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THE ROLE OF THE KURDS IN U.S. FOREIGN POLICY

By

Davis Campbell McCool III

A thesis submitted to the faculty of The University of Mississippi in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College.

Oxford, MS

April 2021

Approved By

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Reader: Professor Wesley Yates

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to everyone who guided and encouraged me throughout the year, including my parents, Leighton and Campbell McCool, who may or may not presently understand what it is I have written my thesis on, and my grandparents, Curtis Wilkie and Jane Wilkie, who have asked me more questions on my topic than I ever deemed imaginable. I would also like to thank my friends both inside the Honors College and out for assisting in my efforts and willing me to the finish line. Thank you.

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ABSTRACT

DAVIS CAMPBELL McCOOL III: The Role of the Kurds in U.S. Foreign Policy (Under the direction of Shaio Zerba)

The Kurdish people in the Middle East have played a valuable role in furthering U.S. policy interests in the region. The U.S. has aligned itself with various Kurdish groups in a series of strategic partnerships dating back to the early 1970s, yet has never considered the Kurdish nation an ally. As such, the U.S. has reneged on multiple different pacts with the Kurds and opened the door for state-sponsored conflict against a supposed ally, despite mutual interests between both groups. This thesis aimed to assign a formal role to the Kurds within U.S. foreign policy, and to analyze the function of the Kurdish minority in U.S. policy decisions in the Middle East. A historical process tracing model was utilized to sequence a history of numerous U.S.-Kurdish partnerships into careful description and analysis, namely to identify the relationship foundations and causal mechanisms driving the connection between both groups. Despite numerous different partnerships that proved beneficial to both groups, this thesis has found that the U.S. has in fact benefited from existing Kurdish vulnerability and the continuation of the Kurdish struggle in the Middle East. The ongoing Kurdish struggle has positioned the Kurds as valuable strategic partnerships in multiple different conflicts in the Middle East. Furthermore, this thesis finds that despite the U.S.-Kurdish connection, Kurdish policy goals aim to upset the greatest U.S. interest in the region, which is to secure state stability and ensure regional security. There exists an inverse relationship between Middle Eastern state stability and Kurdish influence and control in the region. Because of this, the Kurds find themselves in opposition to long-term U.S. policy interests in the Middle East, even though they have contributed multiple times to the defense and security of short-term U.S. goals in the region.

PREFACE

I was first attracted to this subject in October 2019, when the U.S. announced its decision to withdraw a majority of its troops from Syria after declaring the territorial defeat of the ISIS Caliphate. The U.S. troop withdrawal opened the door for a Turkish invasion of northern Syria against the Kurdish population near the Turkish border – a population which had directly contributed to the defeat of the ISIS Caliphate in Syria and Iraq. The U.S. commended the actions of the Kurds in the fight against ISIS, but when the war was over, the U.S. opened the door for an invasion against a supposed ally in the Middle East. Many in the media described “the abandonment of the Kurds” as a humanitarian tragedy, but as I soon learned, it was hardly America’s first involvement in the Middle East that ended disastrously for the Kurds.

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Glossary of Terms

ARCDEM: American Rojava Center for Democracy

FSA: Free Syrian Army

HTS: Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham

ISIS: Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham

KDP: Kurdistan Democratic Party

KDPI: Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran

KNCNA: Kurdish National Congress of North America

KRG: Kurdistan Regional Government of Iraq

KRI: Kurdistan Region of Iraq

NATO: North Atlantic Treaty Organization

peshmerga: Iraqi Kurdish military forces (in Kurdish: *those who face death*)

PKK: Kurdistan Workers Party

PUK: Patriotic Union of Kurdistan

PYD: Democratic Union Party of Syria

Rojava: Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria

SDF: Syrian Democratic Forces

TFSA: (Formerly FSA): Turkish-backed Free Syrian Army, a.k.a. Syrian National Army

YPG: People's Protection Units, paramilitary wing of the PYD

Introduction

Significant scholarly resources, journals, and articles have been devoted to research and study of the “Kurdish question”¹ within the context of international studies and foreign policy. Likewise, many journalists and international news organizations have delved deep into the Kurdish connection to U.S. interests in the Middle East. However, little scholarly research currently exists on the role of the Kurds in U.S. foreign policy, despite the deep connection between the two groups and the significant role that the United States has played in the development of the modern-day Kurdish homeland. As such, I set out to answer what, precisely, is the role of the Kurdish people in U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East? In crafting my research question, I hoped to further the understanding of the Kurdish role in U.S. Middle Eastern policy, and more specifically, develop an analysis of how the Kurdish people play a role in U.S. policy decisions in the region. Different Kurdish groups have, at times, played the role of both ally and adversary to U.S. interests in the Middle East, and despite an almost-constant tangling of alliances among many actors in the region, the Kurds have previously aided U.S. policy and political goals in the region, and vice-versa. Despite their friendly overtures to secure popular sentiment within the U.S., the Kurds remain a point of contention to the United States government. The very nature of the Kurdish struggle actively strives to upset the socio-political order of the Middle East, a worst-case scenario that the U.S. is determined to avoid at all costs. The Kurds, then, exist as a unique case study to U.S. foreign policy: an isolated ethnic group

¹ The Kurdish question is often debated in academic circles as a question of Kurdish rights or territorial claims vis-à-vis the four states that they reside in. The Kurdish struggle, detailed in the chapters to come, is defined as a desire for statehood or autonomy within the states they currently inhabit (Gunter, 2004), especially viewed in the context of persecutorial state policies aimed at repressing Kurdish rights in the states that they reside in.

whose mutual adversaries typically make them an ideal strategic partner to U.S. military forces, yet whose political goals exist in direct contrast to those of the United States. The U.S. has actively attempted to avoid the Kurdish question in hopes of preserving Kurdish vulnerability and maintaining a sometimes-friendly fighting force in a volatile region, but as a period of relative peace enters into current Middle Eastern history, the role of the Kurds in U.S. Middle Eastern policy deserves a deeper understanding.

The U.S.-Kurdish relationship has morphed beyond solely a strategic military partnership that existed in prior military entanglements such as the prelude to the Iran-Iraq War and the buildup to the Gulf War in 1991. The U.S. has actively contributed to the benefit of Kurdish political goals in the region, albeit inadvertently at times, and is now seen by certain Kurdish groups as a purported guarantor of Kurdish security in the Middle East, even if American policymakers would hope to see it differently. Due to multiple different strategic relationships between the 1970s and present day as discussed in detail in the chapters to come, the U.S. has attached itself to the future of the Kurdish people in the Middle East, and yet, a formal role for the Kurds does not exist in current U.S. foreign policy. The U.S. has preferred to deal with Kurdish groups through the lens of the respective states in which they reside, and as such, has curtailed its Kurdish policy as merely an accessory of foreign policy outreach to the four discussed states (Iran, Iraq, Syria, Turkey). This policy proved effective when the Kurds operated as a fractured nation² themselves (e.g. Iraqi Kurds' success in establishing an autonomous region in northern Iraq), but the Kurds have slowly worked towards developing a

² The Kurds do not have a sovereign state, but in referring to the Kurdish population in the Middle East, the term "nation" is often utilized. The Kurds compose an entire cross-border region of significant population, and share a common history, culture, language, and ethnicity, all central elements that comprise a nation. They do not, however, hold permanently-defined territory or have a sovereign government that doesn't simultaneously fall under the purview of another central government. As such, use of the word "state" to describe the Kurdish homeland is avoided except in the case of describing Kurdish aspirations towards attaining statehood.

trans-nationalist sense of identity, and their political goals have likewise expanded into a more united Kurdish policy. The Kurds have attempted to capitalize on the goodwill and graces of American policymakers to advance Kurdish goals in the region, and although their efforts have largely been unsuccessful to date, the growing political role of the Kurds in advancing policy discussions beyond just a military standpoint is unquestionable.

The United States has made its mark on the Kurdish homeland through over five decades of nation-building, regime-toppling, and humanitarian and military intervention efforts. As a result of direct U.S. intervention, the Kurds now have a partially self-governed region in northern Iraq, and currently control northeast Syria in a region deemed autonomous by local leaders. The Kurds know firsthand, and about as well as any stateless minority group in the world, the benefits that the U.S. can provide for the Kurdish nation. It is precisely because of the potential that the U.S. provides that the Kurds have sought out a more precise and active role within U.S. foreign policy. However, the Kurds are vulnerable as a group and hold few bargaining chips beyond their military prowess in northern Iraq and northeast Syria. They are outranked by states with actual foreign policy positions in the U.S. such as Iraq and Turkey, two states with significantly more power to sway U.S. policy than a stateless Kurdish minority group. Furthermore, the Kurds thrive on instability and chaos within the Middle East, two methods of conflict that raise Kurdish visibility on the international scale and allow Kurdish leaders to spread the message of 'Kurdish stability in a volatile Middle East.' Perhaps their two greatest accomplishments through the past five decades were the creation of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq, and the (at least temporary) autonomous region of Rojava in Syria, both of which came to fruition in the midst of an international conflict in their respective regions.

As the examined case studies will show, there exists a direct inverse relationship between state stability in the Middle East and Kurdish influence on U.S. policy. When a Middle Eastern state government has a firm grip on its institutions, bureaucracy, and citizens, Kurdish influence diminishes and calls for autonomy or independence are effectively silenced by their respective governments. When a conflict erupts, Kurdish groups have demonstrated that their effective fighting force and governing structure allow them to seize and hold territory, a technique that has allowed them more influence on U.S. actions in the region. This is precisely why the Kurdish minority in Iraq and Syria, two states ripe with recent conflict, have been able to increase their international presence and escalate their calls for a favorable U.S. policy position, while the Kurds in Iran and Turkey, both states with more stable governments (at least post-1979), have been effectively muzzled by their host states.

Kurds also feel emboldened during times of conflict to increase their international renown, as they have become accustomed to U.S. support in these times that, at least temporarily, minimizes their vulnerability and maximizes their leverage within the Middle East. When conflict erupts, the Kurds generally receive assistance from the U.S. military, as evidenced by American support for certain Kurdish groups in the 1991 Gulf War³, 2003 Iraq War, and ongoing Syrian Civil War. As long as conflict exists in the Middle East, they have a protectorate in the region in the form of the U.S. military, and they have shown that with protection comes strategic political aspirations for the Kurds. In the three aforementioned cases, Kurdish groups were able to 1) gain temporary autonomy in northern Iraq, 2) become recognized in the Iraqi constitution as an official federal province of Iraq, and 3) gain autonomy in northeast Syria (for now, at least). The Kurds have actively benefited from each U.S. military intervention in the

³ To avoid confusion, the term “Gulf War” is utilized throughout this paper to describe the 1991 coalition war effort in Iraq and Kuwait, also known as the 1991 Iraq War or Operation Desert Storm.

Middle East since 1991 and likewise borne the brunt of each subsequent U.S. military withdrawal. In the absence of a U.S. presence, Kurdish vulnerability is again on full display. In each case, the U.S. ultimately withdrew its military presence to the detriment of Kurdish political aspirations. The KRI in northern Iraq was short-lived as a fully autonomous Iraqi province and never achieved full independence, while northeast Syria immediately came under Turkish fire in the wake of a recent U.S. troop withdrawal. Kurdish leaders gambled that aligning with the U.S. military in times of conflict would equate to a lasting political alliance, and their gamble failed. Although the Kurds have played a valuable role in implementing U.S. policy in the region, they haven't been effective in influencing U.S. policy towards their cause. The Kurds equated the two as cause and effect, while the U.S. sought to paint quite a different picture.

Recent U.S. history in the Middle East would indicate that the U.S. views the Kurdish role in its foreign policy quite simply: they are an effective fighting force, a viable ally in times of conflict, and no more. The Kurdish perspective would argue differently. To the Kurds, they are owed something in the form of a U.S. policy reparation for their bravery in fighting the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), their help in toppling Saddam Hussein, and their efforts in sustaining practical, democratic governments in a region notorious for producing authoritarian leaders and governments hostile to U.S. interests. The reality is somewhat of a mix between the two. The U.S. has and will continue to seek out friendly groups in the Middle East such as the Kurds for the purpose of defeating a mutual adversary, but when a U.S. mandate is revoked, so too is their support for the Kurds. The Kurdish cause, one that is positioned in direct opposition to the foremost U.S. policy objective of stability in the Middle East, represents the antithesis of U.S. interests in the region. The U.S. seems willing to gladly sacrifice a stable experiment in democratic governance or even a valuable military ally in exchange for securing state stability,

even it meant siding with an authoritarian government or allowing for the destruction of a former coalition partner such as the Kurds. Certain Kurdish groups could be classified as partners and even potential allies on the battlefield, but in the policy realm, the U.S. has always elected to diminish the political role of Kurdish leaders and deal with Kurdish groups through the lens of their respective states.

Background

The Kurdish nation currently comprises the fourth-largest ethnic group in the Middle East. Indigenous to the Mesopotamian plains, today the Kurdish homeland includes portions of southeast Turkey, northeast Syria, northern Iraq, and northwestern Iran. The Kurds share a common culture, history, race, and language (although dialect differs through the region), yet unlike certain other ethnicities in the region, they have never achieved statehood in the many years since the redrawing of the Middle East in the early 20th century.⁴ Because of their stateless status, many different Kurdish groups have found themselves at odds with their respective host states. The Kurds have achieved a sense of notoriety for their valiant fighting prowess in conflict with actors and states deemed adversaries to the West, yet they have found few nations willing to vouch for the Kurdish cause on an international diplomatic scale. They have played an important role in shaping the current state of Middle Eastern geopolitics, but so too has the United States.

Dating back to the early 1970s, the U.S. has maintained a covert, and sometimes overt, partnership with the Kurds that has at times sent U.S. supplies and munitions to the Kurdish population, provided military support in their defense, and even diplomatic support for their

⁴ Following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire in World War I, the victorious powers, namely Britain and France, embarked on a lengthy series of agreements and treaties aimed at partitioning the former empire into sovereign states. Despite initial assurances that they were to be granted an independent state of Kurdistan, the Kurds were ultimately denied statehood, which commenced the beginning of the modern Kurdish struggle in the late 1920s, detailed in Chapter 3.

populations in Syria and Iraq. The U.S. has been allied with the Kurds in multiple Middle Eastern conflicts, including the prelude to the Iran-Iraq War, the Gulf War, the Iraq War, and the War against ISIS. In exchange, the Kurds have depended on U.S. support against repeated attacks by the Syrian, Iraqi, or Turkish regimes and often found that U.S. support for the Kurds ends with their current mandate in the Middle East. The U.S. has never openly advocated for the formation of a Kurdish state, but has repeatedly turned to the Kurds for help in U.S.-led Middle Eastern conflicts and repeatedly withdrawn their support when their short-term policy goals in the region are achieved. In the words of Henry Kissinger, often considered the modern architect of U.S.-Kurdish relations, “ambivalence has defined, and in fact overwhelmed, American efforts in Kurdish regions of the Middle East” (Kissinger, p. 579).

The groundwork for a U.S.-Kurdish partnership was laid in the partition of the Middle East following the fall of the Ottoman Empire. As documented in the chapter to follow, the Kurds were denied statehood and thus positioned as a valuable strategic partner to the United States in a region of constant conflict to U.S. interests. From its very foundation post World War I, the Kurdish struggle to obtain an independent state has positioned the group in direct opposition to their respective governments of Iraq, Iran, Turkey, and Syria. American interests, policies, and allies have shifted drastically in the Middle East over the last century, but through the years, the U.S. has found itself at odds with multiple different states and non-state actors within the Kurdish homeland. Due to their status as a hostile minority group eager to disrupt the social order in their respective states, the Kurds inevitably caught the eye of the United States, which was seeking partners on the ground in early Middle East endeavors in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Israel, undoubtedly America’s foremost ally in the Middle East, saw the potential for a Kurdish partnership throughout the course of the Israeli-Arab wars, and lobbied the U.S. to form

an official relationship with Kurdish groups striving to fight a mutual enemy in Iraq. At the time, the U.S. cared little about the Kurdish struggle or the Kurdish cause in perspective, but they recognized its merits. The Kurds were fighting the same enemies as the American-Israeli coalition, and Kurdish groups were willing to fight America's battles for them, and as such, the U.S. embarked on a tumultuous relationship with the Kurds that began in earnest in the early 1970s.

The U.S. has provided material support and military assistance to various Kurdish groups in multiple different conflicts since the beginning of the modern-day relationship in the 1970s. America aided and armed Iraqi Kurdish groups fighting Iraqi government forces before 1975, came to the assistance of the Kurds in 1991 in the wake of an Iraqi government offensive, coordinated efforts with Kurdish fighters in the early days of the 2003 Iraq War, and assisted Kurdish fighters in the war against ISIS in the late 2010s. The U.S.-Kurdish relationship, however, could hardly be defined as symbiotic. The relationship has been marred by numerous acts deemed betrayals by the Kurds and dismissed by the Americans as standard operating procedure. The early 1970s saga of U.S. support for the Kurds ended with an Iraqi invasion of Kurdish-controlled northern territory, while the 1991 humanitarian assistance effort only sprung up after repeated calls for U.S. assistance during an offensive onslaught into Kurdish land in Iraq. Likewise, the U.S. was nowhere to be seen in 1988, when Saddam Hussein's forces committed acts against Kurdish civilians that some define as genocide. And in 2019, after a closely-coordinated effort with Kurdish fighters for more than five years in the fight against ISIS, the U.S. opened the door for a Turkish offensive into northern Syria that wiped away years of Kurdish advancement in just a few short weeks. U.S. support for Kurdish groups exists solely as temporary means to an end, typically being the destruction of a mutual enemy. Support for the

Kurds has proved to be contingent upon the current U.S. mandate in the Middle East, and always revocable at a moment's notice.

Furthermore, Kurdish influence on U.S. policy pales in comparison to Turkey's. Turkey is a close NATO ally and mutual defense partner to the United States that often acts as the West's closest insert into the Middle East aside from Israel. Ankara has provided Washington with military basing and close cooperation between armies; they act as a counterbalance towards other regional powers and U.S. adversaries such as Iran; and they have historically sided with Western powers against hostile Middle Eastern leaders and governments. America's foremost interest in dealings with Ankara is to keep Turkey anchored to the Euro-Atlantic community. Turkey remains a critical ally to the U.S. even as the two countries' interests and goals diverge slightly, and Turkey has made certain demands regarding the Middle East's Kurdish population, to which the U.S. is happy to acquiesce to if it means retaining their Turkish alliance. Ankara has long considered its Kurdish minority an existential threat to its southeast population and territory, and has taken stringent measures to curtail increased calls for Kurdish rights both inside its borders and out. Turkey has waged a war against its hostile Kurdish armed groups for decades, but they have also expanded their cross-border operations against the Kurds in recent years, often with help from the United States. Calls from Ankara to Washington typically result in an anti-Kurdish, pro-Turkish U.S. policy position, as U.S. policymakers have proved unwilling to upset the current state of U.S.-Turkish relations. Kurdish leaders are quick to paint the picture of numerous U.S. betrayals, but most have resulted from consistent Turkish lobbying to cease all involvement with Kurdish armed forces. Previous endeavors have shown that Turkish interests will always supersede Kurdish interests in Washington. The close ties between the two NATO

countries are perhaps the greatest hindrance to Kurdish leaders seeking a pro-Kurdish position in the U.S.

Lastly, the Kurds, for all their merits, are a fractured and vulnerable ethnic group spread out through four sovereign countries. They remain divided in their messaging to the international community; they control no valuable natural resources besides some oil reserves in Iraq whose profits are heavily disputed by Baghdad and only distributed with a blessing from Ankara; they wield no significant political power with little foreign policy outreach (even though the groundwork is currently being laid); their policy objectives are always outweighed by those of Turkey; and their visibility comes mostly through conflict and military prowess. Besides in times of conflict, the Kurds have little international audience, if any at all. The time to maximize their bargaining chips is during conflict, but they have failed to cultivate an effective messaging and lobbying campaign to persuade the U.S. to support meaningful policy objectives in Kurdish-held areas beyond any conflict's end. The U.S. military finds them useful tactically, and a working mutual relationship with the Kurds is surely beneficial to U.S. interests in the region, but Kurdish political aspirations have been relegated to the backburner of U.S. foreign policy. American officials are likely to continue their periodic friendly overtures to various Kurdish groups in hopes of securing their assistance in the next conflict that may emerge, but the implications for U.S. foreign policy are simple. Kurdish policy goals coincide with, or at least emerge in conjunction with, the destabilization of states within the region. Precisely because of this inverse relationship between state stability and Kurdish goals, the U.S. would much rather preserve Kurdish vulnerability by securing Middle Eastern state stability than the alternative of aiding the Kurdish cause by assigning the Kurds a formal role in U.S. foreign policy.

Research Design

A mixed methodology technique is utilized throughout this thesis. I primarily applied historical process tracing to my analysis, and traced a historical examination of U.S.-Kurdish relations and strategic partnerships through an understanding of U.S. foreign policy events and relationships in the Middle East. I sought to craft an analysis of the Kurdish role in U.S. policy through careful examination of previous U.S. endeavors in the Kurdish homeland, and the history of American strategic partnerships with the Kurds. As David Collier defines the theory, process tracing is applied primarily by sequencing historical events through careful description and analysis (Collier, 2011). The methodology is based primarily on a foundation of comprehensive description and causal-process observation. In my use of the model, the historical process tracing tool was particularly useful to draw descriptive and causal inferences from close examination of multiple different periods of history as it relates to the U.S.-Kurdish relationship. In this thesis, I aimed to utilize a process tracing analytic model to 1) help formulate an analysis of U.S.-Kurdish relations, 2) identify new relationship phenomena of which existing academic literature is sparse, and 3) gain insight to the critical causal mechanisms driving the relationship between the two entities, the United States and the Kurdish homeland in the Middle East.

Significant scholarly research currently exists on the Kurdish people and the formation of the Kurdish struggle, and I relied on the academic database of JSTOR for a majority of my sources about the earlier history of the Kurds. In subsequent chapters, especially regarding recent conflicts involving both the U.S. and the Kurds, I relied on primarily journalistic sources due to the lack of academic resources on more recent events. I devoted particular concern to avoiding

sources with evident bias, such as those published by pro-Kurdish groups or authors, as well as those with anti-Kurdish bias, such as Turkish state media sources. To track the effectiveness of the Kurdish lobby, I utilized the framework of existing theories regarding the efficiency of various ethnic lobbies, provided through existing scholarly research (Smith, 2005; Schlesinger, 2000-01).

Beginning of the Kurdish Struggle

The roughly 30-40 million Kurds spread out around the globe (but most densely concentrated in the states of Turkey, Syria, Iraq, and Iran) currently constitute what is frequently referred to as the world's largest nation without a state (Taspinar, 2019; Küçükkeles, Mankoff, 2014). Today, most Kurdish people living in the Middle East call the Zagros Mountains home, an area near the intersection of the Iranian, Iraqi, Syrian, and Turkish borders where they live as ethnic minorities in those four countries (see: Figure 1) (Gunter, 2004). A classic Kurdish proverb likely best sums up Kurdish isolation in the Middle East, both in a geographic and political sense: "The Kurds have no friends but the mountains," (Gunter, 2004, p. 197). Much scholarly research has been devoted to the Kurdish struggle for statehood, and I do not wish to delve deeply into the legitimacy of the question, but will recount their struggles within their respective states as it relates to the formation of an unlikely partnership with the United States.

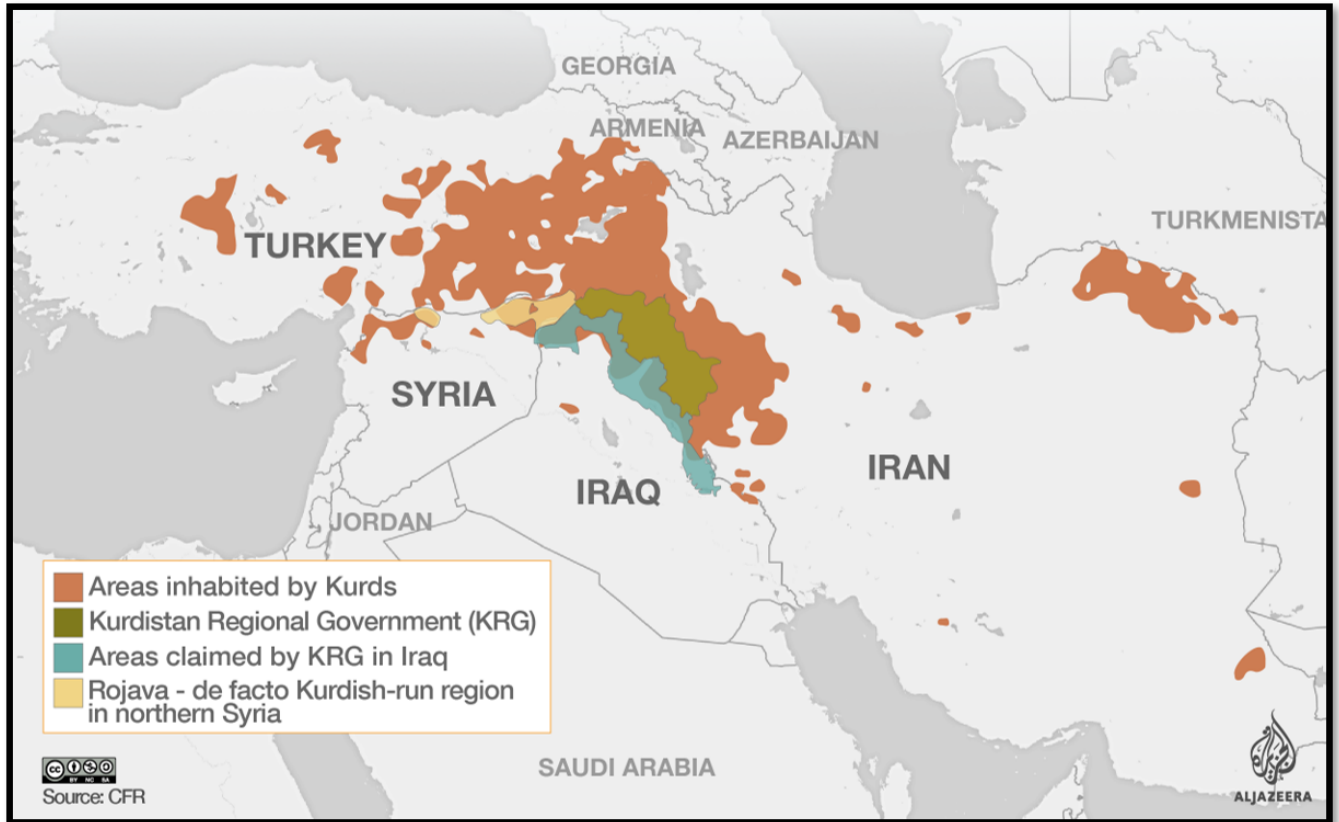


Figure 1: Map of Kurdish-inhabited regions in the Middle East. (Rifai, Ali, 2017)

For centuries, their homeland comprised portions of the Ottoman Empire in modern-day Turkey, Syria, and Iraq, and the Persian Empire in modern-day Iran, before being integrated throughout a multitude of states in the post-World War I partition of the Middle East (Gunter, 2004). Although promised a state in the 1920 Treaty of Sèvres (expanded upon in the next chapter), Kurdish aspirations for statehood were swiftly quelled by Turkey’s emergence and subsequent repression of Kurdish culture. The Kurds’ failure to secure a state following World War I officially commenced the “Kurdish struggle,” defined as a “desire for statehood, or at least cultural autonomy within the states that they now inhabit,” (Gunter, 2004, p. 197). Throughout the late 1900s, Iran, Iraq, Turkey, and Syria all had separate and distinct policies towards their respective Kurdish minority population, and all struggled to incorporate them into a greater

nationalistic identity (Gunter, 2004). Because each state dealt with their Kurds differently, the late 20th century marked a turning point for the Kurdish struggle, one that changed from a unified Kurdish stance into a question of Kurdish rights within the confines of their respective states. From their breakup into four separate states following World War I and continuing until the 1990s or early 2000s, the Kurds of each state largely acted and operated independently of Kurds in other states.

Turkey

As the largest ethnic minority group in Turkey, Kurdish people comprise about twenty percent of the entire Turkish population (CIA World Factbook, Turkey, 2021). Turkey has a larger population of Kurds than any other state, and of the four discussed countries, they have easily taken the most aggressive position against their Kurdish citizens in the southeast. Ever since its modern formation in 1923, Turkey has considered a potential Kurdish state to be an existential threat (Beyoglow, 2020), and for almost a century, has undertaken a massive campaign to mitigate the notion of Kurdish nationalism within its own borders (and even beyond). For much of the 20th century, Turkey simply refused to acknowledge the existence of a Kurdish minority group, and referred to the Kurds in the southeast as “Mountain Turks” (Gunter, 2004, p. 200). When a renewed sense of Kurdish nationalism in the 1970s began to emerge within Turkey, however, Ankara was forced to recognize its Kurdish population and began to officially crack down on the minority group. The 1982 Constitution of Turkey implicitly bans the spoken and written use of the Kurdish language, as well as clarifies its position on the Kurdish question within Turkey, stated as: “the determination that no protection shall be afforded to thoughts or opinions contrary to Turkish national interests,” (Gunter, 2004, p. 200). In response to Turkey’s strict crackdown on Kurdish culture, Turkish Kurds sought more cultural, linguistic,

and political rights beginning in the 1970s, and culminating in the formation of the PKK, or Kurdistan Workers Party (In Kurdish: *Partiya Karkeren Kurdistan*), in 1974. The PKK strived to create an independent Kurdistan, and thus launched an insurgency campaign against Turkey beginning in 1984 that resulted in the deaths of 37,000 people and the displacement of about three million others between 1984 and 2000 (Gunter, 2004). Since then, Turkey and the PKK have engaged in intermittent periods of violence against each other, both inside the borders of Turkey and beyond, even spilling into neighboring countries such as Syria and Iraq.

Iraq

In Iraq, Kurds have enjoyed a greater sense of self-sufficiency than in any other state due to the fact that they have long “constituted a greater proportion of the population (in Iraq) than they did in any other state they inhabited,” (Gunter, 2004, p. 201). Since Iraq’s creation after World War I, the Iraqi Kurds in the north have been in “an almost constant state of rebellion” (Gunter, 2004). For over 50 years, the Kurdish cause in Iraq was synonymous with Mulla Mustafa Barzani, known as the founder of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) in Iraq and renowned for his fighting spirit against the government of Iraq (Gunter, 2004). While Iraq struggled to sustain their legitimacy as a new state throughout the 20th century, they were fending off threats from other countries as well as attempting to quell frequent rebellions from Barzani and his Kurdish *peshmerga* fighters in the north. Barzani had presented himself as a worthy adversary of the Iraqi government and its military forces, and even earned himself a supporter in the United States when Washington began to take a renewed interest in the Middle East. After America withdraw its support for Barzani’s Kurds in northern Iraq, described as the first United States betrayal of the Kurds (and discussed in detail in the following chapter), the Iraqi Kurds became a fractured minority group split between two rival political parties and self-proclaimed

governments in the north, the KDP and Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). Barzani's son Massoud Barzani assumed control of the KDP in 1975, while the PUK emerged as an opposing political party under the leadership of Jalal Talabani (Gunter, 2004). While mostly united in their claims for Kurdish independence and their struggle against the Iraqi government, the PUK and KDP's regional and ideological differences ultimately led to infighting between the two Kurdish groups that culminated in the Iraqi Kurdish Civil War fought between 1994 and 1998. The civil war was the first modern instance of full-scale fighting between two different Kurdish factions, and forced Kurds of all nationalities to choose sides between the KDP and PUK in Iraq and drew in foreign powers such as Turkey, Iran, Syria, and the United States (Gunter, 2004). The war came to a close after four years due to a U.S.-brokered ceasefire between Barzani and Talabani, but the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) remains divided between the PUK and KDP even today. Internal differences may divide the political thinking of Kurdish politicians in northern Iraq, but an overwhelming majority of Iraqi Kurds still claim Kurdistan, as opposed to Iraq, home. In 2017, Iraq's Kurdish provinces held a referendum on independence that brought 4.5 million citizens to the ballot box, where 93 percent supported forming the KRI into an independent state free from Baghdad's reach (Nada, Crahan, 2020). Iraq's Supreme Federal Court nullified the vote and rendered the decision to secede illegal, a decision which the Kurdistan Regional Government ultimately respected after brief fighting with Iraqi government forces, but most Kurds in northern Iraq remain united in their stance for an independent Kurdistan.

Iran

Kurds in Iran compose about ten percent of the entire population as the third largest ethnic group within Iran, behind the Persians and Azeris (Nada, Crahan, 2020). They are primarily concentrated in the Kurdistan province of northwestern Iran and surrounding provinces

that all border Iraq, with one area of significant Kurdish influence in northeastern Iran. Since 1918, Tehran has heard calls of separatism, autonomy, and even independence from their Kurdish minority, with the Iranian government often taking violent action to repress these Kurdish uprisings (Nada, Crahan, 2020). Before the KRG's establishment in neighboring Iraq in 1991, Iranian Kurds were perhaps most notable for their creation of the only independent Kurdish state of modern times. The Mahabad Republic of Kurdistan may have been short lived, in place for just twelve months throughout the year of 1946, but its very existence as a free Kurdish state in western Iran long served as a model of independence for minority Kurdish groups spread throughout other states (Gunter, 2004). The first modern experience in a free Kurdish state was spearheaded by the Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan (KDPI), a Kurdish political movement banned in Iran with ties to the PKK in Turkey (Nada, Crahan, 2020). Like the KRG in Iraq and the PKK in Turkey, the KDPI in Iran has waged war against the Iranian government for decades, but most significantly since the 1979 Revolution and the formation of an official Shia Muslim Iranian state. A majority of Iranian Kurds were forced into the neighboring KRG after an attempted uprising from 1979 to 1981 was crushed by the Iranian Revolutionary Guards (Nada, Crahan, 2020). Unlike in fragile states such as Syria and Iraq, Iran has largely been successful in their commitment to the destruction of all internal security threats, including the PDKI, and as such, most Iranian Kurds have abandoned their hopes for a free Kurdish state within Iran or fled to the neighboring KRI.

Syria

Syria houses a smaller minority population of Kurdish people than any of their three neighboring states in Iraq, Iran, and Turkey (Gunter, 2004). Prior to 2011, the Syrian Assad regime (under father Hafez until 2000, and son Bashar from 2000-present) chose to deal with

their minority Kurdish population not with violence, but with apathy. For decades, the Syrian government largely neglected their Kurdish minority who resided in the northeastern corner of the country far away from the capital city of Damascus. Many Kurds were even denied Syrian citizenship under Hafez al-Assad, but unlike in Iran or Turkey where most Kurds faced threat of persecution or repression, the Kurds of Syria largely enjoyed “a relatively politically and socially amenable space for Kurdish political entities of various ideological characters,” (Al-Kati, 2019, p. 96). Syrian Kurds have previously been described as “not a pressing problem” (Gunter, 2004, p. 203), unlike their fellow Kurds in Iraq and Turkey, but everything changed in regards to the future of Syrian Kurds with the outbreak of the Syrian Civil War in 2011.

The onset of the civil war in 2011 pitted Bashar al-Assad’s regime against a litany of internal non-state actors and external foreign powers committed to the overthrow of the Assad regime. In the early stages of the Syrian Civil War, government forces lost large swaths of land throughout the country and basically withdrew all forces from northeast Syria to concentrate on a strong rebel presence in other parts of the country (Al-Kati, 2019). In 2014, with the government virtually absent from Kurdish-dominated northeastern Syria, the newly-minted Kurdish Democratic Union Party of Syria (PYD) grew ambitious with their demands and declared autonomy with the creation of the Democratic Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, commonly referred to as Rojava (Al-Kati, 2019). The PYD and their paramilitary wing known as the People’s Protection Units (YPG), remained neutral in the war between Assad and the coalition of Syrian rebels, and limited their early aspirations in northeastern Syria to a semi-autonomous federalist project in democracy within Syria (Al-Kati, 2019). Assad was content with the Kurdish experiment in northeastern Syria as long as it didn’t mean adding to the growing ranks of Syrian rebel groups, and the Kurds were likewise eager to stave out an

autonomous region dominated by Kurdish political groups within a sovereign state (Perlov, Lindenstrauss, 2016). The Kurds of Syria increased their international renown with their efforts in combating the rise of ISIS (well-documented in the coalition war effort against ISIS in the following chapter), and were even able to ally themselves with major players such as the United States, Russia, and even the Syrian government, who all considered ISIS the greater enemy (Perlov, Lindenstrauss, 2016). Today, Rojava is governed by the Syrian Democratic Council, the political wing of the Syrian Democratic Forces (a fighting force dominated by a large Kurdish majority), and maintains their autonomy from the rest of Syria (Stein, Burchfield, 2019). Even though the Syrian Kurds won much support from the international community throughout the 2010s, they still face a constant threat from the north in Turkey, which maintains that it will never accept a Kurdish-controlled autonomous region along its southern border (Perlov, Lindenstrauss, 2016). Syrian Kurds have looked to the KRG-model in Iraq as inspiration for a Kurdish autonomous zone in Rojava, but the superior Turkish military presence just to the north has to be considered going forward in the context of any Kurdish territorial claims in northeastern Syria.

The Kurdish Struggle and the United States

For decades, the United States took little interest in the Kurdish struggle. With the exception of U.S. assistance in the establishment of the KRG in Iraq, even today the U.S. actively attempts to avoid the Kurdish question in hopes of preserving the geopolitical landscape in the Middle East and appeasing its NATO ally Turkey. Even when dealing with adversarial governments (Iraq under Hussein, Iran post revolution, or Syria under Assad), the U.S. has elected to preserve the territorial integrity of those three states rather than supporting the Kurds' aspirations for self-determination, autonomy, or independence. Save for President Woodrow

Wilson's declaration in 1918 that the Kurds were entitled to a free and independent state after World War I, the U.S. has never advocated for, nor held a policy position that the Kurds are owed their own state in the Middle East or anywhere else. The modern Kurdish struggle emerged as a result of repression by the central governments of Iraq, Iran, Turkey, and Syria, and as a result, it should have appealed to the U.S. ideals of self-determination and the protection of basic human rights, a privilege Kurds of all four states have been denied for the better part of a century. Instead, the United States has remained mute on the Kurdish question, and could hardly be considered a worthy advocate for the Kurdish cause. As recent U.S. international interventions have shown, especially in the Middle East, a sharing of ideals is not the hallmark of a lasting alliance. The Kurdish struggle began as a question of basic human rights, but quickly morphed into a question of self-determination vs. territorial integrity and state stability, and the U.S. has thus far elected to preserve the latter, even in states with authoritarian governments or gross human rights records, such as Syria and Iraq under Saddam Hussein (Carley, 1997). Why? "(Authoritarianism) is stable, and Western decision-makers now believe instability feeds extremism or creates the areas for it to thrive," (Frantzman, 2020).

Despite their silent approach to the Kurdish struggle, however, the U.S. has relied on Kurdish people to do their bidding throughout the Middle East in numerous different occasions. The old proverb conditions that the Kurds have no friends but the mountains, an adage proven true in dealings with their host states, but when a reprehensible United States adversary emerges in a Kurdish-populated state, the Kurds have generally found a friend in Washington. Due to their status as a mostly-bellicose minority group in the eyes of their host states, the U.S. has used the Kurds multiple times to act as a thorn in the side of governments, states, or non-state groups seen as a mutual enemy to both entities, Kurdistan and Washington. When an adversarial

government is eradicated (in the case of the Saddam Hussein regime in Iraq), a threat eliminated (in the case of ISIS), or an alliance reversed (in the case of the U.S. relationship with Iran and Iraq in the 1970s), the United States is quick to withdraw its support for the Kurds and leave them to fend for themselves. The Kurds, for their part, have little recourse. They exist as second-class citizens within Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Syria, with their very national identity suppressed by multiple different states, and they have little choice but to accept help when it is offered to them, even with no guarantees beyond the mission at hand.

This is why the early formation of the Kurdish struggle, one that almost guaranteed prolonged conflict between sovereign states and the Kurdish minority within those states, has positioned the Kurds as a strategic partner in the eyes of the United States. The U.S. views its role in the partnership as fairly fluid, with the ability to command the Kurds in the direction of whichever short-term policy goal the U.S. is seeking to accomplish at the time. When the goal is inevitably reached, the U.S. is free to turn its Kurdish friends back over to their respective states and let those states deal with their minority Kurdish population as a domestic concern. In this sense, Kurdish vulnerability is valuable in the eyes of Washington. The U.S. has taken advantage of Kurdish vulnerability to use them to accomplish American foreign policy goals. In this sense, America has strategically benefited from the lack of a Kurdish state, and has operated with a policy of willful ignorance towards the Kurdish struggle in hopes of preserving their vulnerability as an isolated minority group divided across four states of particular geopolitical importance to the United States (in their own separate ways, of course). As history has dictated, and the next chapter will detail, if the U.S. needs a useful foil against the present government of Syria, Iran, Iraq, or even potentially Turkey, look no further than the Kurds.

Case Studies of U.S.-Kurdish Partnerships

Over the past five decades, the U.S. has engaged with various Kurdish groups in multiple Middle Eastern conflicts, particularly in their home states of Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria. This chapter will examine the evolution of the U.S.-Kurdish strategic partnership through six different stages of U.S.-Kurdish involvement in the Middle East: President Woodrow Wilson's pledge to create a Kurdish state, the beginning of modern relations between the U.S. and the Kurds in the 1970s, the 1991 Gulf War and the formation of the KRG, the 2003 Iraq War, the fight against ISIS, and U.S. efforts to assist Turkey in fighting the PKK.

Wilson's Pledge

The beginning of the relationship between the United States and the Kurdish population in the Middle East can be traced back to the waning years of World War I. For decades, the Kurdish people lived as ethnic minorities within the confines of the Ottoman Empire, which during World War I encompassed all of modern-day Turkey and Syria, and most of modern-day Iraq, along with territorial holds throughout the Arabian peninsula and the northeastern coast of Africa (Woodward, 2011). In 1914, the Kurdish population within the Ottoman Empire was about 1.5 million, making up six percent of the empire as a small ethnic minority among a very ethnically diverse population (Yapp, 2020). By 1918, with an allied victory looming and the defeat of the Ottoman Empire imminent, allied countries, including the United States under President Woodrow Wilson, began drafting postwar policies and partition plans for central power territories, including the Ottoman Empire. Some scholars argue that Wilson, in his famous Fourteen Points speech in January 1918 to the U.S. Congress, first instituted the belief amongst

the Kurdish people in the Middle East that they had an ally in the United States (Gunter, 2011). Wilson's conditions for postwar peace were wide-ranging and idealistic, but his twelfth point is often cited by scholars as one of the earliest conditions for Kurdish statehood (Gunter, 2011). In that twelfth point, Wilson specifically outlines a roadmap to statehood for all ethnic minorities within the Ottoman Empire, saying, "The Turkish portions 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 an autonomous development..." (U.S. Embassy & Consulate in the Republic of Korea, 2021). Gunter (2011), in his paper *The Five Stages of American Foreign Policy Towards the Kurds*, argues that Wilson's declaration in 1918 represented the beginning of a modern-day relationship with the Kurdish people in the Middle East, although it came to a swift end just a few short years later. While the 1920 Treaty of Sèvres did briefly grant the Kurdish population statehood, it was short-lived, as Turkish nationalism under leader Mustafa Ataturk and British aspirations for the oil-rich region of northern Iraq superseded the territorial declarations established in 1920 (Danforth, 2015). In 1923, Ataturk reneged on the Treaty of Sèvres and founded the modern state of Turkey, thus effectively ending all early hopes of Kurdish statehood after three short years (Danforth, 2015). The British were keen to look the other way in exchange for holding onto the large oil reserves contained just to the southwest in northern Iraq (Gunter, 2011), and the United States chose to leave near-Asian problems to the victorious European powers, thus bringing to a close the opening chapter of U.S.-Kurdish relations.

Kissinger and the Kurds

While Wilson's idealistic plans for a Middle East partitioning never came to fruition, the American president did indeed have profound effects on lasting U.S. policy, as evidenced some

50 years later by his influence on fellow American diplomat Henry Kissinger. Kissinger, as U.S. National Security Advisor and Secretary of State under Presidents Nixon and Ford throughout the 1970s, is, by most accounts, the engineer of modern-day Kurdish-American relations (Gibson, 2019). Opportunism and pragmatism defined the Kissinger approach to *Realpolitik*, which became America's foreign policy approach to a changing and dynamic world stage (Gibson, 2019). Against the backdrop of the Cold War and a growing Soviet ally in Saddam Hussein-led Iraq in the early 1970s, Kissinger and Nixon were the first American officials to seek out the Kurdish minority within Iraq as a strategic partner (Gibson, 2019). At the time, the Kurds furthered American interests in the region, but as they would come to find out, their partnership with the U.S. was merely a means to an end, and was hardly intended to last. As has been the case for multiple different strategic partnerships between the Kurdish minority in the Middle East and the United States, and in Kissinger's own words, ambivalence has defined the U.S. approach to the Kurdish people in the Middle East (Kissinger, 1999, p .579). Perhaps most emblematic of Kissinger's *Realpolitik* philosophy in his dealings with the Kurds, however, is this: (again in his own words): "Wilsonian tradition propels us in the direction of supporting national self-determination, but it also produces what is becoming America's perennial policy dilemma: the limits of American moral obligation in an area so remote and inaccessible as the mountainous Kurdish enclaves amidst countries which profoundly affect the American national interest," (Kissinger, 1999, p. 578).

Before ambivalence and a "perennial policy dilemma" (Kissinger, 1999, p. 578) characterized the American relationship with the Kurds, they were actually seen as a viable U.S. partner in a coming power struggle between two major players in the Middle East at the time, Iraq and Iran. Two key U.S. allies in the early 1970s, Israel and Iran, were supporting Kurdish

fighters in northern Iraq both logistically and financially, and were urging the United States to do the same (Gibson, 2019). After Iraq entered fully into the Soviet sphere of influence, President Nixon finally agreed to support a Kurdish insurgency in northern Iraq for four reasons: to express his support for the Shah of Iran in increasing hostilities against the Ba'athist regime of Iraq, to combat Soviet influence in the Middle East, to relieve pressure on Israel by diverting Iraqi hostilities away from Israel and towards the Kurdish-dominated north, and lastly, to pursue a friendly oil deal once Kurdish leaders were able to secure either independence or autonomy (Gunter, 2011). The Nixon administration was the first American interest to directly finance a Kurdish cause, with the introduction of millions in financial assistance and weapons sales directly to the Iraqi Kurds, but U.S. support didn't last long (Gunter, 2011). In 1975, the Shah of Iran suddenly decided to revoke his support for the Iraqi Kurds in favor of dealing directly with Saddam Hussein for a border concession, and presented his deal with the Iraqi government as a *fait accompli* to Henry Kissinger (Gibson, 2019). The U.S., along with Iran, pulled all interests and resources out of northern Iraq, and within a matter of days, the full might of the Iraqi army descended into the north, killing thousands of Kurds and destroying entire villages (Gibson, 2019). To the rebellious Kurdish fighters in northern Iraq, this represented a monumental betrayal by the U.S. government. Mustafa Barzani, the Kurdish rebel leader at the time, described the 1975 decision by U.S. leaders as such: "We have had bitter experience with the U.S. government... It changed its alliances purely in its own interest at the expense of our people's suffering," (Gunter, 2011, p. 96). Back in the United States, a policy goal may have been settled in the matter, but key officials knew the significance of their actions and the effect it would have on Iraqi Kurds. From Brent Scowcroft, Deputy National Security Adviser under

Kissinger: ““While American support of Barzani’s struggle may not have seemed much back in Foggy Bottom, to Kurdistan it felt like a covenant with God,”” (Lawrence, 2009, p. 25).

Following the Iranian Revolution in 1979, U.S. interests and policy goals in the Middle East changed drastically. At the outbreak of the Iran-Iraq War in 1980, the U.S. was concerned about the growing influence of the Supreme Republic of Iran around the region, and threw its weight behind Saddam Hussein and Iraq (Lawrence, 2009). To the Kurds, Saddam Hussein was public enemy number one, and no altering of alliances would change that fact (Lawrence, 2009). The Kurds stood firm in their opposition to the Hussein regime, and in response to Kurdish support of Tehran during the Iran-Iraq War, the Iraqi Ba’athist regime responded with the Anfal Campaign (also known as the Anfal Genocide) against the Kurdish population in northern Iraq, in which an estimated 50,000-100,000 Kurdish fighters and civilians alike were killed (Human Rights Watch Report, 1993). The Kurds found little support from U.S. officials during the Anfal campaign. Contributing to the apathy among American citizens was the fact that under President Ronald Reagan, the U.S. had signed favorable trade deals with the Hussein regime that made for easy exports of U.S. commodities such as wheat and rice. To some Americans, the suffering and death inflicted on a nation thousands of miles away simply couldn’t merit relinquishing their friendly trade deals. At the height of the Anfal Campaign in 1988, “As (Peter) Galbraith and Senator (Claiborne) Pell tried to push a ‘Prevention of Genocide Act of 1988’ through Congress, a rice lobbyist wept on the phone, accusing Galbraith of genocide against American farmers. The bill, loaded with sanctions, failed. Congress just didn’t care to agonize over a distant war between two unsavory regimes, and most Americans had no idea that a people called the Kurds were being slaughtered in the cross fire,” (Lawrence, 2009, p. 41).

Gulf War and Formation of the KRG

By 1990, Saddam Hussein was back out of the good graces of American leaders, who once again turned their sights on reigning in his influence around the region. The invasion of Kuwait by Iraq prompted the U.S. and a coalition of nations to invade Kuwait and repel Iraqi forces from the country as part of Operation Desert Storm, an effort that resulted in a quick coalition victory (BBC, 2016). From a coalition perspective, the expulsion of Iraqi forces from Kuwait was the only goal of the 1991 Gulf War – never the toppling of the Saddam regime in Iraq (Lawrence, 2009). However, just two days after the liberalization of Kuwait, President George H.W. Bush emboldened the Iraqi Kurds (as well as Shia militias and other opposition parties) to spring to action with his comment that, "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," (BBC, 2016). Opposition forces within Iraq, including Kurdish fighters, began to rebel against Saddam's army but were quickly overwhelmed without U.S. or coalition support. By 1991, the uprising had "turned into a rout" and forced roughly 1.5 million Kurdish refugees to flee into neighboring Turkey and Iran (Gunter, 2011, p. 97). The Kurds, for their part, felt again betrayed by the U.S. and appealed to American leaders for an assistance in this uprising they felt was premeditated by Bush's comments. Both Massoud Barzani of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and Jalal Talabani of the rival Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) directly reached out to Bush, saying "'You personally called upon the Iraqi people to rise up against Saddam Hussein's brutal dictatorship,'" (Gunter, 2011, p. 97).

Fearing a humanitarian disaster, the U.S. reversed course and pledged support for the Kurdish minority in northern Iraq with the launch of Operation Provide Comfort (1991), which

established a no-fly zone over northern Iraq, as well as sent humanitarian relief and peacekeeping troops into the region, (Gunter, 2011). “That was the beginning of the de facto state of what I call the law of unintended consequences,” said (U.S. Ambassador to Turkey, Morton) Abramowitz. Nobody involved suspected this was anything but a humanitarian mission. Years later Abramowitz realized they had accidentally created Kurdistan,” (Lawrence, 2009, p. 55). Without fear of government reprisal, the Iraqi Kurds returned to their homes and established the KRG, an autonomous region of northern Iraq governed by Kurds that now represents the “closest approximation of an independent Kurdish state in modern times,” (Gunter, 2011, p. 97).

Iraq War 2003

The KRG peacefully operated under the auspices of U.S. military support and an Iraqi pledge of non-intervention for roughly the next decade, until the American invasion of Iraq in 2003 (Lawrence, 2009). Kurdish leaders in northern Iraq had been lobbying for an American intervention against the Ba’athist regime for years, and finally got their wish in 2003 when President George W. Bush decided to invade Iraq and oust Hussein. The U.S. was once again looking for strategic partners in the region, and likewise, the Iraqi Kurds were willing to assist in decisive action against the Iraqi government (Lawrence, 2009). As Gunter writes, “Only when the United States perceived the Iraqi Kurds to be a useful foil against Saddam Hussein did Washington begin to take a partially pro-Kurdish position at least towards the Iraqi Kurds,” (Gunter, 2011, p. 100). Contributing to Kurdish support in Washington was the fact that Turkey, a NATO ally, was unwilling to support the coalition war effort against the government of Iraq, and refused to grant the U.S. their territory as a base for a northern front against Iraqi forces (Gunter, 2011). A March 2003 Turkish parliamentary vote narrowly refused to authorize the deployment of some 62,000 U.S. troops on Turkish soil and also denied the U.S. access to

Turkish airbases (Boudreaux, Zaman, 2003). Washington had prepared its war strategy with Turkey's cooperation in mind, but Turkish legislators promptly blocked any hope of Turkey's assistance in the war against Saddam Hussein. In the wake of Turkey's vote, and in hopes of retaining their two-pronged offensive into Iraq (from Kuwait in the south as well as from the north), American military leaders turned to the KRG in northern Iraq, who were more than willing to comply with the U.S. request (Lawrence, 2009).

For the first time in modern history, U.S. leaders had aligned themselves with a Kurdish cause in direct conflict with the Turkish position, which was to root out any Kurdish influence near the Turkish border. To the Iraqi Kurds, this scenario could not have worked out any better. America now found itself at odds with Turkey and in (at least temporary) alliance with the Kurds. Barhim Salih, former Deputy Secretary General of the PUK within the KRG (and current President of Iraq), said at the time that, "We are partners to the U.S. We are part of the coalition. We want to be partners in the campaign to liberate Iraq. We are freedom fighters. The way we look at it, others are coming to help us. Not that we are guns for hire – we are the ones who have been here, consistently. We welcome help, and we are going to do it together," (Lawrence, 2009, p. 153). To back up his statement, in the opening days of the Iraq invasion from the north, Kurdish *peshmerga* fighters numbered about 70,000, while just 5,200 American military personnel deployed along the Iraqi green line and the border with the KRG (Lawrence, 2009, p. 171).

The Iraqi Kurds achieved their two primary objectives in the U.S.-led war against Iraq in 2003: the death of Saddam Hussein, the architect of state-sponsored Kurdish destruction by way of the Anfal Campaign in 1988 (Lawrence, 2009), and recognition of the region of Kurdistan in northern Iraq, though some Kurdish political leaders did push for independence from Iraq as

opposed to the federalist system that was ultimately implemented (Fatah, 2006). For some Kurdish leaders, however, just seeing the name ‘Kurdistan’ in the Constitution of Iraq enacted in 2005 was a life’s work, and they had (at least partly), the Americans to thank (Lawrence, 2009). Thanks to the work of Massoud Barzani’s KDP (and against the wishes of Jalal Talabani’s PUK), the following clause entered Iraqi law in 2005, establishing the KRI as a semi-autonomous region of federalist Iraq: “This Constitution, upon coming into force, shall recognize the region of Kurdistan, along with its existing authorities, as a federal region,” (Iraq Constitution of 2005, Article 117, Section 1, 2005).

For their part in the coalition war effort, the Iraqi Kurds received U.S. guarantees of protection to maintain their autonomy within northern Iraq in one of the first instances of an overt and diplomatic policy favorable to a Kurdish group. In 2009, Defense Secretary Robert Gates promised the Iraqi Kurds that “we will not abandon you,” while President Barack Obama committed his administration to brokering disputes between Erbil, the capital city of the KRG, and Baghdad (Gunter, 2011).

War Against ISIS

In 2014, the U.S. once again found itself needing Kurdish military assistance in the Middle East. Unlike the last time America called on the Kurds for help in 2003, however, this time, it was Kurdish fighters leading the fight. When the ISIS rapidly seized large swaths of land in both Syria and Iraq, including the major cities of Raqqa, Mosul, and Ramadi (among many others), it officially announced the establishment of a caliphate that spanned throughout Iraq and Syria, and rebranded itself as the Islamic State (Hashim, 2019). As they continued to expand their territorial grasp throughout the region and simultaneously carried out attacks throughout the West, President Obama in 2014 announced the commencement of U.S. airstrikes on ISIS-held

positions (Oosterveld, Bloem, 2017). America, and a slew of other coalition nations, were keen to assist in the fight against ISIS, but Obama explicitly stated U.S. intentions at the onset, saying, "We will provide them (opposition fighters) close air support once they are prepared to start going on the offense against ISIL. But what we will not be doing is having our troops do the fighting," (The Takeaway, 2014). Fighting on the ground, however, was already taking place.

The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), initially composed entirely of the Kurdish People's Protection Units (in Kurdish: Yekîneyên Parastina Gel, YPG), "became the backbone" of the fighting force aimed at retaking land claimed by ISIS, and coalition forces soon threw their entire weight behind the SDF (Votel, Dent, 2019). With help from U.S. air support, advisers, weapons, and logistical training, the SDF made swift territorial gains throughout Syria, culminating in the recapture of Raqqa, the declared capital of the Islamic caliphate (Votel, Dent, 2019). Back in Iraq, Kurdish *peshmerga* fighters were equally instrumental in the territorial defeat of ISIS, having played a key role in the recapture of Mosul, Iraq's second-largest city bordering the western edges of Iraqi Kurdistan (Davies, 2019). In late 2018, President Donald Trump (perhaps prematurely) declared the defeat of ISIS, leaving Kurdish fighters to ensure the complete territorial defeat of ISIS (Wedeman, Said-Moorhouse, 2019). In March 2019, the SDF liberated the Syrian city of Baghouz, the last ISIS stronghold, and declared an end to the caliphate established five years prior (Wedeman, Said-Moorhouse, 2019).

To the Kurds, this was always a war about "defending their own lands more than Western interests," (Taspinar, 2019), as ISIS had swept through Kurdish-dominated lands in 2014. Kurdish fighters also took the brunt of the injury, as the SDF announced following the conclusion of hostilities that they had lost over 10,000 troops in the fight against ISIS (Wedeman, Said-Moorhouse, 2019). Kurdish fighters had suffered significantly, but also evolved

as a group. Kurds of different nationalities were fighting hand-in-hand, unified against a mutual enemy, and some scholars have remarked that for the first time in perhaps a century, “the greater majority of Kurds no longer felt part of Turkey, Iran, Iraq or Syria. Although still divided geographically among these four countries, they increasingly see themselves as part of a larger Kurdish nation and are in communication with each other thanks to rapidly growing Kurdish media,” (Taspinar, 2019). The unified Kurdish fight against ISIS and successes in both Iraq and Syria helped to create a trans-nationalist form of ethnic identity between Kurds of different nationalities, as well as a “vibrant Kurdish diaspora in Europe that is politically active, socially integrated and intellectually invested in the pursuit of a pan-Kurdish identity,” (Taspinar, 2019).

U.S. Troop Withdrawal in Syria, 2019

American military involvement with the Kurds ended (as of this writing) with the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Syria in late 2019. Following the territorial defeat of ISIS, President Donald Trump ordered the imminent withdrawal of all American troops from northeastern Syria in October 2019, leaving the Syrian Kurds to fend for themselves in the latest saga of U.S.-Kurdish relations (Barnes, Schmitt, 2019). Kurdish fighters had proven themselves as valuable strategic partners to the U.S. war effort against ISIS, but were quickly reminded that partnering with the U.S. hardly amounted to much in the long run. For years, Turkey had been very critical of the U.S.-Kurdish partnership in Syria, with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan even saying, “A country we call an ally (the United States) is insisting on forming a terror army on our border. Our mission is to strangle it before it is even born,” (Magelson, 2020). Turkey repeatedly insisted that the SDF was merely an offshoot of the PKK, creators of the Kurdish separatist movement within Turkey, and aimed to repel or destroy all Kurdish military forces near the southern Turkish border (Magelson, 2020). The U.S., for their part, managed to

keep Turkey at bay during the five-year long fight against ISIS within Syria, but with their mission accomplished in Syria, the U.S. finally granted Turkey's wish and withdrew all Kurdish support from Syria in the form of a hasty troop withdrawal from the narrow corridor separating the Turkish military from the Kurdish fighters, (Barnes, Schmitt, 2019).

Turkey commenced immediately with their incursion into Kurdish-held territory in northeastern Syria, forcing more than 60,000 civilians out of their home in the first week of the advance alone (Gall, Kingsley, 2019). As the Turkish military advanced into northern Syria, SDF fighters were forced to divert their attention away from remaining ISIS fighters and towards the encroaching Turkish army (Gall, Kingsley, 2019). According to a report from the Inspector General to U.S. Operation Inherent Resolve, the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Syria did indeed affect the fight against ISIS, saying that the terrorist group was "likely to exploit the reduction in counterterrorism pressure to reconstitute its operations in Syria and expand its ability to conduct transnational attacks," (Inspector General Report to the United States Congress, 2019, p. 3). In mere weeks after the U.S. troop withdrawal, Syrian Kurds had undergone a massive transformation. The SDF allied themselves with the Syrian and Russian governments to push back against the Turkish offensive, hundreds of thousands of Syrian Kurds were displaced from their homes, and many Kurds lambasted the latest "betrayal" of the United States (Magelson, 2020). American officials may have ceased their involvement with Kurdish fighters in October 2019, but U.S. policy decisions were still shaping daily life in Kurdish-majority regions throughout the Middle East.

The U.S. and the PKK

Numerous U.S. partnerships with the Kurds across multiple states have so far been documented in this chapter. Much has been written about U.S. and Kurdish cooperation when

seeking a mutual goal, but a chapter titled ‘U.S. Involvement with the Kurds’ would be incomplete without mention of U.S. support for Turkish military efforts against the PKK.

From a military standpoint, the Iranian, Iraqi, and Syrian Kurds could all have been considered, at one point in time, strategic partners to a U.S. war effort or policy objective in the Middle East. In Turkey, however, lies a different situation. From Turkey’s founding in the 1920s until 1991, Ankara repressed its minority Kurdish population, banning the language, culture, and even the words ‘Kurd’ and ‘Kurdistan’ (Baser, 2015, p. 63). In response, the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) was founded in 1974 as a Kurdish nationalist movement with aspirations to create an independent Kurdish state - by violent means, if necessary (Bruno, 2007). The PKK has waged war against the Turkish government for the better part of four decades (with multiple ceasefires throughout), relying on the use of guerrilla warfare, suicide bombings, and attacks on civilians to fight against Turkey (Bruno, 2007). As such, the PKK has been labeled a terrorist organization by Turkey and a handful of its allies, including the United States, with Washington maintaining that the PKK “frequently kill(s) noncombatants, and target(s) village officials, village guards, teachers, and other perceived representatives of the state,” (Gunter, 2011, p. 102). The U.S. has always been keen to assist (or at least abet) Turkish military efforts against PKK targets beyond Turkish borders, specifically in Syria and Iraq. Even when the U.S. has engaged certain Kurdish groups in strategic partnerships, they have typically allowed Turkey to move ahead with cross-border operations against PKK targets. It is important to note that not all Turkish Kurds align themselves with the PKK, but the Kurdish nationalist movement in Turkey does in fact owe its roots to the PKK’s formation in the 1970s.

In 1999, U.S. intelligence agencies shared actionable intelligence with Turkey that led to the capture of PKK founder Abdullah Öcalan, a man renowned in Kurdish culture for his efforts

towards Kurdish nationalism but regarded a terrorist by the United States (Gunter, 2011). Less than ten years later, in 2008, the U.S. provided intelligence on PKK locations within northern Iraq to Turkey, which proceeded with a military incursion in Iraq to destroy PKK targets despite America's "de-facto alliance" with the KRG at the time (Gunter, 2011). During a recent stage of the Syrian Civil War in 2019, Turkey considered the Kurdish autonomous zone in Syria as an "existential threat," and repeatedly lobbied the United States to cease all involvement with Kurdish armed forces, calling the U.S.-Kurdish alliance in Syria a "big American blunder," (Beyoglow, 2020, p. 63). When the U.S. reached mission accomplished status in Syria in regards to ISIS, they once again opted to appease Turkey and welcomed Turkish military forces into Syria to commence with another military operation against Kurdish forces (Beyoglow, 2020). In regards to the PKK question, the U.S. has shown that it will always side with Turkey against the popular political movement within Middle Eastern Kurdish culture. Turkey is a key ally to the United States in a volatile region with ever-changing alliances and partnerships, and Washington has thus far not been eager to jeopardize its relationship with Ankara over the issue of Kurdish nationalism and the PKK, even if the two countries have occasionally disagreed over precise definitions of the PKK and its associated Kurdish groups elsewhere in the Middle East.

The Kurdish Lobby in the United States

As has been documented, the United States has been instrumental in shaping Kurdish policies, politics, and territorial holds throughout the Middle East for the past few decades. Throughout the same time period, however, Kurdish leaders in the Middle East have invested heavily in a large political presence in Washington and an active diaspora throughout the United States in hopes of influencing America's Middle Eastern foreign policy. The early formations of a Kurdish lobbying presence in the United States can be traced back to Iraqi Kurds' pleas for assistance in the wake of Saddam Hussein's brutal crackdown of Kurdish opposition in 1991. The establishment of the KRG inside Iraq by way of Operation Provide Comfort is the first modern example of a successful (albeit informal) lobbying campaign that resulted in a prolonged pro-Kurdish position in American foreign policy. The successes of the Iraqi Kurds in the early 1990s helped spur a wave of Kurdish lobbying movements and organizations, emboldening Kurds of all nations to invest in American politics. At the same time, some of the Middle East's most intellectually-inclined Kurdish people were emigrating to the United States as a result of anti-Kurdish movements in Iraq, Iran, and Turkey during the 1980s and 1990s, creating a diaspora within the U.S. who were eager to kickstart a grassroots campaign in support of the Kurdish cause. As of 2018, constant conflict in their home states had forced about 25,000 Kurdish-Americans to the United States (Eccarius-Kelly, 2018).

The Kurdish lobby can be defined as an ethnic lobby, one with an active worldwide diaspora that can be mobilized to "express concern for the treatment of their ethnic brethren in the homeland and... engage in lobbying activities that specifically address kinship related

concerns abroad,” (Eccarius-Kelly, 2018, p. 20). The Kurds’ ethnic lobbying group within the United States was able to first stake out an audience in Washington simply due to the presence of a mutual enemy in the Middle East. Multiple opportunities (in this sense, adversarial government leaders or non-state groups) have existed previously that have allowed Kurdish policies to gain influence in Washington, but that have diminished when Kurdish interests no longer overlap with the United States’. Despite a revolving door of U.S. support and subsequent reversals for Kurdish interests in the Middle East, the Kurds have generally found a sympathetic audience in America, harkening back to their mastery of public sentiment.

The Kurds are experts in shaping international public opinion. Kurdish expenditure efforts in Washington are miniscule compared to that of Turkey, yet Kurds have made friends of Republican and Democratic policymakers alike, thanks in part to the perception they paint of Kurdish-held regions in the Middle East (Eccarius-Kelly, 2018). In recent years, and in the face of potentially-existential threats from the governments of Iraq or Turkey, the Kurds have been eager to conjure up images they know will resonate back in the United States. If Kurdish groups are receiving silence from the global community in the midst of a government-led offensive, they are quick to cite the potential ‘consequences’ of a Kurdish military defeat: Iranian expansionism into Kurdish-held areas in Iraq in the case of an Iraqi offensive, or an ISIS resurgence in Syria without Kurdish fighters in place to guard their prisons in the case of a Turkish offensive (Eccarius-Kelly, 2018). While it is true that Iranian influence in Kurdish-held regions of Iraq and Syria is minimal, and that Kurdish fighters are instrumental in securing ISIS prisons throughout Syria, their claims are often exaggerated or embroidered in an attempt to secure broad international support in their favor. And if the international community is calling the Kurds’ bluff, as has been the case on multiple occasions, Kurdish leaders are eager to reconjure the

memory of state-sponsored genocide by way of Saddam Hussein's Anfal Campaign and the failure of the international community to come to the Kurds' support. When Iraq retook the oil-rich city of Kirkuk from Kurdish control in 2017 (a city claimed by the KRG but disputed by Baghdad), KRG President Barzani said the international community needed to "prevent this warmongering, murder, [the] violations and the fleeing of people, committed by the Iraqi government through its militia forces and in cooperation with foreign assistance and guidance against Kurdistan," (Eccarius-Kelly, 2018, p. 17). Human rights violations, state-sponsored persecution, and oppression of minority rights are the three greatest cards the Kurds hold in swaying international opinion, and three cards that the Kurdish diaspora utilize frequently. Kurdish diaspora communities are perhaps most instrumental in rallying international support for the safety and security of their fellow Kurds in the "homeland" (Eccarius-Kelly, 2018). Since the beginning of their emerging international presence around the late 20th century, various Kurdish leaders have engaged in formal lobbying efforts, especially in the United States, but it can be argued that their informal lobbying efforts, by way of grassroots campaigns orchestrated by Kurdish diaspora communities or even Kurds back home, have achieved more success than their official lobbying groups.

Before an organized lobbying movement was established, however, the Kurds were forced to utilize the court of public opinion to sway international power brokers. In 1991, without an established political presence overseas, the Iraqi Kurds were looking for help wherever they could get it, during an offensive into northern Iraq by government forces. They pleaded for assistance from the United States, which had recalled its troops following the repulsion of all Iraqi forces from Kuwait, but right before Saddam Hussein turned his eyes to the north. With hundreds of Kurds dying every day as a result of the offensive, the Iraqi Kurds

launched their first international, full-scale lobbying effort: a push to force a coalition of foreign powers to intervene in support of the Kurds in Iraq (Lawrence, 2009, p. 53-58). In the wake of Saddam's defeat in Kuwait, the international coalition of nations withdrew their troops from the region and were thus reluctant to re-enter the conflict just a few months later with the Kurds needing life-saving assistance. The Iraqi Kurds were not having much success in gaining international support, and thus turned to mass media to spread their plight across the world. They invited Western journalists to the Turkey-Iraq border, where most Kurds were attempting to flee into Turkey, and scraped together as many English- and French-speaking Kurds they could to help reporters enter the region and broadcast the "atrocities" committed by the Iraqi forces against the fleeing Kurds.

The early media reports out of Iraqi Kurdistan helped attract the attention of Senate Committee on Foreign Relations staff member Peter Galbraith, a Kurdish sympathizer and foreign policy specialist, and U.S. Ambassador to Turkey Morton Abramowitz. The two key foreign policy advocates in the Bush Sr. administration convinced Secretary of State James Baker to stop at the Iraqi-Turkish border on his way home from a scheduled trip in Turkey, a request he reluctantly accepted. Baker spent just twelve minutes on the ground in northern Iraq near the Turkish border, but Abramowitz would later call it "the most effective twelve minutes spent in the history of refugee work," (Lawrence, 2009, p. 54). At long last, the Kurdish cries were heard by a top member of the U.S. administration, and the sentiment in Washington changed rapidly. Whereas the previous U.S. policy was to leave internal Iraqi affairs to the Iraqi people, the Kurds had effectively delivered their case to the world and virtually forced the U.S. to intervene in the Kurds' favor. Baker's visit to the border wasn't the sole impetus for the

establishment of Operation Provide Comfort, but it certainly kickstarted policy discussions in Washington regarding the fate and future of Iraq's Kurdish minority.

Almost simultaneously, some of Iraqi Kurdistan's brightest minds were laying the groundwork for the Kurdish lobby in Washington. Hoshyar Zebari, the KDP liaison to the U.S. and United Kingdom for Kurdish foreign relations, and his counterpart in the PUK, Barham Salih, were the leading Kurdish voices in the U.S. at the time, and were active in 1991 advocating for a U.S. intervention into northern Iraq. Salih and Zebari, as the official Kurdish delegation in Washington, were granted an audience in the State Department for the first time throughout all their previous efforts to entice U.S. leaders, in direct contrast to the covert U.S.-Kurdish relationship in the early 1970s. The State Department didn't immediately grant the Kurds any favors, but the point in the Kurdish homeland stuck that Washington was finally listening. Although the U.S. delayed its initial response to the Iraqi offensive, they finally caved under the mounting pressure from the Kurdish delegation in Washington and the public outcry generated by Kurdish-orchestrated media reports and broadcasts from Iraq. The U.S. ultimately instituted Operation Provide Comfort in March 1991 as a humanitarian mission to protect the Kurdish refugees from Iraq. The proposed refugee operation, while successful in its efforts, later turned out to be a mission in state-building as the Kurds would capitalize on the newly-minted no-fly zone in northern Iraq and ultimately found the KRG. Thanks first and foremost to the Kurdish lobby, "Washington unwittingly had become the midwife to a de facto Kurdish state, something it certainly never desired" (Lawrence, 2009, p. 62).

The U.S. had plans to remain in northern Iraq for 30 days before turning over the refugee mission to the United Nations, but Kurdish leaders on the ground had other ideas. Working in coordination with Salih and Zebari in Washington were their respective leaders: the PUK's

Talabani, and the KDP's (Massoud) Barzani. Barzani and Talabani personally courted U.S. Major General Jay Garner, the in-country operation commander, in northern Iraq in the early days of Operation Provide Comfort, for a meeting originally intended to outline the plans for an imminent U.S. withdrawal from Iraq. Instead, the personal efforts of Barzani and Talabani persuaded Garner to delay the U.S. withdrawal and assist the Kurds in securing disputed cities in northern Iraq. U.S. forces would eventually pull out, but Operation Provide Comfort would last for more than three years, and America became, somewhat inadvertently, the purported guarantors of Kurdish security in northern Iraq for the next twelve years. Kurdish leaders had successfully helped alter U.S. policy for the first time in their storied relationship. The two most instrumental Kurdish leaders in Iraq, Talabani and Barzani, were courting military leaders while the lobbying arm of the two main Iraqi Kurdish political parties was beginning in earnest thanks to the early work of Salih and Zebari. By 1991, the Kurdish lobby was effectively open for business back in Washington.

Throughout the 1990s, other Kurdish groups sought to capitalize on the successes of the KRG by investing in official lobbying efforts in the United States. Notable organizations that emerged in the decade following the KRG's creation include the American Kurdish Information Network (AKIN), the Kurdish National Congress of North America (KNCNA), the KRG liaison office in the U.S., and the Washington Kurdish Institute, all of which advocate for Kurdish interests in Washington (Eccarius-Kelly, 2018). AKIN has succeeded in cultivating relationships with American officials by relying on the human rights angle, often citing gross human rights abuses to scrounge support for underrepresented Kurdish groups in the Middle East. The KNCNA, meanwhile, has taken a more ambitious approach and has "strived for a unified Kurdistan" since its founding over 30 years ago (KNCNA, 2021). Founded by Dr. Najmaldin

Karim, the former personal physician to KDP founder Mustafa Barzani described as a “one-man lobby for the Kurds,” the KNCNA has advocated for an independent and united Kurdistan composed of Kurds from Iraq, Iran, Turkey, and Syria (Smith, 2020). As opposed to other Kurdish lobbying groups, the KNCNA has attempted to coordinate its efforts with Kurds of all nationalities and has worked to form a blanket Kurdish policy, in contrast with previous U.S. efforts that promoted dealing with the Kurds through their host nations. Karim, and by extension the KNCNA, helped inform Congress on the Anfal Campaign and Saddam Hussein’s use of chemical weapons on his own citizens. The KNCNA was one of the most vocal organizations in Washington advocating for the removal of Hussein throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, and its positions were even utilized by pro-war members of Congress and the White House in their bid to drum up support for the invasion of Iraq from 2002 to 2003 (Eccarius-Kelly, 2018).

Although informally in place since the efforts of Salih and Zebari in 1991, the KRG didn’t officially open its liaison office in Washington until the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003. In its early years, the KRG’s lobbying efforts in Washington were almost synonymous with Qubad Talabani, the son of Jalal, who emerged as a powerful representative of the PUK in the United States and went on to lead the KRG’s liaison office from 2006-2012. The KRG is undoubtedly the most powerful Kurdish lobbying force in Washington due to previously-established close military coordination and cooperation between the two entities. They are also more well-funded than independent Kurdish lobbying movements from Turkey or Syria. From 2010-2016, they spent nearly \$6 million on outside lobbyists and public relations firms in Washington, far outspending all other Kurdish lobby groups (Lipton, 2016). The KRG enjoys a special relationship with the U.S. Departments of Defense and State due to their previous engagements, most notably the 1991 defense of Iraqi Kurdistan. In the eyes of certain other Kurdish lobbying

groups, however, the KRG sometimes works as a detriment to the efforts of lobbyists from Syria and Turkey due to the close ties between the KRG and Turkey. The KRG's oil exports are dependent on Turkey's cooperation, which is home to the majority an oil pipeline from northern Iraq to the Mediterranean Sea, and thus the KRG often finds itself at odds with Turkey's minority Kurds. The Kurdish lobby's disconnected approach to petitioning the U.S. government for policy change has complicated the message for many Kurdish advocacy groups, as many lobbying firms and organizations work independently from each other.

Even as many Kurdish lobbying groups were founded throughout the 1990s, the Kurds secured few U.S. guarantees, and even fewer favorable U.S. policies. That would change, however, with the creation of yet another mutual enemy. In 2014, ISIS quickly emerged on the global stage and took hold of large swaths of territory, first in Iraq and then in Syria. Iraqi government forces were routed in the first stages of the war against ISIS forces, allowing the terrorist group to wrench large areas of northern Iraq away from government control (Ryan, Hosenbell, 2014). Kurdish fighters, meanwhile, were holding their ground and leading the fight against ISIS in the disputed region of northern Iraq claimed by both Baghdad and the KRG. This allowed them a unique opportunity, as Kurdish leaders in Iraq quickly capitalized on their military successes and dominated the early discussions in Washington regarding the fight against ISIS in Iraq. From an outside perspective, Kurdish *peshmerga* forces were fighting valiantly, while the Iraqi military had suffered humiliating defeats in the early stages of the war (Ryan, Hosenbell, 2014). ISIS was gaining ground in Iraq, but so too were the Kurds, who used the failure of Iraq to defend their own territory as evidence of government inability to protect the Kurdish region. Kurdish leaders amplified their calls for Kurdish independence in Washington, but the U.S. remained steadfast in their commitment for a unified (if partially federalized) Iraq.

While the U.S. wasn't budging on the Kurdistan issue, the early successes of the Kurdish *peshmerga* fighters had once again won them an audience in Washington. Qubad Talabani, by then the Deputy Prime Minister of the KRG, led the charge for funding the ISIS war effort in Washington, and capitalized on his previous connections as the KRG liaison chair. In 2016, Talabani's courting of conservative and liberal Congressional members alike helped secured the KRG \$415 million in U.S. government funds to support their efforts against ISIS (Lipton, 2016). In the two years prior, the U.S. only provided financial assistance directly to the Iraqi government, which in turn would disperse a small amount to the Kurdish fighters in the north. Due to a "well-oiled lobbying machine" spearheaded by Talabani, however, the U.S. in 2016 finally bypassed the government of Iraq and provided assistance directly to the Kurds (Lipton, 2016). Three years into the fight against ISIS, the Iraqi Kurds had proven themselves as a superior military force over the Iraqi government as well as a superior lobbying movement in Washington.

One state over, the Syrian Kurds were fighting an equally valiant fight against ISIS – and quickly gaining ground. Syria's Kurdish population was largely ignored on the international stage before they seized the province of Rojava in the midst of the Syrian Civil War, and their lobbying efforts were equally as insignificant. Syrian Kurds previously found representation in Washington only through pan-Kurdish lobbying groups such as the KNCNA, but they seized on their territorial gains in 2012 by opening up a political lobbying arm in the United States. After northeastern Syria declared their autonomy from the rest of the state in the early stages of the civil war, Rojava's majority Kurdish population began citing the region's stability and democratic model in pleas for support in Washington (Christou, 2019). The American Rojava Center for Democracy (ARCDEM), was one such lobbying group, composed mostly of Syrian

Kurds, that emerged in the past decade to advocate for the autonomous democratic movement in Rojava. Syria's Kurds earned themselves many supporters in the U.S. due to their efforts to fight ISIS, and attempted to capitalize on their newfound fame by courting U.S. legislators to support their autonomous project in Syria. Despite growing support for the Kurds in Washington, however, their lobbying efforts were insurmountable compared to Turkey's.

In the context of the Syrian Civil War, with all the many coalitions and warring factions, Turkey's military efforts in Syria have even further complicated the picture. Through the past nine years, Ankara has launched offensives against ISIS, government forces, and Kurdish forces, respectively. To the Kurds, however, Turkey has made its priority clear: the elimination of all Kurdish forces. In the coalition fight against ISIS, a majority of nations chose to train and finance the SDF and Kurdish fighters, while Turkey condemned the act and conducted operations independently from the SDF. Ankara even refused to assist the Kurds in the battle for Kobani against ISIS forces, effectively declaring themselves neutral in the fight between Kurdish forces and ISIS fighters. To the Kurds, this was a tacit endorsement of ISIS from Turkey (Ünver, 2016). Turkey's foremost priority has simply been to root out Kurdish influence on its border, even if it means disregarding the threat of ISIS or neglecting the peril of Assad's forces. And their message concerning the recent Syrian Kurdish movement is simple: the YPG, and by extension the SDF, is a terrorist organization which warrants immediate destruction, or at the very least repulsion from the Turkish border (Christou, 2019).

Turkey's lobbying effort has severely quashed the weight of the U.S. Mission of the SDC (the political arm of the SDF) in both funding and messaging. Turkish interest groups have been instrumental in spreading the message that the PKK, YPG, and SDF are indistinguishable by

name only (a claim of disputed truth⁵), and that NATO and the U.S. should assist Turkey in its cross-border operations against the PKK (Stella Yu, 2019). Turkey's message has resonated in the U.S., if by no other reason than their sheer magnitude of outreach to U.S. policymakers. In 2018, Turkey spent \$6.6 million on U.S. lobbying efforts, compared to the SDC's mere \$120,000 investment in Washington (Christou, 2019). Turkey's efforts to discredit the SDF finally paid off in 2019, when the U.S. relinquished its support for Syrian Kurdish fighters in the wake of ISIS' defeat, and acquiesced to Turkey's request to invade northern Syria. Despite Trump's unilateral decision to withdraw troops from Syria in 2019, the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AA) movement has gained bipartisan Congressional support in Washington. Kurdish lobbying movements in the U.S. have a large audience due to their importance in the fight against ISIS, and they have gained supporters despite their relative small size and budget. Immediately following Trump's decision, even fellow Republicans such as Senator Lindsey Graham criticized the move, calling it "a stain on America's honor for abandoning the Kurds," (Christou, 2019).

Despite an increasingly large lobbying presence in Washington over the past three decades, the Kurds' have found minimal success in influencing U.S. policy. The United States did not support the KRG's independence vote in 2017, nor the push for autonomy in neighboring Rojava, arguably two of the most important policy objectives for the Middle Eastern Kurds over the past 15 years. Militant Kurdish groups have been granted funding from the U.S. whenever a

⁵ The YPG was formed in 2012 and welcomed in Kurds from Turkey, Iran and Iraq to join the Syrian Kurds. The PYD's importance as a political and administrative unit was particularly useful to the PKK in Turkey, who touted the group's experiment in "democratic (Kurdish) self-administration." Still, however, the YPG has attempted to distance itself from the PKK by inviting Arabs and other tribal groups into its ranks to join the fight against ISIS and rebranding itself as the SDF, a democratic fighting force in Syria. The YPG-PKK connection is heavily debated in scholarly circles, but many Turkish exiles and PKK members have indeed left Turkey to join the SDF ranks in Syria since 2012 (Stein, Foley, 2016).

mutual enemy presents itself, but greater Kurdish policy objectives have largely been dismissed in Washington. It can then be argued that Kurdish lobbying efforts in Washington have thus far been a losing effort. Kurdish leaders have prioritized cultivating valuable relationships with policymakers in Washington, yet have not invested in the necessary diplomatic framework to truly influence U.S. foreign policy. One scholar even argued that present Kurdish lobbying efforts consist solely on “rely(ing) on the noteworthy levels of good-will within Congress and the military establishment,” (Eccarius-Kelly, 2018, p. 21). Since the beginning of the modern Kurdish lobby, the Kurds have clearly found allies in powerful circles in Washington that will likely come to the defense of Kurdish groups needing immediate assistance in the event of a crisis, but assistance and defense has shown to be the extent of modern-day relations between the Kurds and Washington. The U.S. has deferred to Turkey in matters concerning both Turkish and Syrian Kurds, and yielded to Iraq (since the fall of Hussein) in matters concerning Iraqi Kurds, and will likely continue to do so.

The Kurdish lobby strives to upset the balance of state stability in the Middle East, the foremost U.S. policy goal in the region. Getting the United States on board is a monumental task and an uphill battle for Kurdish politicians, and one that will require significantly more effort on the part of Kurdish peoples spread out across the globe, and especially within the United States. In the past, the Kurds have relied on conflicts to maximize their bargaining position in Washington due to the inverse relationship between Middle Eastern state stability and Kurdish influence. However, the territorial defeat of ISIS, the growing stability of the new Iraq government, and the declining violence in the Syrian Civil War all reduce Kurdish momentum in Washington and force Kurdish lobbying groups to rely on other methods to spread their message in the United States. One such method is the impact of the Kurdish diaspora in America – a

diaspora that has not yet been fully utilized by Kurdish leaders in the homeland. As one such example, the lobbying effort on behalf of Rojava failed, at least in part, because it “acted like a corporate lobby and failed to invest in building the necessary diaspora infrastructure in the U.S.,” (Eccarius-Kelly, 2018). The number of Kurdish peoples in the United States nears 30,000, and yet they remain disenfranchised with the Kurdish question in the Middle East due to constant bickering and infighting between different Kurdish groups that is evident even in their respective lobbying efforts. For now, the impetus is on Kurdish leaders in the homeland to invest more in diaspora outreach in the United States so that the Kurdish lobby may ultimately succeed in influencing U.S. foreign policy. The Kurds have proved that meaningful policy change can come through public sentiment and outcry, and yet they have thus far neglected perhaps their greatest resource, the American Kurdish diaspora.

The Impact of Turkey on U.S. Relationship with the Kurds

No other state has had a more profound impact on the United States' relationship with the Kurds than Turkey. In the eyes of Turkey, its "mountain Turks" in the south of the country have at times played the part of isolated tribesman, separatist rebels, or just plain terrorists in the context of the PKK's war against Turkey. More than the other three impacted states besides perhaps Iraq under Hussein, Turkey has chartered a course in solution of the Kurdish question through violence and persecution. Yet Ankara remains no closer to solving its own Kurdish question than they were 100 years ago, when Turkey embarked on a program to bring all of its citizens under one national banner, identity, culture, and language. The state's modern formation following the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire aimed to nationalize all Turks, and even those that denied the label but fell within its borders, into one national identity. Turkey was founded on ideals "apprehensive of expressions of ethnic particularism, and it aspired to full homogenization (Turkification) of its citizens," (Loizides, 2010, p. 516). Instead of nationalizing all Kurds, however, the campaign had quite the opposite effect, and in fact, inspired the first Kurdish nationalist movement within Turkey, one that actively resisted the Turkification campaign. Thus, the Kurdish struggle in Turkey officially began in earnest as one that pit Turkey's minority Kurdish population against a repressive central government.

Turkey's foremost adversary in the Middle East, for the better part of three decades, has been various Kurdish nationalist groups, both inside of Turkey and in neighboring states, such as Iraq and Syria. Turkey fears the loss of centralized power within its borders, and the potential institutional consequences commonly associated with Kurdish nationalist movements, often

evoked as territorial losses by hardline Turkish political leaders (Totten, 2015). Turkey has been in an almost constant state of war against the PKK since the late 1970s, while their relationship with even Turkey's non-violent Kurdish citizens could hardly be described as amicable. The United States, then, has been presented with an interesting dilemma. The U.S. defines its relationship with Turkey as tenable, and one that is absolutely necessary towards combatting security threats in the Middle East. According to the State Department, "the United States is committed to improving the relationship between our two countries," as Turkey is a "key NATO ally and critical region partner," (U.S. State Department, Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs, 2021). The U.S. shares Turkey's long-term policy plan for the Middle East, one in which regional security, peaceful conflict resolution, and minimized Iranian influence are all key pillars (Frantzman, 2020). At the same time, Washington has also aligned itself with various different Kurdish groups, much to Turkey's disdain. America's endeavors with the Kurds, even those groups far from Turkish control such as the KRG in Iraq or the YPG in Syria, have been well-documented.

Washington dismisses its relationship with the Kurds as temporary strategic partnerships in its message to Ankara, oftentimes citing imminent threats such as Saddam Hussein or ISIS as the primary reason for their support for the Kurds. Still, however, throughout all the conflicts examined in this power, Turkey has not faced a more pressing threat to their domestic security issues than the PKK and its associated groups outside of Turkey – groups sometimes strategically aligned with the United States. For all of the Kurds' benefits to securing American policy interests in the Middle East, the U.S. has shown no willingness to dismiss its strategic ally in Turkey in favor of the Kurds (besides aforementioned short-term military tactics, such as Turkey's refusal to grant the U.S. a staging base for a potential northern front in the prelude to

the 2003 Iraqi invasion and America's subsequent partnership with the KRG). Washington has at times attempted to play both sides in the Turkish-Kurdish conflict by temporarily aiding Kurdish groups while simultaneously sharing long-term policy goals with Ankara, but the strategic ramifications are evident. In the context of Turkey's relationship (or lack thereof) with the Kurds, the Kurds will always be of secondary concern to the U.S. As such, the U.S. has been reluctant to approach the Kurdish question when Turkey feels that its sovereignty is threatened anywhere near its borders. The U.S. has likewise been hesitant to approach Turkey's Kurdish issue in its relations with Ankara, choosing instead to "remain cautious not to press too hard on an issue of great sensitivity to Turkey, especially given Turkey's importance to US strategy in addressing the challenges posed by the ongoing unrest in the Arab world," (Küçükkeles, Mankoff, 2014, p.1).

Since the onset of the Syrian Civil War and through the past ten years, however, American and Turkish interests have diverged significantly. In the fight against ISIS, the Islamic State was a mutual enemy to both countries as partners within the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS, but the terrorist group remained a secondary concern to Ankara in the context of the wider international effort in northern Syria. Turkey sees the Kurdish autonomous zone in Rojava as an encroachment on its own southern border, and likewise as an existential threat to Turkish territorial sovereignty, and has long attempted to curtail Kurdish-dominated regions along its border (Beyoglow, 2020). Turkey vehemently opposed U.S. support for the YPG and SDF, and even implicitly hinted at American-sponsored terrorism by way of the U.S. arming PKK fighters in northern Syria. "Turkey argues including the PKK in the Kurdish Syrian Defense Forces was a big American blunder because the PKK took advantage of US and NATO terror vulnerabilities in Syria by temporarily switching tactics to fighting ISIS in return for cash, weapons, and

training— fighting which Turkey fears will eventually be redirected against its towns and cities. Turkey believes the PKK has its own strategic agenda in Syria that runs contrary to US-Turkish efforts in the fight against regional and international terrorism within their longstanding counterterrorism cooperation and coordination strategies.” (Beyoglow, 2020, p.63).

For the past decade, Turkey has considered the PKK its greatest security threat along its southern border, with the Assad regime and ISIS as secondary threats. Before 2011, however, Turkey had little to fear in regards to Kurdish armed groups beyond its own borders. Syrian Kurds were effectively repressed by their own respective government under Assad’s Ba’athist regime, and they had few ties to the more radical Kurdish political parties and armed groups to the north in Turkey. When the Syrian Civil War broke out and Assad quickly found himself surrounded by adversarial groups both domestic and foreign, the Syrian president gambled with a proposition that aimed to transform one potential domestic enemy – the Syrian Kurds – into an even greater enemy for Assad’s greatest threat, Turkey. Just months into the fighting within Syria, Ankara had already committed itself to the overthrow of Assad and sided with the Free Syrian Army (FSA) by providing the armed rebels material and logistical support (Altug, 2013). In response, and as mentioned in previous chapters, Assad gifted his Kurdish minority population, some 300,000 Kurds, citizenship under official decree, and virtually gave them free reign and autonomy in northeastern Syria (Altug, 2013). Assad’s wartime gamble, one that immediately shrank his territorial hold over his country, allowed the Syrian president to focus on the more pressing threat of armed rebel groups devoted to the downfall of his regime, while simultaneously presenting Turkey with a worthy obstacle in between his forces and the Turkish army.

In the early days of the Syrian Civil War, Assad's prospects for survival were weak, and his options limited, so his decision to 'release' his Kurdish population against Turkey could certainly be described as an understandable one. Ten years later, however, and Assad's gamble could have proved one of the most strategic decisions the Syrian president made throughout the course of the war. As of this writing, multiple authors and scholars have declared Assad and his regime victorious against the Syrian rebels (World Politics Review Editorial Board, 2021; Dyer, 2021; Hubbard, Saad, 2021), although sporadic fighting persists in the northwestern province of Idlib. Assad's apparent (or imminent) victory, could certainly be attributed to the intervention of Russia and Iran in his favor, the fractured nature of opposition leadership, the advent of ISIS that presented a greater threat and withdrew coalition forces from Assad's doorsteps, or a combination of all three factors, but the role of the Kurds in dividing two of Assad's greatest potential adversaries, the U.S. and Turkey, deserves further understanding. Just as the U.S. has used the Kurds as pieces in its grand Middle Eastern strategy, Assad used his Kurdish population as pawns in the greater picture. Assad was no friend to the Kurds, but he recognized their merits as a useful foil against Turkey, and in the process of alleviating his potential Kurdish threat, he somewhat inadvertently divided two major states once united in their commitment to his downfall.

In the first chapter of the Syrian war, opposition to the Assad regime was mounting throughout the Western world, including in the U.S., which saw the dictator as a threat to regional security, especially considering Syria's close ties with Iran and its proximity to American allies such as Israel, Turkey, and Jordan. Seeking to avoid the same perennial dilemma that kept American troops entrenched in Iraq for two decades, Washington largely sought to leave the fighting within Syria to the Syrians and their respective international allies, but the U.S.

was quietly working behind the scenes in support of Syrian opposition groups. While never officially documented by the U.S. government, American officials were covertly supporting various “vetted” Syrian rebel groups working towards Assad’s removal from power for years (Itani, 2017).⁶ Precise accounts of U.S. policy goals within Syria for the first few years vary, as did the messaging from American policymakers, but President Barack Obama was adamant in his rebuke to President Assad, saying the Syrian dictator must be removed from power (McCain Nelson, 2015). At this point in the war, the U.S. and Turkey were both staunchly committed to Assad’s downfall, though Ankara was taking a significantly more active role in Syria’s combat operations. Turkey has long described the Syrian Civil War as a domestic issue to Turkish politics and policymaking, and an issue of particular importance to the security situation within Turkish borders (Altug, 2013). Perhaps more than any other state aside from Russia in the pro-Assad camp, Turkey has become entrenched in the war and its inevitable conclusion, and has strived to become “an active agent in construction of a post-Assad political order (in Syria) in line with its own domestic and regional political and economic priorities,” (Altug, 2013, p.127).

Due to Ankara’s heavy investment in Syria’s political future, Turkey has at times supported various opposition groups fighting Assad’s forces, including those at odds with U.S. interests. At the onset of the war, Turkey threw its political and military weight behind the FSA, which emerged as one of the first capable fighting forces against the Syrian government (Altug, 2013). The FSA has undergone radical transformations since its creation nearly ten years ago,

⁶ The Timber Sycamore program was a CIA-run covert operation founded in 2013 to train and arm Syrian opposition groups fighting both the Assad regime and extremist organizations such as ISIS. It was reportedly discontinued during the Trump presidency. Within the U.S., and during its reported existence, the program faced opposition from policymakers who alleged that the U.S. was inadvertently funding terrorist groups such as the al-Qaeda aligned al-Nusra Front in northern Syria, or even ISIS itself (Itani, 2017). Turkey, meanwhile, used the program’s existence to question how the PKK became a “vetted” opposition group, given American assistance for the YPG and PYD, and their ties to the PKK (Beyoghlou, 2020).

and has since rebranded as the Turkish-backed Free Syrian Army (TFSA), or the Syrian National Army. The TFSA exists almost as an umbrella organization, with various different armed groups operating under its banner, including those who didn't receive American vetting in the early stages of its oppositional training (Lister, 2016). In fact, while the U.S. did covertly support various rebel groups, it never openly backed the FSA in its fight against Assad, nor commit significant resources to its fighting force, while Turkey aligned its entire political goals for Syria with the FSA (and subsequent TFSA). Due to the U.S.' reluctance to endorse the rebel group, however, the FSA became fractured and gradually lost its ability to effectively combat Assad's forces (Lister, 2016).

The FSA's steady decline from the leading opposition group into a splintered fighting force placed Ankara in a precarious position. Turkey was still looking for partners on the ground, and while they still continue to assist and coordinate efforts with the TFSA, they were forced to seek out other potential partners in the fight. In the midst of infighting within the FSA, multiple different Islamist factions filled the void and stepped up combat operations with Assad's government forces (Al Kanj, 2019). The Islamist factions in the Syrian war were of particular concern to both the U.S. and Turkey in the early stages, due to their supposed ties with either al Qaeda or ISIS, especially the al-Nusra Front (sometimes referred to as al Qaeda in Syria), as well as their opposition to other more moderate rebel factions such as the FSA (Al Kanj, 2019). In the latter stages of the war, as the Islamic factions supplanted the TFSA as the lone rebel groups in constant conflict with government forces, Turkey once again reconsidered its position in the war, especially in the midst of rising Kurdish influence in the northeastern region of Rojava (Al Kanj, 2019). Hay'at Tahir al-Sham (HTS), an Islamic militant faction which rose out of the ashes of the al-Nusra Front, currently maintains control over the last remaining rebel stronghold of Idlib

in northwestern Syria as of this writing in early 2021 (see: Figure 2). Even with their alleged ties to al-Qaeda and terrorism in general, Turkey has (for the most part), allowed HTS to remain in power in northwestern Syria, even as they go on the offensive against Kurdish groups in the east (Al Kanj, 2019). Ankara has even allegedly coordinated military attacks with the militant group, against both regime forces to the south and SDF forces to the east. The relationship is described as a fragile one, but one that has seen mutual cooperation nonetheless (Al-Kanj, 2019). HTS is designated as a terrorist organization by both the U.S. and Turkey (Khalifa, Bonsey, 2021), but just as Ankara failed to assist the SDF in their fight against ISIS, Turkey is keen to let the two adversarial groups – Kurds and Islamic militants – fight it out once again. The U.S. and Turkey both still seek a peaceful political solution to the bloody Syrian war, and preferably one that doesn't include Bashar al-Assad in power, however unlikely the proposition. The two countries are just embarking on markedly different routes to the inevitable solution.

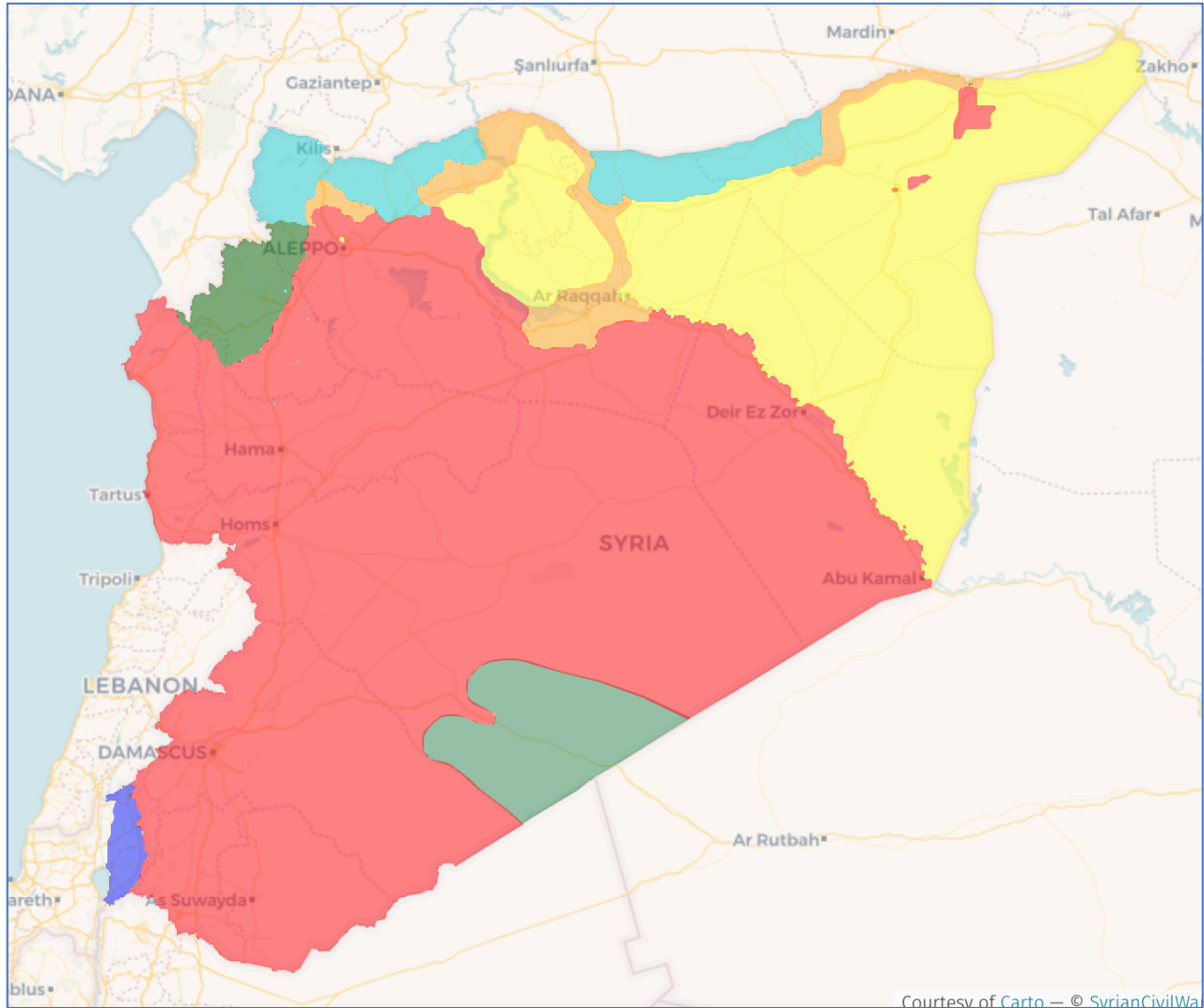


Figure 2: Map of Syrian Civil War, as of January 2021. Red: Syrian government control. Yellow: Kurdish-controlled region of Rojava. Orange: Disputed area between SDF & government forces. Dark green: HTS-controlled region of Idlib. Light blue: Turkish-controlled, TFGA occupied "buffer zone." (Syrian Civil War Map)

All of this to say that Turkey has taken a decidedly different position in the Syrian Civil War than the U.S. by alienating one temporary U.S. ally in the SDF, and allying itself with multiple groups deemed adversarial to U.S. interests in the conflict. Turkey has long viewed any Kurdish autonomous movement along its border as a worst-case scenario, and viewed all other bilateral security concerns, be it ISIS or an authoritarian regime to the south, as secondary matters in its regional security policy. The U.S. opted to go after their most pressing threat in the region, ISIS, and in turn, helped aid the Syrian Kurds create Turkey's worst nightmare: the Autonomous Administration of North East Syria in Rojava. Ankara has responded by aligning itself with notable U.S. adversaries in Syria, embarking on multiple offensives into Kurdish-held land in northeast Syria, and even angering the global coalition to fight ISIS by refusing to aid SDF fighters in ground combat. After the territorial defeat of ISIS, the U.S. finally acquiesced to Ankara's demands and allowed for a Turkish offensive into Kurdish-held Syrian territory to, in the words of President Erdogan: "prevent the creation of a terror corridor across our southern border," (Wright, 2019). The damage of a prolonged U.S. relationship and strategic partnership with Turkish enemies of the state, however, was done. The Syrian Civil War and fight against ISIS in Syria has severely strained the relationship between the two NATO allies.

It is important to note, however, that the U.S. does not view its relationship and alliance with Turkey solely through the vacuum of the Syrian Civil War. Despite noteworthy policy differences between the two countries regarding the future of the Syrian regime and the Kurdish experiment in democratic autonomy in the northeast, the U.S. and Turkey remain committed to ensuring numerous long-term policy goals in the Middle East, including upholding regional security and guaranteeing state stability. Much has changed in the form of the U.S.-Turkish relationship over the past decade, but two constants remain: the U.S. is committed to keeping

Turkey anchored to the West, and Turkey is committed to rooting out any notions of Kurdish separatism or allegiance to Kurdish militant groups inside or outside its borders. If sacrificing a former ally in the Kurds is what keeps Turkey satisfied and within the U.S.' sphere of influence, Washington will happily oblige, as they have previously shown. The U.S. and Turkey are two interdependent states from a geostrategic, political, and economic perspective, argues the former Turkish ambassador to the U.S. Namik Tan (Atlantic Council, 2020), and share the same long-term objectives on policy matters far more important than a domestic ethnic squabble. As such, the Turkish-Kurdish issue will always be a secondary (or tertiary) policy issue for the U.S. to consider. Washington's interests in the Middle East supersede the political aspirations of an isolated minority group, and even though the U.S. has repeatedly turned to the Kurds for assistance in times of conflict, they will not allow an occasional wartime ally to jeopardize their relationship with a country like Turkey.

Conclusion

The United States has no official policy towards the Kurds. Current U.S. policy on the Kurdish minority throughout the Middle East exists merely as an appendage of U.S. policy towards the respective states of Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Turkey, and this current way of reasoning with the Kurdish people is how the United States would prefer it. Kurdish calls for autonomy or independence certainly contradict the United States' long-term goals of region-wide stability and a reduction of military conflicts in the Middle East. It can then be reasoned that it would behoove America's long-term interests in the region to have the Kurdish minorities in Iraq, Iran, Turkey, and Syria to be effectively assimilated into their respective states. Kurdish minorities in all four states have each waged separate bloody campaigns against their respective governments in the name of autonomy or the recognition of an independent Kurdish state. If the Kurdish struggle is to continue well into the 21st century, the point will remain the same. Kurdish policy goals aim to upset regional stability by diminishing state power in their regions (or even destabilizing states altogether if it works towards Kurdish independence or autonomy). Kurdish aspirations invite potential conflict by threatening state sovereignty, while simultaneously working towards decreasing a state's hold over its population and institutions. The U.S. will likely continue to work towards the ultimate goal of securing state stability (even in the case of an authoritarian government or one with conflicting interests to that of Washington) and ensuring regional stability. The Kurds aim to upset this dynamic as a result of the inverse relationship between their policy goals and Middle Eastern state stability, and this is why the U.S. has positioned itself in opposition to the Kurdish struggle.

The efforts of various Kurdish leaders towards a unified sense of Kurdish nationalism, especially since the Kurds' military victory over ISIS, have severely complicated America's stance on a Kurdish policy in the Middle East. The United States would prefer to deal with the Kurds through the same lens that the Kurds viewed themselves for most of the 20th century, as four distinct, subjugated minority groups rebelling against their respective central governments, especially when the U.S. finds itself at odds with one of those respective governments. Instead, increasing Kurdish nationalism has created the need for an overarching U.S. policy towards all Middle Eastern Kurds, a minority group that has slowly but surely gained a sense of trans-nationalist identity. The Kurds are actively working to minimize their vulnerability and maximize their visibility in the Middle East even without ongoing international conflicts raging in the Middle East. A unified Kurdish nation would undoubtedly invite the ire of the central governments of multiple states in the region, and act as a detriment to interests the U.S. has pursued over the past five decades in the pursuit of regional security, thus Washington's apprehension towards a unified Kurdistan.

Throughout most acts of the U.S.-Kurdish modern relationship, however, the Kurds have operated as friendly to current U.S. interests, and in direct pursuit of mutual short-term policy goals with Washington. The Kurds have certainly benefited from a U.S. partnership, hence their clamoring in Washington for a more active political role, but so too has the U.S. benefited from this series of partnerships with the Kurds. The Kurds helped open another front against the spread of communism at the height of the Cold War, helped to bring down a U.S. adversary in Saddam Hussein, and practically led the fight on the ground against ISIS. When instructed by U.S. leaders, the Kurds have generally listened, and thus, it would seem as if Washington has found a valuable partner in a volatile region in the Middle East. In reality, the U.S. has elected to

demarcate its various dealings with the Kurds as separate, independent endeavors aimed solely at securing a singular short-term policy goal. As such, U.S. has curtailed its support for the Kurds on an interesting premise, one that is always contingent on securing U.S. interests, and *always* able to be rescinded at a moment's notice.

Their role in U.S. Middle Eastern policy can best be understood as a series of short-term, temporary strategic partnerships. The Kurds can be viewed as a temporary ally in times of conflict in the region, but other, more pressing long-term policy matters outrank the Kurdish struggle and its associated political and policy goals. Firstly, ensuring state stability, and by extension regional security, is the utmost goal in the Middle East for the United States. The U.S. will always be concerned with adversarial leaders and governments in the region, as will the Kurds, but as the creation of ISIS showed Washington, even a strong authoritarian leader is preferential to the alternative of a weak leader with little control over state institutions and populations. Secondly, Turkey is an entrenched U.S. ally that Washington has shown no particular propensity to relinquish. In conjunction, Turkey's efforts to rectify their Kurdish issue have shown no clear promise, and as such, the U.S. has been forced into a quandary between two supposed allies. Washington has angered Ankara before by siding with Kurdish groups hostile to Turkish national interests, but each time, the U.S. has shown that it will ultimately and inevitably make concessions to Turkey regarding its ties to the Kurds. In the conflict between Turkey and the Kurds, the U.S. has, and will likely continue to, side with Turkey.

The Kurds don't have a formal role in U.S. foreign policy, because assigning them as much would unravel the one goal Washington actively strives for above all else: regional security. The U.S. has tested the limits of its ties to various Kurdish groups in regards to U.S. alliances with Turkey and, delicately, Iraq. None of the four states with a significant Kurdish

minority population, either friend or foe to the U.S., would benefit from closer U.S.-Kurdish ties. As such, the U.S. has attempted to toe the line between respecting state sovereignty and becoming overt Kurdish sympathizers, in hopes of preserving a potential ally in the Kurds, even one whose sole political aspiration is regarded as a nonstarter in U.S. foreign policy. The Kurds recognize their dilemma as well, which is why they have invested heavily in American lobbying and are actively attempting to present a fond picture of Kurdish-held regions in Iraq and Syria. Moving forward, however, Kurdish influence over Washington is declining. As regional conflict wanes, Kurdish vulnerability will likely once again define the isolated minority group. For all their efforts towards furthering U.S. interests over the past five decades, the point remains moot. If a policy of indifference towards the Kurds is what helps the U.S. ensure regional security in the Middle East, a policy of indifference is what the Kurds will get from America.

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