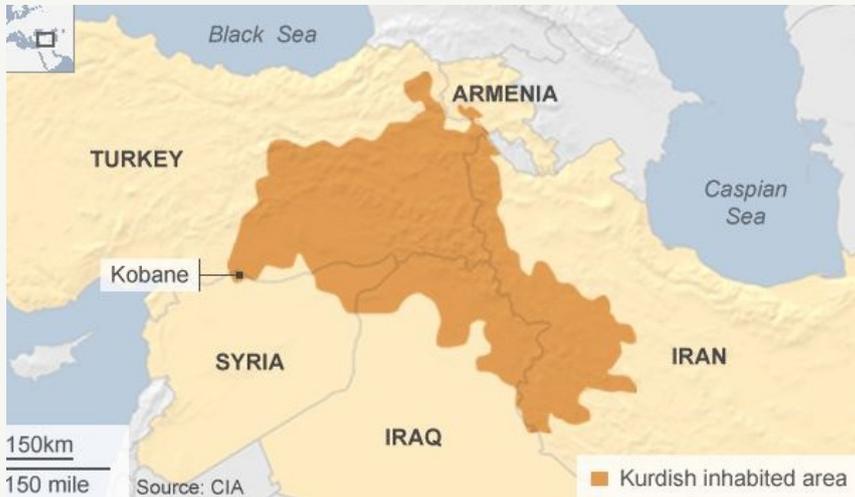


## The Changing Dynamics of Kurdish Politics in the Middle East

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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### *Executive Summary*

Kurds are the largest ethnic minority in the Middle East, living in a wide geography including Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria. They have emerged as one of the primary beneficiaries of the downfall of Saddam Hussein in Iraq and the collapse of Syria, and managed to carve out autonomous regions in both countries. While political differences between Kurdish groups in the region run deep, there is an increasing cross-pollination between them with significant moral, material and human resources shared between Kurds in Turkey, Iraq, Iran and Syria. Kurdish politics and issues in those countries are now intrinsically linked to each other.

Therefore, the one line of analysis that is no longer valid is to regard the Kurds solely as a sub-category of politics in each of these countries. Such a view prevents one from seeing the collaboration between Kurdish groups in different countries, which was crucial in the rise of the Kurds in Syria in recent years. This briefing paper will explain the dynamic political situation in the Kurdish regions of Syria, Iraq, Turkey and Iran while addressing the issues relevant to the broader dynamics of Kurdish politics that affect the larger Kurdish landscape. It thereby aims to help decision makers to develop more comprehensive policies on Kurds that go beyond the political groups claiming to represent the Kurdish populations across the borders in the Middle East.

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## Syria

In Syria, the Kurds went from being inconvenient people that do not fit any larger box of political groupings, to the US's main ally on the ground. The Kurdish-led administrations now control Syria's three strategic dams, access to the Euphrates river and the country's most fertile agricultural fields and much of Syria's oil fields in North Eastern Syria.

The Kurdish political campaign, led by the Democratic Union Party (PYD) started organising themselves in the form of an armed movement very early on during the Syrian uprising. The group received crucial support from the battle-hardened field commanders of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) coming from across Turkey and Iraq. The PKK already had a significant number of Kurds from Syria within its ranks. Some of those Syrian Kurds occupied leading military posts within the PKK and had been fighting against the Turkish army since the mid-1980s.

The Kurdish group, which was excluded from the Syrian opposition upon the request of Turkey since 2011, did not receive any air support from the coalition forces up until a month into the siege of Kobane, a Kurdish town on Turkey's border, which came under a large-scale attack of ISIL forces in September 2014. During this time, the People's Protection Units (YPG) - the main Kurdish armed group, captured significant areas from the al-Qaeda affiliate in Syria and other Islamist Syrian Arab forces and established three non-contiguous administration in Afrin, Kobane and Hasakah regions of Northern Syria.

As the resistance of the YPG against a numerically and technically superior ISIL force in Kobane caught the attention of US military planners as well as the world media, the relationship between the US-led coalition and the Kurdish group changed dramatically. The US forces airdropped the first batch of arms supplies to YPG forces in Kobane on 20th October in 2014. Since then, the YPG, allied with Arab, Christian and Turkmen forces established an umbrella military organisation under the name of Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and went on the offensive against ISIL beyond the Kurdish-majority areas. As a result, the SDF captured Manbij to the west of the Euphrates river and southern Raqqa to the south. The group now captured several neighbourhoods within the city of Raqqa, which has been ISIL's de facto capital.

However, this success began altering the power dynamics within Syria and in the region. The collapse of the peace process between the PKK and Turkey in July 2015, led Turkey to become even more hostile to the rise of the Kurdish-led administrations in Northern Syria due to its threat perceptions. Eventually, the Turkish army and some Turkmen and Arab allies in Syria conducted an operation into Syrian territory in August 2016 with the dual aim of capturing areas controlled by ISIL and preventing these areas from being captured by the Kurdish-led forces.

In the early years of the Syrian uprising, the Assad regime, lacking resources to control areas such as North Eastern Syria, distant from its power base in the West, couldn't offer a strong resistance against the Kurds, some FSA and Islamist groups, who captured areas across Northern Syria. The position of both the Syrian regime and that of Iran has recently turned into active hostility against the Kurdish-led alliance, as the militants marched on to Raqqa with the help of US air support.

Today, there is a rush to capture Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor, with Iran, the regime, Russia and Turkey, each for their own reasons, trying to slow down or prevent Raqqa from being captured by the Kurdish-led SDF forces. The actions of the pro-Iranian forces on the ground in Iraq and Syria suggest that Tehran's aim is to open a secure land-corridor from Iran to Lebanon. The pro-Iranian Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF) in Iraq have already reached the Syrian border on two points.

On the other hand, Moscow has been focusing on capturing oil-rich Deir ez-Zor in Eastern Syria with the regime forces before the US-supported Kurdish-led SDF manages to do it. This turn of events suggests that the military developments around the Eastern Syria will take priority in determining the future of Syria. The capturing of these areas by pro-Iranian or pro-regime forces could end up becoming a significant threat to the long-term stability in the region.

The Turkish government, for its own threat perceptions, want to target the YPG-controlled Afrin areas. The Turkish forces inside Syria have been shelling YPG controlled areas for the last couple of weeks. This will also be an important development to watch, as a large-scale incursion by Turkey can lead to the slowdown or cancellation of the Raqqa offensive since it will push the Kurdish forces to reinforce their forces in Afrin by pulling their forces out of Raqqa.

## Iraq

Kurds in the Kurdish Region of Iraq are also going through consequential times, especially since the President of the Kurdistan Region Massoud Barzani announced that the territory would hold an independence referendum on September 25. President Barzani had multiple discussions with the US and Turkish leadership about independence issues. A landlocked Kurdistan in current Iraqi territories cannot survive without cooperation from one of their neighbours, Turkey, Iraq, or Iran. The Barzani-led Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), which controls almost all of the strategic institutions of the Kurdistan region, enjoys good relations with Turkey.

The Turkish government needs a stronger KDP as a bulwark against the PKK, which dominates the Kurdish political landscape in Turkey and Syria and is a significant force in Iranian and Iraqi Kurdish regions. The KDP, on the other hand, pursues a policy favouring independence, which is something that will receive a very strong resistance from within the Turkish establishment, which includes factions beyond the full control of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. Thinking in longer terms, the broader Turkish establishment regards the possibility of an independent Kurdistan as a major security threat which could extend political support for the Kurds in Turkey if the pro-Turkish Barzani administration is removed from power.

The prospects of an independent Kurdistan would worry Tehran almost as much as Ankara. Being very influential over the Shia-led governments in Iraq and the militarily present in Sunni areas of the country, Iran would see a breakaway Kurdistan as a blow against its dominance in Iraq. Iran would have more influence over a Kurdistan region which is part of Iraq than as an independent entity. Facing regional hostility, President Barzani's independence bid didn't get an active backing from any other forces, except for Israel. The debate about the independence of Iraqi Kurdistan came at a time when Iraqi Kurdish politics faced an array of problems. Massoud Barzani's presidential term extension expired in August 2015, and the Iraqi Kurdish political parties couldn't come to an agreement on how to proceed. The crisis led to the region's Parliament becoming dysfunctional, and several ministers from the KRG government were expelled by the KDP.

Iraqi Kurdish politics were marred by a civil war between 1994 and 1997. The Kurdish leadership reached a consensus to create a regional government only after pressure from the US in 1998. However, the experiment of a regional government didn't manage to carry out a transition from political parties to the institutionalisation of regional government organs. The Kurdish fighting force the Peshmerga, internal security the Asayish and education were never united. The turmoil following the rise of ISIL and rivalling regional allies of the main political parties of the Kurdish region do not facilitate a further reunification of the Iraqi Kurdish politics and could lead to further alienation of Erbil and Sulaymaniyah, the two power centres of the region. These problems make the prospect of Iraqi Kurdish independence not likely even after a "yes" vote is secured in the proposed referendum. However, a strong "yes" vote would strengthen President Barzani's hand in his negotiations with the Iraqi central government and domestic Kurdish politics.

## Turkey and Iran

Despite housing half of all the Kurdish population, the developments in Kurdish politics inside Turkey are, at this moment in time, secondary to the political developments in Syria and Iraq. The latest round of peace process between the PKK and the Turkish government started in early 2013 and came to an end in July 2015. The period was followed by a huge spike in violence in the country, with the pro-PKK forces and the government engaged in prolonged combat in urban settings for the first time since the PKK's armed campaign began in 1984.

According to a recent UN report, only in the last two years, the government crackdown on Kurdish rebels resulted in the death of thousands of people, armed combatants as well as civilians, the displacement of hundreds of thousands of people and the complete destruction of several towns. The conflict has also produced a high level of discrimination and racism towards the Kurds and a lack of democracy and freedom of expression in the broader Turkish community.

Turkey's Kurdish conflict is one of the world's most intractable intra-state conflicts that is still active and have a significant effect on regional dynamics. The dynamics of the Kurdish issue have been one of the primary focuses of Turkish foreign policy in the region. This intractable conflict gave birth to the PKK, which ended up becoming one of the Middle East's most powerful violent non-state actors operating under different forms in Turkey, Syria, Iran and Iraq. The pro-PKK political party, the People's Democracy Party (HDP) achieved over 10 percent of the public support in the last couple of polls in Turkey.

Militarily, the PKK or the pro-PKK forces have been operating from southwestern Kirkuk to Qandil and Sinjar mountain in Iraqi Kurdistan, and from Raqqa to Afrin and Hasakah in Syria. The group also carries out rural guerrilla-type warfare inside Turkey and carries out attacks beyond the Kurdish majority regions. The group's Iranian wing is also operating inside Iran but in a ceasefire position since 2011. Thus, the PKK at different points and to different levels fought against Turkey, Iran, ISIL, the Syrian regime, and other Iraqi Kurdish groups.

The prospect of a new peace process between Turkey and the PKK remains very low, at least until 2019 when the next general and Presidential elections will take place in Turkey. The collapse of the peace process caused a huge breakdown of trust against each other's teams. The factionalism within the Turkish establishment and the nationalist allies that President Erdogan will need to rely on for the 2019 elections is also an important factor preventing a political opening from the government's side.

According to the PKK's strategic calculations, an intensified armed campaign will help to topple President Erdogan. On the other hand, the Turkish officials have renewed faith in their new streamlined military structure and their access to more sophisticated weapons, such as armed drones, in their fight against the PKK.

In Iran, there are several active Kurdish parties linked to Iraqi Kurdish parties or the PKK. Most of these groups recently restarted their military activities against Iran; both the KDP and the PKK also regard these groups as a counter balance to Iranian intervention into Kurdish politics in Syria or Iraq.

## Conclusion

The regional Kurdish political landscape is being dominated by two broader movements, the PKK and the KDP and their affiliates. The outreach by Russia, the Syrian regime and Iran was reversed as the Kurdish gains in Syria and Iraq reached to levels undesirable by these forces. As a result, the Syrian and Iraqi Kurdish political leadership are more pro-US than before.

Russian rapprochement towards the Kurds didn't result in a concrete alliance with Moscow's primary allies on the ground: the Syrian and Iranian regimes have an anti-Kurdish stance. Moscow's rapprochement with Turkey also made it more difficult for the Kremlin to keep the Kurds by its side. As explained above, there are currently two practical alliances taking place in Syria; while Russia and Iran push pro-Iranian and regime forces to capture areas from ISIL, the US-led international coalition is helping the Kurdish-led SDF to capture Raqqa and surrounding areas to drive a wedge between pro-Iranian forces in Iraq and Syria.

As the Middle East is increasingly divided between pro-Iranian and anti-Iranian and along Sunni-Shia fault lines, the Kurds, do not fall into either category yet. The next few years will also be a struggle between the two camps in bringing the Kurds onto their side.

The bitter rivalry between secular Kurdish movements also creates a possible opening for Islamist Kurdish groups. The ISIL and al-Qaeda have for a long time had Kurdish battalions. Several Sunni Kurdish Islamist groups in Iraqi Kurdistan and Turkey are also receiving support from Iran.

The Kurds are poised to benefit more from the crumbling existing nation-state order in the Middle East. But, their chance of seizing the opportunities will depend primarily on their ability to forge unity among rival political parties. The internal division, lack of a unifying leadership, has been one of the perennial reasons why the Kurds didn't succeed in establishing their own state in history.

There is increased factionalism and fragmentation in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq which is one of the major obstacles for self-determination of the Kurdish people. On the other hand, some Kurdish groups complain about the hegemony and the centralised control of the use of violence by the pro-PKK groups in Syria. One of the examples of cooperation across the Kurdish political parties took place during fighting in Kobane, where Iraqi Kurdish parties delivered weapons to Syrian Kurdish forces defending the city in 2014.

One of the main challenges for the Kurds in the region, therefore, is to go beyond being proxies of the larger forces, and instead, to become allies of those forces.