

# A Contemporary Analysis and Comparison of Kurdish National Movements: Syria, Iraq, and Turkey

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A CONTEMPORARY ANALYSIS AND COMPARISON OF KURDISH NATIONAL  
MOVEMENTS:  
SYRIA, IRAQ, AND TURKEY

by

GRAYSON LANZA

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the Honors in the Major Program in Political Science  
in the College of Sciences  
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at the University of Central Florida  
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## Abstract

As commonly understood, and particularly espoused by Kurdish nationalists, the Kurds are by far the largest ethnic group in the world without their own nation-state. An estimated 2 to 2.5 million ethnically Kurdish people inhabit portions of Syria. There are approximately 6.5 million ethnically Kurdish people in Iraq, 7.6 million in Iran, and 16 million in Turkey. Overall, there are about 30 million Kurds in the world.

In the broader context of the Kurdish nationalist struggle, this paper suggests that there is a growing bipolar hegemony for power over the control of Kurdish land and politics. Research was predicated around the question of why not all Kurdish groups pursue full independence. Standing in contrast to each other despite relatively similar goals is the Group of Communities in Kurdistan (KCK) and the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP). The KCK movement is the more diverse of the two, with its member organizations being the dominant forces of the Kurdish movement in Turkey, Syria, and Iran. Within Turkey, the KCK is represented politically through the HDP and PKK, along with the armed wing of the PKK (HPG). In Syria, KCK is represented politically through the PYD and its armed wing YPG. In Iran, the KCK is represented by PJAK and in Iraq it is represented by the PÇDK. In Syria and Turkey, KCK affiliated groups are the dominant political and militia force. The only Kurdish inhabited region where this is not the case is in the Kurdish Regional Government in Iraq, which is dominated politically, economically, and militarily by the KDP and its affiliates. The two camps differ in a host of ways: the KCK espouses anti-state, anarcho-socialist sentiment while the KDP opts for establishing a traditional nation-state. The KCK has poor relations with Turkey universally, while the KDP and by extension the KRG has warm relations built off of growing economic interests. Most importantly, their end goals for Kurdish society are drastically different: KCK organization call for autonomous communities and do not advocate for a state, in direct contrast to the KDP's long

term goal of an independent nation-state for the Kurdish people. Despite the common enemy of Islamic State, tensions between the two camps have only increased as each looks to become the voice for the Kurdish nation.

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## Introduction

The Kurds have drawn a significant amount of attention to their struggle in light of the chaos that has gripped portions of the Middle East since the second Persian Gulf War. With war gripping Iraq and Syria, I too found myself interested in the Kurdish struggle in light of the key roles their organizations played in these conflicts. Initial interest turned into serious inquiry, and I began to consider the question of why do not all Kurdish groups pursue full independence. History, ideology, goals, and many other variables seemed to play a part and this led to the formalizing of my research into the subject. Media coverage of Kurdish groups tends to lack the nuance required to understand the aims and direction of the Kurdish national movement, and the acknowledgement of the disunity that exists within it. In autonomy versus independence, autonomy meant much more than just regional governance of Kurdish lands. For many of the pro-autonomy groups, we see the pursuit of autonomy as a means to pursue ideological goals. The primary proponents of independence may not be as ideologically driven in their pursuit, but their appeals to the public intend to convey otherwise.

This research contains three case studies on the Kurds; those in Syria, Iraq, and Turkey. It should be noted that Kurds have significant inhabitation in not only the aforementioned countries, but also in Iran. Iran was not included as a case study due to the circumstances surrounding the Kurdish national movement in it being much less clear due to the need to analyze further criteria to not only help answer the research question, but to better understand the very divided feelings of Kurdish inhabitants of Iran. While still important, the situation of the Kurds of Iran has also had minimal effect on the movements in Syria, Iraq, and Turkey.

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## The Kurds of Syria

The advent of the Syrian Civil War, and the ensuing collapse of significant portions of Syrian state control throughout its territory, has opened up a new front in the Kurdish nationalist movement. While traditionally a relatively unimportant region of Kurdish nationalist tendencies, the collapse of the Assad regime has allowed the Kurds in the northern regions of Syria to seize control. While Syria had long operated as a base for PKK militia operations into Turkey, the nationalist sentiment of Syria's Kurds had been concurrently suppressed with laws banning traditional Kurdish activities and culture. With a tension filled truce with government forces, the Kurds of Syria have been primarily fighting against the forces of the Islamic State, along with other Islamists groups. Following the ideology of Democratic Confederalism, Syria's Kurds are a part of the nationalist camp that fights for autonomy instead of outright independence. This entails creating an autonomous region within the existing Syrian state.

### Background

An estimated 2 to 2.5 million ethnically Kurdish people inhabit portions of Syria (The Economist). Syria is in the midst of a vicious civil war that began with the Arab Spring in 2011. The Arab Spring has indirectly led to the opening up for the biggest victories in the Kurdish national struggle, thoroughly establishing the Kurdish Regional Government in Iraq as a force to be reckoned with in the midst of fights against the Islamic State. At the same time, its compatriots in Syria in the Kurdish national struggle fight not just the Islamic State, but the Assad regime and Islamist rebels. The Kurds of Syria have, with the support of United States led coalition air support, have managed to take control of the majority of Northern Syria. Politically led by the Democratic Union Party (Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat/PYD) and the party's armed wing the People's Protection Units (YPG), the Kurds are in a position of power in Syria for the

first time since the days of the Ottoman Empire (Carnegie). In accordance with the ideology it adheres to, the YPG facilitated the creation of the Syrian Democratic Forces. This is a coalition of multi-ethnic militias that for all intents and purposes is led by the YPG. Still, this position is wrought with danger and tension. A juggling act exists for the Kurds of Syria, balancing relationships with groups of all backgrounds. There are marked differences, even tensions, between the Kurdish Democratic Party led Iraqi-Kurdistan forces and the Syrian Kurds. The Barzani-KDP led Kurdish Regional Government has held an economic boycott on PYD controlled Syria (Taştekin). It should be noted, that within Syria, the Kurdish struggle is almost completely fought on behalf of the Democratic Union Party. Affiliated with the PKK through the KCK (Groups of Communities in Kurdistan), much tension exists between it and the Barzani-led KDP because of differences in ideology and goals. The PYD shares much more in common, in roots and ideology, with the PKK of Turkey and PJAK of Iran (Carnegie). At the same time, the PYD is at war with Islamic State, al-Nusra (al-Qaeda in Syria), and the Assad regime. The relationships of these different Kurdish groups, all fighting for a similar end goal, provide much to be analyzed in the context of nationalist Kurdish struggle.

#### Contemporary History of the Kurdish National Struggle in Syria

The Kurdish people have inhabited portions of Syria for hundreds of years. In spite of this, in 1963 the Ba'athist regime decided to strip hundreds of thousands of Kurdish Syrians of citizenship. An estimated 300,000 Kurds were technically stateless living in Syria by 2011, a direct result of the Ba'athist regimes policies toward the Kurdish people (Lynch). This prevented many Kurds from being able to own land, property, businesses, and even the ability to work legally within Syria. Syrian state repression toward its Kurdish population included the banning of the teaching of Kurdish in school and the banning of other cultural artifacts, such as traditional dress, caused repeated flare ups of domestic unrest by the population. In 1986, protests erupted

when the Ba'athist regime shot at Kurds dressed in traditional dress for the Newroz festival in Damascus. Traditional Kurdish dress was illegal in Syria, and the resulting regime crackdown caused Kurdish unrest throughout the country (Vanly). Much later on, the 2004 Qamishili riots were caused primarily by the poor response of the Syrian regime toward soccer related violence between an Arab supported team and a Kurdish one (HRW). In the midst all of this unrest, from the ashes of the former PKK operations in the Syria arose a new party to organize Kurdish interests in Syria.

The Democratic Union Party, hereafter referred to as the PYD, was formed from the remnants of PKK operations that were mostly destroyed in Northern Syria following Assad's policy shift toward closer ties with Turkey. Unsurprisingly, the party was ruled illegal by the Syrian government and was forced to operate underground. In 2007, protests were organized by the PYD in opposition to threats by the Turkish government to invade Northern Iraq and attack PKK positions (Carnegie). These protests were met with live ammunition being fired by Syrian authorities. Several years later, with the advent of the Arab Spring, Syria fell into a state of civil war. Facing attacks on regime strongholds by rebels, the Assad regime tactically made a deal with the PYD and withdrew from Kurdish populated areas in the North outside of some of Qamshili and Hasakah (Khaddour). Today, Qamshili is split nearly in half between the PYD and Assad, while the majority of the city of Hasakah is under PYD administration following ISIS attacks. The Assad regime and PYD forces have had several small skirmishes in the war, but tend to stick to a tense neutrality toward each other. One major contradiction to this tense neutrality was the withdrawal of much of the regime's military forces from Hasakah following provocation of regime allied militias in the city several months ago. The urban portion of Hasakah is almost exclusively under PYD political control now.

In the midst of the Arab Spring inspired revolt, the Damascus regime was faced with the threat of being toppled by the rapidly expanding forces of the rebels. Assad pragmatically had most of the Syrian Arab Army withdraw from Kurdish populated areas in Northern Syria, handing over control of the region to local Kurdish forces. In what seemed almost to be overnight, the unrecognized entity of Rojava was formed to govern the region to be governed by TEV-DEM, or the Movement for a Democratic Society. Composed of three cantons (inspired in part by the decentralized form of governance found in Switzerland) named Afrin, Kobane, and Cizire (Rojava). Afrin is located in the northwest of Syria, with its administrative center being Afrin city. Kobane is in the northern central portion of Syria, with canton administration being in Kobane city. The Cizire canton is in the northeast of Syria, with its canton administration occurring in the portion of the city of Qamshili that the Democratic Union Party controls. A ruling coalition was formed quickly by the Democratic Union Party and the Kurdish National Council to govern the area, with defense being held by the People's Protection Units. Despite the government technically being ruled by this coalition, this seemed to only be the case in name only (Carnegie). The PYD and KDP aligned KNC quickly fell into squabbling, with the PYD relegating the opposing group to the sidelines of power in Syria. The canton system was based around local self-rule and local councils were set up throughout Rojava, following the steps laid forth by the ideology of the Democratic Union Party. As SDF forces take more and more of northern Syria, these local councils are formed with encouragement from the underlying political motives of the coalition.

### The Democratic Union Party (PYD)

The PYD is an interesting political party ideologically relative to most standards, but in regards to Kurdish nationalism it shares an ideology with the PKK in Turkey and PJAK in Iran (Taylor). For many, many years, the Assad clan had very poor relations with its neighbor Turkey. In a not so subtle way of undermining its neighbor, Syria allowed for the Kurdish Worker's Party (PKK) to operate bases within Northern Syria for years. Following heavy Turkish pressure (implications that Turkey would invade Syria), Assad changed his position on the PKK completely and went about removing them from Syria. From this, the seeds for the creation of the PYD were planted. The remnants of the PKK in Syria regrouped and established the Democratic Union Party in 2003, in the midst of the broad umbrella of the group shifting from hardline Marxist-Leninist ideology to a form of anarchism advocated by famed anarchist Murray Bookchin. Espousing an ideology of decentralized, socialist, feminist society, the PYD was quickly attacked by the Syrian regime (KNC)(Biel and Bookchin). Operating underground for most of its existence, the Syrian Civil War weakened the Syrian state enough that it chose to withdraw from significant areas of Kurdish population to reinforce cities such as Damascus. Led by Salih Muslim and Asya Abdullah (co-chairs of the party), it has established itself as the primary governing body in much of the northern parts of Syria (Carnegie MEC).

### Governance by the PYD

The PYD is particularly interesting in the context of contemporary Kurdish national struggle in that it does not advocate, and never has, the establishment of an independent Kurdish state. In fact, it does not advocate, in any official capacity, Kurdish nationalism at all (Ocalan). The PYD advocates for autonomy, and officially supports autonomy within the current Syrian state if the government was to become democratic. While the PYD is dominated by Kurdish members, its ideology focuses on democracy and justice for all groups. As a result, Assyrian, Arab, Chechen,

Yezidi, and many more all take part in the PYD's cause. Assyrian and Yezidi defense forces have been formed after interactions with the YPG and in accordance with the prevailing ideology. The PYD's ideology of democratic Confederalism advocates for extreme decentralization of authority for governance, explicitly minorities and women to have equal rights and opportunities. When the PYD aligned forces take over a community, it establishes a local council composed of democratically elected leaders from all of the community's inhabitants. These communities are given local autonomy as long as they follow the established guidelines of the TEV-DAM, which acts as the Rojavan (now Democratic Federal System of Northern Syria) constitution in practice (KNC). Women are required to have representation on the council, and all minority groups within a community must have at least a seat in the council. While there does not seem to be as much focus right now on this, the PYD is anti-capitalist and has moved to establish public properties and worker cooperatives. There is also a rejection of the concept of private property in governed areas.

#### Militia

The cause of the PYD is driven by military support from the People's Protection Units (YPG), which includes the Women's Protection Units (YPJ). The YPG is technically autonomous of the authority of the PYD; the co-chairs of the party have little to no power of its actions and operations. While definitely a strange set up compared to any other contemporary militia force, it is in accordance with the aims of the political ideology. The YPG is composed of volunteers and conscripts and operates against ISIS and other Islamist organizations (such as al-Nusra, Syria's al-Qaeda affiliate) in Syria, and have helped in operations in Northwest Iraq with the Yezidi population (Global Security). It is not in open warfare with the Assad regime, but does have occasionally sporadic fights with Assad forces in areas that the groups border each other. The YPG also operates a foreign militia volunteer service called the Lions of Rojava, where

foreigners come in and fight with the YPG (Alsaafin). The YPG is known to train a local population, particularly minorities, in weapons use for self-defense purposes. As a result of this policy, Assyrian and Yezidi populations have established their own self-defense forces (aligned with the YPG and PYD) to defend their communities. This is done in an effort to empower local people, giving them incentive to buy into the governance of the PYD. The YPG is heavily affiliated with the PKK, as they share the same ideology and fight many common enemies. There are many that claim that the YPG is just a front for PKK activities in Syria, but officially they remain separate and operate under the umbrella of the Group of Communities in Kurdistan (KCK). In the beginning stages of the Syrian Civil War, following the pull out of the Syrian Arab Army from northern Syria, the YPG quickly established control over many areas and had several notable battles over cities with al-Nusra and aligned Islamists. Following the rise of ISIS, the YPG has focused its resources primarily in responding to the Islamic State's threat to northern Syria. Despite the radical leftist ideology espoused by the party it is fights for, the YPG is aided by the United States with coalition aircraft bombing ISIS positions (Denis).

In late 2015, in cooperation with US coalition forces, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) were officially formed. Meant as a coalition to incorporate more ethnicities and militias into the YPG's fight, the YPG became a senior member of the coalition. Operations by the SDF almost always include YPG forces, except in special cases. While the intention of the YPG was never to be a specifically Kurdish force, the reorganization into the SDF has acted simply as a rebranding in many ways to appeal to more diverse peoples of Syria. The re-organization into the SDF, with the YPG as the primary operating force but technically not the "leader", has given the United States plausible deniability to its NATO ally Turkey when providing its allied forces with military support. Turkey views the YPG as merely the PKK in Syria, and while the groups are

most definitely closely related and work together, the distinction of the SDF essentially sidesteps the issue. Very little degrees of separation exist between the US and the YPG, whom Turkey consider terrorists. With the SDF, the US can work more comfortably in the region to advance its aims.

### Economics

There is still limited scholarly information on how the PYD operates economically. It is indicated that, in accordance with the party's ideology, this is decided mostly on a community basis. The PYD does openly advocate for the elimination of private capital and is explicitly anti-capitalist, but it operates rather loosely in how strictly this is enforced so far. It has gone so far as to establish worker cooperatives, and has taken control over many abandoned businesses and opened them to public ownership (KNC) (Ocalan). The aforementioned economic boycott by KDP led forces in the Kurdish Regional Government, along with the difficulties of Turkish border patrol control with PYD controlled areas, has stymied the flow of needed good and resources to help rebuild areas such as Kobane and re-start economic activities in northern Syria (The Economist). As its forces take control of dams, farms, oil production, cement factories, and more, the Democratic Federal System of Northern Syria has slowly rebuilt itself economically despite the blockade and issues with Turkey.

### Summary

Syria's Kurds, influenced by decades upon decades of official and unofficial repression by the state of Syria, have come to unify their support. The Democratic Union Party is a very important player in the Kurdish national struggle, in spite of it technically not espousing what is traditionally considered Kurdish nationalist ideology. In spite of this, its domination by Kurds and the establishment of Rojava has led it to be viewed as another vehicle in the fight to free the



Kurdish people from oppression. It advocates the establishment of autonomous regions for Kurds, along with the PKK in Turkey and PJAK in Iran. With its far-left, anarchist ideology of Democratic Confederalism, the Syrian Kurds of the PYD hope to free all of the Syrian people from the oppression they have faced. Along with parties such as the PUK and Gorran of the Kurdish Regional Government, the PYD finds itself in the autonomy side of the Kurdish nationalist struggle. The heavy emphasis on rejecting neo-liberal economics and the nation-state in their ideology is likely why the PYD (and other KCK affiliated groups) have drawn the ire of the KDP. Relations between the two sides are forced in a time of conflict, but breakdowns along ideological and strategic lines are likely to occur. The PYD espouses a noble cause, and while they are well on their way in regards to controlling territory, the fate of the party and the people it represents is still unknown simply because of the tenuous and confusing nature of the Syrian Civil War. If the PYD were to have any chance of success in the long term, its efforts must be focused on the governance of the territories it holds in order to counteract outside pressures.

## The Kurds of Iraq

The Kurds of Iraq are some of the most unique in the Kurdish nation, with the establishment of an official autonomous governing entity. This is a relatively recent development that it is marred with internal conflict and external threats. With the escalation of Iraq's sectarian conflict devolving into a full-scale civil war with the fall of Mosul and Fallujah to Islamic State forces, Iraq's Kurds in the Kurdish Regional Government had to mobilize quickly. With five to seven million Kurds in Iraq, the Kurds have historically been a repressed minority following the ending of the British mandate. Facing a similar rise in fortunes as their ethnic brethren in Syria, Kurdish forces have seized significant amounts of territory with the retreat of Iraqi Security Forces and battles with Islamic State. At the same time tensions between the traditional Iraqi Kurdish parties, the rise of a new party in the face of government nepotism and corruption, Turkish bombings of PKK positions in the KRG, and a presidential crisis, are all significant issues facing the Kurdish national movement in Iraq.

### Background

This privileged position that the Kurds of Iraq find themselves in today is a drastic shift from the historical treatment and power of the minority within the state. The Kurdish people of Iraq have long moved for independence, or at the very least, autonomy. Be it under the British Mandate, the newly independent Kingdom of Iraq, Qasim ruled Iraq, or Ba'athist ruled Iraq, the Kurds were regularly targets for manipulation, repression, and even genocide (Romano and Gurses). The British had regularly halted any attempts by local Iraqi Kurds to obtain autonomy, even under a British mandate. This was done primarily out of a fear of losing control over the Iraqi mandate, and the sympathies it had toward Arab forces in the region. In the revolt of 1943 against the Kingdom of the Iraq, the Barzani clan (a family of huge significance for Iraq's Kurds) wished for regional autonomy in the face of poor government administration of the

Kurdish areas (Bulloch and Morris). Concerned with losing Iraq as an ally in the Allied war effort, the British went about successfully undermining and defeating the revolt under the guise of Iraqi administrative reform (Bulloch and Morris).

In 1958, Abd al-Karim Qasim successfully managed a military coup against the monarchy and established himself as the prime minister of the new Republic of Iraq. Initially, Qasim had sought warm relations with Kurds, meeting with Mustafah Mullah Barzani and promising the Kurds regional autonomy. Barzani had asserted his control of the Kurdish Democratic Party and the meeting was seen as a significant step in the right direction for Iraq's treatment of the Kurds. By the early 1960's, it was clear that Qasim had reneged on his agreement with Barzani, leading to a decade of sporadic hostility toward the central government of Iraq and KDP forces (Romano and Gurses). Following the defeat of the KDP in 1975, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan party was formed by Talabani, a rival of Barzani's from within the KDP.

Another large scale rebellion broke out by Kurdish forces in 1983 led by KDP and PUK forces in the hope of exploiting Iraq's fighting of Iran in Iran-Iraq war. While successful in controlling significant swaths of lands in Northern Iraq throughout the war, the conflict ended on a terrifying note. Saddam Hussein, under pressure from Iran and the Kurds in his own borders, authorized the al-Anfal campaign against Kurds in general. What followed was three years of genocidal terror, with approximately 4,300 villages destroyed in Kurdish areas. With approximately 100,000 Kurdish civilians killed and a refugee population of about one million people, international attention had to be paid to the region (Bulloch and Morris). Following the 1991 Persian Gulf War, Kurdish areas were placed under international observance and a no-fly zone to protect the Kurds from any further Saddam Hussein retribution. On a bittersweet note, this planted the seeds for Kurdish self-rule and autonomy as the Kurdish populace quickly took over

vacated Iraqi bureaucratic roles (Bulloch and Morris). Following the first phase of the Second Persian Gulf War and the toppling of Saddam, the Kurdish Regional Government, and at last official autonomy, was codified into the new Iraqi constitution.

#### Status of the Kurdish Regional Government

The Kurdish Regional Government has existed officially since 2005 with the creation of the new Iraq constitution. It officially administers the following Iraqi governates: Erbil, Suleimani and Dohuk, Halabja. Erbil is the administrative capital for the KRG, and is where the prime minister's office is located. As of late 2015, the KRG's prime minister is Nechervan Idris Barzani and president is Massoud Barzani. Massoud Barzani has been the president of the KRG since 2005, being re-elected once and having parliament extend his term for two years. At the time of this writing, Barzani's term has officially expired but he has yet to step down from the presidency (Hassan). While the KRG officially only controls four Iraqi governates, it currently also controls portions of the Diyala, Kirkuk, Salah-Din, and Nineveh governates. With the toppling of Iraqi Security Forces throughout the country, the KRG's militia forces quickly filled the vacuum, taking advantage of the expansion of Islamic State. Still, KRG forces were caught on their heels with the rapidly expanding forces of the Islamic State, with clashes occurring throughout 2014 just outside of the newly controlled city of Kirkuk. Already, the control of these areas by the KRG outside of its constitutionally guaranteed governate leads to a potentially tense situation between the federal government and the KRG (Dean). Kirkuk, a historically significant Kurdish city, is also surrounded by extensive gas and oil fields, providing an enormous source of wealth for whoever controls it.

While officially the Kurdish Regional Government is ruled by a governing coalition of the Kurdish Democratic Party and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, in action the KRG is split into

two regions based off of ruling party. The north of the KRG is controlled by the KDP and the KDP's peshmerga (the KRG militia forces), while the south is controlled by the PUK and the PUK's peshmerga (Jabary and Hira). While there had been some moves to consolidate the peshmerga forces into one combined KRG force, these efforts were stalled with the advent of the Iraqi Civil War and the issues of Barzani's continued staying in power past his presidential term limit. While great efforts have been made by both sides to consolidate the KRG into one unified sub-state, historical divisions (particularly along tribal lines) still exist and have continued to flare up in spite of the dangers at the KRG frontlines from the forces of Islamic State.

Dissatisfaction with the nepotism and ensuing corruption of the current two party coalition government of the KRG has led to the rise of a political party centered on reforming the KRG. Gorran, originally part of the Change Party List in the 2010 parliamentary elections, has grown quickly from its origins of grass-roots anti-corruption activism (Goudsouzian). The party is primarily supported by young, urban Kurds who have had the opportunity to become more educated and distanced from the traditional tribal affiliations that have dominated Iraqi Kurdish politics. While focused on reform, its official policies have it on the left spectrum of politics and naturally has found an ally in the PUK because of their similar political ideologies and opposition of the continued ruling of the executive branch of the KRG by the KDP.

The Kurdish Regional Government's militia forces have traditionally referred to as *peshmerga*, which means "one who confronts death" in the Kurdish language (Bulloch and Morris). Well known for being battle tested and relatively well trained, the peshmerga are considered one of the most reliable forces in the fight against Islamic State. The KRG's peshmerga are divided in control by three entities: the KDP, PUK, and the Kurdish Regional Government Minister of Peshmerga Affairs. Despite calls for unifying the different forces of peshmerga, past party lines,

the KRG Minister of Peshmerga has only been successful in the creation of four unified brigades of peshmerga since 2011 (Jabary and Hira). Some minor changes in rules, such as the banning of political party flags on battlefields by peshmerga, have not been enough to finally unify the forces. Today, all three peshmerga entities have independent chains of command and have only minimal cooperation when it comes to intelligence sharing and troop movements. Despite the disunity, peshmerga have been recently heavily supplied by Western states in an effort to shore up KRG defenses and strengthen its militia in light of the view that the peshmerga are the only reliable fighting force in Iraq (Bulloch and Morris). Germany has been an important supplier of military hardware for the KRG's peshmerga. Issues have arisen with supposed "embargo" of weapons shipments to the KRG from the federal authorities in Baghdad, with KRG aiming for direct shipments of weapons to them. The United States, another large supplier of weapons and training to the KRG forces, has refused to directly arm the KRG, preferring to disseminate the weapons through the federal government in accordance with the Iraqi constitution (Chomani). This issue is highly contentious and is still a topic of concern for Iraq in the midst of the civil war.

The Kurdish Regional Government is graced with a naturally abundant land of resources, specifically for gas and oil. As a result of this, with peace settling in the region since the formation of the KDP-PUK unity government in the late 1990's, the KRG has quickly enriched itself through trade of its resources. There are a variety of other service industry jobs in the area, but the primary driver of economic growth in the KRG is still oil and gas (Al-Ansary). The region is run under neoliberal free market principles, with a focus on the energy sector. The KRG potentially has up to forty-five billion barrels of oil to still be proven (Al-Ansary). Interestingly enough, the KRG's biggest foreign trading partner is Turkey. The very same Turkey that has a

very poor relationship within its own borders with its own Kurds has invested heavily in Iraqi Kurdistan, developing very close ties with Barzani and the KDP. The creation of an oil and gas pipeline between the KRG and Turkey has led to an increase in European investment in the KRG as a result of the increased demand for energy provision through Turkey in the face of a shift away from Russia as a primary energy supplier to the continent. With war-torn Syria to the west and war-torn central authority Iraq to the south, the KRG's only realistic option for trade is through Turkey. Since the KRG is still a part of the federal state of Iraq, all revenue that the KRG generates must first pass through the central authority of the federal system, where a supposed 17% of the revenue will be distributed to the KRG since it contributes to 17% of Iraq's oil and gas revenue (Al-Ansary). This has been a cause of much tension between the central government and the autonomous region, as the KRG has increasingly acted independently of the central government. In response to these moves by the KRG, the Iraqi central government has regularly withheld portions of the budget allocated to be distributed to the KRG (Goudsouzian). Further tension has developed with the capture of disputed regions and cities like Kirkuk falling under KRG authority with the withdrawal of much of the Iraqi Security Forces from the region as a result of Islamic State advances. Kirkuk is host to a large amount of gas and oil deposits, with already operating oil fields that are particularly productive (Dean). The gain of this territory has been a boon to not only the economic prospects of the KRG, but general Kurdish nationalist goals as Kirkuk has long been championed as a Kurdish city.

The Kurdistan Democratic Party is the oldest continuously existing political party in all of Kurdistan, an institution that has survived countless conflicts. Started in Iranian Kurdistan in 1946, the party has been one of the most important forces in Kurdish nationalism in any region, primarily because of the amount of influence it has exerted over every region of Kurdish

inhabitation despite being based primarily in Iraq (Bulloch and Morris). The party has, and still is, been dominated by members of the Barzani clan. Historically, the KDP has associated itself with numerous political ideologies, generally being associated with leftist movements until its split with the PUK in the 1970's. In contemporary times, it is mainly associated with neo-liberal economic policies and nationalism. With the official creation of the Kurdish Regional Government, the KDP further solidified its continued involvement in the Kurdish movement.

#### The Kurdistan Democratic Party

The Kurdistan Democratic Party, alongside its rival the PUK, operates essentially as a shadow government within the KRG. While official, bipartisan state institutions exist within the de-facto independent KRG, these are usually co-opted by the party or outright ignored. The KDP maintains its own, separate force of peshmerga, independent of the Ministry of Peshmerga that is the official operator of the KRG's militia forces. The co-opting of many KRG state institutions into KDP strongholds occurred in 2007 with the agreed power-sharing coalition between the KDP and PUK (Jabary and Hira). The KDP was given carte-blanche control over the KRG government, while the PUK assumed control in aspects regarding representation of the KRG within the Iraqi federal system (Chomani). In some sense, the state of the KRG is even divided in political geography. The KDP essentially runs the capital of Erbil and the rest of the northern region, creating a significant stronghold for KDP operations. In the time since 2007, while the KDP continues to entrench it in its position, there has been backlash against over the perceived corruption and nepotism found in the KRG government. Leaked US cables indicated that corruption was holding the economy of the KRG back, citing numerous deals made by KDP party officials and companies with foreign investors in the KDP to take a share of revenue, sometimes up to thirty percent (Dean). Continued backlash against this system has led to the collapse of the power-sharing agreement with the PUK (which essentially ended with the head of



the PUK retiring from his position as president of Iraq) and the rise of a third significant party, Gorran (Goudsouzian). In 2015, significant issues have arisen within the KRG regarding the rule of the KDP at the most powerful leadership positions, president and vice-president. The presidency has been held by Masoud Barzani since 2005, the leader of the KDP since 1979. Despite his term technically expiring in mid-2015, Barzani has refused to step down and the KDP refuses to recognize the legality of the expiration of the ending of the term (Goudsouzian). This ongoing issue has galvanized the opposition to the KDP in the KRG to ally themselves, despite Gorran's issues with the PUK (Hassan).

The Barzani clan is one of the most important, if not the most important, families in the history of Kurdish nationalism. Involved in the movement in some capacity since it began with the fall of the Ottoman Empire, the family's successive patriarchs have maneuvered politically and militarily obstacles that destroy many others. The stranglehold of the Barzani clan on the KDP helped lead to the split with the PUK, with many dissatisfied (former) party members with continued Barzani leadership (Jabary and Hira). Until relatively recently, not many within KDP ranks questioned the ascendancy of the Barzani clan within the party since the split with the PUK, but recent events and perceived incompetence with certain Barzani family members have led to calls for the end of the nepotism. Not only is the party presidency and KRG's presidency held by a Barzani, but the prime minister position is also held by a family member (Hassan).

#### The Patriotic Union of Kurdistan Party

The Patriotic Union of Kurdistan party is traditionally Iraqi Kurdistan's co-ruler, founded in 1975 following the ending of the KDP led revolt against the Iraqi central government. According to the BBC, the "party's decision-making body is an elected Leadership Council of 32 members. The Leadership Council elects the secretary-general and an 11-member Political Bureau, which

is in charge of the day-to-day management of the organization.” (BBC). It was founded and supported by the intellectual class and urban residents in the Kurdish region, splitting away from the tribal/rural supporters of the KDP. While the KDP had originally contained leftist elements (mostly since it acted as the umbrella organization for all Kurdish nationalist elements in Iraq up until the split), these all migrated to the newly formed PUK, solidifying its ideology as being of being of the more progressive sort in contrast to the KDP’s. The PUK continued the revolt of the Kurds against Ba’athist Iraq, managing many successful guerilla raids on Iraqi military forces until another ceasefire was called (BBC). While the KDP dominates the northern portion of Iraqi Kurdistan, the PUK traditionally controls the institutions and geography of southern Iraqi Kurdistan. This is primarily because of the more urban nature of this region, with the PUK having its headquarters in the highly urbanized city of Silemani. Despite the no-fly zone enforcement of the region following the end of the first Persian Gulf War, peace would not find the region with the differences between the PUK and KDP leading to a civil war. Eventually, through US mediation, a power-sharing agreement would be formed that would allow for each to entrench themselves into what would become the Kurdish Regional Government (Romano and Gurses). In the contemporary era of Kurdish nationalism, the two parties have been further split by the different regional powers that they have allied themselves with. While KDP areas of the KRG have significant investment by Turkish companies, PUK areas are mostly invested in by Iranian companies (Jabary and Hira).

While the PUK has several major differences with the KDP, in many ways it is merely a reflection of the more dominate party. Like the KDP, the PUK is traditionally dominated by a single family, the Talabani clan. The founder of the party, Jalal Talabani, is still party president, and several relatives of his hold high ranking positions within party leadership (BBC). The PUK

operates its own Peshmerga forces separate of the KRG, while also maintain an almost absolute control on the institutions of the southern portion of the KRG, be it the media or city administrators. Similar to the KDP, the PUK has suffered some backlash from the public over perceived corruption and nepotism, essentially owning its own shadow state within the KRG. Unlike the KDP, the PUK has not as effectively weathered this storm of criticism, actually losing its city of its headquarters, Silemani, to the relatively recently formed anti-corruption party Gorran. It is a point to consider the PUK's decline in support in the KRG legislature, mostly being lost to members of the Change List. I would propose there to be two reasons for this occurrence, especially in contrast to the KDP's ability to weather the storm of KRG citizen's dissatisfaction with the status quo. The PUK traditionally draws on its support for the more educated, urban citizens in the KRG (Chomani). It is most likely a significant factor in losing electoral support in recent elections since this demographic is more likely to be politically inclined to seek an end to the way affairs are managed in the KRG. In a twist of fate, the PUK's traditional supporters are the ones most likely to leave them for a perceived more progressive party. In this case, this would be the explicitly anti-establishment party found in Gorran. Another likely factor in the decline of PUK support in recent elections would be the deal struck with the KDP following elections in 2005. Choosing to allow the KDP control over most of the significant institutions of the KRG for KDP support of a PUK president of Iraq effectively made the party the junior partner in the coalition. This left the PUK with much less leverage and entrenched support that the KDP could draw upon to maintain their electoral stranglehold on the KRG.

Ironically, especially with fall of the PUK to holding the third most seats in the KRG government, its weakened position has made it make an unlikely ally. The very party that

contributed most to its weakened position, Gorran, is now the PUK's biggest ally in legislature. Effectively forming the bulk of the bloc against the KDP, the PUK has combined its voice with Gorran's in its opposition to total KDP domination.

#### The Rise of a Third Party

One of the most interesting developments within Iraqi Kurdish politics is the emergence of a third political party that actually has challenged the traditional ruling parties. While there have always been opposition parties of some minor significance within the KRG National Assembly, none of ever managed to effectively sway the political system. A former peshmerga and PUK party member decided that he had grown tired of the corruption and nepotism that the KDP-PUK ruling coalition had established within the KRG. Nawshirwan Mustafa helped create an internal schism within the PUK as he created the Movement for Change, what is commonly referred to as Gorran (Goudsouzian). While the founder of the party, he is not the most influential person in it. This is primarily because of Gorran's emphasis on devolution of power and encouragement of civil schism and involvement within the political sphere. The party already has its own TV channel, allowing for it influence public opinion much more effectively (Al Jazeera America). It was one of the main organizers of the public protests that occurred in the KRG during 2011 at the height of the Arab Spring in the Middle East, effectively growing its party base through savvy placement and the releasing of its seven-point plan for reform of the KRG political system. Elections in 2013 lead the party to 24 seats within the Kurdish National Assembly, overtaking the PUK as the second largest party in the electorate and threatening a significant challenge to the KDP ruling majority (Al Jazeera America). The Gorran party platform calls for "the de-politicization and de-party-zation" of government institutions within the KRG, along with the culling of corruption and for better distribution of the KRG budget throughout the region

(Romano and Gurses). Gorran's rise has coincided with public outcry against the KRG's general corruption and laundering of state funds.

With the official ending of Barzani's term as president happening in mid-2015 not leading to him stepping down, the opposition parties within the Kurdish National Assembly have slowly pushing for him to step down. One of the loudest voices for these calls has been from Gorran party members, and as the leading opposition party they have drawn on the full ire of the KDP party leadership (EKurd). Citing violent protests against the KDP throughout the KRG, the KDP has called for Gorran to leave government parliament cabinets and to not report any longer as a result of their supposed support of such actions (Al Arabiya). This action is a dramatic escalation of the standoff between the KDP and the rest of the KRG's political parties. In a twist of fate, the very party that Gorran has gutted has been its strongest supporter in keeping Gorran in government. The PUK explicitly came out against the KDP's call for the dissolving of the government to exclude Gorran, which provides Gorran safety from even more bold moves by the KDP majority government in trying to defy the political processes of the KRG (Al Arabiya).

#### Kirkuk, the PKK, and the Yezidi

One of the most important cities within the Kurdish nationalist movement and nationalist identity is the Iraqi city of Kirkuk. Seen by many Kurds as a sort of cultural hearth, it has been one of the most contentious issues facing not only the Kurds of Iraq, but the Kurdish nation in general. Historically, different Kurdish nationalist movements have attempted to claim (and some have even briefly administered) Kirkuk, but almost inevitably the central government of takes back control over the city. While historically the city of Kirkuk was primarily inhabited by Kurds, years of ethnic displacement and movement within Iraq has changed the city's demographics significantly (Bulloch and Morris). The city's population is split into three ethnic groups that do

not necessarily get along: the Kurds, the Turkmen, and the Arabs. Much to the chagrin of the other two groups, many of the modern Arab inhabitants of Kirkuk were moved there to “Arabize” the city under Hussein’s Ba’athist leadership of Iraq (Romano and Gurses).

While the threat of ISIS was a large security threat to the KRG at the onset of its offensive toward the KRG held lines in Iraq, the frontlines between the two have mostly stabilized. Most interestingly, and for any modern Kurdish nationalist most excitingly, Kirkuk has fallen completely under the control of KRG forces following the retreat and losses of the Iraqi Security Forces. Kirkuk is relatively close to the frontline, with PUK peshmerga and PKK guerrilla fighters holding the front as Kirkuk falls within the PUK peshmerga sphere of influence in the KRG (Dean). While officially Kirkuk is not recognized as a part of the KRG according to the Iraqi constitution, the KRG has quickly laid the foundation for the city’s incorporation into the autonomous state (Dean). With calls for a referendum to decide the fate of who controls Kirkuk being delayed because of the war against ISIS and the rich oil fields that lay in the Kirkuk region, this issue will likely be one of the most contentious issues facing the nationalist movement in Iraqi Kurdistan and the federal authority in Baghdad. The situation is currently frozen, but with the instability of the Iraqi state the future status of the city is all but clear.

The KRG has always had an interesting relationship with the Kurdish Worker’s Party (the PKK), a leftist Kurdish guerrilla organization that has fought against the Turkish government in a low-intensity conflict for over thirty years. The PKK has maintained many bases in the Qandil Mountains of Northern Iraq, allowing it to seek refuge from Turkish military incursions in Southeastern Turkey and enjoy little threat of authority from the KRG (Bulloch and Morris). In the past, the Kurdish Democratic Party, under the leadership of Barzani, has cooperated with Turkey to some extent in allowing it to operate against the PKK, but the KDP has been relatively

tentative in escalating Turkish involvement in KRG borders for fear of alienating voters (Romano and Gurses). Turkey recently bombed PKK encampments in Qandil after declaring its intentions to begin bombing ISIS, surprising many international observers and drawing some light condemnation from Barzani over the violation of Iraqi airspace.

With ISIS sweeping into the region at a rapid pace, the PKK has found itself much more involved in the day-to-day operations of the KRG than it ever has been before. PKK guerrilla fighters still maintain bases in Qandil, but many of the forces fighters have been sent down to fight the Islamic State's forces. The PKK is heavily involved in fighting in the Shingal area and Kirkuk (Dean). Within Kirkuk, it has established itself as not only an influential militia force, but also an influential political force. Its operations in this region are relatively cooperative, as the PUK peshmerga tend to support the PKK in opposition to the KDP's stance (Dean). The most important action of the PKK in the war against the Islamic State came in the face of the genocide that was in process against the Yezidi inhabitants of Shingal. KDP peshmerga retreated from the city and surrounding region to regroup and reinforce more defensible areas, leaving behind the native population to be massacred (Rossomando). Thousands of Yezidi's were murdered or sold into slavery under brutal ISIS attacks, with thousands more fleeing atop to Mt. Sinjar. Trapped without food or water, the situation was desperate for those on the mountain. Fortunately for the Yezidi, PKK and YPG guerrilla troops arrived to allow for the escape from the mountain with US military support, saving thousands of lives. This marked the beginning of the extensive involvement of the PKK (and the Syrian YPG forces) in the battle for Sinjar against the Islamic State (Rossomando). As a result of the retreat of KDP peshmerga from Shingal, many Yezidi were weary of the forces and opted to be trained and equipped by PKK forces. This led to the

creation of the Şengal Resistance Units (YBS), a militia armed and trained by the PKK to fight back against the Islamic State (Rossomando).

The ongoing involvement of the PKK in Iraqi Kurdistan affairs has not sat well with members of the KDP in the KRG's government. While it is likely that Masoud Barzani would prefer for the outright removal of the PKK, much of the PKK's actions in Iraqi Kurdistan have proven very popular amongst the populace. In light of growing resistance to KDP control over the government, Barzani is no position to create a chance for further backlash against his government.

#### Summary

Iraqi Kurdistan is walking the thin line between outright victory for the Kurdish nationalist movement, which for many means the establishment of a Kurdish state, or collapse into infighting. The KRG controls a significant amount more territory than it was originally allotted under the federal constitution of Iraq as a result of the sweeping of the Islamic State throughout Sunni-Arab Iraq. It operates almost completely independently at this point, with the federal government having virtually no control or ability to exert control over the KRG's internal or external affairs. While the KRG is officially a part of Iraq, it tends to operate without much consideration of the fact. Despite early setbacks, KRG peshmerga forces have beat back the Islamic State to showers of praise (shown through the continuing delivery of military supplies) from Western countries. If one were to take a passing glance at Iraqi Kurdistan, it would likely be said that it is poised to be the greatest success story in the history of the Kurdish nationalist movement, with independence almost inevitable. That is, until one takes a look into the rotting internal institutions of the KRG. Despite the democratic aspirations of the people, state institutions have acted not in their interests, but in the interests of whatever party that controls



them. Despite massive economic growth for almost a decade, lack of wealth distribution has only grown inequality in this time. For KDP and PUK party members, the KRG has essentially existed as a piggy bank for prominent party members to build fancy houses and live luxuriously. The most significant issue facing the KRG in the contemporary period has to be the ongoing presidential crisis, as Barzani's refusal to step down as the KRG's president is not only technically illegal, but also a slap in the face of the civic spirit found in Iraqi Kurdistan. Opposition to KDP rule is reflected in the composition of the opposition to it in legislature, with the opposition growing bolder in its refusal to cooperate with KDP leadership. The rise of Gorran in place of the PUK into the second most popular party has only changed the state of governance in the KRG a little, with the KDP-state apparatus still fully functioning. With ISIS at the gates, still occupying Shingal and holding lines near Kirkuk, war has not left the KRG yet. The KRG may very well be kept together mostly from the pressure of war, with the fight against ISIS delaying several important elections and referendums. Iraqi Kurdistan is a land of much potential; having a well-educated populace, developing infrastructure, and politicized society means it has the elements to be a success story. In reflection, it unfortunately also has many elements that could to it being another of a long list of failure in the Kurdish nationalist movement. With the integrity of Iraq in question even when discounting the rise of ISIS from within its borders, the future of the KRG is clear to no observer.

### The Kurds of Turkey

The Kurdish people of Turkey have one of the most recognizable and significant histories within the context of the various national movements Kurdish peoples have pursued. With over 22.5 million Kurds residing within Turkey, it is also the country with the largest Kurdish population out of the three countries being analyzed (Bilgin and Sarıhan). Istanbul, the largest city in

Turkey, is home to 3 million Kurds, the largest concentration of Kurds in any city in the world. Kurdish national identity arguably began to be established for the first time within the settling remains of the Ottoman Empire following World War 1 in what would become Turkey. The strongly nationalist pretenses that Ataturk and his party, the Republican People's Party (CHP), established the modern Turkish state on set the stage for the ongoing conflicts between the state and the native Kurdish population. Kurdish history within Turkey is notable for just how long it took for the Turkish state to even recognize the Kurds as a distinct people. This refusal of recognition led to a host of forced migrations, massacres, and cultural restrictions. The struggle for political, cultural, and economic representation for the Kurds within Turkey is one of remarkable resilience in the face of strength and tenacity of repression.

### Background and History

#### Kurds and the Early Republic

A brief but tense war of independence followed the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire in the face of the borders attempted to be made throughout the former empire by the victorious Allies. Ataturk and his nationalist forces rallied enough support to take control over Istanbul and the entirety of Anatolia. With this victory, his forces formed a government and declared the Republic of Turkey towards the end of 1923. Breaking with the past Ottoman Empire, Turkey was established under a European model Republic, including a secular constitution. At this point in time in history, Kurdish identity was not very well established. The Kurds were mostly rural living, tribal system dominated peoples at this time (Bilgin and Sarihan). They were much more likely to identify as Muslims or with their tribe at this point in time. A key point in the process of establishing a strong Kurdish identity came with the 1925 Sheikh Said Rebellion. The revolt started in primarily Kurdish inhabited areas in an attempt to re-establish the Islamic Caliphate (Gunter). Sheikh Said and other former Ottoman officers from Kurdish backgrounds rallied

members of their tribes to revolt against the newly established secular government. Sheikh Said's followers specifically looked to re-establish the Islamic Caliphate (Bilgin and Sarihan). This would be indicative of the rebellion being mostly religiously motivated, but elements of Kurdish nationalism were appealed to in recruitment efforts for the rebellion. This is one of the first times a rebellion in post-Ottoman Turkey used Kurdish nationalist elements. While most historical evidence makes it clear that this was a religiously motivated rebellion first, concerns were also made by the rebels over the restrictions of the use of the Kurdish language and cultural norms by the Turkish state.

The Sheikh Said rebellion triggered concerns by the military and government of Turkey over further instability in the Kurdish inhabited region of the Southeast. In response to this, former ethnically Kurdish Ottoman military officers formed the nationalist organization Xoybûn. Xoybûn went about organizing Kurdish intellectuals, tribal elders, and soldiers in working for more recognition of the Kurdish people (Gunter). The organization worked quickly, establishing the Republic of Ararat in the city of Kurdava in 1927 (Bilgin and Sarihan). Kurdava was located by Mt. Ararat, an important symbol within Armenian culture in a region that had been depopulated of Armenians during WW1. Now principally Kurdish, the Republic of Ararat attempted to gain international recognition by petitioning the League of Nations. While the mountainous terrain kept Turkish forces at bay for some time, by 1930 Kurdava would be stormed by the Turkish military and the Republic of Ararat would fall. The military operation to crush the Ararat rebellion would entail what is referred to as the Zilan massacre.

#### Turkification of Minorities

Concerns over the lack of homogeneity of the Republic rippled throughout the Turkish government. Not only were there struggles in the East with Kurdish populations, but Greek and

Jewish minority populations in the coastal west were also a source of destabilization of the Turkish state. To address these concerns, the Turkish government would pass the 1934 Turkish Resettlement Law. The intent of this law was explicitly to increase the homogeneity of Turkey by setting what the government referred to as “standards of immigration” (White). Resettlement was dependent on the “Turkishness” of a group, and as a result within a month the non-Muslim Greek and Jewish populations of Thrace were subject to pogroms (Tekeli). While the attacks were not organized by the Turkish government, the Resettlement Law was likely the catalyst for the eruption of hostilities.

One of the first attempts at actually applying the Resettlement Law occurred in the province of Dersim. Dersim is primarily inhabited by Kurdish Alevi’s, a sect of Islam that further marginalized the population in the region due to its conflicting beliefs with mainstream Sunni Islam. The province would first be renamed “Tunceli”, a Turkish language based name in 1935. Shortly thereafter, the Turkish military would establish itself within several villages and towns within the province to oversee the area. The local population originally submitted protest to these actions, which were rebuked. Local leaders organized many of the local men into an outright revolt against the Turkish military imposition in the region in early 1937 (McDowall). The response of the Turkish military was swift, with operations against the rebellion beginning within months of the revolt.

The crushing of the Dersim Rebellion spelled the end of any significant revolts by Kurds in Turkey from a number of years. A combination of overwhelming military force and relatively poorly developed ethnic identity brought the Kurdish national movement in Turkey to a standstill. While attempts to resettle populations were scaled back, Turkey would continue with its policy of assimilation. The focus of assimilation was changed to forcing minorities throughout

the country to speak Turkish in public and pressuring the concealment of cultural customs. Turkey would take the cultural assimilation a step further, changing the population census to refer to Kurds as “Mountain Turks” (McDowall). Kurds were no longer even considered a distinct group from Turks within the public sphere, further marginalizing the Kurdish dominated region of Southeastern Turkey. A relative amount of “stability” would follow in these areas, with the Kurdish population mostly too unorganized and tribal to organize any effective resistance to Turkish assimilation policies.

#### Winding Path of Coups and Rebellions

Turkish civil society was stagnating and fracturing. The economy was in decline and the country seemed to have no direction. Sensing the need to step in, the Turkish military launched a coup against the democratically elected government and quickly formed a ruling junta. With the intention of only holding power for eighteen months, the Turkish military went about setting up reforms of the government in an attempt to curtail the instability of the Republic. The most notable action that the junta would take in regards to the native Kurdish population was the creation of the State Planning Organization. This organization looked specifically to address problems within the eastern parts of Turkey. The State Planning Organization returned to the old population resettlement initiatives that the early Republic pursued with the Kurds, proposing in a report ethnic mixing in the eastern portion of Turkey through migration to quell Kurdish separatism (McDowall).

Abdullah Ocalan, at one time a worker at a Title Deeds Office Diyarbakir, was a university student under significant scrutiny from the Turkish state for his involvement in various radical left-wing organizations. Ocalan’s activities would eventually culminate with his establishment of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) in 1978. The PKK was founded as a Marxist-Leninist

organization that looked to achieve national liberation for the Kurdish people in Turkey (Özcan). Turkey was in the midst of chaos, with violent attacks being carried out by both left wing and right wing organizations throughout the country. Strikes were extremely common, and the Turkish economy was grinding to a halt (Gurses and Romano). Seeing opportunity in the chaos, Ocalan's formation of the PKK was immediately followed by members having small scale confrontations with police and other Turkish state apparatus in urban centers. Most of these confrontations between the PKK and the Turkish state were in the east. Soon after its foundation, the PKK would have to move its base of operations to Syria as a result of the 1980 Turkish military coup (Gurses and Romano). A clamp down on leftist organizations throughout the country followed, necessitating the move. Hostility between the Baathist government of Syria and Turkey led to the willingness of Syria to facilitate the PKK's presence. The newly formed Turkish government became significantly more hostile to not only leftists in the country, but also to the Kurdish people in general. In 1983 the Language Ban Act was passed by the Turkish government (Natali). This made it only legal to speak Turkish in public in all of the country, targeting specifically the Kurdish inhabitants of Turkey (McDowall). The continuing antagonizing of the Kurdish population in Turkey allowed for the PKK to swell in support, culminating in the start of a large scale insurgency in the rural eastern parts of Turkey. With PKK leadership mostly operating out of Syria, the remoteness of eastern Turkey, and effective guerrilla tactics of the PKK, the Turkish military struggled to combat the organization (Özcan). Leaving behind the earlier urban confrontations that the PKK would use, it became extremely difficult to even locate the movements of the organization through the countryside.

#### Escalation

Turkish authorities worked to figure out a counter to the burgeoning PKK rebellion. Military officials would devise a tactic within the "divide and conquer" vein of strategies. In the mid-

1980's it would introduce the Village Guard system to be implemented in Kurdish populated regions. It was set up to allow for the Turkish military to more easily flush out PKK militants, tasking the village guards with preventing locals in the village from joining the PKK or harboring them. Village guards were to be Kurdish villagers who were picked or volunteered for the job. Set up in predominately Kurdish inhabited regions in the southeast, the village guards became known for extra-judicial executions, murders, rape, and general intimidation of the villages they were supposed to protect. Given a pay check and a meager amount of training by the Turkish military, village guards acted with minimal supervision in their actions against their very own neighbors. In the ensuing years following the implementation of the system, Turkey's campaign against the PKK resulted in the village guards working in tandem with the military to forcibly displace between 380,000 and 1.5 million Kurds from their homes in the southeast (HRW). While it would be erroneous to suggest that much of the crimes perpetrated by the village guards can be directly attributed to Turkey, much of the abuses that occurred implicitly happened with state indifference. According to Human Rights Watch, these forcible expulsions were done through the torching of homes, crops, and livestock to terrify and undermine the economic base of Kurdish citizens, driving them westward in the slums of cities. Humans Rights Watch recorded that "by 1994, more than 3,000 villages had been virtually wiped from the map and more than a quarter of a million peasants had been made homeless"(HRW). With the eventual de-escalation of the Government-PKK conflict, the village guard system has remained, allowing for further acts of terror against the local population to occur. When Kurdish civilians would attempt to return to their homes and property in the mountainous southeast, they were often met with intimidation by village guards and found that their properties to be completely destroyed or occupied by their former neighbors (HRW). That is to not say that violence has not

occurred against Kurds who worked as village guards, with the PKK conducting notable acts of retribution and attacks on village guards and their relatives. It was not uncommon for village guards to be kidnapped and never to be heard from again (HRW).

In the midst of the chaos caused from the developments of the PKK insurgency in the southeast, Turkey would go ahead and declare a state of emergency in Kurdish regions through Cabinet Decree 285. This law would go ahead and create a “super-region” encompassing the provinces of Bingöl, Diyarbakır, Elazığ, Hakkari, Mardin, Siirt, Tunceli, Van, and eventually Adiyaman, Bitlis, and Mus. These provinces were specifically placed under emergency law, being provided with a single regional governor appointed by the Turkish government (McDowall). The creation of the OHAL super-region put most of Kurdish inhabited Turkey under military rule, hamstringing the development of civic institutions in already one of the most impoverished regions of Turkey. OHAL over the region would slowly start to be rolled back starting in 1994.

#### Glimmers of Peace

Nearly one decade after fighting began in earnest, the PKK-Turkey conflict was mostly at a stalemate. While it was highly unlikely that the PKK were near any establishment of a Kurdish state, Turkish officials increasingly saw it unlikely that the insurgency could be stopped through military means. Turkish President Turgut Özal was notable for his emphasis on reforms and diplomacy in a variety of issues facing Turkey. He was a strong supporter of the Southeastern Anatolia Project (GAP) which was a Turkish government initiative to better the living standards of inhabitants of the impoverished southeastern region of Turkey (McDowall). President Özal, despite the unwillingness of many of his contemporaries and indifference of much of the PKK, initiated talks with the PKK. His work with the group made significant headway in resolving the conflict. Efforts culminated with the calling of the 1993 PKK Ceasefire to allow for negotiations



to go on uninterrupted. Özal looked to introduce a significant reform package aimed at alleviating the position of the Kurdish people in Turkey. Unfortunately, not too long before the reform package was brought forward, Özal would fall ill and ultimately pass away. Accusations of foul play abounded, with the president being in relatively good health prior and the circumstance of his death being questioned. In the midst of this, the reform package would be tabled in lieu of the Turkish government enacting the “Castle Plan” (Yildiz and Chomsky). With the tabling of the reform package, the PKK ended the ceasefire with progress towards peace no longer in sight.

### Fighting Returns

The renewed fighting following the ending of the ceasefire was characterized by heavy rural fighting by the PKK. There seemed to be a shift in the scope of the fighting, with an uptick of attacks by the PKK in urban areas in the southeast. It is likely that the escalation of fighting by the PKK was a result of the implementation of the Castle Plan, which entailed a broadening of the scope of operations against the PKK and increased support for groups like the Grey Wolves and Hizbollah. Businesses accused of supporting the PKK were specifically targeted for extortion, kidnappings, and killings. The fighting was notably intense in the countryside, and for much of the decade it seemed unlikely that there would be any abatement. Outside of the internal conflict of the Turkey, though, the PKK was being undermined in its operations. Turkey had been working for recognition by countries with significant international clout to not only declare the group as terrorists, but to assist in their fight against them. Most importantly, Turkey was placing intense pressure on Syria to end their facilitation of PKK operations within their borders. This pressure culminated in the threatening of incursions into Syria by the Turkish military to attack the PKK and initiating a regional war. Syria finally relented in 1998, expelling the PKK from Syria and forcing Abdullah Ocalan into hiding abroad (Gunes). PKK operations were

thrown into disarray, and a ceasefire would finally be called in 1999 following the successful capture of Ocalan in Nairobi in 1999. Ocalan would be imprisoned in solitary confinement (eventually commuted to life in prison) and the PKK ceased all fighting.

Notably, this ceasefire came in response to the capture of the PKK's charismatic leader. Turkey had not initiated any long term peace process with the group, and while the PKK's forces withdrew from Syria and Turkey to Northern Iraq, questions lingered within the organization (Gunes). While the Turkish government would go about initiating some reforms on restriction of the Kurdish language and culture, many within the PKK's leadership felt the efforts were much too little. Leaders left with the organization faced the Kurdish regions of Turkey still mostly left in poor conditions, but felt little will to continue on the fighting. An attempt to reform the PKK was met with eventually an internal power struggle between the leadership and hardline factions. Sometime in 2003, deep in the Qandil Mountains in the Kurdish Regional Governments borders, the hardline faction within the PKK won out. Thousands of PKK soldiers would cross the Iraqi border back into Turkey, ending the ceasefire and beginning another eight years of fighting.

During this time, the fight led by the PKK was much more low-level and ineffective compared to previous efforts. A significant shift in ideology would be introduced to the organization, with a shift from Marxist-Leninism to what is referred to by the organization as "Democratic Confederalism". Still left-wing and anti-capitalist, Democratic Confederalism shift the PKK (and its KCK related organizations) to focus on establishment of autonomous, non-state governance.

#### Rise of the AKP and the Peace Process

In 2001, various conservative parties throughout Turkey would merge to create the Justice and Development Party (AKP). In the following parliamentary elections, the AKP would win a majority in the election. Under AKP leadership, Turkey made notable strides forward

economically, and generally gained in support throughout the country. In spite of accusations of being illegal due to the moderate Islamist nature of the party, it would continue to win elections and solidify its position within Turkish politics. The most notable development in regards to the status of Kurds in Turkey was the willingness of the AKP to better the civil position of Kurds in Turkey. Very quickly, the AKP would gain electoral popularity with large populations of Kurds despite not being a Kurdish party (Cavanaugh and Hughes). This is likely a result of the fact that much of the Kurdish population, especially in the less developed and economic regions of inhabitation, had conservative social values. Many Kurds were inclined toward to the Islamist nature of the AKP, alongside the party's work to improve the economic position of Kurds. The AKP filled a political niche that had been left vacant; the conservative Kurdish vote (Cavanaugh and Hughes). Despite the contrast between the groups (the PKK a radical left-wing, secular organization), the AKP would pursue a ceasefire and peace process with group. The AKP government declared negotiations with Ocalan in 2012 for a resolution to the conflict. Another ceasefire was called by the PKK. At this time, a pro-Kurdish rights political party would be formed. The Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) is a left-wing party in favor of Kurdish rights and considerations, another in a long line of political parties that have existed in this vein (Cavanaugh and Hughes). As the peace process moved forward, the Syrian Civil War led to the rise of the PKK's sibling organization in northern Syria. Despite the peace process, concerns in Turkey over the increasing power and control that the PYD exerted in Syria increasingly caused tension between the PKK and AKP led government in negotiations. Throughout 2014 and 2015, Turkey would shell PYD controlled areas near the Turkish border without any action on part from Syrian Kurdish forces. In the desperate Battle of Kobane, Turkey blockaded the border at Kobane, hurting negotiations further with the PKK. Despite years of work on peace, the peace

process would again be ended by a renewal of the insurgency within Turkey towards the closing months of 2015 (Saeed). Still operating mostly out of the Qandil Mountains, the PKK again returned to the countryside to fight the Turkish military. In a major development, the PKK would introduce the most significant urban fighting perhaps ever seen in the protracted conflict. PKK units have gone about blockading entire towns from Turkish military supporters, with the establishment of parallel governing bodies in these urban areas following the Democratic Confederalism models.

#### Status of Kurds in Turkey

The imprisonment of Ocalan led to an interesting development within the leadership of the PKK. Due to the dominance of Ocalan's image over the PKK and the movement they led, there were likely those who thought that the PKK would finally begin to falter in its conflict with the Turkish state. Instead, the nationalist movement in Turkey for Kurds evolved and again established the group as one that fought for all Kurds, instead of just Kurds within Turkey. While the PKK still exists, the leadership or brain-trust of it looked to create a larger umbrella organization following a shift in ideological inspiration. From this idea the Kurdistan Communities Union (KCK) was formed. This organization is technically illegal in Turkey, but it has managed to not only survive but include groups from across the whole of Kurdish populated lands and political parties to armed militias. While the KCK is not a specifically North Kurdistan organization, due to its creation being primarily a result of Northern Kurdish organizations it is to be expanded upon in this chapter.

#### The Kurdistan Communities Union

##### Ideology of the KCK

The exiling of Ocalan did not stop the operations of what would eventually evolve into the KCK. Under the premises of Democratic Confederalism, an ideology that developed from the study

Murray Bookchin's Anarchist works. It is an important development because of the rejection of the concept of a nation state and statehood in general. This has adjusted the dominant national movement in Turkey and Syria further away from pursuing a Kurdish specific state, drawing them further into conflict with KDP forces in the Kurdish Regional Government (HRW).

Democratic Confederalism is not focused on the development of Kurdish cultural protection, and instead is conceptualized to be applicable to a broader audience of cultures. Feminist thought is an important aspect of the ideology, which later is seen to manifest itself in the strong participation of women in its operation. Compared to the Marxist-Leninist liberation ideology of the PKK in the past, Democratic Confederalism is a notable departure. Murray Bookchin's ideology is also a notable departure from most traditional anarchist works, since while it calls for the decentralization of society and removal of hegemony, there is still acknowledgement for the need of leadership. What is interesting about Democratic Confederalism is that it echoes the old aim of the PKK at the very beginning of the insurgency. The PKK in Turkey originally looked to establish a Kurdish state wherever Kurds predominately lived, not just focusing on the southeastern portion of Turkey. Their aims shifted as the insurgency continued, but with the Ocalan's imprisonment and change in ideology, the creation of the KCK would shift the focus again to cross border governance again (Saeed). One of the driving points of the ideology is the organizing of communities at the most basic of levels. Democratically elected councils have been implemented throughout KCK controlled territory, generally following basic guidelines of gender equality and ethnic inclusion. This decentralized way of organizing applies even to institutional structures.

Implementation of the ideology Democratic Confederalism has been suggested from two sources within the framework of the KCK. The first comes from Ocalan directly, and is referred to as

“the Road Map”. Ocalan suggests ten main principles to solve the issues Kurds and other minority groups in the MENA face. This includes; the Democratic Nation Principle, the Common Homeland Principle, the Democratic Republic Principle, the Democratic Constitution Principle, the Democratic Solution Principle, Inseparability of the Individual and Collective Rights Principle, the Ideological Independence and Freedom Principle, and the Principle of Historicity and Present, Morality and Conscience Principle, and the Self-Defense Principle of Democracies (Saeed). The overarching theme of the aforementioned principles is to democratize all aspects of the individual and society, with explicit reference to the dissolution of borders in the Common Homeland Principle. A second, more legalistic and Turkey focused plan for implementation came from the major KCK member parties in Turkey. This plan is referred to as the “Democratic Autonomy” project (Saeed). The Democratic Autonomy project is divided into eight dimensions, with the focus centering on changing the contemporary Turkish state in a complete reformation. This of course includes the creation of an autonomous region for the Kurds, but also suggestions on transforming Turkish state’s political system in general.

### Structure of the KCK

Despite the difficulties of tracking down the KCK’s actual structure due to it being illegal in Turkey, over time an idea of how the KCK structure is organized has been gleaned. At the top of the KCK hierarchy is the Leadership Council. The leadership council is the composed of Ocalan and six other members, split equally along between men and women. While not entirely similar, the leadership council seems to operate mostly as an advisory position for well qualified and involved members of the KCK movement to the legislative body of the KCK. The legislative body of the KCK is referred to as Kurdish People Congress or Kongra Kel. It is composed of three hundred members that are elected bi-yearly from across territory with a KCK presence and

in turn is relatively diverse. Kongra Kel appears to have the most authority within the KCK, with it developing policy and law for the organization to adhere to or pursue. Going along with the reoccurring theme of gender equality in KCK operations, the co-chairs of the Kongra Kel are a man and a woman. Reason more for the Kongra Kel to be considered the most powerful portion of the KCK organization is the fact that both the executive and judicial branches are federated through it. The executive portion of the Kongra Kel is made up of forty-one members of it that are selected from the general body and led by a four person council. Similarly under the authority of Kongra Kel is the judiciary branch, with Kongra Kel members elected to run its three courts: the Courts of People Liberation, Superior Military Courts, and the Administrative Courts (Saeed).

Kongra Kel's members are all members of at least one of the "centers" that it operates. These centers are then subdivided into committees. For example, the Ideology Center is responsible for education and public relations for the KCK. It contains the media committee, science committee, culture and art committee, and education committee. Not every center has the same amount of committees, ranging from two to four committees for each center. Other centers include the Cultural Center, Free Society Center, Political Center, Ecology Center, and Economy Center (Saeed). Much of the activities of these centers are directed depending on the "Areas of Struggle". The areas of struggle are the different regions with significant presence of KCK organizations or areas of strategic importance. There are six regions of struggle, including the former USSR, Europe and beyond, and what is implied to be the North, South, East, and West of Kurdish inhabited lands (Saeed).

## Political Parties of the KCK in Turkey

One of the interesting aspects of the KCK is that it is itself an illegal organization, but its members are both illegal and legal in whatever aspect they operate (Saeed). Most importantly, this includes the two KCK representative political parties in Turkey, the People's Democratic Party (HDP) and the local municipal operating Democratic Regions Party (DBP). These parties are both legal entities in the Turkish state system, although their affiliation with the KCK has drawn ire from that state numerous times.

### The People's Democratic Congress (HDP)

#### Background

The HDP was formed out of the People's Democratic Congress (HDP), which was a leftist coalition of parties and organizations that worked together in the 2011 Turkish elections. It is a relatively young political organization, only becoming an official party in 2013, but its roots mean that much of its leadership is politically and civically experienced (Cavanaugh and Hughes). The HDP's formation was also done in part to replace the BDP, which struggled with being seen as mostly just a Kurdish nationalist party (Saeed). Instead, the BDP would be reformed into the DBP to focus on local municipal elections (HRW).

#### Politics

In accordance with not only the KCK's ideology but also the ideology of much of the organizations it replaced from the HDK, the HDP is anti-capitalist and its official platform includes transitioning Turkey from a capitalist mode of production (People's Democratic Party). While much of its political support comes from the primarily Kurdish southeast of Turkey, the HDP's structure and orientation has managed to appeal to left leaning Turks from throughout the country (Cavanaugh and Hughes). While resolving the Kurdish "question" a significant point of its platform, it is under the context of achieving peace for Turkey and not necessarily the primary



platform point of the party (People's Democratic Party). In part from the influence of its membership in the KCK, the HDP officially supports direct democracy, gender equality, strong ecological considerations, and opposition to the nation-state structure of Turkey (People's Democratic Party).

#### HDP and the PKK

While the peace process was ongoing between the PKK and the Turkish government, the HDP acted as the primary mediator and go between the two groups. It was a relatively new development, as a party that was pro-Kurdish autonomy had never had so much involvement in negotiations between the government and the PKK ever before. This development came about in two parts: the earnest attempt of the AKP controlled Turkish government to achieve PKK disarmament to solidify its political authority and the HDP's connections to the PKK through the KCK (White). As mentioned earlier in the chapter, the AKP has sizeable support from Kurdish voters, and to secure these votes for future elections and aims the party allowed for the HDP to be involved. Those operating the combat on the ground for the PKK knew that with HDP involvement there would be not attempts to misconstrue or deceive them and that they could discuss a process to achieving peace with fair representation (White). This arrangement would work for all three parties in the peace process until the escalation of the Syrian Civil War and the success of the Syrian KCK organizations in securing military victories while building a government (Cavanaugh and Hughes). When the peace process fell apart, the Turkish state would use the obvious connections between the HDP and PKK to attempt to delegitimize the HDP as a party that represents more than just Kurdish interests. While the HDP and PKK definitely have much in relation and communication, much of the resulting actions taken against the HDP have much less to do with these connections and more so to weaken the HDP electorally.

## Contemporary Issues

Its success in the most recent Turkish elections, despite the snap elections that reduced its share of the vote slightly, has also in part made the HDP a threat to the AKP hegemony in Turkey.

When the AKP realized that its willingness to negotiate with the PKK on the issue of peace was not enough to secure its position as a mostly unchallenged political entity, the power of the state began to be used to attack the HDP. Justifying the arbitrary arrests and blacklisting of prominent members of the HDP political apparatus through their supposed support of terrorists due to the HDP's connection to the PKK. After the coup attempt against the Erdogan government by the military, a large amount of pro-Kurdish activists, HDP members, and leftists were targeted and arrested despite their being no relation of these groups with those who attempted the coup. HDP offices across the country have been raided due to accusations of illegal communications with banned groups, although evidence of this has been shaky.

## Militias of the KCK

There is technically an official militia arm of the KCK, which is run under the Executive Council management. Referred to as the People Protection Center NPG, most of its authority is within the Turkish region of KCK operations. The main combat group operating under KCK leadership is the Forces of Protecting People (HPG). Formerly considered the combat arm of the PKK, the HPG is the KCK's militia that is the primary operator in the insurgency in Turkey. HPG units also operate to train and reinforce KCK related groups in Syria, Iraq, and Iran. The female branch of the HPG, YJA STAR, operates similarly. Also under the KCK's Kongra Kel authority is the NPG and YPS. The NPG is the special operations militia, used for higher level missions and is composed of more experienced and trained fighters. The YPS is meant as a self-defense force, composed of volunteers that are trained to protect their locales from attacks. Member organizations of the KCK also include militia groups that are not under the direct authority of the

Kongra Kel. This includes, but is not limited to, the YPG/YPJ in Syria and PJAK in Iran (Rossomando). These groups operate independently of KCK authority for the most part, but cooperate and ascribe to the ideology of the KCK.

#### Economics of the KCK

One of the most difficult aspects to analyze of the KCK is how it operates economically. Due to being illegal, how the KCK raises funding and from who is not well known. Seevan Saeed discusses that their supposedly exists a form of taxation of membership fee for the KCK, but he is not clear on the details of how this works (Saeed). It can probably be deduced that member organizations of the KCK contribute economically to its organization support, too. For groups like the HDP, how these funds get to the KCK is a mystery and is probably done under many layers of precaution due to the risks associated with transferring funds to an illegal organization in Turkey.

Economic policy is the responsibility of the Economy Center. The economy center is responsible for managing the funds and budgeting of the KCK, but it is also responsible for implementing economic policies and funding in KCK operations. This is done in part by training KCK affiliated organizations on the economic policies they advocate for, with region specific initiatives likely due to the KCK's organizing around "areas of struggle" (Saeed).

#### What is the PKK today?

Any discussion on Kurdish nationalism inevitably involves some reference to the one of the titular actors in the movement, the PKK. The substantial reorganization it underwent following the arrest of Ocalan has left the guerrilla group as something much different than its original iteration. Seevan Saeed declares the PKK to be less of an organization and more so a catch all for KCK operations and affiliations (Saeed). He views it as the public image of the ideology advocated for by the KCK, and I would agree with this analysis due to the growing importance

of the KCK. Being the main force behind the creation of the KCK meant that the institutions and capabilities of the PKK was transferred over to the KCK. Militia, legal, and political operations of the PKK all fell under the direct authority of the KCK, and it would be redundant for the PKK to operate as a member organization in the KCK considering this. Really, due to the high degree of visibility the PKK historically has, the acronym is kept around to act a vehicle for the KCK to further its aims. Even the original long form name of the PKK is no longer applicable, as the Kurdish Workers Party moniker is too specific with it implying it being exclusively a “Kurdish” party. Ocalan himself would likely reject to a name like that due to his current views. The PKK acronym, and the associated history, is too precious to just completely disregard. Conveniently, members of the KCK have opted to use it to sometimes to deflect from their own organization and capitalize on the ignorance of others to allow for less interruptions in their operations.

#### Non-KCK Kurdish Nationalism in Turkey

Since the emergence of the PKK in the late 1970’s as a group willing to combat the Turkish state, much of the Kurdish nationalist movement has been predicated around them. This is in part due to their success an organization, and also the PKK’s efforts to monopolize the Kurdish nationalist movement through targeting of other groups (Gürbüz). There has been no significant Kurdish specific movement that has emerged in Turkey that has captured the following of the population. Hizbullah, a primarily Kurdish Islamists group, killed much of its credibility from its start with it focusing on attacking the PKK and leftists. While the PKK did not necessarily receive support from the conservative sections of Kurdish society in Turkey, many of them also did not agree with the focus of the Hizbullah against them. The many connections that Hizbullah have to the Turkish state also hurt its legitimacy, and when the state moved on from Hizbullah the group has found itself on the fringe of relevancy.

While there really is no Kurdish-centric organization that is popular in Turkey, the rise of the AKP did for a time provide an alternative to the KCK and an outlet for conservative Kurds to engage civically (Gürbüz). This support of the AKP by this section of Kurdish society may be hurt by the recent actions of the Turkish state against Kurdish forces in Syria and Iraq, along with the failing of the peace process. This remains to be seen, though, until Turkey holds another election.

## Summary

The Kurdish struggle for recognition, rights, and political autonomy in Turkey has been one of the oldest and intense ethno-nationalist struggles in the world. While the history is long and in some ways tedious, like any sort of history it provides context and depth to the situations that we examine today. The modern state of Turkey and those that forged it managed to successfully put down much of the resistance of other minorities that found themselves within its borders.

Circassians, Greeks, and Armenians would be crippled by that state's actions, with much of the three communities disappearing. Due to the Islamic background of the vast majority of Kurds in Turkey, the Turkish state felt that they could merely erase the cultural identity of the people and "Turkify" them. Despite this policy lasting from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century well into the 1980's with bouts of extreme repression against Kurdish culture, the Kurds remained a distinct group. The fact that not only have the Kurds survived the waves of attacks they have faced in Turkey, but in many ways have responded, gives interesting insight into the ability of an oppressed people to fight marginalization.

Tracing the development of the Kurdish nationalist movement in Turkey topically, it appears to be almost nonsensical the direction it went. The original calls for establishing a Kurdish identity and independence were mostly made under the pretenses of Islam and fighting against the secularization of society that Turks were forcing upon them. Islam was a significant aspect of Kurdish identity, and I would go as far as to claim that for most of Kurdish history Islam was the foremost way for Kurds to identify themselves. Who and what makes someone a Kurd is something that was not well established until it became clear through Turkish state repression that there were differences between the Kurds and Turks. Even today, arguments exist amongst the Kurdish community about whether or not groups like the Yezidi are actually Kurds. The lack of a prevailing ethnic identity within Kurdish communities was a source of weakness for many

of the revolts that would sprout up in Turkey until we see efforts to educate and “revive” the people’s Kurdishness were widespread. While the original call to resistance was based around Islam, the focus would soon shift to the authority of tribal chiefs, intellectuals, and the wealthy within the Kurdish community. In some ways, I would view that these movements were in mostly self-serving since many of these Kurdish revolts in Turkey were led by Kurdish authorities that felt they were being slighted by the state. Some parallels can be drawn between these revolts and the American Revolution, with both being led by the landed classes that were alienated from the state. Now, the American Revolution also had the significant advantage of having the antagonist being an ocean away and significant material support from outside entities. These tribe-centric insurrections also meant that there would be difficulty involving other Kurds due to many of the communities being undereducated and disparate in southeastern Turkey. I believe that this is the main reason much of the early resistance to the Turkish state by the Kurds were localized and ultimately ineffective. What likely planted the seed for future resistance by the Kurds was the pushing of millions of Kurds to the major metropolitan areas of Turkey by the state. While speaking likely the same language and practicing much of the same culture, many of the Kurdish communities that would develop in these cities were composed of people that had little to no interaction with other Kurdish communities outside of their own in their homeland. With access to resources and education, these metropolitan Kurdish communities likely grew a strengthened, Kurdish centric identity in response to the pressures of discrimination and poverty. These experiences for the Kurdish community can probably best explain how an intensely secular, left wing movement could become the leading force in Turkey for a traditionally conservative people.

### Success on the Horizon

Ocalan himself is a great example of the effect of pushing the Kurds to the developed cities in the West. Spending much of his formative years in Ankara gave him an education, but this also meant that he grew to have a better understanding of his ethnic identity. His decision to go back to the Kurdish inhabited region of Turkey was the decisive factor in his success organizing resistance to the Turkish state. Ocalan and his compatriots took what they had learned in the west and made a significant effort to disseminate this knowledge in the traditional homeland of the Kurds in the remaining communities. It was also a move for credibility, as they showed willingness to not only take on the state but also Kurds who they viewed as holding back the people. By the time the PKK would move its leadership to Syria, they had cultivated a significant enough following in the southeast to be legitimized by much of the population. Their focus on breaking down traditional cultural institutions like the tribes eliminated the issues that older Kurdish revolts had faced and set up the potential for a spectrum of Kurdish society support. The PKK's willingness to put years of preparation into their movement until finally initially open combat with the Turkish militia gave it the ability to persist in large part to the popular support they regularly received. While the violence by both sides would usually lead to wariness from civilians, the Turkish state's stubborn refusal to even placate the Kurdish population helped create a pipeline of tactic support from not only local Kurds but also the from the Kurdish diaspora.

One of the main points of the PKK's initial campaign was that they were not a force that was Turkey specific. Despite their capabilities being mostly reserved for fighting within Turkey, the PKK still claimed that they were fighting for a united Kurdistan. Eventually, due to the pressures of the insurgency, they would shift to working for autonomy within Turkey. With the reformation of the PKK into the KCK, though, the claim to be representative for all Kurds



regardless of border emerged again. The difference was that the KCK could legitimately make this claim, with member organizations and operations working throughout not only the Middle East but also abroad. I will say that the PKK, in its original form and operation, unintentionally set up this position for what it is now today. In the insurgency against Turkey, the PKK had significant operations out of the Kurdish populated portion of Syria, Iraq, and sometimes Iran. Again, this was done out of necessity for the conflict in Turkey. What it did, though, was introduce the Kurds in Syria, Iraq, and Iran to the PKK and lay the foundation for the future cross border membership of the KCK. Recruits from these locales would be trained and educated by the PKK, and with this would eventually look to organize their communities similarly. When Ocalan officially shifted the ideology of the PKK to Democratic Confederalism and the KCK would come to fruition, the emphasis of destroying borders on the people's homeland legitimized the ideology throughout Kurdish populated lands. This was solidified with the civil wars in Syria and Iraq. PKK forces (really the HPG under the KCK), not only participated in battles against ISIS in Iraq and Syria but in some cases led them. It was no secret that the PKK was fighting on the frontlines in Kirkuk alongside PUK Peshmerga, and within the city itself the KCK maintains a presence. The most notable action that PKK forces took was their defense of Shingal and the Yezidis, which came as KDP Peshmerga withdrew. While the area has been freed of the presence of ISIS, the fighting and training of the local Yezidi population left its mark. To the chagrin of the KDP, the popular support in the Yezidi community is behind the KCK's ideology alongside the development of self-defense forces in the image of the YBS in Turkey (Rossomando).

War creates an unstable and chaotic environment. With Turkey still undergoing an insurgency while its neighbors in Syria and Iraq struggle with civil war, the transformed PKK finds itself as

one of the leading actors of the Kurdish struggle in the whole of the Middle East. One of the most pressing questions on the horizon for KCK forces is how they will proceed in Turkey, especially with the Turkish military presence in Syria now. As it often has done, the national movement in Turkey could take another unexpected turn at any point.

## Conclusion

Kurdish nationalism is rife with conflict; with the states they inhabit, with outside actors, between the movements, and even sometimes within movements. Conflict has been one of the most significant shaping forces for the Kurdish nationalist movements, and today's are no different in this. The Second Gulf War punctured the Middle East with long term repercussions, and the instability that has followed has led to Kurdish forces filling the cracks and crevices in what were once tightly controlled states. Collapsing central state authority in Syria gave the PYD and other KCK forces the opportunity to enact their ideology on governing in action. Iraq's instability has led to the expansion of the KRG's borders, but has also perhaps exposed the cracks in its own foundation. The rise of the KCK, with its renewed fight in Turkey and its effective control of Northern Syria, comes out of the ashes of the PKK's insurgency in eastern Turkey. It has also drawn the ire of the KDP in Iraq, with the two groups seeing very different visions for the futures of the Kurdish people and the regions that they inhabit.

## Syria

The situation in Syria is perhaps one of the most tenuous for the Kurdish forces. Technically in opposition to Assad's forces, Islamic State, and the Free Syrian Army, their aim for an autonomous northern Syria is caught up in local and geopolitics. The PYD, YPG, and YPJ are the primary actors for Kurdish forces in Syria, and all three are member organizations within the KCK. Turkey, which is aligned with FSA forces and has ruled the KCK and affiliated forces as illegal, takes issue with their control of much of northern Syria. Turkey also takes issue with US support of the KCK affiliated forces, condemning it under the auspices of the groups being no different than the PKK. There is no denying that what was once the PKK and what composes its successor organizations have been heavily affiliated with Syrian Kurdish forces. While they are both similar and share an ideology, the ideology itself lends itself to being a strike against claims

of them being the same organization. The decentralization model of Democratic Confederalism, the ideology professed by the KCK, means that each KCK member group more or less operates autonomously of each other. This means that not only do KCK groups in Syria and Turkey operate independently of each other, but even KCK groups within Syria do too. Again, it cannot be understated that there are a wide range of connection between the groups, but they are not one and the same. The United States had mostly found its fight most against ISIS to be most effective when cooperating with the YPG in Syria, which drew the ire of NATO ally Turkey. To get have a degree of separation between itself and the YPG, the US helped facilitate the formation of the Syrian Democratic Forces. The YPG and YPJ are the largest forces in the SDF coalition, but its incorporation of different militias from different ethnic backgrounds in Syria has helped justify continued US involvement. While in some areas occasionally cooperating or maintaining an uneasy truce, KCK forces and Assad regime have had little to no progress diplomatically. In fact, Assad's government has reportedly explicitly come out against autonomy for northern Syria, a deal breaker in any negotiations between the two sides. There is also the issue of the controlling parties of the Kurdish movement in Syria finding themselves in opposition to the ruling Kurdish Democratic Party in Iraq. A blockade has been enforced intermittently between KRG and KCK controlled territory and disputes continue between the two over actions by both parties on either side of the border.

Caught up amongst the fighting, the ideology of the KCK is being attempted to be implemented throughout territory that falls under the control of the SDF. Governing for any entity, regardless of ideology or status, during wartime is difficult. Setting up localized councils under the TEV-DEM is an ongoing effort that is likely to go through alterations and growing pains. This experiment in governance likely faces its biggest challenge not in local adoption and

implementation, but in the whims of the large geo-political actors involved in the Syrian Civil War. Despite the claims of KCK aligned forces to be explicitly allied to the US, Russia, the Assad's forces, it is much more accurate that KCK aligned forces simply ally with what is most expedient for their efforts. No love is lost between Assad's forces and the YPG; the Syrian government had long harshly oppressed its Kurdish population. Limited cooperation occurring between the two has only happened in areas of Syria where Turkish military forces are embedded with FSA militias. It was not even a year ago where Assad forces and the YPG were in open conflict in the city of Hasakah, which led to the expulsion of Assad's forces from the city. Simply put, it is war. No side in Syria has any deep allegiance to the other, and interactions between the different sides is almost always according to the benefit of their efforts in the overall military conflict. Considering the history of Syria in regards to the Kurds, the effectiveness of the KCK program is impressive. The local Kurdish population is, in spite of the war, enjoying the greatest amount of political and cultural freedom it has had since before the fall of the Ottoman Empire. It is now a question of if this can last, and considering the shifting sands of war, nothing is guaranteed.

### Iraq

The growth in borders, prestige, and outside funding for the Kurdish Regional Government may give the impression for a strong and well operated state. Reports on how the KRG peshmerga would push back Islamic State forces have been popular throughout the West. Undeniably, the militia forces of the KRG have been very successful in pushing back ISIS, especially in light of much of the Iraqi military having to withdraw from cities due to not being prepared for a fight. Despite these successes, the internal fissures of the KRG continue to show. The peshmerga fighting off ISIS so valiantly are still no united force. Instead, they are dependent on the direction of whatever political party that they function as an extension of. In modern conflict, state actors

tend to utilize a centralized military command that can potentially be modified with the use of outside militias. Due to the weak institutional control of the KRG sub-state, the militia is instead co-opted by the political parties that predominate its governance. This extends well outside of the realm of the militia, with the state structures and institutions of the KRG being run depending on geography and party control. Unlike the Kurds in Syria or Turkey, the biggest threat to the Kurdish national movement and project in Iraq comes from within. The ongoing conflict within Iraq has allowed for a convenient excuse to let Masmoud Barzani of the KDP continue as president of the KRG now almost two years over his legal term. His stay in power has been agreed upon by the three governing parties; KDP, PUK, and Gorran. While the KDP has benefitted from this, the PUK and Gorran are much more begrudging in the arrangement. With economic stagnation and increasingly transparent issues with corruption throughout the KRG, it seems that the civil war at the gates of the country is all that is staving off popular dissent.

Politically, the PUK and Gorran have been sitting sidelined on the larger scale issues that the KRG deals with. Foreign relations and general state outward appearances have fallen under the jurisdiction of the KDP. The KDP's platform, which calls for a referendum for independence for the KRG instead of continuing autonomy, has become a contentious point internally. The KDP's friendly relationship with Turkey has proven to be more and more contentious. An oil pipeline between Turkey and the KRG provides a significant amount of money to the KRG's budget, but it has also faced bombings and attacks from KCK aligned forces operating in the KRG. The positive relationship between Turkey and the KDP has led to implicit support by Turkey for their move for independence, in ironic contrast to the historic refusal by Turkey to provide autonomy to its own Kurds. KDP were generally tolerated by the KRG public because of the stability and economic growth they had been enjoying after the Second Persian Gulf War, despite sentiment

of support for the plight of their ethnic compatriots in Turkey and Syria. An event that has, in my analysis, set the stage for growing undermining of the KDP leadership, is the fall of Shingal to ISIS and the resulting attacks on the Yezidi community. KDP peshmerga had been present in the region, but had decided withdraw before ISIS arrived. Explanations for why the peshmerga pulled out vary depending on who makes a statement on it, but ultimately all that matters on the ground is the perception by the local population. The Yezidi that would survive the attack saw the KDP peshmerga leave them to be slaughtered as they were not armed. PKK units came down from the Qandil Mountains and Turkey and then took up the fight, bringing ISIS forces in the region to a stalemate. While the Islamic State has been driven from much of the Nineveh Plain, the Yezidi community had been trained and organized by the PKK and looked to organize their community according to Democratic Confederalist principles, much to the chagrin of the KDP. Tensions ongoing between the KDP and Yezidi lends credence to growing dissent to the KDP hegemon in the KRG, with the popularity of the KCK ideology in the area unacceptable if they are to achieve their goals for a Kurdish state.

#### Turkey

Similar the Kurds in Iraq and Syria, the Kurds in Turkey find themselves in an interesting position relative to their historic national movements. For the first time, a party that backs autonomy for the Kurds has managed to avoid being ruled illegal while gaining a significant amount of seats in parliament. For a time, there seemed to be genuine progress toward a peace deal between PKK forces and the Turkish state government, mediated by the HDP. External events and pressures, particularly the success of KCK aligned forces just south in Syria, slowly wore on the process. Despite the AKP and Erdogan being some of the friendliest governing parties toward the Kurds in Turkish history, the state still could not tolerate the potential for Kurdish autonomy on its border. Of course, the Turkish state encourages and is friendly towards

autonomy for the Kurds in Iraq, but this is due to their clear influence over its administration. As Turkey moved to undermine the success of the KCK aligned forces in Syria, more room was growing for PKK representatives to scrap the peace process and renew the insurgency. In my analysis, the Turkish states moves against Kurdish forces in Syria were alienating to even their own Kurdish support, and gave the PKK a convenient excuse to leave the peace process. The PKK, sensing the potential growing from the success in Syria, was given a convenient out along with some bolstered support. The ending of the peace process put the HDP into a tight spot, having to balance out its connections to the PKK through the KCK and its responsibility to govern for the Turkish state. Snap elections that were called reduced the number of seats they held in parliament, but they managed to still meet the required minimum number of votes to be represented. With the events transpiring in Syria, the renewed insurgency in Turkey would be done differently.

Likely acting off of the success that the PYD were having in establishing their governing bodies in Syria, the KCK aligned forces in Turkey continued their rural fight while also moving into the urban areas of the southeast. Several cities in Kurdish populated Syria declared local councils under the premises of Democratic Confederalism, a slap in the face to Turkish state authority that was unsurprisingly met with a crackdown. Despite the military superiority of Turkish forces, young cadres in KCK-aligned forces throughout the southeast were emboldened enough to effectively control parts of cities and establish shadow governments. Now, it would be grossly misleading to not clarify that this is happening in relatively isolated portions of southeastern Turkey and the country has not broken out into wide scale civil war. The events transpiring are notable because they represent a shift in strategy from what PKK strategy has historically been, with fighting almost exclusively happening in difficult to reach rural areas. While there is no



official confirmation on why there has been this shift, I would gather that the more visible fighting happening is purposeful. As the PYD, YPG, and YPJ have had significant success in Syria, the forces in Turkey now have tangible evidence of the society that they are fighting to create to refer to. With a more tangible option, they likely see this as the opportune time to gain more support from Kurds. The attacks and raids on HDP offices, a legal party in Turkey, further their effort by providing an example of how there is no room for operating within the current Turkish state model for the Kurds. Like any conflict, a good deal of the war is fought by the media and perception opponents curry.

Table 1

| Comparative Factors<br>Case Studies | Leadership   | Autonomy vs. Independence  | Relationship with local government  | Relationship with external government(s)   |
|-------------------------------------|--|--|---|--|
| Syria                               | PYD and YPG/YPJ, who have managed to establish stable governance in areas under effective control. Members of the Kurdish Communities Union (KCK). | Establish an autonomous region in northern Syria.                  | Neutral, but tensions do flare up occasionally between them.                                      | Syrian Kurdish forces considered terrorists by Turkey, but are given material support and training from the US and Russia due to SCW.            |
| Iraq                                | KDP, leadership led to stability until relatively recently from a variety of factors such as a sluggish economy and corruption.                    | Establish an independent, Kurdish identifying state.               | Poor relationship with central Iraqi leadership due to moves for independence.                    | Generally has positive relations with most of its neighbors, particularly Turkey. Has well established relationship with many Western countries. |
| Turkey                              | PKK and HDP, with stability not existing due to violence and suppression. Members of the Kurdish Communities Union (KCK).                          | Establish regional autonomy for Kurdish inhabited areas in Turkey. | Poor relationship with the Turkish government due to political repression and ongoing insurgency. | PKK is widely considered a terrorist organization across the world, while the HDP is considered a legal Turkish party.                           |

The table above is indicative of the suggestion I make earlier in the paper that the Kurdish national movement is split into two, opposing camps. The predominant leaders for the national movement in Syria and Turkey claim to share an ideology and movement, this claim is bolstered by their concurrent aims for autonomy. In contrast, the KDP led Iraqi forces are moving for outright independence under a traditional nation-state structure. I would argue that Turkey is probably the most important outside actor in the Kurdish national movement, and the differences in relationship between the pro-autonomy and pro-independence camps are also indicative of the growing bipolarity of the Kurdish national movement.

### Future Questions

This research gleaned a lot of information about the dynamics of the Kurdish national movement. Further questions could help further our understanding of these dynamics. I would consider the question of how language and religion affects the Kurdish national movement to be helpful in accomplishing this. Analyzing language and religion in the context of Kurdish nationalism would address issues regarding groups like the Yezidi and Zaza, and also allow for a more accurate analysis of the Kurdish national movement in Iran.

### Research in Relation to Conclusion

We started with the question of why not all Kurdish groups pursue full independence. Related questions would be: what causes this difference in goals, why certain regions are more sympathetic to a cause, and what are relations like between the two sides? The difference in ideology between those that fight for autonomy versus independence is most likely the driving reason for a difference in goals. In regards to why different regions of Kurdish inhabitation have different preferences, I believe this to be due to historic material conditions that differ between the three case studies. Relations between the two sides are not entirely negative, but they are clearly not conciliatory. Even positive interactions between the two camps seems to happen only when either side sees an opportunity to gain favor. Notably, the two sides are not in open conflict with each other. Most issues stem from attempts to undermine each other, but neither are in a position to risk alienating their support by more outright attacks. Progress for both sides has come in the past few years, mostly from the destabilization of central authority by ISIS in Iraq and Syria. No matter the progress, the division in the Kurdish national movement is a barrier to either side accomplish their goals. This may inevitably put the two sides on a collision course with each other down the road as ISIS retracts and the time comes for consolidating power.

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