

HOW ISIL ADVANCED KURDISH NATIONALISM

While the media reporting of Syria and Iraq has over the past two years been focusing on the brutality of the terrorist group known as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), there is a much less reported story that may change the course of history: the rise of Kurdish nationalism. The Kurds, believed to be the world's largest ethno-national group without their own independent nation-state, have noticed that ISIL may be more than just a curse taking thousands of lives. As an unintended consequence of the terrorist group's rise, the author argues that the Kurds are now witnessing a rare opportunity that may allow them to correct what some historians call a century-old injustice that has deprived them of their own homeland.

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This year marks the 100th anniversary of the Sykes-Picot Agreement, which drew the boundaries for many of the nation-states in today's Middle East. With the stroke of a pen, the French diplomat François Georges-Picot and Sir Mark Sykes from the UK demarcated modern-day Iraq and Syria as British and French colonies respectively.

This agreement is despised by the Kurds because it forced them to live under Arab rulers with whom they shared neither language nor significant cultural ties. It also turned them into the largest ethnic group in the Middle East – and arguably in the world – without an independent nation-state of their own.

A century later, however, the Sykes-Picot borders have begun to dissolve in an unprecedented manner, due in large part to the emergence of a terrorist group known as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), whose fighters have literally erased most of the Syria-Iraq border and established control over large swathes of territory in both countries.

Even though thousands of Kurds have fallen victim to ISIL brutality, they are joyfully celebrating the virtual demise of the Sykes-Picot agreement as a long overdue opportunity for them to assert their right of self-determination. In the process of carving out their own enclaves, the Kurds now enjoy the backing of Western powers who disregarded their distinct existence when Iraq and Syria were founded a century ago. The 100th anniversary of the Sykes-Picot agreement coincides with an unprecedented rise in Kurdish nationalism.

Where did ISIL Come From?

ISIL was born in a vacuum created by the failure of imposed, exclusionary nationalism. If Syrians and Iraqis had been more proud of their Syrian and Iraqi identity than they are of their ethnic and sectarian ties, ISIL, which aspires to restore a *non-territorial* Sunni-based caliphate, would never have achieved such success. Shiites, Sunnis, and Kurds have always felt a stronger connection to their ethnic or sectarian identities ever since the Europeans introduced them to a new identity a century ago. The only difference today is that they have an opportunity to reassert their values and identity because the authoritarian central government and its brutal suppression are weak or gone.

For Iraqi Kurds, the opportunity to build the institutions of a modern nation-state presented itself in the early 1990s when Saddam Hussein's regime lost its Western backing. In 1991, Western powers responded to the plight of the Iraqi Kurds, who

had been subjected to genocidal aggression by Hussein's regime. A no-fly zone was created for the Kurds, who have enjoyed self-rule for a quarter of a century. Kurds were presented with an even bigger opportunity by the West when US troops invaded Iraq in 2003, toppling the long reign of the dictator Saddam Hussein.

Since 2003, the Kurds have pushed a two-track policy in Iraq. They played the role of a kingmaker in Baghdad even while beginning the process of distancing themselves from Iraq by pushing for more autonomy. As a result, Kurds have built all the institutions that a modern state requires, and they function far better than their Iraqi counterparts.

In brief, Iraqi Kurdistan is currently a state in everything but name. It has its own flag, Parliament, government, president, national anthem, and secular army. The younger generation of Iraqi Kurds does not speak Arabic much better than Turkey's Turks do because of the lack of contact with or interest in Arab Iraq, and more importantly because of the government-led *Kurdification* of the formerly Arabic curricula in schools. In the northern autonomous region, the ethnic red, yellow, and green flag of the Kurds is far more common than the black, white, and red of Iraq's national flag. A giant Kurdish flag flies over the millennia-old citadel in the center of Erbil.

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When Iraqi Kurdistan President Masoud Barzani visited Washington in May 2015 to meet with US President Barack Obama and other senior US officials, the only flag flying outside the Ritz Carlton Hotel, where Barzani stayed, was the Kurdistan Regional Government's (KRG), not Iraq's. Since the beginning of ISIL aggression, Barzani has successfully pushed for recognition of his region's flag on diplomatic visits. The last, and perhaps most important country to recognize it was Turkey, where the flag was seen behind Barzani and Turkish Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu at a meeting in December 2015.

What Have the Kurds Gained Due to ISIL?

Kurdish gains since the rise of ISIL are not limited to international recognition of the Iraqi Kurdish flag. Their achievements can easily be listed in two categories: international and domestic.

On an international scale, Kurds currently enjoy an unprecedented degree of military and political support from the outside world, primarily the West. The US and its allies, including Germany, Italy, France, and Canada, have provided key military equipment, including anti-tank missiles and thousands of other smaller weapons, to the *peshmerga* to fight ISIL. They have established military operations rooms in Iraqi Kurdistan to direct airstrikes against the terror group's positions and facilities. As a sign of how much more faith the Americans have in Kurdish forces than in the Iraqi Army, Americans choose the former as their battlefield comrades in October when they undertook a brazen commando operation on an ISIL-run prison in Hawija, an Iraqi town outside of the KRG's recognized jurisdiction. This displeased some officials in Baghdad, who were left in the dark about this operation.

Even though the US continues to state publically that all of its military support to the Kurdistan region is provided in "full coordination" with Baghdad, there have been instances where this claim is demonstrably false. Firstly, the US launched its airstrikes against ISIL to save Erbil without seeking the approval of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, who was in power at the time. Under the new prime minister, Haidar al-Abadi, who enjoys better relations with Washington than his predecessor, the US is coordinating more closely with the central government.

In May, I met and interviewed Barzani and top officials accompanying him to Washington. Barzani said, "We have received complete assurances that weapon deliveries will not be delayed and will reach the hands of *peshmerga* fighters." What if Baghdad disagrees with a certain type of weapon Washington deems necessary for the *peshmarga*? A senior Kurdish official told me that in such a scenario Washington said it would disregard Baghdad's objection.

The US has, of course, delivered more advanced weapons to Baghdad, including Apache helicopters, tanks, and fighter jets. Iraq has ordered a total of 36 F-16 fighter jets from Washington. Iraqi Kurdistan is unlikely to operate such an advanced fighter jet unless it becomes an independent state.

While these weapons are essential for Iraqi Kurdistan in the short term as it fights for its life against ISIL, they may also prove to be important tools in the event of a conflict with Baghdad in the future, should the latter choose to use force to prevent Kurds from seceding. As long as Baghdad remains weak and the Kurds are interested in a negotiated settlement, war is a remote possibility. Kurds say that once they decide to go their own way, they want to do that through peaceful negotiations rather than through war with Baghdad.

The primary reason for the military support the West provides to the Kurds lies in the fact that both the US and European countries regard ISIL, which has recruited thousands of their citizens, as a threat to their national security. Kurds are viewed as the most effective force on the ground to help in this fight to, in President Obama's words, "degrade and defeat" ISIL.

This does not contradict the argument that with military support comes political backing. Kurds know they have leverage and are utilizing it. Every time US Secretary of State John Kerry, or Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter, visit Iraq, their staff makes preparations for two separate visits to two capitals: Baghdad and Erbil. Since ISIL aggression began, the two officials have made three visits to Erbil.

This is true for other officials from around the world too. In September 2015, French President François Hollande elevated the status of Iraqi Kurdistan when he became the first Western head of state to extend his official visit from Baghdad to Erbil. He was given a formal red carpet reception ceremony by the region's president just like he would by the head of a sovereign country.

Another obvious result of the rise of ISIL is the rise in the global public profile of the Kurdish people as a moderate and secular group. As a people who have been brutally victimized in the past, they now fight against ISIL barbarism for democratic values. Images of heroic Kurdish female fighters gracing the front pages of newspapers in the US and Europe have strengthened the notion that the Kurds are fighting for the antithesis of what ISIL wants: freedom, democracy, and secularism. As a landlocked people, winning the sympathy of outsiders does no harm to the Kurds should they one day demand a seat at the United Nations.

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The second and perhaps more important gain is domestic. In Iraq, the Kurds have seized almost all of the territory they have historically claimed as theirs. This includes the oil-rich city of Kirkuk, which is considered a disputed territory in the Iraqi constitution. The opportunity to seize this city presented itself after ISIL captured Mosul, sending fear throughout the ranks of Iraqi Army officers in Kirkuk. As Iraqi troops fled before the ISIL advance, the *peshmerga* took Kirkuk before

ISIL was able to reach the city. Kurds have since repelled multiple attempts by the terrorist group to take this city.

Kirkuk's oil reserves, estimated at 38 billion barrels – nearly one fourth of Iraq's total reserves – are now almost totally controlled by the Kurds, who have begun shipping it abroad via their own newly-built pipeline. Barzani has said that Kirkuk now belongs to the KRI and his troops will not leave it.¹

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While Kirkuk would definitely strengthen the economic basis for a future Kurdish state, its multi-ethnic makeup of Arabs, Kurds, and Turkmen poses a particular challenge to that dream. Even though the governor and police chief are both Kurdish and this ethnic group comprises a majority of the city's population, there are sizable numbers of Arabs and Turkmen living in this city who may oppose the idea of being part of an independent Kurdistan. This will

definitely not be an easy challenge for the Kurds to overcome.

Even without Kirkuk, however, the oil and gas reserves in the KRI can be enough to provide the foundation for a prosperous nation-state, depending of course on what the price of oil is. Some commentators say the Kurds can use Kirkuk as a bargaining chip with Baghdad in their negotiation for independence. The Kurds might accept Kirkuk as an autonomous entity if Baghdad will give them their independence without war.

The Rise of the Syrian Kurds

Before the 2011 uprising in Syria, Syrian Kurds – estimated at 2 million – had few rights and virtually no influence in the country. Many of them had even been stripped of basic rights such as citizenship. Today, they make up the most effective armed group fighting ISIL. The Kurds have established an autonomous authority in much of *Rojava* (West or Western Kurdistan), an entity that Turkey opposes. The US was initially opposed to the declaration of autonomy by the Syrian Kurds as well. This is no longer the case.

US relations with the Syrian Kurds improved in October 2015 when the US finally gave in and provided support to Kurdish fighters defending the city of Kobani

¹ “Barzani: Peshmarga forces won't leave Kirkuk,” *Al-Alam*, 3 July 2014, <http://en.alalam.ir/news/1607965>

against ISIL.² Initially, the US position was in line with that held by Turkey, namely that Kobani did not constitute, to quote Secretary Kerry, a “strategic objective.”

However, the resistance that the lightly-armed Kurdish men and women who maintain close ties to the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) showed in this border town made it difficult for the US to remain on the sidelines. After days of intense television coverage made possible by the proximity of the town to the Turkish border, the US began to launch airstrikes in October.

“It would be irresponsible of us, as well [as] morally very difficult, to turn your back on a community fighting ISIL as hard as it is at this particular moment,” said Kerry after the first airstrikes hit ISIL fighters in and around Kobani.³ These comments made it clear that the US had broken with the position of its NATO ally, Turkey, which viewed the defenders of Kobani as “terrorists.”

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These rebels, known as the People’s Protection Units (YPG), belong to a political party called the Democratic Union Party (PYD). Ankara sees the PYD as an affiliate of the PKK, a group designated as terrorists by both Turkey and the US. To Washington, the PYD is an independent Syrian political group that deserves US military support because of its effectiveness in fighting ISIL. The US currently works directly with the PYD, which has a representative in the joint operations room that the Americans have established in Erbil. The US has air dropped weapons and non-lethal assistance to the YPG as well.

Syrian Kurds do not share the same degree of aspirations for independence as their brethren in Iraq. The reasons are multiple. Firstly, Syrian Kurds espouse the more Marxist and anti-state ideology propounded by Abdullah Öcalan, the imprisoned leader of the PKK. According to this view, the state is a tool of the bourgeoisie to suppress the working class. What they offer instead is something they have begun to implement in northern Syria, namely autonomous cantons for every city and town

² Throughout this article, Syrian Kurds are used interchangeably with PYD or its armed wing YPG, because of the fact that the PYD represents the strongest political party in Syria’s Kurdish region. This does by no means deny the existence of other smaller Kurdish parties in Syria, who are virtually ineffective in shaping the events in the country and receive no military or political support from the United States or the broader international community.

³ “Remarks With Philippine Foreign Secretary del Rosario,” *US Department of State*, Jakarta, Indonesia, 20 October 2014, <http://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2014/10/233148.htm>

with their own ministers and governors, and full control over their internal affairs. To put it simply, Öcalan's vision is for more of a bottom-up form of governance than that typically seen in sovereign nation-states. Such a demand can still perhaps be accommodated in a loose federation or confederation for a united Syria.

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Secondly, even if Syrian Kurds want complete independence, they realize it might be too early to declare their true intentions. Doing so could make them lose the little outside support they currently enjoy from the US, which is not yet ready to declare the end of Syria. Given the close ties between Syrian Kurds and the PKK, such a move might push Turkey to react to the entity on its southern border with greater hostility.

The number one priority for Syrian Kurds is currently defending their enclave against ISIL. Once this threat is gone and the future of Syria is decided, they might become more assertive in their demands.

What Have the Kurds Lost Because of ISIL?

ISIL has brought considerable losses upon the Kurdish people as well, the most significant of which is no doubt the thousands of people, both fighters and civilians, who have been killed or captured by the terrorist group. ISIL is believed to still hold hundreds of young Yazidi Kurdish girls as sex slaves. The loss of these people once again served as a reminder to the Kurds of where they live and how they cannot depend on central governments in Baghdad and Damascus for protection.

Even if the rise of ISIL has advanced Kurdish nationalism in Iraq, it has not helped the process of democratization. Since the beginning of ISIL aggression, Iraqi Kurdistan has not held elections. The last term of its president, Masoud Barzani, came to an end in August 2015, yet he continues to serve as president in spite of objections from many people, including the major opposition parties.

The dispute over the presidency of the region has created a deep rift in Kurdish politics. In an undemocratic move, Barzani's party has virtually dissolved the region's Parliament, preventing its speaker, Yosuf Mohammed, who belongs to the second largest party, from returning to the capital to perform his duties. Mohammed was opposed to the notion of allowing Barzani to remain in power past his term. Lack of democracy could create instability in Iraqi Kurdistan and hinder Kurdish hopes for independence.

The list of harms that ISIL has inflicted upon the Kurds can be longer. One may no doubt add the devastation left behind in cities such as Sinjar and Kobani, where infrastructure rebuilding may take years, while the impact of the displacement of Kurdish men, women, and children from these cities will last much longer.

Despite this, it can be concluded that ISIL has provided a bigger opportunity for the Kurds in Iraq and Syria. After all, the Kurds have effectively contained the ISIL threat already. The disappearance of the Iraqi-Syrian border and the increased level of military and political clout that the Kurds enjoy today indicates that they are now closer to independence than they have ever been. According to Barzani, Iraqi Kurds are expected to hold an independence referendum this year, which coincides with the centennial of the Sykes-Picot agreement.⁴ If an overwhelming majority of Kurds want independence from Iraq, which is expected to be the case, it would become a matter of credibility for Barzani to act on the mandate soon enough.

⁴ “Barzani: referendum for Kurdish independence should take place before US polls,” *Rudaw*, 26 January 2016. <http://rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/260120164>