

*The Kurdish Question:
The Potential for Kurdish Nationalism Within the Rapidly Changing Middle East*

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In the Middle East today, there is one large ethnic population left without an independent state to call their own. The Kurds have been an indigenous ethnic group without a formalized homeland for all of modern history. These people have been the unfortunate recipient of broken promises regarding their native land for generations, and are still struggling against the modern states in the Middle East for self-determination. Many factors have led to the Kurds being completely marginalized within the Middle East. These factors include: Western Colonialism in the Middle East; the lack of financial ability to develop natural resources in their region; the lack of a cohesive military strategy between different groups of Kurds in various countries; and the hyper-nationalist views of Kemalism in Turkey, the nation with the largest population of Kurds. This paper will discuss the broken promises from Western powers and the Middle Eastern states that have led to the Kurds' status as the landless orphans of the Middle East; the current-day issues the Kurds are facing regarding the choice between autonomy or independence within the nations in which they reside; the individual states' responses to their Kurdish population, and possible avenues of reconciliation for the region.

The region of Kurdish population (which I will refer to as "Kurdistan" in this piece) exists where the borders of four modern Middle Eastern states meet. These four states are Iran, Iraq, Syria and Turkey. The first mention of the region of Kurdistan occurs during the 12th century, where Kurdistan is formally listed as an administrative unit of the Ottoman Empire. As the majority of Kurds are Muslim (Sunni), they were considered full members of the Empire with all the rights and privileges that entailed.¹ The area where the Kurds live is rich in fertile land, mineral resources such as chrome, copper, lead, zinc, and perhaps most importantly to our society, oil.² However, there are few urban centers or developed areas for central governance within this region. For this reason, when the Western colonial powers turned their attention to the "sick old man of Europe" the Kurds fought against the West not for national identity, but to maintain their identity as the last vestige of Ottoman Empire.³ This was unsuccessful.

The era of the Ottoman Empire's collapse was the height of the European colonialist movement. Great Britain and France were the key players in the colonization of the Middle East. Russia opposed the partitioning of the region until Great Britain and France agreed to address Russian concerns.⁴ While Great Britain and France were merrily carving up the remains of the Ottoman Empire to suit their needs, the rest of the region was left with little recourse to protect themselves from the West's efforts. The only region which was able to successfully stave off a colonial master was the newly formed Republic of Turkey, led by the brilliant and popular national

¹ Hakan Ozoglu, *Kurdish Notables and the Ottoman State: Evolving Identities, Competing Loyalties, and Shifting Boundaries* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004), 26-28.

² Wadie Jwaideh, *the Kurdish National Movement: Its Origins and Development* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2006), 8.

³ Ozoglu, *Kurdish Notables*, 94.

⁴ Jwaideh, *Kurdish National Movement*, 185. (Specifically the Sykes-Picot Treaty.)

leader Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. At the end of World War I, the Kurds were hoping to gain at least autonomy for themselves and aligned themselves with the British under the leadership of Shaykh Mahmud. They offered to “officiate as our [British] representative” within the region. This was done in the hopes of maintaining their freedom from “Turkish despotism”.⁵ Unfortunately, the British withdrew from the regions they had agreed to allow the Kurds to govern on their behalf; as the British moved out, the Turks invaded and eventually conquered the region.⁶

Great Britain was not the only western empire interested in the Middle East; France was also looking to expand their colonial holdings and took over Syria. During this occupation, there was friction between France and the Kemalists in Turkey. Seeing the potential for another strong ally, the Milli Kurds cooperated with them against the Turks by the Euphrates River. It appears that France at this time considered setting up a small Kurdish region with five or six small cities in the area; however, they instead reached an understanding with the Turks, and by signing the Franklin-Bouillon Agreement in 1921 France withdrew from territories claimed by Turkey.⁷ The Kurds were once again left without a formal homeland. This time they were left in a territory where the new regime was well aware of the Kurds’ actions to establish a region for their people to call home.

The Kurds have been fortunate to live in an area that has many significant resources for the Middle Eastern region. They reside in areas close to Lake Van as well as the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. However, because of the particular importance of water in the very arid Middle East, the states surrounding the region have been doing what they can to maximize their own control of the resource. This is especially noticeable in Turkey, where the GAP waterworks project has not only displaced thousands of Kurdish residents of the region, but has also impacted the quality of the water that reaches Syria to the south. Because of this action, there is a possibility of a future reaction by Iraq and Syria together against Turkey over water usage in the region.⁸ The other huge resource on the land where the majority of Kurds live is the world’s favorite fossil fuel: oil. Because of the location of rich oil deposits in Kurdistan, each country will be extremely reluctant to consider any sort of independence or autonomy for the Kurds.⁹

The Kurds are also lacking in cooperation amongst differing tribes that live within Greater Kurdistan. For example, during the Syrian independence movement in 1918, the Kurds split along tribal lines. Those Kurds who held power during the Ottoman Empire were willing to negotiate with the French to stay in power under new management, and were content with the status quo. Others were willing to fight alongside of the Arab Syrians to kick out the Western Empires. There were no

⁵ Jwaideh, 161-2.

⁶ Jwaideh, 161-2.

⁷ Jwaideh, 144-5.

⁸ Henri J. Barkey and Graham E. Fuller. *Turkey’s Kurdish Question* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc, 1998), 166-167.

⁹ Kerim Yildiz, *The Kurds in Syria: The Forgotten People* (Ann Arbor: Pluto Press, 2005), 7.

Kurdish independence movements as such at this time because the Kurds left the politics to the intellectuals, who were happy with the way things were.¹⁰ Because of their division, the Kurds in Syria had differing opinions on being ruled either by France or Syria. It took until 1927 before the Kurds established a nationalist movement in Syria, and when the movement was established it was primarily directed against the Turks.¹¹ This trend has continued throughout the 20th century and into today, where in Turkey there are different goals for Kurdish movements. Some are interested in independence, or at the least, autonomy; other groups are willing to remain inside the control of the Turkish government but want the right to acknowledge their traditional language, customs and ethnic heritage.¹² It was not until the establishment of the Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê (PKK) and Ocalan's leadership that a viable independence movement came into being.

The Kurds throughout the 20th century have been on the receiving end of numerous promises from the West regarding the creation of an independent Kurdistan. The first of these treaties was the Treaty of Sevres. Article 62 of the treaty allows for local autonomy for predominately Kurdish areas:¹³

The treaty proposed the establishment of a Kurdish state in two stages. The last paragraph of Article 64 dealt specifically with the problem of the Kurds in the *Wilayet* [province] of Mosul . . . [t]he main signatories of Sevres would not oppose the desire of the Kurds in this *Wilayet* to be a part of that Kurdish State.¹⁴

However because of Turkey's independence movement, this treaty was nullified and supplanted by the Treaty of Lausanne.¹⁵ Turkey uses the language of the treaty to lay claim to the Kemalist virtue of nationalism, by proclaiming that "there are no minorities in their country except the 'non-Moslems' dealt with in Articles 38-44 of the Treaty of Lausanne".¹⁶ The Kurds were once again marginalized this time by being asked if they wished "to be a part of Turkey or of Iraq[?]"¹⁷ This new treaty "radically altered the position of the Kurds in Iraq"¹⁸ and they were, once again, without a nation in their own homeland. Nobody thought to ask the Kurds if they would like formal independence for their people. The French Mandate between France and Syria made provisions for minority rights for the Kurds, but "when their mandate ended ... the French did not secure any

¹⁰ Yildiz, *The Kurds in Syria*, 27.

¹¹ Yildiz, 28.

¹² Brendan O'Leary et. al., eds. *The Future of Kurdistan in Iraq* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005), 197.

¹³ Yildiz, *The Kurds in Syria*, 125.

¹⁴ Mohammed M. A. Ahmed, Mohammed and Michael M. Gunter, eds. *The Kurdish Question and International Law: An Analysis of the Legal Rights of the Kurdish People*, (Virginia: Ahmed Foundation for Kurdish Studies, 2000), 96.

¹⁵ Jwaideh, 186.

¹⁶ Ahmed, 85.

¹⁷ Ahmed, 98.

¹⁸ Jwaideh, 195.

guarantees for Kurdish minority rights within Syria”¹⁹, and the Kurds were left in yet another newly-formed nation to fend for themselves.

Because of the treatment of the Kurds, Kurdistan has now become a predicament for the entire region.²⁰ In Turkey, Ataturk chose to completely ignore the problem by announcing that the Kurds had been cut off from their own history and were really ‘mountain Turks’ and merely had to be reminded of their Turkish identity for everything to be fair and equal for all Turks.²¹ This treatment continues to the present day, where Kurds who want to be accepted into modern Turkish society have little choice but to quietly ignore their ethnicity in favor of acceptance into society.²² In Iran, two Kurdish leaders in Persian Kurdistan began working for an independent nation that they hoped would include Persian Kurds;²³ they were ultimately unsuccessful.

After the Second World War, Iranian Kurds (with Soviet assistance) created the Republic of Mahabad, located in the region surrounding the Kurdish city of Mahabad in northern Iran.²⁴ During this time Iran was split into spheres of influence between the Allied powers, with Great Britain controlling the southern regions of Iran and the Soviet Union controlling the northern regions. The city of Mahabad was historically a “center of Kurdish nationalist sentiment”²⁵ and became the core of the independence movement. The Kurds were demanding the rights of self-determination and self-governance as well as the right to study their own language and culture. However, they also wished to have “grievances existing between the farmer and the landowner to be amended and their future positions defined”,²⁶ which was an ideology that leaned towards the Leninist-Marxist ideology of the Soviet Union. This notion made the Western democratic powers extremely uncomfortable. Backed by the West’s desire to decrease the Soviet sphere of influence in the oil-rich region, the Iranian army regained Mahabad soon after the Soviet withdrawal in 1946 and the republic was destroyed, with most leaders being executed by the spring of 1947. After an assassination attempt on the Shah in 1949, the Iranian government cracked down on all democratic movements in Iran, and hundreds of Kurdish independence sympathizers were imprisoned.²⁷

After their post-WWII experience with the Independent Region of Mahabad, the Kurds in Iran believed they had a chance for at least autonomy within Iran once the 1979 Iranian Revolution had settled. During the Revolution, Mullah Khomeini presented to the Kurds an eight point plan

¹⁹ Yildiz, *The Kurds in Syria*, 23.

²⁰ Robert Olson, Ed. *The Kurdish Nationalist Movement in the 1990s: Its Impact on Turkey and the Middle East*. (Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 1996), 77.

²¹ William Cleveland, *A History of the Modern Middle East*. (Colorado: Westview Press, 2009), 182.

²² Cleveland, 530.

²³ Jwaideh, 139.

²⁴ Yildiz, Kerim. *The Kurds in Iran: The Past, Present and Future*. (Ann Arbor: Pluto Press, 2007), 13.

²⁵ Yildiz, 14

²⁶ Yildiz, *The Kurds in Iran*, 16.

²⁷ Yildiz, *The Kurds in Iran*, 19.

that would grant the Kurds autonomy and the right to be ethnically distinct Kurds after Revolution, if the Kurds would support the Revolution against the Shah.²⁸ However, when the dust from the Revolution settled and the Islamic state was codified, Ayatollah Khomeini rejected the Sunni Kurds' autonomy plan as "superfluous to an Islamic state [a]ccus[ing] them of seeking independence" while what the Kurds were asking for was autonomy for their region and democracy for Iran as a whole.²⁹

In Syria, Kurds were allowed to have their own language and ethnic identity during the French colonial period. However, once the French left in 1946, the Kurds were once again forbidden to speak their own language or practice their own culture.³⁰ By the late 1950s, Arab nationalism had swept the region and Syria joined with Egypt to form the United Arab Republic in 1958.³¹ The Kurds were then accused of being traitors and separatists, and their own nationalist movements likened to both "Zionism and Western imperialism". Their language and culture were banned, publications were seized and even their traditional music was forbidden.³² Even worse, the Kurds in Iraq were seen as a threat to Syrian stability, security and unity.³³ By 1962, native-born Syrian Kurds lost Syrian citizenship in the census due to a technicality, leading to 120,000 – 150,000 Kurds being stripped of their rights within Syria. Modern Syrian Kurds are unable to get passports, travel interstate, stay in hotels without permission, inherit land or attain education past 9th grade.³⁴ This has led to the creation of a permanent underclass within the Kurdish areas of Syria.³⁵ This was in part driven by the fear that Kurds in Iraq would make increased demands for autonomy, which fear led to a "renewed anti-Kurd policy throughout these countries ... particularly Syria".³⁶

In Iraq, the Kurds have had difficulties since the state's inception. Starting with Turkey's desire to take over the oil-rich Kurdish region of Mosul back in the early 20th century, the Kurds have not been given the option of independence by the powers in the region. Because of their treatment in Turkey, when given the option of becoming part of Turkey or part of Iraq the Kurds of Mosul opted to become part of Iraq. While the Kurds would have preferred to become an independent nation, neither Turkey nor Iraq was willing to concede the possibility of independence; however, the choice to remain part of Iraq "saved the great Kurdish enclave ... from Turkish

²⁸ Yildiz, *The Kurds in Iran*, 22.

²⁹ Yildiz, *The Kurds in Iran*, 23.

³⁰ Yildiz, *The Kurds in Syria*, 31.

³¹ Yildiz, *The Kurds in Syria*, 23.

³² Yildiz, *The Kurds in Syria*, 31.

³³ Yildiz, *The Kurds in Syria*, 64.

³⁴ Yildiz, *The Kurds in Syria*, 94, 99. (The census insisted upon documentation that was not easily available in the underdeveloped regions of Syria to prove citizenship including: a Syrian ID card, a "family card" and land deeds showing ownership and residence prior to 1945. Naturally, most Kurds did not have these documents and were stripped of their citizenship.)

³⁵ Yildiz, *the Kurds in Syria*, 103.

³⁶ Yildiz, *the Kurds in Syria*, 57.

domination".³⁷ Unfortunately for the Kurds, the League of Nations' promise to allow them to maintain their cultural identity was denied after Iraq's 1932 independence from Britain. Their rights continued to erode under the new Iraqi state³⁸ and the Kurds were left to suffer under the monarchy until it was overthrown in 1958.³⁹ At that time, Kurdish rebels were allowed to return to Iraq and a Kurd was appointed to a three-man "sovereignty council"; sadly, it soon became clear that the Free Officers who overthrew the monarchy were not going to tolerate any form of Kurdish autonomy.⁴⁰ When the Free Officers were removed by a Ba'ath Party coup, the Kurds were once again hopeful for consideration under the new regime. They were again denied, because the Kurds "insisted on including Kirkuk and Mosul in the Kurdish autonomous region".⁴¹ The new Iraqi government was unwilling to give away the wealthiest oil-producing regions, right when the new regime needed all available funds for transition.

In Iraq, the Kurd's stated goal has been "autonomy, not independence"⁴². The 'Kurdish Problem' led to a tripartite agreement to keep Kurds within Iran, Iraq and Turkey's sphere of control by keeping them from forming their own nation. Although the agreement was accepted by each nation on the surface, each state has chosen to support the Kurds within their neighbors' borders in order to keep their regional rivals preoccupied with their internal affairs instead of looking outside their borders.⁴³ The breakdown: Iranian Kurds receive arms from Turkey and Iraq;⁴⁴ Turkey supports the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP) in Northern Iraq; Iran supports the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) in Kirkuk, Iraq.⁴⁵ Turkey has actually gone as far as raiding into Iraq chasing after the PKK with Iraqi permission, and there are still issues of death squads going into Kurdish regions of Turkey and targeting Kurdish political activities.⁴⁶ When he first came to power in Iraq, Saddam Hussein promised the Kurds autonomy if they would help him consolidate power. The Kurds complied. Once he was firmly established, he then used the government to repress the Kurds. He destroyed Kurdish villages and resettled Kurds in areas where the state would have control over their daily lives. The main reason he chose to deport Kurds from their traditional land and resettle Arab Iraqis (preferably Ba'athists) into the region was for easy access to their main resource, oil.⁴⁷ The Kurds, once again, were left to fend for themselves.

³⁷ Jwaideh, 204.

³⁸ Yildiz, *The Kurds in Iraq*, 14.

³⁹ Yildiz, *The Kurds in Iraq*, 16.

⁴⁰ Yildiz, *The Kurds in Iraq*, 16.

⁴¹ Yildiz, *The Kurds in Iraq*, 17.

⁴² O'Leary, 15.

⁴³ Yildiz, *the Kurds in Iran*, 75.

⁴⁴ Yildiz, *the Kurds in Iran*, 26.

⁴⁵ Yildiz, *the Kurds in Iran*, 84.

⁴⁶ Olson, 116.

⁴⁷ Denise Natali, *The Kurds and the State: Evolving National Identity in Iraq, Turkey and Iran* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2005), 58.

Even with all the suffering and marginalization the Kurds have suffered at the hands of everyone who had a stake in the region since the end of the Ottoman Empire, there is still opportunity for the Kurds to achieve if not independence, at least autonomy through the political mechanisms already in place. In Iraq for example, a “pluri-national federation”⁴⁸ could work in the same manner it works in Canada regarding the *Quebeçois*. If this federation could be accepted by the Iraqi government, it would mean that all of Iraq could still have access to at least part of the oil wealth within the Kurdish regions of the country. The Kurds are willing to discuss oil royalties and the economic development of their Iraqi region in a way where all parties can reach an agreement.⁴⁹ The Kurds in Iraq are happy with their autonomous region, and the Kurdish Regional Government readily accepts other minorities who live within their borders, including Turkomen, Yezidi, and Assyrio-Chaldeans.⁵⁰ Other Kurdish populations in the region are more interested in creating Kurdistan from the regions they already inhabit. “Diyarbakir is the natural capital of the Kurdish region”, and with its location in southeastern Turkey, it will have to be addressed and Turkey will need to “rethink the entire concept of Kurdistan”.⁵¹

Of all the Middle Eastern states with large Kurd populations, Turkey is the one with the most at risk if the Kurdish issue is not reconciled to everyone’s satisfaction. As a new member of NATO, and as a state which has discussed entrance into the European Union, they may have to make a few concessions regarding the Kurds both inside and outside of their borders. At the very least, the “membership standards of [EU] may oblige [Turkey] to cease denying the reality of Kurdistan in Iraq”⁵² and their entry into the European Union will be based partly on the treatment of their own Kurdish population.⁵³ It is also interesting to note that Turkey’s traditional enemy, Greece, has been quick to point out Turkey’s human rights abuses as synonymous with the Kurdish issue.⁵⁴ The PKK is the largest pro-Kurdish nationalist movement in Turkey, and in their first decade of existence there were 14,000 casualties on both sides of the conflict.⁵⁵ In 1991 after the Gulf War, the autonomous region of Kurds in Iraq have been considered a safe zone in a war-torn region.⁵⁶ Kurdish nationals are reminded of the struggles that have been going on for nearly a century when they recall the words of Siverekli Hilmi in 1918, who admonished the Kurds to “...not forget that we have a language of our own, however neglected, and a rich history. Here you have a formula for independence: action and initiative”.⁵⁷

⁴⁸ O’Leary, 72.

⁴⁹ O’Leary, 128-9

⁵⁰ Natali, 64.

⁵¹ Barkey, 190, 191

⁵² O’Leary, 222.

⁵³ O’Leary, 228-9.

⁵⁴ Olson, 120.

⁵⁵ Olson, 116.

⁵⁶ Olson, 107.

⁵⁷ Ozoglu, 82.

If willingness to fight for independence was enough, the Kurds would have had their own nation generations ago. Unfortunately, because they were split between four authoritarian regimes at the end the Western Colonialist era, there was no regional body to turn to for assistance. Because authoritarian regimes are less inclined to establish any form of institutional order, it remains unlikely that these nations will be willing to allow any form of either autonomy or independence for the Kurds. Because these nations all have agreements to cooperate with each other regarding their Kurdish populations, there have been few avenues of recourse for the Kurds. The regional framework of agreements has brought about cooperation regarding other avenues of concern in the region; for example, Turkey and Syria are now negotiating water rights to their shared rivers in exchange for agreeing to stop the “protection of PKK terrorists”.⁵⁸ It is difficult for the Kurds to compete against the offered resources of a formal nation. The most the Kurds have been able to accomplish is to exploit regional rivalries to serve their own interests within each state, while states will exploit Kurds within their nation when dealing with other nations.⁵⁹ Sadly, there is no one group of Kurds in any one nation that has the ability to fight for independence. As long as they cannot speak with one voice on the world stage, they stand to be ignored and branded terrorists anywhere they are attempting to gain independence or autonomy through force of arms.⁶⁰

The ethnic conflict in the region is most analogous to the conflict between the Serbs and Croats in Bosnia. There has, however, been no intervention in the Kurdish region.⁶¹ Why? Mainly because the Bosnian conflict was an issue for its entire region and there was concern that political tension might expand beyond its’ local flashpoint. In the Middle East, at least until very recently, there was no concern that the Kurdish conflict would inflate, and therefore there was no reason to intervene in a dispute, that on the surface, could be explained as an internal affair for each state. Even so, “Turkey still battles separatist Kurds in its southeast and in northern Iraq, Syria and Iran.”⁶² Each nation was willing to let Turkey chase after the Kurds in their region. Since the Kurds live in regions where they have oil and water resources, none of these states want an autonomous or independent Kurdistan.⁶³

Regions with this much insecurity tend to find ways to work within the prevailing institutional design. However, in the region the Arab League is a purposefully weak institution. This is mainly because no nation wants to endorse a regional body that may fail, or worse, destroy

⁵⁸ Olson, 88

⁵⁹ Yildiz, *Kurds in Syria*, 56

⁶⁰ John Ikenberry, *After Victory: Institutions, Strategic Restraint, and the Rebuilding of Order After Major Wars* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 76.

⁶¹ Henry R. Nau, *At Home Abroad: Identity and Power in American Foreign Policy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002), 141

⁶² Nau, 214

⁶³ Yildiz, *Kurds in Iran*, 86

chances of individual regime survival. Were these regimes democratic states, there would be less concern that the regional order would fail. Authoritarian regimes do not like to share power.⁶⁴ Especially as the Kurds are not ethnic Arabs, there is no incentive for the Arab League to assist them.⁶⁵

Beyond even the states of interest are larger regional bodies that could have an impact on the outcome for the Kurds. Economic institutions such as the World Bank or the IMF could be tapped to put pressure on the countries in the region, especially during an economic recession. Loans are already given based upon whether or not the nation is willing to liberalize the economy. It is theoretically possible to reward states with financial assistance for their willingness to allow more autonomy to their Kurdish regions for more financial assistance.⁶⁶ Unfortunately, at the moment the United States is suffering from a lack of legitimacy in the region after what many in the Middle East consider an empire-building endeavor in Iraq. When added to the United States' own human rights abuses in Abu Ghraib, the US hegemonic order is much weaker and the hegemon has lost its moral high ground. This has given the regional actors the ability to ignore the Kurds by marginalizing them.⁶⁷

NATO, on the other hand, could assist in efforts to negotiate autonomy for the Kurds. Autonomy for the Kurds could be the key to Turkey's admission into the European Union. Of course, during the recession and with economic bailouts at home, the EU is not interested in expanding at this time. However, if the US were to announce its desire to see Kurdish autonomy while the entire Middle East is in revolt, it could be a positive force in the region, oil notwithstanding.⁶⁸

Turkey, as the regional hegemon, is not going to be in favor of Kurdish autonomy. Turkey has too much to lose in terms of water rights and farmland to risk a new country springing up on the borders. At the moment, the PKK is only seeking the right to live as Kurds and practice their own language and culture. Sadly, even this small concession is still being denied. If Turkey wants to become a member of the European Union, they will have to address their treatment of the Kurds within their borders.⁶⁹ In Turkey's case, they are also seeing conflict between Western and Islamic ideology; as long as Turkey maintains a secular government, the rest of the world is willing to overlook the human rights abuses of their minorities. However, if Turkey becomes more Islamic, the West will most likely spend more time commenting on their treatment of the Kurds. The large

⁶⁴ Amitav Acharya and Alastair Iain Johnston, *Crafting Cooperation: Regional International Institutions in Comparative Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007) , 262.

⁶⁵ Acharya, 181.

⁶⁶ Acharya, 224.

⁶⁷ Acharya, 177.

⁶⁸ Acharya, 164-5.

⁶⁹ Peter J. Katzenstein, *A World of Regions: Asia and Europe in the American Imperium* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005), 84.

Kurdish populations within Western Europe, especially in France and England, will make sure the international community is aware of any abuses. It is worth noting that the opinions of the Turks themselves are beginning to regarding the notion of an independent Kurdistan: one Turkish journalist pointed out that if Turkey were to acknowledge that with their power they “could become the natural leader and protector of ... an independent Kurdistan which would serve as a buffer between Turkey and ... instability to the south.”⁷⁰

This buffer may prove to be critical to many of the nations in the region. The young populations of authoritarian regimes across the region are rising up and demanding the freedoms that they see enjoyed around the world. In Syria, as in many other nations, there have been weekly protests demanding these freedoms. Within a matter of days, the Kurds in Syria have gone from observing the protests occurring around the nation⁷¹ to protesting themselves and demanding “حرية المواطنة” (la hureea a’lmuatena) or “Freedom not citizenship”.⁷² The Kurds are beginning to realize the potential inherent in the moment to fight for their own freedom. This is a matter of great concern to Turkey, for if the Kurds begin to be shot at by Syrian forces they may flee to the north and join the 14 million Kurds already living in the nation. “Many are sympathetic to the outlawed Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK), which has been waging a 26-year long battle against Turkish forces.” This is the last thing that Turkey needs.⁷³ Unfortunately Turkey is choosing to crack down on its Kurds and just last week barred a group of Kurdish candidates from running for office.⁷⁴

It is extremely difficult to come up with a solution in a region with as many different actors and opinions as the Middle East. However, it has always seemed strange that these nations, who often complain about the historical troubles with Western imperialism, freely agree to abide by the borders drawn by those Western powers. If the various groups in the region could look beyond the immediate needs of their own regimes and look to what would be best for the region as a whole, it would be possible to come to terms with both the idea of an independent Kurdistan as well as the reality. The change from minority people to independent nation could be done in stages, where each state agrees to make their regions of Kurdish population an autonomous region, while still having access to the resources of the land. If this transfer to autonomy could be brokered by an international body it could include enticements from the West such as debt forgiveness or financial assistance. This would give each country incentive to let these areas ease into autonomy. After a set period of time, the autonomous regions could reassess their commitments to each state and their own cultural identity, and determine if they would like to remain part of their autonomous regions or perhaps join with the other autonomous Kurdish regions around them. If nothing else,

⁷⁰ O’Leary, 229.

⁷¹ Next on the List? 2011. *The Economist*, March 26.

⁷² Neil MacFarquhar and Liam Stack. 2011. Syrian Protesters Clash with Security Forces *New York Times*, April 1, online.

⁷³ Erdogan’s Lament. 2011. *The Economist*, April 9.

⁷⁴ Akyol, Mustafa. 2011. What if it’s not all a conspiracy? *The Week*, May 6.

the Kurds would be the masters of their own destiny, instead of merely the unwanted minority problem no nation wants to address. Sadly, the time for this type of slow-moving, methodical change is over. Consistent with current upheavals in the region, the Kurds' most likely route to independence will be through force of arms. After so many decades of marginalization, as well as the systematic destruction of their identity, this landless nation is not going to be willing to play the waiting game while other actors come around to their own point of view. If the Kurds are not given their chance for self-rule, they will take it; the Kurds are unlikely to be patient while the rest of the Arab world gains democracy and freedom from authoritarianism.