This is a repository copy of *Sowing division: Kurds in the Syrian war*.

SOWING DIVISION: KURDS IN THE SYRIAN WAR

Zeynep Kaya and Matthew Whiting

Final version submitted by authors to *Middle East Policy* after the article was accepted.

Zeynep Kaya is a research fellow at the Middle East Centre and Research Officer at the Centre for Women, Peace and Security at the London School of Economics and Political Science. She received her PhD from the LSE and she works on Kurdish politics in the Middle East and gender and displacement in Iraq.

Matthew Whiting is a Research Associate at the Centre for Trust, Peace and Social Relations at the University of Coventry. He holds a PhD from the LSE and his research examines ethnic conflict and the causes of political moderation. His book on the conflict in Northern Ireland is forthcoming with Edinburgh University Press in 2017.

Kurdish groups, both within Syria and throughout the Middle East, undoubtedly see the Syrian war as an opportunity to advance their goals of self-determination. The Kurdish autonomous region of Rojava is held up as proving the viability and necessity of Kurdish self-rule within any future Syria, with Kurdish leader Idris Nassan declaring that "federalism should be the future."[1] In addition, key events throughout the conflict were seized upon by Kurdish leaders in Turkey and Iraq to generate support for their causes. A strong Kurdish presence at the forefront of resistance to ISIS was used to leverage support from the EU and the United States for Kurdish goals.[2] The PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party) drew on its close relationship with Syria's armed Kurdish group, the YPG (People's Protection Units), to further increase its influence across the border. Masoud Barzani, president of the Kurdistan

Region of Iraq and leader of the KDP (Kurdistan Democratic Party), claimed that the Syrian war, combined with the fight against ISIS, heralded an end to the "Sykes-Picot era" and called for a new map of the Middle East — one that would now include an independent, sovereign Kurdistan carved out of northern Iraq.[3] According to Bengio, the turmoil and cracks in the Arab societies since 2011 are juxtaposed with "a growing tendency towards trans-border cooperation and unity" in the Kurdish case.[4] Or so it seemed.

On closer inspection, the Syrian conflict actually exacerbated already existing tensions within Kurdish groups. Clearly, at the grassroots level the suffering of Kurds in Syria generally increased the sense of shared kinship within Kurds living in neighbouring countries.[5] But Brubaker argues, it is a mistake to think of ethnic groups as singular entities, and instead the internal organizational dynamics of an ethnic group need to be examined.[6] In this case, increased transnational solidarity at the grassroots group level did not automatically translate into greater cooperation and harmony of tactics and goals at the level of Kurdish political elites. Instead, examining the internal dynamics reveals increased division at an elite level as competing political projects and struggles emerged across different Kurdish groups.

The differences between Iraqi Kurdish leaders, on the one hand, and Turkish and Syrian Kurdish leaders, on the other, in their visions of the rightful future of Kurds in the Middle East has become increasingly stark since 2011. While in Iraq there were increased demands for independence, the calls were more modest in Turkey and Syria and appealed instead for federalism and autonomy. Turkey's Kurdish leaders actually criticised Iraqi Kurdish demands for an independent state. Cemil Bayık, one of three members of the PKK executive council, warned against partitioning Iraq, declaring that it would strengthen ISIS, and therefore Kurds should be satisfied with autonomy within a unified Iraq.[7] At the same time, the Iraqi Kurdish leader Masoud Barzani demanded that Syrian Kurds throw in their lot

with other anti-Assad opposition groups rather than pressurizing the unity of Syria by looking for regional autonomy.[8]

Rather than binding Kurds into some kind of mythical homogenous group, the war added momentum to related but distinct projects in each of the three states, thus increasing competition within and among these groups. As such, it would be a mistake to think of the Syrian war as inevitably advancing the idea of a unified Kurdish self-rule across the region. In many respects, it has hampered such aspirations by exposing the heterogeneity of the Kurdish population and the competing interests of different Kurdish leaders. While deepening connections between the PKK in Turkey and PYD (Democratic Union Party) in Syria are observable, the war exposed the competing interests and characteristics of the two distinct Kurdish projects of the PKK and KDP, the most powerful and influential Kurdish parties in the Middle East.

Prior to outlining the impact of the Syrian war on pushes for Kurdish self-determination, it is worth briefly outlining the relationship between different Kurdish groups prior to the outbreak of the conflict.

RELATIONS BETWEEN KURDISH ELITES PRIOR TO SYRIAN CONFLICT

Although our argument is that the Syrian conflict exacerbated intra-Kurdish divisions at the elite level, it should be noted that these tensions did not occur in a vacuum. Indeed, divisions between different Kurdish factions in the Middle East have a long history. A complete overview of this process is beyond the scope of the paper, however, to establish context it is worth briefly noting some of these more prominent divisions. Current divisions between rival Kurdish leaders were initially formed in the 1970s, with the proliferation of

Kurdish political groups and political agendas, notably the PKK[1] in Turkey, the PUK[2] (Patriotic Union of Kurdistan) in Iraq, and Komala[3] in Iran.[4] Although each group focused on Kurds within their own state's borders, the PKK in Turkey, and KDP[5] and PUK in Iraq also engaged in activities across borders.

The desire for control and influence across the region has been the key driver of tension between these groups, which has even led to intra-Kurdish armed conflict in the past. The most fragile of the relationships between Kurdish political parties at the regional level is the one between the PKK and KDP (and, to a somewhat lesser extent today, between the PKK and the PUK). The KDP's alliance with the Turkish government is an important factor in this hostility. The PKK and KDP-PUK fought in 1992 when the Turkish army attacked PKK fighters in Iraq and the two Iraqi Kurdish parties gave support to the Turkish army. Additional rounds of clashes between the PKK and the Peshmerga took place in 1996 and 2000.

There are also intra-state tensions between Kurdish parties, such as between KDP and PUK in Iraq (and, although not examined in this article, between the PDKI and Komala in

---

[1] PKK was established in 1978 in Turkey with a Marxist ideology and aimed at radically transforming the Kurdish society. The PKK's initial goal was to establish a Kurdistan uniting all the Kurds across borders, but later it confined its goals democratisation and autonomy within each country.

[2] The PUK was established in 1975 by Jalal Talabani and his close friends, who separated from the KDP. PUK is also a nationalist political party but is more open to a solution within Iraq and also has a more urban supporter base, especially in its initial years.

[3] Komala is one of the oldest Kurdish parties, established in 1969, and was particularly influential in mid-1980.

[4] There are several other Kurdish political parties in each of the four countries, such as KDP (Kurdistan Democratic Party – *different from the KDP in Iraq*), the Kurdistan Islamic Union in Iraq, Yekiti (Kurdish Union Party) and Azadi (Kurdistan Freedom Party) in Syria and HDP (Peoples' Democratic Party) in Turkey. There also several active Kurdish diaspora organisations in Europe and the US. Most of the diaspora organisations have close ties with the regional parties.

[5] KDP's emergence goes back to 1940s when the short-lived Kurdish Republic of Mahabad was established. It was formed as a branch of the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran but later carried out its activities in Iraq to fight against the Iraqi regime and promote Kurdish national rights. The Barzani family is a key component of the party and its members today has influential roles in the party leadership

Iran). The KDP and PUK, the two main rival and equally powerful political parties in the Kurdistan region, also fought each other in mid-1990s over the leadership of Iraqi Kurds. A new Kurdish political party, Gorran (The Change Movement), joined the Iraqi Kurdish political field in 2009, formed by politicians that split from the PUK. Gorran achieved unexpected success in 2010 elections, and in 2015 Gorran and the PUK formed a bloc against the KDP.

Intra-Kurdish rivalry manifests itself in efforts to influence and control Kurdish politics in neighbouring countries. Each of these Kurdish factions have established branches and formed affiliations in the neighbouring states. The PKK has particularly strong transnational links beyond Turkey through the KCK (Kurdistan Communities Union), an umbrella organisation of Kurdish parties affiliated with the PKK.[6] Similarly, KDP and PUK have their own, albeit less institutionalised, affiliations across-borders.[7]

It was against this at times fractious backdrop that tensions as a result of the Syrian conflict arose. One brief example highlights this point, namely how the PKK-KDP rivalry played out in Syria following the outbreak of the conflict. The KNC (Kurdish National Council in Syria), an organisation bringing together various Syrian Kurdish parties, was founded in 2011 with the direct support of the Iraqi KDP, with the aim of fighting against the Syrian regime. The Turkish state also supported the KNC. The PYD initially joined this group but later withdrew from it, instead coming to be seen as a closely related affiliate of the PKK. The PYD became the most effective Kurdish party in offering protection to the people in northern Syria and establishing autonomous control. Throughout this process, the KNC

---

[6] PYD in Syria, PJAK (The Free Life Party of Kurdistan) in Iran and KDSP (The Kurdistan Democratic Solution Party) in Iraq are all members.

[7] Parties affiliated with the KDP are the PDKI, the KDPS (Kurdistan Democratic Party in Syria) and the KDPB (Kurdistan Democratic Party North) in Turkey. PUK's allies are the KDPP (Kurdistan Democratic Progressive Party, Syria) and Komala (Iran).

became increasingly side-lined, much to the KDP's and Turkey's disappointment. In this way, the rivalry between the KNC and PYD in Syria is a layer of the regional PKK-KDP rivalry. It is to these wider regional dynamics following the conflict in Syria that we now turn.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR UNITY

The Syrian war was perceived as an opportunity by Kurdish elites throughout the Middle East to advance their political projects and goals. It was also possible at times to detect increased harmonisation around the tactics used and in the alignments made by various Kurdish leaders. This is evident in increased demands for greater rights by Kurdish elites and by how they framed their struggle as a struggle for democratic rights. It is also evident in Kurdish leaders' use of two key events: the siege of Kobani and the rescue of Yazidis from the Sinjar Mountains. These significant geopolitical changes brought to mind the questions of whether the historical tide was turning in favor of the Kurds and whether these developments could be considered stepping stones to new Kurdish autonomous regions or states, or even pan-Kurdish unity.[9]

The Push for Rights

Since the beginning of the uprisings in Syria, there have been significant changes in the political position and rights of Kurds in each state.[10] The momentum spread throughout the region and was used to frame developments in relations with the governments of Turkey, Syria and Iraq. Kurdish party leaders in all three states consciously position themselves as democratic forces in order to attract international support, particularly from the United States and Europe. The Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) has consistently argued that the Kurdish area outperforms the central government of Iraq in ensuring freedoms,

democratic governance, minority and religious rights, and gender equality. The Kurdish government adopts policies to show off their democratic credentials and often emphasize that remaining a part of Iraq hinders the Kurdistan region's democratic, social and economic progress.[11] They believe this legitimizes and strengthens Kurds' autonomous status.

A progressive rhetoric is also adopted by the PKK and HDP (People's Democratic Party) in Turkey and the PYD in Syria. In the Turkish general elections in 2015, the HDP adopted an inclusive political agenda based on democratic freedoms, gender equality and environmentalism, and this expanded their electoral base in the June general election.[12] The thinking was that an increase in democratic rights for all in Turkey would inevitably improve the position of the Kurds most of all. The HDP also practices gender equality, having adopted a gender-balanced co-leadership at all levels of party management. The same co-leadership principle has been adopted by the PYD, which presents itself as a pluralist and democratic party, inclusive of other Kurdish factions within Syria as well as different ethnic and religious groups.[13] This is the result of its effort to increase its legitimacy among the population it controls and within international society.[14]

Building on the notion that advancing the position of the Kurds was equivalent to advancing democratic principles, the Kurds in each state pushed for greater rights in the fall-out from the Syrian conflict. When the war began, the Assad regime engaged in policies of goodwill toward the Kurds, including granting citizenship to thousands of stateless Kurds in Syria. It also refrained from direct confrontation. As the authority of the Syrian state collapsed, these policies became springboards for Kurds to carve out their de facto autonomy — an unprecedented development, considering the severe repression Kurds had experienced at the hands of the regime. Additionally, Kurdish leaders used the role of Kurds fighting ISIS in Syria and Iraq as an example of resisting authoritarianism; they used this to

promote the idea that Kurdish liberation was synonymous with enhanced democratic rights in the Middle East.[15]

In neighboring Turkey, official peace talks with the PKK had already begun in 2009,[16] but this process was given additional impetus with developments in the position of Kurds elsewhere, and in 2012 Turkey began official talks with the imprisoned leader of the PKK, Abdullah Öcalan. Through these talks, labeled as "democratic opening" by the Turkish government, additional linguistic and cultural rights were extended to its Kurdish population. Although Kurdish elites argued that these reforms did not address political demands and remained "cosmetic," this initiative was a significant turn from the categorical denial of Kurdish rights throughout Turkish republican history.[17]

In Iraq, Kurds pointed to the government's inability to provide peace and stability and increased their demand for independent statehood and plans for holding a referendum.[18] Moreover, the KRG continued to sell crude oil to international markets, despite Baghdad's opposition, based on the claim of a right to oil within their territory. The KRG also benefited from the vacuum created by ISIS's attacks and the withdrawal of Iraqi military forces from the Kirkuk area, moving its Peshmerga forces into those areas. In this way, the discourse of self-determination and its associated rights was given further momentum relative to the state.

Kurds at the Regional Level

From the beginning of the conflict, some Kurdish political leaders engaged in unprecedented collaboration and solidarity was boosted at the community level. One of the most significant examples was seen in the siege of Kobani and its aftermath. The siege rapidly became a Kurdish historical milestone. When Kobani, a city on the Syrian-Turkish border, was besieged by ISIS in mid-2014, militants from the Kurdish YPG and YPJ

(Women's Protection Units) joined together to resist the siege. The effects reverberated throughout the region, rallying Kurds from other states around the suffering of their co-ethnics, especially Kurds in nearby southeast Turkey. The Central Executive Committee of the HDP called on international and local actors to help stop the violence and suffering. It also urged people to take to the streets, declaring, "From now on everywhere is Kobani."[19]

The government in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq sent Peshmerga forces to Kobani with heavy weapons to aid in the fight. The Ankara government reluctantly gave permission for these forces to cross through Turkish territory while carrying arms, having initially denied the request and suggested the Free Syrian Army provide support instead. This was one of the rare occasions where Iraqi and Syrian Kurds (and possibly Turkish Kurds fighting as YPG militants) took up arms together. Moreover, the Kobani process led to the signing of an agreement among Syrian Kurdish parties and those close to the Kurdish government in Iraq, in which they agreed to cooperate militarily and politically against ISIS. Barzani welcomed the increased cooperation, declaring, "This agreement brings us together, and itself is a significant answer to enemies who did not intend the Kurds to be united."[20] These events were optimistically labeled by some Kurdish commentators as the starting point towards unification.[21]

Greater Kurdish unity was also on display during efforts to repel ISIS from the Sinjar Mountains. Following a brutal massacre,[22] at least 130,000 Yazidis had fled to Duhok and Erbil in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. PKK and YPG fighters, as well as some from Iranian Kurdish opposition groups based in Iraqi Kurdistan came to the aid of Yazidis, and later fought together with KDP and local Yazidi forces. In an acknowledgement of the contribution of these fighters to retaking Makhmour, where ISIS had a stronghold, Barzani visited the PKK camp in August to meet with senior commanders there.[23] However, after the

defeat of ISIS, Kurdish groups fell into a bitter rivalry over the control of Sinjar, each flying its own battle flag.[24]

As this brief summary shows, it would be a mistake to claim that the Syrian war did not result in any increased sense of kinship or cooperation whatsoever between Kurdish leaders in different countries. Kurdish leaders from all states used a rights-based discourse to try and advance their claims to self-determination and military cooperation was also evident by Kurds throughout the region. Yet ultimately, there were limits to the level of leadership harmonisation across the regions Kurds.

MOVING FURTHER APART

The opportunities for Kurds discussed above were high points that were not sustained. In fact, when you scratch the surface of this seeming rise in cooperation, the idea of greater pan-Kurdish harmony and coordination falls away. Instead, the fallout of the conflict in Syria has increased competition and schisms between different leadership factions across the region.

Arguments assuming that the suffering and subsequent empowerment of Kurds in Syria would have a positive effect throughout the region overlook the pre-conditions in Syria, Iraq and Turkey at the time of the conflict's onset. The capacity of each state was crucial in how it responded to increased Kurdish nationalism. The Syrian government and the federal government in Iraq are weak or in failure, but Turkey remains stronger. It has international support, a strong military and bureaucracy. Thus, the opportunity for Kurds to move closer to their goals in Syria and Iraq is greater, while Turkey has the capacity to protect its own security interests. This ultimately heightened intra-Kurdish tensions as their different political projects came into competition with each other. In addition, pre-existing relationships between groups mattered more than the increased sense of ethnic identity

produced by the conflict. This is evident in the way that different Kurdish groups have sought to frame the experiment of self-rule in Rojava and how it has led to widening and deepening divisions.

State Capacity to Resist Diffusion of Kurdish Aspirations

Pre-conditions in each state shaped how the Kurdish transnational dimension played out. The failed state of Syria offers a significant opportunity for Kurds. In Iraq, Kurdish leaders are locked in a long-term strategy aspiring to separatism; sectarianism and rise of ISIS limit what Baghdad can do to resist the increasing power of the Kurdistan Region. On the other hand, the Turkish state has the ability to restrict Kurdish leaders' pursuits of greater self-determination, even if this quest may have been given added momentum by the Syrian war.

The uprisings and conflict in Syria were a turning point for its Kurdish population. The weakening of the state's authority presented opportunities to Kurds to pursue their interests. After the start of the war, the regime's forces partly withdrew from northern Syria, leading many to believe a tacit agreement not to fight each other had been struck between the Kurds and Assad. But as the authority and capacity of the state came under sustained attack, this restricted Damascus's ability to resist Kurdish progress towards self-rule or to strike bargains with the Kurds. By 2012, Kurds led by the PYD began taking control of territory they call Rojava or Western Kurdistan (see below for full discussion of significance of Rojava). Although Rojava is undoubtedly an important development, its position remains precarious.[25] As the Assad regime gains leverage in the war against opposition groups, pressure on the YPG has increased.[26] Moreover, the Syrian regime has not given up its full sovereignty in northern Syria. It has continued to pay the salaries of its public employees, and many Syrian state structures continue to receive their budgets from the government,

weakening the Kurdish authorities' legitimacy.[27] Rojava is far from consolidated as a political entity.

In Iraq, however, Kurds have a more secure position, and the government in Baghdad struggles to contain their increasing assertiveness and growing power.[28] The Kurds in Iraq have a long history of struggling to gain autonomy, and many believe they are on an inevitable path towards independence. Following Saddam Hussein's brutal attacks after the 1991 Gulf War, the United States intervened to create a no-fly zone over the 36th parallel, which led to the formation of a de facto autonomous Kurdish region. Since the 2003 intervention, while internal conflict has destabilized Iraq, the Kurdistan Region has remained relatively safe and prosperous. It obtained its official autonomous regional status in 2005, two years after the Coalition Forces led by the United States intervened to depose Saddam Hussein. The next logical (and, many Kurdish leaders hope, inevitable) step is partition of the country and the emergence of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq as an independent and fully recognized state.

In fact, from the KRG's perspective, the main threat to its stability is ongoing tension with Baghdad. The increasing weakness of the federal government and the rising sectarianism that is crippling the state have opened up the possibility of independence. In addition, a lack of budget transfers from Baghdad and the bad management of federal economic resources have put a heavy burden on the KRG's ability to maintain satisfactory day-to-day governing.[29] For Barzani and his KDP, the Syrian war, combined with ongoing sectarian violence in Iraq and the rise of ISIS, has offered an opportunity to realize formal independence. Barzani repeatedly stated his desire to hold a non-binding referendum on the issue.

For Turkey, in some respects, the foundation of the state created the fault lines for the conflict with its Kurdish population. The Turkish state hinged on two core principles that

run through its security policy to this day: the state should be secular (a principle somewhat in flux under the ruling AKP) and unitary.[30] The PKK, which was formed in 1978, emerged at the vanguard of a revival of Kurdish politics in the 1970s and began to carry out armed attacks against Turkish security forces in 1984.[31] The response from the state, which quickly became the entrenched approach of successive governments, has been to confront the PKK militarily and to suppress and proscribe Kurdish political activism. This is not to say that there have been no attempts at rapprochement, but the militancy of the PKK and the limited concessions the state has been willing to offer have led to the failure of such attempts.[32]

During the course of the Syrian conflict, Turkey continued its traditional state policy in relation to Kurdish nationalism: a military response combined with restrictions on Kurdish political activism. It is hardly surprising that this policy framework shaped the state's response to transnational Kurdish developments emanating from Syria. The neighboring civil war, the changing political landscape in the region, and the PKK's increasing influence in Rojava increased Turkey's concerns over the Kurdish issue. Disgruntled by the de facto autonomy of Kurds in Syria and the possibilities this raised for its own Kurdish population and for enhancing the influence of the PKK, Turkey attempted to restrict the space for Kurdish activism within its borders. The Turkish state's advantage in resisting Kurdish transnational influence was its powerful military, its NATO alliance and the PKK's status as a terrorist organization.

Attempts by Turkey to resist the Kurdish transnational dimension extended beyond its borders. Turkey remains deeply reluctant to see a continuous Kurdish belt along its border and has lobbied hard to restrict a self-governed Kurdish area from emerging in Syria in addition to the already existing one in northern Iraq. Ankara tried to increase its influence in northern Syria by calling for an intervention to carry out military operations, ostensibly against radical Islamists but, in effect, focused on the PKK and PYD.[33] It also sought to

shape the Kurdish political landscape in Syria and used its leverage with Kurdish parties in Iraq to limit the possibilities for the PKK. Somewhat unexpectedly, Turkey has long found the Kurdistan Region of Iraq an acceptable political unit and viewed it with enthusiasm as a trading partner.[34] Turkish acceptance of the region is further reinforced by the fact that a powerful KRG in Iraq poses a challenge to the PKK's hegemony over Kurdish nationalism by offering an alternative source of leadership.[35] However, there are ongoing Turkish concerns about the potential for such an autonomous region to inspire the push for independence within its own Kurdish population.

In order for the KDP to realize its ambition of gradually moving towards separation and international recognition, it needs to reassure Turkey that this will not pose a threat to its territorial integrity. To do this, the KDP in Iraq strives to ensure that it does not upset Turkey. The KRG takes its decisions about relations with other Kurdish factions on Turkey's terms.[36] For example, the KRG needed Turkey's approval to send its Peshmerga to Kobani. In order to not jeopardize its own relationship with Turkey, which it needs for its long-term plan for eventual separation, the KDP was lukewarm towards Rojava. Indeed the KDP almost implicitly adopted a stance that was closer to that of the Turkish government than that of Kurds in Syria and Turkey.

The net result is that the different states' capacities to resist Kurdish pushes for self-determination increase intra-Kurdish tensions across the different leadership cohorts. While the PKK and PYD both adopt an approach of pursuing democratic confederalism within the existing states' borders (with Syrian Kurds coming much closer to realising this than Turkey's Kurds), Iraqi Kurdish leaders pursue a project of partition and independence.[37] Tensions arise when these projects come into opposition with each other. The KDP in Iraq attempts to rein in any political activity that the Turkish state may see as a threat to its territorial integrity, like a strong Rojava. Meanwhile Kurdish leaders in Turkey and Syria

have criticised attempts by Iraqi Kurds to seeking outright independence as destabilising the region, but in reality Turkey's Kurdish leaders wish to see Abdullah Öcalan's vision of Kurdish democratic confederalism as the political project that is pursued throughout the region. Their fear is that an independent Kurdistan carved out of northern Iraq would set back their own internal struggles. This also explains why it is possible to observe gains for Kurds within each state without actually seeing gains for Kurds overall across the region as a whole.

Kurdish Factions' Framing of Rojava

Responses by different Kurdish factions throughout the Middle East to the emergence of Rojava also highlight how the ripples of the Syrian war led to intra-Kurdish discord at the elite level. Rojava disrupted the existing balance between these factions as they jockeyed to influence developments in the region in their own interests. Pre-existing divisions within Kurdish groups in Syria and attempts by Iraqi and Turkish Kurds to shape the decisions of Syrian Kurds ensured that the emergence of Rojava both enabled autonomous rule for Syria's Kurds and increased competition among Kurds across the region. This battle of ideas over the meaning and significance of Rojava exposed the different interests of key Kurdish leaders.

The starkest fault line within the Kurdish community in the Middle East is that between the KDP and the PKK, the two most powerful rivals for Kurdish regional leadership. Their rivalry has always been one of the key characteristics of Kurdish politics. Today the ideational aspect is also becoming prominent. The two groups have different visions for the future of the Kurds within each state as well as in the region as a whole and for how Kurds should govern themselves.

The emergence of Rojava served as a catalyst for making the division starker. Through the Syrian war, PYD was able to carve a zone of control in northern Syria and transform it into a de facto autonomous region. This was possible due to the existing cross-border links between the PKK and the Syrian Kurds. The PKK has been developing transnational links with Kurds in Turkey's neighbouring countries for decades.[38] However, the emergence of Rojava, has not only made such links even more tangible, it also manifested Öcalan's political ideology in practice as opposed to the Iraqi Kurdish model.

The PYD tends to share the vision of the PKK, whose leaders strongly endorse the Rojava experiment and whose supporters hold it up as a living example of Öcalan's notion of "democratic confederalism," a system he proposed as a way to provide Kurds with self-rule while still respecting existing borders.[39] From this perspective, Rojava is seen as the beginning of the adoption and implementation of this governing system in other parts of the Middle East.[40] Before Rojava, Öcalan's ideology and system of democratic confederalism was just an idea that was limited to the way the PKK and its affiliated parties ran their affairs. However, the emergence of Rojava, its ability to survive for four years and, most important, its implementation of Öcalan's governance principles, rendered the PKK's ideology a reality. The PKK now offers a model that is bottom-up, decentralized and gender-equal but also quite doctrinaire. It is a radical model and envisions a post-nation-state system in the Middle East both for the Kurds and other peoples.

The KDP in Iraq, on the other hand, sticks to a more conventional nation-state formation route that emphasises self-determination of an ethnic group. It is similar to the Middle Eastern state model where authoritarianism, a centralised state, and tribal and economic elites are interlinked with the political elite. From this perspective, a major outcome of the Syrian conflict for the KDP was that it greatly increased the power of the PYD and the PKK to challenge their vision of what Kurdish self-rule should look like. No

longer is the Kurdish government in Iraq the automatic rallying point for Kurds looking for a governing figure or ruling spokesperson. Rojava increased the appeal of the PKK's ideology among Kurds and sat uncomfortably next to the KDP model. Fault lines became entrenched. The playing out of these divisions between the KDP and the PKK can be seen in how both movements tried to influence the debate over Kurdish political parties in Syria during the course of the war.

The transnational dimension was also about Kurds outside Syria trying to extend their influence inside, as well as the other way round. Myriad Kurdish political parties formed in Syria from the 1950s onwards. In fact, the Kurdish political scene in Syria until the start of the war was sharply divided into different camps, supported by either the Iraqi KDP, the Iraqi PUK or the Turkish PKK. As part of the battle for influence across the region, the KNC was formed in Syria in 2011 with the support of the Iraqi KDP, which argued that Syria's Kurds should join the heterogeneous official opposition.[41] The KNC also received endorsements from Arab opposition groups and the Turkish government. However, the PYD parted ways with it and emerged with a different understanding of the situation on the ground.[42] Turkey, fearful of what this meant for its interests, put pressure on the PYD to remain part of the KNC and blamed the PYD for not cooperating.[43] The PYD chose a third way, not taking part in the opposition or pro-Assad groups, and later pulling various like-minded Kurdish groups under an umbrella organisation called TEV-DEM (Movement for Democratic Solidarity).

Tensions among these parties continue today, reflecting wider tensions between the KDP and the PKK. The KNC argues that the PYD does not represent all the Kurds in Syria, and that the KNC should also be able to carry out activities and organize in Rojava. The KNC has also raised concerns about the intimidation and expulsion of critical voices, political activists and journalists from Rojava, revealing the battle for hegemony within

Syria's Kurds, which in turn acts as a proxy battle for hegemony among Kurds across the Middle East. In fact, in wishing to advance their own push for independence while maintaining the support of Turkey, the KDP has urged caution around Rojava. This is the epitome of Barzani's ambivalence, provoked by the Syrian conflict: a desire to use the opportunity to further his own long-term agenda of independence for Iraqi Kurds, while realizing this requires restricting the aspirations of other Kurdish groups.

CONCLUSION

The position of Kurds in the Middle East has changed significantly as a result of the conflict in Syria. Some of these changes have been profound, especially the emergence of Rojava as an autonomous region of Kurdish self-rule within Syria. Kurds have sought to use the conflict as an opportunity to push for greater rights within the states in which they reside and to frame themselves as being at the forefront of democracy in the Middle East. Some commentators in the region also expected (or in some cases feared) that the conflict would engender greater Kurdish unity and lead to a clear harmonization of Kurds throughout the Middle East around a unified push for greater self-rule.

Such understandings, however, seem a little hasty when the trajectory of recent Kurdish politics is examined. Kurds have always been a remarkably heterogeneous group, and claims of the existence of a Kurdish people united by their ethnic identity have always been out of step with reality. The fallout from the Syrian war has highlighted the Kurds' diversity and competing interests. While increased unity between the PKK and PYD is a by-product of the conflict, the conflict in Syria also resulted in increasing division between Iraqi Kurds and their Turkish counterparts. What is more, the rise of Syrian Kurdish autonomous rule placed it on a collision course with Iraqi Kurdish desires for independence. Here, Iraqi

Kurds chose to criticize Syrian and Turkish Kurdish projects in an effort to advance their own aspirations.

Where does this leave the Kurds after the fallout of the Syrian war? From a Kurdish perspective it may look like there have been some important gains within Syria and Iraq, but the future looks somewhat bleak. Not only is Rojava in Syria decidedly vulnerable; opportunities look sparse in Turkey too. The U.S. decision to side with Turkey in 2016 when Syrian Kurds attempted to cross the Euphrates[44] is an important signal that the international community is more likely to choose Turkey's interests over the aspirations of the Kurds. Turkish military intervention in Syria since mid-2016 and Turkey's role in initiating a ceasefire and a process to end the war with Russia and Iran increased Turkey's ability to shape outcomes on the ground. These will undoubtedly have impact on Rojava. What is more, the future of the Syrian regime does not look as hopeless as it did when Rojava was founded, so the will of Damascus is another factor the PYD will have to contend with. Inside Turkey, another period of military engagement has set in following the collapse of efforts at dialogue. Following the election in November 2015, the ruling AKP government found that tough security responses and playing up the Kurdish threat was a popular strategy. Perhaps the real winner here is Masoud Barzani, whose idea of gradual and structured separation from Iraq seems to be acceptable to the international community. This appears to have gained significant momentum during the period of the Syrian war and the associated conflict with ISIS, at least until recently. However, any victory for Barzani may well come at the cost of disappointing and alienating the Kurds in Turkey and Syria — and even the United States, whose ultimate aim is to keep Iraq united. As such, any short-term Kurdish victory may be mostly Pyrrhic.

---

[1] "Syria Civil War: Kurds Declare Federal Region in North," Al Jazeera, March 17, 2016, http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/03/syria-civil-war-kurds-declare-federal-system-north-

160317111902534.html. The Syrian government immediately rejected the declaration of autonomous rule but were powerless to oppose it.

[2] In 2013, Murat Karayılan, a PKK commander and President of the Kurdistan Communities Union, called on the EU to delist the PKK to resolve a tension between designating the PKK as a terrorist organization while also relying on it to fight ISIS. Although this proposal was supported by a minority of EU politicians, it was rejected in a vote and soon all support for such a position evaporated when the PKK resumed its armed campaign against the Turkish state. Von Wieland Schneider, "PKK: 'Wir wollen keinen kurdischen Nationalstaat'" [PKK: "We Do Not Want a Kurdish Nation State"], *Die Presse*, June 21, 2013, http://diepresse.com/home/politik/aussenpolitik/1421676/PKK_Wir-wollen-keinen-kurdischen-Nationalstaat.

[3] Martin Chulov, "Iraqi Kurdistan President: Time Has Come to Redraw Middle East Boundaries," *The Guardian*, January 22, 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jan/22/kurdish-independence-closer-than-ever-says-massoud-barzani. Barzani has also sought support for an independence referendum on the issue in 2014 and again in 2016, albeit such a referendum has yet to be held. See Paul Iddon, "Barzani, Kurdish Independence and the End of Sykes-Picot," Rudaw, January 3, 2016, http://rudaw.net/english/opinion/03012016.

[4] Ofra Bengio, "Conclusion: The Kurdish Momentum," in *Kurdish Awakening: Nation Building in a Fragmented Homeland*, ed. Ofra Bengio (University of Texas Press, 2014), 269-282.

[5] It is well established that transnational ethnic ties can increase during conflict, even increasing the risk of conflict in neighbouring countries due to a heightened sense of kinship. See Lars-Erik Cederman, Luc Girardin and Kristian Skrede Gleditsch "Ethnonationalist Triads: Assessing the Influence of Kin Groups on Civil Wars," *World Politics* 61, no. 3 (2009): 403-37. A clear example of this increased ethnic solidarity was how Turkish Kurds adopted the slogan 'From now on everywhere is Kobani' ('bundan böyle her yer Kobani'dir') after the siege of the border town of Kobani – see below.

[6] Rogers Brubaker, *Ethnicity Without Groups*. (Harvard University Press, 2004).

[7] Fazel Hawramy, "Exclusive: Senior Kurdish Rebel Leader Warns Iraq Must Stay United to Defeat 'Savage' ISIS," *The Guardian*, December 24, 2014, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/dec/24/pkk-kurdish-leader-cemil-bayik-iraq-syria-isis.

[8] Renad Mansour, "The Role of Iraqi Kurdistan in the Syrian-Kurd Pursuit of Autonomy," Al Jazeera Center for Studies, September 24, 2012, http://studies.aljazeera.net/en/reports/2012/09/201291910402907471.html.

[9] For example, pan-Kurdish thinking seemed possible when Kurds in Qamishli, Syria, were trying to figure out how to respond to outreach from Assad in 2011. They sought counsel from Kurdish leaders outside Syria, including the leader of the PUK, Jalal Talabani, who advised them not to confuse attaining rights within Syria with the dream of greater Kurdistan. In contrast, the current governor of the KRI, Barzani, advised them to throw their lot in with the official opposition pushing for regime change rather than seeking Kurdish autonomy. See Ghadi Sary, "Kurdish Self-Governance in Syria: Survival and Ambition," *Research Paper: Chatham House MENA Programme* (2016), 8.

[10] Gunter optimistically (and rather normatively) labeled this the "Kurdish spring." See Michael M. Gunter, "The Kurdish Spring," *Third World Quarterly* 34, no. 3 (2013): 441-57.

[11] Interviews by author with policy-makers and civil-society activists in Erbil, KRI, Iraq, 2014.

[12] "HDP's Election Manifesto," *Kurdish Question*, April 21, 2015, http://kurdishquestion.com/oldsite/index.php/kurdistan/hdp-s-election-manifesto/839-hdp-s-election-manifesto.html.

[13] Ruşen Çakır's interview with the PKK leader, Cemil Bayık, February 3, 2014, http://www.rusencakir.com/Cemil-Bayik-ile-soylesi--Tam-metin/2439.

[14] Kaya and Lowe, "The Curious Question," 22.

[15] "Protecting Minorities' Rights in the Kurdistan Region: A Tailor-Made Model," Middle East Research Institute, 2015, http://www.meri-k.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/English-Minorities-Report.pdf.

[16] Cengiz Çandar, "The Kurdish Question: The Reasons and Fortunes of the 'Opening,'" *Insight Turkey* 11, no. 4 (2009): 13-19.

[17] Mehmet Gurses, "From War to Democracy: Transborder Kurdish Conflict and Democratisation," in *Conflict, democratization and the Kurds in the Middle East: Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria*, eds.David Romano and Metin Gurses (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 249-265, p. 256.

[18] "Barzani Calls All Party Meeting to Discuss Referendum," Rudaw, June 23, 2016, http://rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/230620161. He made the same call in 2014: "Iraqi Kurdistan Independence Referendum Planned," BBC News, July 1, 2014, http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-28103124.

[19] "Kobani'de yaşananlara karşı harekete geçilmeli [Action Is Needed against What's Happening in Kobani]," *Hürriyet*, October 6, 2016, http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/hdp-kobani-de-yasananlara-karsi-harekete-gecilmeli-27340041.

[20] "Divided Syrian Kurds Reach Deal in Face of ISIS Threat," Rudaw, October 22, 2014, http://rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/221020141.

[21] Necat Keskin, "A Starting Point towards Unification between Kurds: Peshmerga to Kobani," *Ekurd Daily*, October 31, 2014, http://ekurd.net/mismas/articles/misc2014/10/syriakurd1628.htm.

[22] The UN declared that the killing of Yazidis in the Sinjar Mountains met official definitions of genocide. Patrick Wintour, "UN Condemns ISIS Genocide against Yazidis in Iraq and Syria," *The Guardian*, June 16, 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jun/16/un-condemns-isis-genocide-against-yazidis-in-iraq-and-syria.

[23] Mohammed A. Salih, "PKK Forces Impress in Fight against Islamic State," Al-Monitor, September 1, 2014, http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/09/pkk-kurdish-fight-islamic-state.html.

[24] Mohammed A. Salih, "With the Islamic State Gone from Sinjar, Kurdish Groups Battle for Control," Al-Monitor, December 10, 2015, http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/12/iraq-kurdistan-sinjar-liberated-isis-hegemony.html.

[25] Robert Lowe, "The Emergence of Western Kurdistan and the Future of Syria," in *Conflict, Democratization and the Kurds in the Middle East: Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria,* eds. David Romano and Metin Gurses (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 225-246, at 230-3.

[26] "Syria: YPG Launches Assault to Take All of Hasaka," Al Jazeera, August 22, 2016, http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/08/syria-ypg-launches-assault-hasaka-160822041843880.html.

[27] Ghadi, "Kurdish Self-Governance," 14.

[28] Natali refers to the Kurdistan Region of Iraq as a quasi-state, which shows the degree to which their autonomy is embedded. Denise Natali, *The Kurdish Quasi-State: Development and Dependency in Post-Gulf War Iraq* (Syracuse University Press, 2010).

[29] Ari Mamshae, "Baghdad Not Sincere about KRG Budget," Rudaw, March 11, 2015, http://rudaw.net/english/middleeast/iraq/110320151.

[30] Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Turkey, "Turkey's Perspectives and Policies on Security Issues," http://www.mfa.gov.tr/i_-turkey_s-security-perspective_-historical-and-conceptual-background_-turkey_s-contributions.en.mfa.

[31] Robert Olson, "Five Stages of Kurdish Nationalism: 1880-1980," *Journal Muslim Minority Affairs* 12, no. 2 (1991): 391-409, at 402.

[32] Two such attempts have been made under the current AKP government (with talks in Oslo between the PKK and Turkish Intelligence in 2008-11 and later in 2012 the then prime minister, Erdoğan, confirmed his government was in talks with imprisoned PKK leader Öcalan. The failure of these talks ultimately to make any progress, even after some initial promise in 2012, and the conditions that led to their collapse are highly instructive of the embedded militancy by both sides in their approach to each other. Michael Gunter, "The Turkish-Kurdish Peace Process: Stalled in Neutral," *Insight Turkey* 16, no. 1 (2014): 19-26, offers a good background to their failure.

[33] See Lyse Doucet's interview with Davutoğlu: "Davutoğlu: sınırımızda İŞİD'i, PKK'yi, Esad'ı istemiyoruz [Davutoğlu: We Do Not Want ISIS, PKK or Assad at Our Border]," BBC Türkçe, October 28, 2014, http://www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler/2014/10/141027_davutoglu_doucet.

[34] Soner Cagaptay, Christina Bache Fidan and Ege Cansu Sacikara, "Turkey and the KRG: An Undeclared Economic Commonwealth," *Policy Analysis* (The Washington Institute, 2015), http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/turkey-and-the-krg-an-undeclared-economic-commonwealth.

[35] Josh Wood, "Why Turkey-KRG Ties Will Likely Trump Kurdish Solidarity," *The National*, July 27, 2015, http://www.thenational.ae/world/middle-east/why-turkey-krg-ties-will-likely-trump-kurdish-solidarity.

[36] Denise Natali, "Turkey's Kurdish Client State," Al-Monitor, November 14, 2014, http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/11/turkey-krg-client-state.html.

[37] Joost Jongerden and Ahmet Hamdi Akkaya, "Kurds and the PKK," *The Wiley Blackwell Encyclopedia of Race, Ethnicity and Nationalism*, December 30, 2015 (published online), 1-5.

[38] For an example of the transnational nature of PKK fighters see Guneş Tezcür, "Ordinary People, Extraordinary Risks: Participation in an Ethnic Rebellion," *American Political Science Review* 110, no. 2 (2016): 247-264.

[39] Abdullah Öcalan, *Democratic Confederalism* (Transmedia Publishing, 2010).

[40] PKK website, http://www.pkkonline.com/en/index.php?sys=article&artID=210.

[41] Hazal Ateş, "Barzani Unites Syrian Kurds against Assad," Al Monitor, July 16, 2012, http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/politics/2012/07/barzani-grabs-assads-kurdish-car.html.

[42] Wladimir van Wilgenburg, "PYD Leader Sceptical of Kurdish Agreement with Syrian Opposition," Rudaw, September 20, 2013, http://rudaw.net/english/middleeast/syria/30092013.

[43] Ali Hüseyin Bakir, "Türkiye'nin Suriye krizi hesapları ve Kürtler [Turkey's Calculations on the Syrian Crisis and the Kurds]," Al Jazeera Turk, October 3, 2012, http://www.aljazeera.com.tr/haber-analiz/turkiyenin-suriye-krizi-hesaplari-ve-kurtler.

[44] Martin Chulov, "Turkey and U.S. Unite to Oust ISIS and Curb Kurds," *The Guardian*, August 24, 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/aug/24/turkey-and-us-unite-to-oust-isis-curb-kurds-syria.