The Impact of the Syrian War on Kurdish Politics Across the Middle East

Summary

- The demise of state authority in Syria is creating an unprecedented opportunity for Syrian Kurds, who have acted with speed to organize themselves politically and militarily. Across the region, Kurds seem to sense that their moment has arrived.

- In 2014–15, the battle for Kobane created a new Kurdish nationalist myth of heroism and liberation. Kobane will endure as a famous victory – regardless of the devastation caused – of huge symbolic value for Kurdish sentiment across the region.

- However, Syrian Kurds do not on their own have the political or military power to determine the outcome of the conflict or their own future trajectory. Both will hinge on their relations with other sections of the Syrian opposition, as well as on the actions of regional powers.

- The long-term success of the Kurds as a force in regional politics will also depend on their ability to create cooperative relations among various Kurdish political movements. While Kurdish politics in Syria is marked by deep fractures and rivalries, exemplified in the split between the Democratic Union Party (PYD) and the Kurdish National Council (KNC), recognition of the need to cooperate is increasing.

- None the less, the persistence of significant differences between Kurdish political parties makes it difficult to determine whether military cooperation between the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in Turkey, the PYD's People's Protection Units (YPG) in Syria and the *peshmerga* of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq will lead to closer political cooperation.

- Turkey, the KRG and the international community will play a major role in determining the future of the Rojava experiment in Syria. The KRG–Turkey relationship places significant constraints on the KRG's ability to cooperate with the PYD and the Rojava administrations. The KRG has been careful to protect its relationship with Turkey from being impacted by developments in Syria's Kurdish regions.

Introduction

The establishment of *de facto* autonomy in Syria's Kurdish majority areas has turned the Kurds into key actors in the conflict in Syria. Since then the connection between the conflict in Syria and Kurdish politics in Turkey and Iraq has increased significantly, as seen most strikingly during the siege of the Syrian town of Kobane. This paper seeks to evaluate the impact of the war on the Kurds in Syria and throughout the region, both with respect to existing political dynamics and long-term trends. Specific areas of focus include the war's implications for Kurdish politics in Syria, Turkey and Iraq; and for the complex web of relations between Kurdish political movements and regional powers. The paper also explores the war's impacts on domestic politics in the three states, and the implications for foreign affairs.

Since the creation of the modern states of Turkey, Syria and Iraq nearly 100 years ago, the Kurdish populations of each country have struggled – in the face of widespread ethnic discrimination – to secure equal rights of citizenship and expression. For most of this period such efforts were largely unsuccessful, but the establishment of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq, which governs the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), and a limited rapprochement between the Turkish state and its Kurdish population in the 2000s gave rise to a feeling of unprecedented opportunity for the more than 35 million Kurds in the region. This feeling intensified in late 2013 with the creation, as a result of the civil war in Syria, of the autonomous administration of Rojava (Western Kurdistan). Across the region, Kurds seem to sense that their moment has arrived.

Syrian Kurdish representatives and opposition groups have diverging views about the nature of Kurdish rights in a post-conflict Syria. This key issue prevents the inclusion of Kurdish demands into the programme of the Syrian National Coalition and other Syrian opposition groups. The Kurdish movement in Syria is itself deeply divided, and these splits are exacerbated by the influence of Kurdish and state actors outside Syria. The legitimacy of the dominant Syrian Kurdish political party, the Democratic Union Party (PYD), is questioned by other Kurdish parties in Syria (and elsewhere). It is also questioned by the Syrian opposition and by neighbouring states. Moreover, the PYD and the Rojava project need to be understood within the broader context of trans-state Kurdish nationalist politics, the key factors in which are the influence of Turkey's Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK)[1] and the tension between that movement and the KRG in Iraq. Of Kurdish parties within the KRI, the PKK enjoys closer ties with the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). However, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) controls the most important positions in the KRG, and the historical rivalry between it and the PKK is the main source of the tensions that have resurfaced in Rojava in the past three years.

Another consequence of the Syrian war for the Kurds has been the disruption caused by jihadist groups in both Syria and Iraq – particularly by Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), as its offensive against the Kurds demanded a military response. The KRG's *peshmerga* forces initially struggled in the face of ISIS's advance, but have since made gains. Kurdish forces in Syria have been fighting jihadists since 2012, most notably during the recent siege of Kobane.

ISIS's impact has extended beyond the military sphere, as its emergence has loosened previous alliances and enmities among the Kurds. Paradoxically, this may have boosted cooperation among Kurdish movements in Iraq, Syria and Turkey – strengthening the Kurds' position and impact in

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[1] The PKK, founded in 1978, began armed struggle against the Turkish state in 1984. The party's ideology has mixed Kurdish nationalism, socialism and Marxism-Leninism. It now frames its demands within a radical democratic political project and advocates 'democratic autonomy' as a framework to accommodate Kurdish demands within the existing state boundaries. A ceasefire has been in place since 2013 and the dialogue to find a negotiated end to the conflict is currently ongoing, but relations remain tense. For an extensive discussion of the PKK and the wider Kurdish movement in Turkey, see Cengiz Gunes, *The Kurdish National Movement in Turkey: From Protest to Resistance* (London: Routledge, 2012).

regional politics. At the same time, the rise of ISIS has informed alignments between Kurdish groups and regional and international governments.

Box 1: Key actors in Kurdish politics

Democratic Union Party (PYD): the dominant Syrian Kurdish political party, which administers the Rojava cantons. The party is ideologically linked to the PKK, even though it denies being a branch of the PKK.

People's Protection Units (YPG): the militia associated with the PYD.

Kurdish National Council (KNC): an umbrella body, based in Erbil, made up of smaller Syrian Kurdish political parties that are ideologically linked to the KDP and the PUK in Iraq. It does not include the PYD.

Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG): the administration, formed in 1992 and officially recognized in 2005, that governs the semi-autonomous Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI).

Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK): the militant organization, formed in 1978, which is the dominant Turkish Kurdish group.

Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP): the Iraqi Kurdish political party which controls the most important positions in the KRG and has a long-standing rivalry with the PKK.

The rise of the PYD and the emergence of Rojava

The 2011 uprising in Syria and subsequent civil war have created the conditions for a major shift in Kurdish politics and society in Syria. Most Kurdish political parties trace their descent from the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Syria – the first Kurdish nationalist party – which was founded in 1957. These parties have always been illegal and have struggled to mobilize. Undermined by state repression and internal fractures, they have mainly confined their activities to the cultural sphere.[2] Syria gave sanctuary to the PKK in the 1990s, and the numbers of Syrian Kurds who joined the party increased during this period.

Following the PKK's expulsion from Syria in 1998, former members of the party established the PYD in Syria in 2003. This party is ideologically linked to the PKK, even though it denies being a branch of the PKK. The PYD is openly a member of the Union of Kurdistan Communities (KCK), the umbrella body for groups supportive of PKK ideology and goals. At the outbreak of the Syrian uprising, the PYD was one player among many in Syrian Kurdish politics. However, its subsequent rise to dominance through its exploitation of the circumstances of war has been remarkable.

Among the specific factors behind this rise are the PYD's greater discipline, organization and strategic planning in comparison with the older, fissiparous Kurdish parties. The PYD's links to the PKK also give it a distinct ideology and access to training, experience, fighters and arms. By the summer of 2012, as Syria collapsed into warring factions and fiefdoms, the PYD moved decisively to assert control over three pockets of territory with majority Kurdish populations in the north of the country: Jazira, Kobane and Afrin. By late 2013/early 2014 the PYD had styled these as cantons of local administration

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[2] Harriet Allsopp, *The Kurds of Syria: Political Parties and Identity in the Middle East* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2014).

under the collective name Rojava ('West') to represent Western Kurdistan, and had held elections to local assemblies. While the PYD stresses its commitment to political pluralism and to agreements with other Kurdish parties, it is clear that Rojava is a PYD experiment in autonomous government.

A further significant dynamic is the deepening fracture, within the Syrian Kurdish movement, between the PYD and the numerous parties of the 1957 genealogy, most of which joined the Kurdish National Council (KNC) in 2011 when the need to respond coherently to the uprising pushed them together. The older parties' schisms, their failure to adapt and their weakening popular legitimacy – combined with the effects of the PYD's assertiveness and unilateralism – mean that they are currently less meaningful actors in the region.[3] A further factor here is that the parties in the KNC mostly operate outside Syria, limiting their influence there. For example, the Iraqi Kurds trained several hundred Syrian Kurds, who were subsequently prevented from entering Rojava by the PYD and its militia (the YPG, or People's Protection Units). Moreover, the KNC leadership moved to Erbil, the regional capital of the KRI, because it was unable to operate in Syria.

For much of the past four years, relations between Kurdish political movements in Syria have remained tense. This has been despite repeated negotiations and power-sharing agreements between the PYD and the parties of the KNC. The KNC's members, and other observers, complain of PYD intimidation and harassment, and have catalogued a long list of alleged authoritarian actions and abuses of power.[4] The PYD rejects most of these accusations. As discussed in more detail below, the signing of the Duhok Agreement in October 2014 marked progress towards better cooperation, but the agreement has yet to be fully implemented.

The rise of the PYD has been aided by the tacit acquiescence of the Syrian regime, which allowed the PYD to take over without a fight, retains a presence in the major city of Qamishli and continues to pay the salaries of civil servants in PYD-controlled areas. The Assad regime and the PYD are not natural bedfellows, but the expedience of war and the fact that both share mutual enemies (notably the jihadist groups and Turkey) have led to an understanding for the time being – though tensions remain. As Saleh Muslim, the co-president of the PYD, has explained, 'The PYD is part of the Syrian revolution, but it is not prepared to be used as its soldiers.'[5]

Rojava marks the first attempt at government based on the political theory of democratic confederalism – or democratic autonomy – advocated by Abdullah Öcalan[6] and the PKK. It reflects the argument that the nation state and capitalism have failed and that a direct system of bottom-up government is needed.[7] Its aim is a fundamental transformation of the state and a democratization of society, with equality for women and minorities and a separation of religion and state. Kurds in Turkey, Iraq and Iran are closely watching the progress of the Rojava administration, the success or failure of which is of particular interest to the Kurds in Turkey given the project's basis in Öcalan's ideas. The prominence of the roles held by women in the PYD administration, as fighters, administrators and politicians – an approach so dramatically different to that of the jihadists – has also attracted international attention.

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[3] For analysis of the weakening of the 1957 parties, see Harriet Allsopp, 'The Kurdish Autonomy Bid in Syria: Challenges and Reactions', in Michael Gunter and Mohammed Ahmed (eds), *The Kurdish Spring: Geopolitical Changes and the Kurds* (Costa Mesa: Mazda, 2013).
[4] *Flight of Icarus? The PYD's Precarious Rise in Syria*, International Crisis Group Middle East Report No 151, May 2014; *Under Kurdish Rule: Abuses in PYD-run Enclaves in Syria*, Human Rights Watch, June 2014; and Eva Savelsberg and Jordi Tejel, 'The Syrian Kurds in "Transition to Somewhere"', in Michael Gunter and Mohammed Ahmed (eds), *The Kurdish Spring: Geopolitical Changes and the Kurds* (Costa Mesa: Mazda, 2013).
[5] Author interview with Saleh Muslim, 3 December 2012, London.
[6] Abdullah Öcalan has led the PKK since its founding. He has been held in a Turkish prison on the island of Imrali since 1999, but despite this managed to remain the key influence on the PKK's ideological evolution and strategic choices.
[7] Abdullah Öcalan, *Democratic Confederalism* (London: Transmedia, 2011); Joost Jongerden and Ahmet Hamdi Akkaya, 'Democratic Confederalism as a Kurdish Spring: The PKK and the Quest for Radical Democracy', in Michael Gunter and Mohammed Ahmed (eds), *The Kurdish Spring: Geopolitical Changes and the Kurds* (Costa Mesa: Mazda, 2013).

Before the establishment of Rojava, local self-government by Kurds had few precedents beyond the short-lived Mahabad Republic in Iran in 1946 and the KRG in Iraq. Its existence is therefore celebrated by many Kurds in other states. That the autonomous region developed in Syria is particularly remarkable. Before 2011 the concept of autonomy in the area had barely been discussed, let alone demanded by the local population. But the chaos and insecurity of the war in Syria, and the sharp response of the PYD, caused an extraordinary shift in the Kurdish movement which was evident in growing demand for self-determination. The Rojava project remains fragile but, whatever its future, its very creation has fundamentally altered the Kurdish nationalist discourse. Trapped in such a hostile and dangerous environment, Kurds – even those who do not support the PYD – have had no alternative but to create their own government as a means of protecting their security. There has been an accompanying shift in position by the broader body of Kurdish political parties, which have become increasingly supportive of autonomy or federal status for Rojava. As a result, popular commitment to the project appears strong – in the case of an attack on the autonomous region, it is likely that the YPG would defend Rojava determinedly and would have support from the broader Kurdish population in doing so.

The jihadist impact and the significance of Kobane

Another new dynamic created by the war is the militarization of the Syrian Kurdish struggle. Previously, Kurds had not used arms in support of their cause in Syria (although they had fought for the PKK in Turkey and for Kurdish groups in Iraq). As recently as 2012, Saleh Muslim noted: 'Kurdish areas are still peaceful; the PYD is in control and will not allow arms.'[8] As instability in northern Syria worsened – amid a rise in fighting that involved the Assad regime, the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and jihadist groups – the YPG began engaging militarily in the defence of Kurdish towns and villages. The YPG and the FSA share interests in opposing the jihadists, and are both long-term enemies of the Ba'athist regime, but they remain suspicious of one another. The two groups have cooperated at times, and have clashed militarily at others, depending on local circumstances and the broader dynamics of the war. Currently, the number of YPG fighters is estimated at around 50,000.[9]

In addition to the Kurdish populations in the majority Kurdish regions, a significant number of Kurds reside in mixed areas, such as Aleppo and the surrounding region. There, since the beginning of 2012, the Kurds have organized themselves militarily as Jabhat al-Akrad (the Kurdish Front), operating as independent units within the FSA. However, due to jihadist attacks on Kurdish-controlled areas and against Kurdish civilians in the Aleppo region, relations between the FSA and Jabhat al-Akrad have been severely strained since July 2013.[10]

Increasingly, the YPG's main adversaries have been the jihadist groups – notably ISIS, against which since late 2012 the militia has waged repeated battles for control of border crossings and Kurdish towns. The Islamists view the Kurds as ideological enemies as well as rivals for control of territory and resources. The success of the jihadists (and accompanying threat to Kurds' safety) has pushed Syrian Kurds to support the PYD, which not only offers security but also access to services and employment. Support for the YPG militia is probably even greater than for the PYD, because the former provides the only viable protection for Kurds living in the north of Syria. Moreover, the YPG's success in defending Kobane has enhanced its legitimacy.

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[8] Author interview with Saleh Muslim, 3 December 2012, London.
[9] Author interview with Saleh Muslim, 11 September 2014, London.
[10] Cengiz Gunes, 'What's Next for Syria's Kurds?', Jadaliyya, 5 September 2013, http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/14005/what%E2%80%99s-next-for-syria%E2%80%99s-kurds.

In late 2014, the Kurdish town of Kobane on the Turkey–Syria border took centre stage in the conflict in Syria. ISIS forces encircled and then intensified their attacks on Kobane, and Kurdish resistance was unable to prevent ISIS from entering the town. The situation appeared desperate for the defenders, with predictions of the city's fall and the massacre of those remaining prompting international intervention. US airstrikes against ISIS positions around Kobane and the arrival of *peshmerga* fighters with heavy weapons and ammunition from the KRI turned the tide against ISIS. The YPG continued its defence of the city throughout this period, and on 27 January 2015 it declared that ISIS had been fully expelled. The cooperation between the US, the KRG *peshmerga* and the YPG was a transformational moment, signifying both regional Kurdish and international support for the PYD/YPG. This unprecedented development gave a major boost to the PYD and to the legitimacy and geopolitical standing of the Rojava project.

Alder Xelil, a leading member of the PYD-linked Western Kurdistan Democratic Society Movement (TEV-DEM), commented:

> Kobane became Stalingrad. In the same way that Stalingrad changed the balance of the Second World War… and Kobane is now playing that role. For that reason it is strategic. For that reason it has become a battle of hono[u]r for Kurdistan. … In particular 1,500 fighters have come from Bakur [North Kurdistan]. We are fighting against this terror for the world and all its peoples. Everyone should help us in the war we are waging. We are the most successful force defending against terrorism, that is to say the Kurds.[11]

The successful defence of Kobane was massively significant for Kurds in Syria. The siege created a narrative with potent ingredients: hundreds of thousands of Kurdish refugees fleeing the town; a heroic, 133-day defence of the town by lightly armed Kurdish forces against heavily armed and previously undefeated ISIS troops; the martyrdom of Kurdish fighters, including women; the Turkish state's refusal to help from across the border; the Kurds on the Turkish side of the border gathering to watch the desperate defence of the town; the arrival of the *peshmerga* convoy from the KRI with heavier weaponry, celebrating pan-Kurdish fraternity; and then the turning of the tide against ISIS, leading to its expulsion from Kobane. Regardless of the devastation caused, the strategic value of the town or the future progress of the YPG's battles against ISIS, Kobane will endure as a famous Kurdish victory of huge symbolic value.

Most important, perhaps, is the victory's potentially galvanizing impact on Kurdish populations in Syria and beyond. Until recently, Kurds in Syria had a weaker history of nationalist mobilization compared with Kurdish populations in Turkey, Iraq and Iran. The movement lacked powerful symbols of its own national struggle – it had no Halabja genocide or Mahabad Republic.[12] It now has Kobane. Further, most of the momentous events in the history of the wider Kurdish nationalist struggle were tragic failures, whereas the defence of Kobane was a rare victory. It is unusual for a development in Syrian Kurdistan to have such impact on Kurdish sentiment in other states (an exception was the uprising in 2004), but the defence of Kobane and the establishment of Rojava are significant for Kurds elsewhere. The town was described as 'the Castle of Resistance for the four parts of Kurdistan', and Kurds across the region celebrated its recapture in January.[13] The recapture of Kobane has given Kurdish forces renewed momentum, enabling them to make further gains against ISIS in villages surrounding Kobane and in Jazira.

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[11] 'TEV-DEM Rep: Kobanê Has Upset Their Plans', interview with Alder Xelil, *The Rojava Report*, 24 October 2014, https://rojavareport.wordpress.com/2014/10/25/tev-dem-rep-kobane-has-upset-their-plans/.

[12] See Robert Lowe, 'The *serhildan* and the Kurdish national story in Syria', in Robert Lowe and Gareth Stansfield (eds), *The Kurdish Policy Imperative* (London: Chatham House, 2010).

[13] 'Syrian Kurdistan's Kobani Defense Minister: Everyone needs to support the resistance', *EKurd Daily*, 15 November 2014, http://www.ekurd.net/mismas/articles/misc2014/11/syriakurd1682.htm.

Turkey, the conflict in Syria and the Kurds

Turkey is massively important in Syrian Kurdish politics. The Kurdish parts of Syria all lie tight against the Turkish border, and have strong bonds with Kurdish society and politics in Turkey. Indeed, to many Kurds in both Syria and Turkey, the border between the two countries is irrelevant: they see themselves as one people and feel the struggle of their neighbours to be theirs also.

Turkey's Kurdish conflict has strong regional dimensions. Events and developments in Syria have a huge impact on Turkey's domestic politics. Sharing a 900-kilometre-long border with Syria has made Turkey one of the main destinations for refugees from the Syrian conflict. A significant number of Kurds have also crossed the border, especially since the attack by ISIS on Kobane and its surrounding areas began in September 2014. Other issues that Turkey has had to contend with include security risks arising from the activities of jihadists on the Syria–Turkey border and terrorist attacks inside Turkey, such as that in the town of Reyhanli on 11 May 2013[14] and, more recently, the suicide bombing at a police station in Sultanahmet, Istanbul on 7 January 2015.[15] Additionally, ISIS took 49 Turkish hostages after capturing the Iraqi city of Mosul in June 2014; it released them in September 2014. However, the biggest source of concern for Turkey has been the establishment of Kurdish autonomous regions in Syria.

Turkey frames its policy towards Syria's Kurds within its overall policy on management of its Kurdish conflict.[16] The antagonistic state of Kurdish–Turkish relations, epitomized by the ongoing conflict between the PKK and Turkey, has meant that developments in Kurdish regions of Syria – especially the rise of the PYD and the speed and effectiveness with which it has organized Kurds militarily under the YPG – have been interpreted by Turkey as a threat to its national security. Turkey's main worry stems from the fact that the PYD, with its close ideological affiliation to the PKK, is playing a prominent role in the government of an autonomous region. Turkey fears that such a situation will increase the PKK's power as a regional actor and put more pressure on Turkey to grant political rights to its own Kurdish minority.[17] Hence, Ankara refuses to develop constructive and cooperative relations with the PYD despite the fact that in the past two years Turkey and the PKK have restarted the peace process and created the possibility of cooperation.

For their part, Syrian Kurds have accused Turkey of sponsoring attacks on them since 2012 and of working to undermine Rojava and Syrian Kurdish unity. The Turkish government called for a buffer zone inside the Syrian border and threatened intervention in Syria as its 'natural right' if 'terrorists' (by which it meant the PYD/PKK) threatened Turkey from beyond the Syrian border.[18] Turkish territory and citizens have not yet been threatened from inside Syria, and so Turkey has not moved troops over the border (other than to evacuate the remains of Suleyman Shah and the soldiers guarding his tomb). Turkey's refusal to offer assistance during the siege of Kobane confirmed the Syrian Kurdish view of the Turkish state as an enemy. A senior official of Turkey's Justice and Development Party (AKP) stated, 'There is no tragedy in Kobane as cried out by the terrorist PKK. There is a war between two terrorist groups.'[19] Syrian Kurds have regularly accused

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[14] 'Turkey admits Reyhanli was attacked by al-Qaeda', http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/04/reyhanli-qaeda-bombing-attack-admits.html.

[15] 'Sultanahmet suicide bomber spends 11 days in Istanbul before attack', *Today's Zaman*, 16 January 2015, http://www.todayszaman.com/national_sultanahmet-suicide-bomber-spends-11-days-in-istanbul-before-attack_370026.html.

[16] Cengiz Gunes, 'What's Next for Syria's Kurds?', Jadaliyya, 5 September 2013, http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/14005/what%E2%80%99s-next-for-syria%E2%80%99s-kurds.

[17] Ibid.

[18] Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, quoted in Wyre Davis, 'Crisis in Syria emboldens country's Kurds', BBC News, 28 July 2012, http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-19021766.

[19] Yasin Aktay, vice-chairman of the AKP, quoted in 'Kobane: Air strikes "stall IS advance" on Syrian border town', BBC News, 10 October 2014, http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-29555999.

Turkey of supporting the jihadists, and some on each side view the other as a more profound and dangerous enemy than ISIS.[20]

In the past decade, despite significant opportunities to resolve the conflict with the PKK, Turkey has failed to develop a new policy framework for doing so. So far, Turkey has followed a piecemeal approach to granting collective rights to its Kurdish minority.[21] The creation of a Kurdish-language TV station, TRT6, as part of the Turkish state broadcasting network in January 2009, and the establishment of departments in some state universities in which Kurdish language is taught and researched, are often cited as the government's main steps towards recognizing Kurdish rights. However, so far the government's position on Kurdish demands for decentralization and autonomy, and for a full recognition of Kurds' linguistic rights, such as the provision of education in Kurdish language, is unclear.[22] Recognition of Kurdish identity and associated rights would require major changes in Turkey's identity as a state, which in turn would depend on achieving a consensus on renegotiating the dominant conception of citizenship, universal rights and group-specific or minority rights in Turkey. The public debate so far reveals the ideological rigidity of Turkish nationalism and its hesitation in accepting the legitimacy of Kurdish political demands and rights. It is not clear what the new coalition government's approach to the peace process will be given that the AKP lost its parliamentary majority after the general election on 7 June 2015. However, in the course of the election campaign, some government ministers made disarmament of the PKK a precondition for the peace process; in the current environment in the region, the group is unlikely to accept this precondition.

Additionally, the AKP's campaign focused on portraying the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) – one of the main actors in the peace process – as a threat to democracy and as a supporter of violence and terrorism. This was an attempt to keep the HDP's support below the 10 per cent election threshold and thus deny the party parliamentary representation. The widespread use of such polarizing discourse shows the limits of the AKP's commitment to pluralism and of its willingness to accommodate Kurdish political demands in Turkey. The opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) has in recent years softened its opposition to Kurdish collective rights and maintains a democratization agenda, but its ability to form a viable coalition government depends on winning the support of the Nationalist Action Party (MHP), which opposes the peace process on the grounds that it will lead to Turkey's break-up. However, the presence of 80 HDP MPs in the new parliament will ensure that Kurdish demands are advocated through the legal political channels.

Turkish politicians on many occasions have publicly declared their opposition to Kurdish self-rule in Syria, but at the same time they have maintained a dialogue with the PYD. The PYD's co-president, Saleh Muslim, has visited Turkey several times since July 2013. However, this has not improved relations between Turkey and the Syrian Kurds. Indeed, during the Kobane crisis Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan referred to the PYD as a terrorist organization. Turkey, which has called for the fall of the Assad regime since 2011, has often accused the PYD of cooperating with the Assad government and has repeatedly pressed the PYD to support the opposition Syrian National Coalition. Turkey also opposes Kurdish demands for autonomy on the grounds that it would lead to the break-up

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[20] See, for example, 'ISIS increased their attacks in West Kurdistan (Syria) with the support of Turkey', Kurdistan National Congress Information File III, KNK: Brussels, 23 September 2014; and 'Interview with Meysa Ebdo, YPG Commander', *The Rojava Report*, 28 September 2014, https://rojavareport.wordpress.com/2014/09/28/interview-with-ypg-commander-on-the-attack-on-kobane-and-its-objectives/.
[21] Kurds in Turkey lack equal cultural, linguistic and political rights, and suffer socio-economic disadvantages. Historically, Turkey has rejected Kurdish demands for equal citizenship rights on the grounds that they constitute separatism. Various legal measures during the past three decades that have broadened the remit of Kurdish rights in Turkey have failed to break the influence of Turkish nationalism. As a result, the Turkish constitution does not recognize the Kurdish minority as a distinct group.
[22] Cengiz Gunes, 'What's Next for Syria's Kurds?', Jadaliyya, 5 September 2013, http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/14005/what%E2%80%99s-next-for-syria%E2%80%99s-kurds.

of Syria. The Turkish government has threatened to invade Syria if Kurdish autonomy is established under PYD rule. Undeterred, the Kurds of Syria established the cantons of Rojava (three self-ruling entities in Afrin, Kobane and Jazira) in late 2013/early 2014 as an administrative structure to manage their *de facto* autonomy. Also, in the past year closer cooperation between Kurdish movements in Syria and Iraq – a development necessitated by the threat from ISIS – has made the YPG an important player in the international fight against ISIS and has increased the international legitimacy of the PYD. This has not led to a significant change in Turkey's attitude, however.

The conflict in Kobane has been a major issue for the Kurds in Turkey, who were enraged at Turkey's reluctance to allow help and supplies to cross the border to reach the Kurdish fighters encircled by ISIS in the town. On 6–8 October 2014, much of the Kurdish southeast of Turkey witnessed large-scale protests against Turkey's inaction and unwillingness to help the Kurds, and violence broke out between police and the protesters. The protests showed how delicate the situation had become. In total 51 people were killed, with the escalation of violence in such a short space of time exposing the lack of trust that still defines Turkey's approach to peace with the Kurds.[23] The Turkish government has failed to deliver a comprehensive plan to end its conflict with the PKK through peaceful means and to broaden Kurdish rights. With that failure, it has left millions of Kurds deeply frustrated, exacerbating the risk of full-blown ethnic conflict in Turkey.[24] Under severe pressure from the US, on 1 November 2014 Ankara reluctantly agreed to let Iraqi Kurdish *peshmerga* forces cross Turkish territory to reach Kobane.

The persistence of distrust, and even conflict, between Turkey and Rojava's Kurds contrasts with the improving political and economic ties between Turkey and the KRI. Part of the reason for this improvement, visible since 2005, is that the KRI has become an important market for Turkish exports. In the past two years a budget dispute with the Iraqi central government has prompted the KRG to more actively cultivate economic relations with Turkey, for example by exporting oil via Turkey and using Turkey's Halkbank to deposit the proceeds. As a consequence, Turkey has come to be seen as the KRG's only ally in the latter's attempts to increase its economic independence. Unsurprisingly, the KRG has therefore been careful about protecting its relationship with Turkey from the impact of developments in Syria's Kurdish regions.

However, doubts remain about the extent to which the KRI can rely on Turkey for support in the objective of becoming an independent state. In fact, the limits of Turkish support for the KRG were revealed during ISIS attacks against the KRI in the summer of 2014, which threatened the security of the city of Erbil. The military support that the KRG received from the US and other states in its fight against ISIS, together with the improving political situation in Iraq, means that the KRI is not as vulnerable as before; it is therefore less dependent on Turkey for its survival. However, Turkey is likely to remain a key partner for the KRG in the years to come.

Impact on the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI)

The KRI has been closely involved in the conflict in Syria from the outset. Kurdish activism in Syria has created an opportunity for the KRG to organize Kurds in Syria through political parties affiliated to the Iraqi Kurdish political parties. This has rekindled rivalry between Kurdish movements from Turkey and

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[23] Constanze Letsch and Ian Traynor, 'Kobani: anger grows as Turkey stops Kurds from aiding militias in Syria', 8 October 2014, http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/oct/08/kobani-isis-turkey-kurds-ypg-syria-erdogan.
[24] Cengiz Gunes, 'Everything's at stake for the Kurds in the battle for Kobanê', The Conversation, 12 October 2014, https://theconversation.com/everythings-at-stake-for-the-kurds-in-the-battle-for-kobane-32646.

Iraq, mainly between the PKK and the KDP. As early as June 2005, the president of the KRI, Massoud Barzani, called on the Syrian regime to grant the Kurds collective rights.[25] Given the surge in Kurdish refugees entering the KRI since the conflict began, and ISIS attacks against Kurds in Iraq, the Syrian conflict has become a domestic issue in the KRI.[26]

The KRG's first significant action with respect to the Syrian conflict was to support the unification of the Kurdish opposition in Syria in 2011 by bringing together Kurdish political parties other than the PYD under the umbrella body of the KNC. The primary purpose of this move was to strengthen the KRG's influence among the Kurds of Syria. The KNC is made up of smaller political parties that are ideologically closer to the KDP and the PUK, historically the two main Kurdish political parties in Iraq. In contrast to the support that parties associated with the KNC have received from the KRG, the relationship between the KRG and the PYD has been strained for much of the past three years. This is due to political differences between the Kurds in Syria and those in the KRI, which stem from the PYD's ideological affiliation to the PKK. Relations between Iraqi Kurdish political parties and the PKK have been strained over the past 30 years, and tensions erupted into armed conflict during the 1990s.

Despite the rivalry, the KRG has acted as a conciliator between the PYD and KNC. It was instrumental in brokering the Erbil Agreement between the two groups in July 2012, a pact that was meant to lead to the creation of a Kurdish Supreme Committee *(Desteya Blind a Kurd)* and a form of power-sharing in Kurdish-controlled areas. This would have included coordination of the military activities of the YPG in Syria.[27] Yet the Erbil Agreement was never implemented and disagreements between Kurdish factions in Syria persisted, damaging relations between the KRG and the PYD. One event that raised tensions, in particular, was the construction of a ditch on the Iraq–Syria border to prevent the movement of people between the two countries.[28] This occurred at a time when Kurds in Syria were accusing the KDP-led government of the KRI of imposing an embargo. President Barzani's visit to the main Kurdish city of Diyarbakir in Turkey on 16 November 2013 as a guest of the AKP government further damaged relations after he accused the PYD of acting unilaterally in creating an autonomous region and of putting pressure on Kurdish opposition members who do not support the PYD.[29]

Recently, however, relations between the PYD and KRG have improved markedly, after ISIS attacks against the Yazidi Kurds in the Sinjar area of Iraq prompted close military co-operation between Kurds from Turkey, Syria and Iraq. The YPG and PKK played notable roles in rescuing the Yazidis from ISIS in Iraq and in lifting the siege of Sinjar. The KRG's recent approach to the PYD and YPG has included supplying arms to YPG forces defending Kobane and sending *peshmerga* forces with heavy military equipment to support the YPG. This positive development came about after a new round of talks in the KRI produced the Duhok Agreement on power-sharing, which was accepted by participants from the KNC and PYD. The pact entailed the creation of a joint council to manage the affairs of the region. Since then, tensions between Kurdish political movements in Syria have diminished. However, due to the ongoing security problems in the region, the agreement has yet to be fully implemented.

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[25] Michael Gunter, *Out of Nowhere: The Kurds of Syria in Peace and War* (London: Hurst & Co, 2014), p. 3.

[26] The UNCHR estimates that approximately 235,000 Syrian refugees are in Iraq, with most being Kurds from Syria and located in the Kurdistan Region, http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/country.php?id=103 (accessed 2 March 2015).

[27] Cengiz Gunes, 'What's Next for Syria's Kurds?', Jadaliyya, 5 September 2013, http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/14005/what%E2%80%99s-next-for-syria%E2%80%99s-kurds.

[28] Fehim Taştekin, 'KRG trench divides Syrian, Iraqi Kurds', Al-Monitor, 21 April 2014, http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/04/krg-trench-divides-syrian-iraqi-kurds.html#.

[29] Cengiz Çandar, 'Erdogan-Barzani "Diyarbakir encounter" milestone', Al-Monitor, 20 November 2013, http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/11/erdogan-barzani-kurdistan-diyarbakir-political-decision.html#.

The KRG's relations with the PYD need to be seen in the broader context of KRG–Turkey relations, and of the effort to combat ISIS. The need to coordinate militarily will remain for as long as ISIS threatens Kurds in Iraq and Syria, but the persistence of significant differences between Kurdish political parties makes it difficult to determine whether military cooperation between the PKK, YPG and *peshmerga* of the KRG will lead to closer political cooperation. As discussed above, Turkey has maintained its opposition to the consolidation of Kurdish autonomy in Syria under PYD influence; this has been another reason for the KRG's lukewarm attitude towards the PYD and Kurdish autonomy in Syria. The KRG–Turkey relationship places significant constraints on the KRG's ability to cooperate with the administrations of the PYD and Rojava; forging and maintaining close ties with Turkey will be essential for the KRG if it is to increase its economic independence and its effectiveness as a regional actor.

International dimensions

The other major Kurdish population of the Middle East lives in Iran. Numbering approximately 7 million, this minority has a long and restive history of relations with successive Iranian regimes, which have generally made few concessions to it. Kurds who have protested against the Iranian authorities have often faced imprisonment or execution. The Iranian Kurdish political movement is venerable but fragmented. Many parties and political leaders operate from exile. The Kurdish question in Iran is more static than in the other three states. The Kurds in Iran, like those in Syria until recently, are not free to express their views and receive scant international attention. The Syrian war has had less direct impact on Iran's Kurds than on the region's other Kurdish populations, but Iranian Kurds none the less have followed and celebrated the Rojava project and the lifting of the siege in Kobane.

The PKK's sister party in Iran, the Party of Free Life of Kurdistan (PJAK), might be expected to benefit from the situation. The PJAK has proposed a canton model for Rojhilat ('East Kurdistan'), along similar lines to Rojava, but non-PKK-affiliated parties in Iran are stronger than those in Syria. Iran is not a natural supporter of the PYD because of its own conflict with the PJAK, and because of the unwelcome (from the Iranian government's point of view) precedent set by Rojava. Iran shares Turkey's interest in keeping the Kurds divided; maintaining the rivalry between the KRG and the PKK suits it well.

On the wider international stage, the after-effects of Kurdish forces' successful resistance in Kobane are translating into growing sympathy for their cause. The US and its allies are beginning to accept that the PYD and Kurdish forces cannot be excluded from the campaign against ISIS. This is in stark contrast with the position of the US and its allies earlier in the war, when they refused to engage with the PYD as a full and legitimate part of the Syrian opposition. Turkey's hostility towards the PYD has influenced how Western governments have approached the party. The international response to the creation of Rojava has also been lukewarm, even hostile, due to fears about the integrity of the Syrian state and that its existence could reduce the influence of the Arab opposition in Syria. International powers that wish to see the Assad regime fall have focused on building a pan-Syrian opposition movement as an alternative future government.

The significance of the siege of Kobane can be seen in the decision by the US and its allies to intervene militarily against ISIS. Accompanying this development has been a notable increase in cooperation between the US and the PYD; US diplomats have met Saleh Muslim. The US has relied on intelligence from the YPG, seen as a 'reliable partner' on the ground in helping it to target attacks against ISIS

forces, and does not designate the PYD as a terrorist organization.[30] Kobane became important for US strategy because ISIS had invested so much manpower, equipment and propaganda in the siege that it was important for the West to set an example that ISIS could be pushed back.

The PYD's international legitimacy continues to increase. It has recently taken part in meetings in Cairo and Moscow to search for a peaceful end to the conflict. France has been more supportive of the PYD than have other European states, and President François Hollande met PYD and YPG women representatives in Paris in February 2015. The UK has given 'only very limited recognition' to the PYD. The British government struggles to reconcile its interest in supporting a group that is resisting ISIS with that same group's links to the PKK – which the UK considers a terrorist organization. More recently, the PYD was officially invited by the UN to participate in the 'Geneva III' talks on Syria which began in early May 2015.[31]

The move towards international engagement with the PYD will affect the internal struggle in Syrian Kurdish politics. The KNC parties enjoy much better international support (because they have no ties to the PKK); indeed this has been one of the few advantages they have held over the PYD. However, they lack the popular support that the PYD enjoys, and the latter's growing international recognition may therefore weaken the KNC parties even more. It may also anchor the PYD in democratic practices and cooperation with other parties. The PYD will know that this is essential to securing and maintaining legitimacy. The party is therefore likely to be more accommodating of other Kurdish political parties in Syria. US and EU engagement with the PYD could thus have a positive effect on the Syrian Kurdish fracture.

Recognition of the PYD also has implications for international relationships with Turkey, which will remain strongly opposed to the existence of Rojava or the notion of legitimacy for the PYD. While Turkey reversed its position on recognition of the KRI and became a strong ally of the autonomous region, the Turkish state's deep-rooted hostility towards the PKK makes a similar about-turn on Rojava and the PYD unlikely. Turkey's attitude could change if there is significant progress in the peace process between Turkey and the PKK. While the KRG and the PKK offer competing visions of Kurdish futures, and are rivals for pan-Kurdish leadership, the government in Erbil operates a more nuanced approach towards the PYD and Rojava, as befits its self-appointed role as the main pan-Kurdish mediator and provider of sanctuary.

Conclusion

The demise of state authority in Syria is creating an unprecedented opportunity for Kurds in the region, who have acted with speed to organize themselves politically and militarily. However, despite constituting roughly 10 per cent of Syria's population, the Kurds do not on their own have the political or military power to determine the outcome of the conflict or their own future trajectory. Both will hinge on their relations with other sections of the Syrian opposition, as well as on the actions of regional powers.[32]

In Syria, the Kurds are short of friends. The Arab nationalist Assad government is implacably opposed to Kurdish autonomy, and would not remain passive if it were able to act against Rojava. Islamist

[30] Pentagon Press Secretary Navy Rear Admiral John Kirby, quoted in Yerevan Saeed, 'US congratulates Kurds over Kobane as Turkey slams celebrations', *Rudaw*, 28 January 2015, http://rudaw.net/english/middleeast/syria/28012015.
[31] http://kurdishquestion.com/index.php/kurdistan/west-kurdistan/breaking-news-pyd-invited-to-geneva-3-on-syria/853-breaking-news-pyd-invited-to-geneva-3-on-syria.html.
[32] http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/14005/what%E2%80%99s-next-for-syria%E2%80%99s-kurds.

groups are committed to Rojava's destruction, and the non-Islamist parts of the Syrian opposition remain Arab nationalist in orientation and therefore do not support Kurdish autonomy. Turkey is opposed to Rojava, and the international community is unsure how to deal with the enclave.

Kurdish political parties in Syria do not advocate the creation of an independent Kurdish state. Rather, their goal is extensive autonomy, pluralist democracy and recognition of the rights of all ethnic and religious minorities in Syria.[33] So far, the YPG has been able to withstand the ferocious attacks of ISIS on Kurdish-controlled territories in northern Syria. However, the future of Rojava remains highly uncertain, given the deep instability of its existence, the extremely hostile environment it sits within, and the massive challenges of war, displacement, poverty, resources and government.

Since 2011, the PYD has taken power and acquired increased support and a measure of legitimacy through its autonomous administration. In 2014–15 the defence of Kobane created a new Kurdish nationalist myth of heroism and liberation. The establishment of Rojava and the accompanying cultural and relative political freedoms mean that a return to Syrian Kurdish quiescence in the face of discrimination and repression is unlikely.[34] Kurdish autonomy in Syria has given further impetus to the wider discussion of the position and the status of the Kurds in the Middle East in general.[35]

Kurds number over 35 million people, and have a crucial influence on domestic politics in Syria, Turkey, Iraq and Iran. Kurdish political issues must be viewed simultaneously as domestic issues in each of the four states and as regional geopolitical issues. This reflects the powerful and complex ties between trans-state Kurdish movements, between such movements and state powers, and between Kurdish groups and other actors. A significant regional impact of the Syrian civil war has been to fuel the rise of Kurdish nationalism across the northern Middle East. Kurds have gained influence in Rojava and Kobane, as well as in the cities of Kirkuk and Sinjar in Iraq. As Syria and Iraq have shattered, Kurds are taking their opportunities.

The long-term success of the Kurds as a force in regional politics will depend on their ability to create cooperative relations among various Kurdish political movements. While Kurdish politics in Syria (as well as in the whole region) is marked by deep fractures and rivalries, recognition of the need to cooperate is increasing among Kurdish political factions in the country. In particular, Kurdish movements are cooperating more in the battle against ISIS. None the less, this is unlikely to lead to pan-Kurdish mobilization across the region.

Turkey, the KRG and the international community will play a major role in determining the future of the Rojava experiment. Turkey's potential influence is the greatest, given its geographical, economic and political importance for the Syrian Kurdish movement as well as its broader role in the Syrian civil war and as a regional power. Having largely ignored Syrian Kurdistan until the war, the KRG is playing an increasingly assertive role which aligns with its promotion of itself as the protector – and its aspiration to be the patron – of all Kurds.

International actors are uncomfortable dealing with minority nationalism and non-state actors. The fear is that Kurdish demands for self-determination risk fracturing established states in what is already an extremely fragile geopolitical environment. But no Kurdish movement is calling for independence; rather, the demands are for political, social, cultural and economic reforms within the established

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[33] Ibid.
[34] 'If the regime returns, it will not be as before. Anything taken by the people cannot be taken back.' Interview with Saleh Muslim, 3 December 2012, London.
[35] http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/14005/what%E2%80%99s-next-for-syria%E2%80%99s-kurds.

states. That said, the issue of independence has been on the agenda of the KRG, especially in the period following the withdrawal of Iraqi forces from Mosul in June 2014. However, so far it has not taken any concrete steps to pursue independence. Significant Kurdish interests in the Middle East now align with international interests to an extent not seen since the 1920s. Despite recent gains, the Kurds remain highly vulnerable. This is especially the case in Syria, but there are also few signs of improvement in their situation in Iran and Turkey.

Kurdish demands need to be incorporated into the international community's policy of building sustainable peace. A long-term objective should be to aid the transformation and peaceful resolution of the Kurdish conflicts in the region. This requires international and regional powers to increase their engagement with a more diverse set of Kurdish political actors across the region.

Abbreviations

AKP	Justice and Development Party [Turkey]
CHP	Republican People's Party [Turkey]
FSA	Free Syrian Army
HDP	Peoples' Democratic Party [Turkey]
KCK	Union of Kurdistan Communities [Regional]
KDP	Kurdistan Democratic Party [Iraq]
KNC	Kurdish National Council [Syria]
KRG	Kurdistan Regional Government [Iraq]
KRI	Kurdistan Region of Iraq
MHP	Nationalist Action Party [Turkey]
PJAK	Party of Free Life of Kurdistan [Iran]
PKK	Kurdistan Workers' Party [Turkey]
PUK	Patriotic Union of Kurdistan [Iraq]
PYD	Democratic Union Party [Syria]
TEV-DEM	Western Kurdistan Democratic Society Movement [Syria]
YPG	People's Protection Units [Syria]

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The Syria and its Neighbours Policy Initiative

This paper forms part of the Chatham House Middle East and North Africa Programme's ongoing 'Syria and its Neighbours Policy Initiative'. The initiative aims to support a coordinated and holistic policy response to the conflict in Syria and its long-term regional implications, with a particular focus on the country's immediate neighbours. It is doing so through the conduct of three cross-cutting research streams:

Refugees: Looks at the long-term challenges of the refugee crisis, examining how host governments can best navigate political, economic and social challenges to build the resilience of local and refugee communities. This stream also assesses the prospects of return for refugees, particularly the factors that are likely to inform their decision.

Political and economic inclusion: Explores how a lack of political and economic inclusion in Syria and the neighbouring states has entrenched grievances and fostered conflict. This stream will analyse how the Syrian crisis has impacted developments in Iraq and in transnational Kurdish dynamics, as well as the status of marginalized communities across the region.

The future of the Syrian state: This research stream will examine the long-term implications of potential outcomes in the Syrian conflict in critical sectors. These are likely to include: economic governance and reconstruction; models of governance; and the role of regional powers.

Independent thinking since 1920