere was given the utmost importance. One interviewee who returned to the KRI recently stated that

> Well, at the time I was the main chance of economy for our family at that times. We sent hundreds of dollars to the family that family could survive. I'm talking about 1990s and 2000s so economically *(it)* was good.

The importance of remittances also echoes in Lisa Pelling's excellent study (2013, p. 3) on the Kurdish Diaspora. Since 2003, physical visits and family reunions also became highly feasible, especially thanks to the introduction of direct flights from European capitals to the KRI.

The Known Community Sphere

Here a diaspora member's engagement focus on known community including encounters in schools, neighbourhoods, workplaces, markets and shops, and mosques among other places. The Kurds established local associations which usually organized cultural activities such as the *Newroz* celebrations (Wahlbeck, 2013). A majority of my interviewees stated that they regularly attended such local organizations rather than political ones. The main activities revolved around culture and language which helped them keep their 'Kurdishness' and transfer their identity to the next generations. My interviews also show that these associations are often the first stops for newcomers who do not know their way around in the hostland. Apart from the associations, the known community networks also helped the newcomers establish businesses, engage in business partnerships as well as finding spouses.

The Imagined Community Sphere

This category includes membership of political parties in exile, support for insurgent or loyalist groups, advocacy networks and lobbying. As Wahlbeck (2013, pp. 51–52) has observed, diaspora Kurds were highly politicized and have established political organizations to support the Kurdish cause. Political parties opened branches and political rivalries back in the homeland also surfaced in diaspora spaces. Dominant political parties in the KRI opened branches in several European countries and tried to shift the agenda of the diasporans towards their aims and interests in the transnational space. The KDP and the PUK have existed for a long time while during the recent years, the Gorran movement also gathered significant supporter base in the diaspora.

Political mobilization for the homeland took different shapes and forms in Kurdish diaspora spaces. Diasporans first and foremost tried to draw attention to the massacres against Kurds in Iraq (e.g. the Anfal campaigns of 1987–1988) by organizing protest events and lobbying European governments to stop the persecution of Kurds. The first comers also established institutions which are highly influential even today. One example is the Kurdish Institute, which was established in 1983.[9] Diaspora Kurds also established TV channels, which Hassanpour (1998, p. 53) defines as 'sovereignty in the sky', new technologies and diaspora mobilization created 'Kurdish flags from satellites.'

As Natali (2004, p. 111) argues 'shifts in international norms, active and influential diaspora networks have semi-legitimized the idea of Kurdish statehood'. The patriotic behaviours of diaspora Kurds have sustained a longing for a 'free Kurdistan', in the words of many interviewees, and the 'myth of return'—which is an essential component of the diasporic psyche —has been kept as a vivid goal. A majority of interviewees stated that when they left they perceived their departure as temporary and planned to return to Kurdistan 'when the time is right'. My observations reveal that although after the 1990s some Kurds did return to their homes, for the majority of them the fall of Saddam regime and a politically and economically thriving KRG have been perceived as major turning points in return decisions.

Diasporas as Agents of Change?

The growing importance of diaspora politics has been gathering increasing interest during the last decade as their leverage in both home and hostland politics have increased due to 'new technologies and the rise of global media and communications that allow dispersed populations to engage in transnational politics in real time' (Adamson, 2016, p. 291; Van Hear & Cohen, 2017, p. 172). Diasporas are believed to act as bridges between the home and host countries (Nielsen & Riddle, 2009, p. 436) and they are 'perceived as both insider and outsider in their countries of origin' (Shindo, 2012, p. 1688). Moreover, diasporas accumulate human, financial and social capital in their hostlands, and if these valuable skills could be transferred to the homeland, it might be a cure for under-development and aid post-conflict reconstruction (Williams, 2018, p. 6).

As Brinkerhoff (2009, p. 79) suggests, diasporans are more likely to invest in economies of post-conflict homelands while other foreign investors might find it too risky. Similarly, Nielsen and Riddle (2009, p. 435) state that as post-conflict economies are often found too daunting by foreign investors, many nations reach out to their diasporas for much-needed foreign investment capital. Besides, Kuschminder (2011, p. 4) suggests there is also increasing evidence of non-economic contributions on issues such as human rights, good governance and capacity building in the homeland. They might act as advocacy networks and establish relationships with various stakeholders to contribute to short and long-term development needs and democratization in the homeland (Budabin, 2014; Brinkerhoff, 2009, 2012; Kent, 2006).

International organizations, as well as home and host states, often fund temporary return programmes which facilitate diasporas' short-term return to the country of origin to train peers or transfer knowledge (Kuschminder, 2011, p. 4). Moreover, as shown in the case of WKC, the homeland policy-makers might issue a 'homeland calling' (Baser, 2018) to invite the diaspora to return to contribute to the rehabilitation process. However, realities and expectations do not always meet in the middle when it comes to encouraging return. While 'wealthy people from the diaspora' (Brinkerhoff, 2009 p. 78) might return with high expectations and get disappointed when they do not receive the heroes' welcome 'they deserved', others might return with no intention to turn themselves into 'diaspora heroes'. Van Houte and Davids (2014) reveal that return experiences are heterogeneous and not all returnees have the capacity or the

will to act as agents of change. Moreover 'motivations of return define an important part of the post-return experience' (van Houte & Davids, 2014, p. 77). Therefore, while some returnees who returned out of failure might choose to keep a low profile; others who want to transfer their success story back to the homeland might expect a heroes' welcome. 'Most diasporas demonstrate commitment to their homelands through repeated small scale charitable acts' (Kent, 2006, p. 457) and they keep their emotional attachments to their homelands. However, economic investment entails other factors besides these psychological reasons (Brenick & Silbereisen, 2012). Nielsen and Riddle (2009) suggest there are three main motivations for diasporans to invest in their home countries: financial, emotional and social. These motivations, as well as the conditions of the receptions of their engagement, creates the space for them to make a difference in their homelands.

Challenges of Diasporic Homecomings

Once policy makers in the homeland are aware of the potential of the diaspora to contribute to homeland interests, they usually formulate policies to create an institutional relationship which can harness diasporas' resources. Homeland politicians' discourse towards the returnees and diasporans are highly important in this regard. Additionally, home states as well as international organizations 'need to create an *enabling environment* to put in place the conditions that will create incentives and facilitate the efforts of diasporans' (Brinkerhoff 2009, p. 75). Especially in cases where the diaspora remained isolated from the homeland due to conflict, then navigating bureaucratic red tape and establishing new businesses can be a highly challenging task for the diasporans (Nielsen & Riddle, 2009, p. 443).

Financial incentives can stimulate diaspora interest but they are not enough to sustain it, as other challenges occur along the way. Nepotism, a lack of transparency, political connections and differences might also determine the limits of diaspora engagement in homeland affairs. In Afghanistan, Van Houte (2014, p. 578) identified three distinct ways that the returnees adapted to deal with these problems: changing, avoiding and rejecting. In her words, 'the changers were returnees who wanted to combine their European higher education, working experience and ideas

with their identification in Afghanistan and the desire to reclaim an influential (political) position' (pp. 578–579). However, not all her interviewees had a desire to challenge the long-established structures, and they opted for avoiding them by seeking opportunities elsewhere such as in the private sector and international NGOs. Others have rejected incorporating into the new context altogether (Van Houte, 2014, p. 580). Paasche (2016a, 2016b) also revealed that corruption in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq constituted a barrier to the reintegration of Kurdish returnees from Europe. A neutralized return, free from politics could be more appealing to the diaspora members who plan return (Shindo, 2012, p. 1699), however it is rarely the case.

While so much attention has been given to how diasporans and returnees can engage in homeland development activities, little research has been carried out on how locals who stayed during the conflict actually perceive such interventions (Rock, 2017, p. 205). As previous research shows, ethnic ties do not necessarily bring a feeling of shared destiny and future (Baser & Toivanen, 2018; Rock, 2017). Diasporas can only contribute fully when there is harmony between the homeland policies, expectations and capabilities of both sides, and also when there is a working relationship between the locals and the diasporans/returnees.

Does the KRG Have a Diaspora Strategy?

As Ancien et al. put it, 'a diaspora strategy is an explicit and systematic policy initiative or series of policy initiatives aimed at developing and managing relationships with a diaspora' (Ancien et al., 2009, p. 3). The KRG adapted both 'tapping and embracing' (Gamlen, 2015, p. 168) approaches at the discursive level. At the same time, no legal/institutional framework about returnees has been implemented so far despite the abundance of diaspora resources. Many politicians also referred to the potential of diaspora contributions for state-building in Kurdistan. For instance, KRG's Head of Foreign Relations, Falah Mustafa Bakir stated that: 'The KRG has always encouraged those with experience and expertise to return to their homeland and contribute to our ongoing success and help us improve the performance of our government and the services we provide

to our people.'[10] In another interview, he referred to the diaspora Kurds as the 'ambassadors of Kurdistan'.[11] My interviews with high-ranking politicians in 2013 also included talks on a potential Diaspora Ministry as a sub-unit under the Ministry of Foreign Relations, which would deal specifically with this policy. The KRG, however, is yet to formulate such policies.[12] Dr. Sardar Aziz, who returned to take a position as a senior advisor to the KRG, states that the current economic difficulties crippled government from taking any step in that direction and the diasporans hesitate to return now for reasons of security, economic crises and lack of services.[13]

The KRG's diplomatic missions are responsible for its paradiplomacy and public diplomacy efforts and work in close cooperation with the diasporans (Baser, 2018). The diasporans were also allowed to vote at the independence referendum in 2017,[14] which could be interpreted as an incipient external-voting right practiced by the Kurdish quasi-state. It is also no surprise that, after the independence referendum, the former President of the KRG, Masoud Barzani turned to the diaspora and made a historical call to diaspora Kurds to stage protests and engage in civil activities in a legal and peaceful manner to garner support for the KRG.[15]

The KRG has expectations from its diaspora, especially in the economic realm (Baser, 2018), but at the same time does not create the incentives to facilitate diaspora engagement as suggested above by Brinkerhoff (2006) and Nielsen and Riddle (2009). My interviews with the Chamber of Commerce and the Board of Investment in Kurdistan revealed that although the KRG has invested significant effort in determining in which areas there is need for investment, diasporans were still treated equally with other foreign investors and do not receive specific advantages by law to invest in the KRI.[16] Facilitation of diasporic returns with regards to investment, then, has been dependent on who has connections to ruling political parties and who can easily receive permits and land necessary to establish their business.

One of my main observations is that the KRG engages with its diaspora in an ad-hoc rather than a sustained manner, a finding echoed in other studies on KRG-diaspora relations. (e.g. Eccarius-Kelly, 2018, p. 18). The interviewees in Europe complained that party networks and clientelism played an important role in determining which diaspora member can be

included in the joint projects with homeland policy makers. When asked about the role that the diaspora can play, interviewees usually stated that the KRG has to formulate policies to facilitate diasporan's entry into social and political spheres in the KRI. For some interviewees, the KRG itself was the barrier preventing diaspora engagement: 'If the government let them…' or 'If they are given the chance…' were some of the phrases used by the sceptics among diasporans and returnees. One interviewee also suggested that the divisions within the diaspora may also prevent them from effectively engaging: 'Having a Kurdish community there was effective, sometimes it could solve problems, but sometimes diaspora itself was a problem.'[17]

The Iraqi Kurdish Diaspora in Europe: Nation and State-Building from Afar in the Post-Saddam Era

I have conducted interviews with diaspora Kurds between 2012 and 2014 when the KRG was still thriving and the economic and political crises remained dormant. The KRG's autonomous status was perceived as a highly significant achievement and its profile eased the pain caused by statelessness while they were in exile. The majority of interviewees showed patriotic motivations above anything else. The KRG's eventual goal of independence gave diasporans a target to work for.[18] A majority of the interviewees stated that they started visiting the region quite often, but that they had not made immediate return decisions. They had established businesses or stable jobs in their host countries and were also concerned about the future of their children. I observed a trend of male diaspora members' paying a couple of visits to the KRI, or even engaging in circular migration in order to test the waters in Kurdistan before making the decision of permanent return. For those who were politically active in exile and had close connections to the ruling parties, return was a preferred option as they took highly prestigious positions either in the parliament or as advisors to high-ranking politicians.

Diaspora groups which were close to the KDP started following the political agenda set by the KRG. Those who were aligned to other parties still joined lobbying and advocacy networks, taking a step back at times when they perceived a clash of interests. For instance, the members of the Gorran party in Berlin told me that they felt sidelined by the KDP when there is an event in Germany.[19] There are, however, other platforms which bring all groups together and raise the profile of the KRI as a whole such as the Kurdish Institute in Paris[20] as well as commemoration events for Halabja. In fact, one of the most influential activities of the diaspora, in collaboration with KRG diplomatic representations, was to push for the recognition of the Anfal as genocide. Receiving support from Kurdish-origin MPs in Sweden, Norway and the UK, Kurdish diaspora prepared petitions and lobbied host country governments to discuss this issue in their parliaments. Recognition of the Anfal as genocide might also serve for legitimizing the Kurdish quest for statehood, and the diaspora put it at the centre stage of its transitional justice efforts (Baser & Toivanen, 2017). Most recently, many Kurds organized large protests in the USA, Canada as well as Europe to condemn the KRG's loss of control of disputed territories in October 2017. These recent developments made diaspora diplomacy and advocacy all the more important again; they are needed to legitimize the quest for statehood in the eyes of the international community by lobbying, protesting and constantly negotiating with national and supranational institutions.

Diaspora entrepreneurs were usually recruited by the KRG and were invited to contribute to specific projects in sectors which the KRG seems important for building a state. For instance, an interviewee in Sweden testified that he had received an invitation to contribute to the development of the healthcare sector in the KRI. He founded the 'Swedish Hospital' in Erbil with the support of both the Board of Investment in the KRG and Swedish companies. Previously, many Kurdish patients who had heart disease or diabetes had been travelling to Jordan, Lebanon or Turkey for treatment. Although he had hoped the project would create employment opportunities for local Kurds, he was unable to find sufficiently qualified locals to work in a hospital and had to source workers from Turkey, Romania, Slovenia and Iran. He felt that in the absence of systematic training and other educational possibilities he was unable contribute further to the local economy.[21] Examples of this sort can be multiplied. For

instance, other returnees opened cafes in Ankawa, a posh neighbourhood in Erbil, or restaurants and supermarket chains in different districts of KRI. The presence of oil sector workers and constant visits of diplomatic missions and foreign investors also created demands for hospitality industry. Among my interviewees, there were returnees from the US who opened hotels in Erbil which became popular for visitors from the US. Others have returned to become language teachers in private schools which are usually preferred by the political elite as well as the returnees.

According to Newzad Hirori, the president of the Kurdish Library in Stockholm, Iraqi Kurdistan needs all sorts of infrastructure and human capital and the Kurdish diaspora is a great resource to address this gap. However, Hirori asserts, the KRG has not created a systematic or strategic way of tapping into the resources of the diaspora. Echoing the previous interviewee, he suggests that the diaspora could train the locals, thus empowering locals to develop the region themselves.[22] An interviewee, who is a doctor in the Netherlands, complained that although she had interesting ideas to develop the health sector, she could not find anyone to encourage her and move the project forward because she had no political connections.[23] Some interviewees also complained that getting things done in Kurdistan was a 'bureaucratic nightmare'. A business permit approval might take up to a year, there is bribery involved and despite the tax relief incentives, many diasporans simply give up before they complete the business projects they had in mind.

Socially, diaspora Kurds also engage in a variety of projects that are supported by the KRG. For instance, many diaspora Kurds are taking part in projects supported by the Swedish humanitarian aid organization QANDIL, which has an office in Erbil.[24] The Kurdish Womens' Association in Sweden has organized a number of seminars in the KRI teaching women about their rights and the 'Swedish model' of democracy. Other interviewees reported that the dysfunctional education system of the KRG is significant subject of debate amongst diaspora Kurds. Teacher training programmes, short term staff exchanges as well as vocational training is a top priority on the agenda of diaspora organizations. There are also many diaspora initiatives which aim at strengthening civil society and women's rights in the KRI. Iranian and Kurdish Women's Rights Organization which was founded in the UK in 2002 or the Kurdish

Women's Rights Watch are just a few examples of a larger spectrum of initiatives.[25]

The social sphere sometimes becomes the only sphere for the critics of the ruling parties in the diaspora to make their contributions as the economic and political sphere is controlled by the state elites with little room for dissident voices. Therefore, diaspora and returnees' social remittances become all the more important to push for development of civil society and human rights as well as democratization in the KRI. Overall, diaspora contributions are more visible in government, education and private sectors in addition to media and civil society. Nonetheless, transformation via knowledge and skill transfer from the diaspora is a long process that is difficult to detect immediately and will bear fruits in the long run.[26]

Returning to the 'Homeland'

There is still no systematic study of the number of the returnees and their potential economic, social and political contributions to a post-2003 KRI. The KRG officials I have interviewed confirmed that they do not have reliable statistics on how many people have returned since 2003 and how many are potentially participating in circular migration. The lack of data on this matter also makes it hard for the international organizations to develop projects accordingly. International organizations such as the IOM (International Organization for Migration) are organizing assisted return programmes for the Kurdish refugees who are settled in the UK, France and the Netherlands. During my interview with the representatives of IOM offices,[27] I was told that it is actually very hard to find people who want to return—even temporarily—to give vocational training to the locals or to set up small businesses. A systematic mapping of the diaspora is therefore in order to tailor policies both by the governments and host-country national or international actors.

Having tried to map the profile of returnees during this research, I have become cautious of making generalisations—in reality, the group is notable for its heterogeneity. As in the case of Afghanistan and Iraq, many

diasporans went into exile and come back for political reasons. They were always engaged in homeland politics and when the time was right, they returned. For instance, Dr. Fuad Hussein, who was an exile in the Netherlands and returned to the KRI to become the Chief of Staff to the KRG Presidency, states: 'since 2005 I am a member of cabinet and we had some cabinets- %80 of them were from the diaspora…now perhaps half of them.' He stated that many Kurds in exile actually went on with their education and studied in Europe, now they come back as experts in their field. 'That is why', he says, 'diaspora plays a big role in administration.'[28] These examples can be multiplied. Dr. Dlawer Ala'Aldeen, who lived in the UK for many years, returned to Kurdistan to take a post as the Minister of Higher Education and Scientific Research in the KRG. Before that, he founded the Kurdish Scientific and Medical Association, which lobbied US and UK governments for Kurdish causes. Qubad Talabani, a son of former Iraqi President and the leader of the PUK, Jalal Talabani, served as the PUK's representative and then KRG's representative to the US until 2012. He then returned to take a position as the Deputy Prime Minister of the KRG in 2014 (Eccarius-Kelly, 2018, pp. 26–27).

Apart from political remittances, returnees could also remit economically to the newly developing region. Many managerial jobs are currently taken by foreigners in Kurdistan, and foreign expertise is often imported (Hautaniemi, Juntunen, & Satō, 2013, p. 81). The diaspora offers an important asset to break this cycle. In order to facilitate this, the KRG has opened an official website which informs first and second-generation diaspora Kurds about how to return and potential benefit from job opportunities in Kurdistan. The website also shows testimonies from previous returnees who give a positive outlook about their experience and advice about what to and not to expect.[29]

The returnee accounts from my own interviews also revealed that many first and second-generation diaspora Kurds who returned state altruistic reasons as their primary motivation. One of the interviewees said: 'They need people like me who lived abroad, who can speak different languages, familiar with different cultures.'[30] Another returnee from the UK said: 'I was constantly encouraged by my parents to think about my future in Kurdistan.'[31] It became clear to me that these diasporans never cut relations with their homeland, and the second-generation who were born in Europe actually grew up with transnational attachments to the region and its

history. A returnee from the UK explained that he returned after living abroad for the last 20 years because he feels the urge to transfer his skills and knowledge into the Kurdish region.[32]

The secondary motivation that came to the fore during the interviews was the economic opportunities in Kurdistan. According to one of the interviewees,[33] the economic crisis in Europe was a 'blessing in disguise' for the Kurdish Region as many young Kurds from Europe felt frustrated with the declining opportunities in various European cities and decided to come and try their luck in Kurdistan instead. Lastly, especially among the 2016 fieldwork cohort, there were a high number of interviewees who also stated that they returned for family-related reasons. Therefore, in parallel to what Van Houte (2014) suggested, motivations for return and capacities to politically, economically and socially remit vary.

Especially between 2012 and 2014, the interviewees mentioned that they found jobs in public sector due to their academic degrees or language skills. When I visited the Foreign Affairs Headquarters in Erbil, it seemed to me that most of the civil servants working there were young people who returned from abroad. They immediately took key positions in foreign affairs and the oil sector because they also connected their host countries' policy makers to the KRG, acting as bridges. Their language skills helped them work as translators during diplomatic meetings and gave them the opportunity to be employed as interpreters by foreign companies. At the same time, the KRG's diaspora management falls short of institutionalizing this kind of a return practice. Many interviewees complained that obtaining work permits and bureaucratic matters took too much time, creating an atmosphere of deterrence. The process usually takes place within the realm of personal contacts, prior political party loyalties and family and friend networks. Having said that, the returnees underlined that they observed progress in that realm, and that merit-based employment has been increasing. In particular, private firms in the oil business are increasingly hiring people through websites or job portals, and agencies offer merit-based recruitment opportunities.

Although the economic boom painted a rosy picture of Kurdistan until 2013, some problems were already a cause for concern as far back as 2003. As mentioned, people without prior connections and job possibilities have found it hard to come back. Secondly, the ones who have returned face a variety of problems. First of all, return migration, especially after exile, is

not a simple homecoming and requires seriously tailored policies and strategies (Hautaniemi et al., 2013). Especially among the 2016 interview cohort, we have observed complaints about reintegration policies for returnees. For example, education remains one of the many problems for the returnee families. Their children cannot speak perfect Kurdish and they usually go to the 'expat schools' as one of the interviewees called it.[34] Some interviewees also mentioned that although they returned thinking about Kurdistan's future, they sometimes feel that they had put their children's future at stake.

My research confirms the previous finding that returnees perceive corruption as a major issue in the KRG (Paasche, 2016b, p. 129). Interviewees in 2016 stated that 'there is no law and there is high level of corruption'[35] and that they found it morally hard to integrate since they were used to European way of life and do not know their way around in a different setting. In the case of the KRI, three categories of returnees' reactions to corruption—*changing, avoiding and rejecting* were all present (Van Houte, 2014, p. 578). This 'moral dilemma' (Paasche, 2016b, p. 134), created a significant amount of frustration for some of the interviewees, while some others had a 'give it time' approach. I have also noticed some interviewees found a way to deal with disappointments by simply adapting a 'loving Kurdistan with its imperfections' approach, while others interpreted what is happening as a 'wasted opportunity' for the future of the Kurdish nation. Another matter that came up frequently in the interviews was the question of patronage and its impact on any types of diaspora and returnee engagement, (also observed by Paasche, 2016b, p. 133). Especially in the testimonies conducted in 2016, there is a noticeable resentment against nepotism as well as the damaging rivalries between different political parties for the future of Kurdistan.

One of the most striking elements of my fieldwork in the KRI in 2013 was to see that a sizeable number of the returnees referred to themselves as 'expats' or as 'internationals'. As returnees, they 'continued their negotiations on history, identity and nationhood' which shows that 'the construction and reconstruction of identity is a never-ending project' (Chan & Tran, 2011, pp. 1101–1102). What Chan and Tran (2011, p. 1108) called the 'cultural territory' was very much present for many returnees, erecting invisible barriers between themselves and the locals. I could observe that some of them would be the new middle class in the KRI and they seemed as

if they were parachuted to a new reality. They preferred to attend European style cafes and restaurants where foreigners go, and live in gated communities where foreigners live while others seemed to have adapted immediately as if they were grown up there. I have not, however, detected a correlation between their new attitudes and their integration levels in the host country. For instance, a returnee could be very well-integrated into his/her host country but at the same time can adapt easily to the new conditions in Kurdistan upon return. While another returnee who returned due to failure of integration in the host country might find it very hard to adapt to the new conditions in Kurdistan. A confluence of many factors such as age, education, motivations for return, class, networks both at home and abroad determined the experience of return.

When it comes to relations with the locals, the interviewees gave varying answers. On the one hand, some of them talked openly about frictions with the locals. A returnee from UK said the following:

> I brought with me loads of experience in the UK…I want to teach them, help them with what I know…But, you have to do it in a very subtle way…you can't make it as if you are condescending and you show the cultural and class gap…if you do that, there is no dialogue. This is very very dangerous…[36]

A returnee from the USA stated that: 'I know people who told me now that Kurdistan has money…that is why you are coming back from USA and Europe'.[37] For another interviewee who returned from the USA a couple of years ago, there was a massive gulf between the locals and the 'internationals.' On the other hand, a high number of testimonies revealed no tension whatsoever. For instance, a returnee from Canada mentioned that the locals 'always care about returnees' and they asked her many times whether she feels good in Kurdistan.[38] Another interviewee added that 'I am learning a lot from the Kurds here, from political, cultural and social perspective…It doesn't exist in Europe.' For him reintegration was a two-way street and both locals and returnees should adapt to each other as they have a lot to learn from each other.[39]

Conclusion

The KRG's desire to reach out to its diaspora is not exceptional. Many home states have been formulating policies to tap into their diasporas' material and non-material resources for many years. What is interesting in the KRG's case is its ambiguous status as an autonomous entity within war-torn Iraq. This post-2003 atmosphere gave incentives to Iraqi Kurdish diasporans who had been living in exile in the USA, Europe and elsewhere to either return or contribute to the prosperity of the homeland from afar. In line with van Hear and Cohen's (2017) three frameworks that examine diasporic identity, one can argue that diaspora Kurds kept their attachments to the homeland in their family circles, known and imagined community, while at the same time trying to influence politics at home and abroad. Since 2003, they managed to transfer skills and know how to their homeland either with engaging from afar or returning to the homeland temporarily and permanently. The most visible contributions occurred in government, education and private sector in addition to media and civil society and time will tell their long-term impact on Kurdish politics and society.

This study confirms findings of the previous studies in on the subject of return. Echoing Van Houte (2014), I found that the motivations of diasporans vary and the returnees do not have a single profile. Some return because of failure to integrate in the host country, while others have more altruistic or financial motives which determine their decisions, which begs for further research to examine varying reasons for return. Similar to Paasche (2016b, p. 132), I have also found that the diasporans usually had the will and the capacity to transfer knowledge and values to the KRI, however they lacked a clear strategy to do so. As in the case of many state-led diaspora initiatives (Williams, 2018), the KRI also felt short in creating an enabling environment for the diasporans to contribute more effectively. While, the KRG has made a discursive commitment to collaborate with its diaspora in a variety of areas, it does not yet have an institutionalized diaspora policy.

Considering the current crisis that the KRI has been facing since 2013, it is possible to argue that the diaspora and returnee contributions matter more than ever, as other types of foreign direct investment will likely decline. However, the opportunities that the KRI can offer to the diasporans and returnees have also been affected by these recent developments. The KRG could not pay the salaries of civil servants for a long time, the

unemployment rate is strikingly high and the KRG still does not offer diaspora-specific incentives for economic investments. Returnees complain about corruption, nepotism and rivalries among Kurdish political parties as the biggest problems that the KRI must address in the future. There is a risk that these problems could trigger a re-return to the host countries (Baser & Toivanen, 2018). It has also been reported that many young Kurds have started to leave Kurdistan during the last five years (Eccarius-Kelly, 2018). Recent developments show that the KRG urgently requires a more systematic and sustained diaspora engagement strategy which will re-energise diaspora-homeland relations and create more avenues for cooperation. The post-referendum developments can trigger 'diasporic patriotism' (Ancien et al., 2009) and, if used in a structured and targeted way, can rekindle diaspora interests in advancing the homeland's prosperity at a time when it is needed the most.

Notes

1. I participated in this conference with over 600 participants. It created transnational a platform for Kurdish policy makers, diplomats, civil society organizations and the diaspora to discuss the future of Kurdistan and its place in the Middle East. See: http://cabinet.gov.krd/a/d.aspx?l=12&a=45538 (Last access 28 February 2018).

2. As one of my interviewees at the Congress put it, what happened to Kurdistan in the recent years was a 'miracle'.

3. I thank Dr. Bayar Dosky for conducting the interviews in the KRI as part of this project.

4. Our sample included 9 female and 17 male interviewees. One of the reasons we found it hard to reach female interviewees was that in most cases men return and bring their families afterwards or they leave them in the host countries. Secondly, the research assistant was male and he found it hard to reach female interviewees in Kurdistan's relatively conservative setting.

5. Two of these interviews were conducted face to face in London and three of them were conducted via skype with academics who are based in the KRI.

6. For more information on the KRG's 'success story' and the recent economic and political crises see Soguk (2015) and Sumer and Joseph (2018).

7. http://www.basnews.com/index.php/en/reports/349883 (Last access 28 March 2018).

8. The Anfal Campaigns refer to the Saddam Regimes genocidal campaign against the Iraqi Kurds between 1986 and 1989, killing almost 200,000 people. The Halabja chemical attack occurred on 16 March 1988 and killed more than 5000 Kurdish civilians.

9. Interview with the President of the Kurdish Institute, Kendal Nezan, November 2013, Paris, France.

10. http://cabinet.gov.krd/a/d.aspx?l=12&s=02010200&r=73&a=45562&s=010000 (Last access 28 March 2018).

11. http://www.rudaw.net/english/interview/10062017 (Last access 28 March 2018).

12. For more information on KRG's diaspora engagement policies see Baser (2018).

13. Author's interview with Dr. Sardar Aziz, June 2018.

14. Diaspora Kurds also have the right to vote or to be elected if they are Iraqi citizens and can provide the necessary documentation required to practice these rights.

15. http://www.rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/201020177 (Last access 28 March 2018).

16. The KRG has introduced various laws including the Investment Law (July 2006) which stated that foreign investors shall be treated as national and local investors. The law did not provide any exemptions to the diaspora therefore diaspora entrepreneurs were treated the same way as nationals or foreign investors, unless of course they have a special agreement with the KRG via personal initiatives and contacts. See the law: http://cabinet.gov.krd/p/print.aspx?l=12&smap=010000&p=293 (Last Access June 2018). Currently the KRG is introducing new tax systems for private sector therefore these laws might change in the short run. See: http://www.kurdistan24.net/en/economy/7543c01a-6b71-438f-91c6-b3fe6c205a28.

17. Interview with a returnee from Germany, Erbil, April 2016.

18. Although patriotic motivations played big role in convincing the diasporans to return, the political situation in the KRI as well as the economic crisis compelled many to re-return to their host countries. This shows that initial motivations might not be sustained after return and priorities might be reshuffled depending on the ever-evolving situation in the homeland.

19. Author's interview with Gorran Representatives in Berlin, April 2013.

20. Interview with Kendal Nezan, Paris, November 2013.

21. Author's interview, November 2012, Stockholm, Sweden.

22. Author's interview with Newzad Hirori, November 2012, Stockholm, Sweden.

23. Author's interview, October 2013, Rotterdam, The Netherlands.

24. http://www.qandil.org/ (Last access 28 March 2018).

25. See: http://ikwro.org.uk/ (Last access 28 March 2018).

26. Author's interview with Dr. Sardar Aziz, June 2018.

27. The interviews took place in London (December 2012), Paris (November 2013), In the Hague (September 2013), in Geneva (May 2016), in Germany (April 2016).

28. Author's interview with Dr. Fuad Hussein, April 2013, Erbil, KRI.

29. http://kw.krg.org/en/diaspora (Last access 28 March 2018).

30. Author's interview, Erbil, April 2013.

31. Author's interview, Erbil, April 2013.

32. Author's interview, Erbil, April 2013.

33. Author's interview with a returnee from the UK, Erbil, April 2013.

34. See also: http://www.kurdishglobe.net/article/017FBFC47C78EE5341560187F4FBBDD3/Returning-Kurdish-diaspora-students-seek-KRG-s-attention.html (Last access 28 March 2018).

35. Interview with a returnee from the UK, Duhok, April 2016.

36. Author's interview with a returnee from the UK, Erbil, April 2013.

37. Interview with a returnee from the USA, Erbil, May 2016.

38. Interview with a returnee from Canada, Duhok, April 2016.

39. Author's interview with a returnee from the Netherlands, April 2013.

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The HDP, the AKP and the Battle for Turkish Democracy

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ABSTRACT The conflict between the AKP and the HDP can, in part, be understood as a conflict over the nature of democracy in Turkey. While the AKP embodies a vision of majoritarian democracy that has descended into electoral authoritarianism, the HDP offers an alternative vision of 'radical democracy' that argues for minority rights and checks on the centralised state. It is against this backdrop that this article analyses the rise of the HDP to become the first Kurdish party to pass the 10% electoral threshold without allying with another party and gain representation in the Grand National Assembly. This article argues that while both parties offer competing visions of democracy, both are instrumental. That is, the parties' commitment to their democratic visions depends upon the degree to which it helps to advance their interests. In this regard, they fit a longer-term pattern in Turkish politics, which ultimately leaves Turkish democracy weak and with little reason for optimism going forward.

Introduction

As the Gezi Park protests of 2013 gained increasing momentum, demonstrating the potential vulnerability of the AKP to popular protest, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan responded in what was becoming his typical fashion. He decried the protestors as a small minority that were not

representative of Turkish opinion, he blamed the opposition and an unspecified 'interest lobby' for provoking the protests, and he threatened to confront the protestors with the 50% of the population (referring to his party's vote share in the most recent 2011 general election), that Erdoğan said 'he was hardly able to keep [at] home'.[1] This reveals much about his and his party's (AKP—*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* or Justice and Development Party) view of democracy. From this perspective, democracy is a process that occurs once every election cycle and mandates any party that wins a majority to act without restriction on their power. This understanding subsequently descended into an outright authoritarian concentration of power in the personal hands of Erdoğan.

Contrast this with Selahattin Demirtaş's understanding of democracy. In the run up to the June 2015 election he declared that 'our aim is to create a broader movement and to do this on the basis of Kurds and Turks living together in peace'.[2] The party of which he was co-chair, the People's Democracy Party (*Halkların Demokratik Partisi,* HDP), a Kurdish nationalist party, ran on a pluralistic manifesto that sought to decentralise power. Half of HDP candidates were women and a large number were minorities, including Kurds, Alevis, Christians, Syriacs and Armenians. For Demirtaş and the HDP, democracy in Turkey should be rights-based and consensual, an approach which would of course significantly advance the position of Kurds within Turkish political life.

In other words, the electoral battle between the AKP and the HDP, which has taken centre stage in all Turkish elections since 2014, is not just a battle for votes but also a battle over the rightful nature of Turkish democracy. The Kurdish conflict is often reduced to a competition over the nation-state model, with the Kurds fighting since 1923 for distinct political recognition within Atatürk's Republic while the AKP represents the latest in a succession of governments that use the tools of the state to defend its territorial integrity and Turkish identity. This is a key component of the clash, but reducing it solely to these terms fails to acknowledge the full complexity of this contestation. The AKP, whilst undoubtedly accepting the state's borders, historically has its own conflict with the tutelary state and is challenging some of the founding values of Atatürk's Republic and its ideology (despite its initial claims to the contrary when the party was founded in 2001). The AKP has also been willing to concede to Kurdish political desires for cultural recognition, and Demirtaş himself once

declared that no prime minister has done as much for the Kurds as Erdoğan.[3] Additionally, Kurdish nationalists claim to be seeking autonomy and recognition within the Turkish state and no longer wish to separate from it. Abdullah Öcalan declared in 2003 that the PKK was now seeking decentralisation for the Kurds within the existing borders of Turkey, a system he labels 'democratic confederalism' (Öcalan, 2011). Singing from largely the same hymn sheet, Demirtaş also called for a reorganisation of the administrative structure of Turkey based on the principle of decentralisation.[4] Therefore, reducing the battle between the AKP and the HDP solely to a clash over a nation-state model overlooks the possibility for pragmatism on both sides.

Instead an overlooked reason for the vitriol of the clash between the AKP and HDP lies in the two competing visions of democracy offered by each party. For the HDP, the main shortcoming of Turkish democracy is the state's wilful neglect of Kurdish and minority rights, justified by the AKP through a majoritarian understanding of democracy that has descended into electoral authoritarianism. From the HDP's perspective, the ruling party conflates its interests with the state's interests and uses the tools of the state to suppress all minority dissent forcefully. In contrast, for the AKP a crucial factor hindering Turkey's democracy is the revolutionary politics of the HDP and anti-system violence by the PKK—with the AKP viewing them as two sides of the same coin. For the AKP, the refusal of the Kurdish movement to accept the ruling state as the legitimate site of power undermines democratic stability and weakens Turkey's internal security. That is not to say there are no commonalities in their positions. Both the HDP and the AKP are highly critical of interventions by the tutelary state over the years—the AKP because it was against Islamic actors and the HDP because it was against Kurdish actors. Yet recent developments show that the divide between them is far greater than their shared experiences and this division can be framed as a battle over the rightful meaning of Turkish democracy.

This raises a number of key questions which this article seeks to address: what are the HDP's and the AKP's understandings of democracy? What is the wider context in which these understandings emerged? How has each party challenged the other's understanding and framing of Turkish democracy? This article argues that while both parties offer competing visions of democracy, both are instrumental That is, the parties'

commitment to their democratic visions depends upon the degree to which it helps to advance their interests. In this regard, they fit a longer-term pattern in Turkish democracy.

The Limited and Limiting Paradigm of Turkish Democracy

Past struggles over how democracy was institutionalised matter when explaining outcomes today (Capoccia & Ziblatt, 2010). As an archetypal hybrid regime that was never fully consolidated, struggles over the nature of Turkish democracy are still ongoing (Turan, 2015). What the history of Turkish democracy tells us is that embracing a majoritarian vision of democracy that slides into authoritarianism is nothing new. Similarly pursuing a democratic agenda only to the extent to which it promotes the interests of the party is a common and recurring theme throughout the history of the modern Republic. Tracing these patterns in full detail from the 1960s to the present era is beyond the scope of this article and has already been undertaken elsewhere (for example, Ahmad, 1977; Heper, 1985; Özbudun, 1995). However, what is important to note is that the AKP's and HDP's clash over different visions of democracy occurs in a long-term framework which incentivises and constrains the parties today.

A strategic commitment to democracy has been a hallmark of Turkish democracy. This is not to say that strategic commitments to democracy (as opposed to a normative, attitudinal commitment or 'positive democratic consolidation' to use Pridham's (1995) phrase) prevent democracy from bedding down. After all, initially strategic commitments can evolve into consolidation in cases where the context and institutions incentivise actors to make binding commitments to democracy), even when faced with adverse structural conditions (see Alexander, 2002; Przeworski, 1998, or for this specific argument in the Muslim world see Salamé, 1995). However, historically, incentives for elite-led consolidation have never clearly existed in Turkey. What is more, they certainly do not exist for the AKP today (David, 2016), albeit they are stronger for the HDP in that democratic rights

would most likely improve the position of the Kurds, but only if their particular understanding of a pluralist democracy is institutionalised.

The dominant framework of Turkish democracy that emerged with the beginning of multi-party democracy, and which has been perpetuated until today, is one that does not lend itself to plural democracy. As Çınar and Sayın (2014, 367) demonstrate, Turkish democracy operates within a historical paradigm that 'reinforces an anti-pluralist attitude' and 'routinizes a zero-sum perception of politics in which only one party wins'. Turkish democracy has historically been a tutelary one, with the armed forces often over-riding the decisions of elected representatives in the name of protecting the national interest, which it defines as distinct from the interests of voters. In this process, the state identified minorities that could potentially threaten the established order, labelled them as 'others', and attempted to restrict their political rights (unless they jettisoned their minority identity and entered the public realm as Turks). This included Islamists, Kurds, Alevis, Armenians, and Christians. In order to combat this narrative, a series of centre-right parties, beginning with the Democrat Party (DP) in the 1960s sought to use elections as a tool to achieve the 'concentration of all powers in the hands of elected governments so as to establish supremacy over the non-elected and non-accountable civilian and military bureaucracy' (ibid, 370).

As such, the history of Turkish democracy can in part be characterised by a tutelary elite versus a more populist (usually centre-right) elite, both vying for control of the state and justifying this on the basis of national interest or majority support respectively. The victims of this were liberalism and pluralism, which were of little concern to either side in their quest for control over the state. This played out in the four major coups as well as the proscription of numerous leftist, Islamist and Kurdish parties (for a detailed overview of how these events can be understood within this framing, see Öktem, 2011). Even when seemingly liberal measures were introduced, such as the clauses in the 1961 constitution that specified clear divisions of power or the 1982 constitution that checked the power of the prime minister, with hindsight these can be seen as policies implemented by one side to restrict opposing forces and shore up their own power.[5]

It was within this historical context that both the AKP and the HDP have pursued their particular visions of democracy, both as a challenge to the state and to advance their own interests. The AKP, representing the latest

incarnation of the populist centre-right tradition, embraced the idea of a majoritarian democracy and used this to justify gaining control of the state and neutralising the threat of intervention from the tutelary elites. The centralisation of power initially in the party's hands, later primarily in Erdoğan's hands, became the hallmark of its time in power. Initially, it saw the Kurdish movement as a potential ally given Kurds' historically hostile relationship with the tutelary state. However, as circumstances changed and HDP support was no longer needed or was seen as a threat to its control, the AKP followed a similar pattern to its predecessors and used the state to suppress, marginalise and criminalise Kurdish nationalism, whether violent or not, and decry it as a threat to Turkey's democracy. Yet there is nothing inherently anti-democratic in nationalist groups that challenge the state. If the status quo in a polity is an authoritarian one, then radicals may be radical democrats demanding its complete overhaul in a revolutionary fashion (Schwedler, 2011). Even the use of violence would not necessarily make such actors inherently anti-democratic but more 'ademocratic' (Hart, 2003). Often such groups are not pursuing an authoritarian or fascistic state and instead declare themselves to be fighting to establish a more democratic order. This is certainly how the HDP understands its challenger role within the Turkish democratic paradigm, but that does not imply its approach is not also somewhat strategic and pursued on condition it advances their interests.

The Evolution of the AKP's Vision of Democracy

The AKP's commitment to democracy in Turkey is strategic and has changed during its time in power, increasing or declining according to the extent to which this path best serves their interests. The key characteristic of its time in power is a series of reversals in which the democratic credentials of the party, as well as institutional checks and balances, steadily weakened (Başer & Öztürk, 2017; Esen & Gümüşçü, 2016). The history of Turkish democracy meant there was a large degree of mistrust by the AKP towards the existing system and it incentivised the party to eliminate such checks on their power (Akkoyunlu & Öktem, 2016). From the AKP's perspective, provided it had a clear mandate, any reforms that prevented the tutelary

state from intervening and that bolstered the AKP's ability to enact its legislative agenda, were synonymous with enhancing Turkish democracy, even if these reforms were illiberal in nature.

After initially embarking upon a series of seemingly democratic reforms, today the party has a decidedly weak commitment to liberal rights. Furthermore, its majoritarian electoral understanding of democracy has become autocratic through ever increasing concentrations of power within the hands of Erdoğan in a form of electoral authoritarianism. In government, the AKP has viewed a clear electoral mandate as the *sine qua non* of their powerbase and used it as a platform from which to implement policies that eroded many aspects of democracy. The AKP's changing vision of democracy, which provides the context against which the HDP offered an alternative vision that challenged that of the AKP and laid the foundations for the clash of ideas, can be analysed in three phases.

Phase 1 (2002–2007): Ambivalent Democrats

This phase was about the AKP using its electoral mandate to create a strong executive that could dominate parliament and then using this position of power to reform the system in their vision. The AKP built electoral support for its agenda through appealing to pious and conservative voters who previously felt marginalised from political life, through controlling the public sphere for debate, and initially through a strong programme of economic growth (Hale & Özbudun, 2010). Offering an alternative to the previous decade of fragile coalition politics and receiving support from voters dissatisfied with the governing coalition, the party secured 34.2% of the vote, translating into 365 of the 550 seats in the parliament thanks to the 10% threshold.

These initial years showed some commitment by the AKP to democratic consolidation, meaning, in general terms, the strengthening of democracy to make it unlikely to breakdown (Schedler, 2001, 66), albeit this did not involve entrenching liberal values and rights (Turam, 2012). From the AKP's perspective its policies were equivalent to entrenching democracy—reining in the power of the guardian state to intervene protected the electorally endorsed AKP. Many of these reforms took place with a view to enhance Turkey's EU candidacy. Yet this too was about the AKP pursuing a

democratic agenda for instrumental gains, most notably using the EU mandate to expand freedom of religion which would appeal to its conservative voters and to weaken domestic secular forces (Saatçioğlu, 2010). Later, when the prospect of EU membership faded, the desire to pursue democratic consolidation also faded given it no longer served as strong a purpose for the party (Aydın-Düzgit & Keyman, 2013).

Major reforms included curtailing the power of the armed forces. Unable to challenge the position of the military outright for fear of provoking a backlash, the party passed laws that weakened the military's veto power. Through an EU harmonisation package in 2003, it increased civilian membership of the National Security Council and downgraded the Council's 'binding' decisions to 'recommendations'. The AKP railed against human rights abuses by the police and military and removed any possibility of imposing the death penalty even in war and near war conditions. Even highly divisive issues were addressed, including pursuing a peace deal with Cyprus, lifting the state of emergency in the southeast of Turkey, and extending some (ultimately limited) cultural rights to Kurds around language and broadcasting.

However, alongside democratic reforms sat other initiatives that were undemocratic in nature, as well as signs of increasing state intervention in the private sphere. Dissent and criticism of the government was suppressed through media regulation, such as revising the penal code in 2004 to allow the criminal prosecution of journalists for discussing any subject deemed controversial by state authorities and, in 2005 passing and widely utilising a series of defamation laws against public criticism of the government and governing institutions such as the infamous Article 301. Other new laws facilitated the blocking of websites and the identification of Internet users, and allowed the Radio and Television Supreme council to forbid coverage of certain issues altogether. The AKP also punished dissenting media conglomerates by hindering their wider business interests and by imposing tax bills and fines (Yeşil, 2014). It also began to establish government sponsored civil society organisations, squeezing out pre-existing civil society organisations (Doyle, 2017).

Phase 2 (2007–2013): Eliminating Checks on Executive Power

Having created a powerful executive, the AKP became more robust in reining in the potential of the army and courts to block the will of the executive. Again, this was justified on the basis of protecting the democratically expressed will of the people at the ballot box. The military may have been publicly accepting the AKP's electoral rise, but rumours and threats of a coup dominated the early years of AKP rule.[6] Indeed, Armağan Kuloğlu, a retired general, publicly stated in 2003 that his former colleagues would not easily relinquish their guardian role any time soon.[7] Prior to the 2007 general election, the Turkish Armed Forces sent the AKP an official warning about its perceived Islamism. The army along with the opposition and high judiciary also tried to prevent the appointment of Abdullah Gül as president after parliament had voted for him, with his wife's headscarf being a particular cause of concern.

However, after the AKP won the 2007 general election with an increased majority, it strengthened its position further. In 2007, public prosecutors claimed that key military officials, law-makers and journalists were part of a secularist plot (named *Ergenekon*) to overthrow the government and a major court case was prepared. Although few charges were proved, the trials and allegations discredited the armed forces and damaged their reputation, limiting their role in public life. The AKP also passed two-dozen constitutional changes via referendum in 2010 that restricted the independence of the senior judiciary. In 2014, the justice minister was given power to directly appoint members to the disciplinary board for judges and prosecutors and within six months more than 3,000 sitting judges were removed. Decisions around the dissolution of political parties passed from the constitutional court to the legislature (Özbudun, 2015).

A crucial factor which made the curtailment of these institutions possible without provoking a backlash was the Gülen movement. The movement's educational programmes had empowered a newly emerging middle class and helped them to secure opportunities within the bureaucracy, the armed forces, and other public bodies (Hendrick, 2013). This large body of pious Muslims then helped the AKP to penetrate state institutions and ensured a significant degree of support at a time when the AKP was trying to take these institutions under greater control. Additionally, a Gülenist-influenced press helped to promote the AKP's position within the population.

Phase 3 (2013-present day): From Illiberal Majoritarianism to Electoral Authoritarianism

The party was now in a position of enhanced power, having reined in the tutelary forces and gained control of much of the state itself. All this was done under the rubric of a majoritarian vision of democracy. However, in this final phase, the AKP was confronted with threats to its power from popular protests, from the Gülen movement and Kurdish nationalists. The result was that the AKP pushed its reforms of the earlier phases to their logical conclusion of electoral authoritarianism. Dissent and critics of their policy programme were framed in a zero-sum mentality. The party conflated itself with the state and so critics of the party were seen as critics of the state and, therefore, the AKP was at liberty to use the full powers of the state to punish and control dissent.

The first threat came from the Gezi Park Protests of 2013, which expanded from an environmental protest in central Istanbul to most major urban centres around the country and became a site of general dissatisfaction from a range of groups, including liberals, socialists, Kurds, secularists, LGBTQ groups, women's rights groups amongst others. The other threat came more from within the Islamist movement when relations between Gülenists and the AKP collapsed amidst both sides accusing the other of seeking to consolidate power. In December 2013, Gülenists initiated a wide-ranging investigation into Erdoğan's inner circle, which led to the resignations of several ministers and the arrest of many individuals. Erdoğan labelled the investigation a judicial coup by a parallel authority, declared the Gülenists a national security threat, fired thousands of officers and members of the judiciary, and closed several media outlets (Lowen, 2014). This clash escalated further when on 15 July 2016, a coup was attempted that had the heavy involvement of the Gülen network. This differed from earlier coups in that it did not involve a majority of the high command in the military and it faced popular resistance (Öktem, 2016). Around 250 people were killed resisting the coup, individuals that the AKP labelled 'martyrs to democracy'.

The final threat stemmed from Kurdish nationalism. Although the AKP initially sought to reach out to Kurdish groups and pursue a 'democratic opening', this policy proved unsustainable for both sides. Secret talks between the PKK and the state had been held between 2008 and 2011,

known as the Oslo Talks. Official talks started again in 2012 between the government and the imprisoned leader of the PKK, Abdullah Öcalan.[8] However, these collapsed amidst a lack of willingness by the government to extend the concessions the Kurds aspired for and a lack of willingness by the Kurdish leadership to support initiatives that might threaten its position within the community, all further complicated by the war in neighbouring Syria. Following the collapse of the talks, levels of Kurdish violence have risen significantly. At the same time, support for Kurdish parties has increased, with the HDP crossing the national threshold in the last three general elections.

The AKP's response to these combined threats has been to further conflate its interests with those of the state, to portray the threats as existential threats to the nation, and to then use state powers to tackle the challenge and further entrench its position. After the coup, the AKP declared a state of emergency which concentrated all power in the hands of Erdoğan—a state which was extended seven times. Additionally, the AKP embarked upon a shockingly widespread purge of all levels of society, impacting the armed forces, the judiciary, universities, the bureaucracy and public bodies, and the media, as well as general critics of the government.[9] In response to the electoral threat from the Kurds, the AKP extended this purge to Kurdish activists and elected officials, even stripping HDP members of their parliamentary immunity and detaining many, including both its co-leaders. The AKP also sought to maintain its electoral dominance by positing radical Kurdish nationalism as a security risk and building an alliance with the right-wing nationalist MHP (*Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi*—Nationalist Movement Party), which added nationalistic tones to their electoral strategy.

Yet by far the most significant institutional development in this phase was that Erdoğan used this opportunity to transform the regime from a parliamentary system to an executive presidency. After the coup, the AKP held a referendum in April 2017 with the support of the leader of the MHP, Devlet Bahçeli. The referendum took place under a state of emergency, in conditions far from 'free and fair', and was passed by 51.4% to 48.6% (OSCE, 2017). Erdoğan was duly elected president in the first elections in June 2018. The AKP's refashioning of Turkey's democracy and its quest to gain untethered control of the state was largely complete.

HDP's Vision of Democracy

It was within this context that the HDP's vision of democracy emerged and, in part, crystallised in opposition to this dominant version. It was one that was more liberal in the sense of putting rights at its core and challenging the increasing concentration of power under the AKP. However, the HDP's understanding of democracy is also strategic—not as ruthlessly so as the AKP's, but strategic nonetheless. This is evident from the way that it pitches itself. Its quest to promote democratic minority rights and decentralisation throughout Turkey is also clearly about advancing the Kurdish agenda, which may well take priority over a wider democracy agenda if a competing situation between these two features arose. Additionally, its ambivalent relationship with the PKK and its inability to condemn the military violence carried out by the PKK highlights the limits of its democratic commitment.

The party has showed pragmatism in pursuing its democratic agenda. For example, it was initially reluctant to support the Gezi Park protests for fear of upsetting the AKP during the peace process. The HDP initially explored an alliance with the AKP and considered supporting Erdoğan's push for an executive presidential system in return for movement in the peace process, but later abandoned its support for this plan. This is not to deny the possibility that a normative commitment to liberal rights underpins the HDP's commitment to democracy, but it is to say that we must not ignore the fact that the party's positioning is pragmatic and fluid, varying according to its interests. Finally, of course, seeing them as the great hope for Turkish democracy neglects their uncomfortable and ambivalent relationship with the PKK.

The Origins of HDP and Radical Democracy

The HDP is the outcome of an attempt to unify Kurdish nationalist forces with the Turkish left. In so doing, it sought to give the Peace and Democracy Party (*Barış ve Demokrasi Partisi*, BDP—HDP's predecessor) a territorial rather than ethnic (*Türkiyeli*) identity. In promoting this new branding, the Kurdish political movement found it necessary and useful to

close a gap that opened up in the 1970s between Kurdish politics and leftist movements. Both groups were part of the same leftist movement until 1978 when Öcalan and his followers decided to leave and form their own movement, the PKK, with a primary focus on the Kurds. After the military coup in 1980, and the partial normalisation of politics in Turkey, in 1990 the Kurdish movement, under the PKK's influence, formed its first political party, the People's Labour Party (*Halkın Emek Partisi*). This party was closed by the Constitutional Court but subsequently replaced with new incarnations under different names, with the HDP founded in 2012 being the current representative of this tradition.

The HDP stands on a platform of 'radical democracy'—originally a socialist idea that referred to the rejection of existing democratic models in favour of more pluralistic and direct democracy (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001). This notion, adopted by imprisoned PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan, appealed to Kurdish nationalists as it goes beyond simply increasing the democratic rights of the people and it implies a revolutionary transformation of the system to increase the power and oversight of the people over the state (Küpeli, 2014). According to the HDP, Turkey needs 'real democracy to be able to build a new life where the whole of society is guaranteed the circumstances that each of its elements needs for its existence and life'.[10] It sought to challenge the long-standing 'one-nation mentality' that it saw as dominating Turkey and to promote a more multi-identity and multi-cultural vision. The logical extension of its 'real democracy' is to reform laws and policies perceived as discriminating against Kurds (and other social groups) and the southeast of Turkey.

It was within this context that the HDP were able to find some common ground with the AKP in its fight against the tutelary state. With both Kurds and Islamists having a history of suppression at the hands of the military-bureaucratic apparatus of the traditional state, Kurdish political elites were happy with any developments that restrained and curtailed the military's and bureaucracy's ability to intervene in the political sphere. This combined with the AKP's initial pursuit of EU membership, opened the possibility for cooperation between the two parties. The HDP initially considered supporting the AKP's push for an executive presidential system and it remained cautious in criticising the majoritarianism of the AKP in the hope of gaining concessions that never came in the peace initiative. HDP MPs declared that their party was not against an American style presidential

system[11] and Öcalan said that 'We could support Mr Erdogan's presidency. We can enter into an alliance with the AKP based on this', albeit with clear conditions attached.[12] The HDP took part in a Conciliation Commission between 2011 and 2013 along with the other three major parties (AKP, CHP and MHP) to discuss constitutional reform, with each of the parties given equal voting rights and veto power over decisions. The Commission could only agree on technical articles and not on more substantial reforms, leading to its eventual demise. Following the collapse of the Conciliation Commission in 2013, the redrawing of the constitution was conducted with little input from other parties in Parliament or from civil society. The way the process was handled and their exclusion from the process frustrated the HDP.[13] In other words, potential Kurdish support for the AKP's presidential system was conditional on this being as part of a wider package of reforms linked to the faltering peace initiative. Therefore, after initial prevarication, the HDP came out in support of the Gezi Protests and refused to support Erdoğan's referendum to bring in a presidential system.

For refusing to support Erdogan's referendum on the presidential system the HDP paid a high price in terms of how the AKP responded. However, it did help to distinguish its position from the AKP. Today the HDP defines itself as a party that criticises the AKP's 'authoritarian and hard (*katı*) centralised political and administrative structures' and 'anti-democratic laws imposed under the guise of law'.[14]

The Electoral Strategy of HDP

From its outset, the HDP was an elections-focused party. For many radical parties, being election-focused enforces a degree of moderation as parties are forced to work through the existing system (Whiting, 2018). However, interestingly the HDP managed to retain a high degree of radicalism relative to other parties competing in the system while still performing well in elections. It did this by appealing to three sets of potential voters in addition to its core: conservative voters of ethnic Kurdish descent who previously supported the AKP, voters of Kurdish descent who had emigrated to urban centres around the country, and liberal-secular non-Kurdish voters who had grown tired of the AKP (Grigoriadis, 2016). To appeal to these wide

ranging groups, the party embraced a new strategy that came to be known as '*Türkiyelileşme'* in the 2014 local and presidential elections and the 2015 general elections. This built on an earlier argument by Abdullah Öcalan that Kurdish political movements should seek to appeal to the whole of Turkey and avoid being reduced solely to the Kurdish issue. For example, during the 2014 presidential elections, the HDP leader Demirtaş's campaign was based around an appeal to the frustrations of workers, environmentalists, women, LGBTQ groups, youth, and the Kurdish community.[15]

The new strategy brought HDP significant electoral success. Not only did HDP's vote share increase, but it did so by attracting votes from parts of the country outside the Kurdish-populated southeast. In the 2014 presidential election, Demirtaş competed and gained the 9.8% of the vote, doubling the votes for the pro-Kurdish party outside the south eastern provinces. This was seen as an indicator of the possibility of HDP passing the 10% national electoral threshold to enter parliament. Therefore in the June 2015 general elections, HDP decided to enter as a party rather than through independent candidates, as HDP's predecessors had done in a bid to circumvent the threshold. This risk paid off, making it the first Kurdish political party to pass the electoral threshold (winning 13.1% of the vote share and 80 parliamentary seats), and as a result the AKP failed to achieve parliamentary majority to form a single-party government for the first time since 2002.

The wider political context of the Kurdish peace talks enabled HDP's electoral success. The democratic opening initiative allowed the Kurdish issue to be relatively normalised and discussed in the public domain without fear of persecution or heavy judgement in western parts of Turkey. This political atmosphere was aided by the ceasefire between the PKK and the Turkish army and the talks between Öcalan and the Turkish government (which the HDP were facilitating) provided some degree of legitimacy to HDP to join the political competition at a national level in order to enter the parliament (Cavanaugh & Hughes, 2015). Of course, these openings were later to be undone by the AKP after concerns over its electoral stake and wider regional dynamics stemming from the Syrian civil war (Çiçek, 2018; Kaya & Whiting, 2017).

HDP's success was also the outcome of key contingent factors. Frustrations with the AKP's rule among the electorate living in western Turkey and in large cities, combined with the ineffectiveness of the CHP

opposition, aided their cause. The Gezi protests provided a constituency that HDP eventually chose to court. Dovetailing with this was frustration among some moderate and liberal voters towards restrictions on political discussion combined with state infringements into the private sphere and the imposition of a particular form of Islam. Policies on women's rights and gender equality, LGBTQ rights, the environment, and criticisms of the AKP's concentration of power, all suddenly chimed. Demirtaş's declaration to Erdoğan that 'we shall not make you president' ['*seni başkan yaptırmayacağız*'] was a defining moment in the June 2015 elections. It had become clear to voters who would not necessarily vote for a Kurdish party but whose reservations about the AKP were stronger, that if HDP passed the 10% nationwide electoral threshold, it would jeopardise the AKP's overall majority position in the parliament.

The HDP and the PKK

Yet amidst the HDP's self-espoused radical democracy and positioning itself as the best hope for the future of rights in Turkey, lies its uncomfortable relationship with the PKK. Indeed Erdoğan identifying this as a way to turn voters against the HDP and to justify a heavily securitised clamp-down on Kurdish politics, has constantly emphasised the links between the two groups. Erdoğan labelled Demirtaş a 'terrorist' and declared that Demirtaş had 'encouraged my Kurdish brothers to spill onto the streets and thus caused 53 of my Kurdish brothers to be killed by other Kurds. That is only one of his crimes'.[16] Binali Yıldırım, prime minister of Turkey from 2016 to 2018, accused the HDP of diverting state money for local municipalities towards funding terrorism.[17] Alongside this, the AKP constantly linked the HDP to the PKK, reducing the HDP to a terrorist organisation and using the state to respond accordingly. Of course, the HDP denies any links with the PKK and asserts that it does not condone violence. Demirtaş declared in response to accusations that the PKK was guiding the HDP's strategy during the peace initiatives that 'throughout my political career, I have never received any instructions from a member or an executive of the PKK. I would not have accepted it even if I received such an instruction'.[18]

The reality is somewhat more ambiguous than either side portrays. It would be going too far to claim that the HDP is merely the political front for the PKK and it appears to be a more autonomous organisation than this. Levels of cross and dual membership and the coordination of tactical platforms falls somewhat short of what was seen between Sinn Féin and the IRA, for example (albeit that is not to deny any coordination or membership overlaps). However, there can be little doubt of strong ideological links between the two groups and high levels of sympathy. Indeed, the HDP's core policy of decentralisation originates with Öcalan's notion of 'democratic confederalism' as a solution for the conflict whilst still retaining Turkey's existing borders. Additionally, HDP parliamentarians have carried coffins at PKK fighters' funerals; when being escorted from parliament some HDP members chanted in Kurmanji 'Long Live Apo' (a reference to Öcalan); many HDP representatives have given speeches espousing the same interpretation of the conflict as the PKK and condoning PKK attacks; and, HDP leaders gave open support for the PKK-affiliated PYD's (Democratic Union Party) struggle in northern Syria. While the PKK also denies any firm organisational links, it encourages its supporters to vote and rally behind the HDP.[19]

Clearly the HDP's vision of democracy is distinct from the AKP's and in many respects it has been defined directly in opposition to it. Whilst it is more consensus and rights based, the strategic nature of the HDP's democratic vision should not be dismissed either. The party continues to have an ambivalent relationship with the PKK, which limits its credibility to be seen as the best democratic hope for the future of Turkey, a relationship that has been exploited by the AKP. There are different factions within the HDP with different perceptions towards the PKK and its ideology. Several HDP members consider the PKK as an inherent component of the Kurdish political movement. PKK leaders have emphasised the role of their struggle over decades in bringing the Kurdish political movement and HDP to its current position. Therefore, the HDP leadership is in a difficult position; it cannot simply ignore the PKK and its role in the Kurdish political movement, but nor can it accept the PKK's role, even if it wanted to, due to articles in the penal code regarding terrorism and supporting terrorism.

The end of the ceasefire and resumption of the conflict between the PKK and Turkish military forces exacerbated the dilemma for the HDP's

leadership. At the same time, HDP lost credibility as a pro-democracy party due to its attempts at de facto local governance led by PKK militants in parts of the southeast. This led to questions about the HDP's real intentions in the promotion of radical democracy; political rivals began to question whether their radical democracy agenda was for the sake of democracy or simply a strategy to create the context for increased Kurdish rule in the southeast at the expense of non-Kurdish citizens.[20] Indeed, it has been reported that some of the Democratic Regions Party (DBP)[21] mayors carried out exclusionary policies in the provision of services and alienated non-Kurdish residents in their towns.[22]

A key factor that led to such questioning was the ambivalent position adopted by some of the party's mayors. Claims were made that they: facilitated digging trenches during the conflict between the PKK and Turkish security forces in the southeast in 2015, attended funerals of PKK members and allowed the declaration of autonomous rule in some districts and towns.[23] Another important factor is the processes in which candidates for local elections were chosen. Having a family member who had fought and died as a PKK militant and sacrificed himself/herself for the cause was considered in the selection of the candidates.[24]

Conclusion

The conflict between the AKP in power and Kurdish nationalism is often reduced to a conflict over territory, competing nationalisms or regional security. While undoubtedly all these dimensions are significant, what has been overlooked to date is how this conflict also represents a clash over the legitimate nature and direction of democracy in Turkey. From this perspective, the conflict becomes all the more embedded and salient because it represents a clash between the AKP's vision of a majoritarian democracy that concentrates unchecked power in the hands of its leader, Erdoğan, and which has descended into electoral authoritarianism, and the HDP's vision of a rights-based democracy that seeks to challenge the established ruling order in a fundamental way. Yet this dichotomy should not be taken to imply the HDP are automatically normative liberal

democratic actors (although this should not be dismissed either). Both parties approach democracy strategically. HDP's initially fluid position on the question of presidential system and its ambivalent relationship with the violent strands of the Kurdish movement raise questions about HDP's claim to be a non-territorial party of Turkey and its claim to uphold pluralistic democracy.

For the AKP, the people should express their preferences once every electoral cycle, which then empowers a ruling party to govern according to its preferences free of checks and oversight. Its democratic vision is essentially about empowering a party to rule, not checking or inhibiting their exercise of power. It is possible to trace how in the Turkish context of weak pre-existing institutions, a history of suppression of Islamist actors, threats to depose them from power, and a sense of paternalism and desire for power, the AKP took this understanding to its extreme and used it to justify their descent into electoral authoritarianism.

HDP meanwhile see democracy as revolving around minorities and securing their rights and recognition, as well as checking the power of the centre ideally through decentralisation. Yet this commitment to widespread rights and replacing the pursuit of separatism with a call for decentralisation is a relatively new development. It appears to be adopted at least as much to advance their vote share and forward the Kurdish issue by proxy as it is based on any overriding commitment to equality.

All this raises the question of how we should appraise the role of the HDP's political participation and its consequences for Turkey's democracy. The biggest consequence of the HDP's successful touting of their vision of democracy was to unleash a backlash from the AKP in an effort to shore up its electoral power. The rise of the PYD rule in Syria and the PYD's commitment to Öcalan's democratic confederalism, a model and ideology to which both the PKK and HDP adheres, threatened the AKP (Kaya & Lowe, 2016). Securing an electoral majority is fundamental to the thinking of the AKP and central to its political thinking and power. Therefore, the HDP's success had the effect of increasing polarisation at the elite level. Given the long-standing tendency in Turkish politics for ruling parties to conflate their interests with those of the state, this has enabled the AKP to label the Kurdish issue a security threat and adopt a militant response accordingly. In other words, it is largely business as usual and the AKP, after exploring the possibility of a Kurdish opening, have now followed the

same pattern of arrest, detention and suppression that many of their predecessors in power pursued against Kurdish nationalism.

Notes

1. Başbakan: Yüzde 50'yi evinde zor tutuyorum. [Prime Minister: I am hardly able to keep the 50% at home]. *Hurriyet*, 4 June 2013. http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/gundem/basbakan-yuzde-50-yi-evinde-zor-tutuyorum-23429709.

2. Turkey: Fading Factionalism. *Financial Times*, 11 June 2015.

3. Erdoğan's challenger. The man who could save Turkish democracy. *Der Spiegel*, 1 June 2015. http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/how-selahattin-demirtas-became-a-rival-to-erdogan-in-turkey-a-1036595.html.

4. Türkiye'nin güney sınırları resmen Kürdistan olacak [Turkey's southern borders will officially be Kurdistan]. *Taraf*, 10 April 2012, http://www.taraf.com.tr/nese-duzel/makale-selahattin-demirtas-turkiye-nin-siniri-kurdistan.htm, last accessed 26.04.2012.

5. In contrast, Öztürk and Gözaydın (2017) see these as genuine achievements of democracy even whilst acknowledging the longer troubled history of Turkish democracy.

6. *Nokta*, a Turkish political news and analysis journal, currently closed, revealed coup plans in 2003–2004. Yetvart Danzikyan, Ergenekon'da yeni hamle: Darbe tehdidi gerçekten bertaraf edildi mi? [A new move in Ergenekon: Has the coup threat really been averted?]. *Birikim*, 7 July 2008, http://www.birikimdergisi.com/guncel-yazilar/661/ergenekon-da-yeni-hamle-darbe-tehdidi-gercekten-bertaraf-edildi-mi#.WYW_3fn4-Hs.

7. Not quite at ease. *Economist*, 27 November 2004.

8. See Çiçek (2018) for a detailed account of the talks between the PKK and the Turkish state since 1990s until today.

9. The exact numbers impacted by the purge are changing all the time but this website claims to keep an up to date record: https://turkeypurge.com/. Last accessed 11 July 2018.

10. HDP general elections manifesto, June 2015.

11. HDP'li Fırat: ABD tipi başkanlığa karşı değiliz [HDP MP Fırat: We are not against American style presidential system], BBC Türkçe, 4 November 2015. https://www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler/2015/11/151104_hdp_baskanlik_sistemi2.

12. İşte İmralı görüşmesinin tutanaklarının tam metni! [Here is the minutes of the İmralı meeting!], T24, 28 February 2013. http://t24.com.tr/haber/iste-imralidaki-gorusmenin-tutanaklari,224711.

13. Selahattin Demirtaş'tan başkanlık sistemi açıklaması [Selahattin Demirtaş's statement on the presidential system], CNN Türk, 5 November 2015. https://www.cnnturk.com/turkiye/selahattin-demirtastan-baskanlik-sistemi-aciklamasi.

14. HDP general elections manifesto, June 2015.

15. Işte Selahattin Demirtaş'in seçim sloganı [Here is Selahattin Demirtaş' election slogan]. CNN Türk, 15 July, 2014. https://www.cnnturk.com/haber/turkiye/iste-selahattin-Demirtaşin-secim-

slogani.

16. Jailed HDP co-Chair Slams Erdoğan over Terrorist Claims. *Hurriyet Daily News*, 10 July 2017. http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/jailed-hdp-co-chair-demirtas-slams-erdogan-over-terrorist-claims-115318.

17. Turkish PM: Opposition HDP Funding 'Terror'. *Al Jazeera*, 6 November 2016. https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/11/turkish-pm-opposition-hdp-funding-terror-161106125444256.html.

18. Demirtaş Testimony Sheds Light on Turkeys Recent History. *Ahval* 13 April 2018. https://ahvalnews.com/selahattin-demirtas/demirtass-testimony-sheds-light-turkeys-recent-history.

19. Murat Karayılan, co-leader of the PKK, called on Kurds to vote for the HDP in the 2018 general election. Terörist başı Karayılan HDP'ye oy istedi [Terrorist leader Karayilan called to vote for the HDP]. *Hürriyet,* 20 June 2018. http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/gundem/terorist-basi-karayilan-hdpye-oy-istedi-40872980.

20. Interviews with representatives of the local branches of political parties (including MHP, AKP, HDP and CHP) in the Van province, 2015–2017.

21. DBP is HDP's sister party, active in areas where large Kurdish populations live. DBP is mainly active in local elections.

22. International Crisis Group (2017).

23. Ibid.

24. Interviews with representatives of the local branches of political parties (including MHP, AKP, HDP and CHP) in the Van province, 2015–2017.

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