

Kurdish Politics in the Global Context **FREE**

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Summary

Kurds are considered to be one of the largest ethnic groups in the world—with a population of more than 30 million people—who do not have their own independent state. In the Middle East, they are the fourth largest ethnic group after Arabs, Persians, and Turks. The statelessness of such a major group with an increasing ethnic and national consciousness in the post-Ottoman world led to their traumatic insecurities in the hands of majority-led nation-states that used modern technologies of social engineering including displacement, dehumanization, assimilation, and genocidal acts throughout the 20th century. With the memory of such traumatic insecurities, the driving force of contemporary Kurdish nationalism in the Middle East has primarily been the question of state or state-like entities. Yet, Kurds are not a homogeneous group with a collective understanding of security and self-government. Rather, there are political-organizational rivalries within Kurds across Iraq, Syria, Turkey, and Iran. Thus, it is important to understand the multifaceted Kurdish politics in the Middle East within a global-historical perspective where global power rivalries, regional geopolitics, and intra-Kurdish organizational competition are interwoven together. While the opportunities for Kurdish self-determination were missed in the early 20th century, resilient Kurdish political organizations emerged within the bipolar international context of the Cold War. The American hegemony in the post-Cold War era transformed the Kurdish political status in the geopolitics of the Middle East, where the 1991 Gulf War, the 2003 Iraq War, and the broader war on terror provided the Kurds with many political opportunities. Finally, the shifting regional and global alliances in the post-Arab Spring era—where the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) has become the global nemesis—created new political opportunities as well as significant threats for the Kurds.

Keywords: Kurds, Middle East, geopolitics, great powers, nonstate actors

Subjects: Conflict Studies, Identity, Security Studies

Introduction

In the summer of 2017, when Masoud Barzani, the then-president of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) of Iraq, announced that the Iraqi Kurds would hold an independence referendum from Baghdad in September 2017, there was almost no international or regional endorsement for the idea of a fully sovereign Kurdish statehood (Eppel, 2018; Kaplan, 2019). Leading European powers and the United States, a long-time ally of the Iraqi Kurds, opposed this independence move on the grounds that it would violate the territorial integrity of Iraq

and disrupt the global struggle against the notorious terror group, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) (Barkey, 2019). Although Russia stated that Iraq's territorial integrity should be respected, they did not fully disapprove of the Kurdish national aspirations (Wasser, 2019; Zhdannikov, 2017).

Iran and Turkey, the two key regional powers in the Middle East, fiercely criticized the independence bid of the Iraqi Kurds on the grounds that it would destabilize the entire region, particularly considering the potential sympathy for Iraqi Kurdish independence among the millions of Kurds populating Iran, Turkey, and Syria (Morris, 2017). There was even a perception of the Kurdish independence bid as an attempt to create "a second Israel" among some Iranian and Turkish nationalists. In fact, Israel was perhaps the only country that openly endorsed the Kurdish independence referendum, since the Iraqi Kurds had been off-the-radar Israeli allies against pan-Arab nationalism in the 1960s and 1970s as well as the growing Iranian influence in the Middle East since the Islamic Revolution of 1979 (Bengio, 2014; 2017).

Although approximately 92% of Iraqi Kurds said "yes" to independence on the referendum held on September 25, 2017, the KRG was mostly alienated within the international community and intimidated by Tehran, Ankara, and Baghdad, particularly regarding the loss of the disputed oil-rich city of Kirkuk, which had been under the control of the KRG since 2014 (Kaplan, 2019).

The 2017 Iraqi Kurdish independence bid was only one reflection of how more than 30 million Kurds residing across contemporary Turkey, Iraq, Syria, and Iran (as well as a diaspora of a few million in the West) and the geopolitics of an imagined Kurdistan have become one of the most politically and militarily contested territories among contemporary regional rivalries (particularly Iran, Turkey, Israel, and Saudi Arabia) as well as a global rivalry for becoming a potential hegemony in the region between the United States, Russia, and, most recently, China. While the different state actors have tried to pursue a carrot-or-stick approach toward the Kurds based on their regional interests, the Kurds have, in turn, sought to politically, economically, and militarily benefit from such interstate rivalries either as leverage within their own intra-ethnic competition for supremacy or against external threats.

Historically, Kurdistan was a buffer zone between the Persian and Ottoman empires ruled by the autonomous Kurdish emirates, who were mostly tied to the Sunni Ottoman empire (Ates, 2013; McDowall, 2003). Despite their nonstate actor status, the Kurds and Kurdistan were never detached from interstate competition in regional and world politics. Before World War I, they were the frontier people within the rivalries of the Ottoman, Persian, and Russian empires. In the post-World War I regional order, the British and French partition of the Middle East led to the separation of the Kurds across Turkey, Iraq under the British mandate, and Syria under the French Mandate (Eppel, 2016; Izady, 2004). During the Cold War, the Gulf War (1990–1991), and the Iraq War (2003) led by the United States, the Kurds were always under the radar of the broader geopolitical interests of regional states and global powers.

Kurds still do not have an independent state. Despite their shared grievances rooted in assimilation, state violence, and forced displacement in the hands of state actors throughout the 20th century, they remain politically and organizationally divided with multiple Kurdish

political actors interacting separately in regional geopolitics as well as in global alliances. Thus, it is significant to put Kurdish politics in the Middle East within a global-historical perspective that would knit the complexity of intra-Kurdish rivalries, shifting regional geopolitics, and global interventions together. The centrality of Kurdish politics within the global context is discussed through key historical episodes such as (a) the post-Ottoman regional and international order, (b) the bipolar world and the Cold War, (c) the American hegemony and liberal international order in the post-Cold War era, and (d) the war on terror in the 2000s and the rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) after the Arab Spring of 2010–2011.

The Postimperial International Order and the Emergence of the Kurdish Question in the Early 20th Century

By the mid-19th century, the Ottoman and Persian empires faced the heavy challenge of a new world order and interstate system based on European modernity. The emerging notion of modernity and a new world order were mostly being built on the principles of territorial sovereignty, constitutionalism, liberalism, and nationalism gradually influenced by the political and economic transformations in the West such as the Industrial Revolution (1760s–1830s), the American Revolution (1776), and the French Revolution (1789). Constitutionalism entailed restrictions on the power of the godly emperors; liberalism entailed more economic and political rights for ordinary subjects; nationalism entailed secularization, popular sovereignty, citizenship, and a homogeneous social order (Mylonas, 2013; Reynolds, 2011; Wimmer, 2013).

In this context, one particular aspect of the post-World War I international zeitgeist was the notion of national self-determination. Although a new world order based on states with relatively homogeneous populations, fixed borders, territorial integrity, and rule by popular sovereignty was in the making during the 19th century, World War I and the postwar settlements crystallized the new era of national states. Erez Manela (2007) called this international zeitgeist “the Wilsonian moment.” The announcement of “the Fourteen Points” by U.S. President Woodrow Wilson in January 1918 outlined a liberal way forward for a peaceful international order along with the creation of the League of Nations. The autonomous development of nations under the rule of the Ottoman empire was particularly emphasized under point 12 (Al, 2019).

According to Manela (2007), the Wilsonian moment “launched the transformations of the norms and standards of international relations that established the self-determining nation-state as the only legitimate political form throughout the globe, as colonized and marginalized peoples demanded and eventually attained recognition as sovereign, independent actors in international society” (p. 5). Kurds also saw opportunity within “the Wilsonian moment” and began entertaining the idea of autonomy and a fully independent Kurdish state.

The *Kürdistan Teali Cemiyeti* (Society for the Advancement of Kurdistan) was founded in Istanbul in late-1918 within such a transnational context. The organization’s political agenda initially had ebbed and flowed between pro-Ottoman and pro-Kurdish rhetoric, but later

Kurdish autonomy and independence inspired by the Wilson principles formed the main framework for moving forward. The *Kürdistan Teali Cemiyeti* was involved in diplomatic efforts during the Paris Peace Conference in 1919 with the representation of Mehmed Şerif Pasha (the son of Ottoman foreign minister Kurdish Said Pasha) seeking Kurdish self-rule (Bajalan, 2019). The international diplomatic recognition of Kurdistan and potential independence under the Treaty of Sèvres (August 1920, never ratified) signed between the Ottoman government in Istanbul and the Allied powers is usually attributed to the pro-Kurdish diplomatic efforts. Section III of the Treaty was about Kurdistan. Article 62 stated:

A Commission sitting at Constantinople and composed of three members appointed by the British, French and Italian Governments respectively shall draft within six months from the coming into force of the present Treaty a scheme of local autonomy for the predominantly Kurdish areas lying east of the Euphrates, south of the southern boundary of Armenia as it may be hereafter determined, and north of the frontier of Turkey with Syria and Mesopotamia, as defined in Article 27, II (2) and (3).¹

Article 64 stated:

If within one year from the coming into force of the present Treaty the Kurdish peoples within the areas defined in Article 62 shall address themselves to the Council of the League of Nations in such a manner as to show that a majority of the population of these areas desires independence from Turkey, and if the Council then considers that these peoples are capable of such independence and recommends that it should be granted to them, Turkey hereby agrees to execute such a recommendation, and to renounce all rights and title over these areas.²

Despite such recognition, designated Kurdish territory under the treaty was smaller than the Kurds expected. While eastern Anatolia was mostly recognized as Armenian territory, the Kurdish provinces within the vilayet of Mosul in Mesopotamia remained disputed, and the final decision was left to the League of Nations (and later left to Iraq in 1926). Despite this international recognition of the Kurds and Kurdistan, the broader interest of the British and the French was to contain the Ottomans within the small territory of Asia Minor and establish deeper spheres of control and influence in the Arab Middle East which was already planned with the 1916 Sykes-Picot Agreement (Eppel, 2016; Jwaideh, 2006).

The major resistance against the terms of the Sèvres came from the Turkish National Liberation Movement, which emerged in Anatolia (1919–1923) with the leadership of Mustafa Kemal Pasha. Mustafa Kemal even gained support from some Kurdish tribes in eastern Anatolia who perceived Orthodox Armenian statehood as a greater threat than a Muslim Turkish state. The rhetoric of Muslim solidarity against the non-Muslim foreign interventions appealed to some Kurds as well (Bozarslan, 2008; Mango, 1999). Mustafa Kemal's national liberation movement also gained support from Bolshevik Russia as solidarity against so-called Western imperialism. As a result, the Russian revolution and the potential spread of an anti-Western revolutionary project particularly pushed the British to compromise with the Turkish

nationalists. British support for Kurdish self-determination was never a strategic priority, but the unexpected Russian revolution and its support for Turkish national liberation made the British political investment in the Kurds much less of a priority (Bajalan, 2019; Gokay, 2006).

Under this weakening international support for Kurdish autonomy or statehood, the Treaty of Lausanne (1923) was signed between Turkey (as the successor state of the Ottoman empire) and the Allies. This treaty, which basically replaced the unratified Treaty of Sèvres, included eastern and southeastern Anatolia as the official territories of the new Turkish state with no political status for or recognition of the Kurds. Overall, the making of the postimperial order with the end of World War I created political opportunities for Kurdish self-determination, but the broader geopolitical context dimmed the realization of an autonomous or independent Kurdistan in the Middle East. Thus, the Kurds became one of the most significant political losers of the broader global transformation in the international order and the interstate system based on the right to national self-determination after World War I.

Toward a Bipolar World: The Rise of Resilient Kurdish Political Actors and the Cold War

As scholars of nationalism and ethnicity are cautious about the groupness and unity of ethnic categories (Brubaker, 2006), scholars who study the Kurds in the Middle East should also be cautious about a single, unified, and homogeneous Kurdish voice and interest in the region (Černý, 2018). As the Kurds in the beginning of the 20th century were not unified on the idea of self-determination due to tribal and political differences, their post-World War I territorial division further led to the emergence of separate resistance movements and political organizations against the nation-states they were part of. Despite their similar experiences of assimilation, state violence, denial of their languages, and forced displacements by the Turkish, Arab, and Persian states, the Kurdish antistate uprisings and mobilizations were and have remained mostly fragmented.

During the interwar period, there were a series of Kurdish rebellions for political status and recognition. In Turkey, the Sheikh Said rebellion (1925), the Agri rebellion (1930), and the Dersim uprisings (1937–1938) were heavily suppressed (Bozarslan, 2008; Olson, 1989, 2000; Van Bruinessen, 1991). In Iraq, the declaration of the Kurdistan Kingdom (1922–1924) by Sheikh Mahmud Barzanji was repressed by the British mandate, but the later uprising by Ahmed Barzani in 1931—and his brother Mullah Mustafa Barzani's revolt between 1943 and 1945—laid the groundwork for the Iraqi Kurdish national movement in the second half of the 20th century (Ghareeb, 1981). The more the nation-states sought to repress any pro-Kurdish demands, the stronger the Kurdish nationalist mass mobilization and political organizations became through the end of the 20th century.

The first resilient Kurdish political organization that has survived as one of the most influential actors in the Kurdish Middle East, as well as within regional-international geopolitical rivalries, is the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), founded in 1946. Mullah

Mustafa Barzani remained the leader of the KDP and led the struggle for Kurdish autonomy in Iraq until his death in 1979. The KDP has been the leading governing party of the Kurdistan region of Iraq (Stansfield, 2003).

The precedent of the KDP in Iraq was the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran (KDP-I), which had originally evolved from the *Komalay Jiyanyay Kurdistan* or the Society for the Revival of Kurdistan, and was led by Qazi Muhammed in 1945. Qazi Muhammed was able to establish the short-lived self-governing Kurdistan Republic of Mahabad (January–December 1946) in northwestern Iran with Soviet support. Mullah Mustafa Barzani also became the commander of the army in Mahabad (Eagleton, 1963; Koohi-Kamali, 2003; Vali, 2011). During World War II, both Iran and Iraq established closer relations with the pro-Axis powers, particularly Germany, in order to reduce British and Soviet interventionism in their domestic affairs. Iran in particular was subject to the Anglo-Soviet invasion in 1941 due to concerns about German expansionism toward the Caucasus, and securing the British-controlled oil fields and the trade route to British India, as well as protecting the British–Soviet supply exchange (Nerwiy, 2012).

During and after the occupation of Iran by global powers, ethnic minorities such as the Kurds and Azeris sought self-government between 1941 and 1946. While the central government was concerned about the territorial integrity of Iran, first the Azeris declared their autonomous government in late 1945, and later the Kurds followed by declaring their self-governing entity. As the Soviets were sympathetic to the idea of national self-determination and designed their foreign policy supporting anticolonial self-determination movements around the world, they initially supported Qazi Muhammed's declaration of a Kurdistan Republic, but Britain and the United States supported the territorial integrity of Iran. This great power disagreement in Iran also sowed the seeds of the Cold War in the second half of the 20th century (Nerwiy, 2012).

As the firm British–American stance against Soviet support for minority self-determination attempts left Qazi Muhammed alone in Iran, the Iranian military took control of Mahabad in December 1946, and Muhammed was hanged in March 1947. After the fall of the Kurdistan Republic, Mullah Mustafa Barzani remained in exile in the Soviet Union until his return to Iraq after the fall of the Hashemite monarchy in 1958.

While the Kurdish uprisings in Turkey during the interwar years were heavily repressed, and no resilient organizational challenge emerged until the rise of the Marxist-Leninist Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in the late 1970s, the Iranian Kurdish struggle for autonomy was mostly repressed by Tehran after the Republic of Kurdistan experience in 1946. Although the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran (KDP-I) supported the overthrow of the Shah's regime in 1979, their demands for autonomy were denied by the new Islamic regime led by Ayatollah Khomeini, and the Kurdish armed resurrection of 1979 was violently suppressed. Abdul Rahman Ghassemlou, a promising leader of the KDP-I, was later killed by Iranian intelligence in Vienna in 1989 (Prunhuber, 2019).

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During the Cold War, the primary site of regional and global rivalries within which the Kurds were embedded was Iraq. After the monarchy was ousted through a military coup in 1958, senior military officer Abdal Karim Qasim became the leader of Iraq. Although he was a nationalist, he distanced himself from Egypt's Gamal Abdel Nasser's wave of pan-Arabism which culminated in the unification of Egypt and Syria under the United Arab Republic (1958–1961). Qasim preferred a domestic alliance with the Kurds and the leftists against the pan-Arabist factions. Under these circumstances, Mullah Mustafa Barzani returned to Iraq in 1958 from his exile in the Soviet Union and led the Kurdish national movement for autonomy in Iraq. Although the Qasim government promised autonomy for the Kurds, the demands were not met, and the first Arab–Kurdish war, started in 1961, lasted until a bilateral peace agreement in 1970 (the March Accord). Baghdad promised autonomy; however, Baghdad never agreed to give the Kurds authority over the oil fields of northern Iraq (Schmidt, 1970).

Since the United States was mostly concerned about containing the influence of the Soviet Union and communism in Iraq and the region, Arab and pan-Arab nationalism were not a primary threat. The Gulf monarchies, primarily Saudi Arabian, did perceive pan-Arab nationalism as a threat to their regimes. For the British, Nasser's rising popularity with his political anticolonial Arab nationalist and pan-Arab unity rhetoric was disturbing and culminated in the Suez Canal crisis of 1956 when Nasser attempted to nationalize the strategic canal. Israel's priority was the containment of offensive Arab nationalist states and its own survival. Thus, the Israeli, British, and American priorities and interests were not always aligned. As the British influence in the region faded after the 1960s, the United States began to play a primary role in the balance of power with the Soviet Union (Gibson, 2015).

In Iraq in the 1950s and 1960s, while the United States was initially concerned with preventing a potential pro-Soviet communist government in Baghdad, the Soviet Union was supportive of the Kurds. Until the early 1970s, there was an American suspicion about Barzani being a communist agent in Iraq. Interestingly, two American allies—Israel and Iran—were instead supportive of the Kurdish struggle against Baghdad for the purpose of weakening the Arab nationalist wave. It was only when Ba'athist Iraq signed the Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation with the Soviet Union in April 1972 that the Kurds became a promising ally for the Americans against the Soviet-friendly Baghdad government (Charountaki, 2011; Gibson, 2015).

When the Baghdad government, under the influence of Saddam Hussein, did not fulfill the autonomy agreement signed in 1970, a new wave of conflict started in 1974 between the Barzani-led Kurds and Baghdad. The United States, Israel, and Iran sided with Kurds covertly, but when Tehran signed the Algiers Agreement with Saddam Hussein in 1975, financial and weaponry support for the Kurds ended, and the Kurds were defeated (Gibson, 2015). After this defeat, the Arabization policy throughout the Kurdish territories in northern Iraq was put in effect. This policy was in line with Syria's Ba'athist rule under Hafez Al-Assad who established the so-called Arab Belt in Kurdish-dominated northeastern Syria in the early 1970s.

The KDP's defeat in 1975 and Barzani's exile to Iran (and later to the United States, where he died in 1979) led to the foundation of a new Kurdish political party called the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), which was founded by a mostly urban, leftist, intellectual cadre (including such members as Ibrahim Ahmed and Nawshirwan Mustafa) led by Jalal Talabani. These urban intellectuals already had ideological and cultural disagreements with Barzani, who had more tribal authority (Van Bruinessen, 1986). After the KDP, the PUK has become the second most resilient and influential Kurdish political organization. It has been a major player in the region, and has mostly controlled the Sulaymaniyah province along the border of Iran. The foundation of the PUK in 1975 was also the beginning of deep intra-Kurdish rivalries with shifting alliances and unending intra-ethnic violence, which regional states effectively utilized for divide-and-rule tactics over the Kurds (Černý, 2014; Gunter, 1996).

A diverging alliance formed between the PUK and the KDP briefly appeared during the Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988), during which the Iraqi military invaded Iran after the Islamic revolution. During the war, while Iraq's Saddam Hussein mostly supported the Iranian Kurds (KDP-I) against Tehran, Iran supported the Iraqi Kurds against Baghdad. However, the PUK remained ambivalent and sought to negotiate with Baghdad in 1983, later reconciling with the KDP against Baghdad in 1984 (Gunter, 1996, p. 231). Interestingly, the United States and the Soviet Union, the two Cold War global powers that the Kurds had previously looked upon for aid, were on the side of Baghdad against Tehran under the rule of Khomeini (Hiltermann, 2007).

The war ended catastrophically for the Iraqi Kurds after Saddam Hussein's genocidal attacks in northern Iraq during the infamous Al-Anfal campaign. Thousands of Kurds were killed with chemical weapons and in air bombings. This genocide in 1988 has become one of the most significant building blocks of Kurdish national memory and state building in Iraq (Bengio, 2012).

While the KDP in Iran was in decline and weakened by Tehran through the end of the Cold War, the KDP and the PUK in Iraq remained mostly intact and resilient despite their defeats by the notorious rule of Saddam Hussein. In the meantime, a new armed and militant Kurdish organization, the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), was in the making in Turkey in the late 1970s, which would later become active and influential in all parts of the Kurdish Middle East.

The PKK, founded by Abdullah Ocalan and others such as Kemal Pir, Cemil Bayik, and Haki Karer, was based on a Marxist-Leninist ideology and Maoist guerilla war strategy with the goal of establishing an independent socialist Kurdish state in the Middle East (Marcus, 2007). While the pro-Kurdish mobilization in Turkey remained mostly limited after the suppression of Kurdish rebellions in the early years of the Turkish republic, the rise of socialist and leftist student movements and political organizations in the late 1960s and 1970s created an opportunistic space for Kurdish political activism (Romano, 2006). The PKK came into being under Cold War ideological rivalries in domestic Turkish politics.

Before the PKK initiated its first armed attack in 1984 within Turkey, Abdullah Ocalan departed to the Soviet-ally Syria in 1979 and established a sanctuary there supported by the Assad government. PKK militants were trained along with the like-minded Palestinian fighters of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) in the Bekaa Valley in the early 1980s (Marcus, 2007). This solidarity of “war of national liberation” endorsed by the Soviet and Syrian governments provided Ocalan and the PKK with a significant opportunity for ideological and military training as well as for establishing regional and international political alliances. The Assad government utilized the PKK as leverage against the neighboring Turkish state with which Syria had tense relations over sovereignty claims for the Hatay province (which became part of Turkey in 1939) and water disputes over the Euphrates and Tigris rivers whose upper sources are located in eastern Turkey (Černý, 2014).

During the Cold War, Turkey became a member of NATO in 1952 and was a strategic partner of the United States against the communist threat in the region. Thus, the rise of the PKK turned into a strategic opportunity for the Soviet Union (later Russia) and Syria. Yet, the PKK benefited from such broader ideological and geopolitical rivalries in the region and was able to significantly strengthen its organizational power in the late 1980s and 1990s. As a result, the PKK became the most powerful threat to the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Turkish state since the Kurdish uprisings in the early 20th century. Although Turkey pushed the Syrian government to expel Ocalan from Syria in 1998, the historical legacy of the PKK presence in Syria later paved the way for the rise of a pro-Ocalan Kurdish political formation in the early 2000s in northern Syria.

The Post–Cold War American Hegemony, Liberal International Order, and Kurdish Political Gains

The end of the Cold War and the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 was also regarded as the end of the bipolar world where most of the disputes and conflicts around the world were embedded within the ideological and hegemonic rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union. The United States, being triumphant and unrivaled throughout the 1990s, became more deeply engaged with consolidating the liberal international order (e.g., democratization, free marketization, and globalization) as a work in progress since the Second World War (Deudney & Ikenberry, 1999). As the communist threat disappeared, the United States, along with the European Union, tended to push and encourage the international community toward embracing human rights, minority rights, and respect for multiculturalism for overcoming the identity-based conflicts and disputes of the 20th century. The United Nations embraced a human security agenda where a state-centered security paradigm in world politics was criticized, and states were encouraged to consider the cultural and economic insecurities of minorities and other disadvantaged groups (UNDP, 1994). In this optimistic environment of liberal international order, forced assimilation of ethnic minorities in the hands of state actors was perceived as a crime against humanity.

Since the Kurds in the postimperial order of new nation-states were subject to exclusion, assimilation, and homogenization projects throughout the 20th century, the intensification of liberal democratic discourses endorsed by the West in the 1990s created favorable conditions for the Kurdish cause, particularly in winning moral power against the exclusionary and repressive nation-states. For instance, while the European Union kept warning the membership-seeking Turkey to consider an offer of extensive cultural and linguistic rights for the Turkish Kurds, Saddam Hussein's increasingly dictatorial and genocidal acts on the Kurds during and after the Iran–Iraq war received more international attention and increased humanitarian concerns. Kurds under the anti-Western Iranian and Syrian regimes were increasingly seen as potential Western allies for future regime change and democratization projects.

Under such increasing global empathy for the Kurds, the first significant opportunity for political power and cultural security appeared during the Gulf War (1990–1991), when the Iraqi army invaded Kuwait over oil disputes. Saddam's aggressive move triggered regional concern by other Arab states, particularly Saudi Arabia, as well as a hegemonic concern from the United States. A global coalition was formed, led by the United States, and military campaigns (Operation Desert Shield and Operation Desert Storm) were initiated to contain Iraqi aggression. In this unfolding event with rapt global attention, the Iraqi Kurds (along with Iraqi Shiites in the south) as the significant anti-Saddam group on the ground found unprecedented opportunistic space against Saddam as well (Gunter, 1993).

When the Iraqi military was expelled from Kuwait in early 1991, then-U.S. President George H. W. Bush stated, "In my own view ... the Iraqi people should put Saddam aside, and that would facilitate the resolution of all these problems that exist and certainly would facilitate the acceptance of Iraq back into the family of peace-loving nations" (BBC News, 2016). Upon hearing this message, the Shiites in the south and the Kurds in the north rebelled against the regime in March 1991, but the U.S.-led global coalition did not provide any aerial protection for the uprisings. Consequently, the regime helicopters bombed the rebels, who had no capacity to defend themselves, and this caused a significant humanitarian and refugee crisis for the Iraqi Kurds. More than one million Kurdish refugees were estimated to have rushed to the Turkish and Iranian borders (BBC News, 2016).

Such humanitarian crises and the internationalization of the Kurdish cause in Iraq pushed the U.S.-led coalition to start Operation Provide Comfort in April 1991, which established a no-fly zone and humanitarian aid along the 36th parallel. As a result of this internationally protected no-fly zone, Iraqi Kurds became mostly immune from the tyranny of Saddam Hussein and they declared a *de facto* Kurdistan Regional Government in 1992 (Jüde, 2017). The first Kurdish elections were held in May 1992, which resulted in an almost equal share of votes between the PUK and the KDP. The establishment of this *de facto* Kurdish autonomy with international support was the most significant political victory of the Iraqi Kurds since World War I, which later transformed into a *de jure* federal entity of Iraq in 2005 when the Ba'ath regime was toppled by the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 (Ricks, 2006; Stansfield, 2013).

In the 1990s, the PKK-Turkish state conflict was operating under very different regional and international perceptions than the Kurdish-Iraqi conflict. Although Turkey's denial of Kurdish identity and bans on the Kurdish language were being criticized by the European Union and the United States, the PKK's guerilla-style war against Turkey as a NATO member easily put the organization under strict international scrutiny. The United States listed the PKK as a terrorist organization in 1997, followed by the United Kingdom in 2001, and the European Union in 2002. While Turkey, the United States, and Israel have cooperated against and shared intelligence on PKK activities in the region, Syria opened a safe haven for the PKK with the backing of Russia. The PKK has also never been listed as a terrorist organization by Russia (Kavalek & Mares, 2018). As Turkey was sympathetic to the Muslim Chechen war against Russia in the 1990s, Russia was in turn sympathetic to the PKK's war against Turkey (Olson, 1998).

When Turkey pressured Syria to expel PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan in 1998, Ocalan first fled to Russia and then to Italy. Due to maritime zone disputes and the Cyprus conflict with neighboring Turkey, some Greek politicians were sympathetic to the PKK and Ocalan. Yet, Turkey's diplomatic efforts with the support of the United States prevented Ocalan's freedom to travel in Europe. He was later captured in Kenya where he was residing in the Greek embassy of Nairobi and was sent to Turkey in February 1999. As of 2021, Ocalan remains in a highly guarded island prison in Imrali, Turkey; he was first charged with the death penalty, but Turkey abolished capital punishment in 2004.

Overall, the fact Turkey has been a member of NATO since the 1950s and has been seeking E.U. membership since the 1980s has prevented the broader international support for the PKK that the Iraqi Kurds enjoyed since the Gulf War. In this international context, and because of internal organizational debates, the PKK distanced itself from the idea of an independent socialist Kurdish state and adopted a democratic autonomy mission without disrupting the existing territorial borders (Akkaya & Jongerden, 2012; Gutaj & Al, 2017).

At the turn of the 21st century, while the PKK was weakened and called for a unilateral cease fire against Turkey between 1999 and 2003, the KDP and the PUK went through a bloody civil war between 1994 and 1998; this ended with the U.S.-led Washington Agreement. The KDP-I, with no significant leadership, was not in a position to challenge Iran. Syrian Kurds, with no major organizational power, were mostly passive under the Ba'ath regime of the Assad family. Despite notable progress for the Kurds throughout the 1990s, the jihadist attack against the United States on September 11, 2001 was an important sign that the democratization and liberalization in the Middle East would not be an easy or smooth process.

The War on Terror, the Axis of Evil, and the Kurds Against Rogue States

The 9/11 attacks, one of the deadliest terror assaults in history by jihadist Al-Qaeda, was a major blow to the U.S.-led unipolar world optimism of the post-Cold War era. Causing almost 3,000 deaths and unprecedented American trauma, the United States government under the administration of George W. Bush declared the bifurcation of the world, saying, "Every nation,

in every region, now has decision to make. Either you are with us or you are with the terrorists” (Bush, 2001; Tankel, 2018). First, the United States invaded Afghanistan in October 2001 because of the Islamist Taliban’s support for Al-Qaeda. Later in March 2003, the U.S.-led coalition invaded Iraq on the premise that Saddam Hussein held weapons of mass destruction. While the United States initiated the global war on terrorism, which targeted Sunni Islamist terror networks, the Islamic Iranian regime was gaining ground in the Middle East with Shiite and non-Shiite anti-American groups in Iraq, Lebanon, Palestine, and Syria. The so-called Axis of Evil from the U.S. viewpoint included rogue states such as Iran, Iraq, North Korea, and Syria as states sponsoring terrorism (Homolar, 2011). Israel and Saudi Arabia, both U.S. allies, were particularly concerned about the growing influence of Iran.

Under this U.S.-led global initiative in the post-9/11 era, the Kurds—with no strong history of or connection to radical jihadism or anti-Israeli discourse—appeared to be one of the most reliable groups on the ground. When the Saddam regime was toppled after the 2003 invasion, the new state and nation building of Iraq in the hands of the United States paid particular attention to the autonomy and sovereignty of the Iraqi Kurds, to which the 2005 constitution granted an official federal status as Iraqi Kurdistan. Despite no strong direct involvement, Kurds in Iran and Syria have also come onto the radar of the United States and Israel as potential allies on the ground in the early 2000s.

In such regional chaos with a heavy U.S. military presence, the PKK also began organizational investment and activities in Iran and Syria as well, while maintaining a low profile in Turkey. First, the Democratic Union Party (PYD) was founded in Syria in 2003, and later the Kurdistan Free Life Party (PJAK) was founded in Iran in 2004. Although the PJAK has been fighting against Tehran since then, the direct U.S. support for a PKK-affiliated group would be crossing the lines within the NATO Turkish-American alliance (Nader et al., 2016).

While the PJAK sought to mobilize Kurdish masses in Iran, the majority of Kurdish areas in northern Syria mostly remained calm with one exception. The Kurdish-majority town of Qamishli in March 2004 was an exemplar of the increasing pro-Kurdish frustration with the Ba’athist Syrian regime. Kurdish riots began after some Arab fans in a football match insulted Kurdish fans with posters of Saddam Hussein; these riots were later suppressed by the Ba’athist regime of Bashar Al-Assad (Tejel, 2009). Yet, such Kurdish awakening in Syria—where strong pro-Kurdish mobilization was mostly weaker compared to Iraq, Turkey, and Iran—was an initial sign of the subsequent major pro-Kurdish advancement in northern Syria after the Syrian civil war started in 2011 with the Arab Spring.

As the Iraqi Kurds achieved political recognition and federal status in 2005 by the international community, Turkey also began to reconsider its traditional opposition to any Kurdish autonomy in the region. Since the PKK established its headquarters in the mountains of northern Iraq, Ankara feared that the Kurdistan Region of Iraq would become a safe haven for an anti-Turkish Kurdish opposition and that a potential independent Kurdish state would motivate the Turkish Kurds for a similar project as well (Tugdar & Al, 2018). If one reviews Turkey’s traditional stance toward the Iraqi Kurds throughout the 20th century, it would be accurate to say that they were seen as a potential security threat for Ankara. It was mostly

with Turgut Ozal, a liberal Turkish prime minister (1983–1989) and later the president (1989–1993), that Ankara considered rapprochement with KDP's Mesud Barzani and PUK's Jalal Talabani with the hope of establishing an economic and political relationship. Ozal was also looking for opportunities to start a dialogue with PKK leader Ocalan through the mediation of Iraqi Kurdish leaders. However, the unexpected death of Turgut Ozal in 1993 disrupted this process.

Iraqi Kurdistan is a particularly strategic region for its energy resources (including the oil reserves in the disputed city of Kirkuk) as well as being a buffer zone between the rogue states of Iran and Syria. Since Iraqi Kurdistan is landlocked, its economic survival largely depends on access to neighboring states, particularly Turkey and Iran. Thus, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) has been very attentive in building friendly relations with these two significant regional powers. While the PUK has built good relations with Iran (the PUK's stronghold city of Suleymaniyah borders with Iran), the KDP has a particular interest in good relations with Turkey. Oil exports through the Kirkuk–Ceyhan pipeline have been a significant revenue source for both Baghdad and Erbil, the capital of Iraqi Kurdistan.

Before the U.S. invasion of Iraq in March 2003, Turkey did not grant permission for the deployment of American soldiers through Turkish soil since any threat to the territorial integrity of Iraq would mean a national security threat for Turkey, as was the establishment of an independent Kurdistan (Tank, 2005). In this environment of substantial changes in Iraq, the PKK also restarted its militant campaign against Turkey in 2004, mostly by using the Qandil mountains in Iraqi Kurdistan as a base of operations. The heavy presence of the PKK in KRG territory has been a source of tension with Turkey since the early 2000s. Yet, since the KDP and the PKK have mostly been ideological and organizational rivals in Kurdish politics, Turkey under the rule of the conservative leader Recep Tayyip Erdogan has been able to build close relations with KDP leader Mesud Barzani and establish a strategic partnership based on economic and security cooperation, particularly since 2008. Since then, Turkish construction companies have been present in significant infrastructure-building investments such as airports, roads, hospitals, schools, and water supply systems. Ankara opened a Turkish consulate in Erbil in 2010. Turkish goods and services industry have become the main economic source in the region. Turkey has also increased its military presence against the PKK in Iraqi Kurdistan. Good relations mostly continued until the Iraqi Kurdish independence referendum in 2017, which the Erdogan government in Ankara fiercely opposed, and deemed this move by Barzani as treasonous (Park, 2019; Tugdar & Al, 2018).

Overall, the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 led to the emergence of a first internationally recognized and lasting Kurdish autonomous region which has become a strategic territory within regional and international politics. Similarly, the beginning of the Syrian civil war in 2011 amidst the rise of the salafist-jihadist Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in the aftermath of Arab Spring (2010–2011) led to the rise of a de facto Kurdish enclave in northeastern Syria in 2014. This Kurdish enclave, called Rojava, has become the political laboratory of PKK leader Ocalan's democratic autonomy project, and its emergence has reshuffled regional and global alliances.

The Arab Spring, the Rise of ISIS, and the Kurds as Global Partners Against Jihadists

The decades-long authoritarian stability in the Middle East was unprecedentedly disrupted with antigovernment mass demonstrations and protests across the Arab societies, first in Tunisia in December 2010 when a young street vendor named Mohamed Bouazizi set himself on fire in protest of harassment from local municipal officials. This first individual act of frustration, combined with the lack of economic opportunities, political freedoms, and civil liberties under the rule of autocratic Arab leaders, spilled millions of Arab citizens into the streets with the hope of bringing their tyrannical regimes down. These series of protests, demonstrations, and uprisings were called the Arab Spring, and they spread from Tunisia to many states in the region including Egypt, Lebanon, Yemen, Bahrain, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, and Syria in 2011 (Brownlee et al., 2015). As a consequence, Zine Al-Abidine Ben Ali (who had ruled Tunisia since 1987) stepped down; then Hosni Mubarak of Egypt (in power since 1981) could not resist the Tahrir Square demonstrations and resigned as well. Ali Abdullah Saleh of Yemen and Muammar Qaddafi of Libya were also overthrown, but these cases ended in catastrophic civil wars and failed states.

Syrian uprisings against the Ba'athist Assad regime started in the southern city of Dara in March 2011, and the violent crackdown of protesters by the government later led to nationwide protests, which eventually turned into a full-fledged civil war. The power vacuum during the civil war led to the emergence of a variety of Sunni jihadist organizations including Al-Qaeda affiliated fighters and ISIS. The Syrian civil war—which still awaits a long-lasting peace settlement—has increasingly turned into a site of international proxy conflict where regional and global powers have been caught in rivalries. For instance, while Iran, Hezbollah, and Russia have been providing military and financial support to the Assad regime, pro-opposition support has been provided by the United States, France, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar. Israel, on the other hand, has been trying to prevent increasing Iranian influence in Damascus and the expansion of Hezbollah in the region (Philips, 2016).

The implications of the Arab Spring for the Kurds mostly unfolded in Iraq, Syria, and Turkey. In particular, the rise of the militant jihadist group ISIS in the midst of the antigovernment protests and uprisings led to the organization's unexpected control of vast territories in the region. The northern Syrian city of Raqqa came under ISIS control in early 2014 and was declared the capital of the Caliphate. In the summer of 2014, Mosul, a major resource-rich city in Iraq, fell under the despotic control of ISIS as well. The international community, already in shock with the sudden expansion of ISIS-held jihadist territories in Iraq and Syria, the genocidal attacks on the heterodox indigenous community of Yazidis in the northern Iraqi town of Sinjar, and the abduction of Yazidi women as jihadists' sex slaves in the summer of 2014 further deeply traumatized the civilized world. In August 2014, then- U.S. President Obama initiated American airstrikes against ISIS in order to defend the Yazidi community.

Sinjar was mostly under the protection of the Kurdish Peshmerga forces of the KDP. Since they were not able to resist the advance of ISIS, the PKK also strategically deployed some of its militants to the region in order to protect the Yazidis from ISIS.

In Syria, since Bashar Al-Assad was primarily concerned with the survival of his regime, the Syrian security forces mostly focused on defending areas such as Aleppo and Damascus. The Kurds in northeastern Syria were not an existential threat to his regime. Thus, the presence of Syrian regime forces in Kurdish-majority northeastern Syria began to diminish, which paved the way for a Kurdish self-declared *de facto* autonomy (called Rojava) in 2012. Although the Barzani-affiliated Kurdish National Council (KNC) and the Ocalan-affiliated Democratic Union Party (PYD) with its armed group called the People's Protection Units (YPG) have been the two leading organizations in Rojava, the PYD along with the YPG have mostly controlled the Kurdish enclave. The Rojava administration was officially announced by the PYD in January 2014. Due to its ideological and organizational links with the mostly secular-leftist PKK, Rojava under the security of the YPG quickly became a primary nemesis for ISIS, and a full jihadist assault was held on the Kurdish town of Kobane in September 2014. The battle for Kobane swiftly turned into a modern-day Normandy where YPG fighters successfully resisted ISIS with the help of U.S. airstrikes, and Kobane became one of the first military defeats for the jihadists (Charountaki, 2015; Gunes & Lowe, 2015).

It was at this time, in September 2014, that the U.S.-led Global Coalition against Daesh (an Arabic acronym for ISIS) was formed with 83 partners. The mission of this global coalition has been to defeat ISIS in Iraq and Syria and to stabilize the region. Kurds in both Iraq and Syria have become some of the most reliable partners of the United States and the coalition in the fight against the jihadists (McGurk, 2019). While the KRG's Peshmerga forces in Iraq joined this coalition along with the Iraqi military in the military campaign to liberate Mosul from ISIS (October 2016–July 2017), Syrian Kurdish forces along with the U.S.-led coalition liberated Raqqa, the *de facto* capital of ISIS, in October 2017. Western sympathy for the Kurds climaxed during this existential fight against the jihadists.

The increasing global interest in and sympathy for the Kurds along with the legitimization of the PKK-linked Kurdish Rojava in the eyes of the United States particularly concerned Turkey. As the Syrian civil war and the rise of ISIS were unfolding in the region, Turkey was in the middle of peace talks with the PKK and its imprisoned leader, Abdullah Ocalan. While Turkey hoped to convince the PKK to lay down its arms, dialogue with the PYD was also established in Syria by the Erdogan government to ask for support against the Assad regime. Yet, the PYD's primary interest was not to overthrow the Assad regime. The PKK, on the other hand, was encouraged by the victories in Sinjar and Kobane. In the meantime, the electoral success of the legal pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) in the summer of 2015 also pushed the Erdogan government to adopt a more Turkish nationalist discourse and policy against the Kurds. As a result, the peace talks between Ankara and the PKK failed, and heavy urban clashes between the PKK and the Turkish military erupted in southeastern Turkey after July 2015 (Parlar Dal, 2016). The Turkish military's heavy-handed operations since then by and large weakened the PKK presence in Turkey.

Turkey's next target was Syria in order to contain PKK-affiliated Syrian Rojava and to open up safe spaces for the Turkish-backed Free Syrian Army, which was fighting against the Assad regime (Bayulgen et al., 2018). In the meantime, relations between the two NATO members Turkey and the United States were strained due to divergent views on the YPG. For Turkey, the YPG has always been an offshoot of the PKK and is therefore considered a terrorist organization. However, for the United States, the YPG has been a significant partner against ISIS. In spite of this, the United States tried to appease Turkey's concern by encouraging the establishment of more multiethnic Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in late 2015. Turkey, however, still continued with a series of military interventions in northern Syria in 2016 and 2017 (Operation Euphrates Shields), in 2018 (Operation Olive Branch), in 2019 (Operation Peace Spring) and in 2020 (Operation Spring Shield). The first two operations ended with the Turkish control of Jarablus, Azez, and the Kurdish town of Afrin, and pushed the YPG forces east of the Euphrates River (Gunter & Yavuz, 2020). The last operation targeted the rebel-held Idlib province which had been fighting against the Assad regime.

Overall, the aftermath of the Arab Spring and the global fight against ISIS offered profound opportunities for the Kurds in the Middle East. While the Syrian Kurds have gained de facto autonomy after the decades-long exclusion and repression of the Assad regime, Iraqi Kurds pushed the independence bid in 2017, albeit abortively, and signaled their desire for statehood. The PYD has opened many foreign representative offices including in Moscow, Berlin, and Paris. Additionally, the iconic images of Kurdish fighters against ISIS have created very favorable international public opinion about the Kurds. Yet, despite significant Kurdish political progress after the Arab Spring, the future remains uncertain for the Kurds.

Conclusion: The Post-ISIS Era and an Uncertain Future

From no political status and recognition under the assimilationist and exclusionary states in the first half of the 20th century, Kurdish political elites established resilient and strong political organizations and mobilized the masses for their nationalist causes across Iraq, Turkey, Iran, and Syria in the second half of the 20th century. In the 21st century, they have been able to establish an official federal region in Iraq, a de facto autonomous region in Syria, and significant electoral successes in Turkey.

Yet, the Kurds in the Middle East are far from a single and unitary actor. Instead, Kurdish political organizations and armed groups compete with each other within shifting regional and international alliances. The idea of an independent Kurdish state still has weak support globally as shown by the significant losses in the 2017 independence referendum and has been further weakened by disunity between the PUK and the KDP, which resulted in the fall of Kirkuk. The future of Syrian Kurdish autonomy is far from certain, since its fate will be more likely decided by the United States and Russia along with Iran and Turkey. Kurds have been reliable partners and strong boots on the ground so far, yet they will need more global diplomacy and international support to survive politically in the 21st century.

Due to increasing international attention on the Kurds in the last few decades, scholarly works on the Kurdish Middle East have widely expanded as well; however, future studies on the Kurds with more methodological sophistication (e.g., public opinion surveys, elite interviews, ethnographic field research, and archival research) and in more comparative-transnational frameworks are needed. Kurdish studies still lag behind the current methodological-theoretical state of Middle East studies as well as the broader debates in international relations despite the many significant and nuanced experiences existing within the Kurdish case.

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