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KURDISH MILITARY FORMATIONS IN MIDDLE EASTERN BATTLEFIELDS



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ORIGINS

Three factors of Kurdish history must be underlined in order to understand the current dynamics of the Kurdish question. First, Kurdish autonomous states (Kurdish emirates), which survived for centuries on both sides of the Ottoman–Iranian division, were disbanded in the course of the twentieth century. When the Ottomans incorporated the Kurdish areas after their victory in the Battle of Chaldiran (1514), they preserved Kurdish autonomous political structures as border military forces against the Safavids and Qajars of Iran. Even in the nineteenth century, when the Ottoman Empire destroyed the Kurdish emirates in its modernizing and centralizing drive, these policies were soon revised. Sultan Abdul Hamid II rearmed Kurdish tribes in what was called the Hamidiye Cavalry, again for borderland defence against the Russians.¹ Even after the 1908 Young Turk revolution, when the Hamidiye Cavalry was initially dissolved, the old structure was soon revived under a new name: the Tribal Light Cavalry. Throughout the twentieth century, state interventions to suppress, modernize, assimilate or utilize Kurdish tribal military forces would cause many frictions, uprisings and wars.

Second is the diverse tribal, religious, ethnic, regional, social and political identities of what we came to call Kurds. Kurdish nationalism is a new phenomenon, largely influenced by older social structures, identities and differences. The majority of Kurds are Sunni Muslims, but other religious groups also exist, such as Shiite Kurds (Feyli Kurds), Alevis, Yazidis, Ahl ul-Haq (also known as Yarsani or Kakai), etc. Tribal and regional differences are equally important, and linguistic diversity (Kurmanji, Zazaki, Sorani, Palewani) often reflects ethnic and geographic specificities.² Therefore, any expectation of uniform Kurdish political behaviour under an imagined Kurdish nationalist myth is potentially misleading.

Finally, Kurdish tribal confederations lived for centuries next to largely sedentary, urban or agricultural Christian populations, namely Armenians and Assyrians,³ whose numbers in what is today considered to be Kurdistan were greater than that of the Kurds. Yet, the Ottoman Turkish leadership in a series of deportations and massacres, in which some Kurdish tribes played an active role, exterminated those populations. The outcome was that, for the first time in history, Kurdish populations had continuity over vast areas of West Asia, reinforcing Kurdish nationalism: “With the disappearance of the Armenians, most of eastern Anatolia became almost exclusively Kurdish territory... A Kurdish nation state was now feasible.”⁴

The dissolution of the Ottoman Empire led not only to

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the division of Kurdish-inhabited areas by a series of new and rigid international borders, but also to unprecedented pressure on the political autonomy and social fabric of the Kurds. In Turkey, with the establishment of the Republic, Kurdish areas came under forced centralization, leading to a series of Kurdish revolts, often under the leadership of tribal sheikhs. The last such revolt took place in Dersim (1937–1938), resulting in thousands of casualties and the remaining civilian population being deported.⁵ In Iran, after the withdrawal of Soviet troops from the north, the Kurdish Republic of Mahabad quickly fell to the armies of the Shah (1946). In Iraq, Kurdish tribes revolted against British occupation; yet, after independence they fought a series of wars against Baghdad, the last being against Saddam Hussein in the infamous Anfal campaign of forced Arabization, the most notorious episode of which was the chemical attacks in Halabja (March 1988) where an estimated 5,000 people

perished.⁶ At a time when modern nation-states were emerging in the Middle East, even the most basic Kurdish national rights, such as speaking Kurdish in public, were repressed. These tensions in a modernizing Middle East led to the emergence of a series of Kurdish guerrilla groups in Iraq, Iran, Turkey and Syria, revolting against the nation-state system of the Middle East that negated Kurdish rights and even Kurdish identity.

The Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990 changed the geopolitical equilibrium of the Middle East, and constituted a historic opportunity for the Kurds. For the first time since the fall of the Ottomans, a global power established an alliance with them: the imposition of ‘no-fly zone’ to the north of 36th parallel protected Kurdish Peshmerga from reprisals by Saddam Hussein’s armies. The US invasion of Iraq in 2003 further accelerated those trends, as Kurdish guerrillas played a key role in the US invasion from the north and were the only recognized native military structure in the entire northern Iraq after the dissolution of the Iraqi army. The outcome was the creation of a Kurdish entity in northern Iraq that has all the attributes of statehood with the exception of international recognition.

Today, three distinct political-military groups that emerged from the conflicts of the second half of the twentieth century dominate the Kurdish space: the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK), Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP) and Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), with a number of smaller guerrilla groups originating from Iran but based in northern Iraq, such as the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran (KDP-I) and the Komala Party of Iranian Kurdistan. These groups represent distinct interests and have contradictory alliances with regional and global powers. For example, Kurdish factions in Iraq allied in different periods with neighbouring Iran, both under the Shah and after the 1979 revolution, to fight the Baghdad government, while inside Iran the Kurdish national movement was continuously repressed. Another example is the alliance and close cooperation between the Iraqi KDP

1 J. Klein, *The Margins of Empire: Kurdish Militias in the Ottoman Tribal Zone*, Stanford University Press, 2011.

2 M. S. Kaya, *The Zaza Kurds of Turkey: A Middle Eastern Minority in a Globalised Society*, I.B. Tauris, 2011; N. Fuccaro, *The Other Kurds: Yazidis in Colonial Iraq*, I.B. Tauris, 1999.

3 In some cases, Assyrians, namely the Nestorians (Assyrian Church of the East) of Hakkari and the Syriacs (Jacobites) of Tur Abdin, had nomadic and tribal social structures similar to those of tribal Kurds.

4 M. van Bruinessen, *Agha, Shaikh and State: The Social and Political Structures of Kurdistan*, Zed Books, 1992, p 277. See also V. Cheterian, *Open Wounds: Armenians, Turks and a Century of Genocide*, Oxford University Press, 2015, pp 263–272; S. G. Donabed, *Reforging a Forgotten History: Iraq and the Assyrians in the Twentieth Century*, Edinburgh University Press, 2016.

5 H. Bozarslan, ‘Les révoltes Kurdes en Turquie kémaliste (quelques aspects)’, *Guerres mondiales et conflits contemporains* 151 (1988) 121–136.

6 C. Tripp, *A History of Iraq*, 3rd edn, Cambridge University Press, 2007 p 236. For a detailed report on the al-Anfal campaign, see Human Rights Watch, *Genocide in Iraq: The Anfal Campaign Against the Kurds*, July 1993, <https://www.hrw.org/reports/1993/iraqanfal/> (last accessed 6 november 2017).

and Turkish authorities while the PKK carried out an armed struggle inside Turkey.

IRAQI PESHMERGA

Iraq was home to continuous Kurdish revolts. With the end of World War I and the establishment of the British Mandate, Sheikh Mahmud Barzanji, a sufi Qadiriya religious figure and member of the Barzanji tribe in Suleymaniya, revolted against the British in 1919 and again in 1922–1924. One of his followers was the young Mustafa Barzani, who would later become the leading figure of Kurdish nationalism. With his brother, Ahmed Barzani, he took part in the anti-British revolt of 1931, and in 1945 he joined the short-lived Mahabad Republic declared by Qazi Muhammad in Iran. With the fall of Mahabad, Mustafa Barzani and a group of his followers escaped to the Soviet Union, only to return to Iraq after the 1958 overthrow of the Hashemite monarchy by Abdel Karim Qasim. Barzani is the founder of the KDP and, after relations with Qasim deteriorated, he led yet another revolt known as the First Iraqi–Kurdish War (1961–1970). A peace agreement signed in 1970 was not respected, much like earlier agreements, leading to yet another revolt, the Second Iraqi–Kurdish War (1972–1975). Mustafa Barzani would establish a strong leadership among Kurdish tribes thanks to his nationalist discourse but mainly his success in developing an irregular military force known as Peshmerga.

The defeat of Barzani in 1975, largely caused by the Shah of Iran reaching an agreement with Baghdad, led to internal divisions within the KDP, and one of its members, Jalal Talabani, founded the rival PUK, with its own military wing. The rivalry and in-fighting between the KDP and PUK has deep historic, social and regional specificities, the KDP having its power base in the North of Erbil while the PUK's base is in the Suleymaniya region. The PUK also had a more radical-left ideology and allied with Syria and Iran.⁷

Both the KDP and PUK leadership have been accused of nepotism and corruption. In the 2009 elections, a division appeared within the PUK with the emergence of a new movement named Gorran (Movement for Change), which managed to receive 51 percent of the votes in Suleymaniya province. The referendum on independence on 25 September 2017, which was the project of Massoud Barzani, succeeded in mobilizing the population of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) around the idea of independence. Yet, the challenges ahead remain immense. First, the problems of governance remain;⁸ second, the essential challenge of the referendum is not the recognized limits of the KRG, but the disputed territories and mainly the Kirkuk region and its fate;⁹ third,

7 D. McDowell, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, I.B. Tauris, 2005, pp 343–348.

8 C. Hardi, 'The Kurdish Referendum: Dream of Independence and Fear of Dictatorship', *Middle East Eye*, 25 September, 2017, <http://www.middleeasteye.net/columns/internal-view-kurdish-referendum-2142158935>.

9 F. Hawramy, 'Kirkuk Teetering on the Brink of War', *Al-Monitor*, 24 September 2017, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/09/kurdistan-independence-referendum-kirkuk.html#ixzz4thNF6lhd>.

the KRG continues to remain divided between three military influences: Peshmerga forces loyal to the KDP, Peshmerga forces loyal to the PUK, and PKK militants stationed in the Qandil and Sinjar Mountains.

THE KURDISTAN WORKERS' PARTY (PKK)

The roots of the PKK lie in the leftist movement in Turkey itself, influenced by guerrilla movements of the 1970s, especially the Palestinian guerrillas. The PKK, founded in 1978, was a latecomer to Turkish leftist movements, which is one of the explanations for its radicalism and tendency to use violence against the Turkish state as well as possible rivals. The initial logistic base of the PKK was the Lebanese Bekaa Valley, in camps controlled by the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP), one of the Palestinian guerrilla groups of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). From 1980–1982, some 300 PKK activists received military training from the DFLP.¹⁰ The Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982 destroyed the PLO infrastructure there, driving the PKK into the lap of the Syrian security agencies, the infamous Mukhabarat. The Syrian Baath regime intended to use the Kurdish guerrillas as leverage against Ankara. By the time the PKK launched its attacks within Turkey in 1984, most of its training bases were either in Syrian controlled Bekaa or Syria itself. The PKK could also recruit from among Syrian Kurds, and in return these young men were freed from Syrian military service. As a result, over a third of PKK recruits were Syrian Kurds and the vast majority of the rest were Turkish Kurds. Yet, the PKK did

not limit its assets to areas under the control of Damascus, but developed two additional dimensions. One was the strong network among the growing Kurdish diaspora, especially migrant workers and asylum seekers in Europe following the 1980 Turkish military coup and the severe repression that followed. These networks would prove valuable for funding and lobbying. The second was the military camps established in northern Iraqi

Kurdistan's Qandil Mountains, in the frontier triangle between Iraq, Turkey and Iran. The bases in Iraq would prove extremely important after Turkish military threats forced the Syrian authorities to expel Abdullah Ocalan and the PKK militants from both Syria and Lebanon's Bekaa Valley in 1999. They would also permit the PKK to operate and develop its influence among Iranian Kurds.¹¹

PKK violence can also be explained by the fact that it was attempting to revive Kurdish national identity, which was largely forgotten between the 1930s and 1980s. While the PKK was largely successful in recreating Kurdish national identification, it also – indirectly – contributed to the revival of tribalism among Kurds: to counter guerrilla violence, the Turkish government recruited, armed and financed 'village guards' – over 50,000 in the 1980s – reminiscent of the tribal

10 A. Marcus, *Blood and Belief: The PKK and the Kurdish Fight for Independence*, New York University Press, 2009, p 57.

11 J. Jongerden and A. H. Akkaya, 'Born from the Left: The making of the PKK', in M. Casier and J. Jongerden (eds), *Nationalisms and Politics in Turkey: Political Islam, Kemalism and the Kurdish Issue*, Routledge, 2011, pp 123–142.

Hamidiye Cavalry.¹² In spite of its use of violence, the PKK had from the beginning a 'civilian wing' that differed with the military activists on the principle of negotiations with the Turkish authorities, use of force and the final aim of the struggle. In fact, even Ocalan, years before his arrest, declared a 'unilateral ceasefire' in 1992, 1995 and 1998, called for reforms rather than secession and made gestures towards Ankara showing readiness to negotiate.¹³

THE DEMOCRATIC UNION PARTY (PYD)/ PEOPLE'S PROTECTION UNITS (YPG)

In Syria, while Kurdish basic political and cultural rights were violated by successive administrations, with up to 300,000 Kurds deprived of their citizenship,¹⁴ there was no Kurdish political activism against the Syrian state. Not only the PKK, but also the two major Iraqi Kurdish Parties, the KDP and PUK, used Syrian Kurds as a logistic base for their activities, thus cutting deals with the Damascus authorities. In other words, when mobilized, Syrian Kurds struggled for Kurdish rights either in neighbouring Iraq or Turkey but not for their own rights. One major explanation for this phenomenon could be that Kurdish presence in parts of what became Syria is relatively recent: Syrian Kurdish areas, especially those in the Jazira region (north-east Syria) were established in the twentieth century during the French Mandate.¹⁵

Several questions arise in this regard: first, what is the nature of relations between the PKK and PYD today? Second, is the Syrian territory held by the PYD a priority project for self-rule, similar to the Kurdish entity in north Iraq, or will it serve as a logistic base for the PKK armed struggle inside Turkey? Is the PYD an independent structure from the PKK? To answer these questions, we have to consider both the historic dimension, as well as current political developments.

While the PKK originates from Turkey and is perceived as a Kurdish armed non-state actor (ANSA) from there, the reality is that from the start it has had strong bases inside Syria and has recruited heavily from among Syrian Kurds, who comprise a third of its casualties. In the early 2000s, the PKK underwent a transformation through the creation of a number of institutions: 'PKK militants attempted to create new parties with the double objective of escaping state repression while maintaining support from its thousands of members and sympathizers. In doing so, the PYD (Democratic Union Party), [was] founded in 2003'.¹⁶ (Its armed wing – the People's Protection Units (YPG) – was formed in 2004.) The Kurdistan Free Life Party (PJAK), a PKK-related ANSA, has

been active in Iran since 2004. Yet, these changes are largely formal and do not touch the core of the organization, which remains a nationalist, military formation with hierarchical control, engaged in an ferocious armed struggle since its foundation.

There is little doubt about the influence of the PKK over the PYD on the command level.¹⁷ One study, looking at Kurdish casualties in Syria in the period January 2013–January 2016, based on the official YPG released data, shows that 49.24 percent – more than the number of Syrian Kurd casualties – were Turkish Kurds.¹⁸ The military strategy of the PKK–PYD inside Syria was to try and create geographic unity between the three Kurdish areas: Jazira in the north-east, Kobani in the north centre and Afrin in the north-west. While Jazira was united with Kobani, the Turkish military intervention in Syria aimed to prevent them linking with Afrin. Whether the PKK–YPG leadership will attempt to develop a northern Syrian de facto Kurdish entity similar to the KRG in Iraq will largely depend on external factors. In Turkey, there is a strong Kurdish-leftist popular political movement engaged in a legal, political struggle for reform and democratization, which could have helped transform the military wing, but continuous violence on multiple fronts has hindered such a possibility.

Since 2012, Kurdish armed groups have emerged as a major force in northern Syria. The withdrawal of Syrian governmental troops from the area in July 2012 created a power vacuum, which two separate Kurdish political forces tried to fill: the PKK and its associate PYD/YPG, and the Iraqi KDP and its allies in Syria. The KDP, through its Syrian

associates of 16 formations allied through the 'Kurdish National Council', tried to create a Syrian-Kurdish force of 1,600 fighters by recruiting from among Syrian army deserters who found refuge in Northern Iraq in mid-2012.¹⁹ Yet, it was the PKK–PYD who would emerge as the masters of northern Syria, impose their military dominance over the Kurdish areas there and become the barrier that stopped the Islamic State (ISIS) wave that spread through Syria and Iraq in the summer of 2014, and would later, with the help of the US-

led coalition, roll back ISIS gains.

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KURDS AND THE 'NEW TURKEY'

For 400 years, Kurdish tribes have largely been loyal to the Ottoman sultans, guarding their eastern frontiers against the Iranians or Russians. Kurdish loyalty to the Turkish leaders was frustrated only when Mustafa Kemal betrayed his previous promises of Kurdish autonomy and dissolved both the Ottoman Empire and the Caliphate.

¹² McDowell, *A Modern History*, I.B. Tauris, 2005, pp 423–425.

¹³ M. van Bruinessen, 'Turkey, Europe and the Kurds After the Capture of Abdullah Öcalan', *Kurdish Ethno-Nationalism Versus Nation-Building States*, ISIS Press, 2000, pp 1–11.

¹⁴ 'Syria's Assad grants nationality to Hasaka Kurds', BBC News, 7 April 2011, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-12995174>

¹⁵ M. van Bruinessen, Agha, Shaikh and State, p 95.

¹⁶ J. Tejel, *Syria's Kurds: History, Politics and Society*, Routledge, 2011, p 79.

¹⁷ An International Crisis Group (ICG) report describes the YPG as a PKK 'affiliate' in Syria. See ICG, *The PKK's Fateful Choice in Northern Syria*, Middle East Report No 176, 4 May 2017, p 1, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/eastern-mediterranean/syria/176-pkk-s-fateful-choice-northern-syria> (last accessed 6 November 2017).

¹⁸ A. Stein and M. Foley, 'The YPG-PKK Connection', Atlantic Council, 26 January 2016, <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/the-ypg-pkk-connection>.

¹⁹ V. Cheterian, 'Chance historique pour les Kurdes', *Le Monde diplomatique*, May 2013, <https://www.monde-diplomatique.fr/2013/05/CHETERIAN/49062>.

The initial Kurdish revolts, such as that of Sheikh Said, were led by religious leaders, in the name of Islam, and largely orchestrated by former Hamidiye Cavalry members. Turkish–Kurdish relations deteriorated further after the Turkish military coup of 1980, in which over half a million people – including many Kurds – went through ‘filtration camps’ and torture, and the PKK armed rebellion starting in 1984, which led to over 35,000 dead and the destruction of thousands of Kurdish villages. Yet, all of the above, from Sheikh Said to the PKK rebellion, could be represented as a conflict between Kurds of various social strata and ideological convictions (traditionalist-Islamist, nationalist, third-worldist, etc.) and Turkish nationalism. Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s accession to power with the Justice and Development Party (AKP) and its conservative-Islamist ideology opened new possibilities. In fact, the AKP argued that it was nationalism that divided Turks and Kurds (as well as other Muslim nations that were part of the Ottoman Empire), and that Islam could rally them once again, thus resolving the conflict of national character.²⁰

On two occasions, the AKP and PKK tried to negotiate a peaceful solution. The first was in 2009, after the AKP made some gestures towards Kurdish cultural rights, including the broadcasting of Kurdish-language television programmes by the official channel TRT 6. The parties began indirect talks aimed at major political reforms to give Kurds their cultural rights, local self-governance and an amnesty for their fighters, and at reaching a ceasefire accommodation. Yet, political repression against Kurdish political figures continued and the first groups of disbanded guerrillas were arrested, which ended the peace process. Guerrilla attacks on one side and repressive measures by government forces on the other escalated between 2010 and 2012.

The Arab Spring and the collapse of Syria opened up new perspectives. In January 2013, the parties to the conflict declared yet another ceasefire. Both Turkey and the PKK were busy with the developments inside Syria and were contemplating a possible alliance. If Ankara had given basic rights to the Kurds and allowed them to participate in the internal Turkish political processes, then Turkey could have succeeded in creating an alliance with the PKK–PYD in north Syria, much like the US has done in the same period. Yet, two developments put an end to the ceasefire and to the possible Turkish–Kurdish rapprochement. The first was the battle of Kobani. Erdoğan, himself belonging to a party espousing political Islam, had strong sympathies towards Syrian Islamist groups,²¹ including the salafi-jihadi Ahrar al-Sham and Jabhat al-Nusra, and sustained an ambiguous stance towards ISIS.²² For many Islamists,

20 N. Fisher Onar, ‘Turkey’s Future: Erdoğan, Elections and the Kurds’, *Open Democracy*, 7 April 2015, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/nora-fisher-onar/turkey%27s-future-erdog-elections-and-kurds>.

21 Islamism is used in the sense of a political organization that holds an Islamic worldview and strives to introduce Islamic law.

22 D. L. Phillips, ‘Turkey-ISIS Oil Trade’, *Huffington Post*, 11 September 2014, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/david-l-phillips/research-paper-turkey-isi_b_8808024.html.
B. Gupton, ‘ISIS Sees Turkey as Its Ally’: Former Islamic State Member Reveals Turkish Army

including Erdoğan, the jihadi groups were considered a part, albeit excessive, of the ‘family’ of political Islam. Therefore, when the ISIS attack on Kobani began in September 2014, creating 300,000 refugees and great anxiety among Kurds everywhere including in Turkey, the ambiguous Turkish position came as a shock to many Kurds. Erdoğan, in a public declaration, equated ISIS with the PKK, while the Turkish foreign minister said, ‘How can you say that this terrorist organization is better because it’s fighting ISIS? They are the same. Terrorists are evil. They all must be eradicated.’²³

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Many Turkish citizens of Kurdish ethnicity who traditionally voted for the AKP felt betrayed and did not vote for the ruling party in the June 2015 general elections, instead voting for the Kurdish People’s Democratic Party (HDP). The 2015 elections and their outcomes constitute the second turning point for Erdoğan and Turkey’s Kurdish electorate. The events in Syria galvanized the Kurdish electorate around the HDP, which received over 13 percent of the votes and thus passed the 10 percent threshold for entering parliament.²⁴ This was the first time a pro-Kurdish party achieved such success. This Kurdish triumph was at the expense of the

AKP, which failed to get a parliamentary majority to pass Erdoğan’s constitutional reforms. The Kurdish factor in internal Turkish politics was not acceptable to the AKP, nor to the majority of Turkish voters. The security situation deteriorated immediately after the elections.²⁵ Soon, Kurdish-inhabited towns in southern Turkey, along the border with Syria and Iraq, became war zones. Hundreds of Kurdish activists were arrested, including elected parliamentarians and mayors of the HDP. Turkish–Kurdish relations were back at the previous level of antagonism, and even political Islam failed to provide a solution.²⁶

THE KURDISTAN REGIONAL GOVERNMENT OF IRAQ: ONE, TWO OR MORE KURDISH STATES?

On 1 August 2014, ISIS launched a surprise attack on Peshmerga positions in Zumar, a town north-west of Mosul, between Dohuk and Sinjar, and rapidly occupied it. On 3 August, ISIS launched another surprise attack on Sinjar, from where Peshmerga forces were withdrawn in panic without fighting, for fear of encirclement, leaving

Cooperation’, *Newsweek*, 7 November 2014 : <http://www.newsweek.com/isis-and-turkey-cooperate-destroy-kurds-former-isis-member-reveals-turkish-282920>.

23 R. Collard, ‘Why Turkey Sees the Kurdish People as a Bigger Threat than ISIS’, *Time*, 28 July 2015, <http://time.com/3974399/turkey-kurds-isis/>.

24 C. Letsch and I. Traynor, ‘Turkey Elections: Ruling Party Loses Majority as Pro-Kurdish HDP Gains Seats’, *The Guardian*, 7 June 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jun/07/turkey-election-preliminary-results-erdogan-akp-party>.

25 On 20 July 2015, a pro-Kurdish solidarity gathering was bombed by ISIS, killing 33 and wounding many more. The HDP accused the government of not providing the necessary protection.

26 T. Bachel and S. Noel, ‘The Justice and Development Party and the Kurdish Question’, in M. Casier and J. Jongerden (eds), *Nationalisms and Politics in Turkey: Political Islam, Kemalism and the Kurdish Issue*, Routledge, 2011, pp 101–120.

the local Yazidi population without protection.²⁷ These attacks came two months after ISIS' blitz of Mosul, where Iraqi army positions fell in a matter of hours, leaving large quantities of arms and ammunition to the jihadi fighters. In the following days, ISIS fighters took over the Assyrian town Qaraqosh in the Nineveh valley. What followed can be described as genocide: ISIS assassinated Yazidi and Shia-Turkmen men, kidnapped thousands of Yazidi girls and women, forcing them into slavery, and forced Assyrian Christians to convert, pay jizya (tax) or depart. Several thousand Yazidis, Assyrians, Shabak, Shias and Kakai (ahl ul-Haq) escaped their homes into internally displaced people camps in areas under Peshmerga control.²⁸ Thousands of Yazidi civilians were trapped and encircled at the top of the arid Sinjar Mountain, where many vulnerable people perished because of lack of water, food or medication. A military operation by PKK-PYD fighters from Syria opened a small corridor to the north of the mountain, evacuating the civilians.

The ISIS attack and PKK counter-attack heightened already existing tensions between Kurdish political-military formations. The Peshmerga withdrawal in the early hours of 3 August 2014 has engendered bitterness among the Yazidi population, whose trust in the KRG has been shattered as much as their trust in their Arab neighbours to the south. On the contrary, the PKK military operation has made its fighters popular among the Yazidis. The Yazidi

²⁷ On the history of the Yazidis, see Fuccaro, *The Other Kurds*.

²⁸ V. Cheterian, 'Les Yézidis, éternels boucs émissaires', *Le Monde diplomatique*, January 2017, <http://www.monde-diplomatique.fr/2017/01/CHETERIAN/56969>.

areas liberated from ISIS, including the town of Sinjar, are divided into two zones of influence, between the PKK on one hand and the KDP Peshmerga on the other.²⁹

Halfway from Erbil to Suleymaniyah, the flags change from yellow to green, as do the posters of martyred fighters. This is the non-official border between the KDP and the PUK, which, in spite of both being part of the KRG, have distinct command structures. The two parts of the KRG have equally different political orientations: while the KDP is close to Ankara and has tense relations with Baghdad, the PUK has close relations with Baghdad as well as with Tehran. Although there are tensions today between the two sides, we are far from the bloody internal war of 1994–1997, which led to thousands of casualties. More recently, tensions rose around questions such as budgetary allocations and political and administrative posts including

the KRG presidency. While the Iraqi Kurdish referendum for independence revealed a political fiasco that backfired and led to the loss of territorial gains that Kurdish ANSAs had made in the 'disputed territories' the question of Kurdish sovereignty in northern Iraq and in the neighbouring states remains a challenge yet to be addressed, which will shape the map of the Middle East in the next decades.

²⁹ F. Tstekin, 'How are Iraq's Yazidis Faring Amid Kurds' Confrontations? *Al-Monitor*, 9 May 2017, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/05/turkey-iraq-sinjar-what-is-happening-in-yazidi-land.html>.

On 3 August, ISIS launched another surprise attack on Sinjar, from where Peshmerga forces were withdrawn in panic without fighting, for fear of encirclement, leaving the local Yazidi population without protection.



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CONCLUSION: A HIGH-RISK FUTURE

The referendum on independence in KRG areas reshuffled the political cards in the Middle East, but long-term challenges persist. Will the tacit alliance between the Syrian government and PKK–PYD survive the defeat of ISIS and the marginalization of al-Nusra and other forces? Is the new alliance between the US authorities and the PKK–PYD a tactical or strategic choice? Equally important, will the various Kurdish military forces refrain from inter-Kurdish violence in spite of their contradictory alliances with regional and global powers? The KDP is close to Ankara, while the PKK and PUK are struggling against Turkey and close to Baghdad–Damascus. While the PKK–PUK are close to Baghdad, the PUK is equally close to Tehran and the PKK-affiliated PJAK is at war with the Iranian government.

Probably the most fundamental challenge for all Kurdish political forces is the ideological shift in the larger Middle Eastern environment. Kurdish political forces operate on the basis of nationalism, to which the Kurds are latecomers.

Probably the most fundamental challenge for all Kurdish political forces is the ideological shift in the larger Middle Eastern environment. Kurdish political forces operate on the basis of nationalism, to which the Kurds are latecomers. When Turkey, Iran and Arab states were enthusiastically nationalist, Kurdish political formations and the public at large were still under the influence of former social divisions led by feudal lords (aghas) and traditional religious sheikhs, and created by tribal alliances. Today, the Kurdish nationalist phenomenon is an anomaly in a region where the nation-state is collapsing, and where neo-Islamism is widespread, influenced by salafi-jihadism and sectarian divides.

The influence of jihadi groups such as al-Qaeda and more recently ISIS has largely been taboo, although there is enough circumstantial evidence concerning the important influence of salafi-jihadism in all four areas of Kurdish political reality.³⁰ In fact, the Iraqi Kurdish Ansar al-Islam was the group that provided logistic support to Abu Musi'b al-Zarqawi when he first moved to Iraq with a handful of loyalists. The group also provided many of the fighters of Ansar al-Sunna, a radical armed group that fought against the US-led occupation of Iraq. Recent ISIS attacks inside Iran reveal the influence of jihadi ideology among marginalized Kurdish sectors of Iran. Will the young Kurdish nationalism be a shield against the Middle Eastern trend of Islamization and sectarianization?

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³⁰ On the rise of ISIS influence on Iranian Kurds, see F. Hawramy, 'Iran Wakes up to Salafi Recruitment in Kurdish regions', Al-Monitor, 9 June 2017, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/en/originals/2017/06/iran-tehran-isis-attacks-kurdistan-salafist-recruitment.html>. On ISIS influence in the KRG, see R. Collard, 'Kurdish ISIS Recruits Threaten Identity and Security of Kurdish State', Time, 23 January 2015, <http://time.com/3679970/kurds-isis-recruits/>. On Kurdish fighters who joined ISIS in the battle of Kobani, see A. Speri, 'Not All Kurds are Fighting Against the Islamic State – Some are joining it', Vice News, 7 November 2014, <https://news.vice.com/article/not-all-kurds-are-fighting-against-the-islamic-state-some-are-joining-it>.

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