

The Kurdish Awakening and the Implications for Israel

Gallia Lindenstrauss and Oded Eran

The Kurds, who number an estimated 30 million, are the largest ethnic group in the world that does not enjoy self determination.¹ Over the years this minority has been oppressed in the countries in which it is dispersed (Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria), and at times the governments have even cooperated in the suppression of this minority (although they have also sometimes used the Kurds as a tool in the struggle against one another). Recently there is evidence of a “Kurdish Spring” and a significant awakening among this population.

In at least two countries with Kurdish minorities (Iraq and Syria), the central government’s influence on the Kurds’ policy is extremely limited. In Turkey, a dialogue is currently underway between representatives of the Turkish intelligence agency and the leader of the PKK (the Kurdistan Workers Party – the militant Kurdish nationalist organization). Even if the talks are unsuccessful, they will almost certainly lead to a greater degree of cultural autonomy for the Kurds in Turkey. The situation of the Kurds in Iran remains difficult, but in this country too, the Iranian branch of the PKK, the Party of Free Life of Kurdistan (PJAK), is fighting for autonomy for the eight million Kurds living there.²

This article focuses on developments related to the Kurds in northern Iraq and northern Syria, as developments in these entities will more likely have implications for Israel.

Northern Iraq

Of all the Kurdish entities, the entity in northern Iraq, numbering some six million, is currently the strongest and most significant. Historically

Dr. Gallia Lindenstrauss is a research fellow at INSS. Dr. Oded Eran is a senior research fellow at INSS.

it has also led Kurdish national aspirations.³ The establishment of the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG), which was officially recognized by the Interim Iraqi Government in 2005, began with the 1991 Gulf War, when the Turks pressed for the establishment of a no-fly zone in northern Iraq in order to prevent a flood of Kurdish refugees fleeing towards the border between the two countries. Turkey initially opposed the process of strengthening the KRG and the issue became a serious source of tension in Turkish-US relations, but since 2007 Turkish policy has done an about face, with Turkey starting to develop strong relations with the KRG. Iraq is now Turkey's second largest trade partner after Germany, and estimates are that half of this trade is with northern Iraq.⁴ Similarly, about 1,500 of the approximately 1,900 foreign companies operating in northern Iraq are Turkish companies.⁵

The Kurdish Regional Government has many of the characteristics of a de facto state. In order to travel from one part of Iraq to the area controlled by the KRG, it is necessary to pass through border control. Since 2005, three rounds of elections for the KRG parliament have been held. In 2006, the KRG set up a "Ministry of Foreign Affairs," and many countries, including Iran, Turkey, and Egypt, have opened a consulate in Erbil, the regional "capital." The KRG in northern Iraq has 200,000

soldiers armed with warplanes and tanks from the Saddam Hussein period, which were seized as booty in 1991 and 2003.⁶ In January 2014, a transaction for the purchase of 14 helicopters from an American company was completed.⁷

Yet despite these state-like characteristics and the ongoing discussions of statehood in the Kurdish internal arena,⁸ the regional government has thus far refrained from declaring independence, fearing that such a declaration would arouse opposition among the countries bordering Iraq. Furthermore, there is also a dispute over who will eventually control a number of regions that contain a large Arab minority such as Kirkuk (where 40 percent of Iraq's oil reserves

are located),⁹ and there is concern that the KRG would find it difficult in the short term to function economically without suitable arrangements with Baghdad.¹⁰ Currently, 94 percent of the KRG budget comes from the central government in Baghdad.¹¹

The questions related to the Kurds about the distribution of resources in Iraq are also liable to surface in the Syrian context, and certainly in all matters pertaining to the distribution of revenues, although the amounts involved are smaller.

A recent key focus of dispute between the central government in Baghdad and the KRG has been the question of direct oil exports from northern Iraq to Turkey through a pipeline inaugurated in January 2014. This is a source of tension not only within Iraq, but also between Turkey and Iraq, and the Iraqi Minister of Oil has even threatened legal proceedings against Turkey.¹² In the background of this dispute are also claims that in a meeting that took place in November 2013 between Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan and KRG Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani, the two men reached a series of secret agreements on the export of substantial quantities of oil directly to Turkey.¹³ In the fifth round of talks between the central government in Baghdad and the KRG on the issue of direct exports through the pipeline to Turkey, which took place in mid-February 2014, it appeared that some progress had been made in the discussions, but no solution has yet been found.¹⁴ Meanwhile, the oil flowing from northern Iraq to Turkey is stored in containers in the Port of Ceyhan, but is not re-exported from there.¹⁵ In the future, Turkey's growing energy needs and drive to become a major energy hub are liable to heighten the tension in the Baghdad-Erbil-Ankara triangle not only where oil is concerned, but also involving natural gas.

Iraq's energy resources production, insofar as Baghdad succeeds in increasing the volume of its exports, is liable to aggravate problems relating to its geographic and political division. The KRG has issued over 50 oil and gas exploration contracts, and this measure raises the still unanswered question of who has the right to grant concessions and who will get the profits from the sale of oil and gas.¹⁶ At the same time, more than a few foreign energy companies are still reluctant to sign independent transactions with the KRG, out of concern that this would anger Baghdad and jeopardize energy transactions with it.¹⁷ Secondary questions are who wields authority in the "grey" regions where the identity of the ruler is unclear, and what will happen to energy reserves that lie on both sides of the border between the Kurdish autonomous region and the other parts of Iraq. Given that even moderate forecasts predict that Iraq is likely to produce about 90 BCM of natural gas in 2035 (making it the world's sixth largest gas producer),¹⁸ and that part of this amount will come from the gas fields in the Kurdish autonomous region, these questions are of major economic importance.

Northern Syria

Over the years the Kurdish minority in Syria has received less attention than any of the Kurdish populations in the region. Smaller than the Kurdish

minorities in other countries, the Kurdish population in Syria is 2.2 million, about 10 percent of the total Syrian population. The shooting down of a Turkish warplane by Syria in June 2012 led to a Turkish demand that the Syrian army move back from the border between the two countries. Given this situation and the ongoing civil war in Syria, a governmental vacuum was created in this region, which the Kurds hurried to fill. The strongest group among the Kurds in northern Syria is the Democratic Union Party (PYD), which is considered a branch of the PKK. Massoud Barzani, president of the KRG in northern Iraq, successfully promoted the founding of the Kurdish National Council (KNC) in 2011, which was supposed to cooperate with representatives of the Syrian opposition united in the Syrian National Council (SNC). However, the SNC's refusal to recognize the Kurdish desire for autonomy caused a split between these two groups. Barzani's chief achievement in 2012 was a cooperation agreement between the PYD and the KNC. Nevertheless, the dominant PYD continues to exert a decisive influence on developments in northern Syria. Since 2013, there have been conflicts between groups identified with global jihad, such as al-Nusra Front and the Syrian Kurds. The Kurds even claim that Turkey is aiding the Islamic groups fighting against them.¹⁹ At the same time, Turkey is also in contact with the PYD, so its policy is not unequivocal.²⁰

In January 2014, after not being invited to the Geneva 2 Conference as an independent party, the Syrian Kurds decided to declare their autonomous entity, which they called Rojava (Western Kurdistan). They gradually declared the three Kurdish centers in northern Syria to be autonomous cantons (Qamishli-Jazeera, Afrin, and Kobane), even though these are not territorially contiguous. Massoud Barzani, however, opposed the Syrian Kurds' declaration of autonomy for several reasons. First, the measure was led by the PYD, and until now, Barzani has tried to encourage other factions among the Kurds in Syria. Second, Barzani has developed close ties with Turkey in recent years, and Turkey is worried that autonomy for the Syrian Kurds will encourage the separatist ambitions of the Kurds in its territory. Furthermore, it was claimed that the establishment of autonomy in Syria is likely to weaken the status of the KRG in Iraq as a center for all the Kurdish entities, which could impair Barzani's status in particular.²¹ In contrast to Barzani and his party, most of the other parties in the KRG parliament in northern Iraq have decided to recognize Kurdish autonomy in Syria, which could cause tension within the coalition headed by Barzani.²²

According to Professor Ofra Bengio, the Kurdish entity in northern Syria differs from its counterpart in northern Iraq in several ways. First, the Kurds there have not yet obtained support from foreign countries and non-governmental organizations for state-building processes, the way the Iraqi Kurds have. Second, the Iraqi Kurds did not have to struggle with the Iraqi opposition, in the ways the Syrian Kurds have had to fight battles against the Islamic groups in Syria. Third, they do not enjoy the mountainous topography that the Iraqi Kurds utilized at times of danger. Finally, there is no territorial contiguity between the three Kurdish centers in northern Syria.²³

In 2013, the central government in Syria lost effective control of the country's oil fields, which are located close to the border with Iraq and east of Homs.²⁴ The Syrian Kurds managed to take over the oil fields in the area under their control, but since the Syrian government production company ceased to function, the Kurds have used primitive refining methods, which are not only detrimental to the environment and the population's health, but also deplete the oil reserves in the area more rapidly.²⁵ While the Kurds are refining only negligible quantities, they are using the proceeds to finance their continued warfare. In the future, the pipeline that runs from the oil fields in the Kurdish region in northeastern Syria to the port of Tartus, and the gas pipeline from this region that is connected to the national network of gas pipelines, with a branch reaching the port of Baniyas, can generate mutual dependence between the central government in Damascus and an autonomous entity in the Kurdish area. Thus, the questions that have been raised about the distribution of resources in Iraq are therefore also liable to surface in the Syrian context, and certainly in all matters pertaining to the distribution of revenues, although the amounts involved are smaller.

It is nearly certain that if the Kurds declare independence, Israel's response will be quick recognition of the new country. The expected gains from recognizing a Kurdish state would likely greatly outweigh the damage caused by possible linkage to the Palestinian question.

Implications for Israel

Israel formulated its policy on countries on its periphery in the late 1950s. This policy, which aimed to breach the country's regional isolation, included recognition of Israel's interest in creating links to minorities in the region.²⁶ As part of this policy, and in order to facilitate the smuggling of the approximately

5,000 Jews left in Iraq through the north of the country in the 1970s, Israel assisted in training the Iraqi Kurds and supplied them with light weapons and ammunition, as well as anti-tank and anti-aircraft weapons. A large part of this aid was given through Iranian territory with the knowledge of the authorities there.²⁷

Although the growing autonomy enjoyed by the Kurds in northern Iraq following the 1991 Gulf War could have been an opening for cooperation with Israel, Israel's good relations with Turkey in the 1990s were an obstacle in the way of better relations with the Kurds. Following the 2003 war and the strengthening of the autonomy of the Kurds, who were loyal allies of the American forces in Iraq, it appeared that Turkey and Israel had contrary motives with respect to Kurdish autonomy. While Turkey found the Iraqi Kurds' aspirations to independence alarming, the prevailing opinion was that Israel would welcome such independence and would enlist the help of a new Kurdish state in its efforts to deal with threats emanating from Iran, and even Pakistan.²⁸ Some now claim that Turkey's attitude is no longer an obstacle to the development of relations: first, because the Turks themselves have changed their position, at least where northern Iraq is concerned, due to Turkey's need to diversify its energy sources and some expectation on Turkey's part that the KRG will restrain the Kurds in Turkey and Syria; and second, because of the poor state of relations between Israel and Turkey, which no longer justifies Israel's acceptance of this Turkish demand.²⁹

From an Israeli foreign policy perspective, it is nearly certain that if the Kurds declare independence, Israel's response will be quick recognition of the new country, similar to Israel's policy on South Sudan, and in contrast to the

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question of Kosovo (to which Israel has yet to grant recognition). Possible opposition to recognition of an independent Kurdish state could come from those who fear that this would strengthen international recognition of a Palestinian state. However, the expected gains from recognizing a Kurdish state would almost certainly greatly outweigh the damage caused by linkage to the Palestinian question.

It should be emphasized that the American position on the Kurdish question is much more significant than the Israeli position. From this standpoint, it would be easier for Israel to follow the Americans' lead as soon as they take a clear position on the issue. However,

the US is very hesitant to support Kurdish independence in northern Iraq, in part because it wants to avoid giving the impression that the war it initiated in 2003 was the cause of Iraq's dissolution. This is also a source of the current tension between the Kurds in Iraq and the US (and more specifically, the reason behind the pressure exerted by Washington on the KRG not to export oil from northern Iraq directly to Turkey as long as no agreement has been reached with the Iraqi central government), and the Kurds' feeling that they are being "taken for granted."³⁰ Israel's relations with the non-Arab periphery have always been of interest to Washington, but this has never reached the extent of directing or overseeing what Israel does. As long as the open ties between Jerusalem and Erbil do not draw a response from Ankara, it can be assumed that Washington will not stop the process. The leaders of the autonomous region are steering their policy with great sophistication, while striving to avoid premature action, certainly as long as international consent is lacking, especially on the part of the US.

The Kurds' pro-Western views, the history of Israel's support for the Kurds, mainly in Iraq, and the two peoples' similar narratives, combined with the existence of a 150,000-strong Jewish community who emigrated from Kurdistan, contribute to the empathy between Israel and a future Kurdish state. At the same time, this sentiment is not open-ended; there has also been disagreement in the past among the Kurds whether to accept help from Israel, as many thought that this would strengthen the accusation of being "traitors" hurled at the Kurds in their host countries.³¹ Moreover, in contrast to the support that Israel gave the Kurds over the years in Iraq, at the high point of the Israeli-Turkish alliance, Israel helped the Turks combat the PKK; in particular, Israel is reputed to have helped Turkey capture PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan, which has left some Kurds with a grudge.³² Furthermore, although there has been some change in recent years, the Kurds are still traditionally suspicious of foreigners: "There are no friends but the mountains" is a popular local saying.³³

The oil and natural gas reserves in northern Iraq and the possibility of exporting these resources could guarantee the economic future of the region, which is already attracting foreign investments, especially if the Kurdish Regional Government manages to reach agreement with the central government. Although Iraq is defined as a hostile country, some Israeli security and telecommunications companies are already active in northern Iraq.³⁴ The dominance of Turkish companies in northern Iraq raises the question of how open the market will be to other players, but

it is clear that some of the Israeli companies are exporting products that have no competition from the Turkish market.

The fact that a Kurdish state would have Iran as a neighbor, especially if the relations between the two are hostile, is a potential basis for security cooperation with Israel. It would be in the interest of the Kurdish side to cooperate with Israel in order to deter the neighboring countries from interfering with its newfound independence. It would be in Israel's interest to cooperate with the Kurdish state, both for the purpose of intelligence gathering and as a possible base for military operations. At the same time, Israel is already utilizing its close ties with Azerbaijan for these purposes, and it is unclear whether there would be significant added value in cooperation with an independent Kurdish state. However, a range of options would be advantageous for Israel, and that in the event of a possible deterioration in relations with Azerbaijan, Israel would have a substitute.

Where northern Syria is concerned, given that one possible scenario is that Syria will become a failed state and even split into three separate political entities (Kurdish, Sunni, and Alawite), it is clearly in Israel's interest to tighten its relations with the Kurdish minority. In particular, following the consolidation of global jihad activity in Syria and the dangers that could result from it, it is clear that Israel could profit from intelligence and tactical cooperation with the Kurdish minority. Given that global jihad groups are also aiming their activities against the Kurds in Syria, Israel and the Kurds could have a clear common interest in cooperation in this context. At the same time, to some degree, as in northern Iraq, it is possible that Turkish influence could prevail in this region. This would not necessarily be an obstacle to Israeli activity there, but it could constitute a restriction. Moreover, due to concern over a possible uprising by its own Kurdish minority, and also because of regional considerations, Iran is also striving to develop its relations with the Iraqi and Syrian Kurds.

Conclusion

It is in Israel's interest to strengthen the Kurdish entities, particularly when they constitute an independent, and in principle, friendly element. Parties in Israel have likely maintained ongoing contacts with Kurdish groups, with these contacts strengthening as Kurdish autonomy was consolidated in northern Iraq. At this stage, the relations between Israel and/or people of Israeli nationality and the KRG will remain clandestine, because the regional government has no wish to create a confrontation with

its neighbors, i.e., the Arab countries, Turkey, and Iran. It is in the mutual interest of Israel and the Kurds, however, to prepare an infrastructure that can be useful when the political conditions in the region make it possible to use that infrastructure to inaugurate a public relationship. Depending on events in Iraq as well as in Syria, and if the instability persists there, Israel can try to persuade Washington to show more sympathy to the idea of Kurdish independence, because the Kurds are pro-Western, and have already demonstrated their loyalty to the Americans in the past. The Kurds in Iraq can utilize Israel's influence in Washington to moderate the American objections to Kurdish efforts to achieve formal independence, i.e., moving from a de facto to a de jure independent status. However, this will be a lengthy process.

Israel should also find ways to make it clear to Turkey that its support for the Kurds is not anti-Turkish, but is aimed primarily against Iran. Given the traditional suspicion in Turkey toward Israel's relations with the Kurds, and especially in view of the crisis in relations between Israel and Turkey in recent years, it will be difficult to mollify the Turks on this subject. This difficulty is expected to become even more important if the peace talks with the Kurds within Turkey fail.³⁵ At the same time, there are weighty considerations, first and foremost in energy matters, behind the moderating in recent years of the Turkish position on the Kurds, and these considerations will make it difficult for Turkey to significantly change its policy vis-à-vis the Kurdish Regional Government. As such, there is not necessarily any clash between Israel and Turkey's policies on this issue. In addition, an effort can be made to minimize the tension between Israel and Turkey on the question of the Kurds in Syria, in part by disclosing to Turkey the information communicated to the Kurds about global jihad groups. While Turkey is at the moment turning a blind eye to the passage of jihad groups into Syria from its territory, in the long run, Turkey will presumably change its policy, at least in part because these groups also pose a threat to stability inside Turkey.

Notes

- 1 Under the 1920 Treaty of Sevres, the Kurds were due to receive autonomy, or even more, in the regions that were part of the Ottoman Empire. Following the Turkish war of independence and the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne, the Kurds did not ultimately obtain what had been promised them in the Treaty of Sevres. In this context, see Ofra Bengio, *The Kurds of Iraq: Building a State within a State* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2012), p. 10.

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- 3 Bengio, *The Kurds of Iraq*, pp. 10-11.
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- 8 Ofra Bengio, "Will Barzani Declare Independence?" *Jerusalem Post*, April 22, 2012.
- 9 Part of this minority was deliberately moved there in the 1970s on the orders of the Baath Party regime. For further discussion on the subject of Kirkuk, see also Gallia Lindenstrauß, "Turkey vs. the Kurds in Northern Iraq: Approaching Military Intervention?" *Strategic Assessment* 10, no. 2 (2007): 92-98.
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- 18 For the sake of comparison, Iraq's natural gas production in 2010 totaled 10 BCM. Thomas K. Grose, "Iraq Poised to Lead World Oil Supply Growth, but Obstacles Loom," *National Geographic Daily News*, October 9, 2012.
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- 21 Cihan Celik, "Syrian Kurds and their Fragile Autonomy Move," *Hurriyet Daily News*, January 25, 2014.

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- 25 "Syrian Kurds Struggle with Islamist Factions," *al-Monitor*, February 18, 2014.
- 26 For more discussion in this context, see Yoel Guzansky and Gallia Lindenstrauss, "Revival of the Periphery Concept in Israel's Foreign Policy?" *Strategic Assessment* 15, no. 2 (2012): 27-40.
- 27 Bengio, *The Kurds of Iraq*, pp. 73-76.
- 28 Mustafa Kibaroglu, "Clash of Interest over Northern Iraq Drives Turkish-Israeli Alliance to a Crossroads," *Middle East Journal* 59, no. 2 (2005): 247; 262.
- 29 Ofra Bengio and Oded Eran, "Israel and the Kurdish Spring," *Haaretz*, February 26, 2013.
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- 35 For a discussion of this scenario, especially its significance for Turkey's relations with the Kurdish Regional Government, see Park, *Turkey-Kurdish Regional Government Relations*, p. 53.