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The Copernicus Journal of Political Studies nr 2 (4), 159-182

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2013

Artykuł został opracowany do udostępnienia w internecie przez Muzeum Historii Polski w ramach prac podejmowanych na rzecz zapewnienia otwartego, powszechnego i trwałego dostępu do polskiego dorobku naukowego i kulturalnego. Artykuł jest umieszczony w kolekcji cyfrowej [bazhum.muzhp.pl](http://bazhum.muzhp.pl), gromadzącej zawartość polskich czasopism humanistycznych i społecznych.

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## **AN HISTORICAL OVERVIEW TO THE KURDISH PROBLEM**

### **ABSTRACT**

This article presents an overview of the history the largest nation in the world without its own independent state. Nationalist aspirations of an approximately 30 million Kurds living within the borders of Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria remain a factor of instability in the geostrategically important Middle East, especially due to the fact that Kurds inhabit areas with strategically important resources. The desire of many Kurds for statehood, or at least cultural autonomy, has led to an almost continuous series of Kurdish revolts since the creation of the modern Middle East state system following World War I. The Kurdish problem refers to the fear of the states in which the Kurds live that Kurdish demands will threaten and even destroy their territorial integrity, even though, as the author points out, the Kurds themselves are notoriously divided geographically, politically, linguistically, and tribally. The article is divided into parts, which are devoted to the origin of the Kurdish nation, as well as the history and the current situation of Kurds in Turkey, Iraq, Iran, Syria, and Europe (the European diaspora).

### **Key words**

Kurdistan, Kurdish diaspora, Middle East, Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), Kurdish Opening, Gulf War

### **1. Introduction**

Surrounding the mountainous borders where Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria converge in the Middle East, the approximately 30 million Kurds constitute the largest nation in the world without its own independent state. The Kurds are a largely Sunni Muslim, Indo-European-speaking people. Thus, they are quite distinct ethnically from the Turks and Arabs, but related to the Iranians, with whom they share the *Newroz* (New Year) holiday at the beginning of spring.

A reasonable estimate is that there may be as many as 15 million Kurds in Turkey (20 percent of the population), 6.5 million in Iran (11 percent), 5 million in Iraq (20 percent), and 2 million in Syria (10 percent). At least 200,000 Kurds also live in parts of the former Soviet Union (some claim as many as 1,000,000 largely assimilated Kurds live there) and recently a Kurdish diaspora of more than 1.5 million has risen in Western Europe. Finally, it should be noted that numerous minorities also live in Kurdistan. These minorities include Christian groups such as the Assyrians and Armenians, Turkomans and Turks, Arabs, and Iranians, among others.

The desire of many Kurds for statehood, or at least cultural autonomy, has led to an almost continuous series of Kurdish revolts since the creation of the modern Middle East state system following World War I. On the other hand, the states in which the Kurds live fear that Kurdish demands will threaten and even destroy their territorial integrity. The resulting situation constitutes the Kurdish problem or question.<sup>1</sup>

Nevertheless, the Kurds themselves are notoriously divided geographically, politically, linguistically, and tribally. In all of the Kurdish revolts of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, for example, significant numbers of Kurds have supported the government because of their tribal antipathies for those rebelling. In Iraq, these pro-government Kurds have been derisively referred to as *josh* (little donkeys), while in recent years the Turkish government created a pro-government militia of Kurds called village guards. Thus, their mountains and valleys have divided the Kurds as much as they have ethnically stamped them. Recently, however, a greater sense of pan-Kurdish identity has arisen due to the fall of Saddam Hussein in Iraq, increasing Kurdish rights in Turkey, and the civil war in Syria.

## 2. Historical background

The origin of the Kurds is uncertain, although some scholars believe them to be the descendants of various Indo-European tribes, which settled in the area as many as 4,000 years ago. The Kurds themselves claim to be the descendants of the Medes who helped overthrow the Assyrian Empire in 612 BC, and also recite

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<sup>1</sup> For background, see D. McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, London–New York 2004; M. van Bruinessen, *Agha, Shaikh and State: The Social and Political Structure of Kurdistan*, London 1992; W. Jwaideh, *The Kurdish National Movement: Its Origins and Development*, Syracuse 2006; and for an excellent more popular study, J.C. Randal, *After Such Knowledge, What Forgiveness? My Encounters with Kurdistan*, New York 1997.

interesting myths about their origins involving King Solomon, *jinn*, and other magical agents. Many believe that the Kardouchoi, mentioned in his *Anabasis* by Xenophon as having given his 10,000 such a mauling as they retreated from Persia in 401 BC, were the ancestors of the Kurds. In the seventh century AD, the conquering Arabs applied the name “Kurds” to the mountainous people they Islamicized in the region, and history also records that the famous Saladin (Salah al-Din), who fought so chivalrously and successfully against the Christian Crusaders and Richard the Lionheart, was a Kurd.

Although semi-independent Kurdish emirates such as Ardanan existed into the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, there has never been an independent Kurdistan (literally, land of the Kurds) in the modern sense of an independent state. However, Sharaf Khan Bitlisi, the Kurdish author of the *Sharafnama*, an erudite history of the ruling families of the Kurdish emirates and completed in 1596, identified numerous historical Kurdish dynasties, which in effect enjoyed independence at various times.

Early in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, most of the Kurds loosely fell under Ottoman Turkish rule, while the remainder was placed under the Persians. Badr Khan Beg, the ruler of the last semi-independent Kurdish emirate of Botan, surrendered to the Ottomans in 1847. Some scholars argue that Sheikh Ubeydullah’s unsuccessful revolt against the Ottoman Empire in 1880 represented the first indication of modern Kurdish nationalism, while others consider it little more than a tribal-religious disturbance. At this point it would be useful to analyze the Kurdish problem in each one of the separate states in which the Kurds live.

### 3. Turkey

In 1891, Ottoman sultan Abdul Hamid II created the *Hamidiye*, a modern pro-government Kurdish cavalry that proved to be an important stage in the emergence of modern Kurdish nationalism.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, the Kurds supported the Ottomans in World War I and Mustafa Kemal (Ataturk) during the Turkish War of Independence following that conflict.

During World War I, one of U.S. President Woodrow Wilson’s Fourteen Points (Number 12) declared that the non-Turkish minorities of the Ottoman Empire should be granted the right of “autonomous development.” The stillborn Treaty of Sevres signed in August 1920 provided for “local autonomy for the

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<sup>2</sup> For background, see J. Klein, *The Margins of Empire: Kurdish Militias in the Ottoman Tribal Zone*, Stanford 2011.

predominantly Kurdish area.” Article 62 and in Article 64 even looked forward to the possibility that “the Kurdish peoples” might be granted “independence from Turkey.” Turkey’s quick revival under Ataturk – ironically enough with considerable Kurdish help as the Turks played well on the theme of Islamic unity – altered the entire situation. The subsequent and definitive Treaty of Lausanne in July 1923 recognized the modern Republic of Turkey without any special provisions for the Turkish Kurds.

Ataturk’s creation of a secular and purely Turkish state led to the first of three great Kurdish revolts, the rising in 1925 of Sheikh Said, the hereditary chief of the powerful Naqshbandi sufi Islamic order. Sheikh Said’s rebellion was both nationalistic and religious as it also favored the reinstatement of the Caliphate. After some initial successes, Sheikh Said was crushed and hanged.<sup>3</sup> In 1927, *Khoyboun* (Independence), a transnational Kurdish party that had been founded that year in Lebanon, helped to launch another major uprising under General Ihsan Nuri Pasha in the Ararat area that also was completely crushed, this time with Iranian cooperation. Finally, the Dersim (now called Tunceli) rebellion from 1936 to the end of 1938, and led by Sheikh Sayyid Riza until his death in 1937, also ended in a total Kurdish defeat.

Although many Kurdish tribes either supported the Turkish government or were at least neutral in these rebellions, the Turkish authorities decided to eliminate anything that might suggest a separate Kurdish nation. A broad battery of social and constitutional devices was employed to achieve this goal. In some cases, what can only be termed pseudo theoretical justifications were offered to defend what was being done. Thus, the so-called Sun Theory taught that all languages derived from one original primeval Turkic language in central Asia. Isolated in the mountain fastnesses of eastern Anatolia, the Kurds had simply forgotten their mother tongue. The much-abused and criticized appellation “Mountain Turks” when referring to the Turkish Kurds served as a code term for these actions. Everything that recalled a separate Kurdish identity was to be abolished: language, clothing, names, etc.

The present (1982) constitution instituted by the military after its successful coup in 1980 contained a number of specific provisions that sought to limit even speaking or writing in Kurdish. Its preamble, for example, declared: “The determination that no protection shall be afforded to thoughts or opinions contrary to Turkish national interests, the principle of the existence of Turkey as

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<sup>3</sup> For greater detail, see R. Olson, *The Emergence of Kurdish Nationalism and the Sheikh Said Rebellion 1880–1925*, Austin 1989.

an indivisible entity.” Two articles banned the spoken and written usage of the Kurdish language without specifically naming it.

Although restrictions on the usage of the Kurdish language were eased following the Gulf War in 1991, Article 8 of the Anti-Terrorism Law that entered into force in April 1991, made it possible to consider academics, intellectuals, and journalists speaking up peacefully for Kurdish rights to be engaging in terrorist acts. Similarly, under Article 312 of the Turkish Penal Code, mere verbal or written support for Kurdish rights could lead one to be charged with “provoking hatred or animosity between groups of different race, religion, region, or social class.” Despite harmonization efforts of the European Union (EU), a new Article 301 that took effect in June 2005 made it a crime to denigrate “Turkishness,” a provision that made it possible for extreme nationalists and statist to accuse writers, scholars, and intellectuals such as Nobel-Prize-winning Orhan Pamuk of treason and subversion. Thus, although many partial reforms have occurred in recent years, as of this writing early in 2013, the promised new, more democratic and civilian constitution has yet to be written.

### **The PKK Insurgency**

Beginning in the 1970s, an increasingly significant portion of Turkey’s population of ethnic Kurds has actively demanded cultural, linguistic, and political rights as Kurds. Until recently, however, the government ruthlessly suppressed these demands for fear they would lead to the breakup of the state itself. This official refusal to brook any moderate Kurdish opposition helped encourage extremism and the creation of the *Partiya Karkaren Kurdistan* (PKK) or Kurdistan Workers Party, headed by Abdullah (Apo) Ocalan on 27 November 1978. In August 1984, the PKK officially launched its insurgency that by the beginning of 2013 had resulted in more than 40,000 deaths, as many as 3,000 villages partially or completely destroyed, and during the 1990s some 3,000,000 people internally displaced.<sup>4</sup>

For a short period in the early 1990s, Ocalan actually seemed close to achieving a certain degree of military success. In the end, however, he over-extended himself, while the Turkish military spared no excesses in containing him. Slowly but steadily, the Turks marginalized the PKK’s military threat. Ocalan’s ill-advised decision in August 1995 to also attack Massoud Barzani’s Kurdistan

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<sup>4</sup> For more background on the PKK, see A. Marcus, *Blood and Belief: The PKK and the Kurdish Fight for Independence*, New York–London 2007 and A.K. Ozcan, *Turkey’s Kurds: A Theoretical Analysis of the PKK and Abdullah Ocalan*, London–New York 2006.

Democratic Party (KDP) in northern Iraq because of its support for Turkey further sapped his strength. The final blow came when Turkey threatened to go to war against Syria in October 1998 unless Damascus expelled Ocalan from his longtime sanctuary in that country.

Ocalan fled to Italy where U.S. pressure on behalf of its NATO ally Turkey pressured Italy and others to reject Ocalan as a terrorist undeserving of political asylum or negotiation. Indeed for years the United States had given Turkey intelligence training and weapons to battle against what it saw as the “bad” Kurds of Turkey, while ironically supporting the “good” Kurds of Iraq against Saddam Hussein. With U.S. and possibly Israeli aid, Ocalan was finally captured in Kenya on 16 February 1999, flown back to Turkey for a sensational trial, and sentenced to death for treason.

Instead of making a hard-line appeal for renewed struggle during his trial, however, Ocalan issued a remarkable statement that called for the implementation of true democracy to solve the Kurdish problem within the existing borders of a unitary Turkey. He also ordered his guerrillas to evacuate Turkey to demonstrate his sincerity. Thus, far from ending Turkey’s Kurdish problem, Ocalan’s capture began a process of implicit bargaining between the state and many of its citizens of Kurdish ethnic heritage as represented by the PKK and the Peoples Democracy Party (HADEP). HADEP had been founded in 1994 as a legal Kurdish party and had elected numerous mayors in the Kurdish areas during the local elections held shortly after Ocalan’s capture.

At this point, Turkey’s potential candidacy for membership in the European Union entered the picture. If implemented, EU membership would fulfill Ataturk’s ultimate hope for a strong, united, and democratic Turkey joined to the West. Until Turkey successfully implemented the Copenhagen Criteria of minority rights for its Kurdish ethnic population and suspended Ocalan’s death sentence to conform with the EU standards which banned capital punishment, however, it was clear that Turkey’s long-treasured candidacy would be only a pipe dream. As some have noted, Turkey’s road to the EU lies through Diyarbakir, the unofficial capital of Turkish Kurdistan.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> The EU Turkey Civic Commission (EUTCC), an NGO established in 2004 to promote Turkish accession to the EU as a way to help solve that state’s Kurdish problem along the lines of EU democratic laws holds annual conferences in the EU parliament in Brussels to analyze Turkey’s progress towards meeting the Copenhagen Criteria of EU accession. See <http://www.mesop.de>.

However, arguing that Turkey had not implemented the necessary reforms, the PKK ended the cease-fire it had implemented after Ocalan's capture and renewed low-level fighting in June 2004. In addition, opposition to Turkish membership in the EU began to grow in such EU members as France, Germany, and Austria, among others. In November 2002, Recep Tayyip Erdogan's *Adalet ve Kalkinma Partisi* (AKP) or Justice and Development Party, with its roots in Islamic politics, won an overwhelming victory, which it added to in elections held in July 2007 and again in June 2011. Beginning in 2005, the *Komo Civaken Kurdistan* (KCK) or Kurdistan Communities Union began to operate as the umbrella organization bringing together the PKK and numerous other related Kurdish groups in Turkey as well as other states in the Middle East and western Europe. Under the leadership of Murat Karayilan, some 5,000 PKK guerrillas remained entrenched in the Kandil Mountains straddling the border between northern Iraq and Iran.

In Turkey, HADEP was finally closed down in 2003. Its place was taken first by the Democratic Peoples Party (DEHAP), which then merged into the Democratic Society Party (DTP), which was created in November 2005. Osman Baydemir was elected mayor of Diyarbakir in 2004 and quickly emerged as one of the most successful young ethnic Kurdish politicians in Turkey. Baydemir also carried his message of achieving Kurdish rights peacefully in his travels to Europe and the United States, but was constantly in danger of being arrested for his activities.<sup>6</sup> The off-again, on-again Ilisu Dam project on the Tigris River was touted by the government as a way to help modernize the southeast's agriculture, while opponents denounced the project as a way literally to drown the Kurdish historical presence in the area. ROJ TV, a Kurdish television station in Denmark connected to the PKK, stoked Kurdish self-awareness throughout Turkey, the Middle East, and Europe. Leyla Zana – a Kurdish leader elected to the Turkish parliament in 1991 but imprisoned in 1994 for her non-violent support of the Kurdish cause – was finally released in 2004 after her case had become a *cause celebre* for Kurdish human rights.

In August 2005, Prime Minister Erdogan declared that Turkey had a “Kurdish problem,” had made “grave mistakes” in the past, and now needed “more democracy to solve the problem.” Never before had a Turkish leader made so explicit a statement regarding the Kurdish problem. As progressive Islamists,

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<sup>6</sup> For more on the legal, pro-Kurdish political parties in Turkey, see N.F. Watts, *Activists in Office: Kurdish Politics and Protest in Turkey*, Seattle–London 2010.



however, the AKP was increasingly opposed by the reactionary Kemalist establishment which included Turkey's influential military fearful of losing their long held privileged positions.

This situation eventually led to the crisis of 2007 over the election of the AKP's Abdullah Gul as Turkey's new president. The AKP triumphed in this struggle by winning an enormous electoral victory on 22 July 2007 (even slightly outpolling the pro-Kurdish DTP in the southeast) and then electing Gul as president. Gradually, the AKP began to reduce the political influence of Turkey's military and secretive Deep State, which were opposed to Turkey's democratization and Kurdish rights.

### Rise and Fall of the Kurdish Opening

During the summer and fall of 2009, the continuing and often violent Kurdish problem in Turkey<sup>7</sup> seemed on the verge of a solution when the ruling AKP<sup>8</sup> government of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan and President Abdullah Gul announced a Kurdish Opening or Initiative (aka as the Democratic Opening/Initiative). Gul declared that "the biggest problem of Turkey is the Kurdish question" and that "there is an opportunity [to solve it] and it should not be missed."<sup>9</sup> Erdogan asked: "If Turkey had not spent its energy, budget, peace and young people on [combating] terrorism, if Turkey had not spent the last 25 years in conflict, where would we be today?"<sup>10</sup> Even the insurgent PKK, still led ultimately by its imprisoned leader Abdullah Ocalan, itself briefly took Turkey's Kurdish Opening seriously.<sup>11</sup> For a fleeting moment optimism ran rampant. What happened?

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<sup>7</sup> For recent analyses of the Kurdish problem in Turkey, see M.C. Unal, *Counterterrorism in Turkey: Policy Choices and Policy Effects toward the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK)*, London–New York 2012 and *Nationalisms and Politics in Turkey: Political Islam, Kemalism and the Kurdish Issue*, M. Casier, J. Jongerden (eds.), London–New York 2011.

<sup>8</sup> For recent scholarly work on the AKP, see *Secular and Islamic Politics in Turkey: The Making of the Justice and Development Party*, U. Cizre (ed.), London 2007 and M.H. Yavuz, *Secularism and Muslim Democracy in Turkey*, New York 2009.

<sup>9</sup> Cited in *Gul: Kurdish Problem is the Most Important Problem of Turkey*, "Today's Zaman", May 11, 2009.

<sup>10</sup> Cited in "Today's Zaman", August 12, 2009.

<sup>11</sup> Author's contacts with Kurdish sources in Europe and the Middle East. For background, see M.M. Gunter, *The Kurds Ascending: The Evolving Solution to the Kurdish Problem in Iraq and Turkey*, New York 2011, pp. 155–88.

## Problems

It soon became evident that the AKP government had not thought its Kurdish Opening out very well and then proved rather inept in trying to implement it. Specific proposals were lacking.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, despite AKP appeals to support its Kurdish Opening, all three of the parliamentary opposition parties declined. Indeed, the CHP (Kemalists or Nationalists) accused the AKP of “separatism, cowing to the goals of the terrorist PKK, violating the Constitution, causing fratricide and/or ethnic polarization between Kurds and Turks, being an agent of foreign states, and even betraying the country,”<sup>13</sup> while the MHP (Ultra Turkish Nationalists) “declared AKP to be dangerous and accused it of treason and weakness.”<sup>14</sup> Even the pro-Kurdish DTP failed to be engaged because it declined to condemn the PKK as the AKP government had demanded. Erdogan too began to fear that any perceived concessions to the Kurds would hurt his Turkish nationalist base and future presidential hopes.

The PKK’s “peace group” gambit on October 18, 2009 to return home to Turkey 34 PKK members from northern Iraq also backfired badly when these Kurdish expatriates were met by huge welcoming receptions at the Habur Border Crossing with Turkey and later in Diyarbakir. These celebrations were broadcast throughout Turkey and proved too provocative for even moderate Turks who perceived the affair as some sort of PKK victory parade. The Peace Group affair seemed to prove that the government had not thought out the implications of its Kurdish Opening and could not manage its implementation let alone consequences.

Then on December 11, 2009 the Constitutional Court, after mulling over the issue for more than two years, suddenly banned the pro-Kurdish DTP because of its close association with the PKK. Although the *Baris ve Demokrasi Partisi* (BDP) or Peace and Democracy Party quickly took the DTP’s place, coming when it did, the state-ordered banning of the pro-Kurdish DTP could not have come at a worse time and put the kiss of death to the Kurdish Opening. In addition, more

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<sup>12</sup> In addition, earlier economic hopes have yet to materialize for the Kurdish areas in Turkey despite the *Guneydogu Anadolu Projesi* (GAP) or Southeast Anatolia Project, for harnessing the Euphrates and Tigris Rivers through the construction of gigantic dams.

<sup>13</sup> “Hurriyet”, issues of November 18, 2009; December 2, 2009; December 9, 2009; and December 14, 2009, as cited in M. Cinar, *The Militarization of Secular Opposition in Turkey*, “Insight Turkey” 2010, No. 12, p. 119.

<sup>14</sup> O. Celep, *Turkey’s Radical Right and the Kurdish Issue: The MHP’s Reaction to the Democratic Opening*, “Insight Turkey” 2010, No. 12, p. 136.

than 1,000 BDP and other Kurdish notables were placed under arrest for their supposed support of the PKK, yet another body blow to the Kurdish Opening. Soon the entire country was ablaze from the fury that had arisen, and the Kurdish Opening seemed closed. The mountain had not even given birth to a mouse, and the entire Kurdish question seemed to have been set back to square one.

Although the AKP won practically 50 percent of the popular vote or 326 seats while the BDP and its allies won a record 36 seats in the parliamentary elections held on June 12, 2011, further problems soon arose and hopes for a renewed and more successful Kurdish Opening quickly foundered. Shortly after the election results had been announced, the newly elected BDP MPs began to boycott parliament in protest over the jailing of five of their elected colleagues, while a sixth (the well-known Hatip Dicle) was stripped of his seat for “terrorism” offenses. Newly elected Prime Minister Erdogan seemingly turned his back on an earlier promise to seek consensus on the drafting of a new constitution that would help solve the Kurdish problem, broke off contact with the BDP, and continued to declare that the Kurdish problem had been solved and only a PKK problem remained. How could the new AKP government begin to solve the Kurdish problem when it refused to deal with its main interlocutor?

Others argued, however, that even more, the ultimate problem was the inherent ethnic Turkish inability to accept the fact that Turkey should be considered a multi-ethnic state in which the Kurds have similar constitutional rights as co-stakeholders with the Turks. Moreover, during 2011 and 2012, more leading intellectuals have been rounded up for alleged affiliations with the KCK/PKK, whose proposals for democratic autonomy seem to suggest an alternative government. Many of those arrested were also affiliated with the BDP.

These arrests point to serious problems. First, there is the nature of the crimes, which allege no violence. Mere “association” is enough to be counted as a terrorist. In addition, the connections are tenuous. As Human Rights Watch has noted, these arrests seem less aimed at addressing terror than on attacking “legal pro-Kurdish political organizations.”<sup>15</sup> Second, the arrests come at a time when Turkey is planning to develop a new constitution. The silencing of pro-Kurdish voices as constitutional debates go forward is counter-productive for Turkey’s future. Finally, there is the way suspects are treated. Virtually all are

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<sup>15</sup> Human Rights Watch, *Turkey Arrests Expose Flawed Justice System*, November 1, 2011, <http://www.hrw.org/news/2011/11/01/turkey-arrests-expose...> [Access date: 13.11.2011].

subject to pre-trial detentions, effectively denying them freedom without any proof that they have committed a crime. Although precise figures are unavailable, Human Rights Watch has declared that several thousand are currently on trial and another 605 in pretrial detention on KCK/PKK-related charges.

Nevertheless, recent events offer cautious hope that the time to renew the dialogue and resume direct negotiations between the Turkish government and the PKK may have arrived. In late October 2012, for example, a report in “Zaman”, a respected news outlet, declared that “the government is preparing to launch a new initiative to deal with the Kurdish problem to hopefully pave the way for arms to be buried for good.”<sup>16</sup> The *Zaman* report went on to say that the government had learned from the past what steps would not work.

#### 4. Iraq

After their victory in World War I, the British decided to attach the largely Kurdish *vilayet* (province) of Mosul to their newly-won League-of-Nations mandate Iraq because of its vast oil resources. The British felt that this was the only way Iraq could be made viable. The Kurds in Iraq felt cheated by this situation and have been in an almost constant state of revolt ever since.

With the final defeat of Sheikh Mahmud Barzinji in 1931, Mulla Mustafa Barzani began to emerge as the leader almost synonymous with the Kurdish movement in Iraq. Although the Barzanis’ power was originally founded on their religious authority as Naqshbandi sheikhs, they also became noted for their fighting abilities. For more than half a century, Barzani fought the Iraqi government in one way or another. Despite his inherent conservatism and tribal mentality, he was the guiding spirit of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) founded on 16 August 1946, spent a decade of exile in the Soviet Union (1947–58), and at the height of his power negotiated the March Manifesto of 1970 which theoretically provided for Kurdish autonomy under his rule. Kurdish infighting against such other leaders as Ibrahim Ahmad and his son-in-law Jalal Talabani and continuing government opposition, however, finally helped lead to Barzani’s ultimate defeat in 1975. Barzani’s defeat also occurred because the United States and Iran withdrew their support in return for Iraqi concessions, an action U.S.

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<sup>16</sup> A. Donmez, A. Albayrak, *Government to Put Together a New Roadmap on Kurdish Issue*, “Zaman”, October 22, 2012, <http://www.mesop.ed/2012/10/22/government-to-put-together...> [Access date: 23.10.2012].

National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger cynically explained as necessary covert action not to be confused with missionary work.<sup>17</sup>

Following Barzani's collapse in March 1975, his son Massoud Barzani eventually emerged as the new leader of the KDP, while Talabani established his Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) on 1 June 1975. Divided by philosophy, geography, dialect, and ambition, Barzani's KDP and Talabani's PUK have alternated between cooperation and bloody conflict ever since. They have also suffered grievously from such horrific repression as Saddam Hussein's genocidal *Anfal* campaigns of 1987–88 and the chemical attack against the city of Halabja on 16 March 1988.<sup>18</sup>

After the 1991 Gulf War and failure of the ensuing Kurdish uprising in March 1991, the mass flight of Kurdish refugees to the mountains reluctantly forced the United States to create a safe haven and no-fly zone in which a de facto Kurdish state began to develop in northern Iraq. In addition, the unprecedented United Nations Security Council Resolution 688 of 5 April 1991 condemned "the repression of the Iraqi civilian population (...) in Kurdish populated areas" and demanded "that Iraq (...) immediately end this repression." As symbolic as it may have been, never before had the Kurds received such official international mention and protection.

Despite the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) that emerged in northern Iraq following Saddam Hussein's defeat in the Gulf War, the KDP and PUK actually fought a civil war against each other from 1994–98. As a result of this internal Kurdish fighting, there were two separate rump governments in Iraqi Kurdistan after 1994: the KDP's in Irbil and the PUK's in Sulaymaniya. The United States finally brokered a cease-fire by bringing Barzani and Talabani together in Washington in September 1998. The Kurds also began to receive 13 percent of the receipts from the oil Iraq was allowed to sell after 1995. Peace, relative prosperity, and democracy began to grow in the KRG region of northern Iraq. In October 2002, the reunified parliament of the KRG met for the first time since 1994 and declared that Iraqi Kurdistan would be a federal state in a post-Saddam-Hussein Iraq. However, despite its official unification on 7 May 2006, the KRG still retains divisions between these two parties.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> For background, see E. Ghareeb, *The Kurdish Question in Iraq*, Syracuse 1981.

<sup>18</sup> See Human Rights Watch/Middle East, *Iraq's Crime of Genocide: The Anfal Campaign against the Kurds*, New Haven–London 1995 and J.R. Hiltermann, *A Poisonous Affair: America, Iraq, and the Gassing of Halabja*, Cambridge 2007.

<sup>19</sup> For further information, see *The Future of Kurdistan in Iraq*, B. O'Leary, J. McGarry, K. Salih (eds.), Philadelphia 2005.

## The 2003 Gulf War

On 19 March 2003, the United States finally launched a war against Iraq that quickly overthrew Saddam Hussein's regime. Given the sectarian and ethnic divisions, however, establishing a stable new Iraqi government has proven much more difficult. Therefore, the Iraqi Kurds were determined to establish at least an autonomous federal state in post-Saddam-Hussein Iraq. If this failed, they would then opt for complete independence.

For its part, Turkey feared the demonstration effect on its own restless Kurds of any Kurdish entity on the Turkish border. Given the adoption of the Iraqi constitution in October 2005 and its institutionalization of federalism, however, Turkey has begrudgingly come to accept the existence of the KRG. Indeed, by 2009, Turkey and the KRG had begun to complement their thriving economic relationship with a promising political rapprochement as Turkey sought to further its new "zero-problems" with its neighbors' foreign policy.

## Elections

On 15 December 2005, elections were held to choose the first permanent post-Saddam-Hussein parliament and government. After a great deal of haggling, a Shiite Arab, Nouri al-Maliki, finally emerged in May 2006 as the new prime minister, while Jalal Talabani was chosen as the largely ceremonial permanent president. The Kurdish role in Baghdad was a hedge against renewed Arab chauvinism.

On 25 July 2009, the KRG held presidential and parliamentary elections. Approximately 78 percent of 2.5 million eligible voters participated. Massoud Barzani was reelected president with a large majority of almost 70 percent of the popular vote. Four years earlier he had simply been elected president by the KRG parliament. More dramatically perhaps was the strong showing of Nawshirwan Mustafa's *Gorran* or Change Party which garnered approximately 24 percent of the vote and gained 25 seats in the parliament, largely at the expense of the PUK. This new Change Party had strongly criticized what it charged was the entrenched Kurdish leadership's corruption and nepotism. On 7 March 2010, national Iraqi elections saw the KDP-PUK electoral alliance win 43 seats, while the *Gorran* Party captured eight seats. Kurdish Islamists also took six seats in the new parliament of 325 members.

## Current Situation

Despite being economically underdeveloped historically, the KRG region has witnessed a tremendous amount of economic, political, and social modernization

in recent years. Indeed, the economy of the KRG had surpassed that of the rest of Iraq in the late 1990s due to the oil-for-food program funds it received from the sale of Iraqi oil through the United Nations. Even more, given the security problems to the south, many foreign investors were attracted to the much safer KRG region after 2003.

The economy in the KRG region has developed even more dramatically since the fall of the Saddam-Hussein regime. Many foreign investors – particularly Turkish – have been attracted to the region and construction has been booming. Modern stores, homes, and automobiles have proliferated. Two international airports have been constructed and are handling more than 100 flights a week in Irbil and Sulaymaniya. A third airport is now on tap to be constructed in Dohuk. Seven universities as well as numerous other schools of higher education are also operating. However, huge discrepancies in wealth have developed as well as corruption and nepotism. Problems between the KRG and central government in Baghdad continue regarding access to the rich oil resources and their internal border, especially the future of the province and city of Kirkuk. Thus, the ultimate political and resulting security situation remains problematic.

Nevertheless, the Iraqi Kurds, now not only possess their most powerful regional government since the creation of Iraq following World War I (the KRG), but also have played a very prominent role in the Iraqi government in Baghdad including the posts of president (Jalal Talabani), foreign minister (Hoshiyar Zebari), and several other cabinet positions. However, despite its relative economic and political success, the KRG has been forced to maintain a delicate balance to preserve its existence amidst perilous surroundings. The first and, of course, most immediate dimension of this delicate balance is the KRG's precarious relationship with the Iraqi central government in Baghdad. This situation was put on hold due to the inconclusive Iraqi national elections of March 7, 2010 and the resulting hung parliament. However, even though the Kurds eventually proved to be one of the kingmakers in this electoral imbroglio, once a new central government headed again by Nouri al-Maliki emerged in Baghdad, the inherently more powerful Arab majority again began pressuring the Kurds for concessions.

The Iraqi Constitution approved by a hotly contested referendum on October 15, 2005, had established a federal structure for Iraq that grants significant powers to the regions. Indeed, for the first time ever most Kurds now think of their government in Irbil, not the one in Baghdad, when the concept of government is broached. As noted above, however, the actual division of power between the Iraqi government and the KRG remains in dispute. These contested powers include the ownership of the rich oil reserves and the control of the revenues

flowing from them, the role of the KRG army or *peshmerga* (militia), and the final status of Kirkuk. Although their current role in Baghdad has been a hedge against renewed Arab chauvinism, it is likely that the Kurds will gradually play a reduced role in the future Baghdad governments as the large Arab majority in Iraq increasingly and inevitably reasserts itself.

On February 17, 2011, violent demonstrations against the KDP and PUK broke out in Sulaymaniya and lasted for 62 days until forcibly curtailed by the KRG. During the first few days at least three protestors were killed and scores wounded. Most of the demonstrators were protesting against corruption, nepotism and the lack of effective services such as jobs and electricity. Intellectuals and journalists also protested against limitations against speech and press as well as daily harassment. Among all there was a deep anger against the Barzani's KDP and Talabani's PUK family domination over society and government. There were even calls for the resignation of President Massoud Barzani and Prime Minister Barham Salih. At the least these demonstrations constituted a serious wake up call that all was not well with the KRG and potentially held momentous consequences for the future.

At the present time the relationship between Erbil and Baghdad "is characterized by suspicion, animosity and brinkmanship"<sup>20</sup> that "threaten the stability of the [Iraqi] state at a far deeper political level."<sup>21</sup> "The conflict, which has left a devastating imprint on the country's twentieth-century history, could cause political paralysis or, worse, precipitate Iraq's break-up. (...) Arab-Kurdish relations remain a tinderbox."<sup>22</sup> As the Baghdad government of al-Maliki grew in strength and confidence, it naturally began to seek to reimpose its authority over the northern Kurdish part of the state. The 2005 constitution that guaranteed real federalism and thus semi-independence for the KRG was now challenged as having been imposed at a moment of weakness.

For the past five years, Barzani and al-Maliki also have been locked in a bitter on again/off-again verbal struggle over the situation. During a tense meeting in Baghdad in November 2008, for example, Barzani told al-Maliki "you smell like a dictator"<sup>23</sup> and also declared that the Iraqi prime minister was "playing

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<sup>20</sup> For a lucid analysis, see G. Stansfield, L. Anderson, *Kurds in Iraq: The Struggle between Baghdad and Erbil*, "Middle East Policy" 2009, No. 16, pp. 134–45.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 135.

<sup>22</sup> International Crisis Group, *Iraq and the Kurds: Confronting Withdrawal Fears*, Middle East Report No. 103, March 28, 2011, p. ii.

<sup>23</sup> Cited in *Iraq: Is It Really Coming Right?*, "The Economist", November 27, 2008.



with fire.”<sup>24</sup> In August 2008, these semantic fireworks nearly resulted in open hostilities over the disputed city of Khanaqin situated in Diyala province some 90 miles north of Baghdad on their de facto internal border often referred to as the “trigger line.” Here the Kurdish *peshmerga* ignored an ultimatum by the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) to withdraw within 24 hours. After some very tense brinkmanship, the two sides each withdrew some 15 miles north and south of the city leaving security within Khanaqin to be handled by the police. The two sides have come close to fighting on several subsequent occasions, most recently at the end of 2012.

Oil-rich and strategically located Kirkuk, of course, represents the center of these KRG-Baghdad tensions. It “is a classic divided city (...) over which people are prepared to fight and die. (...) The numbers of actors involved, resource dimensions, and international involvement (...) add (...) layers of complexity that are matched by few other disputes over territorial ‘ownership.’”<sup>25</sup> From a position of initial strength that appeared to be ready to hand Kirkuk to the KRG under the provisions of Article 140 of the 2005 Iraqi constitution, the contested city and province now seem the proverbial bridge too far for the Kurds to take. Kirkuk also represents the opposing constitutional positions with the Kurds maintaining that the Iraqi constitution (including Article 140) must be implemented, while Baghdad has become increasingly critical of the constitution in general and particularly Article 140 as being part of a constitution written for a now dated situation.

How then will ties between the KRG and Baghdad play out? Clearly, their political future remains in doubt. Whether Iraq will remain truly federal as the KRG demands or federal in name only as the Arabs recentralize the state remains to be seen. However, KRG president Massoud Barzani has unequivocally warned: “We will not allow the Kurdish people’s achievements to be wrecked by the Iraqi parliament. Iraq will fall apart if the Iraqi constitution is violated.”<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Cited in E. Londono, *Kurds in Northern Iraq Receive Arms from Bulgaria*, “The Washington Post”, November 23, 2008.

<sup>25</sup> L. Anderson, G. Stansfield, *Crisis in Kirkuk: The Ethnopolitics of Conflict and Compromise*, Philadelphia 2009, p. 9.

<sup>26</sup> Kurdistan Regional Government, *President Barzani: Iraq Will Fall Apart If Constitution Violated*, KRG Press Release, August 7, 2008, <http://www.krg.org/articles/detail.aspx?map=02010100&Ingrnr=12&anr=25113&rnr=223> [Access date: 7.03.2010].

## 5. Iran

Although twice as many Kurds live in Iran as do in Iraq, the Kurdish national movement in Iran historically enjoyed much less success due possibly in part to the relatively greater long-term strength of the Iranian governments as well as Kurdish ethnic affinity with the Iranians.<sup>27</sup> Thus, even though the Iranian regime seems to hang a Kurd for some reputed political offense at least once a week, Kurdish nationalism in Iran has been quiescent in recent years. In addition, of course, the Kurds in Iran have not benefited recently from the positive developments their co-nationals have in Iraq, Turkey, and now Syria.

Despite these problems, the Iranian Kurds are famous among their pan-Kurdish brethren for having established the only Kurdish state in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the short-lived Mahabad Republic of Kurdistan (January-December 1946). When Iran destroyed this rump Kurdish state, however, it also hanged its president, Qazi Muhammad, on 31 March 1947, a blow from which the Iranian Kurds still have not completely recovered.<sup>28</sup>

In the 1920s, Ismail Agha Simko led major Kurdish revolts that only ended when the Iranian government treacherously assassinated him under false pretenses of negotiation in 1930. This Iranian technique of solving its Kurdish problem was used again on 13 July 1989 when Iranian agents assassinated the leader of the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran (KDPI), Abdul Rahman Ghassemlou, in Vienna, Austria while supposedly negotiating with him.<sup>29</sup> On 17 September 1992, Iranian agents also assassinated Ghassemlou's successor, Sadeq Sharafkandi, while he was dining at the Mykonos Restaurant in Berlin, Germany. Mustafa Hejri became the new KDPI leader and has remained so to the present despite divisions within his party.

Earlier, the KDPI's revolt against the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's new government had been completely smashed by 1981. Armed KDPI remnants, however, continued to shelter in northern Iraq. Their goal was "autonomy for Kurdistan, democracy for Iran." Fighting, however, broke out between the more moderate KDPI and the Marxist Komala in 1985. Hundreds died in this intra-Kurdish bloodletting. In 2006, a group calling itself the KDP and led by Khalid

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<sup>27</sup> For background, see F. Koohi-Kamali, *The Political Development of the Kurds in Iran: Pastoral Nationalism*, New York 2003.

<sup>28</sup> For further analysis, see W. Eagleton, *The Kurdish Republic of 1946*, London 1963.

<sup>29</sup> For further analysis of Ghassemlou's treacherous assassination, see C. Prunhuber, *The Passion and Death of Rahman the Kurd: Dreaming Kurdistan*, New York 2009.

Azai split from Hejri's KDPI. However, in December 2012, these two groups began reunification talks. Moreover, in August 2012, the KDPI and the Komala, now led by Abdullah Mohtadi, reached a strategic agreement calling for federalism in Iran to undo the national oppression suffered by the Kurds. Finally, since 2004, the Kurdistan Free Life Party (PJAK), a new Iranian Kurdish party cooperating with the PKK, has been ensconced in northern Iraq's Kandil Mountains and carrying out military operations against Iran. Rather incongruously, PJAK's leader Abdul Rahman Haji Ahmadi lives in Europe. Supposedly PJAK reached a cease-fire agreement with Iran in 2012.

Many Kurds boycotted the election of hard-line Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who was elected president of Iran in June 2005 and reelected in a hotly disputed contest in June 2009. Only 25 percent of those eligible voted in the decisive second round of the June 2005 presidential elections in Kordestan province. Even fewer Kurds voted in other provinces. This compared with a national turnout of more than 60 percent and would seemingly be indicative of Kurdish alienation from the current Iranian political system. This pattern of Kurdish alienation from Ahmadinejad continued during the elections held in 2009. In June 2012, U.S. assistant secretary of state for democracy, human rights, and labor Michael Posner denounced continuing negative trends in Iran towards its Kurdish population: "Intolerance, of dissent (...); free speech restricted; internet freedom restricted; political participation severely circumscribed; unfair trials; amputations; floggings; lots of death penalty. (...) So it is a very grim picture."<sup>30</sup>

## 6. Syria

From being merely a sleepy unimportant backwater in the Kurdish struggle, Syria has suddenly graduated to being not only a burgeoning center of Kurdish nationalism, but even more importantly a major flashpoint in the regional geopolitical situation. How did this occur?

The Arab Spring revolt that broke out against the long-ruling Assad family in March 2011 quickly involved not only the many different groups within Syria, but also most of the surrounding states and parties as each perceived the Syrian outcome as potentially bearing a most important impact on its own future. Turkey feared that the violence would spill over into its borders and further inflame its own Kurdish problems especially as the PKK-affiliate Democratic Union

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<sup>30</sup> *Exorbitant Human Rights Violations in Iran*, "Voice of America", June 8, 2012, <http://www.mesop.de/2012/06/08/exorbitant...> [Access date: 8.06.2012].

Party (PYD) headed by Salih Muslim Mohammed in Syria began to gain influence. To meet this threat, Turkey supported the oppositional Syrian National Council (SNC). However, such Turkish support scared the Kurds in Syria away from backing the opposition as Turkey clearly had no interest in empowering the Syrian Kurds in a post-Assad Syria. The PYD especially argued this point. Furthermore, the Syrian Kurds did not trust any prospective Sunni Arab government that might succeed Assad to grant or protect Kurdish rights.

The Sunni-ruled KRG in northern Iraq, however, opposed Assad whose earlier anti-Kurdish record had been abysmal. The KRG's support for the Syrian opposition aligned it with its new ally Turkey but against the PKK and its related Syrian affiliate PYD, which in part implicitly supported Assad since it feared Turkish control of the Syrian opposition. Thus, even the Kurds in Syria were divided among themselves between the much stronger PYD-supported People's Council of Western Kurdistan (PCWK) and the Kurdish National Council (KNC), which consisted of most of the other 12–15 odd Kurdish parties in Syria. Such Kurdish divisions in Syria, however, were not novel. Nevertheless, in July 2012 KRG president Massoud Barzani managed to patch together a tenuous umbrella Supreme Kurdish Council out of the various Syrian Kurdish groups at a gathering held in Irbil.

With this incredibly complicated and evolving scenario in mind, this article will now turn to examine specifically three recent developments concerning the Kurds in Syria: 1) the assassination of Mishaal Tammo on October 7, 2011; 2) the rise of Salih Muslim Muhammed (SMM) and his PKK-affiliated PYD; and 3) the emergence of a de facto Syrian Kurdish autonomy in northeastern Syria in July 2012.

### **Mishaal Tammo's Assassination**

Mishaal Tammo (1957–2011), the widely respected 53-year-old leader (speaker) of the Syrian “Kurdish Future Movement” and also a member of the executive committee of what was then the recently formed, broadly based opposition Syrian National Council (SNC), was assassinated in Qamishli, Syria on October 7, 2011. Tammo was attending a political meeting when the attack occurred. The assassination obviously held implications for the developing situation in Syria.

Following Tammo's assassination, 50,000 demonstrators took to the streets in Qamishli for his funeral. It was maybe the largest demonstration in the Kurdish areas since the Arab Spring uprising against Assad had begun in March 2011. Security forces killed six of them. Other large demonstrations took place in the suburbs of Aleppo, Latakia, and Hasaka. Ironically, the embattled Assad

government had only recently rescinded the notorious Law 93 passed in 1962 which had denied citizenship to some 160,000 Kurdish *ajanib* (stateless) and another 75,000 Syrian Kurds known as *maktoumeen* (concealed). As the famous French scholar Alexis de Tocqueville once observed: revolutions seldom start when things are bad, but rather when they are getting better.

### **The Rise of Salih Muslim Muhammed and the PYD**

Salih Muslim Muhammed (SMM), a chemical engineer and fluent in English, fled from his Syrian home to the Gare (Goran) Mountains in Iraqi Kurdistan in 2010 where he lived in a camp maintained by the *Partiya Yekitiya Demokrat* (PYD) or Democratic Union Party, an affiliate of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK). However, the Assad regime allowed him to return to Syria in October 2010. He quickly became the surprisingly successful leader of the rejuvenated PYD that had been created in 2003, largely from the remnants of the PKK that Hafez Assad had expelled from Syria in October 1998.

SMM currently plays a complicated, but potentially important role in the Syrian uprising against Bashar Assad that has been raging since March 2011. Some argue that in effect SMM's PYD has become *Shabiha* (thuggish militiamen of Assad) unlike the other 12–15 or so odd Kurdish groups in Syria.<sup>31</sup> Indeed, Assad's late father Hafeez Assad (died 2000) long granted the PKK a virtual alliance and safe house in Syria until Turkey's threat to go to war in 1998 forced Assad to sign the Adana Agreement under which Syria finally expelled the PKK, as mentioned above.

However, once Turkey began supporting the Syrian Arab Spring uprising against Assad in 2011, the Syrian regime apparently began playing the PKK card again against Turkey by inviting SMM back and allowing him to operate relatively freely. Assad had already sought to appease the Syrian Kurds (who at maybe 2,000,000) constitute the largest ethnic minority in Syria) by lifting long-running restrictions against them. In this newly-found role SMM has strongly opposed Turkish influence upon the opposition Syrian National Council (SNC) and (Syrian) Kurdish National Council (KNC), regarding them as lackeys of Turkey and other outside forces. Indeed, he went so far as to state that Turkey, the

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<sup>31</sup> O. Hassino, I. Tanir, *The Decisive Minority: The Role of Syria's Kurds in the Anti-Assad Revolution*, A Henry Jackson Society Report, March 2012, <http://www.scpps.org/libs/spaw...> [Access date: 6.06.2012].

supporter of the SNC, was a greater enemy than Assad.<sup>32</sup> However, SMM denies any support for Assad and can point to members of his PYD being detained by the Syrian regime and his own denunciations of the regime. Thus, the alliance between SMM's PYD and Assad is more implicit, temporary, tactical, and only partial.

With its military wing the Peoples Defense Units (YPG), the PYD has become the largest, best-armed, and most-disciplined Syrian Kurdish party. SMM's weakness, however, might be the traditional PKK inclination his PYD has inherited to either be the unchallenged leader of the Kurds and thus reluctance to join in any alliance of equals or go it alone. Indeed the so-called Supreme Kurdish Council Barzani tenuously had patched together between the PYD and the KNC in July 2012 seemed to be unraveling by October 2012. Furthermore, at the end of October 2012, 30 people were reported killed in Aleppo as a result of fighting between the PYD and the Free Syrian Army (FSA), the supposed military arm of the SNC.<sup>33</sup> The PYD saw the FSA as Turkey's hireling army, while the FSA viewed the PYD as a proxy for the Assad regime. The creation of the National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces in November 2012 to replace the moribund SNC did not seem to solve these Kurdish problems. Even more, however, conflict among the Syrian Kurds themselves threatened given the divisions between the PYD and KNC.

### **De Facto Syrian Kurdish Autonomy**

In July 2012, the Assad regime suddenly pulled most of its troops and authority out of the Kurdish regions of northeastern Syria, which lie just below Turkey's southern border, to concentrate on holding its position in the heartland of the country. The Kurds quickly formed a local assembly and government in Qamishli leading to comparisons with how the KRG had been initially created back in 1991. The resulting Syrian Kurdish autonomy caused great apprehension in Turkey because suddenly PKK flags were flying just across its southern border with Syria; what had been just 500 miles of border with Kurdistan had overnight metastasized into one of 750 miles. A second or even pan-Kurdish state seemed possible.

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<sup>32</sup> *Interview with Salih Muhammad, President of PYD*, "Firat News", February 2012, <http://en.firatnews.eu/index.php?...> [Access date: 28.02.2012].

<sup>33</sup> P. Hartling, *Arab Rebel-Kurd Tensions*, Agence France Presse (AFP), October 31, 2012, <http://www.mesop.de/2012/10/31/arab-rebel-kurd-tensions...> [Access date: 31.10.2012].

Ankara feared that this newly-won Kurdish Syrian position would serve as an unwanted model for Turkey's own disaffected Kurds and PKK. Turkey also feared that the Syrian Kurdish autonomous area bordering the KRG might seek to unite with the KRG and form for Turkey the nightmare of a pan-Kurdish state. Thus, Turkey hoped that its influence over the Syrian opposition and the KRG would help to control pan-Kurdish ambitions.

However, these Turkish fears seemed overblown because the Syrian Kurds remained divided and relatively weak, the mere temporary beneficiary of the Syrian civil war. As soon as that struggle would be settled, the winners would likely reincorporate their wayward Kurdish provinces. Moreover, if this were slow to occur, Barzani's KRG stood in a de facto alliance with Turkey and could be counted on to dampen excessive Syrian Kurdish ambitions, especially those of the PYD. In addition, violence between the PYD and KNC among the Syrian Kurds themselves and between the PYD and the Arab-led FSA also threatened. On the other hand, Barzani's KRG remained a two-edged sword because many Syrian Kurds wished to join the KRG if things did not work out for their autonomous ambitions in Syria.

## 7. The European diaspora

Approximately 1–1.5 million Kurds from Turkey currently live in Europe. In recent years this large population base has given the PKK's multifaceted nationalist movement an opening to successfully politicize "the Kurdish question in Europe by encouraging the formation of Kurdish special interest groups and intensifying political lobbying efforts."<sup>34</sup> "Today's Zaman", a sophisticated and important Turkish newspaper, recently agreed with Eccarius-Kelly when it declared: "In Germany, the PKK operates freely, runs public campaigns, courts politicians and collects money for terror attacks against Turkish military, police and civilian targets in Turkey."<sup>35</sup> Perhaps as many as 800,000 Kurds from Turkey reside in Germany. Although the PKK has been technically banned in that country since

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<sup>34</sup> V. Eccarius-Kelly, *The Militant Kurds: A Dual Strategy for Freedom*, Westport 2011, p. 184.

<sup>35</sup> Cited in *Turkey Puts More Pressure on Europe to Curb PKK Activities*, "Today's Zaman", October 30, 2011, <http://www.today'szaman.com/news-261436-turkey-puts-more-pressure...> [Access date: 2.11.2011].

1993, some 13,000 are said to be “stable core PKK members.”<sup>36</sup> On September 8, 2012, a large Kurdish cultural event held in Mannheim, Germany witnessed violent confrontations between the police and some of those in attendance.

As Vera Eccarius-Kelly notes: “Germany is at the epicenter of this transnational [civic] web because the majority of politically engaged ethnic Kurds reside there.”<sup>37</sup> The Netherlands, Belgium, France, the United Kingdom, Austria, and Denmark, among others, also serve as homes for these “Euro-Kurds.”<sup>38</sup> “The PKK has created a broadly supportive and legitimized network of legal experts, human rights activists, and environmental specialists, along with connections to scholars, media professionals, and technologically skilled members of the Kurdish diaspora,”<sup>39</sup> resulting in “the transformation of the PKK from an organization that predominantly pursued a guerrilla strategy in Turkey [and still partially does] to one that established parallel political structures in Europe.”<sup>40</sup> The popular, young ethnic Kurdish rapper “Azad” also illustrates how deeply Kurdish nationalism has penetrated into the European culture. Azad’s band “called themselves ‘Warheit,’ a clever play on the German word *Wahrheit*, or truth. By eliminating one letter, the band invented the term ‘wardom’ or ‘state of war,’ but also implied that their cause was justified and truthful.”<sup>41</sup>

## 8. Conclusion

Second only to the perennial Arab-Israeli dispute, Kurdish nationalism remains a continuing and leading factor of instability in the geostrategically important Middle East. Furthermore, since the Kurds sit on a great deal of the Middle East’s oil and possibly even more important water resources, Kurdish nationalism probably will become increasingly more salient in the coming years.

Unlike the Arab-Israeli dispute, however, the Kurdish issue no longer seems intractable as the Kurds have actually established an autonomous state in northern Iraq, the KRG. Although this entity’s future remains problematic, it represents the Kurds’ closest achievement to statehood since the Mahabad Republic in

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<sup>36</sup> International Crisis Group, *Turkey: The PKK and a Kurdish Settlement*, Europe Report No. 219, September 11, 2012, p. 18.

<sup>37</sup> V. Eccarius-Kelly, *Militant Kurds*, p. 181.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 173.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 20.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 4.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 175.



1946. Given continuing U.S. diplomatic backing as well as wise KRG leadership, it is likely that the KRG will be able to survive and even prosper amidst all the birth pangs of the new democratic Iraq.

The situation for Kurdish nationalism in Turkey, of course, is more uncertain. However, a quick comparison with where the Kurdish issue stood in Turkey just one or two decades ago when the very term Kurd constituted a four-letter word in the Turkish lexicon will illustrate the enormous progress that has been made. The immediate task is for the fighting to stop and the writing of a new, more democratic constitution to commence. Both sides are on record as favoring just such a scenario, so the burden is on them now to produce.

Syria presents a totally new and most important situation for the Kurds given their sudden involvement in the uprising against the Assad regime that has been continuing since March 2011. From being nothing more than a mere afterthought, the Kurdish movement in Syria has suddenly taken on a crucial role that not only impacts the future of Syria, but regional relations involving Turkey, Iraq, and Iran, among others.

This leaves Iran as being so far the odd man out of the current rise of Kurdish nationalism. This, of course, is only a relative statement. Since Iran also contains the second largest Kurdish population in the Middle East, the long-festering Kurdish unrest there clearly has the potential to burst forth suddenly.