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# On the KRG, the Turkish- Kurdish Peace Process, and the Future of the Kurds

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# On the KRG, the Turkish–Kurdish Peace Process, and the Future of the Kurds

Henri J. Barkey\*

Turkey

Kurdish question

KRG

Syrian conflict

## Abstract

While the Kurdish areas of the Middle East are increasingly interacting with each other and developments in one influence developments in another part, the relative influence of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), the first and most important Kurdish entity, has declined of late. This is because of the emergence of the Islamic State (ISIS) as well as the Syrian Kurds' successes – buttressed by the American air force – against ISIS. The KRG also finds itself at a disadvantage as the Turkish–Kurdish peace process has increasingly gained an independent life of its own as the ruling party in Turkey, the Justice and Development Party (AKP) which had built a close relationship with the KRG leadership, for the first time suffered significant electoral losses.

## Introduction

In mid-June 2015, the reliably unreliable *Sabah*, the daily most closely affiliated with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, thundered that the Western coalition (read America) was engaged in an operation to acquire the Syrian oil fields and link them to the Mediterranean.<sup>1</sup> The source of this consternation was the military operation launched by the Syrian Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) forces, with primarily American air support, against the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS)-controlled border town of Tel Abyad in northern Syria. *Sabah* was reflecting the Turkish government's deep unhappiness with the fact that a Syrian Kurdish organisation affiliated with, if not created by, the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), an entity deemed to be terrorist by both Washington and Ankara, had in effect emerged as a *de facto* ally of the United States in the fight against ISIS.

In reality, the rise of ISIS and its successes in capturing vast chunks of Syrian and Iraqi territory, including its occupation of Iraq's third-largest city Mosul in the summer of 2014, represent the latest complication and change in the evolution of the Kurdish question in the region. The collaboration between the United States and the PYD, which is not on its list of terrorist organisations, had begun with the siege of the Syrian Kurdish town of Kobane – an event that, as will be argued later, would profoundly alter the course of Turkish politics by contributing to the success of the Turkish Kurdish

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<sup>1</sup> Yahya Bostan, "Amaç, petrole yeni güzergâh çizmek", in *Sabah*, 15 June 2015, <http://www.sabah.com.tr/gundem/2015/06/15/amac-petrole-yeni-guzergh-cizmek>.

party, the People's Democratic Party (HDP), in the June 7, 2015 parliamentary elections. The PYD's successes in Syria in defending Kobane as well as the collaboration with Washington have imbued Turkish Kurds with a new sense of self-confidence. The combination of Kobane and electoral successes that also saw the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) lose its parliamentary majority for the first time since 2002 has also eclipsed the traditional Kurdish powerhouse, the Kurdistan Regional Government in Iraq (KRG), led by Massoud Barzani and his Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP).

The KRG and Barzani have been at the heart of the Kurdish question since the end of the Second World War. Especially after the two Iraq Wars in 1991 and 2003, the Iraqi Kurds have slowly and surely acquired the attributes of a quasi-independent state. The KRG is an internationally recognised federal entity within Iraq, and its President Barzani is received in many capitals as if he were a head of state. The pivotal and privileged position the KRG has occupied among the Kurds has therefore translated into significant influence on all things Kurdish, including the Turkish-Kurdish peace process launched by the AKP government in collaboration with the PKK's imprisoned leader, Abdullah Öcalan.

A *prima facie* case can be made that the combination of events in Syria and Iraq, the reversals suffered by the KRG in its own fight with ISIS, and the KRG's declining fortunes due to the deteriorating overall security situation in Iraq, lower oil prices, and the rise of the HDP in the 2015 elections are all factors likely to diminish its importance and its future role in the peace process in Turkey. However, Turkey is entering a period of tumult and uncertainty, in which many assumptions, including that of the peace process' irreversible course, will be tested, with possible deleterious consequences. Whether the peace process goes forward or is interrupted by a return to violence, the fact of the matter is that the KRG's options are quite limited. The KRG itself could also become a casualty of new Turkish coalition politics, a weakened Erdoğan, and the rise of Turkish nationalism.

## Turkey and the Kurdistan Regional Government

The fortunes of the Kurds in Iraq took a turn for the better following the 1991 Iraq war launched after Iraqi strongman Saddam Hussein's occupation of Kuwait. The no-fly zone established in northern Iraq, however limited and precarious, provided an opening for Iraqi Kurds to begin the process of state and nation formation. However, this was not an easy process. They had experienced periods of terrible repression, been subjected to genocidal attacks, and been used by both Iran and Iraq as pawns in their own wider struggle for regional supremacy. Years of war

and resulting economic and environmental devastation saddled the region and its people with grave burdens. If these were not enough, the divisions among Kurds – principally between Barzani and his KDP and his rival Jalal Talabani's Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) – spilled over into a mini Kurdish civil war, the end of which had to be brokered by the United States. The difficult years between 1991 and 2003 were not all wasted, though, as the Iraqi Kurds gained some experience going at it alone, literally isolated as they faced official rejection from all of their neighbors, who feared the spillover effect on their own Kurdish minorities. The US-led coalition that protected Iraqi Kurds from Saddam's potential incursions and revenge operated from Turkish air bases. The irony of the situation was not lost; Turkey, which had militated against any recognition of the Kurdish identity and not just within its own territory, had assumed, even if indirectly, the midwife role to the first Kurdish state.

The 2003 US invasion of Iraq and the subsequent undoing of the Iraqi state had the unintended consequence of further solidifying the Iraqi Kurdish separateness, and the new Iraqi constitution pronounced Iraq to be a federation, with the KRG representing one of its two constituent states. The civil war and Sunni insurgency, triggered by an ineffective American occupation and the perception of Shi'a ascendancy at the expense of the traditional Sunni power holders, ravaged Iraq. The KRG, affected by the instability and violence in the rest of Iraq, nevertheless emerged as an oasis of relative stability. Paradoxically, for companies and governments operating in Iraq and Baghdad, a far safer KRG became a substitute location to open offices and base employees. High oil prices and the agreement between the KRG and the government in Baghdad that allocated some 17 percent of all Iraqi oil revenues to the Kurdish authorities meant that for the first time since 1991, the north had a separate source of income that it could use as it pleased.

The KRG's changing fortunes and the AKP's international and domestic ambitions combined to facilitate a 180-degree turnabout in Turkey's relations with Iraqi Kurds. The AKP had prioritised economic stewardship, export-led growth, and improving living standards as its main sources of legitimacy. The oil-revenue-blessed KRG represented a sizable export market. As an aspiring regional power wanting a greater say in the wider Middle East, Turkey could not afford to ignore its new and immediate neighbor the KRG. Finally, contemplating a new approach to the domestic Kurdish problem that had been Turkey's most important challenge, Ankara realised that improved relations with the KRG could prove to be a quick signal that the new Turkey was capable of good relations with Kurds. In so doing, Ankara sought to shift the burden and pressure to compromise onto the PKK. Domestic and international agendas intermingled; as the then-prime minister's foreign policy advisor Ibrahim

Kalın argued, “the current state of the [domestic] Kurdish issue alone cripples Turkey’s ambitions to speak with confidence about democracy, transparency, and human rights in the Middle East.”<sup>2</sup>

In the context of the much-heralded “zero problems with the neighbors policy” enunciated by the AKP government, maintaining a cold war with Iraqi Kurds seemed counterproductive. Besides, Turkish absence in the KRG opened the door to Iranian influence. In many ways, the events since the mid-2000s vindicated the AKP’s approach. Turkish trade has mushroomed, and while Iraq is Turkey’s second-largest export market, the bulk of these exports are accounted for by the KRG. Turkish exports to Iraq increased from less than 2 billion dollars in 2004 to well over 10 billion in 2013. Visitors to the KRG cannot help but notice the prevalence of Turkish products in stores as well as the presence of Turkish banks and companies involved in construction, transportation, consumer goods, and the like. Paradoxically, due to the deterioration in political relations between Baghdad and Ankara, the former Iraqi prime minister Nouri al-Maliki decided when in power to implement a semi-visible boycott of Turkish companies, which in turn helped further improve the KRG’s standing in Turkey.<sup>3</sup>

Finally and equally importantly, the change in the policy with the KRG would prove to be an important marker in the AKP’s struggle with the mighty Turkish military establishment that continued to call the shots on all matters relating to national security and especially the Kurds. Improving relations with the KRG as a first step in initiating a peace process would necessarily come to entail the wresting of the Kurdish file away from the security forces and, in the process, reducing their hold – even if only partially – on policymaking in general and on power more broadly. The 2007 elections, which were fought over one issue – whether the military could block then-foreign minister Abdullah Gül’s ascendancy to the position of President of the republic – ended with a disastrous outcome for the officers. The electorate strongly endorsed the AKP and, thereby, demonstrated that the military had shot itself in the foot.

The decline of military tutelage and its domestication removed an important obstacle to the improvement of relations with the KRG, as the officers had not differentiated between Iraqi and Turkish Kurds: they simply were the enemy. Also, the Turkey-backed Iraqi Turkmen Front (ITC) failed to garner support among Iraqi Turkmen, thus depriving the Turkish military and nationalist circles of

their much-touted real Iraqi allies.

With time, Ankara would assume increasingly pro-KRG positions on the question of oil and gas exports, siding with Erbil against both Baghdad and Washington. Turkey actively encouraged the KRG to develop pipeline routes for both oil and gas directly into Turkey, thus facilitating the export of Kurdish petroleum products through its own pipeline network to Turkish ports in the Mediterranean. In so doing, Ankara was attempting to achieve two goals: first, with an eye on future market changes and developments in the Middle East, to ensure the expansion of a pipeline and export infrastructure that served its own markets. Second, as explored further below, Ankara sought to politically strengthen the KRG amidst the uncertainty and chaos of Iraq.

From the KRG’s perspective, improving relations with the Ankara government was an obvious policy choice. Its checkered history with the Kurds notwithstanding, Turkey remained the best-positioned state to provide the landlocked Kurds with a vital lifeline to the outside, specifically to the West. After all, Turkey, the country with the most developed economy amongst all of the KRG’s neighbors, is a member of NATO, an applicant to the European Union, and, most importantly, a close ally of the United States.

The other important factor had to do with the nature of Kurdish politics in both Turkey and Iraq. A significant proportion of Turkish Kurds, including many who consider themselves Kurdish nationalists, had in the past voted for the AKP. Until the 2015 parliamentary elections, perhaps as many as half of the Kurds living in the east and southeast had routinely voted for the AKP and against PKK-supported political parties. This is because Kurds have historically been more conservative and pious than the average Turkish citizen; their rejection of the arch-secular PKK-affiliated parties has revolved around the approach to life and religion. What also attracted the Kurds to the AKP and its predecessors was these parties’ continuous struggle with the *status quo* and with the military-dominated Turkish state apparatus and its Kemalist ideology.

Until recently, the generally conservative Barzani family had a natural ally in AKP governments. The conservative Turkish Kurds – many Kurds have familial ties that cross state boundaries – have had much admiration for the role that the Barzanis, from Mullah Mustafa Barzani down to his son Massoud, have played in Kurdish history. Their affinity and close links to the KDP served as a natural bridge to Turkey’s Islamist movements. Starting with Necmettin Erbakan’s Refah Party, many Kurds served in the parliament among the ranks of the Refah and Fazilet parties and most recently the AKP. By making the AKP the number two party in Kurdish-majority provinces, and in

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2 Ibrahim Kalın, “Turkey and the Middle East: Ideology or Geopolitics?”, in *Private View*, No. 13 (Autumn 2008), p. 32, <http://www.setav.org/en/turkey-and-the-middle-east-ideology-or-geopolitics/yorum/253>.

3 Daniel Dombey and Funja Güler, “Turkey emerges as true Iraq war victor”, in *Financial Times*, 12 March 2013, <http://t.co/poK3XhsTww>.

some even the number one, these conservative Kurds have until the 2015 elections been critical to the AKP's electoral successes. In fact, the more the KDP perceived the PKK as a challenge to its dominance among Kurds, the more it saw its interests coincide with those of the AKP. Barzani, through his family and clan networks, sought to ensure that these Kurdish votes went to the AKP. But by 2015, conditions had changed dramatically: Erdoğan no longer represented the anti-*status quo* forces in society, which was what had formed the basis of his appeal to Kurds, but now rather *was* the establishment – one that was increasingly alienating its traditional Kurdish base. The 2015 elections results, therefore, have to be seen as a defeat for the KRG, or at least for the Barzanis, as much as for the AKP and Erdoğan; Barzani's one important card, his influence on conservative Kurds and his ability to deliver them as a voting bloc to the AKP, has for the time being lost much of its value.

By the same token, the AKP governments saw the KDP and the KRG as a balancer of sorts, if not a bulwark, against the PKK in greater Kurdistan and specifically in Turkey and Syria. In recent times, therefore, it appears as if in Turkish perceptions the KDP-led KRG has been transformed from an export haven, a source of oil and gas imports, and a conduit for Turkish goods to the rest of Iraq, to a critical actor in Turkey's Kurdish problem. Ankara's break with Baghdad over oil exports was as motivated by its own economic interests and dislike for Iraqi Prime Minister al-Maliki as it was by its desire to shore up the KDP as an alternative to the PKK down the road. Even if strengthening the KRG was not Ankara's primary intention, it certainly was a consequence of its policies.

This, in turn, raises the question of Kurdish independence, a notion that Ankara has always been vehemently opposed to for fear that any form of Kurdish independence, even if limited only to northern Iraq, would act as a catalyst for other regions to emulate. Before we explore this aspect of the issue, it is important to analyse the state of affairs of the Turkish-Kurdish peace process.

## The Turkish-Kurdish Peace Process

The peace process is as much the result of the AKP's willingness to change the discourse in Turkey and reduce the impact of what it perceives to be an albatross on Turkey's domestic peace as it is about its own future foreign policy ambitions. The impetus for the change came from a degree of war weariness, but also from the realisation that there was no military solution to what was essentially a political problem. Even the military institution, reluctantly perhaps, came around to this conclusion. The Chief of the General Staff, General İlker Basbug, acknowledged in 2009 the right of Turkish citizens to have "sub" or "secondary" identity in addition to

being Turkish. Basbug's indirect support for the process was an important milestone; his successors, although not obliged to pursue a similar policy, have not yet interfered. In fact, they have allowed for the process to deepen as indirect negotiations with Abdullah Öcalan, the putative head of the PKK who is jailed on an island in the Marmara Sea, were made public and regularised. The PKK itself may never have had any expectation that the armed struggle would succeed directly in creating a Kurdish state in Turkey, but the military conflict allowed it to establish itself as the uncontested source of power and legitimacy among a large segment of the Kurdish population. Perhaps more importantly, the Kurdish movement has sought to build the institutions deemed necessary for what they call "democratic autonomy" in Kurdish-majority provinces. In effect, this is an effort at constructing parallel political institutions that mimic those of the Turkish state. The psychological and institutional separation this entails has proved to be the most effective card Kurds could develop in their struggle with the Turkish state; it is far more dangerous than any insurgency.

In March 2013, Öcalan formally called for a unilateral ceasefire as part of a three-step process that included the withdrawal of PKK fighters from Turkish territory and their ultimate integration into Turkish society. This ceasefire, adhered to by both the PKK and the Turkish military, has given rise to hopes and expectations among Turkish and Kurdish communities for an end to the conflict that took the lives of many young combatants on both sides. Just like every other peace process, this one has had many ups and downs. If this peace process has had one drawback, it is the degree to which its future has been tied to the political calculations of the two leaders: Erdoğan and Öcalan.

The fundamental question for Erdoğan, his supporters, and the public is the extent to which they accept the legitimacy of the Kurdish cause and narrative, its demands, and the necessity for compromise. For Öcalan and the Kurdish community the issue is not about the other side's legitimacy but rather the fact that any deal will fall short of their requirements. The Kurds, whether represented by the HDP, the PKK, or Öcalan, have settled roughly on three broad sets of demands: the changing of the constitution to reflect the multicultural character of Turkey by eliminating the Turkic-centric language and definitions; the removal of prohibitions on Kurdish cultural expression, including education in their mother tongue; and the decentralisation of the Turkish administrative system for the whole country and not just the Kurdish provinces.<sup>4</sup> There are a myriad of other issues to be settled, including Öcalan's status – a potentially explosive issue that, while not a necessary condition for the future of Turkish-Kurdish

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<sup>4</sup> Henri J. Barkey and Direnç Kadioglu, "The Turkish Constitution and the Kurdish Question", in *Carnegie Articles*, 1 August 2011, <http://carnegieendowment.org/publications/?fa=45218>.

peace, is nonetheless sufficiently problematic to bring about the worse among arch-nationalists on both sides.

By contrast, if the Kurds' demands are clear, what is indiscernible for the moment is the AKP's and Erdoğan's view of, or conceptual approach to, the Kurdish question. What is this Turkish government or the next expecting to concede in exchange for the end of the insurrection and for the PKK to abandon its armed struggle? The focus to date has been on a process or dialogue – though quite significant in its own right – that could result in some though not all of the Kurdish demands outlined above being accepted in some form or another. However, the behavior of the AKP and Erdoğan during the Kobane crisis and beyond as well as during the 2015 election campaign has led Kurds to seriously question whether the Turkish leadership genuinely accepts them as a legitimate actor and a constituent element of modern Turkey. Erdoğan and others made it clear that they wanted the Syrian Kurdish town of Kobane across from the Turkish border besieged by ISIS to fall to the jihadists. Subsequently, Ankara vigorously opposed Washington's efforts, first to come to Kobane's rescue and then to partner with the PYD to push back ISIS wherever possible and use air power to deal heavy blows. If Turkey's preference for ISIS at the expense of the Syrian Kurds was not sufficient, the Turkish Kurds were further embittered by Erdoğan, who during the 2015 election campaign seemed to turn his back on them during the electoral campaign when he reiterated that Turkey no longer had a Kurdish problem. Government spokespersons and certainly the Erdoğan-affiliated press outlets unleashed a relentless barrage of attacks on the HDP and its leaders.

This was surprising considering that Erdoğan had championed and taken genuine risks in initiating a serious dialogue with the Kurds and Öcalan. One can argue that this electoral strategy was a gamble designed to suppress the HDP's vote potential – the single most important threat to the AKP's announced aim to win the 330 seats needed to call a referendum on the constitution that would transform the largely ceremonial presidency into a powerful executive one and thereby enable Erdoğan to assume vast powers. The strategy backfired; the AKP lost much of its reservoir of conservative Kurdish votes, as voters were alienated by both Turkish (in)action in Kobane and Erdoğan's divisive discourse. The AKP had already missed a chance to win the hearts and minds of the Kurds by not reducing the 10 percent electoral threshold in advance of the elections. Not only would it not have lost its electoral majority, but were it in need of votes in Parliament to reach the 330 necessary, a grateful HDP would most likely have obliged.

It is worth noting that the AKP is as much a nationalist party as it is an Islamist one. As such it has had its own difficulties with the issue of a separate Kurdish ethnicity. It can

construct a connection to Turkish Kurds by approaching them not as an ethnic group but as Muslims who happen to be Kurds. By contrast, previous governments and especially the military, as the power behind the throne, perceived Kurdish ethnicity as a threat and could not build a bridge to them on religious grounds given that Islamic identity was also considered a danger for the Turkish republic. In its pragmatism, however, the AKP is accepting of the Iraqi Kurdish reality in the KRG, which is subservient to Ankara but rejects the rebellious and non-compliant Syrian variant. At the time of writing, there was still no government in Turkey and the parliamentary math was not conducive to a continuation of the peace process unless a grand coalition is formed between the AKP and the main opposition party, the Republican People's Party (CHP). Such a coalition intent on pursuing the peace process would most likely benefit from HDP's support as a silent partner. The CHP, which represented the old-line Kemalist establishment, has traveled a long way on this issue; even if it still harbors hard-liners, their influence has diminished. All other combinations are either inherently unstable or would be unwilling to tackle the Kurdish question precisely because the arch-nationalist MHP, the Nationalist Movement Party, would be a member. The MHP has put forward as a condition for joining any government the halting of the negotiations with the PKK.

So what are the prospects for the future, and what role can the KRG play?

## The Kurdistan Regional Government and the Turkish-Kurdish Peace Process

The KRG's own troubles will weigh heavily on its stance on the peace process in Turkey. Its difficult relations with Baghdad, economic problems, military setbacks against ISIS, and succession issues have made the KRG government more dependent on Turkey than ever before. The KRG shares Ankara's misgivings about the PYD's success in Syria; Öcalan and the PKK represent an ideological challenge to the KDP's traditional hold and influence on the Kurds,<sup>5</sup> and the 2015 elections demonstrated a diminished KRG influence over Turkey's Kurds. The reversals the Kurdish *peshmerga* forces suffered during the June 2014 ISIS offensive that netted Mosul – although the *peshmerga* had been quickly dispatched to fill in the vacuum created by retreating Iraqi troops – as well as the fact that the PKK came in to save the populations of Sinjar and adjoining areas, were serious blows to the KRG's prestige. In an effort to restore the KRG's damaged reputation, the AKP and KDP collaborated to have three rotations of some 150 heavily armored *peshmerga* travel from the KRG through Turkey to Kobane after the town

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<sup>5</sup> Cale Salih, "Divided Kurds fight the Islamic State", in *ECFR Commentaries*, 2 October 2014, [http://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary\\_divided\\_kurds\\_fight\\_the\\_islamic\\_state330](http://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_divided_kurds_fight_the_islamic_state330).

had survived the ISIS onslaught. Since then, however, the PYD has scored other important symbolic victories. For one, its collaboration with the US has deepened. In an allusion to the PYD, President Barack Obama stated that “over the past year, we’ve seen that when we have an effective partner on the ground, ISIL can be pushed back.”<sup>6</sup> Moreover, the Americans have also integrated a member of the PYD into their operation cell in Erbil, something they have refused to do with the Free Syrian Army (FSA) representatives.<sup>7</sup> This has buoyed the Kurds’ hope, as this is the first time Washington has worked with Kurds other than the Iraqi ones.

The peace process in and of itself represents an additional challenge to the KRG and Barzani in particular. Were it to conclude successfully, it would represent another victory for the Öcalan/HDP line and strengthen further the Syrian Kurds’ attachment to their brethren in Turkey at the expense of the KRG. But this, of course, is just one viewpoint or possibility; the question is to what extent does it affect or cloud KRG perspectives on the issue?

In the post-2015 election period one can construct two scenarios for the peace process. They both start with a weakened Erdoğan whose party lost its parliamentary majority despite his Herculean efforts (or because of them). The first scenario is one that postulates a return to violence and the abandonment of the peace process. It could come about as a result of two possible sets of circumstances. The first would result from an attempt by Erdoğan to re-militarise the domestic conflict with the PKK, if only because it brings him back into the limelight; he is, from a constitutional perspective, the commander-in-chief of the armed forces and the head of the National Security Council. His role would be enhanced, and it could serve as another bid to change the Turkish citizenry’s take on an executive presidency, or at the very least put the HDP on the defensive in the event of early elections to undermine its vote potential. While this may appear to be a far-fetched scenario, the fact remains that it would not be the first time that miscalculations and accidental events have caused conflagrations. A second possible set of circumstances could emerge from a possible coalition government between the AKP and the nationalist MHP, whose primary objective has always been to roll back Kurdish gains and return to the *status quo ante* on this question.

In either situation, the return to violence may come indirectly through Syria. Ankara has increasingly ratcheted up its combative rhetoric against the PYD in Syria, declaring at times that it sees it as being far

more dangerous than the Islamic State. Moreover, it has accused the PYD and the United States of engaging in ethnic cleansing of Turkmen (or Turcoman) communities. Ankara took a page from its old playbook from the late 1990s and early 2000s when it made exaggerated claims about the Kurds trampling on Turkmen populations in northern Iraq. Then they were embarrassingly proven wrong, as the Turkmen in the first free Iraqi elections would not support the pro-Turkish Turkmen parties. Erdoğan and Ankara have reiterated that they would prevent a PYD push westward to create a band of three contiguous cantons and establish the basis for a future autonomous region.

Any move to curtail PYD gains through an intervention in northern Syria would likely entail clashes with the PKK and with many other groups, including ISIS. In a period of heightened tensions, any accidental exchange of fire can easily be misconstrued and set the stage for a larger conflagration. The sensitivity of Turkish Kurds to the fate of their brethren in Syria was already demonstrated in October 2014, when deadly clashes throughout Turkey erupted during protests against the government’s stand on Kobane. At the time of writing, there was rampant speculation in the Turkish press of an impending move into northern Syria, ostensibly to block ISIS but in reality as a means to prevent the contiguous consolidation of the PYD’s control throughout the three cantons. Nevertheless, the speculation notwithstanding, it is unlikely that Erdoğan would put soldiers in harm’s way by sending them into unknown region where non-conventional threats in the form of suicide bombers, IEDs, and other tactics would likely cause large numbers of casualties. These moves may appear to have more to do with the complex coalition-building negotiations and with Erdoğan’s desire to reinforce his image as commander-in-chief.

The presumed July 21, 2015 ISIS suicide attack on Turkish-Kurdish NGO assembly in Suruç across the border from Kobane that caused 32 deaths and more than 100 wounded is precisely the kind of Syria-generated event that can unleash a new wave of violence. Kurdish groups blamed the government for failing to protect its citizens and the PKK accused the Turkish government of collusion with ISIS and retaliated by killing two police officers. As Turkey entered a new crisis mode, Ankara opened its southern air bases to American combat missions against ISIS but the peace process is once again on life support.

The KRG, in the event of a return to hostilities, has a few cards to play. It could pressure the PKK militarily, but that would be of limited impact given the *peshmerga*’s extended lines of defense *vis-à-vis* the Islamic State as well as the PKK’s military prowess. More importantly, the KDP and Barzani could work on influencing conservative Turkish Kurds to return to the AKP’s fold and separate from

6 The White House, *Remarks by the President on Progress in the Fight Against ISIL*, Washington, 6 July 2015, <http://go.wh.gov/PSDiFC>.

7 Tolga Tanış, “Suriye işindeki çarpıklıklar”, in *Hürriyet*, 4 July 2015, [http://sosyal.hurriyet.com.tr/yazar/tolga-tanis\\_322/suriye-isindeki-carpikliklar\\_29461506](http://sosyal.hurriyet.com.tr/yazar/tolga-tanis_322/suriye-isindeki-carpikliklar_29461506).

the HDP/PKK. However, it is hard to see how effective this would be given the changing pattern of Kurdish politics in Turkey, especially if Turkish Kurds, irrespective of their political affiliation, blame Erdoğan for an escalation. On the other hand, it could also seek Washington's help to interject itself as an intermediary between the Turkish state and the PKK on the assumption that any such conflagration serves to strengthen ISIS and generally undermine US interests in the region.

In a second scenario in which the peace process resumes, the KRG's role would be limited. In such an eventuality, the sides would have little need for the KRG except for in the final phase, when issues of amnesty for PKK fighters and their relocation are considered. Here it is quite possible that a number of them will not want to return to Turkey and may elect to remain in the KRG. Perhaps more significant is the issue of the PKK's future. Conversations with its military leadership has convinced me that it is unlikely to disband and disappear even if it were to completely abandon the armed struggle against Turkey. The PKK sees itself as part of the permanent fabric of the region, where it thinks that it has a use in promoting not just Öcalan's ideas but, more significantly, in coming to the aid of communities in need or in danger, be they Yazidis or Christians or even other Kurds (read Iran). In fact, the PKK may become one of the many groups in the region that will inhabit the space, both geographical and political, abandoned by weakening states.

Paradoxically, therefore, the PKK, given its base in the Qandil mountain range in northern Iraq, may in the event of a peace deal become a problem for the KRG rather than for Turkey. The PKK may even side with the PUK or Gorran, the other major opposition party in northern Iraq, against the KDP. In many ways, the PKK represents the exact opposite of the KDP: it is leftwing, ideological, and action-oriented as opposed to a traditional, clan-based, and rentier-type political movement. It could become an alternative source of opposition to the KDP's control over the KRG, especially among the youth and those who feel they have not benefited from its rule.

Much has changed in the last six years; a peace deal in 2009 or 2010 would have required greater and far more vital KRG involvement. Paradoxically, in the intervening years, the KRG has lost much of its influence while simultaneously moving closer towards independence due to the disintegration of the regional political order. Gone are the KRG's confident days when someone of Jalal Talabani's stature was president of Iraq, when there was no ISIS or al-Nusra, and when there were stronger states and a politically much weaker PKK. Today, the KRG finds itself more dependent on Turkey, whose leadership itself has become more irascible, for its oil exports. In addition, its military forces have had to be rescued by PYD/PKK forces, the United States has partnered with the PYD to fight off ISIS, and it has stalled economically. Hence, its influence over Kurds is significantly diminished and unlikely to return even in the aftermath of independence.