VIEWPOINT
The Kurds in the changing political map of the Middle East

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Abstract

This article examines how the rise of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), the on-going Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) insurgency and current peace negotiations with the Turkish government, and the recently declared autonomy by the Syrian Kurds—largely under the leadership of the Democratic Union Party (PYD)—have empowered the Kurds and challenged the existing political map of the Middle East largely established after World War I. At the same time this article also considers the rise of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) as one of the other main tipping points changing the Middle East political map. The roles and policies of Turkey and the United States to these transformations are also analysed.

Keywords: Kurds; ISIS; Middle East; politics; Syria; Iraq; KRG; Turkey.

Kurd di xerîteya siyasî ya Rojhilata Navîn a di guherînê de

Armanca vê gotarê ew e tehlîl bike ka duristbûna Hukûmeta Herêma Kurdistanê, serhildana berdewam a Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê û danûstandinên aştiyê ligel hukûmeta Tirkiyeyê, û ew otonomiya ku kurdên Sûriyeyê, heyamên dawî, piranî di bin pêşengiya Partiya Yekîtiya Demokratîk de ragihandin çawa kurd bihêz kirine û çawa hevsengiya xerîteya siyasî ya Rojhilata Navîn, ya bi piranî li dû Şerê Cîhanî yê Yekem hatiye binecihkirin, xistiye ber birparsyaran. Gotar herwiha balê dikêşe ser peydabûna Dewleta Îslamî li Iraq û Sûriyeyê wek xaleke dîtir a werçerxanê di guherîna xerîteya siyasî ya Rojhilata Navîn de. Herwiha, dewr û siyasetên Tirkiye û Dewletên Yekgirtî yên Emerîkayê yên di barê van guherînan de jî hatine tehlîlkirin.

کورد له نهخشهی سیاسیی ڕۆژ ههڵاتی ناوهڕاستدا

ئهم وتاره لهوه دهکۆڵێتهوه که چۆن سهرههڵدانی حکومهتی ههرێمی کوردستان، ڕایهڕینی بهردهوامی یارتی کرێکارانی کوردستان (پ.ک.ک.) و وتووێژهکانی ئاشتهوایی ئێستا له گهڵ حکومهتی تورکیا و، ئهو ئۆتۆنۆمییهی که لهم دواییانهدا له لایهن کوردهکانی سوریاوه—به زۆرری به ڕێبهرایهتی یارتی یهکێتی دیموکراتیک (پ.ی.د.)—کوردهکانی بههێز کردووه و نهخشهی ئێستای ڕۆژ ههڵاتی ناوهڕاستی خستۆته ژێر یرسیار، ئهو نهخشهیهی که به لایهنی سهرهکی دوای شهڕی یهکهمی جیهانیی دامهزرا. ههروهها، ئهم وتاره سهرههڵدانی "دهوڵهتی ئیسلامیی له عێراق و سوریا" (داعش/داعس) وهکوو یهکێک له خاڵهکانی وهرچهرخان له گۆڕینی نهخشهی سیاسیی ڕۆژ ههڵاتی ناوهڕاست دهخاته بهرچاو. جگه له ئهمانه، دهور و سیاسهتهکانی تورکیا و وڵاته یهکگرتووهکانی ئهمریکا لهم ناڵوگۆڕانهدا تیکراوهتهوه.

Introduction

The rise of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in northern Iraq as well as the on-going Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) insurgency and current peace negotiations with the Turkish government have empowered the Kurds and challenged the existing political map of the Middle East. On 19 July, 2012 the previously almost unheard of Syrian Kurds - largely under the leadership of the Democratic Union Party (PYD), a party closely associated with the PKK - suddenly emerged as a potential game changer in the Syrian civil war when in an attempt to consolidate their increasingly desperate position government troops were abruptly pulled out of the major Kurdish areas (Gunter 2014, Ahmed and Gunter, 2013, Romano and Gurses, 2014). The Kurds in

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Syria had suddenly become autonomous, a situation that also gravely affected neighbouring Turkey and the virtually independent KRG in Iraq. Indeed, the precipitous rise of the Kurds in Syria bids to become one of the main tipping points that might help change the artificial borders of the Middle East established after World War I by the notorious Sykes-Picot Agreement.[1]

This article looks at what both the traditional state actors and non-state actors have at stake since Syria's Kurds gained their autonomy in July 2012. In particular, also starting with a quick review of historical events since the foundation of the Turkish Republic in 1923, we examine what this could mean for Turkey, the United States, PKK and KRG and how this could affect the region in general going forward. At the same time this article also considers the rise of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) [also known as ISIL or the Islamic State (IS)] as one of the other main tipping points changing the Middle East political map. ISIS also, of course, has become an existential threat to both the Syrian and Iraqi Kurds as well as potentially to virtually all the other state and non-state actors in the Middle East.

Thus, ironically both the Syrian (as well as Iraqi and Turkish) Kurds and ISIS, archenemies that they are, are playing key roles in the changing Middle East political map. Both ISIS and the Syrian Kurds claim to be post-state entities that supersede the concept of the Westphalian state. ISIS purports to have established a trans-state caliphate, while the Syrian Kurds claim to have instituted Abdullah Öcalan's philosophy of democratic autonomy or bottom-up rule largely cut loose from the concept of the traditional state (Jongerden and Akkaya, 2013). What has caused the traditional state and with it the Middle East political map to weaken and potentially change so much?

From the perspective of this writing at the beginning of November 2014, it appears that there is a wide range of political, sociological, economic, and military factors, among others. However, the bottom line is the virtual collapse of the traditional state system in Syria and Iraq with the resulting absence of its previous legitimacy (see: Spyer, 2014a and 2014b; Bengio, 2012). As *The Economist* recently concluded: "Across the Middle East non-state actors increasingly set the agenda, challenging governments, overthrowing them or prompting them to retrench behind increasingly repressive controls" (Economist, 2014b: 57)." Some have even argued that only two and a half states remain in the region: Turkey, Iran, and Egypt as the fractional digit.

In addition to the artificiality of the remaining states, other factors are also at work. Frequently, the region's weak, sometimes minority-dominated governments fail to integrate their populations within any sense of inclusive nationality. At the same time important political ideologies such as Arab nation-

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alism, political Islam, Jihadism,[2] and Salafism[3] transcend existing state borders. Existing state governments also frequently fail to provide public services such as functioning courts, schools, or hospitals. These failures prompt citizens to look to non-state religious groups and charities for the services which successful states are supposed to provide. Furthermore, the civil wars in former Iraq and Syria have resulted in a horrendous internally displaced person (IDP) crisis and further international refugee problems for Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq, among others. These IDP and refugee problems have strongly contributed to the destabilisation of the existing state system.

Tribal loyalties have also been reactivated and rejuvenated to the extent that we now can refer to tribes as well as even gas stations with flags, instead of states with flags. In addition, the age-old Sunni-Shia split has further torn Iraq and Syria apart. Thus, the seemingly mad violence and power of ISIS is largely a symptom of the collapsed state system. A beginning solution would require sociological, political, and economic answers as well as military ones, which, of course, remain necessary to provide security.

ISIS

There are, of course, a number of additional specific factors that also should be mentioned. Although vehemently denied, the earlier tacit support of Turkey, which allowed jihadists from all over the world to transit its territory and cross into Syria, has been well documented (*Zaman*, 2013 and 2014; Sly, 2014). Turkey's motivation was to enable the Syrian opposition to defeat Assad and in addition, quash the Syrian Kurds who had declared a thinly disguised PKK proto-state on the southern Turkish border. Chechnya, long since radicalised by Islamic ferment and struggle, has been one of many important contributors to this jihadist traffic (Ollivant and Fishman, 2014).

These jihadists, who sought to recapture the lost glories of a resplendent Islam, were bolstered by others whose true motivations were more a sense of adventure and excitement all the way to the pathologically sick and criminal who revelled in approved thrill-killings, rape, and the chance for wealth. Drugs have even been used to convince converts to launch suicide attacks

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[2] Jihadism in the sense used here has come to mean a commitment to violent struggle against the perceived opponents of Islam. Frequently it involves transnational actions that tend to breakdown existing state borders, among other results.

[3] Salafism is a movement critical of what it considers to be misguided additions to Islam such as grave visitation, saint venerations, and monument preservations, among others. The doctrine calls for abolishing these unwanted accretions and returning to the actions of the original followers of the Prophet Muhammad, the salaf or predecessors. Sometimes, but not always hand-in-hand with Jihadism, Salafism too involves transnational actions that tend to breakdown existing state borders.

with the promise of immediate entrance into a paradise that would offer them 72 virgins.[4]

The beheading of their enemies is the most infamous of ISIS's actions. The group interprets some verses in the Quran (especially in Al-Anfal and Muhammad) to justify this deed. The Surah Muhammad, in section 4, states: "So when you meet those who disbelieve [in battle], strike [their] necks until, when you have inflicted slaughter upon them, and then secure their bonds …"[5] Another justification of beheading lies in the Surah Al-Anfal: "… those who disbelieve so strike [them] upon the necks and strike from them every fingertip."[6] The ISIS method of intimidation is also supported by section 60 in the Surah Al-Anfal: "And prepare against them whatever you are able of power and of steeds of war by which you may terrify the enemy of Allah and your enemy and others besides them whom you do not know [but] whom Allah knows. And whatever you spend in the cause of Allah will be fully re-paid to you, and you will not be wronged."[7]

Paradoxically, even some Christians and Kurds have joined ISIS for either sheer adventure or ideological reasons dealing with anti-Americanism/Westernism or whatever perceived grievance they bore. However, the totals of these latter two groups are probably low and should not be over-emphasised. Still, that non-Muslims and non-Sunnis have been recruited warns against facile explanatory factors for the strength of ISIS. Clearly there is much that we simply do not know about ISIS (e.g. Doostdar, 2014). Nevertheless, what is undoubtedly relevant to our understanding is the strict and uncompromising Wahabi Islamic doctrine prevalent in Saudi Arabia as well as finances from sympathisers in such states as Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates, among others (see Rogin, 2014; Chulov, 2014; Carey et al. 2014).

Even the United States has inadvertently helped what has now morphed into the Islamic State through lax policies that allowed many of its current leaders to escape from earlier U.S. detention centres in Iraq (Thompson and Suri, 2014). The list includes the caliph himself Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, who spent almost five years imprisoned at Camp Bucca in southern Iraq, as well as Abu Muslim al-Turkmani, Abu Louay, Abu Kassem, Abu Jurnas, Abu Shema, and Abu Suja, among others. In prison, these extremists were held side-by-

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[4] One does not have to subscribe to the analyses of Daniel Pipes who sees these violent attributes inherent in even mainline Islam to admit that historically the very English word assassin is said to stem from the secretive Islamic organisation that employed hashish to drug its adherents into launching suicide attacks against Crusader enemies more than 1000 years ago. Furthermore, the Quran promises such earthly sexual rewards for its fallen warriors. For a recent example of Daniel Pipes work, see his "Explaining the Denial: Denying Islam's Role in Terror," 20, *Middle East Quarterly* (Spring 2013), pp. 3-12.

[5] Quran, Surah Muhammad, 47:4. http://quran.com/47 (last accessed 27 April 2015).

[6] Quran, Al-Anfal, 8:12. http://quran.com/8 (last accessed 27 April 2015).

[7] Quran, Al-Anfal, 8:60. http://quran.com/8 (last accessed 27 April 2015).

side with those less radical, allowing U.S. coalition prisons in Iraq to become recruitment centres and even training grounds for ISIS recruits. Moderates who objected to being radicalised were harassed and coerced through so-called Sharia courts that spread through the prisons. Limited resources to evaluate the prisoners effectively helped obscure what was occurring. Eventually, even prisoners with strong evidence against them were still released because of the weaknesses of the Iraqi court system and the refusal of the United States to share classified information. In addition, some of the most extreme radicals who had been sentenced to death were freed by successful ISIS attacks on what were now Iraqi prisons after the United States withdrew from Iraq at the end of 2011.

ISIS has clearly learned much about how to survive to fight successfully another day through its past travails. The organisation is now burgeoning because of its perceived success, dynamism, and sense of destiny. The Mosul victory in June 2014 enforced these attributes by bringing vast amounts of captured finances (McCoy, 2014) and some of the latest U.S. military equipment into the organisation's grasp. Although ISIS now seemed to be the enemy of everybody and had become the specific target of a hastily constructed U.S. alliance, its opponents' strength was much less than the sum of their parts due to their mutual hatreds and lack of unity. The United States, for example, forgot Churchill's positive reference to the devil when Nazi Germany attacked the Soviet Union and its own wartime alliance with Stalin, and refused to admit Iran to its anti-ISIS coalition even though the Shia state was clearly one of the most effective potential opponents of Sunni ISIS. For the time being at least, ISIS could mobilise the maximum possibility of its strength, while its myriad opponents were divided and unable to strike back in unison.

Thus, when ISIS suddenly struck the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) on 3 August, 2014, its vaunted military or peshmerga found themselves out-gunned due to inferior military equipment and initially without allies. Since the KRG is still not yet independent, American aid could only legally be given through Baghdad, which hesitated to give too much lest the Kurds use it to become independent. Only after an emergency appeal from KRG president Massoud Barzani for immediate U.S. aid (Goodenough, 2014) to stem the ISIS tide that had driven within a mere 20 miles of its capital Erbil with its 1.5 million inhabitants, was ISIS brought, at least, to a temporary halt by U.S. air power in the Iraqi Kurdish region. However, the present U.S. proclamation that it will not commit U.S. "boots on the ground" obviously encourages ISIS to believe that it can eventually triumph because of its enemies' continuing weakness and disunity. At the same time, however, ISIS's attacks on the two rival Kurdish groups in Iraq (KRG) and Syria (PYD/PKK) have served to bring them together. Indeed a new agreement between the two Kurdish rivals was announced on 25 October, 2014 (van Wilgenburg and Saadullah, 2014). In addition, ISIS's attack on the Syrian Kurds in Kobanê has

elicited nascent U.S. support for the PYD to the chagrin of Turkey (Gurbuz, 2014; *Economist*, 2014b).

For their part the Iraqi Kurds have become all but independent. At the same time the Kurds in Turkey seem to be headed toward some type of local self-rule or autonomy. Furthermore, raging civil wars in Syria since 2011 and now again in Iraq with ISIS's attacks that captured Mosul on 10th June, 2014, Sinjar on 3rd August, 2014, and continuing strikes toward Baghdad itself may well have led irrevocably to the final breakup of both Syria and Iraq as originally created by the Sykes-Picot Agreement of World War I.

The collapse of the poorly conceived Geneva II process for peace in Syria in January 2014 amply illustrates the bankruptcy of U.S. foreign policy when it ignores these changes, especially the rise of ISIS and the Syrian Kurds. The United States decided not to invite either the Syrian Kurds or Iran to Geneva II. How could one possibly believe that a formula for peace could be found when two of the main participants to the Syrian struggle were not even invited to the peace talks? Indeed one might well argue that the Syrian Kurds controlled more territory, were far more unified, and apparently more democratic and secular than any other opposition group that was invited!

Furthermore, the U.S. ignoring of the important role the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) played in helping roll back ISIS and save the lives of thousands of Yezidi Kurds threatened with ISIS's genocidal campaign in August 2014 further illustrates the changing Middle East political map. When the Kurds rallied against ISIS in front of Erbil with U.S. air support in August 2014, it was not just the KRG peshmerga, but also the battle-hardened PKK militants from the Qandil Mountains in northern Iraq, and the Democratic Union Party (PYD) fighters from Rojava (Syrian Kurdistan), closely associated with the PKK, who helped save the day. One month later it was again the PYD/PKK who successfully used U.S. air support to beat back ISIS's attack on Kobanê in Syria. The U.S. aid to the PKK-related PYD showed how the changing political map in the Middle East was also making for strange bedfellows. The ISIS threat created even stranger associates by bringing U.S. air power together with Iranian ground forces to recapture Amerli, an Iraqi city near the Iranian border, from ISIS in August 2014.

If the United States is serious about pursuing ISIS in its Syrian lair, it might also find itself working with Bashir Assad's government in Syria as well as such Al-Qaeda affiliates as Jablat al-Nusra and Salafists/Jihadists as the Islamic Front. This is because, with the sole exception of the Syrian Kurds, no meaningful moderate Syrian opposition exists for the United States to work with. In addition, the United States may also find itself cooperating with Iran, Hezbollah and Russia to bring down ISIS.

At the same time Turkey will surely come to rue its earlier support for Jihadists in Syria. ISIS blowback against Turkey has already led to it holding 49 Turks captured when it overran Mosul in June 2014 as well as ISIS threats to

attack targets in Turkey. However, this did not prevent Turkey from passively watching ISIS try to destroy the Syrian Kurds holed up in Kobanê just across the Turkish border during the vicious fighting for that city in September to October 2014. Again, the collapse of the traditional state system in Syria and Iraq has made for strange and confused bedfellows as the parties involved grope for new ways to understand the changing situation.

Turkey

Until recently Turkey has taken an almost schizophrenic attitude toward the Kurds, fearing that their national claims would potentially destroy Turkish territorial integrity. Indeed, during the 1920s and 1930s, Turkey crushed three great Kurdish uprisings: Sheikh Said in 1925, Ararat in 1930, and Dersim (now called Tunceli) in 1938. All Kurdish schools, organisations, and publications, and religious institutions were closed. The name "Mountain Turks" when referring to the Kurds in Turkey served as a code term for these actions and the refusal to even recognise the existence of the Kurds.

Naturally Turkey also closely monitored Kurdish activities across its borders. That Khoybun, the first transnational Kurdish political party, backed the Ararat rebellion of 1927-30 from its base in Syria reinforced the Turkish fear of the Kurds. Although the Treaty of Saadabad in 1937 and subsequently the Baghdad Pact (formally known as the Middle East Treaty Organisation) in 1955 were both on paper fashioned to contain Soviet expansion while also acting as non-aggression pacts, both conventions also implicitly obligated Turkey, Iran, and Iraq to cooperate on the Kurdish issue. This collaboration included measures to prevent cross-border communication and support among the Kurds and, in general, sought to prevent any joint, transnational Kurdish action that might challenge international boundaries set up following World War I. Syria was certainly a silent partner in both endeavours, and therefore its Kurds were a silent victim.

In August 1944 Mount Dalanpur located where Turkey, Iraq, and Iran converge was the site of a famous meeting of Kurdish delegates from those three states as well as Syria. The participants signed a treaty known as *Peyami-ani sei Sanowar* (The Treaty of the Three Boundaries) in which they pledged mutual support, the sharing of resources, and the restoration of the Kurdish language and culture. Although this meeting did not result in any practical Kurdish unity, it did illustrate the existence of transnational Kurdish aspirations and thus correspondingly threats to the states in which Kurds lived. Nearly 70 years later, in September 2013, another pan-Kurdish conference was scheduled to take place in Irbil, but was postponed due to internal Kurdish disputes. Given the Kurds' growing empowerment, it will be interesting to see what its transnational results will be when this pan-Kurdish gathering finally does occur. Turkey has intervened militarily many times into northern Iraq because of the Kurdish situation – most recently in 2011. It was not until 1926 that Turkey conceded what is now northern Iraq or Mosul, the Ottoman

name for the province, to Iraq. It is only very recently that Turkey has come to see the possibilities of cooperation with the KRG and even began formal negotiations with the PKK in January 2013. These initiatives already have had important effects on the Kurds in Syria by leading Turkey to take a somewhat less hostile attitude toward the PKK-affiliated Democratic Union Party (PYD).

Ankara has played a key role in assisting the opposition in the Syrian civil war. The Syrian National Council (before it was succeeded by the Syrian National Coalition in November 2012) was founded and largely based in Istanbul. The Free Syrian Army (FSA) maintains its nominal headquarters in south eastern Turkey. However, by indiscriminately supporting the Syrian opposition and allowing anyone associated with it free transit to fight Assad, Turkey has not only been aiding the FSA but also has been aiding Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIS, armed groups affiliated with al-Qaeda or worse that are also part of the Syrian opposition, but opposed to the Syrian Kurds.

The PYD, founded in Syria in 2003 by the PKK, has been enjoying de facto autonomy just across the border from Turkey since 19 July, 2012. Although it might be one latent reason why Turkey decided to open negotiations with the PKK in 2013, the resulting situation in Syria has wrought havoc in Turkey. However, if Turkey intervenes against the PYD, it risks getting bogged down in a quagmire. In addition, the al-Qaeda-affiliated groups mentioned above that are supported by Turkey have already fallen into conflict with the PYD. In March 2012, Murat Karayılan, the PKK military leader holed up in his Qandil mountains sanctuary on the Iraqi-Iranian border, declared that "if the Turkish state intervenes against our people in western Kurdistan, all of Kurdistan will turn into a war zone" (Hemming 2012). Nevertheless, the PYD already has clashed on numerous occasions with the Turkish-backed al-Qaeda militants referred to above in Kurdish populated areas of Syria (Lang, 2013).

In July 2013, these battles intensified as Turkey's policy toward Syria and the PYD lurched toward crisis (Idiz, 2013). Fearing the effect on its own disaffected Kurds, Turkey has also repeatedly warned the Syrian Kurds, who have raised the PYD flag only 50 meters from the Turkish border, not to declare autonomy (*Today's Zaman*, 2013). Turkey's then foreign minister and now Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu declared:

> We expect 3 basic things from the Kurds in Syria. . . . Firstly for them not to cooperate with the regime. . . . The second is for them not to form a de-facto foundation based on ethnic or religious bases. . . . The third is for them not to engage in activities that could endanger the security of the Turkish border (*Sabah*, 2013).

In a surprise visit to Ankara on 26 July, 2013, Salih Muslim, the leader of the PYD, assured the Turkish authorities that the Syrian Kurds continued to see themselves as part of Syria and posed no threat to Turkey's territorial in-

tegrity. However, he did add that the Kurds in Syria needed to establish "a temporary serving administration until the chaos in Syria is over" (Sabah, 2013). Shortly afterwards, however, and to the disapproval of Turkey who did not want what it viewed as a proto-PKK state on its Syrian border, the Syrian Kurds (PYD) formally established three autonomous cantons: Hasaka (Jazira), Kobanê (Ayn al-Arab), and Afrin (Kurd Dagh).

So what does Turkey now want? During ISIS's siege of Kobanê in September - October 2014, Turkey demanded, as the price for its intervention against ISIS, a buffer and no-fly zone to insulate itself from both ISIS and the PYD, upon both of whom Turkey looked with equal apprehension. Turkey also probably viewed a buffer and no-fly zone as a protected base from which to allow the Syrian opposition to attack Assad with impunity. Turkey also wanted the PYD to end its implicit alliance with Assad and join the Syrian opposition to overthrow him. Only if the PYD agreed to these terms, would Turkey enter the fray against ISIS and thus supposedly help alleviate ISIS's siege of Kobanê (*Economist*, 2014a).

The United States

Given its immense power and continuing involvement in Middle Eastern politics, the United States is clearly also very important in the region and for Kurds with the potential to be the most important. For this reason, the situation regarding the United States warrants close analysis.

The United States has not formulated a grand foreign policy strategy towards the Kurds due to them living across four states. What is more, these states are clearly important for U.S. foreign policy. The Kurds cause problems for the United States when it deals with these more important states. Nevertheless, given its interest in Middle East stability as well as human rights, the United States has come to accept that it does owe the Kurds a certain amount of attention and even protection. This has been true especially in Iraq given how the Iraqi Kurds supported the United States in the 2003 war against Saddam Hussein when others such as Turkey did not. Indeed the virtually independent KRG in Iraq largely owes its very existence to the United States. This was illustrated once again in August 2014 when the U.S. air strikes helped save the KRG from ISIS.

Despite its support for the Iraqi Kurds, however, the United States opposes their independence. The US feels that this would lead to the partition and end of Iraq and thus lead to greater instability in the Middle East. The United States position on this point is all the more adamant given the attitudes of other states in the region that oppose Kurdish independence as a threat to their own territorial integrity. The United States tentatively does support the KRG as a way to maintain the political unity of Iraq and satisfy the Kurds. This position, of course, can be inherently contradictory and is a

very fine line to implement successfully, especially given the new de facto Turkish-KRG alliance.

On the other hand, rightly or wrongly, the Turkish Kurds are often perceived in the United States as too closely tied to the PKK, which the United States considers to be a terrorist organisation. As a result, the cause of the Turkish Kurds in the United States has not prospered as well as that of their brothers and sisters to the south. This is all the more so given the longstanding U.S. alliance with Turkey. The United States has paid even less attention to the Kurds in Iran, although they might someday serve as a potential ally against the Iranian regime in much the same way as the Iraqi Kurds did against Saddam Hussein's Iraq. As for the Kurds in Syria, they were clearly off the radar until Kurdish autonomy occurred in July 2012. Subsequently, however, the United States has shown little interest in the Kurds of Syria because of its deference to Turkish sensitivities and vision of a united Syria contributing to stability. On the other hand, the Syrian Kurds are keenly aware of the United States' all- important role and would dearly like to win its support. Now that the United States seems committed to attacking ISIS in its Syrian base, the United States will probably have to work more closely with the PYD and its senior partner, the PKK, as indeed occurred during the failed ISIS siege of Kobanê during September-October 2014.

US foreign policy toward the Syrian Kurds

The United States had long viewed Syria with caution and often hostility as a radical Arab state sponsor of international terrorism and implacable foe of Israel. This position was formalised by the Syria Accountability and Lebanese Sovereignty Restoration Act (SALSRA) the U.S. Congress passed on 12 December, 2003. The stated purpose of this bill was to end what the United States saw as Syrian support for terrorism and its illegal presence in Lebanon, stop Syria's development of weapons of mass destruction which included chemical weapons, and halt Syria's illegal importation of Iraqi oil and shipments of military items to anti-U.S. forces in Iraq. Ironically, however, SALSRA did not address Syrian human rights violations.

Until the ISIS crisis arose in the summer of 2014, the United States had the following priorities in Syria. First, respond successfully to the regime's probable chemical attack against elements of the opposition on 21 August, 2013; second, protect Israel; third, oppose Iran; fourth, curb al-Qaeda and fifth, maintain Syrian unity.[8]

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[8] For background, see U.S. Congress. Senate. Committee on Foreign Relations. "Syria Transition Support Act of 2013," S. Rept. 113-79, 113th Congress, 24 July, 2013. http://beta.congress.gov/congressional-report/113th-congress/senate-report/79/1 (last accessed 22 September, 2013).

The first priority emerged after the Syrian regime's apparent use of chemical weapons against the opposition in Ghouta, an eastern suburb of Damascus, killing between 500 and 1,400 people (see BBC, 2014). This suspected use of chemical weapons was not a sufficient reason for the United States and its Western allies to intervene militarily in Syria – notably because the United States had neither an intelligent entry nor exit plan if it did so.

In the event, the United States found a way out of its chemical weapons dilemma in Syria, by taking up a Russian suggestion to have Assad surrender his arsenal to international control and destruction. Although many in the United States and the Syrian opposition criticised US President Barack Obama's UN option as feckless, the UN route not only avoided most of the pitfalls of the United States unilaterally bombing Syria, but also provided a legal diplomatic strategy that successfully dismantled Assad's chemical weapons.

On the other hand, by opposing Kurdish autonomy in Syria as leading to secessionism and to please its NATO ally Turkey, the United States may find itself weakening a secular Kurdish ally that was successfully combating the al-Qaeda-affiliated enemies of America. At the time of writing the United States still hesitated to give heavy military equipment to the Syrian opposition fearing that it would fall into anti-Western, Jihadist/Salafist hands. However, by remaining aloof the United States could, in effect, be seen to be favouring the Assad regime, which its ally Turkey opposes but its enemy Iran supports.

In July 2013, however, the United States did see fit to denounce the PKK-affiliated PYD for clashes in the town of Amuda in which the PYD had killed several Kurds from other parties (see HRW, 2014). Once again, by denouncing the strongest Kurdish party battling the Salafists, the United States ironically was implicitly supporting al-Qaeda. The PYD replied that it had to defend itself against the al-Qaeda-affiliated al-Nusra brigade (van Wilgenburg, 2014a and 2014b).[9] Probably in deference to its Turkish ally, the United States has also opposed the PYD's plans to establish some kind of Kurdish administration in the areas of Syria they now dominate.

However, the PYD claims it has been in hopeful contact with the United States over the issue.[10] Indeed, Salih Muslim has appealed to both the United States and Europe to support the Kurds against their common al-Qaeda affiliated enemy in the Syrian civil war. "I want the American public and the entire world to know that we are trying to stop these jihadist groups, and we want

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[9] "PYD Press Release: On Statement of U.S. Department of State Regarding Situation in Amuda, Syria," 1 July, 2013. http://peaceinkurdistancampaign.com/2013/07/03/pyd-press-release-on-statement-of-u-s-department-of-state-regarding-situation-in-amuda-syria/ (last accessed 18 July, 2013).
[10] "Salah Muslim's Press Conference before Going to Istanbul," *Transnational Middle East Observer*, 26 July, 2013. http://www. mesop.de/2013/07/salih-muslims (last accessed 26 July, 2013).

them to stand with us. These people attack innocent civilians and kill children, women and old people simply because they are Kurds" (Civiroglu, 2013). Indeed, as noted above, U.S. support for the PYD finally occurred in the October 2014 battle for Kobanê.

The PKK/PYD

The Democratic Union Party's (PYD) very existence illustrates the importance of examining transnational non-state actors because it owes its very existence to the PKK. To understand today's most important Syrian Kurdish political party, one must, therefore, study a variety of inter-related transnational actors, both state and non-state.

Beginning in May 1979, the Assad regime gave the PKK what might be termed a strategic alliance when its long-time leader Abdullah Öcalan, sensing the military coup that was to occur in Turkey in September 1980, first arrived. There are several reasons for this situation but water was probably the main one as Turkey controlled the flow of the Euphrates River into Syria. As Turkey's *Güneydoğu Anadolu Projesi* (Southeast Anatolia Project) to harness the rivers to the north neared completion, Syria began to use the PKK as a bargaining tool in an unsuccessful attempt to obtain a more favourable guaranteed annual water quota from Turkey. Smouldering animosities regarding the Turkish annexation of Alexandretta (in Turkish, Hatay) in the closing days of the French mandate also contributed to Syria's support for the PKK. Indeed to this day Syrian maps still show Hatay as part of Syria.

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Many also argue that Syria gave the PKK sanctuary in return for it keeping the lid on Syria's Kurds. Thus Hafez Assad allowed Syrian Kurds to join the PKK in lieu of serving in the Syrian army. One estimate suggests between 7-10,000 Syrian Kurds were killed in clashes between the Turkish army and the PKK (Montgomery, 2005: 134). Indeed Öcalan went so far as to declare publicly in 1996 that most of the Kurds in Syria were refugees from Turkey and thus not Syrian (Montgomery, 2005). The PKK leader rationalised this cynical position as being merely a temporary, tactical one necessary to pursue the more important struggle against Turkey.

Although some might argue that this tactic would have sown mistrust and even disdain for the PKK amongst the Kurds of Syria, this was not the case in the long run as illustrated by the eventual rise of the PYD. The PKK's armed struggle for an independent pan-Kurdish state fostered sympathy and hope for tangible results in contrast to the other Syrian parties which avoided conflict and seemed almost invisible in comparison. Even though the Kurds in Syria avoided armed struggle, the revolts in Turkey of Sheikh Said in 1925, Ararat in 1927, and in Iraq of Barzani as recently as 1975, were stables of the Kurdish national narrative in Syria. Even before the advent of the PKK, Syrian Kurds had joined Kurdish guerrilla movements in Iraq. Other factors helping to explain the PKK's growth included "a feeling of national solidarity,

getting away from the social control of the elders, for women, freedom from the patriarchy, [and] individual interests (access to material and symbolic resources)" (Tejel, 2009: 135).

Thus, for almost two decades the PKK was sheltered and permitted to grow in Syria. Öcalan commuted between an apartment in Damascus and various PKK bases in the countryside. For many years the Mazlum (Mahsun) Korkmaz camp in the Syrian controlled Bekaa Valley in Lebanon was the most important one until Assad closed it down as a concession to the Turks in 1992. Other camps appeared, however, one being very close to Damascus and where the present author visited in March 1998. This site contained several buildings, housed hundreds of guerrillas and even possessed recreational facilities.

However, the futile dialogue between Turkey and Syria over this issue finally came to an end in October 1998 when Turkey threatened to go to war unless Syria expelled the PKK. Under the Adana Agreement, the PKK was shut down in Syria, while Öcalan and most of his guerrillas were expelled. Öcalan then was captured in Kenya by a joint U.S.-Turkish operation on 15 February, 1999. At first he was sentenced to death, which was later commuted to a life prison term.

After almost two decades in Syria, however, a potential base remained among the sympathetic population. In October 2003, the PKK in effect reincarnated its Syria branch under the new name Democratic Union Party (PYD). According to one analysis, the newly reformed PKK-affiliate played "the central role" (Tejel, 2009: 123) in the *Serhildan* or Qamishli riots of March 2004, arguably the formative event for the sudden current Syrian Kurdish awareness. Salih Muslim (Mohammed) became the new PYD leader in 2010. Imprisoned by the Syrian authorities for a while, Muslim was eventually released and withdrew to a PKK camp in northern Iraq from where the authorities allowed him to return to Syria in April 2011, just as the civil war was beginning.

Although the PYD denies any organic links to the PKK, the connection is illustrated institutionally by the PYD being one of the constituent members of the *Koma Civakên Kurdistan* (KCK) or Kurdistan Communities Union, an umbrella organisation created by the PKK to unite the PKK with a host of other Kurdish organisations including those in Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and across Europe.

Further illustrating the PKK/Syrian connection, one study found that as of 2007, 20 per cent of the PKK's troops stationed in the Qandil Mountians were of Syrian origin (Brandon, 2007; *Zaman*, 2013). Leadership was also Syrian – with a Syrian Kurd by the name of Fehman Hüseyin (or Dr. Bahoz Erdal, his nom de guerre in reference to being a dentist) commanding the *Hêzen Parastina Gel* (HPG) or People's Defense Force, the PKK's military arm until being succeeded by the more moderate Murat Karayılan, a Kurd from

Turkey. Salih Muslim, the leader of the PYD, also said that his party had discussed the first draft of a proposed interim government for the Syrian Kurds with the PKK as well as the two main Iraqi Kurdish parties, the Kurdistan Democratic Party of (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) (TMEO, 2013).

The Iraqi Kurds (KRG)

Iraqi Kurds have played a crucial role as transnational actors interacting with and influencing Syrian Kurds. This was through the first political parties (the KDP and PUK) and since the creation in 1992 and constitutional recognition in 2003 of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). As Mishaal Tammo, the leader of the Kurdish Future Movement (Party) in Syria explained: "The Iraqi war liberated us from a culture of fear. . . . People saw a Kurd [Jalal Talabani] become the president of Iraq and began demanding their cultural and political rights in Syria" (Landis and Pace, 2006-2007: 53).

In the late 1950s, while he was still a member of the KDP, Jalal Talabani often lived in Damascus as the representative of Mulla Mustafa Barzani. The "conservative" Barzani and "progressive" Talabani were rivals and each had had his own partisans within the Kurdish Democratic Party in Syria (KDPS). Talabani, for example, temporarily convinced the KDPS to change its name from Kurdish to Kurdistan, implying that the Kurds in Syria were also part of a transnational entity called Kurdistan, instead of just being some group living in Syria. As this terminology may have led Damascus to believe that the KDPS's ultimate goal was secession it soon reverted to the earlier Kurdish. Nevertheless and despite declining to seek independence, in its early days the KDPS had as part of its program such transnational goals as the fight against imperialism and support for the Kurdish struggles in Turkey, Iraq, and Iran (*Kurd Watch*, 2011: 7). There was also the question of whether the KDPS should support Barzani or Talabani – which ended up with a split in the KDPS in the 1960s.

In the 1970s, Barzani invited the two KDPS factions to Iraqi Kurdistan in an attempt to reunify them, but this ultimately failed. The Kurdish parties in Syria continued to fragment into what became a confused host of mostly obscure entities. Nevertheless, those parties with links to the PKK in Turkey or the KDP and PUK in Iraq today contain the largest number of militants, finances, and thus, in part, legitimacy. To this day portraits of Mulla Mustafa Barzani can be found in people's homes. At the time of writing in early November 2014, the Kurdish Democratic Party of Syria (PDKS), headed by Abdul Hakim Bashar, is the sister party of Massoud Barzani's KDP. The Kurdish Democratic Progressive Party of Abdul Hamid Darwish plays a similar role with Talabani's PUK, while the Democratic Union Party (PYD) of Salih Muslim is affiliated with Abdullah Öcalan's PKK. The PDKS, known as *el-Parti* (the Party), in reference to its claimed descent from the original KDPS - an assertion that several other Kurdish parties can also make - maintains that it is

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the strongest. Developments since July 2012 would demonstrate that this accolade is now held by the PYD. However, both the KDP and PUK continue to maintain offices in Syria.

After Mulla Mustafa Barzani died in exile in the United States 1979, his two sons Idris and Massoud eventually reconstituted the KDP. Jalal Talabani proclaimed his new PUK in Damascus in 1975. With that the Barzani - Talabani rivalry was renewed. Idris Barzani arrived in Damascus in 1979 to establish formal relations with Syria. The PUK opened a radio station (The Voice of Revolutionary Kurdistan) in Syria in November 1980 that began broadcasting to Iraq. Damascus offered these opportunities and sanctuary to both the KDP and PUK for two main reasons. First, the intra-Baathist rivalry between Hafez Assad's Syria and Saddam Hussein's Iraq; and, second, the quid pro quo between Syria and the Iraqi Kurds that by granting the latter sanctuary, they would not try to foment rebellion among the Kurds in Syria. It was the same game that Assad later played with the PKK.

Thus both the KDP and PUK have maintained offices in Damascus and Qamishli up to the present day. This has allowed the two Iraqi Kurdish parties to hold a gateway at the furthest end of Jazira for journalists and political representatives to pass back and forth between Kurdish areas in Syria and Iraq. Furthermore, since 2003, the KRG has welcomed Kurdish activists exiled from Syria and given them facilities from which they were able to reorganise. Kurdish students expelled from Syrian universities have been admitted in universities in Irbil and Sulaymaniya. When Jalal Talabani became president of Iraq in April 2005, Kurds living in Damascus played the pan-Kurdish national anthem *Ey Reqib*[11] in celebration (Zoepf, 2005).

Conclusion

This article has analysed the specific roles the Syrian Kurds (largely the PYD) and its senior sister organisation the PKK, ISIS, the KRG, the United States, and Turkey, among others, have played in the changing political map of the Middle East. At the time of writing, it is clear that this situation will call for a new paradigm to classify and understand the changing geopolitical reality of the Middle East. The United States has been slow to grasp this fact as illustrated by its continuing stance on trying to maintain the artificiality of what should be called former Iraq as well as former Syria. Neither state comes close to meeting Max Weber's famous definition of a state as being that entity which commands a monopoly on the legitimate use of force within its territory. Instead, new types of entities are forming and ironically the two bitter enemies, the Kurds and ISIS, are the main beneficiaries of this situation. A variety of political, sociological, and economic factors are operating in addition to

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[11] In English, Ey Raqip translates as "Hey Enemy," with the added implication that the Kurds are still surviving and on guard.

the more visible military ones. The United States has failed to fully comprehend and implement Carl von Clausewitz's famous understanding that war is often politics by other means. In other words, U.S. military action must be wisely used in conjunction with intelligent political and diplomatic policies that conform to the new geopolitical realities of the changing political map of the Middle East.

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