

The making of the modern Kurdish Middle East

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Rather than a unified Kurdistan across borders, a single ethnic group with multiple sovereign territories is more likely to be the political foundation of the modern Kurdish Middle East.



The flag of Kurdistan, the national flag of the Kurdish people. Jens Kalaene/DPA. All rights reserved. In early December 2016, the burning of a Kurdish flag in the northern Syrian town of Amuda revealed the fault-lines of intra-Kurdish power relations. The flag was [allegedly burned](#) by supporters of the ruling Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD), whose armed wing is the People's Protection Units (YPG), in Syria's Rojava region. The YPG is an offshoot of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), a left-wing Kurdish group fighting for autonomy in Turkey. Masoud Barzani, the president of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in northern Iraq strongly condemned the incident. Moreover, the Barzani administration has been very uneasy about the PKK's armed presence in the town of Sinjar in northern Iraq, which the group has yet to abandon after battling the Islamic State there in the summer of 2014.

While Turkey pressures the United States and the Barzani administration to prevent Sinjar becoming the PKK's new headquarters, the United States diplomatically seeks to prevent any intra-Kurdish clashes in the middle of anti-ISIS coalition efforts. In late December 2016, [Nechirvan Barzani](#), the prime minister of the KRG, urged the use of force in order to push the PKK out of Sinjar. Amidst this increasing political tension between the two major Kurdish groups in the region, the first armed clash between the PKK-affiliated Yazidi group called Sinjar Resistance Units (YBS) and a group called Rojava Peshmarga, close to Masoud Barzani, led to casualties in early March, near the town of Khanesor in [Sinjar](#), northern Iraq.

For many Kurds, this intra-Kurdish hostility has led to fears of another "Birakuji" (Kurdish Civil War) that devastated the region during the violence of the 1990s among competing Kurdish factions. For Middle East experts, this intra-Kurdish tension has once again raised the question of whether Kurds across the borders are more likely to unite or clash with each other in the era of the Islamic State challenge.

Unity or civil war?

There are basically two arguments. The first is that the rise of the Islamic State, as an existential threat against the broader Kurdish presence and survival in their historical homeland, can unite the Kurds, as ethnic nationalism is

assumed to override the ideological differences across factional Kurdish groups. This argument is more inclined towards the possibility of a greater Kurdistan across Iraq, Syria, Turkey, and Iran.

The second argument is that different Kurdish groups such as Barzani's KDP and Abdullah Ocalan's PKK have deep historical and ideological divisions where rivalry is more likely than unity, even in the face of the ISIS threat. This either-or approach can be misleading, however. A third way, often neglected, is the co-existence of rival Kurdish groups with their differences and multiple sovereignties. This perhaps may be the foundation of the making of the modern Kurdish world. Like the Arab world or the Arab Middle East, the structure of the Kurdish Middle East is not necessarily about pan-Kurdish ambitions or intra-ethnic strife, but it is more about the shared cultural identity, common memory and similar challenges within their historical territories. Rather than political unity or civil war, the Kurdish Middle East may become a region of multiple Kurdish sovereignties with shared cultural identity.

The KRG in Northern Iraq is already a politically divided territory between Suleymaniyah province under the dominant influence of Gorran (Change Movement) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) and Erbil province under the predominant authority of Barzani's KDP. In northern Syria, or what is often called Rojava (Western Kurdistan), the power vacuum, left after Bashar Assad abandoned the area to protect his stronghold capital of Damascus, was filled by the Democratic Union Party (PYD) and its arm wing, YPG, mostly affiliated with the PKK's left-wing worldview. In southeast Turkey, the pro-Kurdish political party (HDP) has been able to win the majority of Kurdish hearts and minds in the last elections in 2015. Although the Kurdish issue in Iran has been relatively absent from the international community's radar, the Democratic Party of Kurdistan (PDKI) seeks the option of armed struggle and mobilizes broader populations.

Above all, despite different approaches of the aforementioned actors on the future of the Kurds and Kurdish cause, the threat of Islamic State has been able to create a common Kurdish ethnic consciousness and public opinion across borders. Yet, in the Kurdish Middle East, ethnic solidarity and rivalry can be the *modus operandi* within the context of shifting domestic interests, regional alliances and international order. For instance, the recent [Kurdistan flag](#) controversy in Iraq's Kirkuk province is a good example of how factional Kurdish groups such as the PUK and KDP can become united against Kurdish rivals.

Kurdish political geography

In the post-Ottoman political context, scholars of the Middle East have widely begun to use the concept of the Arab World or the Arab Middle East in order to highlight a highly complex political geography with a shared cultural identity, language, and history. As a late-comer in its political development, it is now essential for scholars and pundits to consider the Kurdish political geography with its variety of actors, ideas, and interests as 'the modern Kurdish Middle East.' This will help to prevent falsely perceiving the Kurds as one homogenous group on the one hand and the crude idea of greater Kurdistan across borders on the other.

The modern Kurdish Middle East consists of around 30 million people with no independent state. There is, however, a federal government in northern Iraq and a de facto autonomous region in northern Syria. Interestingly, the Kurdish world has neither an equivalent to the pan-Arabism articulated by Nasserism during the 1960s, nor a corresponding organization such as the Arab League. Rather the Kurdish world is home to a variety of competing political and ideological actors including the Islamists (Yekgirtu in Iraq and Free Cause Party in Turkey), the nationalists (KDP in Iraq, PDK-I in Iran, and Kurdish National Council in Syria) and the leftists (Komala in Iran, PYD in Syria, and HDP in Turkey). The leadership paradigms in the Kurdish political world are also varied. Masoud Barzani and his KDP's independence path dominate northern Iraq, while Abdullah Ocalan (imprisoned in Turkey) and his PKK's democratic autonomy path remains influential in Turkey and Syria.

Although Barzani and Ocalan have differences as how they imagine ideal Kurdistan and Kurdishness (more conservative and pro-nation state and more socialist and anti-nation state, respectively), the rise of the Islamic State as a common threat to the existential security of historically Kurdish territories has pushed contextual cooperation and dialogue to the forefront. If you walk around the Family Mall in Erbil, you will see many nicely framed pictures of

Masoud Barzani and Abdullah Ocalan sold as souvenirs. If you drink a tea in the historical Hasan Pasha Han in the Sur district of Diyarbakir, Turkey you will see small souvenir rugs with knitted pictures of Molla Mustafa Barzani (Mesud Barzani's father who led nationalist campaigns against Iraqi and Iranian governments until his death in 1979) and Selahattin Demirtas (the co-leader of the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party or HDP in Turkey). An overarching Kurdish public opinion which welcomes the plurality and co-existence of Kurdish actors and leaders is greater than the power struggles of the rival Kurdish actors.

Despite the rivalries and political differences among factional Kurdish groups, the broader Kurdish public opinion forces them to show ethnic solidarity in one way or another. The last armed clash in Sinjar between PKK-affiliated and Barzani-affiliated groups ended in a couple of hours due to the sensitivities of Kurdish public opinion which does not approve anymore of 'Birakuji' among Kurds.

Kurdish Identity and Multiple Sovereignties

What is different today about the Kurdish Middle East is that the era of regional states and international powers using the 'Kurdish card' against each other is less likely. There may be competing ideas and conflicting interests of different Kurdish groups in the region, but an overarching Kurdish public opinion is strongly in the making, cutting across borders with the self-consciousness of being their own agents rather than the instruments of 'others'. This mental independence is creating the modern Kurdish world from north-western Iran (Rojhelat) to northern Syria (Rojava) and from south-eastern Turkey (Bakur) to northern Iraq (Bashur). This is a historical transition from the scattered and disorganized world of Kurdish tribal lands into a diplomatic, authoritative, self-conscious political geography with *raison d'état*.

Yet, it is still misleading to see the Kurds as a single, homogenous group that collectively strive for a united or greater Kurdistan. As the Arab Middle East, the modern Kurdish world is large enough to have more than one Kurdish sovereign territory, one leader, or one ideology. Today, while the Peshmerga in Iraqi Kurdistan is a frontier force and a key ally of the international coalition to liberate Mosul, the YPG as a leading member of the Syrian Democratic Forces, has begun Operation Euphrates Wrath in isolating ISIS in its Syrian heartland of Raqqa. Kurds in Iraq are perhaps the closest to having their own state in the near future. There is a good chance that the Kurds in Syria may have some form of autonomy in post-civil war Syria. Rather than a unified Kurdistan across borders, a single ethnic group with multiple sovereign territories independent from each other is more likely to be the political foundation of the modern Kurdish Middle East. The key question for the rival Kurdish actors is how to compete for power and represent broader Kurdish public interests without falling into another 'Birakuji,' or civil war.



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