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*How does the desire for Kurdish
self-determination impact the Middle East?*

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For my research paper I am focusing on the desire of the Kurds, the world's largest national group without a state, in their desire for independence. The Kurdish homelands are located in Northern Iraq, Northeastern Syria, Southeastern Turkey, and Northwestern Iran. This area, called Kurdistan, has produced notables such as the Saracen King Salah al-Din to poets like Ahmad Ghazi. At different periods in history it has proclaimed its independence, though in the contemporary Middle East there is no Kurdish state. The closest thing to one is Iraqi Kurdistan, an autonomous region of Iraq. The world in recent years has been focused on the Middle East, especially because of American military expeditions there in the War on Terror. The Kurds have recently begun to take a larger part in that fight, specifically in fighting against ISIS, and losing thousands of people while doing so. With the spotlight being placed on the Kurds, there has been increased discussion of some form of a Kurdish state, and it is important to know how this Kurdish want of their own state will impact the other powers in the region. In sum, this paper will demonstrate the perspectives of Kurdish political parties and the sovereign states to see how the Kurdish desire for self-determination is impacting the Middle East.

Kurdish myths of their creation stretch back into antiquity, but they all center within the Middle East. Some myths claim that the wife of Abraham was a Kurd, while others claim the Kurds were the descendents of children who escaped from a man eating giant in the mountains.¹ All of these suggest their creation as an ethnic community stretches back over 25 centuries into the past, though the first official use of the term Kurdistan was in the twelfth century by the Seljuk Turkish Empire.² For most of this time, the Kurds existed in the hinterlands where power

¹ McDowall, David. *A Modern History of the Kurds*. London: Tauris, 2014. Google Books. I.B. Tauris, 2007. Web.
<<https://books.google.com/books?id=gUQBAAQBAJ&printsec=frontcover#v=onepage&q&f=false>>. p.4

² McDowall page 6

centers of the Turks, Persians, and Arabs met. They have long been a marginalized people in the area between the Eastern Anatolian Plain, the Northern Banks of Mesopotamia, the foothills of the Caucasus, and the Northwestern End of the Zagros Mountains. It wasn't until the fall of the Ottoman Empire in the beginning of the 20th century that the Kurds had a realistic shot at their own state.

During the downfall of the Ottoman Empire, imperial powers France and Britain agreed to divide the Middle East in two via the Sykes-Picot agreement. The Ottoman vilayet of Mosul, the heartland of the Ottoman Kurds, was split in two.³ In the British half an autonomous entity, the Kurdish State, was declared, but was subsequently done away with by the British after the quelling of a Kurdish rebellion.⁴ Early on in the modern era, the colonial master snuffed out a Kurdish state, something that would be replicated by non-Kurdish states dominated by other ethnic groups. Realistically, it also shows how the Kurds are treated as a threat rather than as an integral part of a cosmopolitan Middle Eastern state.

One of the more recent iterations of the Kurdish desire for self-determination manifested in the 1970 Iraqi-Kurdish Autonomy Agreement. This agreement stipulated autonomy for certain areas of Iraq that were Kurdish, with a census to be undertaken to determine further areas that may become part of Iraqi Kurdistan. It is ironic in a sense that the Kurds trusted the Iraqi state whom they had just fought against for autonomy, to manage the census. However, the census was never undertaken, for fears that the Iraqi Government would lose more land than it was willing to, including oil rich areas like Kirkuk.⁵ This led to an autonomous region within Iraq that was pitted against the Iraqi state, and still disputes its own boundary claims with its

³ Eskander, Saad. "Britain's Policy in Southern Kurdistan: The Formation and the Termination of the First Kurdish Government, 1918-1919." *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, vol. 27, no. 2, 2000, pp. 139-163., www.jstor.org/stable/826089. p.3

⁴ Eskander p.6-7

⁵ "Iraq and Kurdish Autonomy." *MERIP Reports*, no. 27, 1974, pp. 26-30., www.jstor.org/stable/3011338.

sovereign state. This has led to a very complicated situation in Iraq, with ripples across the region for other states like Turkey, Syria, or Iran who are wary of losing territory to their own large Kurdish populations.

The Iraqi history with its Kurdish population is long and complex, but more importantly filled with enmity between the majority Arab south and the majority Kurd north. One key event that showed this animosity to its full extent was the Halabja gas attack in 1988. During this attack, thousands of Kurds died at the hands of Saddam Hussein, who directed the Iraqi military to use airplanes for the deployment of chemical weapons over the town. This was at the end of the Iran-Iraq War, and Iraq wanted to avenge the fall of Halabja to Iran as well as weaken the Kurds who had been pushing for autonomy. It is ironic that the Iraqi fear of an independent Kurdistan led to the attack, but then subsequently bolstered the separatism of the Kurds. According to a correspondent for the BBC, it backfired as “[t]he atrocity at Halabja scarred the collective memory of Iraqi Kurds and hardened their determination to run their own affairs autonomously within a loose Iraqi federation.”⁶ Today the Halabja gas attack is seen by some states as genocide, and was certainly genocidal in its targeting of the Kurdish population. This historical animosity however did not cut deep enough into the political realities of the Kurds, who had to make do with an autonomous entity in Iraq, something they are still committed to this day.

Though Iraq may have had a history of war with its Kurds, today they are an integral part of the Iraqi state and their military forces fight side by side the Iraqi military in the Syrian Civil War. The war spilled over its borders and into Iraq when ISIS invaded the North and West of Iraq. While panicked Iraqi divisions fled, Kurdish military forces known as *peshmerga* held out

⁶ Staff, BBC. "Iraqi Kurds Mark 25 Years since Halabja Gas Attack." BBC News. BBC, 16 Mar. 2013. Web. <<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-21814734>>.

against ISIS and provide the main force today behind the assault into the terrorist heartland.⁷ The Syrian Civil War has become an interesting case study on the relations between the Kurds and between Middle Eastern states. On the ground, Iraq and its Kurds have become allies, though within living memory they were bitter enemies on opposite sides of a war that sometimes devolved into genocide.

In Iraq, the two main political parties for the Kurds are the Kurdish Democratic Party (PDK) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). Both parties state their goals as protecting the interests of the Kurdish people within their autonomous region and throughout Iraq, as well as focusing on civil rights and self-determination. The PDK specifically lists two of its platform goals as:

- “ 1. Re-outs (sic) all regions of the province of Kurdistan in accordance with the mechanisms contained in Article 140 of the Federal Constitution of Iraq, stabilize the borders of the region on this basis.
2. Defend the rights of all Kurds living in other areas of Iraq as part of the non-fragmented Kurdish nation and work to strengthen and perpetuate the social and cultural ties with them”⁸

The PUK defines its role as:

“a Kurdish party performing its organizational work in Iraqi Kurdistan and Iraq as whole, [which] has a further duty to accomplish at the Iraqi level: to help establish an Iraqi republic based on federalism, democracy, and the parliamentary process, whose principles have been set forth in a constitution. The PUK sees Iraq as a

⁷ Peterson, Nolan. "ON THE BATTLEFRONT AGAINST ISIS WITH THE PESHMERGA." Newsweek. Newsweek, 11 June 2016. Web. <<http://www.newsweek.com/battlefront-against-isis-peshmerga-457615>>.

⁸ "About the Kurdish Democratic Party." Democratic Party of Kurdistan. PDK, 2017. Web. 19 Mar. 2017. <<http://www.kdp.info/p/p.aspx?p=23&l=14&s=010000&r=390>>.

platform from which to defend the democratic achievements of all Iraqi people and the Kurdish nation so that citizenship in Iraq will not be used as an excuse for limiting diversity but rather becomes a country that is multi-ethnic, multi-religious, and multi-sectarian.”⁹

Both the PUK and PDK see an integral part of their role as defending the rights of Kurds in Iraq, and see Iraq becoming a more cosmopolitan state in the future. This state would be federal and democratic, designed to protect the rights of minorities as well as larger groups such as the Kurds.

The Kurds however may have already received their wish in the 2005 Constitution setup in Iraq, which carved out a huge role for the Kurds as one of the integral ethnic groups in Iraq, second only to the majority Arab groups. The Constitution recognizes the struggles undertaken upon the minority ethnic groups in Iraq, specifically mentioning “the massacres of Halabcha, Barzan, Anfal and the Fayli Kurds” who were subjected to violence on behalf of the Saddamist state. Further, the Constitution recognizes the dual nationality of many Iraqis, and makes sure that “The Arabic language and Kurdish language are the two official languages of Iraq.” Also included in the Constitution is a codification of the language which established the Kurdistan Regional Government, as well as the Region’s laws which may predate the Constitution.¹⁰ This shows how the Kurds were able to achieve their limited political goals in the context of the post-Saddamist Iraqi state, using their political power and influence to be treated as an equal ethnic group to the majority Arab population.

⁹“Party Definition.” Patriotic Union of Kurdistan. PUK Leadership Council, 2013. Web. 19 Mar. 2017. <<http://www.pukpb.org/english/penase>>.

¹⁰ Press, Associated. “Full Text of Iraqi Constitution.” The Washington Post. WP Company, 12 Oct. 2005. Web. <<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2005/10/12/AR2005101201450.html>>.

Further, it should be noted that the President of Iraq is now traditionally a Kurd, with the Presidents who have been elected both being Kurdish, while the Prime Minister and Speaker of the Parliament are either Sunni or Shia Arabs, with this unofficial political balance being created to balance out the sectarian sensibilities inherent in the Iraqi state.¹¹ What this Constitution represents is a major success for the Kurds in Iraq, who have fulfilled their political goals for self determination as stated, namely being in an autonomous arrangement within a federal and democratic Iraq. This shows just how influential Kurdish political goals can be on a state entity, while in other places the Kurdish political parties and their achievements in Iraq may be seen as a threat to sovereignty.

This development of the Kurdish parties in Iraq is threatening to other states such as Iran and Turkey, who have actively fought with their own Kurdish populations in the past. In fact, Turkey has a long simmering Kurdish insurrection within its borders from the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), while Iran has fought the Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan in the past. All of these groups desire to have at the very least an autonomous region within their states that they can call home, though some have called for separation and the formation of an independent Kurdistan. This desire on behalf of the Kurds for their own communities and possibly their own state has complicated politics within the Middle East. Take for example the Syrian Civil War, which has Turkey supporting Kurdish militias in their fight against ISIS and Syrian dictator Bashar al Assad, while Turkey also fights Kurds in Turkey and in different parts of Syria.¹² As Kurdish groups grow more powerful, those groups who have advocated for a Kurdish state or for greater autonomy are feeling the ire of other regional powers.

¹¹ "Iraq Selects Senior Kurdish Politician Fuad Masum President." World Bulletin. World Bulletin, 24 July 2014. Web. <<http://www.worldbulletin.net/headlines/141288/iraq-selects-fuad-masum-as-new-president>>.

¹² Monitoring, BBC. "Turkey v Syria's Kurds v Islamic State." BBC News. BBC, 23 Aug. 2016. Web. 19 Mar. 2017. <<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-33690060>>.

One regional power that has a direct interest in arguments over Kurdish sovereignty is Turkey. According to the *CIA World Factbook*, about 19% of the Turkish population is part of the Kurdish ethnic community. The Kurds in Turkey have long been a restless group, struggling against the Turkish state for greater autonomy or secession to form their own Kurdish state.

“A separatist insurgency begun in 1984 by the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) has long dominated the Turkish military's attention and claimed more than 40,000 lives. In 2013, the PKK and the Turkish Government agreed to a cease-fire, but fighting resumed in 2015.”¹³ The PKK is a socialist party in Southeastern Turkey and Northern Iraq, originally to establish a state called Kurdistan, but now for greater autonomy for the Kurds within Turkey. The PKK describes its democratic struggle in the following terms:

“The AKP [Islamist Conservative] government has come to a stage where it is demanding a democratic solution and wider democratisation. The Kurdish freedom movement has brought the AKP government to this stage. All forces for democracy must play an active role in the progression of this process; and not just criticise the process from a distance.”¹⁴

The PKK now sees its struggle as one to fill a void within Turkey among leftist parties. They see conservative and nationalist parties, but believe there needs to be a socialistic alternative. They present themselves as an anti-capitalist, feminist, and democratic party that is pushing the Turkish state for greater democratization.¹⁵ Turkey has long waged a war against the PKK in

¹³ "The World Factbook: TURKEY." Central Intelligence Agency. Central Intelligence Agency, 12 Jan. 2017. Web. <<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/tu.html>>.

¹⁴ Karasu, Mustafa. "The Process of Democratic Solution and the Socialist Struggle within Turkey." The Process of Democratic Solution and the Socialist Struggle in Turkey | Partiya Karkeren Kurdistan - PKK Official Site. Partiya Karkeren Kurdistan (PKK), n.d. Web. <<http://www.pkkonline.net/en/index.php?sys=article&artID=186>>.

¹⁵ Bayik, Cemil. "The Process: Where Are We?" The Process: Where Are We? | Partiya Karkeren Kurdistan - PKK Official Site. Partiya Karkeren Kurdistan (PKK), n.d. Web. <<http://www.pkkonline.net/en/index.php?sys=article&artID=201>>.

order to maintain its territorial integrity and dominance over the Kurds within its borders. The President of Turkey frequently calls the PKK and its Syrian affiliate the YPG a terrorist organization.¹⁶ Turkey also sees an interest in the Kurds as a transnational issue, with President Erdogan stating that the attacks by the PKK in Turkey are “not unrelated to the incidents occurring in our region, the developments in Syria and Iraq in particular.”¹⁷ Turkey’s issues with the Kurds are not unique, with other Middle Eastern states having also struggled with Kurdish militants.

As such, Turkey has sought to engage with other regional partners to address their issues with Kurds. Turkish Prime Minister Yildirim met with Iraqi Prime Minister Abadi in January, where they issued a joint statement saying “that they will not have any terrorist organization in their territory and will not allow any activity that threatens the national security of the two countries.”¹⁸ Both Iraq and Turkey have struggled with their Kurdish populations in the past, with the ill-maintained mountainous border between the countries allowing militants to move between the two states and support operations on both sides of the border.

The PKK in particular has been able to maintain its insurgency by being able to exploit the porous situation at the border, moving men and materiel across and hiding in Iraq from the Turkish military. It has been so bad that in the past, Turkey has intervened in Northern Iraq to fight against Kurdish militant, either condoned or condemned by the Iraqi government. Recently, the Bashiqa Camp in Iraq was taken over by Turkey in order to train friendly Kurdish militants

¹⁶Erdogan, Recep Tayyip. "August 30 Victory Day." Presidency of the Republic of Turkey. Office of the President, 29 Aug. 2016. Web. <<https://www.tccb.gov.tr/en/speeches-statements/558/51123/august-30-victory-day.html>>.

¹⁷Erdogan, Recip Tayyip. "Press Statement by President Erdoğan on Terrorist Attack in Kayseri." Presidency of the Republic of Turkey. Office of the President, 17 Dec. 2016. Web. <<https://www.tccb.gov.tr/en/speeches-statements/558/66398/press-statement-by-president-erdogan-on-terrorist-attack-in-kayseri.html>>.

¹⁸ "Joint Statement from Yildirim and Abadi." ILKHA-Ilke News Agency. ILKHA, 9 Jan. 2017. Web. <<http://en.ilkha.com/haber/1577/joint-statement-from-yildirim-and-abadi>>.

from the Kurdish Regional Government, all part of Turkey's efforts to fight against the Islamic State and unfriendly Kurdish militants. The joint statement "emphasized that Bashiqa Camp is an Iraqi camp. The Iraqi side emphasized that the position on the Bashiqa camp is constant, emphasizing the need for the Turkish side to initiate a process to withdraw its forces and to end this issue. The Turkish side also reiterated respect for Iraq's territorial integrity and sovereignty."¹⁹ Turkey and Iraq have differing security challenges when reacting to the Islamic State and their Kurdish groups, and they have a complicated relationship. Initially, Iraq condemned the Turkish intervention into Bashiqa, however over time they came to accept it and by getting Turkey to state that it was an area under Iraqi sovereignty, they were able to legitimize Turkey being there. According to Prime Minister Yildirim:

"The government in northern Iraq [Kurdish govt.] and also the Iraqi central government have promised us that they will not differentiate between one terrorist organization and another. We are thankful to both governments for their sensitivity in fighting terrorist organizations and for their seriousness in expelling terrorist organizations in Sinjar, and we are prepared to cooperate with both governments to fight terrorist organizations."²⁰

This statement was in direct reference to the PKK organization, as all three governments involved are opposed to the PKK acting as a military force within their border. Turkey is actively opposing them, while the KRG and Iraqi Government have only threatened force to remove them. Both states treat the PKK as a terrorist organization, and have committed to opposing their use of violence. Turkey also maintains a relationship with the Kurdish Regional Government in Iraq that is friendly in nature, with Turkish officials giving support to the KRG and openly

¹⁹ Joint Statement from Yildirim and Abadi, 2017

²⁰ "Abadi and Yildirim Talk Bashiqa and PKK, Pledge to Fight Terrorism Together." Rudaw. Rudaw, 7 Jan. 2017. Web. <<http://www.rudaw.net/english/middleeast/07012017>>.

coordinating with them on development and security strategies,²¹ all in the context of a sovereign Iraq, an autonomous Kurdish region, and a Turkey that actively fights its own Kurdish population. This shows the complex intricacies of the relationships between the states that are affected by the Kurds, with their struggle for self-determination resulting in civil wars, military interventions, and regional insurgencies.

A key event that defined the role of the Kurds in the contemporary Middle East was the Kurdish Civil War in Iraq, Iran, and Turkey. Beginning in 1994, the PUK and KDP in Iraqi Kurdistan began a civil war for control of the Kurdish Regional Government. This fighting drew in the Iraqi military to try and end the fighting, as well as Turkey, which did not want to see Kurdish militants on their border. This civil war provided an opportunity for Turkey's PKK to enter into Iraq, where it has had maintained a presence since the end of fighting. This conflict spilled out of the borders of Iraqi Kurdistan into Iraq, Turkey, and Iran, showing how fluid the Kurdish nation and the fighting was. Being a transnational conflict, it greatly affected the states in which the Kurds were fighting, and drew them closer in the process as they all maintained an interest in upholding the Kurdish Regional Government and ending Kurdish militancy. If militancy were to continue, it could mean rebellion and insurrection across the region known as Kurdistan, potentially ending in secession of territory which no state wanted.

The Civil War in Kurdistan was ended by the Washington Agreement in 1998, bringing the Kurdish parties together in a political agreement to end the conflict.²² This agreement was conducted not only in light of Kurdish interests, but of the interests of the United States and its

²¹Sinirlioglu, Feridun. "From Rep. of Turkey Ministry of Foreign Affairs." Republic of Turkey Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 4 Nov. 2015. Web. <http://www.mfa.gov.tr/speech-by-h_e_-mr_feridun-sinirlio%C4%9Flu_-minister-of-foreign-affairs-of-turkey_-at-the-meri-_middle-east-research-institute_-forum_-4-november-2015_-erbil.en.mfa>.

²² Makovsky, Alan. "Kurdish Agreement Signals New U.S. Commitment." Kurdish Agreement Signals New U.S. Commitment - The Washington Institute for Near East Policy. Washington Institute, 29 Sept. 1998. Web. <<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/kurdish-agreement-signals-new-u.s.-commitment>>.

regional partner Turkey, as well as of the Iraqi state. For example, the agreement included “security arrangements (including a pledge to deny use of northern Iraq to the anti-Turkish PKK).” This agreement shows the interest of the regional powers that maintain Kurdish populations, as they do not want to enflame Kurdish militants and risk insurrection. All of the regional powers desire the Kurds being pacific and divided, as it makes it easier to rule them and maintain the status quo. The regional powers were actually incensed against the Washington Agreement, though parts were made more agreeable to maintain their support, such as security agreements for Turkey and the commitment to a federated Iraq rather than an independent Kurdistan.

However, Syria, Iraq, Iran, and Turkey, all were concerned by this agreement as it elevated the Kurds on the international stage and gave them an international standing of sorts. However, this conflict was resolved and proved that the Kurds can maintain their own government after a period of war, but in the framework of the existing states. This conflict also showed how important the Kurdish struggles for self-determination are in the relations between Syria, Iraq, Iran, and Turkey, because their Kurdish populations exist across fluid boundaries and are able to support one another, showing how the powers want the Kurds to be pacified and stable rather than inflamed into war.

A good example of why these states would like to maintain pacific Kurdish populations can be seen in Iran and Turkey. In Iranian Kurdistan, also called Eastern Kurdistan, the PDKI Party has maintained an insurrectionary presence that finds its roots back in 1918. In 2016, the group announced that it was abandoning its ceasefire deal of 20 years with the Iranian government and was returning to militancy, promising only to use violence if provoked. They claim to have resorted to violence due to arbitrary punishments by Iran, a lack of space for Kurds

in civil society or the political sphere, as well as to show the international system that Iran is not as strong as it posits.²³ The only independent Kurdish state once existed in Iran, the Mahabad Republic, and the legacy of that state is still felt in Kurdish *peshmerga* fighters today throughout Kurdistan.²⁴ Kurdish researcher Mamand Roja reflected on the current state of relations between Middle Eastern states and the place for Iranian Kurds in it, stating "The regional rivalries between Iran, Turkey and Saudi Arabia have created an opportunity through which Iranian Kurdistan can become part of the bigger regional picture."²⁵ The Kurds exist in a phenomenon wherein the regional states can coordinate to maintain the stability of their Kurdish populations across their porous borders, but as the rivalry between the states has shown, the vacuum is quickly filled by Kurds desiring their own self-determination.

Prior to the ongoing Syrian Civil War, Syria had been an Arab dominated state that looked to destroy its Kurdish population. To do so, the Syrian Arab Republic in the 1960s engaged in a campaign of Arabization. The Jazira Census as it is now known was undertaken in the majority Kurdish province of Jazira, in order for the state to identify its Kurdish population. These Kurds had to turn in their ID cards, and those who didn't were considered "unregistered." Kurds, both unregistered and who had turned in their ID cards, were now effectively invisible to the state, as they could not participate in civil society and were barred from state institutions. According to a 1996 Human Rights Watch report, the 1962 Census "stripped an estimated 120,000 Syrian Kurds -- 20 percent of the Syrian Kurdish population -- of their Syrian citizenship" and "was one component of a comprehensive plan to Arabize the Kurdish northeast

²³ Salih, Mohammed. "Why Iranian Kurdish Party Is Stepping up Fight against Tehran." Al-Monitor. Al-Monitor, 09 July 2016. Web. <<http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/07/iran-kurdish-party-attack-irgc.html#ixzz4E1sIPoY>>.

²⁴ Abdullah, Mufid. "Mahabad – the First Independent Kurdish Republic." The Kurdistan Tribune. Kurdistan Tribune, 12 June 2011. Web. <http://kurdistantribune.com/mahabad-first-independent-kurdish-republic/?doing_wp_cron=1462373775.4627330303192138671875>.

²⁵ Mohammed Salih, 2016

of Syria along the Turkish-Syrian border.”²⁶ By denying the Kurds their identity and nationhood, they were able to disenfranchise a fifth of the Syrian Kurdish population and lay the groundwork for a sweeping Arabization campaign.

This Arabization campaign was meant to displace and disempower the Kurds in Syria, take their lands for Arabs, and strengthen one group at the expense of another. In 1973, after identifying the Kurds and the areas they inhabited, the Syrian government committed to an ‘Arab Belt Initiative’ wherein Arabs would populate the Syrian-Turkish borderlands and displace the local Kurdish population. The aim of these campaigns was to breakup the contiguity of the Kurdish nation across the borders, and to subjugate the Kurds to a position of statelessness. The Syrian state feeling threatened by the Kurds, decided to repress them and take away their power, though this changed because of the recent Civil War. With the advent of the war, there was an opportunity for Syrian Kurds to gain autonomy and practice self-determination, though the fate of their experiment is unclear.

Northeastern Syria holds the greatest concentration of Kurds, centered around a region called Rojava. The aim is to develop a secular polity inside a future federal Syria. The so-called Democratic Federal System of Northern Syria was established in 2014 by the Democratic Union Party (PYD), a left-wing Kurdish political party that claimed to represent the majority-minority districts of Northern Syria. A part of the preamble of the charter reads as follows:

“Under the Charter, we, the people of the Autonomous Regions, unite in the spirit of reconciliation, pluralism and democratic participation so that all may express themselves freely in public life. In building a society free from authoritarianism, militarism, centralism and the intervention of religious authority in public affairs,

²⁶ "Syria - The Silenced Kurds." Syria. Human Rights Watch, Oct. 1996. Web. <<https://www.hrw.org/reports/1996/Syria.htm>>.

the Charter recognizes Syria's territorial integrity and aspires to maintain domestic and international peace."²⁷

This Kurdish led drive for autonomy is revealing in its constitutional creation. It aims for a peaceful and secular polity that is democratic in nature, something very unlike the regime that Bashar al-Assad now heads. It wants a robust civil society, something that would have been off limits to these minority groups in a Syria that valued Arabs above all else. The charter also recognizes Syria's territorial integrity, meaning that these groups are not looking to have an independent Assyria or Kurdish state, but rather they are looking to gain their rights within the framework of the Syrian state.

This Kurdish led entity in Northern Syria has been seen as a threat by Turkey and Syria, and they have responded to it with hostility. Turkey closed the border and imposed an embargo on businesses and goods engaging in commerce in the federal Northern Syria, designed to economically isolate the region. According to Kurdish businessman Abu Ali:

“Syria's Kurdish region ... has become an open-air prison, and a simple journey of no more than six kilometres (from Qamishli to the Turkish border) has now been turned into an operation that is both expensive and dangerous.”²⁸

To the Kurds inside the region, the economic blockade by Turkey is devastating. As one woman who hired smugglers commented, “We have nothing.” The isolation by Turkey is not the only form of aggression being suffered by people in Rojava. The militia units in Rojava are affiliated with the PYD and other Kurdish political parties, and are called the People's Protection Units (YPG). These groups are considered terrorists by Turkey, as some have links to the PKK

²⁷ "Charter of the Social Contract." Peace in Kurdistan. Peace in Kurdistan, 18 June 2015. Web. <<https://peaceinkurdistancampaign.com/charter-of-the-social-contract/>>.

²⁸ Barbarani, Sofia. "Syrian Kurds Risk Their Lives Crossing into Turkey." Middle East Eye. Middle East Eye, 29 Dec. 2014. Web. <<http://www.middleeasteye.net/in-depth/features/syrian-kurds-risk-lives-cross-turkey-33769556>>.

operating inside Turkey. As such, as late as April 27th, Turkey was fighting these groups and conducting air and artillery strikes along the entire length of its border with the Rojava federal region.²⁹ Turkey has not only committed to an economic blockade, but also a military strategy aimed at undermining any chance of an independent Kurdish polity on its borders. Turkey sees the Kurds desire for self-determination as an existential threat to its own sovereignty. As such, though Turkey is an enemy of the Syrian regime of Bashar al-Assad, in this case the civil war has put them together as strange bedfellows against a common Kurdish enemy.

However, this was not always the case. “[T]he Syrian government used the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) [in Turkey] as a proxy to wage war in response to Turkey's "water-dam politics" that left Syria vulnerable to droughts.”³⁰ It is interesting to think that though Syria and Turkey are traditional enemies over such a necessary resource as water, that the Syrian Civil War and strengthened Kurdish power has pushed them together. It also is demonstrative of the role the Kurds play in Middle Eastern politics, that of a group looking for power and able to find it in state sponsorship that often forces them to be pawns of larger regional rivalries.

The Syrian regime of course is adamantly opposed to the Kurds de facto autonomous region, and has been actively fighting them for the length of the Civil War. Going back into history as we have shown, there is bad blood between Syria and the Kurds. Now, today, that historical animosity has spilled into open warfare. The Kurds in the North of Syria have formed their YPG militias, which are allied with the Syrian Democratic Forces, which according to the

²⁹ Starr, Barbara, and Angela Dewan. "US Troops Patrol Turkey-Syria Border after Airstrikes." CNN. Cable News Network, 30 Apr. 2017. Web. <<http://www.cnn.com/2017/04/30/middleeast/turkey-syria-us-troops-patrol/>>.

³⁰ Paasche, Till F. "Syrian and Iraqi Kurds: Conflict and Cooperation." Middle East Policy Council. MEPC, n.d. Web. <<http://www.mepc.org/syrian-and-iraqi-kurds-conflict-and-cooperation>>.

updated 2016 Constitution of Rojava form the official defense forces of that territory.³¹ Possibly alarming to the Syrian state is the rate at which Arabs have flocked to the Kurdish banners in order to fight against ISIS militants and Syrian Arab Army units. According to the US Department of Defense, “[t]he SEF [special forces of the SDF] now consists of approximately 45,000 fighters, more than 13,000 of which are Arab.” Further, more than 90% of those graduating from training to join the SDF are Arabs,³² reflecting the diversity of the multiethnic coalition. This in and of itself represents a larger threat to Syria and Turkey. Syria has long tried to ostracize its Kurdish population, taking away their lands and citizenship in order to benefit Arabs. However, the Arabization campaign largely failed, and the Arabs from the Arab Belt Initiative largely integrated and assimilated into the local Kurdish population. By trying to play one group off of another, the state was able to maintain control and keep potentially problem populations weakened. However, now there are as many as 32 factions and ethnic groups represented in the Syrian Democratic Forces through the YPG, showing that the Rojava Revolution has succeeded in uniting disparate entities against a tyrannical Syrian regime.

This uniting of minority groups proves a challenge to Turkey as well. Turkey has long been against Kurdish self-determination, and argues that it is a secular state that embraces its own diversity within the framework of modern Turkey. By having a diverse entity on its borders, it threatens the unity of the Turkish state. By having an autonomous Kurdish polity on its borders, it also threatens the territorial integrity of the Turkish state. The Rojava federal entity is very different than the Kurdish Regional Government in Iraq. The Kurdish Regional

³¹ Arafat, Hisham. "'Rojava' No Longer Exists, 'Northern Syria' Adopted Instead."Kurdistan24.net. Kurdistan 24, 28 Dec. 2016. Web. <<http://www.kurdistan24.net/en/news/51940fb9-3aff-4e51-bcf8-b1629af00299/-Rojava--no-longer-exists---Northern-Syria--adopted-instead->>.

³²Dorrian, Col. John. "Department of Defense Press Briefing by Col. Dorrian via Teleconferenc." U.S. DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE. US Dept. of Defense, 8 Dec. 2016. Web. <<https://www.defense.gov/News/Transcripts/Transcript-View/Article/1025099/departement-of-defense-press-briefing-by-col-dorrian-via-teleconference-from-bag/>>.

Government came out of the Iraqi Civil War, and its formation was facilitated with input from Iraq, regional states including Turkey, as well as the United States. Though it is an autonomous Kurdish entity it was not one that sprang up on its own like Rojava. The Kurdish Regional Government was a negotiated end to a civil war in an area that the Iraqi state had already granted autonomy. The Rojava Revolution on the other hand utilized violent means to seize power from Syria, something that Turkey worries deeply over.

These states are not the only ones to worry over their Kurdish populations, especially in regards to the Syrian conflict. Iran is another regional actor engaged in Syria, and in its own domestic disputes with its Kurdish population. “Iranian Kurds, for example, rose up against the state in a bid for independence immediately following the Iraqi invasion of Iran in 1980. Occurring at a time when the Islamic Republic was at its weakest, the revolt was not suppressed until 1984 following a two-year campaign by the Iranian army.”³³ Following this, Iran had many years of relative peace with its Kurdish populations, with as many as 40 Kurds entering parliament and Kurds entering into the Presidential cabinet. However, forces did conspire to foment Kurdish separatism within Iran.

Immediately following the Islamic Revolution, which formed the modern Islamic Republic of Iran, Kurds took the opportunity to proclaim their own sovereignty. They were able to capitalize on the revolution, as well as the Iran-Iraq War, to hold control over portions of Iranian Kurdistan. However,

“[t]he Kurds were not interested in being part of an Islamic State and found the upheaval generated by the collapse of the central government to be an opportune moment to establish their own sovereignty. It was not to last; on August 17, 1979

³³ "The Iraq War and American National Security Interests in the Middle East." (2009): 68-86. Middle East Brief. Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Web. <<http://web.mit.edu/polisci/people/gradstudents/papers/shiffrinson.MEB14-1.pdf>>.

Khomeini declared a holy war against the Kurds and proceeded brutally to put down the rebellion in Kurdistan. Entire villages and towns were wiped out in an attempt to force the Kurds quickly into submission.”³⁴

The Iranian state reacted with violence in order to ensure its territorial integrity. Though much focus has been given to Turkey and Iraq for the Kurdish populations, it is often lost on the casual observer that Iran has its own problem with minority populations. In fact, Ayatollah Khomeini said that the idea of minorities was un-Islamic as it could be used to disunite Muslims from the global *ummah*. As such, he issued a fatwa against the Kurds and declared a holy war against them,³⁵ adding a uniquely Islamic twist to a largely secular conflict.

Another example is when the PKK established a sister wing in Iran known as the Party for a Free Life in Iranian Kurdistan (PEJAK). However, PEJAK took a different tact to the desire for self-determination than other established Kurdish groups. As the Jamestown Foundation’s Terrorism Monitor noted:

“Having killed several hundred Iranian soldiers and policemen since 2004, PEJAK militancy in support of Kurdish autonomy and eventual independence contrasts sharply with the conciliatory approach towards the Iranian government favored by more-established Iranian Kurdish groups.”³⁶

It should be noted that the PKK and PEJAK are more radical left-wing separatist groups than other established Kurdish political entities like the KDP or KDPI. However, the ongoing low-level insurgency that is occurring in Iranian Kurdistan is indicative of the lack of trust between Iranians and Kurds.

³⁴ "Kurdistan Today and Tomorrow." Kurds Today and Tomorrow. International Turkey Network, 8 Feb. 2007. Web. <https://web.archive.org/web/20070208042832/http://www.itnet.org/kurds_today.html>.

³⁵ Kurds Today and Tomorrow, 2007

³⁶ Middle East Brief, MIT, 2009

Something of a detente was reached between the two groups in the late 1990s and early 2000s, when Muhammad Khatami came to power as the Iranian President. Khatami was a reformist, who was more liberal than his predecessors or even the Ayatollah on minority rights. As the economist noted in 2000, Iranian Kurds could “raise their grievances directly with Iran's reform-minded president, Muhammad Khatami,” rather than having to rely on outside powers like the Iraqi or Turkish Kurds. Further, under Mr. Khatami the ability of Kurds to enjoy minority rights expanded, with the region's Governor issuing record numbers of permits for Kurdish cultural expositions, and even allowing Kurdish to be taught in schools. Though these seem like minute improvements, they went far in ensuring that Iranian Kurds would retain their cultural history and be seen to be valued inside of a unitary Iran. However, the Economist also noted how some Kurds still looked longingly at the Kurdish Regional Government in Iraq,³⁷ underlining how uncertain the future between Kurds and Iranians was.

Since the Khatami period, the detente has largely ended and tensions have again risen between the state and its Kurdish populations. Following the killing of several Kurdish activists, riots broke out across Iranian Kurdistan, resulting in security forces brutally cracking down on the population. Dissident groups in Iraqi Kurdistan claimed “as many as 100,000 state security forces, backed up by helicopter gunships, had moved into the region to crack down on pro-Kurdish demonstrations.”³⁸ Even the slightest dissension in Iran, especially on such a large scale as the Kurdish led riots which spread to non-Kurdish areas, is subjected to the full power of the

³⁷ Sanandaj. "The Lucky Ones?" The Economist. The Economist Newspaper, 23 Dec. 2000. Web. <<http://www.economist.com/node/459337>>.

³⁸ Focus, Iran. "Iran Sends in Troops to Crush Border Unrest - Iran (General) - News." Iran Focus. Iran Focus, 12 Mar. 2008. Web. <<https://web.archive.org/web/20080312190948/http://www.iranfocus.com/modules/news/article.php?storyid=3183>>.

Iranian state. As such, this dissension was crushed brutally, resulting in dozens of deaths before it dissipated.

The PKK's Iranian sister party, PEJAK, took up arms in 2004 with the aim of an independent Kurdistan, and with a minimum political goal of autonomy for the 3 majority Kurdish provinces. The conflict goes on to this day, with thousands of Kurds and Iranians having died in an oft-overlooked conflict in the Middle East.³⁹ This conflict has brought Iran closer to Turkey and Iraq, with deepening security cooperation between the states. It should also be noted that PJAK has claimed that Turkey is actively fighting against them, something that would be illegal for a NATO ally to do. However, this shows the seriousness with which the Kurdish threat is taken by Turkey, so much so that they are willing to coordinate with a rival of their alliance in order to ensure their own territorial integrity.

Iran is also actively involved in the Syrian Civil War, having taken the side of dictator Bashar al-Assad and being active in the fight against rebels, ISIS, and the Kurdish factions. Iran is providing direct military support to the Assad regime, including through the use of regular military forces, as well as through military aid and arms shipments. According to British think tank the Royal United Services Institute, "Tehran worries that greater autonomy for Syrian Kurds might trigger the establishment of independent Kurdish states in Turkey, Iraq and, ultimately, Iran." Though it is not an active enemy of the Kurds, it is not a friend either, and sees the Kurds as "a useful force in the fight against Daesh which, however, does not have the same long-term interests in Syria."⁴⁰ In the short term, the Iranian strategy is to eliminate ISIS as a threat to the

³⁹ Zambelis, Chris. "PJAK Intensifies Its Struggle for Iranian Kurdistan." Jamestown Foundation. The Jamestown Foundation, 18 June 2008. Web. <<https://jamestown.org/program/pjak-intensifies-its-struggle-for-iranian-kurdistan/>>.

⁴⁰ Tabrizi, Aniseh Bassiri, and Raffaello Pantucci. Understanding Iran's Role in the Syrian Conflict (2016): n. pag. RUSI. Royal United Services Institute, Aug. 2016. Web. <https://rusi.org/sites/default/files/201608_op_understanding_irans_role_in_the_syrian_conflict_0.pdf>.

Syrian Regime, and though it has denounced the Syrian Kurds and their formation of a federal entity in Rojava, it has not come to blows with them as of yet. Rather, it is using them as a tool to weaken enemies of Assad, and may turn on them in the future.

The Syrian-Iranian relationship was not always so cozy, and Iran did not always support the regime. In fact, the religious leadership in Tehran claimed that the Alawite leadership in Damascus were heretics, and Iran was a regional rival to Syria even up until 2003. However, Iran also sees Syria as a counterweight to its old Gulf rival Iraq, and is looking to embolden it so it can reassert its influence in Iraq and over its former Baathist brothers. “While Iran is in many ways a trusted friend, shoring up the resilience of the Syrian army and enabling the survival of the regime, it is also perceived as having played a key role in the fracturing of the Syrian state and the creation of a parallel security state.”⁴¹ Damascus is wary of the role of Iran in its Civil War, so the fact that they have been joined together is a marriage of convenience rather than one of true friendship.

This interacts in an interesting way with Damascus’ relation with the Kurds in light of the relation it has to its Iranian ally. Though the regime is actively fighting against the Kurds and their Democratic Front in Rojava, their Iranian friends are not. Iran is worried about attacking Syrian Kurds for how it might impact their own Kurdish populations. The biggest worry amongst Iran in regards to its Kurds is a replay of earlier clashes, or at worst an insurgency resembling the one in Turkey. By being tolerant of the Syrian Kurds in the short term, Iran can consolidate its influence and the holdings of the Syrian regime long enough to eventually turn their ire towards Rojava, but not before dispatching ISIS and other rebel factions.

The relations between states in the region are impacted greatly when considering the Kurdish population. The Kurds have long been used as a tool by states in the region to

⁴¹ RUSI p. 20

undermine each other and their sovereignty, or have become a problematic group that forces states to work together against a common enemy. However, in either case the Kurds are not recognized as a national group or for their human value, rather they are seen as a group to be used in a threatening manner.

It should also be noted that self determination looks different to different Kurdish groups. As has been demonstrated in earlier quotations, some Kurds see themselves as an integral part of an existing state, like in Iraq where they are content with their autonomy and have not added to their political platforms a desire for independence. Some see themselves as an integral part of an idealized state, like Syria's Rojava which wishes to remain part of Syria, with that state being federal. In Iran, this desire ranges on a spectrum from a recognition of minority rights, as was seen under President Khatami, to a full on desire for independence as is seen in PEJAK. And of course, Turkey has the other end of this spectrum, containing a Kurdish group in the PKK whose stated desire is independence from Turkey in the form of a Kurdish state.

As has been demonstrated, the Kurdish desire for self determination has a tangible impact on relations between Middle Eastern states, and between state actors and the Kurdish ethnic community. In some areas it has produced cooperation between the state and the Kurds, such as in Iraq where the President is Kurdish or where the Kurdish Regional Government has committed troops to the fight against ISIS. In other areas like Turkey however, enmity has deepened and war is ongoing. It is a testament to the longevity and political power of the Kurds that they have been able to achieve their political goals in some places, while in others they still struggle to achieve what they see as their rightful place. However, the relationship between the Kurds and their states is complicated, underpinning the complexity of regional politics in the Middle East today.